

**BECKETT'S CREATURES:
ART OF FAILURE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST**

JOSEPH ANDERTON

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Abstract

The Beckettian creature is a product of dehumanisation and endures a variety of irresolvable tensions which culminate in a contingent mode of being that subsists in the nostalgia or hope for an authentic, meaningful life. This thesis examines Samuel Beckett's evocation of the 'creature' as an ontological concept to make the case for the oblique historical and political significance of his artistic forms. My work traces the aesthetic, biopolitical and humanistic resonance of the creature to contribute new ways of analysing Beckett's 'art of failure' in the post-Holocaust context. Through close readings of Beckett's prose and drama, particularly texts from the middle period, including *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, I explicate four arenas of creaturely life in Beckett. Each chapter attends to a particular theme – testimony, power, humour and survival – to analyse a range of pressures and impositions that precipitate the creaturely state of suspension. I draw on the philosophical and theoretical writings of Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida to relate Beckett's creatures to a framework of critical theory that addresses the human condition and the status of art in the second half of the twentieth century. The key findings of this thesis are that Beckett's creatures traverse the edge of a bare life devoid of meaning, but live on through the debased idea of the human as they negotiate pressing obligations and melancholic repetition compulsions. Beckett invents author-narrators and narrative modes replete with epistemological and expressive failures, which act as an appropriate aesthetic response and pertinent reflection of the destabilised human after the Holocaust. As such, Beckett conveys the anti-humanist vision that attends the perverse or ineffective performance of humanist assumptions.

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Abbreviations

- C** *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
- E** *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)
- FN** *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End / First Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
- HD** *Happy Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)
- HII** *How It Is* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
- K** *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Shorter Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
- M** *Murphy* (London: Calder, 1993)
- MC** *Mercier and Camier* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)
- T** *Trilogy – Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994)
- TN** *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)
- W** *Watt* (London: Calder, 1998)
- WFG** *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

Introduction

Forgive me now and always for all my stupidities and blanknesses, I am only a tiny little part of a creature, self-hating vestiges, remains of an old longing, when I was little, for rounding out, even on a small radius. That shuts you in your whole life long. And one drives in vain towards figurelessness.

Samuel Beckett, letter to Georges Duthuit, 12th August 1948.¹

Drawing upon the expansive semantic value and recently theorised form of the 'creature', this thesis examines the 'creaturely' aesthetic and political dimensions of Samuel Beckett's work to explicate the relevance of his art in the post-Holocaust context. The creature is a concept that encompasses authorial tensions in the composition process as well as the antagonisms of power apparatuses and ideological systems. It is best understood as a dynamic arising from creative and biopolitical *animations*, in which the actions of authority and pressures of necessity impinge on the very materiality or texture of the subject. In essence, the creature describes a post-human state that resides within the human as a potential and is either actuated by other humans or manifest as an anachronistic performance of the human. As the human's constitutive properties and forms of meaning become unviable, the creature's debased, melancholic life ensues. One of the central claims I make is that Beckett's work is attentive to the ways in which the creature embodies a suspended mode of being resulting from the irresolvable tensions between contradictory or interdependent forces. The Beckettian creature marks the endurance of a crisis of the human that is sustained by the idea, memory or hope of a liberating resolution. The concept of the

¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1941-1956*, Vol. 2, ed. by George Craig *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011), p. 104.

creature therefore acts as a versatile lens in this thesis through which to view Beckett's mode of bearing witness, the type of subject issuing from power struggles, the degradation of the human in his humour and the ontological state of his surviving characters.

Dictionary definitions of the word 'creature' reveal how its creative resonance is interlaced with political meaning. In the most general sense, it describes 'a created thing or being; a product of creative action; a creation'.² The terms 'creature' and 'creatures' occur frequently in Beckett's major works, usually in this first sense. They appear on twenty-nine occasions in the post-war trilogy of novels *Molloy* (French 1951; English 1955), *Malone Dies* (1951; 1956) and *The Unnamable* (1953; 1958) to refer to the created narrators and to the author-narrators' own figments. For example: 'Yes, a little creature, I shall try and make a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image, no matter what I say' (*T*, 226). The etymology of 'creature', deriving from the Latin verb *creare*, meaning 'to create', suggests a fictitious or imaginary being, especially an aberration or grotesque figure. These latter qualifiers establish the further sense of the creature as a subject of another's control, 'a person who owes his or her fortune and position, and remains subservient to, a patron; a person who is ready to do another's bidding; a puppet, a cat's paw', which evokes a certain level of being that incites contempt or stirs up sympathy. Beckett often emphasises the wretched side of this relationship: 'The essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line, as long as there are waters and banks and ravening in heaven a sporting God to plague his creature' (*T*, 341). The creature is subject to another's power, but in this hunting image, Beckett brings to mind a subordinate animal. The creature also denotes 'a living or animate being; an animal, often as

² All definitions are taken from *OED online*, <www.oed.com>.

distinct from a person', which is how the term appears in the book of Genesis: 'And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof' (King James Version, Genesis 2.19). The Biblical connotation of the creature also suggests 'all created beings', which implicates man and therefore encompasses both animals and humans, as in the phrase 'fellow creatures'.

Much literary fiction exploits these associations with creation and control, notably Romantic literature, in which there is often a keen awareness of the author's role in original creation and a strong sense of affinity between the poet's personal voice and the protagonist. Indeed, 'the Romantics position the author as at the centre of the literary institution by insisting on the immediacy and spontaneity of poetic creation, on the work of art as the direct representation of the creative experience'.³ In this regard, the creature also has an entrenched metafictional level that calls to mind the creative force, or, in Beckett, the 'deviser', which intimates the presence of an implied author whilst indicating the divine creator (C, 1). This relationship is alluded to in Gothic fiction, a genre that engendered one of the most familiar and enduring literary creatures in Adam, or simply 'the monster', in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).⁴

Taking into account Beckett's metafictional leanings, the creature is an apt description for his characters in that it foregrounds their constructed nature whilst retaining the potential for an autonomous life. The focus on creaturely life in my own work underlines the significance of the on-going creative act for the existential status

³ Andrew Bennett, *"The" Author* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 62.

⁴ Dirk Van Hulle draws on these connections between creation and Romanticism in Beckett in "'Accursed Creator": Beckett, Romanticism, Modern Prometheus', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 18, All Sturm and No Drang, Beckett and Romanticism, ed. by Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 115-129.

of the creations themselves, in order to identify a type of vitality that subsists despite the static, self-reflexive conditions of Beckett's work. The creature is effectively exposed to survival conditions, facing the task of acquiring meaning independent from the status offered by unfulfilling creative and ideological animations, which sees the creature anticipating a resolution whilst continuing nonetheless. As the author-narrators seek to extricate themselves from the mechanisms of creation, the ironic consequence is that they protract the creative process: 'The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue. No, I must not try to think, simply utter. Method or no method I shall have to banish them in the end – the beings, things, shapes, sounds and lights with which my haste to speak has encumbered this place' (*T*, 301-2). The creature endures in the act of creation as it is occupied by other creaturely figments. It lives on with the imperative to pursue the expression, identity and meaning that will offer completion, but it is effectively penned in the void.

I posit notions of the creature in the ambivalent spaces of creation and authority in Beckett's writing in order to trace a number of intersections between artistic, historical and socio-political significations. The underlying aim is to outline ways in which the creature in Beckett's work responds to the state of literary writing after the Second World War and acts as a necessarily oblique reference point to the Holocaust. In the most general sense, the creature is the subjectivity that survives the disruption of established values. The creature therefore stands out as a particularly applicable concept in terms of investigating Beckett's art of failure and his dehumanised characters alongside the contemporaneous crises in expression and humanity.

Critical Perspectives

Before introducing the theory behind the creature in more detail, it is necessary to situate my theoretical and contextual approach in the history of Beckett studies to describe the intervention this thesis seeks to make. The critical reception of Beckett's work has amassed a profuse and plural account of the formal, philosophical, structural and theoretical range of the literature, rendering Beckett studies one of the most prolific and dialogic critical discourses on any twentieth-century writer. Although a comprehensive study of over fifty years of criticism is now a formidable task, particularly since the output comes from at least three different languages and traditions of critique, scholarly material on Beckett has yielded considerable reflection on its own evolution. It is worth summarising the trends in Beckett criticism to highlight how notions of the creature constitute a timely and incipient analysis of the Beckett canon. A mixture of formal and philosophical angles, which are now recognised by the rubrics New Criticism and Existential Humanism, characterizes the early commentary from the 1960s and 70s. The preeminent critics of the period Ruby Cohn, John Fletcher and Hugh Kenner recognised Beckett's engagement with formal experimentation, identified his affinity with the work of Dante Alighieri and Arnold Geulincx, and, most notably, underlined his fascination with Cartesian duality. Significant to this thesis are Cohn's *The Comic Gamut* (1962) and Kenner's *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (1962) for their contributions to the study of Beckett's humour, thus ensuring this crucial aspect was not overwhelmed by accounts foregrounding his supposed nihilism or esotericism.⁵

Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) situated Beckett amongst other contemporary dramatists, and, in the process, popularised Beckett's vision of the

⁵ Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1962); Hugh Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey, 2005 [1962]).

human condition and the profound formal impact of 'absurd' drama.⁶ Esslin associates Beckett's aesthetic with a trans-historical value, displaying the emptiness and senselessness intrinsic to human existence. However, although Esslin's introduction is cited as 'undoubtedly the most influential fifteen pages in the history of Beckett criticism in English', his initial reading holds less weight for the generations of criticism that follow, partly owing to Beckett's own assessment of 'absurdity'.⁷ When asked whether artistic enterprise is impossible without rigorous ethical standards, Beckett replied:

[M]oral values are not accessible and not open to definition. To define them, you would have to make value judgements, and you can't do that. That's why I have never agreed with the idea of the theatre of the absurd. Because that implies making value judgements. You can't even talk about truth. That is part of the general distress.⁸

Esslin's value judgement reveals his use of a humanistic paradigm; he promotes a rational and decorous vision of a bygone humanity that acts as a frame of reference to the absurdity on stage. The devaluation of human ideals and purpose cannot be acknowledged without addressing its implicit counterpoint, and the theatre audience observes this discord, aware of the fact that one is unable to evaluate without firm criteria of what constitutes value.

⁶ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

⁷ P. J. Murphy *et al.*, *Critique of Beckett Criticism: A Guide to Research in English, French, and German* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), p. 17.

⁸ Beckett qtd. in Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, trans. by Janey Tucker (Leiden: Academic Press, 1995), pp. 148-9. For a recent reconsideration of Esslin, see Michael Y. Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet and Pinter* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

In Esslin's usage, the theatre of the absurd denotes the 'sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose' through the 'unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed'.⁹ Whilst this thesis does not make use of Esslin's notion of absurdity specifically, the genesis and provisional nature of his concept is relevant, particularly since Esslin is keen to stress the historical foundation of this essential vision. He explains how the dramatic techniques of the theatre of the absurd were 'elements that arose from the zeitgeist, the atmosphere of the time, rather than deliberate theoretical considerations'.¹⁰ Each playwright is included under Esslin's umbrella term by virtue of an intuitive experimentation with form and a shared perspicacity on the expressive requirements of the post-war period. Therefore, the theatre of the absurd refers to an existential condition, but Beckett's insight into life develops supposedly from ideological shifts occurring at a distinct historical juncture.

The tension between the timeless profundity and contemporaneous import of Beckett's work leaves Esslin reluctant to commit to his exegesis, and he revises the text over three editions. Esslin discusses his misgivings regarding a systematic definition of absurdist drama and his forewords repeatedly aim to safeguard absurdity from simplification. Indeed, he places emphasis on the title as a 'working hypothesis', which suggests that categorising these particular dramatists under an umbrella term is less than reliable and should not be accepted as rule.¹¹ Beckett appears to warm to this hesitancy, perhaps because it undercuts the restrictive interpretations of academic criticism. In a letter to Esslin, Beckett wryly comments on the critic's technique: 'I like the way you raise hares and then say they are better not pursued'.¹² By proposing

⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 24.

¹⁰ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn, p. 12.

¹¹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 10.

¹² Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn, p. 12.

and dismissing possible lines of inquiry, Esslin illustrates Beckett's resistance to comprehensive explanation, and, coincidentally, echoes the affirmations and negations of Beckett's author-narrators. In this way, Esslin's early reading foregrounds the difficulties Beckett criticism faces in surmounting an ambiguous and elusive style that works to disempower critical approaches and keep meaning in a state of uncertainty.

The value of existential and essentialist readings declined by the 1980s when Beckett studies followed mainstream literary theory into a poststructural interrogation of language and meaning. The focus of discussion turned towards the aporetic textual conditions of Beckett's writing, questioning its representational function and disputing the authority of the author. Curiously, Esslin's contemporary Theodor Adorno, whose essay 'Versuch, das *Endspiel* zu verstehen' (Trying to Understand *Endgame*) was published in the same year as Esslin's book, returned to prominence during this decade, profiting from a 1982 translation into English by Michael T. Jones for an edition of *New German Critique*. According to David Weisberg, Adorno's essay 'might still be the best piece of criticism on a single work by Beckett', precisely because it manages to propose the cultural significance of Beckett's play whilst doing justice to its resistant nature. Thus, Adorno's understanding of *Endgame* (1958) as an exercise in the absence of stable meaning complements Beckett's anticipation of issues related to poststructuralism and deconstruction in both the immediate post-war work and later minimalist writing.¹³

Adorno famously asserts that *Endgame* 'cannot chase the chimera of expressing its meaning with the help of philosophical mediation. Understanding it can

¹³ David Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (New York: SUNY, 2006), p. 6.

mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility'.¹⁴ According to Adorno, Beckett's play educes the malfunctioning structures of conventional thought and value, which elevates *Endgame* to a new level of commentary suitable for critiquing contemporary society and culture. The 'truth content' of Beckett's work is implicitly connected to its aesthetic formation, specifically the dramatic and linguistic material that organises its emptiness.¹⁵ As David Cunningham notes, 'the "meaninglessness" of the work is determinately "enunciated", via its realization in "the aesthetic material", thus becoming a kind of *aesthetic meaning*'.¹⁶ The artistic merit and social significance of *Endgame* is achieved in the workings of the play as a whole, developing a negative revelation through the dramatic embodiment of meaninglessness. In other words, the meaning of Beckett's text is its meaninglessness.

Yet, besides the dominant message of Adorno's seminal essay, peripheral details regarding his motivation and approach are also significant to the current study. Adorno's essay is, in part, a defence of Beckett's work against Georg Lukács' denunciation in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957). Lukács rejects the static form and asocial detachment of modernism in general, arguing that Beckett's solipsistic psychopathology and primitivism in particular celebrates insularity and exalts abnormality. He writes that Beckett 'presents us with an image of utmost human degradation – an idiot's vegetative existence'.¹⁷ In response, Adorno contests Lukács' objections to Beckett's reduction of humans to 'animality', pointing out the irony in 'a kind of artistic behaviour denounced as inhuman by those whose humanity

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', *New German Critique*, Critical Theory and Modernity, 26 (1982), trans. by Michael T. Jones, 119-150, p. 120.

¹⁵ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 120.

¹⁶ David Cunningham, 'Trying (Not) to Understand: Adorno and the Work of Beckett', in *Beckett and Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Lane (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 125-139, p. 133.

¹⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin, 1963), p. 31.

has already become an advertisement for inhumanity'.¹⁸ For Adorno, the simple relegation of the human to the non-human other is itself a cursory reduction of Beckett's characterisation. Beckettian Man is not animalistic *per se*, but rather the 'image of the last human'; he is the end product of previously esteemed philosophy and education.¹⁹ The orderliness and selectivity of 'perspective' that Lukács lauds in realism is left in tatters in *Endgame* for Adorno precisely due to Beckett's fidelity to prior epistemological foundations: 'thoughts are dragged along and distorted like the day's left-overs'.²⁰ Hence, the animal state of Beckett's figures is apparent in a vision of what humanity has become as a result of human properties. Adorno sees this degradation in Beckett as the culmination of humanity's trajectory; it is the nemesis to humanistic hubris.

However, in Adorno's own reading he employs animal analogies to describe Beckett's characters. They are 'flies that twitch after the swatter has half smashed them' and 'not a self but rather the aping imitation of something non-existent', whilst the audience are like 'people who, when visiting the zoo, wait attentively for the next move of the hippopotamus or the chimpanzee'.²¹ Adorno's recourse to the animal suggests that animality is bound up with the last human, that modernity's 'progression' bears the hallmarks of a regression in the ontogenetic process. Therefore, for Adorno, it is not that Beckett's figures are 'ahistorical', as Lukács implies, but that 'only the result of history appears – as decline'.²² Adorno's dialogue with Lukács, in effect, points out a humanist teleology in which catastrophe is viewed as a backward step, contrary to advancement. In contrast, Adorno's position is closer to the concomitance of progression and retrogression; he is more open to the idea of a

¹⁸ Adorno, 'Trying to Understanding *Endgame*', pp. 125, 126.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 123.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 121.

²¹ Ibid. pp. 128, 143, 140.

²² Ibid. p. 125.

paradoxical progress that is itself a mode of decline, which suggests that the Beckettian last human conveys a process of ruination. This explains Adorno's assertion that '*Endgame* is true gerontology'.²³ The means of enlightenment have aged, suggesting that sage cognition and judgement have matured and become senile. In its depiction of decrepit and unsound old age – the stage when enriching life experiences, knowledge and wisdom are typically extensive – Beckett's play actually evokes earlier stages of both human life and pre-human organic evolution. In effect, the final image of the human encloses an atavistic vestige of humanity's origins.

After the emphatic textual autonomy of poststructuralism and deconstruction, the 1990s onwards saw the reassessment of the relationship between Beckett's work and its historical background. Beckett's death in 1989, and the centenary anniversary of his birth in 2006 – which was marked by a six-week festival at the Barbican theatre – served as catalysts for reflection on the author's life and legacy. The effort to reinsert the author's life and times into the work was encouraged predominantly by two biographies in 1996: Anthony Cronin's *The Last Modernist*, and, with Beckett's cooperation, James Knowlson's *Damned to Fame*.²⁴ Each account offers an insight into the interplay between the personal and the artistic, principally referring to Beckett's correspondence for commentary, and Knowlson in particular brought to critical attention the diaries Beckett wrote during a 1936-7 trip to Germany. These biographical leads have intensified the consideration of the social, political and historical value of Beckett's work in recent years, and resulted in the publication of Beckett's letters, his German diaries and his theatrical notebooks. Unsurprisingly, critical interest gravitates towards Beckett's reading, and, partly due to Beckett's notes on Wilhelm Windelband's *History of Philosophy* (1901), there is a return to

²³ Ibid. p. 142.

²⁴ Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York: Da Capo, 1997). James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

writers such as Fritz Mauthner, Arnold Geulincx and Marcel Proust.²⁵ Beckett's appreciation of visual art, film and music has attracted more sustained critical attention as a result of the influx of biographical detail and is now considered integral to understanding Beckett's formal concerns. Recent critics such as David Weisberg and Sean Kennedy have also attempted to situate Beckett in relation to the 1930s literary scene, and establish his relationship with the postcolonial conditions of his native Ireland.²⁶

Parallel to the historicisation of Beckett's corpus is the increasing acknowledgement that the manuscripts have received since Richard L. Admussen's *The Beckett Manuscripts: A Study* in 1979. Genetic criticism has illuminated Beckett's process of obliteration as he revised and edited his drafts. Stan Gontarski's *The Intent of Undoing in Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (1985) reveals Beckett's reduction of biographical material and more recently Dirk Van Hulle's *Manuscript Genetics: Joyce's Know-How, Beckett's Nohow* (2008) describes Beckett's 'work in regress' against Joyce's 'work in progress'.²⁷ Undoubtedly, genetic criticism in Beckett studies will yield a plenitude of material as critics take advantage of the burgeoning 'Samuel Beckett: Digital Manuscript Project'. This collaborative effort to archive Beckett's manuscripts electronically promises to be an accessible and efficient research tool, and the first instalment has already enhanced awareness of Beckett's late writing

²⁵ For example, see Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (London: Continuum, 2006).

²⁶ See Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder*; Patrick Bixby, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009); Sean Kennedy, *Beckett and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010); Sean Kennedy and Katherine Worth, eds., *History, Memory, Archive* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁷ Richard L. Admussen, *The Beckett Manuscripts: A Study* (London: G. K. Hall, 1979); S. E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985); Dirk Van Hulle, *Manuscript Genetics: Joyce's Know-How, Beckett's Nohow* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2008).

practice.²⁸

The current critical focus on historicising, and, to a lesser extent, politicising Beckett informs the direction of my research into the artistic manifestation of the wartime and post-war milieu in Beckett's contemporaneous work. Beckett experienced Nazi ideology and propaganda in pre-war Germany; fled to Roussillon and the Vichy 'free zone' in southern France during the Nazi occupation of Paris; served with the French Resistance group Gloria SMH, mediating information for the Allies; grieved the death of his close friend Alfred Péron who was imprisoned at Mauthausen; and helped rebuild the hospital at Saint-Lô. That Beckett was involved in and had first-hand knowledge of the effect of the Second World War is not disputed, yet Beckett does not or cannot explicitly address these events in his prose and drama. Despite diverse approaches, recent criticism shows that historical and socio-political considerations are a burden for Beckett that cannot be lifted with artistic tools. Rather, the manifestation of the war and Holocaust in Beckett is bound with his preoccupation with narrative, language and representation – with the failure of art.

Beckett in Context

James Knowlson's biography suggests that Beckett was involved in the wartime situation purely on a personal and private level. He regards Beckett as an altruist, concerned with the injustices committed against people and especially partial to the 'underdog' figure: 'His responses almost always seem to have been motivated by spontaneous feelings of sympathy for the underdog: the failure, the invalid, the

²⁸ Dirk Van Hulle, *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Stirrings Still / Soubresauts and Comment Dire / what is the word* (Brussels: University Press Antwerp, 2011).

prisoner (political or otherwise), the beggar, the tramp or even the rogue'.²⁹ Beckett, then, is attuned to the reality of the situation on a human level, conscious of subaltern groups regardless of the political dimension of the Third Reich. Deirdre Bair presents a similar account in her early biography, in which she suggests that Beckett was beyond political motivations despite his 'abandonment of neutrality' with Gloria SMH and the French Resistance:

'I was so outraged by the Nazis, particularly by their treatment of the Jews, that I could not remain inactive,' he said. Long after the war, when an interviewer asked Beckett why he had taken an *active political stand*, he replied, 'I was fighting against the Germans, who were making life hell for my friends, and not for the French nation.' He was being consistent in his apolitical behaviour.³⁰

Beckett's feeling of responsibility, specifically towards his friends and generally towards the victimised, reveals a basic ethical imperative that supersedes any protest against Nazi or Vichy laws. This viewpoint is epitomised in Knowlson's later work *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett* (2006), in which he recalls Beckett's phrase 'revolted but not revolting'.³¹ This distinction implies that Beckett's disgust arises at an individual level as opposed to being roused by a collective rebellion. Moreover, as a determined effort to resist, 'revolting' implies an on-going action or process, whereas Beckett's revulsion appears fixed and fundamental. According to

²⁹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 642.

³⁰ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990), pp. 326-7.

³¹ James Knowlson and Elizabeth Knowlson, *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett* (New York: Arcade, 2006), p. 137. Knowlson's biography also relates Beckett's view: 'you simply couldn't stand by with your arms folded', Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 304.

Knowlson's and Bair's biographical portraits, it appears that Beckett does not take an active political stand, but is instead emotionally activated.

As a result of Beckett's apolitical assertion, Beckett studies have sought to trace how his work avoids socio-political material and yet betrays a historically informed rejection of political art in the process. In his *Chronicles of Disorder* (2006), David Weisberg suggests that artistic and creative directions are historical consequences. He notes that 1960s and 70s criticism perceives political art in the degree to which it eschews 'bourgeois' narrative conventions. In contrast, Weisberg regards Beckett as 'a refraction of the more general struggle to define art's social function' during a divisive and transitional historical period.³² The profound magnitude of the Second World War introduced a cultural disorder that thwarted the effort to narrate meaningfully in literature and therefore repudiated creative authority. Accordingly, as Weisberg opines, Beckett's own indeterminacy arises from the more generalised indeterminacy of the writer's social function in post-war conditions. Although critics like Adorno deem the lack of explicit subject matter, determinable message or 'metaphysical meaning' in Beckett an attempt to avoid the oppression of authoritative communication associated with articulated political programmes, such ambivalence is not a simple expression of a liberal antithesis.³³ Rather, Beckett's constant vacillations elicit the neutral, the undecided, even the nugatory status of an art form unsure of its purpose.

In 'Art After Auschwitz: Theodor Adorno' (1990), Terry Eagleton discusses the 'poor but honest' claustrophobic artistic spaces that Beckett navigates and Adorno explicates.³⁴ By way of Adorno, Eagleton claims that Beckett's reticence towards the

³² Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder*, p. 5.

³³ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 120.

³⁴ Terry Eagleton, 'Art After Auschwitz: Theodor Adorno', in *The Ideology of Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 341-365, p. 357.

historical climate participates in art as 'contradiction incarnate', which is 'critically estranged from its history yet incapable of taking up a vantage-point beyond it'.³⁵ Notwithstanding art's alienation from the conditions of its production, Eagleton's Marxist view subscribes to the inextricable reality that accentuates Beckett's approach and remains as a diaphanous boundary to the work. The idea of not belonging, of being 'estranged', maintains the alterity between history and autonomous art, which maintains a negative relationship between the presented work of art and the tacit context.

In his later decisive article 'Political Beckett?' (2006), Eagleton places Beckett firmly on the political Left. Following a biographical study of Beckett's self-exile from Ireland and his role with the French Resistance, Eagleton underlines the progressive values of Beckett's art:

Unusually among modernist artists, this supposed purveyor of nihilism was a militant of the left rather than the right. A champion of the ambiguous and indeterminate, his fragmentary, provisional art is supremely anti-totalitarian. It is also an art born in the shadow of Auschwitz, which keeps faith with silence and terror by paring its language, characters and narrative almost to vanishing point. It is the writing of a man who understood that sober, bleak-eyed realism serves the cause of human emancipation more faithfully than starry-eyed utopia.³⁶

³⁵ Eagleton, 'Art After Auschwitz', p. 352.

³⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Champion of Ambiguity', *The Guardian*, Monday 20th March 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/mar/20/arts.theatre>> [accessed 11/4/12], para 6 of 6. This excerpt is a revised version of the article 'Political Beckett?', *New Left Review*, 40, (2006), 67-74.

For Eagleton, Beckett's work is politically and historically relevant due to its elusive nature, eviscerated material and stoic vision. Yet there is a basic problem in asserting this critical position. Eagleton's reading is couched in persuasive rhetoric, with 'champion', 'supremely' and 'faith' suggesting an overt Left-wing commitment on Beckett's part. Despite Eagleton's sensitivity towards Beckett's ambiguity, the critic's political framing and emphatic tone serves to appropriate indeterminacy in order to ascertain a prevailing meaning, which, in effect, undermines the qualities it applauds. For this reason, Beckett's work proves to be difficult to articulate since it renders even the most receptive interpretation totalitarian.

Leslie Hill makes a similar point early in the first of two complex essays on the textual politics in Beckett. In "'Up the Republic!': Beckett, Writing, Politics' (1997), he notes that 'to translate the author's writing into ready-made terms of an established political discourse is to do little more, in fact, than to reiterate a gesture of violence'.³⁷ Hill begins his piece by stating a general resistance towards politics in Beckett's work, noting the text's irreducible singularity. Yet, in an effort to transcend a politics of representation and the inescapable causality beneath art, Hill explores the friction between writing and discourse, exemplified by the political slogan 'Up the Republic!' in Beckett's *Malone Dies* (T, 236).³⁸ For Hill, '[a] fundamental disjunction intervenes in the text, with the result that the political discourse that is audible in Beckett's novel operates there solely as an ironic residue of itself'.³⁹ The sincere and mocking resonance of the phrase loads and unloads signification at the same time, which approximates a political affair in the ineluctable struggle between contradictory forces. This 'micrologics of relation', as Hill expresses it, reveals a basic principle of

³⁷ Leslie Hill, "'Up the Republic!': Beckett, Writing, Politics', *MLN*, Comparative Literature, 112.5 (1997), 909-928, p. 910.

³⁸ '¡ UPTHEREPUBLIC !' was also Beckett's laconic response to Nancy Cunard for *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (London: Left Review, 1937).

³⁹ Hill, 'Up the Republic!', p. 913.

political activity in that it enacts the manoeuvring of discrete and associated forces. He sums this up, stating that:

Writing as contestation, writing as challenge, writing as a response to the infinity of the other beyond all representation [...] [is] indispensable for any attempt to think in its radicality the relation of non-relation between Same and Other that is fundamental to politics as such.⁴⁰

Hill seeks to uncover core political relations in Beckett's use of language as Beckett refuses to resolve the pervasive contradictory forces in his work, particularly between autonomous writing and historically constituted discourse. For Hill, this indeterminable texture perpetuates the difference and engagement between opposing positions, which makes a sort of political negotiation implicit when navigating Beckett's work.

As if to clarify his position, Hill responds to his own piece, reiterating that writing is intrinsically connected to history as an inscription and event, but not 'a treacherous copy or dubious semblance'.⁴¹ Hill's contribution to the debate on Beckett's political relevance is to argue that the inside and outside dichotomy should be abandoned in order to look beyond both the referential function of art and the simple resistance to reference. As a consequence, his essay distances Beckett from any recognisable political persuasion, such as the ideological agendas and pragmatic methods of nationalism, conservatism, socialism or liberalism. Instead, Hill enters into political philosophy, or rather, textual politics after poststructuralism. Hill's textual

⁴⁰ Hill, 'Up the Republic!', p. 925.

⁴¹ Leslie Hill, 'Beckett, Writing, Politics: Answering for Myself', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 9, Beckett and Religion: Beckett/Aesthetics/Politics, ed. by Matthijs Engelberts and Onno Kusters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 215-221, p. 218

approach effectively beholds a kind of political lily pad and proceeds to explore the submerged stem, the base origins that buoy up the visible political mass. Yet, the salient political dimension away from a literary representation of the external remains unclear. There is no vocabulary or discourse available to articulate an alternative political dimension without disengaging from the received idea of the 'political'. This dearth is fitting for Hill since it conveys the unnameable that requires a name and the untranslatable that translates itself, which are paradoxes that highlight the struggle for freedom that is endemic to politics. As Hill readily acknowledges, his approach occludes a large part of what is understood as politics and this makes it difficult to discern how Beckett's irreconcilable registers or paradoxical conundrums constitute political value distinct from social, moral or ethical intercourse.⁴²

Gabriele Schwab also advances the textual politics of Beckett's *The Unnamable*, asserting that the very fabric of language that Beckett unravels reveals a political engagement. According to Schwab, language is a system that works towards a 'territorialization of subjects', a locking in of the reflexive 'I'.⁴³ Beckett's political level emerges in his challenge to this linguistic incarceration, since his work endeavours to collapse dichotomies and nullify difference, which leaves identity and authority suspended and dispossessed. Beckett's work withstands such codification to launch unowned and unanchored 'de-constructs' that exist in an indefinite state of deferral. As with Hill, the orientation of Schwab's argument necessitates a politics beyond practice or instrumentality: 'A voice that is neither I nor Not-I, subject nor object, performs speech acts on the tightrope toward the impossible'.⁴⁴ Beckett's

⁴² Hill writes: 'Formulas such as these do not found a politics, if politics is to be understood as the art of the possible, the feasible, or the practical', Hill, 'Up The Republic!', p. 925.

⁴³ Gabriele Schwab, 'The Politics of Small Differences: Beckett's *The Unnamable*', in *Engagement and Difference: Beckett and the Political*, ed. by Henry Sussman and Christopher Devenney (New York: State University of New York, 2001), 42-57, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Schwab, 'The Politics of Small Difference', p. 56

textual no-man's land subsists as unresolvable linguistic factions, which serve to invoke and deny the basic political functions of ownership and belonging at the level of language.

Evidently, critics take heed of Beckett's refusal to enter directly into historical commentary, social critique or political agendas, and have developed ingenious ways to draw out the contextual significance of the work. Both neo-Marxist and poststructuralist critics have problematized the biographical formation of Beckett's aesthetic, often deflating real-world politics and resorting to political abstractions. Indeed, it is difficult to identify the contextual relationships that Beckett's literature supports without underestimating its capacity to exceed the limits of biographical interpretation. As a result, Beckett's enduring texts are broadly recognised in relation to the author's wartime experiences and the Holocaust, yet the importance of this era remains as an intermittent or underlying account accumulated over the past fifty years. The dialogue between different phases of Beckett studies, then, has tended to show that the significance of Beckett's response is how it questions biography, history and politics as much as it employs or reflects them. However, Beckett's engagement with the social, cultural and political conditions of wartime Europe has emerged in a handful of recent essays that benefit from rigorous precedents but also utilise a more complete biographical portrait and sophisticated but controversial philosophical apparatuses.

Several Beckett scholars turn to the seminal and provocative writings of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben to discuss the relationship between the Holocaust and literary responses to mass trauma. In 'What Remains of Beckett: Evasion and History', Daniel Katz assesses Agamben alongside Adorno to adjudge 'silence' as a pertinent response to catastrophe, and, in doing so, touches on several key notions

discussed at length in this thesis. Katz refers initially to the violence of the 'image ban' that Adorno points out, and maintains that the absence of the atrocities of the Holocaust in Beckett's work is appropriate, not owing to ethical sensitivity or even artistic inadequacy, but by virtue of the severe and forceful manner of its interdiction. For instance, in light of Knowlson's observation that Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* (French 1952; English 1954) was originally named 'Levy', Katz suggests that Beckett removes the Jewish name to impose an uncompromising image ban.⁴⁵

In pursuit of further elisions, Katz turns to Agamben, specifically his reading of Primo Levi's first-hand accounts of Auschwitz, in order to explore the inability to speak for others, and moreover, speak for oneself. Katz charts the common ground between Agamben and Beckett orientated around the idea that 'one speaks by proxy precisely when most speaking for oneself'.⁴⁶ He also queries and refines several of the arguments that Agamben sets out in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999). Katz asserts that Agamben's onomastic explanation of the term *Muselmann* – a term applied by the inmates at Auschwitz to people appearing 'as if dead before their death' – neglects its deflective quality.⁴⁷ With recourse to Fethi Benslama, Katz suggests that *Muselmann* does not designate the 'non-human created by the camps', but demonstrates a kind of Freudian *witz*, or 'rhetoric of survival' by adopting a pseudonym to shift the emphasis of degradation away from the denomination 'Jew'.⁴⁸ Since he refrains from further comment, Katz's allusion to Jewish perseverance and Freud's study of jokes invites a sustained analysis of humour as a defence or anaesthetic in times of extreme adversity, which forms a part of my study of Beckett's humour in chapter three.

Katz also takes issue with Agamben's philosophical appropriation of 'the

⁴⁵ Daniel Katz, 'What Remains of Beckett: Evasion and History', in *Beckett and Phenomenology*, ed. by Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (London: Continuum, 2009), 144-157, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Katz, 'What Remains of Beckett', p. 149.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 152.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 152.

ineluctable link to one's own singularity' in the Levinasian concept of shame. According to Katz, Agamben is insensitive to the individuality of Holocaust accounts, and therefore lacks subjective and historical specificity in his focus on the enunciation of testimony. This point serves as a reminder of both the analytical and ethical sensitivity required when interrelating first-hand, literary and philosophical accounts of the Holocaust. Beckett criticism that addresses the biographical, historical, social or political context of his prose and drama broaches contentious ethical issues in comparing fictional and non-fictional accounts. In terms of biography's ability to highlight broader historical truths, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Beckett's personal experiences relate to other victims and represent a wider community. The more pressing issue is the extent to which Beckett, and then Beckett's fiction, can be a legitimate substitute or voice-piece for other war and, particularly, Holocaust accounts. Beckett as a 'survivor' and 'witness' is a specious idea that risks subsuming the survivors and witnesses of warfare or the death camps. In effect, the thrust of Katz's essay foregrounds the tension between the ethical obligation and implications in exacting, denoting and naming the catastrophe, or approximating, connoting and 'not-naming'. In other words, Katz addresses the differences between articulating and evoking the narrative of Auschwitz, which are issues that charge Beckett's elision with ethical relevance. Beckett's strict silence on the Shoah is a significant response to the event that shows how art can bear witness whilst respecting the idea that the horror is beyond artistic representation.

In 'Beckett's Theatre "After Auschwitz"', Jackie Blackman explores the 'unsayability' of catastrophe that materialises in both Adorno's essay on Beckett and Agamben's writings on the death camps. She notes that Adorno tempers his famous assertion '[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' to admit that '[p]erennial

suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream'.⁴⁹ The latter formulation stresses entitlement, not efficacy, and is therefore in close proximity with Agamben's analysis of the ethical obligation to bear witness to the inability to bear witness, or, as Beckett implies in *Watt* (written in English in 1943; published in English in 1953), *eff the ineffable* (*W*, 61). From this expressive duty, Blackman extends a more biographical reading in response to Michel Foucault's question: 'How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death?'.⁵⁰ She suggests that, short of a textual signature, biographical 'traces' remain in the artwork that indicate contextual information and aesthetic decisions, which, in turn, disclose the expressive dilemma that compels one to express what cannot be expressed. Thus, it is 'possible to read Beckett's early plays as a very personal and unique creative response to the unsayability and unplayability of Holocaust narrative – a story impossible to represent, yet, a story which must be repeatedly told and somehow understood'.⁵¹

In two other valuable essays, Blackman expands upon Beckett's unperformed play *Eleutheria*, written in 1947, and the Jewish presence in Beckett's post-war work. Blackman accepts Alain Badiou's perception of Beckett as a 'Resistant Philosopher' whose commitment to silence, or rather, a kind of spoken voicelessness, is a 'radical and intimate, violent and reserved, necessary and exceptional action'.⁵² However, Blackman again finds historical and socio-political 'traces' in Beckett's work that remain despite, and as a result of, the general erasure of specifics. In fact, in contrast

⁴⁹ Adorno qtd. in Jackie Blackman, 'Beckett's Theatre "After Auschwitz"', in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Sean Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 71-87, pp. 71, 79.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 74.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 82.

⁵² See Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 5. Jackie Blackman, 'Beckett Judaizing Beckett: "a Jew from Greenland" in Paris', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 18, All Sturm and No Drang, Beckett and Romanticism, ed. by Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 325-340, p. 326.

to Katz's insistence on the particularity of each trauma, the most striking reflection of the Jewish situation that Blackman points out is in the complete negation of distinction. For Jacques Derrida, this contradictory identity of non-identity is inherently Jewish, or at least a humorous Jewish self-image: 'the more one dislocates one's self identity, the more one says "my own identity consists in not being identical to myself, in being a foreigner, the non-coinciding with the self," etc. the more Jewish one is!'.⁵³ It seems that, as much as Beckett's work strips back particularity and allows indeterminacy to reign, the overarching critical view is able to appeal to world history to account for it. The idea that Blackman mobilises is that biographical 'traces' do not define the text's scope, but are further evidence of the feeling and incompetence that make up Beckett's artistic toolset after the war. These tools are incapable of representing an extra-literary reality but can perforate the materials of production to reveal the reality of producing.

For James McNaughton, the inability to convey a past that deserves recognition is also a portal into Beckett's historical predicament. Crucially, McNaughton arrives at this conclusion in his essay 'Beckett, German Fascism, and History: The Futility of Protest' by way of Beckett's German diaries, which meticulously record Beckett's trip through Germany in the years prior to the annexation of Austria in 1938. As McNaughton notes, it is 'more antiquarian in its documentation than reflective'.⁵⁴ Moreover, the critic develops his historical perspective on Beckett in spite of the author's supposed lack of 'historical sense' and

⁵³ Jacques Derrida qtd. in Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* (New York: Columbia University, 2004), p. 83. Blackman, 'Beckett Judaizing Beckett', p. 334.

⁵⁴ James McNaughton, 'Beckett, German Fascism, and History: The Futility of Protest', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 15, *Historicising Beckett/Issues of Performance*, ed. by Marius Buning *et al.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 101-116, p. 108. It is apt that McNaughton's essay appears in an issue dedicated to both historicising Beckett and issues of performance, because increasingly Beckett is seen not as a reflection of historical events but a demonstration or enactment of obligations and problems related to a specific historical juncture.

'disgust of sweeping historical narratives'.⁵⁵ Against the aesthetic protest of modernist art, which experiments with form to frustrate the rationalisation of oppressive regimes, Beckett's diaries take the first steps towards a view of logical structure and precise detail as absurd and meaningless. Thus, in his diaries, Beckett's fidelity to an intrinsically flawed method divulges its own weaknesses. McNaughton clearly sums up the crux of this dynamic for Beckett's art:

Beckett appears caught in a paradox: on the one hand, without memory and the capacity to rationalise the past, the present cannot be understood and the same events threaten to repeat. On the other hand, he rejects causes and backgrounds and finds the rationalisation of them intellectually dishonest and politically dangerous. Far from making him an ahistorical writer, as Beckett's critical reputation often has him, this paradox reveals Beckett caught between the fear of forgetting the past and greater fear of rationally misshaping it.⁵⁶

The prefixes 'non' and 'mis' capture the two potential forms of injustice towards the recent past that Beckett encounters; the event itself is at risk of oblivion if not treated or wrongly treated. The difficulty, then, is how to attend to the historic event without reducing it to an inadequate historical narrative.

A handful of other critical texts elucidate the themes that are central to this thesis. The extant research on testimony, historicity and politics in Beckett's work in relation to the Holocaust and post-Holocaust context shapes my own research, encourages certain areas of development and informs decisions on which Beckett texts to examine. Peter Boxall's *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of*

⁵⁵ McNaughton, 'Beckett, German Fascism, and History', p. 102.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 111.

Modernism (2009), for instance, includes a couple of sections on what he calls 'a Beckettian mode of remembrance', which complements my own chapter on Beckett's method of tracing the lacuna of the event to respond to the recent catastrophe.⁵⁷ Boxall describes how Beckett evokes a concern for the past whilst being reticent towards it. Along with Austrian author Thomas Bernhard, Beckett develops 'a form with which to express the uncanny presence of the past, but for both writers this presence, this continuity between present and past is achieved only through a kind of radical discontinuity, through the erection of a boundary between present and past'.⁵⁸ This kind of separation from the past but traversal of the schism between past and present filters into Beckett's writing style. For Boxall, 'the experience of literary correction and disintegration' seen in Beckett, whereby the very substance of the text involves its deconstruction, appropriately conveys this simultaneous proximity and distance; the past is on the edge of the tongue but always in the process of being revised or erased.⁵⁹ For the most part, however, Boxall's text concentrates on Beckett's literary legacy and his parity with later writers, such as Bernhard and Sebald. Furthermore, Boxall is primarily interested in the texture of temporality and testimony in Beckett, whereas the present work extends the relationship between Beckett and the Holocaust to identity thinking in power struggles, humour as a reaction to suffering and the prevalence of survival.

Similarly, David Houston Jones has produced a monograph dedicated to testimony in Beckett, which makes certain areas of inquiry less pressing. In his first chapter 'Situating Testimony', Jones examines *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, singling out the latter as a particularly fertile text for readings of testimony owing to a

⁵⁷ Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London, Continuum, 2009) p. 86.

⁵⁸ Boxall, *Since Beckett*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 109.

narrator who 'can only speak by disavowing his own voice'.⁶⁰ Jones argues that contumacy 'figures the breakdown of the dialectic of presence and absence which conventionally characterises the relation of the speaker to the dead, as the speaker is the subject of discourse which attempts to make him or her present'.⁶¹ The very speech that should confirm the speaker's presence also exposes the speaker's depersonalisation in language. In *Texts for Nothing*, it is the figure of contumacy that 'allows the discourse of the witness to express both belatedness and the parasitical occupation of the other'.⁶² Since *Texts for Nothing* is the culmination of this type of disintegration, a sustained reading of that collection would only duplicate or converse with much of the work Jones has already undertaken. However, there is less material on *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* in Jones' monograph, and these texts consequently make up the majority of my chapter on testimony. By focusing on these earlier texts initially, there is opportunity to offer productive readings of Beckettian testimony in the context of creaturely life and subsequently develop Jones' analysis of heteronymy in *The Unnamable*.

The Lost Ones (French 1970; English 1971) is another text that is highly appropriate for an interpretation of Beckett and the Holocaust but has already received sustained attention in this context. Antoinette Weber-Caflisch's French-language study *Chacun son dépeupleur* (1994) details the striking likeness Beckett's searching figures have to the malnourished and demoralized prisoners in the Nazi camps. In this text, Beckett describes a cylinder that acts as an incarcerating container for these searching inhabitants, some of whom try to escape on ladders whilst others have given up. In a reference to Weber-Caflisch's book, Jean-Michel Rabaté describes how she 'shows that "*si c'est un homme*" used twice in the last section of the text quotes

⁶⁰ David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 12.

⁶¹ Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, p. 21.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 28.

directly Primo Levi's book *Si c'est un homme* (*Se quest'un uomo*). The questers, called here the "vanquished," do resemble those concentration camp inmates who had abandoned all hope and who, as Levi narrates, were "Muslims".⁶³ Weber-Caflisch makes the allusions to the Holocaust explicit, which conflicts with the largely indirect relationship with context that I underline in the following chapters. Her study leans towards a representation of the camps as a site and specific experience whereas my reading tends to appreciate Beckett's engagement with the Holocaust as a more distant response, attentive to certain testimonial problems, power struggles and survival conditions without necessarily showing how Beckett's texts set these themes in the camps themselves. Rather, it seems that the modes of creaturely life in Beckett's earlier post-war prose and drama that relate to the Holocaust constitute the aftermath that has impacted upon the everyday world, and, for this reason, I choose not to dwell on *The Lost Ones* here.

Alysia Garrison's essay "Faintly struggling things": Trauma, Testimony, and Inscrutable Life in Beckett's *The Unnamable* (2009) intersects with several key concerns of this thesis. Garrison's focus is on Beckett's relationship with trauma theory and how both transhistorical trauma and the historical trauma related to the Holocaust are evident in the last text of Beckett's trilogy. She argues that '*The Unnamable* formalises wounded forms of life by an aesthetic of diminishment'.⁶⁴ In terms of transhistorical trauma, this diminishment occurs as Beckett's subjects fade or are fragmented physically to become more spectral and through the inability to account for this collapsing subjectivity. Nevertheless, this increasingly bare life demands to be heard and seen, giving rise to 'the luminous trace that endures' as

⁶³ Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Philosophizing with Beckett', in *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (Malden: Blackwell, 2010), 97-117, p. 113.

⁶⁴ Alysia E. Garrison, "Faintly struggling things": Trauma, Testimony, and Inscrutable Life in Beckett's *The Unnamable*, *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Seán Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 89-106, p. 92.

'memory gasps'.⁶⁵ In the second half of the essay, Garrison explains how more precise images and terms such as 'tears' and 'ash' act as 'placeholders for specified loss'.⁶⁶ Although a secondary or distant witness, Beckett still uses his experience or knowledge of the events according to Garrison and his texts are therefore inevitably marked by these memories. One of Garrison's key claims, then, is that the transhistorical and historical registers of trauma entwine so that nonspecific visions of trauma are always suggestive of specific traumatic events and vice versa. The notion that Beckett's novel 'can be read as an *effect* or *symptom* of the atrocities' resonates with my own approach to Beckett and the Holocaust, whereby the modes of creaturely life evident in Beckett serve to illuminate 'life's distorted alterity under contingent biopolitical duress' and 'the annihilation of expression and the return of ghostly remains, a testimonial form appropriate, perhaps, to witness what remains of the human in the inhuman in the aftermath of traumatic limit events'.⁶⁷ Although Garrison only touches on these areas, the biopolitical dimension and the human-inhuman divide offer potential for further development in the attempt to associate Beckett's work with the political dimensions of the Holocaust and post-Holocaust views of the human. Indeed, Beckett's work does engage with experiences of trauma and the concept of the creature articulates the historical significance of these experiences more acutely by theorising the denuded mode of being seen in Beckett's inscrutable life. Furthermore, the creaturely life apparent in Beckett's post-war prose and drama helps us to understand this construct as a literary figuration in a historical context.

Ostensibly, Joanne Shaw's *Impotence and Making in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable, and How It Is* (2010) is also a pertinent study, with its focus on the creation of beings and how impotence in Beckett's prose

⁶⁵ Garrison, 'Trauma, Testimony and Inscrutable Life', pp. 97, 98.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 99.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 93, 101.

texts actually generates creativity. For Shaw, the performance of language, however inadequate or impotent, marks the beginning of the physical condition of the self: 'through an impregnation, words fertilize Beckett's narrators to produce the foetus that will develop into their bodily offspring. [...] I want to examine how Beckett and his narrators pose the question of being – the question of how the self is made, or (if you will) "how it is" or how it comes to be'.⁶⁸ Shaw goes on to offer a psychoanalytically oriented study that describes Beckett's work as a narrative of creation and destruction between birth and death drives. As Adam Piette explains in his review of the book, Shaw applies the idea of a 'male mother' to Beckett's narrators and views creativity as 'the symptom of a death-entranced longing for the womb created by a myth of the foetus born prematurely in an amniotic space'.⁶⁹ In this reading, Beckett's impotent creatures appear to be a consequence of the enduring desire to be unborn, but in their very desire for nothingness the creatures reveal their substance as creative subjects.

Shaw's examination of impotence and making does contain several overlaps with my own work. The idea of a subject produced through the performance of language and the dialectic between power and impotence are areas of inquiry that I also pursue. The most directly relevant aspect of Shaw's study is the relationship between textual creativity and bodily creation. In this thesis, chapter three on humour includes a section on textual performances in which the language in Beckett's prose takes on a demonstrative quality, and a section on flesh and words in which language in Beckett's drama is considered as a fundamental part of the physical action on stage. Yet, given my interest in humour as a response to the impotence of language, these

⁶⁸ Joanne Shaw, *Impotence and Making in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable, and How It Is* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2010), p. 16.

⁶⁹ Adam Piette, 'Impotence and Making in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, and *How It Is*' (Review), *French Studies*, 67.3 (2013), 436-437, p. 436.

issues are largely treated with a different analytical framework. More importantly, there is no concept of creaturely life or the creature in Shaw's study despite several references to creatures in her introduction. As such, I replace Shaw's psychoanalytical navigation of mind-body duality as it appears in Beckett with an analysis of the extent to which creaturely life pertains to a politically produced form of being. On this front, Shaw's study is mainly disinterested or else lacks detail. As Piette affirms in his assessment of Shaw, 'the occasional allusion to Holocaust or Cold War nuclear contexts is too fleeting to have any real impact'.⁷⁰ Although this thesis responds to similar Beckettian themes as Shaw, I seek to contribute an exposition of the modes of creaturely life apparent in Beckett's work that also have a broad historical and political dimension to them.

Finally, one of Beckett's later stage pieces warrants mention for its potential for political interpretation. *Catastrophe* (French 1982: English 1982) is a short play dedicated to Czech dissident and fellow playwright Vaclav Havel. It centres on a director and his assistant as they manipulate a 'protagonist' on stage in preparation for a performance. The pair strip off the protagonist's gown and hat, which makes him shiver. They raise him on a pedestal and force him to bow his head, but in the final moments of the play, the protagonist looks up defiantly as the sound of an audience's applause fades. There is clearly a play on the idea of authority in both an artistic and political sense as Beckett explores the power involved in directing, which resembles the tyrannical control associated with a dictatorship. Appearing late in Beckett's career, this play makes the artistic and political axis relatively explicit, and, as Beckett affirms, the end is obviously a display of dissidence: "'There's no ambiguity at all,'" said Beckett. "He's saying: you bastards, you haven't finished me yet!"⁷¹ Indeed, the

⁷⁰ Piette, 'Impotence and Making' (Review), p. 436.

⁷¹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 680.

play is at odds with the general tenor of Beckett's body of work owing to its strong political connotations and unusually unambiguous ending. The political and power dynamics of the play have been covered at length in other studies, including Robert Sandarg's 'A Political Perspective on *Catastrophe*' (1989) and Shannon Jackson's 'Performing the Performance of Power in Beckett's *Catastrophe*' (1992).⁷² My work is predominantly limited to earlier Beckett texts in order to trace these themes as they germinate between 1945 and 1960 during which time Beckett's work enters a transitional stage and bears the creaturely dislocation from a recognisable, meaningful world. For the most part, I focus on *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* since these texts are central to the Beckett canon, contemporaneous with the immediate post-Holocaust cultural milieu and yet still underexplored in terms of relating Beckett's work to the historical and political context.

The argument that I develop in terms of Beckett's relationship with the historical context is that Beckett is attentive to two key elements that are specific to the Holocaust but have implications that extend well beyond the camps. In the chapters that follow, I unpack Beckett's evocations of the unspeakable event and the inhuman with the human, both of which are made clearer through the concept of the creature, which is discussed at length in the next section. These two elements pertain to the Holocaust as a traumatic experience and exercise in dehumanisation, and yet lead to more diffuse responses to the Holocaust as a cultural watershed in the West. Hence, the unspeakability of the event escalates into the inadequacy of art after Auschwitz. The individual's obligation to account for the unsayable or unintelligible

⁷² See Robert Sandarg, 'A Political Perspective on *Catastrophe*', in *'Make Sense Who May': Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works*, ed. by Robin J. Davis and Lance St J. Butler (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1989), pp. 137-144. Shannon Jackson, 'Performing the Performance of Power in Beckett's *Catastrophe*', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 6.2 (Spring 1992), 23-42.

catastrophe suggests a crisis in expression and epistemology that also puts artistic forms in jeopardy. Likewise, Nazi ideology against the Jews and the creation of the *Muselmann* in the camps question the capacity for inhuman cruelty and suffering. The power struggles between different groups and the perverse sovereign decision on life worthy of living destabilises the humanistic vision of the human and the very notion of universal human rights.

Beckett engages with these issues through his art of failure and his creaturely beings so that the Holocaust is evident in Beckett's work not only through traces that permeate his writing, but in modes of expression (testimony, humour) and being (power, survival) that constitute the texture of his work. What might be considered direct references or allusions to the historical context in Beckett, then, are generally eschewed in favour of these pertinent conditions or states made apparent by the catastrophe whilst having repercussions for the status of art and the human 'after the Holocaust'. It is not my intention to suggest that Beckett attempts to represent the Holocaust as an event that happened to people, but more that Beckett's post-war work bears the products of the Holocaust. The direct impact of this historical context on Beckett's work is in his awareness of the obstacles facing testimony and the idea that the human has entered a survival mode or post-human phase, which are aspects of the perceived rupture in value systems and structures of meaning in the wake of the Holocaust.

In a 1995 address to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel claims that '[a]fter Auschwitz, the human condition is not the same, nothing will be the same'.⁷³ This assertion indicates the broad cultural impact of the Holocaust, an impact that dominates postmodern thinkers who 'insisted that the

⁷³ Elie Wiesel, 'Liberation of Auschwitz', *First Person Singular: Elie Wiesel*, <<http://www.pbs.org/eliewiesel/life/auschwitz.html>> [accessed 19/07/2013].

Holocaust marks a break in the trajectory of the West, one which provokes us to rethink the implications of the project of modernity'.⁷⁴ Beckett is at the epicentre of this shift in thinking regarding art and the human condition, and an insight into his creatures and art of failure goes beyond the idea that 'Beckett's skeletal characters and desolate landscape are haunted by the ghosts of Auschwitz'.⁷⁵ Whilst Beckett's imagery might be said to resemble the camps and inmates or convey the ruins of culture, one of the focal points here is the conditions evoked by the *Muselmann*, both in terms of a curious testimonial position and as an uncanny, inhuman survivor. Since I describe these two elements with recourse to creaturely life, thus making the creature a product of the historical context, each mode of creaturely life in Beckett's work that I explicate here is to be understood as being related to the Holocaust implicitly.

'Defining' the Creature

The current study enters into dialogue with the model premises and precepts developed in Beckett studies to expand upon the intricacies of Beckett in context. My own standpoint on Beckett's historical relevance, in an amalgamation of biographical, social and political elements, draws upon the notion of the 'creature', which has yet to be applied thoroughly to Beckett's work.⁷⁶ I suggest that Beckett's literature develops a number of 'creaturely' dimensions that relate to the historical juncture in an oblique, elliptical manner but also extract the kind of basic components of power and production, ownership and organisation that found interactive relations. As such, the creature and its attendant meanings open up parallels between artistic and socio-

⁷⁴ Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, eds., *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), p. 2.

⁷⁵ Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 142.

⁷⁶ The study of animals in Beckett, and the relationship between human and non-human beings, has deservedly received critical attention. See Mary Bryden ed., *Beckett and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2013).

political issues to relate Beckett's work to his contemporary milieu, which was dominated by a sense of disenchantment, particularly towards a humanist model of meaning and purpose, after the devastation of the mid-twentieth century. The Second World War and the Holocaust transformed, or rather revealed, the idea of the human as people had witnessed its creaturely potential.

The creature is an especially ambiguous and polyvalent concept, and it is therefore necessary to outline its theorised form in order to understand what it might signify for Beckett. In Julia Lupton's essay 'Creature Caliban' on Shakespeare's figure of servitude and monstrosity, the '*creatura* is a thing always in the process of undergoing creation: the creature is actively passive or, better, *passionate*, perpetually becoming created, subject to transformations at the behest of the arbitrary commands of an Other'.⁷⁷ Lupton's emphasis is on the process of creating the creature and its endless potential, focusing on the perpetual act of manipulating an inferior other, which serves to differentiate the superior maker. As an identity in action, the creature is an indeterminate figure, defined as much by the forces inflicted upon it as the results of the subjugating process. Therefore, a figure such as Caliban can embrace each of the various layers of the term 'creature' by evoking its overall pliability. He is essentially human despite his lack of human form, and in this respect, he is a liminal being that unsettles the borderlines of anthropology.⁷⁸ Beckett recognises this type of uncanny being, both familiar and alien, early in his career. In Beckett's first published novel *Murphy* (1938), the title character is described as not 'rightly human' by the 'chandlers' eldest waste product' (*M*, 47). 'Not rightly human' is an apt description of the creature's position; it suggests a being that retains an element of the human but

⁷⁷ Julia Reinhard Lupton, 'Creature Caliban', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51.1 (2000), 1-23, p. 1.

⁷⁸ In performance, Caliban is necessarily portrayed by a human actor, which makes the human semblance more apparent and is a fitting dramatic limitation that fixes the inextricable human aspect of the creature.

fails to correlate with humanity's vision of the human. The fact that a character metaphorically reduced to excrement can justifiably cast such a judgement on Murphy shows how the hierarchy system works, in which each individual jostles for the higher, more human rank.⁷⁹

Whilst Beckett's 'not rightly human' figures retain human properties, the Beckettian creature is also an amalgamation of human, animal and mechanical elements, which can imply either a composite monstrosity or introduce the creature as a being that potentially inhabits each denomination. In the same way that 'animal' evokes animate and 'machine' suggests contrivance, the creature intimates a process of making or being made. Creatureliness is an ontological condition that a god, sovereign or writer can inflict upon a person or produce within a subject, and is therefore 'intrahuman'. The potential to be impoverished and attenuated, to be an amorphous and ambiguous being, to be more inhuman, is endemic to the human. As a result, the semantic baggage of the term 'creature' alludes to a framework of fabrication and mastery that scaffolds both socio-political relations and artistic matters in Beckett.

In his book *On Creaturely Life* (2006), Eric Santner employs W. G. Sebald as a key exponent of several interrelated definitions of 'creaturely life'. It should be noted that Santner uses 'creature' and 'creaturely life' interchangeably, and, on the whole, I will adopt a similar strategy to avoid confusion. Having said that, there are acute differences between the terms. The latter is a more general and mobile phrase, not necessarily referring to the creature's life but rather applied to evoke a particular condition and set of characteristics that might be associated with the creature. Santner suggests as much in his formulation of the unsettling proximity between humans and

⁷⁹ See Shane Weller, 'Not Rightly Human', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 19, Borderless Beckett (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 211-221, p. 216.

animals, in which he manages to retain both similarity and difference between the species. In the wake of the philosophical argument about 'speciesism' from the early 1970s, he writes that creaturely life occurs in 'the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference'.⁸⁰ Creaturely life, in Santner's approximation, is a paradoxical state of individuality and commonality between humans and animals, as though adjacent through their alterity. It is anchored in the distinct category of human or animal, but retains impressions of its other. Therefore, there is a distinction between 'creaturely life' in which we find the creature within a distinct being, and the 'creature', which incorporates aspects of the human, animal and machine but, despite appearances and behaviours, is essentially none of these. The creature's essence, in effect, is in its lack of definition and its ability to resist fixed denominations. The upshot of this distinction is that Santner confines his reading to *creaturely life* as a human dimension, and whilst this is a significant part of the present study, I also use the *creature* to access a less anthropocentric view of the human, the overlapping areas between human and non-human categories, and the more animalistic and mechanical components of Beckett's figures.

The real significance of creaturely life for Santner is that it marks a political dynamic. Santner suggests that the political constitutes the human's passage into creaturely life and yet it is the political that distinguishes man from the creature: 'human beings are not just creatures among other creatures but are in some sense *more creaturely* than other creatures by virtue of an excess that is produced in the space of the political and that, paradoxically, accounts for their "humanity"'.⁸¹ This contradictory state, in which the political appears simultaneously to make and take humanity, is misleading if creaturely life is perceived in isolation from human life. On

⁸⁰ Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), p. 12.

⁸¹ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 26.

the contrary, creaturely life forms a dimension of human life, it is 'the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life'.⁸² According to Santner, the creature's political being correlates with what Foucault, and subsequently Agamben, calls 'biopolitics', and evokes an essential vitality known as 'bare life'. Foucault proposes that politics permeates the raw substance of being and makes a decision on what constitutes a life worth living: 'For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question'.⁸³ As Foucault intimates here, the political sphere of human life was once an ancillary property that confirmed humanity's place at the summit of the Aristotelian *scala naturae*.⁸⁴ However, in the modern age, political being is conflated with being itself, which realises the transition from the contingency of politics, or its place as a human privilege, into creaturely terrain and the more essential, animalistic foundations of the human. In Foucault's initial conception at least, biopolitics appears to blur the margins between anthropological and ethnological perspectives by reducing 'man the animal *with* politics' to 'man the animal *of* politics'.

For Santner, however, the creature emerges as the new subject of political interventions that pervade the core of human existence. Creaturely life is removed from politics that govern a particular way of life and is exposed to the biopolitics that regulate life itself, altering the meaning of 'state politics' to suggest an authority that grants the very state of human being. Santner makes it clear that creaturely life is a

⁸² Ibid. p. 12.

⁸³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, Vol. 1, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 143.

⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida points out the human's inherent political capacity: 'The definition of man as political animal, a definition that never fails to specify "by nature"', *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. 1, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), p. 315.

human component that 'pertains not primarily to a sense of shared animality or a shared animal suffering but to a biopolitical *animation* that distinguishes man from animal'.⁸⁵ This 'biopolitical animation' occurs most obviously for Santner in a judicial prorogation, which draws heavily on Agamben's readings of the German political theorist Carl Schmitt. Santner asserts that 'creaturely life is just life abandoned to the state of exception/emergency, that paradoxical domain in which law has been suspended in the name of preserving law'.⁸⁶ The state of exception rejects valued principles in order to safeguard them, which undermines the sanctity of the rule and underlines its provisional status. As such, the state of exception indicates an alternative jurisdiction: a default set of rudimentary actions invoked when the ideal order fails or no longer suffices.

Agamben argues that the concentration and extermination camps are the paradigmatic sites of biopolitical activity under a sustained state of exception. They represent 'an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin'.⁸⁷ As facilities introduced to solve an excess population that was labelled the *Ballastexistenzen* in Nazi Germany, or lives that were encumbrances and a 'waste of space', concentration and extermination camps prevent unworthy life from becoming unmanageable.⁸⁸ It appears that when the exception becomes the rule, the unexceptional, there is a kind of devolution in the name of revolution, whereby a primitive intervention invoked by rationalised prerogatives or 'necessity' supersedes

⁸⁵ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 39.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 22.

⁸⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Open: Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003) p. 22.

⁸⁸ Lawrence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* (London: BBC, 2005), p. 54.

the former ideological structure. Hence, creatures abandoned to the state of exception are subjects of an order at once enlightened and barbaric.⁸⁹

Although Santner rejects 'shared animality' as a determining part of the creature, his use of the state of exception at least suggests a more atavistic human jurisdiction that evokes a master narrative of power relations. Indeed, when Adolf Hitler invoked the 'Decree for the Protection of the People and the State' and pursued the Nazi regime's *Gleichschaltung* that marked a twelve-year long state of exception, he inaugurated a biopolitical domain that reintroduced the primacy of sovereign power, identity and alterity, and survival. These implications materialise in Beckett's creaturely narrative dimensions and creaturely subjectivity to suggest an artistic and biopolitical axis. His post-war work interrogates, and arguably protests against, total authority to explore the power struggles in the production of subjects. When Beckett employs the *poioumenon* (a literary genre in which the work is about its own making) as he does in his post-war trilogy of novels, his work engages with the power dynamics involved in the mutual ordering and structuring of worlds in art and reality. As H. Porter Abbott contends: 'tyranny is rooted in the imagination. The creating of art, like the making of worlds, is a matter of cramming, jamming, wedging, bending, poking. Nothing is sacred in this process'.⁹⁰ Similarly, Beckett's work survives on the power to unravel systems that make sense, that shape efficient and proper relations, and that aspire to utopian perfection.

Beckett's movement between historically pertinent images and tones, and an elemental or biotic plane, shows a facet of the Beckettian creature that relates to an

⁸⁹ Although Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer do not address the political state of exception, my reading is informed by ideas described in their co-authored book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947): 'With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of new barbarism are germinating'. See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2002), p. 25.

⁹⁰ H. Porter Abbott, *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996), p. 141.

underpinning theme of this thesis. In the following chapters I introduce ways of combining a historical perspective with an anthropological significance to show that Beckett's contextual relevance also pertains to a larger ontological scale. Beckett invokes 'vast tracts of time' (*HII*, 3), not in terms of a historiographical portrait that draws a line between the present and past, but as an atavistic presence that is always available to the human. That is, the more primitive, animalistic stratum accompanies Beckett's creatures in the present. As I discuss in chapter one, Beckett's indirect response to the Holocaust highlights the obstacles to human communication and epistemology. In chapters two and four I address the biopolitical exclusions that occur in Beckett's texts, whereby the protagonists are treated as substandard citizens, which intimates the insecure nature of the human status. The resultant degradation of language, disruption of epistemology and devaluation of human meaning all place emphasis on the human's transformation into the basic materiality of existence. In other words, Beckett's aesthetic and political layers convey a kind of parallel vision of the human as the debased life of the surviving creature betrays an uncanny resemblance to the humanistic ideal. The viewpoint I adopt in this respect is similar to Adorno's view as expressed in his notes on *Endgame*: 'B[eckett]'s genius is that he has captured this semblance of the non-historical, of the *condition humaine*, in historical images, and thus transfixed it'.⁹¹ Together, Beckett's evocation of the inability to account positively for the Holocaust and the biopolitical assessment of valuable human life means he conveys the essential paradox of the human condition: to be human is to be provisional, in flux, and *potentially* inhuman. In this way, the historical moment discloses the precarious condition of the human.

⁹¹ Theodor Adorno, 'Dossier: Adorno's Notes on Beckett', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 19.2 (2010), trans. by Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller, 157–178, p. 162.

The essential captured in a temporal image is pivotal to Santner's notion of the creature. Apropos of Walter Benjamin, he suggests that inapprehensible fragments of history reify the abstruseness of nature to reveal the natural historical distance between the human world and its human meaning. Santner's explanation is worth quoting at length:

The opacity and recalcitrance that we associate with the materiality of nature – the mute “thingness” of nature – is, paradoxically, most palpable where we encounter it as a piece of human history that has become an enigmatic ruin beyond our capacity to endow it with meaning, to integrate it into our symbolic universe. Where a piece of human world presents itself as a surplus that both demands and resists symbolization, that is both inside and outside the “symbolic order” [...] that is where we find ourselves in the midst of “natural history”. What I am calling creaturely life is a dimension of human existence called into being at such natural historical fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning.⁹²

Santner's Benjaminian ‘natural historical fissures or caesuras’ are intimately related to the idea of ‘the open’, considered in different ways by Rainer Maria Rilke and Martin Heidegger. In contrast to Heidegger's view of the animal as *weltarm*, or ‘poor in world’, belonging to its environment without conscious reflection, Rilke suggests that the human ability to form the world, what Heidegger calls *weltbildend*, aligns man with the poor in world. According to Rilke's eighth duino elegy, consciousness distances man from the ‘pure space’ of the world, the open, whereas animals are

⁹² Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. xv.

united with their environment.⁹³ Man therefore borders on the animalistic poor in world, not because he is incognizant and merely exists, reacting to the things he encounters around him, but because he is unable to apprehend the world in an immediate sense. The human world is impoverished as a result of a self-constructed and mediating worldview, complete with lexical signs and conceptual values.⁹⁴

It is the remote position in relation to the open – accentuated by historical moments that expose the hiatus in world meaning – that forms the creaturely dimension. The decisive event here is the human's dislocation from the construction, as it enacts the 'traumatic disruption' of creaturely life, which is shown to be not quite animal but not exactly human.⁹⁵ For Santner, the natural historical status of artefacts beyond the 'symbolic universe' leads to a state akin to Benjamin's 'petrified unrest', or '*undeadness*, the space between real and symbolic death', which Santner takes to be the ultimate domain of creaturely life.⁹⁶ This definitive space of the creature between types of death resonates profoundly in the purgatorial images of Beckett's work and conjures the *Muselmann's* death-in-life. When the ability to effect the world-forming mediation is redundant, the human withdraws from human life, endures a symbolic death and is thrown into a creaturely realm between the open and the construction. Santner writes that '[c]reatureliness is thus a dimension not so much of biological as of *ontological vulnerability*, a vulnerability that permeates human being as that being whose essence it is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, susceptible to breakdown'.⁹⁷ By all accounts, the creature is a figure of

⁹³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (London: Hogarth, 1963), p. 77.

⁹⁴ See Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, pp. 1-12.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 10.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. xx.

⁹⁷ Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains – The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: Chicago University, 2011), p. 6.

trauma that beholds the lost idea of the human as a melancholic reminder, but moves into the future as the post-human, bearing the remnants of the human with it.

Santner's conception of creaturely life is the most thorough attempt to articulate this mode of being. In the chapters that follow, I apply and expand upon his key notions that I deem relevant to Beckett's work, namely the relationship between flesh and words in chapter three, and the state of 'undeadness' in chapter four. I also follow Santner's lead in drawing on Walter Benjamin's concepts of 'melancholy immersion' and 'petrified unrest' to describe creaturely life. Yet, my understanding of creaturely life, as shaped by Beckett's evocations, departs from and develops Santner's model in several respects. Whilst I make use of Benjamin for an insight into creaturely life, one of the concepts I derive from his comments is left unsaid in Santner. As I discuss in chapters one and two, Beckett's art of failure suggests a conception of the sovereign and creature in which positions of power slide into weakness and contrariwise. Although Benjamin's few references to the creature offer ample opportunity for interpretation and are by no means prescriptive, this is clearly a dynamic of the creature that is present in Benjamin's work and yet Santner does not dwell upon it. This is perhaps because the simultaneously potent and impotent Beckettian author-narrator makes such a creaturely dynamic more apparent. I use the term '(in)sovereignty' to describe this shifting of power, which I consider key to the dichotomous nature of Beckett's creatures as creators and creations.

Whereas Santner's creaturely life fixes on the human who experiences a process of destitution to become something other than human 'between real and symbolic death', my reading is often directed towards the close proximity with animalistic and, to a lesser extent, mechanical elements that the fall from humanity

suggests.⁹⁸ Santner writes that 'creatureliness' is 'a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of the antagonisms in and of the political field'.⁹⁹ Even so, as the human is exposed to bare life, there is a greater similarity to the nonhuman animal and I emphasise this intimacy with the other in my concept of the creature. This involves working through the notions of the 'open' and 'construction' that Santner reflects upon in order to think about the use of the animal status in the Nazis' biopolitical applications, the realisation of human captivation through humour, and the possibility of human and nonhuman animal types of survival. As a product of the state of exception, the creature can also evoke the more contrived, mechanical elements of being, such as the adherence to broken human forms of making meaning and repetitive behaviours and recollections. If creaturely life is a mode of being between the human and bare life, my understanding of the creature pays attention to the 'foul brood, neither man nor beast' that Beckett describes in *Molloy* (T, 19) but still considers the extent to which a denuded human might have an affinity with animalistic and mechanical elements.

I also place emphasis on the biopolitical nature of the Holocaust as an example of creaturely life, which means expanding on aspects of the creature that are underdeveloped in Santner. The Nazi denationalization and dehumanization of the Jews marks a remarkable state intervention in the classification of life granted political value and deemed unworthy of living. This signals a strong case for a contextually grounded creaturely life. However, Santner only offers a passing reference to the *Muselmann* in a footnote in his book *On Creaturely Life*, which I quote in chapter four. It is my contention that the creaturely life in Beckett occurs through an awareness of the precarious and provisional condition of the idea of the

⁹⁸ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. xx.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. xix

human during this era. Beckett's creatures evoke the *Muselmann* and it is this figure that conveys the inhuman potential that resides within the human, as Dominic La Capra has also noted: 'One might also see Samuel Beckett as having had the daring to stage, in an incredible series of radically disempowered beings, the – or at least something close to the – *Muselmann*'s experience of disempowerment and living death'.¹⁰⁰ The parity between the *Muselmann* and the Beckettian creature is made apparent as I refer to the *Muselmann* as a witness in relation to Beckett's art of failure, the identity anxieties that give rise to the Jew as creature in relation to Beckett's master-servant relationships and the Nazis' orchestration of torturous survival conditions that bear comparison with the purgatorial lives of Beckett's characters.

As we have seen, the creature is called into being by disjunctions between states and the friction of difference, yet continues to lack a stable denomination of its own. For these reasons, my analysis of Beckett's prose and drama is guided by a trope compatible with poststructuralist theoretical practice, particularly in its misgivings about essentialism. Cary Wolfe recognises that the crisis of humanism was 'brought on, in no small part, first by structuralism and then poststructuralism and its interrogation of the figure of the human as constitutive (rather than technically, materially and discursively constituted) stuff of history and the social'.¹⁰¹ As with the destabilisation of humanism, the creature engendered and defined by external conditions can be considered a 'created' figure, but this creation can often imply the creature's own creative role. The author-narrators in the trilogy, for example, are effectively sundered beings that create themselves through the desubjectifying processes of self-reflection and projected figments, which are processes that remain

¹⁰⁰ Dominic La Capra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 2004), p. 187.

¹⁰¹ Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), pp. x-xi.

incomplete. More accurately, then, the creature is a being always in process and therefore a kind of unrealisable or inexhaustible potential. It is *subject to creation* in the sense that it is possible for another to make the creature, it is always yet to be fully made and is also a figure involved in the process of its own creation. As such, the creaturely is evoked in relation to Beckett in this thesis to capitalise on its many connotations, but also acknowledge the coalescence of other 'identities' and resistance to identification that renders it irreducible, or *sui generis*. The creature is a paradoxical appellation for 'this unnamable thing that I name and never wear out', 'born of the impossible voice the unmakeable being' (TN, 27, 53).¹⁰²

However, as David Wood points out, '[i]t is one of the greatest achievements of deconstruction to have drawn our attention to the fact that thinking (and responsible action) typically consists not in resolving ambivalences, but in "going through the undecidable," finding "productive" ways of acknowledging and responding to conflicting situations'.¹⁰³ My own debt to deconstruction is to explicate the liminality and indeterminacy of Beckett's work by way of the creature and creaturely life, not claiming to resolve Beckett's relationship with context but allowing discourses to participate in a dialogue that brings social, political, biographical and historical frames of reference back into contention with one another. That is, to address the creature *in-between* the possibilities of Beckett, his work and its various contexts. Furthermore, this thesis does not intend to enter into the modernism/postmodernism turf war that has dominated Beckett studies since the advent of poststructuralism. The creature's

¹⁰² In a manner akin to Hill's 'Up The Republic!' noted above, Jacob Lund perceives the endless naming of the unnameable as a political act, but in a particularly biopolitical sense: 'As with Beckett's unnameable being, this "wordless thing in an empty space" can be read as a manifestation of Agamben's infancy, which forms the basis for an ethical and political attempt to resist and counter-act the biopolitical ambition to completely separate naked life from political existence, the living being from the linguistic being', see Jacob Lund, 'Biopolitical Beckett: Self-desubjectification as Resistance', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 8.1 (2009), 67-77, p. 75.

¹⁰³ David Wood, 'Thinking with Cats', in *Animal Philosophy – Ethics and Identity* (London: Continuum, 2004), 129-144, p. 135.

mobility filters into the determining approach of the thesis, which works to navigate conflicting critical schools in Beckett studies to offer an insight into the contextual value of Beckett's writing. Far from reconciling divergent critical positions, the framework employed here acknowledges Beckett's work as an accommodating form that demonstrates an inclusive but indeterminate quality, generated by the tension between diverse and inconsistent components.

Terry Eagleton describes how '[i]t is possible to see Beckett as stranded somewhere between modernist and postmodernist cases'. He writes:

In his sense of the extreme elusiveness of meaning, Beckett is classically modernist. [...] Everything in this post-Auschwitz world is ambiguous and indeterminate. Every proposition is a tentative hypothesis. [...] The other side of Beckett's work, however, is a kind of postmodern positivism, for which things are not endlessly elusive but brutally themselves.¹⁰⁴

Increasingly, Beckett is included as a 'late modernist' to convey these debts to modernism whilst intimating the postmodern traits that distance him from his precursors. The late in 'late modernism' might suggest a period at the end or just after modernism, and by extension, before or at the beginning of postmodernism. However, to periodise late modernism as a kind of 'time capsule of isolation or exile' between 'two eras' is to miss the continuities and intersections between modernist and postmodernist styles.¹⁰⁵ Anthony Mellors points out this problematic formulation in his book *Late Modernist Poetics* (2005) and goes on to note that '[i]f modernism

¹⁰⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), pp. 59, 64.

¹⁰⁵ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1999), pp. 10-11.

dissolved, its solution was more modernism. If it died, it had an afterlife, not an empty space. Its survival is still a powerful force in aesthetic practice and cultural ideals today'.¹⁰⁶ It therefore seems wise to recognise Beckett's work, particularly his post-war texts, alongside late modernist artists who 'remain true to the modernist imperative that eclecticism and difficulty form a hermeneutic basis for renewal, but their belatedness involves a disavowal of the unifying and totalising gestures of modernist aesthetics'.¹⁰⁷ By delineating the creature as a type of being nostalgic or hopeful for a settled form of meaning but actually subject to the frisson of the creative process, this thesis remains aware of the fact that modernist and postmodernist traits overlap in Beckett. Between his great precursor James Joyce and art in the wake of Auschwitz, Beckett's art is a strange breed of uncompromising dedication and kaleidoscopic possibility.

In some respects, the Holocaust marks the transition between these types of thinking, as Mark C. Taylor asserts: 'In the dark light of those flames and the arid dust of those ashes, modernism ends and something *other* begins'.¹⁰⁸ Reeling from the unfathomable but perversely rationalised endeavour to annihilate an entire people, Western civilisation finds the very idea of truth in a precarious state. As a result of this growing uncertainty, postmodernists 'refuse all offers of truth, wholeness and immediacy', which challenges the modernists' 'old-fashioned desire for presence, immediacy and purity'.¹⁰⁹ Yet, Beckett's late modernism is suggestive of a continuum whereby modernist traits linger on in the aftermath of the Holocaust whilst postmodernist ideas are taking root. The instability of meaning, 'incredulity towards

¹⁰⁶ Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰⁸ Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), pp. 46-47.

¹⁰⁹ Tracy Fessenden, 'Mark C. Taylor and Limits of Postmodern Imagination', in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, ed. by Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 85-100, p. 86.

metanarratives' and language's construction of the subject in postmodernist thought do not entirely account for the accompanying longing for meaning seen in Beckett's post-war works.¹¹⁰ As such, my interest in the creaturely dislocation from meaning in Beckett employs aspects of critical theory to assess how the experience of meaninglessness can be situated in a historical and political context whilst recognising how the very meaning the creatures wish to retain is itself open to a constructed status.

The primary intervention this thesis seeks to make is in the field of Beckett studies as it sets out to contribute an analysis of the suspended modes of his creatures and the relationship that these dynamics have with contemporaneous contexts. As a result, however, this thesis will also develop an understanding of the creature more generally, and specifically as a literary figuration entangled in the biopolitical dimensions of the Nazi regime. The framework of critical theory employed here is thus designed to articulate the broader issues of alienation from and the very possibility of authentic meaning that I see as a fundamental part of creaturely life in Beckett's post-war work. That is, how language can attest for or constitute a subject and how biopolitical activity unsettles the idea of a natural order, showing that meaningful life is dependent on a privileged place in a totalising system. The point is that a meaningful status as a subject is not a given fact, but a process open to revision and stipulations. In the most extreme case, this is true of the human category. At this particular period in time, to be human is to be granted value according to a biopolitical system that ascribes meaning, and the resulting vulnerability of meaning invades the idea of language as an autobiographical tool and prompts the psychological investment in a prior order.

¹¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), p. xxiv.

The theorists selected for discussion in this thesis represent a workable and cohesive group that engage with related areas of critique. Theodor Adorno's essay on Beckett is a crucial point of reference in any reading of Beckett as a writer engaged with social content through an oblique or negative method. As noted above, Adorno's essay begins to understand the meaninglessness of Beckett's work in terms of an aesthetic response to culture after Auschwitz. I draw on Walter Benjamin's work primarily for his allusive references to the creature, which help to illuminate the melancholic nature of creaturely life and the relationship between sovereignty and the creature. These issues of sovereignty and variations on the creature, such as the beast or inhuman, are also scattered throughout Jacques Derrida's later works and Giorgio Agamben's writings on biopolitics and Auschwitz. Alongside their contributions on testimony, Derrida and Agamben offer particularly applicable material for a discussion of the creaturely life in Beckett and this concept's bearing on the historical and political context, with their emphasis on decentring the subject and eliciting the unsettled nature of meaning. Derrida accepts that the Holocaust is an implicit part of his work ('Certainly "Auschwitz" as you correctly state has never been "very far from my thoughts"') and that he feels a close proximity with Beckett ('This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close').¹¹¹ Similarly, Agamben's influence on contemporary reflections on the Holocaust is palpable, and, as the essays by Katz, Blackman and Garrison show, he is a felicitous figure for studies of Beckett's work in this context. Each of the four key thinkers are concerned with at least one, and often several, of the relationships I am looking to develop.

¹¹¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Canons and Metonymies: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. by Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 1992), 195-218, p. 211. Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida", trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33-75, pp. 60-61.

However, the range and density of these four theorists' work is well known and consequently a sustained engagement with the entirety of their output is not possible. Derrida in particular was a prolific writer on a diverse range of subjects, and, as Shane Weller notes, he was comfortable discussing an array of philosophers and writers in a single text: 'To take, for instance, the 1994 volume *Politics of Friendship*—the range of authors covered in this text is daunting, to say the least: Aristotle, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Schmitt, Heidegger, Levinas, Blanchot, to name only a few'.¹¹² Hence, the texts discussed here focus on selected points of contact with Beckett and suggestive ideas on the creature, biopolitics, testimony and sovereignty. Owing to purely practical constraints, a number of valuable other philosophers and theorists are marginalized, but they should be regarded as opportunities for further inquiry and part of the wider critical project that this thesis begins. The works of Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt contribute a wealth of material to the areas of thought that this thesis examines. The theorists employed here nevertheless offer a complementary and manageable theoretical framework for a study of the exposure to the disruption of former models of meaning.

Overview of Thesis

It remains to offer some prefatory notes on the structure of the present study and the focus of each chapter. In chapter one I examine Beckett's alternative type of testimony to the crisis facing the act of bearing witness after Auschwitz. I draw on Agamben's notion of the constitutive 'lacuna' of testimony and Derrida's 'dissociation' between witness and witnessed object to expound the voice of incapacity in Beckett's trilogy, which is unable to attest positively to past experiences

¹¹² Shane Weller, 'When the Other Comes Too Close: Derrida and the Threat of Affinity', *Kritikos*, Vol. 3, June 2006, <<http://intertheory.org/weller.htm>> [accessed 19/07/2013].

or retrospectively account for oneself. However, with reference to Benjamin's notion of the 'sovereign as creature', I employ the term '(in)sovereignty' to describe how Beckett's author-narrators illustrate the convergence of impotence and potency as they articulate their failures and salvage a level of testimonial value in confronting the unspeakable. This insight acts as a gateway to my argument that the necessary and continual processes of testimony generate a creaturely subjectivity. As organic, progressive and unified versions of testimony collapse, Beckett conveys subjects exposed to mechanical rigidity, incessant enunciation and ruinous ambivalence. The final point I develop in this chapter is that fiction itself figures as a mode of testimony. Figments of the imagination and projections of the self serve to defer the subject's complete identification, but they allow Beckett's author-narrators to recognise the identity dilemma that constitutes the partial subjectivity of the creature. Thus, in my focus on the testimony of failure and fiction in Beckett, I argue that Beckett's art is an extreme example of bearing witness to the inability to bear witness after the Holocaust.

In the second chapter I study more explicit assertions of power between Beckett's 'pseudo-couples' to explicate processes of identification through alterity. After a discussion of the role of writing in Beckett's experience of oppression, I offer close readings of the master-servant relationships in *Watt* and *Waiting for Godot* to underline how the influence of an absent master provides a sense of objectivity for the creatures, which preserves the possibility of meaning and identity. The masters in these texts are projected figures that grant a means of avoiding the creaturely subjectivity invested in failure, but ultimately give rise to an alternative subjectivity immersed in melancholy. One of the dominant claims of this chapter is that the necessary others in Beckett have a contextual equivalent in the Nazis' persecution of

the Jews, and that the biopolitical power that enforces these identity positions reveals the unsettling proximity with the animal. In the governance of space and care, sovereign masters decide who is human and what is inhuman, and this is reflected as Beckett's subaltern creatures are subjugated and take the place of animals. The dynamics of master-servant relationships, however, mean that the two roles are contracted to one another and this traces a creaturely tension between others. The attempt to impose a vulnerable, subhuman status invariably backfires on the master to expose them as equally dependent on the servant.

Chapter three revisits Beckett's art of failure to examine how humour figures in the continuation of the author-narrators' expressive dilemmas. At the limits of language, humour and laughter act as emergency measures that respond to and recommence the possibility of speaking the impossible. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's study of 'grotesque realism' in the 'carnavalesque', I contend that Beckett's humour degrades the elevated sphere of human language and reason to the level of the body. In this way, his prose works evoke amusing textual performances and equally his physical humour on stage depends on words. In *Endgame* this convergence of language and the body enacts a tension that contributes to the creatures' suspended conditions, as the dialogue sustains their physical incarceration. In the last two sections of the chapter I claim that this is a tragicomic predicament that extends to the readers and spectators in that Beckett's metanarrative techniques embroil the implied audience in the characters' static dynamics. More than this, however, Beckett's dark humour recognises the comedy of this captivation so that laughter essentially reflects on and contributes to the enduring tragicomic complexion.

The fourth chapter on survival is concerned with a shared component that underwrites the previous studies on testimony, power and humour. I argue that an

underlying spirit of survival drives Beckett's corpus and produces the insistent but onerous tone of his writing. In the context of a specific biopolitical application of survival in the concentration and extermination camps, I describe how Beckett negotiates diminishing creative opportunities to develop an aesthetic of survival that echoes the debased life that persists in a post-human world. With recourse to Santner's concept of creaturely 'undeadness', which describes an excess of life granted by the subject's investment in a repetition compulsion, I argue that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* exploit the vitality in iterability to evoke a 'still life' that simultaneously encompasses the stasis of sameness and the activity of difference. Finally, I apply this focus on repetition to the spiral narrative structures of *Molloy* to illustrate that Beckett's creatures are essentially caught in a psychological performance of the past that sees them adhering to dead structures of meaning in the hope of reviving them.

1. Testimony

Bearing Witness to the Event and Self

In 1955, in a rare insight into his writing's relationship with the zeitgeist, Beckett said: 'My people seem to be falling to bits. [...] I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, of a non-can-er'.¹ The act of bearing witness in Beckett's post-war work must negotiate the remnants of context and identity left in the wake of this ignorance and impotence. The contemporaneous conditions of testimony after the catastrophes of World War Two and the Holocaust, 'nowadays' as Beckett puts it, are suffused with similar deficiencies in knowledge and ability. The traumas of these events destabilise the credible witness and subvert language's capacity to relate the experience adequately. The witness must therefore contend with absence and negation over detail and fact to bear witness to the tribulations of attesting without reliable information and without sound means of expression. Parallel to these testimonial obstacles, Beckett's writing offers an approach to the representation of experience that contests the idea that a verbal or written account can apprehend historical and biographical events in a decisive way. He begins the task of imparting the obscured accounts of struggling narrators and confronts the challenge of giving voice to what cannot be repeated verbatim.

However, to complicate matters in Beckett, the kind of lucid statement in which Beckett acknowledges ignorance ('non-knower') and impotence ('non-can-er') as the conditions of experience does exercise the ability to point out inability. The recognition that witnesses cannot fully know or relate their own experiences at least

¹ Israel Shenker, 'An Interview with Beckett', in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Raymond Federman and Lawrence Graver (London: Routledge, 1979), 160-64, p. 148.

grants the possibility of a disappointing but incontrovertible fact from the effort to bear witness to oneself, thus giving the witness a kind of perceptivity towards their deficiencies. Of course, the extreme implication from this devaluation of testimony is the disturbing suspicion that the witness was not there or a denial of the event itself. As such, testimony cannot rest on this inability to capture the experience, but must act out its ignorance and impotence, rather than simply absorb incapacity as knowledge. The complete absence of testimony, whilst indicating the fact that the event exceeds transmission, would allow the significance of that fact to fade away. It is the obligation to keep trying that underlines the catastrophe's capacity to elude testimony and, paradoxically, bears witness to the magnitude of the event.

An echo of this engagement with the unspeakable occurs in Beckett's post-war writing in which he 'pays attention' to the experience of impossibility, concentrating on an art of failure that marks a significant re-direction in his writing practice after 1945. In his oft-quoted 1948 dialogues with art historian Georges Duthuit, Beckett claimed that the Dutch artist Bram van Velde was open to failure, that this artist wanted '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'.² Beckett identifies a combination of inadequacy and continuation, hopelessness and responsibility that describes art as an interminable bind. The repetition of the word 'act', for instance, indicates an imperative to perform that must be honoured. These observations on failure resound in the fallible author-narrators of Beckett's subsequent work and serve to intimate the testimonial value of his art in the post-Holocaust context.

² Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues', in *Disjecta*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 138-145, p. 145.

In committing to the onerous fidelity to failure, Beckett not only adumbrates the impossibility of bearing witness but also generates a distinctive type of subjectivity. Beckett was accustomed to the wretchedness of expressive acts as he composed and reworked his material. In a letter to Pamela Mitchell, Beckett wrote: 'I am absurdly and stupidly the creature of my books and *L'Innommable* is more responsible for my current plight than all the other good reasons put together'.³ Beckett evokes a creaturely subjectivity through the martyrdom in the writing of failure. He is a kind of suffering figure produced by the conditions of obligation.⁴ In his reflections on the creative process, referring specifically to his 1953 French text *L'Innommable*, Beckett shows that the travails of testimony and illusiveness of the traumatic event also apply to authorial and autobiographical terrain. As with his people 'falling to bits', Beckett includes himself in a creaturely category of being that is worn down by insistent acts. But whereas Beckett's creatures are doomed to failure owing to their deficiencies as author-narrators, Beckett's own creatureliness is connected to the intention to produce impotence, to 'fail better' as he puts it in the 1983 minimalist text *Worstward Ho* (C, 81). This creaturely presence, subject to dehumanising imperatives and confounding typical notions of artistic competence, is the foundation of Beckettian testimony.

This chapter traces the expressive difficulties that Beckett embraces through the author-narrators in his trilogy of novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* to unearth a historically significant engagement with the challenges facing acts of witnessing and bearing witness. The hypothesis is that the disparity between present and past events, and the fissure between reality and representation, induces a creaturely element endemic to the process of narration that connects a state of

³ Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 27.

⁴ The word 'martyr' is from the Greek *martur*, meaning 'witness'.

destitution with a valuable creative contribution. Following an exposition of a number of key concepts from Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), this chapter draws parallels between the crisis of communication inflicted by the Holocaust, frequently expressed by the metonym 'Auschwitz', and Beckett's artistic engagement with ignorance and impotence. With recourse to Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'sovereign as creature', I argue that an alternative brand of '(in)sovereign' testimony emerges in Beckett's work. This authenticity without authority vouches for a degree of ineffability within experience that is not unique to the psychosomatic trauma of disaster, but rather exists within the necessary fracture between the event and act of relation that constitutes testimony.

Since the ability to apprehend and depict events is largely wanting for Beckett's author-narrators, the principle of continuation becomes paramount. The effort required to prolong an expressive act, suffused with failure, now replaces the message usually delivered by a successful, positive testimony. The ensuing inorganic forms and mechanical methods of continuation not only question the agency and humanity of Beckett's narrators, they also contribute to the creaturely aspect of narrative practice itself. I examine narration as an example of a particularly human mode of meaning and indicative of the humanistic enlightenment through reason, which is subverted by the very rigidity of the process in Beckett, particularly when conducted under the duress of obligation. The broken image of the human leads into the concept of 'ruin', or an identity in disorder, which is central to Agamben's readings of enunciation. The idea of the subject in ruins signals a simultaneous possession and dispossession of self that parallels the division between a founding voice and its figments in Beckett's prose. Consequently, in the concluding section I concentrate on Derrida's emphasis on the fiction of testimony in *Demeure* (2000),

which also implies the testimony of fiction, to discern the extent to which Beckett's narrators produce valuable accounts due to, rather than despite, their difficulties with epistemology and communication. This section involves a reading of prosopopoeia and the role it plays in expressing or effacing the life and biography of a primary subject. Having analysed the dislocation of the narrative voice in Beckett's *Company* (1980), the final point is to develop the ways in which a residual or implied voice subsists amidst the interplay between fictional voices.

'I was not there': Agamben and the Lacuna of Testimony

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben extrapolates the impossibility of bearing witness from Primo Levi's accounts of the Nazi concentration camp. The Italian philosopher employs the term 'Levi's paradox' to refer to the lacuna between perception and truth in the act of testimony.⁵ Agamben conceives this notion of a hiatus or lapse in the act of bearing witness, at least initially, as a testimony lacking the crucial experience and formed *in absentia* of the true witness. He discusses the inadequacy of the living speaking for the dead and questions how a survivor can testify for the ultimate experience of an extermination camp. Echoing Levi, Agamben affirms that '[t]he survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses'.⁶ Having endured the Holocaust, the *salvati*, the saved, stand beside the lacuna that the *sommersi*, the drowned, are submerged in, speaking on their behalf as the nearest representative, offering a contiguous but necessarily distant account.

Agamben elaborates on Levi's paradox with recourse to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's study *Testimony* (1992) and their assertion that it is impossible to tell the truth from the inside, the side of death, and equally impossible to reveal truth from the

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz – The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 82.

⁶ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 34.

outside, the side of exclusion.⁷ The death camp presents an ineluctable problem for testimony since it throws the qualified witness into a state without reflection; the experience is not retainable because death is never part of the victim's knowledge. Agamben observes that 'here the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks, at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority'.⁸ Despite the risk of undermining the survivors' stories, their individual circumstances and singular involvement in the event, Agamben proposes that the point at which the witnesses' accounts subside marks the threshold where the complete experience begins. This means the survivors can only testify to their alienation and give voice to their silence. As Laurence Simmons notes, the survivor is 'the witness who bears witness to the impossibility of bearing witness'.⁹ Despite a profusion of first-hand knowledge, detailed observation and profound insight, the witnesses' accounts fundamentally accommodate the lacuna of testimony.

Although Agamben refrains from any direct reference to Theodor Adorno, his commentary on testimony at this stage largely attempts to refigure the ideas of unintelligibility and unspeakability that the German sociologist discusses in relation to art after Auschwitz. In Adorno's essay 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', he lauds Beckett as an appropriate response to post-Auschwitz culture, arguing that the play reflects and respects the magnitude of recent historical events through its very reticence towards catastrophe. Agamben detects two potential faults with this line of reasoning, namely that it can be read as glorifying Auschwitz and rendering language obsolete. On the first point, Agamben argues that saying 'Auschwitz is "unsayable" or "incomprehensible" is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adorning in silence, as one does

⁷ Ibid. p. 35. See also Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony – Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (Oxford: Routledge, 1992), p. 232.

⁸ Ibid. p. 34.

⁹ Laurence Simmons, 'Shame, Levinas's Dog and Derrida's Cat (and Some Fish)', in *Knowing Animals*, ed. by Laurence Simmons and Phillip Armstrong (Boston: Brill, 2007), 27-43, p. 28.

with a god'.¹⁰ Adorno anticipates this issue in his essay and, with reference to the German public's reaction when details of the Holocaust materialised, he proposes that 'one can only speak euphemistically about what is incommensurate with all experience'.¹¹ Initially, euphemism suggests a kind of defensive reflex that installs a protective barrier to reject the full extent of the event, thus granting a diluted acceptance only. However, for Adorno, this weakened reaction is the result of a profound ignorance, a withdrawn perspective on the truth, and the suspicion that, in the traumatic event, it is wise to avoid an intimate knowledge. Primo Levi recalls a corresponding feeling amongst the veterans in camp when he explains '[w]e were old *Häftlinge*: our wisdom lay in "not trying to understand", not imagining the future'.¹² As a result, euphemism is precisely the point for Adorno in the sense that Auschwitz should be evoked indirectly. The fitting way to address the Holocaust is to pay testament through silence, not with the intention of minimising the magnitude of reality but to point out its incommensurability with what went before and elevate it to the level of 'taboo'.¹³

On the second point regarding the status of language, Agamben insists that language remain in use to demonstrate its inadequacy. He suggests that it is only through speaking that the vital 'unsayability' of the Holocaust will be recognised. Agamben writes:

If they mean to say that Auschwitz was a unique event in the face of which the witness must in some way submit every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking, they are right. But if, joining uniqueness to unsayability, they

¹⁰ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, pp. 32-3.

¹¹ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 123.

¹² Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man / The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1979), p. 122.

¹³ Adorno, 'Dossier: Adorno's Notes on Beckett', p. 166.

transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separate from language, if they break the tie between an impossibility and a possibility of speaking that, in the *Muselmann*, constitutes testimony, then they unconsciously repeat the Nazis' gesture; they are in secret solidarity with the *arcanum imperii*.¹⁴

Agamben does not advocate the impossibility of speaking, which would mean that the lacuna in testimony is simply occluded, but rather that the possibility of speaking the impossibility remains. Agamben's dispute with 'unsayability' here is perhaps overly literal, particularly if he has Adorno's commentary in mind, which is more cognizant of the 'sayable' through 'unsayability' than Agamben gives it credit for. In fact, both philosophers converge on one central thesis, with Adorno bringing to light the transmissible effect of a lack of meaning in Beckett's work whilst Agamben is receptive to the gaps in testimony. They ask that methods of conveying and receiving positive meaning, be it social content or testimonial truth, be put to the test.

It is clear that Agamben privileges the missing experience of the camps in his focus on death as the defining function and characteristic of Auschwitz. Fatalistic prisoners known as *Muselmänner* hold particular significance for Agamben as figures enduring a state of being bordering on human life but entering a mesmerised existence.¹⁵ The irony of the *Muselmann*'s experience as a being resigned to death is that whilst being subjected to the extreme destructive power of Auschwitz, he is also stripped of the awareness required to testify to that human experience. In a cruel muting of testimony, not dissimilar to how the deceased's stories are silenced, the *Muselmänner* are reduced to what Levi describes as 'faceless presences', figures 'too empty to really suffer', 'too tired to understand' and 'on whose face and whose eyes

¹⁴ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 157.

¹⁵ Agamben focuses on 'Muselmann', a term used at Auschwitz, but it worth noting that there were alternatives in other camps, including 'Gamel' (rotting) at Majdanek and 'Krypel' (cripple) at Stutthof.

not a trace of thought is to be seen'.¹⁶ These anonymous, vacuous shells are dispossessed of their individual stories, numb to their own conditions and unable to account for their on-going existence on death row.

Agamben is drawn to the fact that the *Muselmann* is wholly constituted by its own nescience, asserting that 'the *Muselmann* has neither seen nor known anything, if not the impossibility of knowing and seeing'.¹⁷ Without consciously reflecting on it, the *Muselmänner* are simultaneously experienced in and oblivious to an ignorant state. If they are familiar with non-knowing in the sense that they exist as vacancy, it follows that the *Muselmann* lives through what the survivors objectify in the aftermath: the impossibility of bearing witness due to not really being there. According to Agamben, then, the *Muselmann* is a witness whose aphasia can vouch for the extremity of the conditions in the camps.

However, in several first-hand accounts, the *Muselmänner* do reflect on and attest to their descent in a kind of double impossibility – living through the impossibility of bearing witness and then bearing witness to the impossibility of bearing witness. In David Matzner's Holocaust account entitled *The Muselmann* (1994), the author articulates his return from imminent death. Matzner writes 'I became a *Muselmann* – camp slang for someone whose days, because of deteriorating physical or mental condition, were known to be numbered'.¹⁸ Presuming the term signifies the passage to certain death, a state without self-consciousness and thus a condition to be diagnosed only by an onlooker, Matzner's conflicting statement questions how a *Muselmann* can be defined. As opposed to the given meaning, Matzner's usage suggests an interim on the fringe of life and death that can be resolved either way. In such cases, Agamben takes the claim 'I was a *Muselmann*' as

¹⁶ Levi, *If This Is A Man / The Truce*, p. 96.

¹⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 54.

¹⁸ David Matzner, *The Muselmann* (New Jersey: KTAV, 1994), p. 56.

an aphorism for the paradox in testimony: 'I, who speak, was a *Muselmann*, that is, the one who cannot in any sense speak'.¹⁹ Whilst it is debatable whether these self-confessed *Muselmänner* can be what they insist they are, the point is that their testimonies amount to an avowal of incapacity. This paradoxical declaration signals a more authentic falsity than the pseudo-witnesses', the validity of which is its spoken silence. For figures not present at their own experience but attempting to tell the tale regardless, the performance of testimony envelops a necessary futility that, in its persistent failure, accounts for the one who cannot speak and that which cannot be spoken.

It is this performance of unspeakability that gives Beckett's obligation to failure testimonial significance. Beckett's evocation of testimony is in developing an aesthetic that attempts to expose the crucial emptiness behind language, '[t]o drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind it, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through', thereby describing the schism between the witness's voice and the event.²⁰ The act of speaking despite the inability to communicate positively is the transferrable element and historical parallel between Beckett's writing and Holocaust testimony. Furthermore, in terms of the dislocation from event and self, an obscure ontological status and a curious claim to testimony, Agamben's theorisation of the *Muselmann* bears comparison with Beckett's creatures. Beckett presents figures that also drift into detached mental spaces and become oblivious to the external world, yet they do return to their physical conditions intermittently to recognise their plight. In effect, Beckett's creatures vacillate between the absent *Muselmann* that Levi describes and the self-reflective *Muselmann* that Matzner describes. They are withdrawn,

¹⁹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 165.

²⁰ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, Vol. 1, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009), p. 518.

etiolated creatures that also recognise the lack of objectivism or self-presence that would positively vouch for their experience.

As with the paradoxical testimony of the *Muselmann*, Beckett's creatures negotiate a fundamental absence that causes the concomitant inability to speak and imperative to speak. Beckett's *The End* (published in French in 1946 and English in 1953) is the first of four *nouvelles* written in the mid-forties. It follows an itinerant protagonist as he tramps from the city to a seaside cave to a dilapidated rural cabin. In a fugue state he gravitates towards the periphery of society, as though intuitively searching for a rightful home. Towards the end of the story, the narrator offers this assessment of his presence in the world: 'Normally I didn't see a great deal. I didn't hear a great deal either. I didn't pay attention. Strictly speaking I wasn't there. Strictly speaking I wasn't anywhere' (FN, 51). The narrator's sensory faculties are disengaged, leaving him virtually blind and deaf to his surroundings. This detachment from the external setting means he is absent, and though the narrator at least recognises that a 'there' exists, at this point he is merely a reflection on his emptiness. Shortly after this insight, a political speaker in the street labels the narrator a 'living corpse' (FN, 52). Although the context for Beckett's tale is very different, this depiction of a zombie-like creature is clearly reminiscent of the *Muselmann*'s automatic, desensitised existence. Both are physically present, but their empirical consciousness has failed so that they are effectively removed from the environment. At the same time, Beckett's narrator remains aware of his radical lack of presence, thereby articulating the inability to speak as a conscious witness.

The paradoxical articulation of absence recurs in Beckett's play *Endgame*. The two protagonists, the blind master Hamm and lame servant Clov, are bunkered in a bare grey room where they pass time with jaundiced prattle. In the background,

Hamm's parents Nagg and Nell peer out of trashcans, beg for food and reminisce about better times. These figures appear to inhabit a post-apocalyptic world, with Hamm declaring, 'Outside of here it's death' (E, 9). When Clov goes to survey the crepuscular view from the window, Hamm reflects on his absence from the former world and ignorance of the implied catastrophe:

HAMM: Do you know what it is?

CLOV: [*As before.*] Mmm.

HAMM: I was never there. [*Pause.*] Clov!

CLOV: [*Turning towards Hamm, exasperated.*] What is it?

HAMM: I was never there.

CLOV: Lucky for you.

[*He looks out of window.*]

HAMM: Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened. (E, 44)

Hamm says 'I was never there', that he was not strictly present in the world at the time. He has no knowledge of the event since the ambiguous 'happening' transpired without his conscious attendance. After this exchange, Hamm goes on to ask Clov what has happened, but the servant is also nonplussed, repeating the Beckettian refrain 'I don't know'. As with Agamben's vision of the *Muselmann*, the nature of the experience appears to have rendered the witnesses ignorant. Therefore, the implied catastrophe resides in the ellipsis; it is sustained in the inability to relate exactly what has occurred. In an echo of the rhetorical technique 'occultatio', in which the speaker draws attention to what he will not explicitly discuss, the incipient event of *Endgame*

casts a shadow over the entire play. Although the characters' unawareness enforces an interdiction on the catastrophe, its absence is felt through the circumlocution that Hamm and Clov must necessarily conduct.

Absence and deficient memory also destroy the accuracy of relayed experiences in Beckett's later play *Footfalls* (1976). This play centres on the character May pacing a corridor as she converses with a disembodied female voice. Their conversation makes it known that May nursed her mother during ill health, before the disembodied voice begins to commentate on May's movements. In the 'sequel' (K, 112), May relates a discussion between the mother Mrs Winter and daughter Amy, in which the former is shown to confuse the events of the past. The elderly lady is adamant that Amy was at Evensong, but the daughter denies it, claiming 'I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there' (K, 113). Despite Mrs Winter insisting that 'I heard you distinctly' (K, 113), the impression is that the elderly lady is suffering from delusions and that her point of view is no longer reliable. As with several of Beckett's characters, Mrs Winter's deterioration into misremembering causes the act of bearing witness to be tantamount to invention since she is without the stable psychological foundation to trust her experiences and commit sound impressions to memory. The play is doubly equivocal in that the entire account comes from May, the 'anagrammatical other' of Amy, which suggests that these stories implicate the main character but are projected as discrete events.²¹

When read literally, these three absences in Beckett's work insist that there is no person at the event; people were not physically in attendance. It is a prevalent point in the relationship between Beckett's work and the historical context of testimony in

²¹ C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Beckett* (New York: Grove, 2004), p. 202.

that it foregrounds the difference between actual absence and psychological detachment. Beckett himself was not a Holocaust survivor, but a secondary witness on the periphery of the event, and therefore absent in a real way. In contrast to this distinction, I take the absence in 'I was not there' to mean that Beckett's creatures experience a fundamental gap in their memories due to the inability to apprehend or digest events. Peter Boxall argues that this frail type of memory in Beckett's work befits a post-Holocaust world:

It is as if the modernist forms of recovery, the Proustian Madeleine, the Joycean epiphany, are not adequate to the kinds of witnessing that are demanded by the Holocaust. It is in Beckett's writing, in Beckett's adaptation of the modernist forms that he inherited from Joyce and from Proust as well as from (a protomodernist) Kleist, that he develops a form that can simultaneously remember and forget, that can at once preserve and annihilate.²²

Beckett's narrator-authors are denied the essence, revelation or transcendence that Proust, Joyce and Kleist afford. There is no release from doubt or moment of clarity to grasp the crux of past experiences. In terms of the Holocaust's demands on testimony and forms of recovery, however, the Beckettian memory suggests a form of remembrance in which the declared truth is less valid than the on-going process of remembering and failing to remember. The psychological states of Beckett's creatures means they are constantly outlining the lacuna of testimony that is central to Agamben's subsequent model of bearing witness.

²² Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 127.

The extent of the absence from event and self that paradoxically preserves and undermines testimony in Beckett is such that 'his work has become, or is becoming, a cipher for unspeakability *within the field of Holocaust studies itself*'.²³ It is true that, as an author associated with meaninglessness, Beckett's work has been appropriated to figure as the voice of testimony in the specific context of the Holocaust. As David Jones' *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* demonstrates, current scholarly discourse is wary of attributing the mechanics of unspeakability solely to the Holocaust context, preferring instead to present the lack of historical or biographical foundations as a constitutive point of Beckett's testimony. My own work accepts the fact that testimony in Beckett is not concerned with explicitly representing historical contexts, but that fact does not make the contexts for Beckett's testimony irrelevant. The peculiarity of theory on Holocaust testimony means that blindness, deafness and muteness to the event are valuable forms of bearing witness. It is – self-evidently – not the case that every contemporaneous literary text that is not ostensibly about the Holocaust is, by virtue of its silence, related to Holocaust testimony. Beckett, however, is clearly compelled to perform the highest fidelity to failure, and it is his outstanding commitment to such a restrictive project that coincides with post-Holocaust unspeakability more concretely, making his work historically significant though not contextually bound. Whilst the 'shearing-off of enunciation from context' gives us an insight into Beckett's engagement with lacunae as the fundamental components of testimony in general, it is the extremity of this severance that actually parallels the violent dislocation of account from event that Holocaust testimony magnifies.²⁴ Despite the difficulties in attesting to the Holocaust, then, Beckett is unable to avoid his work's affinity with testimony after Auschwitz.

²³ Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 20.

The accounts that Beckett's narrators proffer engage with the aporia of Holocaust testimony in the way that, in Agamben's reading, the Holocaust survivors are fundamentally compelled to 'pronounce the unpronounceable' or the manner in which the *Muselmann* vouches for the 'unexperienced experience' of death.²⁵ Both scenarios comprise an inherent absence that denies the witnesses the ability to attest for themselves finally, and compels them to expose the spaces between object and subject that occur in testimony. The narrators in Beckett's work cannot document articles as proof or retain impressions beyond doubt since they are open to the possibility that their story, their communicable existence, could consist in the interminable struggle to stamp their authority on events that essentially elude them. That is, they are condemned to an autobiographical mission that is beyond them experientially at first and then expressively.

Fallibility and Dissociation

Having noted the impossibility of bearing witness that Agamben discusses in *Remnants of Auschwitz* and Beckett alludes to through variations on the phrase 'I was not there', I now want to discuss in detail how Beckett's narrators evoke the obstacles to testimony and effectively bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness. The aim of this section is to show that Beckett's narrator-authors are unable to offer a positive testimony because they are subject to ruptures immanent to the nature of experience and transmission of knowledge. It can be inferred that the impossibility of bearing witness arises from two distinct phases: the *event*, which impairs self-presence and restricts comprehension, particularly in cases of trauma or infirmity, and the *act* of relation, which involves further mental and linguistic impediments that

²⁵ See Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1986), pp. 7, 72.

circumscribe the account. In their sustained efforts to bear witness to themselves, however, Beckett's narrators essentially trace the impassable aperture of their life stories to offer an alternative form of testimony that gives voice to the unspeakable.

The preeminent Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg uses the phrase 'I was not there' as the title of his 1987 paper on the ways in which direct survivors, secondary witnesses, historians and artists confront the same barriers when writing about the catastrophe. He highlights the inadequacy of literary and plastic arts, announcing 'the Holocaust has caught us unprepared. Its unprecedentedness and, above all, unexpectedness, necessitates the use of words or materials that were never designed for depictions of what happened here. This is a problem that affects everyone, including those who had seen these occurrences first-hand'.²⁶ Hilberg asserts that language itself is not up to the task of positively depicting the Holocaust. The shocking nature of the event has exposed weaknesses in the articles of representation. Majorie Perloff finds a similar inadequacy in words in her essay on Beckett's engagement with the wartime context. She writes: 'To use words like *war*, *Vichy*, *Resistance*, *Auschwitz*, *atom bomb* would inevitably be to short-circuit the complexity of the experiences in question'.²⁷ Hilberg and Perloff suggest that language is too crude to do justice to the singularity of experience. Words malfunction under the strain of honouring intricacies that exceed their capacity.

Despite the inappropriateness of language, Hilberg notes that there are still 'rules' that failing writers must heed, one of which is 'silence'. The paradox of the Holocaust, he avers, is that it plunges both the deceased and surviving victims into reticence, and yet testimony must break this silence in order to recognise it. Hilberg

²⁶ Raul Hilberg, 'I Was Not There', in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 17-25, p. 21.

²⁷ Marjorie Perloff, "'In Love with Hiding': Samuel Beckett's War", *Iowa Review*, 35.2 (2005), 76-103, p. 99.

remarks 'there cannot be silence without speech. Silence can only be introduced between words, some times with words'.²⁸ The acts of speaking and writing are therefore crucial in disclosing the fact that, although this is an event that language cannot communicate, only the effort to testify will reveal the silencing effect of the Holocaust. It is necessary to explore the protracted struggle to bear witness in order to underline how the event can exceed testimony and, at the same time, reveal itself in the all-important spaces and silences of failure.

With the legacy of flawed empirical encounters and epistemological uncertainty, Beckett's narrators find it difficult to settle on an accurate reconstruction of the event as it happened or offer a commentary of life as it is presently unfolding. The trilogy of novels that Beckett produced during a prolific four-year spell after the war is his principal foray into a mode of narration deprived of the authority to assert the truth. In *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, the title characters are storytellers, but whereas Molloy undertakes an autobiographical project that stipulates he apprehend and reproduce the chain of events he experienced, Malone attempts to shirk this responsibility in favour of devising narratives that act as a supposed distraction from self-reflection. The two texts offer differing responses to the authorial role and autobiography, but essentially display similar faults that serve to obscure their narratives and subvert the author as a consolidating agent.

In part one of *Molloy*, the narrator writes in his mother's room about the journey he takes to find her. Without saying as much, Molloy is a paid writer, selling his stories to a man who comes to collect the pages. He says, 'Yes, I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work any more' (*T*, 7). Molloy reveals that he is returning to a previous vocation, apparently after a hiatus, but that he is

²⁸ Hilberg, 'I Was Not There', p. 23.

unable to carry out his duties as before. It is clear that Molloy's approach to writing has altered and that the skills he possesses are no longer effective. Molloy's inability to work shows in the resulting interior monologue, with its tenebrous view and digressive texture. For example, Molloy witnesses the moon through a window, but his attempt to describe its movement only leads to convoluted hypotheses:

Two bars divided it in three segments, of which the middle remained constant, while little by little the right gained what the left lost. For the moon was moving from left to right, or the room was moving from right to left, or both together perhaps, or both were moving from left to right, but the room not so fast as the moon, or from right to left, but the moon not so fast as the room. But can one speak of right and left in such circumstances? That movements of an extreme complexity were taking place seemed certain, and yet what a simple thing it seemed, [...]. How difficult it is to speak of the moon and not lose one's head, the witless moon. (*T*, 39)

The opening sentence of the passage offers a rather lucid account of the shifting triptych that the window frame and the moon create. After the first use of the conjunction 'or', however, Molloy introduces a series of further alternatives that turn his attempt at accuracy into an unwieldy language game. Molloy repeats and inverts the words 'left' and 'right' to produce a semantic satiation effect in which the words appear to lose their function in plotting the imagined space. The simple slant rhyme 'moon-room' also draws attention to the aural patterns in the passage to distract from the movements discussed. The 'simple thing' thus spirals into a complicated list of possibilities owing to Molloy's determination to understand his situation. When the

'complexity' of the scene first appears to dawn on him, even this concession includes the contradictory phrase 'seemed certain' to undermine its resolution. It is evident that Molloy is compelled to talk about things that elude him in both comprehension and expression.

Molloy's unreliability is compounded when he realises that he witnessed a crescent moon the night before. His answer to this anomaly stretches the suspension of disbelief to breaking point: 'here I had to do with two moons, as far from the new as from the full and so alike in outline that the naked eye could hardly tell between them, and that whatever was at variance with these hypotheses was so much smoke and delusion' (*T*, 42). Molloy privileges the more radical solution of two moons in order to dispel other possibilities as mere fallacy. The consequence is that the reader must accept that Molloy resides in an unearthly world, or, more likely, that he confuses the time period of these sightings. Molloy's inability to assign memories to particular days is detrimental to the veracity of his story and reduces it to conjecture.

Beckett's focus on fallible perspectives also impacts the narration in the following text of the trilogy, *Malone Dies*. Malone is a bed-stricken figure planning to use stories as a game to occupy his dying days. He intends to describe the present state; tell tales about a man and a woman, an animal, and a stone; and finally draw up an inventory. The story that Malone produces follows a 'precocious' boy named Sapo, his love of nature, his 'poor and sickly' parents as they deliberate their son's future and his encounter with a farming family called the Lamberts (*T*, 187). Malone chooses to refer to the adult Sapo as Macmann and relates how his character ends up in an asylum, has a relationship with an elderly nurse called Moll and is then under the charge of Lemuel. Malone's narration begins to blur his present situation with the

fictional tale, but in a more obvious passage of self-reflection, he wishes to understand the relationship between reality and fiction:

All I want now is to make a last effort to understand, to begin to understand, how such creatures are possible. No, it is not a question of understanding. Of what then? I don't know. Here I go none the less, mistakenly. Night, storm and sorrow, and the catalepsies of the soul, this time I shall see that they are good. The last word is not yet said between me and – yes, the last word is said. Perhaps I simply want to hear it said again. Just once again. No, I want nothing. (*T*, 199)

Malone embarks on a confabulation with himself, contradicting statements with two abrupt negatives and an affirmation. His attempts at assertion lead to denials, meaning that Malone's initial intent to express what he wants results in the disappointing 'I want nothing'. As he tries to decipher his desires, he must make do with ignorance, continuing with mistaken premises so that he conducts a rather nugatory activity. Hence, Malone appears to demonstrate the catalepsies of the soul as his narrative mode descends into an entrancing vacillation. He is increasingly unresponsive to external stimuli the more he is embedded in the workings of his own broken storytelling and the fictional lives of his characters.

It is noticeable that Beckett's author-narrators struggle with incompetence in their efforts to bear witness to the past, but there is no obvious catastrophe that prevents them from relating their stories. Beckett's trilogy does not fixate on a single traumatic experience that escapes his creatures, but on problematic autobiographical projects that, for Molloy, Moran and Malone at least, carry on in ordinary, if strangely

inapprehensible, circumstances. Their depositions seem to take place at a point in time when any incipient event has vanished, but its lingering impact has also destabilised acts of bearing witness to the unexceptional, leaving figures racked with problems comparable to the crisis of enunciation in post-Holocaust attempts to testify. In this way, the author-narrators' accounts extend beyond the task of recovering one lost event but are still burdened with the difficulties inherent to attesting for oneself in the distant or near past.

Although Agamben concentrates specifically on the impact of Auschwitz, he also traces several problematic dynamics that apply to bearing witness in general. Bearing witness, as opposed to witnessing only, is an attempt to articulate observed situations without the essence going missing or being distorted in the process between seeing and saying. For Agamben, '[t]he aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension'.²⁹ This introduces the wordplay on 'baring' witness, which evokes the struggle to uncover knowledge faithfully, or lay bare unbearable personal experiences, considering the added task of reconciling the looking eye in the past with the speaking 'I' in the present. Agamben draws on the disparity between initial event and subsequent statement, the experience and the gathered account. As with Molloy's confusion with the moon, the 'non-coincidence' of testimony sees the shift from a fidelity to the truth to an explanation of how the event now appears. The witness retrospectively incorporates himself and his posterior thoughts into the remembered event, thereby contaminating the experience with extraneous material. The act of testimony therefore updates the witnessed experience and betrays the space in between the witness at the event and the clinical 'I' bearing witness but not strictly

²⁹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 12.

there. The witness is unable to repeat the experience exactly and can only resort to an admixture of the past and present.

This retrospective disjunction is an element of testimony that Jacques Derrida prefigures in his *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993). Derrida's text focuses on the practice of self-representation in the painterly arts to offer an acute insight into the interaction between eye and object. But whereas Agamben identifies the aporia between actual experience and reconstituted facts, Derrida emphasises the fracture in each moment of witnessing. He asserts that 'a witness, as such, is always blind. Witnessing substitutes narrative for perception. The witness cannot see, show, and speak at the same time, and the interest of the attestation, like that of the testament, stems from this dissociation'.³⁰ The discrepancy between observation, demonstration and enunciation, that inevitable fissure in the passage from spontaneous moment to meditated account, is where the taciturnity of testimony emerges. In Derrida's later essay 'Poetics and Politics of Witnessing' (2005), predominantly on Paul Celan's 1948 poem 'Todesfuge' (Death Fugue) and the possibility of perjury that is inherent to testimony, he reaffirms his view that 'speech can be dissociated from what it is witness to: for the witness is not *present* either, presently present, to what he recalls'.³¹ Derrida lights on the problem of remembering and presenting the memory at once, rapidly shifting from past to present, thinking of then but speaking now. As with Agamben's 'non-coincidence', the words betray the thought gap that occurs in the transition from recollection to articulation.

Beckett's work is a precursor to the momentary non-coincidences and dissociations that Agamben and Derrida dissect. In the second part of *Molloy*, for

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind – The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), p. 104

³¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Poetics and Politics of Witnessing', in *Sovereignities in Question – The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University, 2005), 65-96, p. 76.

example, Gaber's role as a messenger evokes the difficult transposition of reliable information that constitutes testimony. In an attempt to bypass the erasing effect of delay, Gaber adopts an instantaneous method of reflection:

Gaber understood nothing about the messages he carried. Reflecting on them he arrived at the most extravagantly false conclusions. Yes, it was not enough for him to understand nothing about them, he had also to believe he understood everything about them. This was not all. His memory was so bad that his messages had no existence in his head, but only in his notebook. He had only to close his notebook to become, a moment later, perfectly innocent as to its content. And when I say that he reflected on his messages and drew conclusions from them, it was not as we would have reflected on them, you and I, the book closed and probably the eyes too, but little by little as he read. And when he raised his head and indulged in his commentaries, it was without losing a second, for if he had lost a second he would have forgotten everything, both text and gloss. I have often wondered if the messengers were not compelled to undergo a surgical operation, to induce in them such a degree of amnesia. (*T*, 107)

For Gaber, memory is not a resource. He must resort to the spontaneity of thought and speech, almost concurrently, with the least interference from recollection or reason. Gaber's reflection is bent back on what he considers only to the slightest degree, meaning he performs his ideas with the minimum of cognition, attempting instead to hit intuitively upon the import of his notes. Such forgetfulness aligns Gaber with the Nietzschean celebration of the animal's amnesia, without consideration of the past but

rather 'fettered to the moment'.³² In this way, Gaber deposes the idea of the messenger as mediator, who typically passes on what is known. He is a passive conduit, in contradistinction to the 'you and I' mentioned in the passage above, who are presumably adept at data collection and retrospective comprehension. In their complicity, the 'you and I' implies the relationship between a masterful author complete with transmissible idea and the reader as a reflective receiver. Gaber, on the other hand, is a vacuous witness, oblivious to the secret information he carries and literally performing his duty.

Gaber's instinctive commentary, his inclination to gabber, is an example of the expressive dilemma that finds its fullest expression in the third text of Beckett's post-war trilogy, *The Unnamable*. The anonymous, asexual narrative voice in this notoriously difficult monologue acts as a rendezvous point for many of Beckett's past characters, including Molloy and Malone.³³ The text also vaguely relates the stories of two new figments, Mahood and Worm. It is a fragmented, self-reflexive musing on the nature of existence, which grows increasingly anxious the more the uttered words appear to form the sole condition of being. Beckett takes the belatedness of enunciation a step further in *The Unnamable*, problematizing the acute levels of mediation between thought and words that expand the distance between event and account, memory and language. The narrative voice wonders 'how can you think and speak at the same time, how can you think about what you have said, may say, are saying, and at the same time go on with the last-mentioned' (*T*, 377). Beckett points out that there is no means of simultaneously speaking and reflecting. The narrative

³² See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. by Daniel Breazale, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 57-124, p. 57.

³³ For convenience, I refer to the narrator of *The Unnamable* as 'he' in this thesis, but strictly speaking, the voice is without gender.

voice is either occupied with speech or dwelling on the spoken, meaning the subject is not truly present to what it delivers or contemplates.

Beckett's magnification of latency in *The Unnamable* shows that dissociation is not only a problem of vague retrospection, but also a difficulty in occupying a present space and being in the moment. Time appears to be running away immediately, each instant colliding with the living being, and every second burying the last: 'they arrive, bang, bang, they bang into you' (*T*, 399). In the aftermath, the mental and linguistic tools of reflection are overdue so that memory cannot lay claim to the essence of experience. Yet, in the present, the cognitive powers to process experience become inundated by the ensuing action. The present is always slipping into the past, and thus always distorted. As David Jones notes, '[t]estimony is doubly belated: not only is the listener receiving a post-hoc account, but that account originates in an experience from which the witness is effectively absent'.³⁴ In Beckett's work, this discrepancy between received, stored and transmitted data, each of which have their own inherent obstacles to overcome, is intrinsic to the testimony of his creatures who lack the vantage from which to master their experiences.

(In)sovereign Author-Narrators

As we have seen, the dissociation between witnessing and bearing witness fills attestation with cognitive and creative material foreign to the original event. For Derrida, the distance between seeing and saying calls into question the sovereignty of the subject. The word 'sovereign' is typically associated with the supreme power of a monarch, pontiff or autocratic political figure. In terms of literary or testimonial authority, sovereignty is used to take the idea of absolute rule and apply it to spaces of

³⁴ Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, p. 6.

meaning. It is this kind of 'essential claim of sovereignty' that Derrida identifies and critiques in Agamben's *Homo Sacer - Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995).³⁵ In session three of *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009), Derrida finds Agamben posing as the first to identify the original practitioners of various key philosophical inquiries and, consequently, Derrida deprecates Agamben's self-aggrandizement and command of chronology.³⁶ According to Derrida's reading, Agamben accepts the role of sovereign author, reigning supreme over his material.

Derrida introduces a variation on sovereignty, in closer proximity with the beast, from the French words *savoir* and *faire*. He describes how knowledge involves a certain know-how [*savoir-faire*] to be made known [*faire savoir*], which can remove the resulting understanding from the original point of knowing.³⁷ This expertise is crucial to an understanding of Derrida's reading of sovereignty because it suggests that the ability to communicate effectively involves the, often liberal, handling of information as much as the acquisition of facts. He underlines how the process of disseminating a message is discrete from its actual source and content. An exhaustive understanding of a situation or topic does not ensure a direct articulation of that knowledge. In fact, making known can mean 'making like' knowledge, which implies 'fabulous' elements that breathe life into the account, and therefore borders on the 'rogue' status also associated with the beast.³⁸

Derrida exploits this impression of knowledge elsewhere in relation to testimony, noting '[f]or it to be guaranteed as testimony, it cannot, it must not, be absolutely certain, absolutely sure and certain in the order of knowing as such'.³⁹

³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer - Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1995).

³⁶ Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, pp. 92-3.

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 34-38.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 35, 19.

³⁹ Derrida, 'Poetics and Politics of Witnessing', p. 68.

More than this, Derrida claims that an assured avowal is the *sine qua non* of falsification: 'That is the essence of lie, fable, or simulacrum, namely to present itself as truth or veracity, to swear that one is faithful, which will always be the condition of infidelity'.⁴⁰ In Derrida's reading, testimony presupposes a personal belief that appeals to others, which can be rejected as a false impression or a feigned pledge. Testimony therefore encloses a degree of uncertainty as opposed to absolute fact.

Beckett and his author-narrators show that the act of bearing witness to one's experience does not always involve a claim to the authority associated with sovereignty. As a writer closely affiliated with the experience of a non-knower, it is clear that Beckett is not interested in depicting reality as a verifiable experience. On the contrary, Beckett's focus on ignorance modifies the idea of *savoir-faire* to accentuate an expertise in making known what is unknown, in the sense that he reveals asininity as opposed to dispelling myths. In an interview with Israel Shenker, Beckett explains this orientation towards ignorance:

I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be an esthetic axiom that expression is achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 91.

⁴¹ Shenker, 'An Interview with Beckett', p. 148.

Beckett embraces the struggle to express and inability to create that the sovereign author subjugates. The traditional vision of the author conceives a figure who gives a complete and efficient form to an object. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the author assumes the responsibility of 'introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things', whilst Michel Foucault recognises the concept of the author as synonymous with 'a principle of a certain unity of writing'.⁴² Given that the received author is the single agent who negotiates and consolidates all of the many constituent elements required to make up the work of art, the 'unity' that both Sartre and Foucault identify is closely related to the 'omni' that Beckett mentions and, by his own concession, is without.

However, as Beckett suggests, he is 'using' and 'exploiting' the material set aside in the past. Despite his focus on failure, or 'my dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving' as he described it to Georges Duthuit, Beckett himself is tasked with succeeding in crafting an art of failure.⁴³ He must make decisions on the appropriate way to depict his author-narrators as impotent figures, which retains an impression of the artistic achievement that he associates with his compatriot Joyce. Beckett's trilogy is a *tour de force* with regard to its ability to give form to deficiency and make ignorance known, which, contradictorily, brings sovereign power into contact with impotence to produce a creaturely position. As noted earlier, when Beckett writes 'I am absurdly and stupidly the creature of my work', he underlines the sense of obligation he has to an insistent task. But as the creature of his work, Beckett also embodies a peculiar aspect of the creature, namely its association with creativity. Beckett is both the

⁴² Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 27; Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard (New York: The New Press, 1999), p. 215.

⁴³ Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 141.

author and subject of his writing, acting at once as potent source of the work and subservient minion to its design.⁴⁴ This is a creaturely junction between producer and product, related to the idea of a divine maker who moulds creatures 'in his own image' (Genesis 1. 27), but is simultaneously a subject under the control of another. Beckett effectively exemplifies the dichotomous composition of the creature, implicated in both strength and weakness, and this is a status that extends to his author-narrators.

Beckett's focus on impotence in his work yields authorial and narrative positions that are incongruous to a conventional understanding of sovereignty as absolute rule. It is patent that both Beckett and his narrating creatures are exposed to the thralldom of creative tasks. Yet, he does evoke the 'sovereign as creature' that Walter Benjamin describes in his 1925 doctoral dissertation entitled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.⁴⁵ In this text, Benjamin initially presents an image of sovereignty analogous to the unifying power of the traditional author. He writes that '[l]iterature ought to be called *ars inveniendi*. The notion of the man of genius, the master of *ars inveniendi*, is that of a man who could manipulate models with sovereign skill'.⁴⁶ Benjamin refers to literature as the art of invention to promote the creative talents and adept control of a writer, but he goes on to derive a contrasting view of sovereignty from seventeenth-century baroque drama:

⁴⁴ James Joyce also felt his authorial grip on *Ulysses* slipping at times, particularly in the 'Circe' episode. Maud Ellmann writes: 'Joyce's complaints about the episode suggest that writing is dehumanizing in a double sense, first because it goes on writing regardless of the writer, like the robotic music of the player piano, and second because it animalizes its creator, reducing the author to a beast in the machine', Maud Ellmann, 'Changing into an Animal', *Field Day Review*, 2 (2006), 75-93, p. 75. Joyce's struggle with his 'monster-novel' in these instances is closer to the expressive dilemmas that Beckett explores with his author-narrators.

⁴⁵ The description 'sovereign as creature' appears on the content page of Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977).

⁴⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 179.

The antithesis between the power of the ruler and his capacity to rule led to a feature peculiar to the *Trauerspiel* which is, however, only apparently a generic feature and which can be illuminated only against the background of the theory of sovereignty. This is the indecisiveness of the tyrant. The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision.⁴⁷

Benjamin aligns an artistic genre with a political theory in this passage to outline the power dynamics in the creative process. He refers to the sovereign duty to make decisions, which is equally inherent to efficient forms of narration, as Beckett notes in *Molloy*: 'you cannot mention everything in its proper place, you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so' (*T*, 41). The problem is that the individual who can make a decision can also make another to counter his original order. There is no necessity for the sovereign to commit to his decrees or develop an effective means of governing his material. Instead of making known, the sovereign's authority makes it difficult to stand by any single view; everything he announces can be renounced. In Benjamin's view, the sovereign power to choose alternatives makes the sovereign incapable of living by an order other than the constant flux of decision making.

The power to override decisions that amounts to indecisiveness also undermines the narrative efficacy of Beckett's author-narrators. Molloy, for example, is continually at a loose end: 'my resolutions were remarkable in this, that they were no sooner formed than something always happened to prevent their executions' (*T*,

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 71.

32). The complication to which Molloy refers is that he changes his mind, or, more accurately, his mind is never fully made. Whilst his general orientation towards the mother persists, the satellite thoughts and actions that surround his quest are far from refractory. Molloy's resolutions are always provisional, threatening to swerve at any point: 'How agreeable it is to be confirmed, after a more or less long period of vacillation, in one's first impressions. Perhaps that is what tempers the pangs of death. Not that I was so conclusively, I mean confirmed, in my first impressions with regard to—wait—C' (T, 15). The extent to which Molloy is 'confirmed' here is clearly questionable as the passage is rife with uncertainty in 'more or less', 'impressions', 'perhaps', inconclusiveness and the moment of hesitation at the end. The very instant a decision is formed, Molloy is aware of other possibilities or problems, which can send him back to square one.

Similarly, Malone's attempts to establish an order are confounded in *Malone Dies*. In an aside during his account of Macmann's stay at the House of Saint John of God, Malone considers the ambivalence of his narrative as he moves from precision to distortion. He remarks, 'A thousand little things to report, very strange, in view of my situation, if I interpret them correctly. But my notes have a curious tendency, as I realize at last, to annihilate all they purport to record' (T, 260-1). The inability to proceed with an idea causes the application of power to be capricious, ready to reverse itself as opposed to reassert. Malone claims to realise this problem finally, but he actually produces a liar paradox so that the very claim to annihilate is itself open to annihilation. It is impossible to accept Malone's realisation of this curious tendency as true without the same logic undermining itself. Beckett's author-narrators can exercise the power of inconstancy in that they can nullify every statement they make, but it is that sovereign privilege that casts them as creatures.

In Molloy's provisionality and Malone's impuissance, Beckett works with a combination of changeability and ineffectuality that evokes sovereign power but places emphasis on what I label the '(in)sovereign'. In an effort to distance conventional notions of authority, this term suggests that from *within* a position of power, in sovereignty, comes a dearth of practical power, *insovereignty*. In other words, the sovereign creature is theoretically potent but pragmatically incapable. The term '(in)sovereign' therefore avoids simply negating the ability to decide in order to retain a sense of the sovereign power that slides into creaturely asininity. The proximity between these two states is evident in Beckett's art of failure itself, which invests the author's creative skills into an exhibition of indigence. This hybridity manifests itself within the work in the form of author-narrators who conduct their own stories and develop fictional constructs, but are ultimately unable to reign over a determined meaning. In their extended conflicts with decisions that are not fixed, they demonstrate the instability of creaturely '(in)sovereignty'. Beckett's creatures cannot command thought and expression with the unquestioned supremacy of a deity, only the uncertainty of the lowly creature.

The creaturely junction between potency and impotence is most arresting in Beckett's treatment of reason. His author-narrators frequently appeal to rational analysis as they try to understand and articulate the situations they encounter. Despite this, their reasoning is often inefficient, distending the processes of logic as opposed to making sense. After stealing several silver items from Lousse, Molloy rigorously describes a knife rest because he is unaware of the name and function of the object. Such scrutiny of the knife rest proliferates thought as opposed to dispelling Molloy's ignorance: 'there was no doubt in my mind that it was not an object of virtue, but that it had a most specific function always to be hidden from me. I could therefore puzzle

over it endlessly without the least risk' (*T*, 64). Molloy is adamant that the knife rest is useful and not merely an aesthetic article, but because its function is inscrutable, he can contemplate the object knowing that such examination is in vain. In this case, it is the opportunity to indulge in reflection that drives Molloy's reasoning, not the possibility of knowledge. Whilst rationality does not have active power, in the sense that it fails to settle on explanations, causes or meaning, its template continues to serve as a pastime and actually sustains the enigma game for Molloy.

The perpetuation of thought through the empty rhetoric of reason is intrinsic to the style of narration in Beckett's trilogy. Adorno, for one, finds this kind of engagement with reason at the centre of narration, asserting that 'communicative language postulates – already in its syntactic form, through logic, the nature of conclusions, and stable concepts – the principle of sufficient reason'.⁴⁸ The ordering of language into sentences itself suggests a rational being organising thoughts. However, it follows that, without a stable foundation to apply language, such as an empirical experience, a reliable memory or a conceived idea – that is, a known point of causality – language is forced to revolve infinite possibilities. Whilst language shows logic in action, Beckett's author-narrators apply this level of reason to evoke a spectrum of thinking that ranges from fruitless bouts of rationalisation to the paralysing aporia in which every remark is negated.

Molloy's inclination towards sincerity, for instance, frequently neutralises much of the conviction in his narrative undertaking, which results in a strange admixture of unreliability and honesty. As he grows familiar with his ignorance, Molloy can explicitly identify his predicament: 'notions like mine, all spasm, sweat and trembling, without an atom of common sense or lucidity' (*T*, 68). Molloy is able

⁴⁸ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 139.

to articulate his own lack of clarity, but the narrative project grows stagnant when this is the only lucid judgement. Consequently, Molloy must entertain the reasonable exploration of obscurities in an attempt to further his narrative, if only to return to his tendency towards inaccuracy, which is a point he highlights early on when he says 'The truth is I don't know much' (T, 7). Molloy does not fabricate his account purposely to deceive since he has no reliable truth to conceal. Yet, he knows a more truthful account does exist and that his version is always parallel to reality, throwing an unattainable truth into relief. Again, this is a fact that he expresses distinctly: 'I am merely complying with the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace. For what really happened was quite different' (T, 87-8). It is evident that Molloy's lack of awareness is a condition he realises; he is not blissfully ignorant. Molloy must therefore direct reason towards his lack of sovereignty as a substitute for reason's inability to work through his epistemological shortcomings.

For Adorno, the unavailing reasoning in Beckett means that '[t]he sovereign *ego cogitans* is transformed by the *dubitatio* into its opposite'.⁴⁹ Adorno argues that the logical mind inflicts its own undoing, which echoes Beckett's own view that '[t]here is at least this to be said of the mind, that it can dispel mind'.⁵⁰ The power of reason, in this respect, is to reveal its own weakness and reflect on its failure. This mental faculty is incapable of apprehending reality but does manage to illuminate its own inadequacy, recognise unproductive cycles of logic and realise the holes in testimony that captivate the creature. As such, the power of Beckett's creatures rapidly shifts from the original position of sovereignty, to the servitude to reasoning processes, to a re-evaluation of the decline into indecision. The point is that Beckett's (in)sovereign creatures accept the conventional forms of testimony, expose the

⁴⁹ Adorno, 'Dossier: Adorno's Notes on Beckett', p. 173.

⁵⁰ Beckett qtd. in Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1996), p. 39.

drawbacks of communicative language and reasoned judgements, but salvage testimonial value in bearing witness to the crisis of positive testimony.

Beckett develops this blurred division between sovereign and creature more distinctly in *Malone Dies*. Malone shares Molloy's type of reasoning without result, and it eventually contributes to the apathetic disposition that Malone courts, which would bypass the temptation to resolve any inconsistencies in his account. Firstly, Malone says 'I will not weigh upon the balance any more, one way or another. I shall be neutral and inert. No difficulty there' (T, 179). Malone goes on to express his intention not to be mired in an approach that neurotically catalogues details: 'My desire henceforth is to be clear, without being finical' (T, 181). He effectively renounces his position as sovereign author by refusing to make authorial decisions on conflicting ideas and choosing to be equivocal rather than selectively organise the text. He wants to concede a lack of ability and dismiss his influence upon the account. Indeed, he would rather defer his responsibility in favour of an arbitrary process: 'If I had a penny I would let it make up my mind' (T, 252). Malone's hope of relinquishing his authorial voice is aimed at vanquishing his identity from the forefront of the text, to dissolve the author in the writing and surrender to the spontaneity of creation.

However, Beckett highlights the contradiction in Malone's decision not to decide, which is a conflict that makes it difficult to determine the author-narrator's level of efficacy in the text. Malone's intentions continue to interfere with his absences so that he appears to fail on two fronts. Firstly, the decision to be ambiguous suggests Malone can retain sovereign power, albeit through a paradoxically resolute irresolution. Even when he does manage to recede into Macmann's story, the fulfilment of his original intention is still detectable, which reinserts Malone into his supposed absence from the narrative process. Secondly, Malone's original decision to

be detached is frequently undermined, as he is not completely neutral but intermittently self-aware: 'I must simply be on my guard, reflecting on what I have said before I go on and stopping, each time disaster threatens, to look at myself as I am. That is just what I wanted to avoid' (T, 189). In this way, Malone's decision to be passive is not possible, which shows him powerless in one sense, but more distinctly the author in another; his decision is undone, but consequently, he is revealed as the figure behind the narrative. The paradox is that when Malone decides to be less present, he is ineffective in that he re-emerges in the author-narrator position, but at the same time he is also indulged in that his decision to be less present is not carried out, therefore effectuating his desire to be less potent. Ironically, Beckett accentuates the convergence of potency and impotence in (in)sovereignty when Malone insists that his sovereign presence is attenuated.

The concomitance of failure and success continues in the final text of the trilogy, *The Unnamable*. This stunted text is made up almost entirely of aporetic revolutions around narrative incompetence, but it also conveys the great significance of reflecting on inability. In the opening pages of the text, the narrative voice develops an accurate description of his position albeit through a fractured narrative style:

The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never. (T, 294)

The narrator of *The Unnamable* illustrates the fact that the crux of the matter is beyond his expressive capabilities. Although a 'fact' is clearly understood, it is delivered in such an interrupted way that the narrator loses his train of thought altogether. In repeatedly trying to elaborate on his inability to speak through the phrases 'not only' and 'but also', the narrator shows he is unable to develop an idea. Beckett presents a narrative voice that cannot speak but continues nevertheless, and it is only through this fidelity to failure that the genuine aponia, or voiceless quality, of Beckett's creatures is heard.

Shortly after his attempt at facts, the narrator of *The Unnamable* continues: 'I shall remark without further delay, in order to be sure of doing so, that I am relying on these lights, as indeed on all other similar sources of credible perplexity, to help me continue and perhaps even conclude. I resume, having no alternative' (T, 296). The narrator's testimony lies precisely in the 'credible perplexity' that pervades his endeavour. He can honestly pronounce his confusion, although that same confusion both invalidates the understanding of his own incomprehensible situation and prevents him from accepting his ignorance unconditionally. Hence, *The Unnamable* does not merely pinpoint incertitude. It is the regenerative process of trying to speak, failing to speak and addressing that failure that entails a performative element that guarantees the credibility of the perplexity. When the narrator later says, 'But what is the right manner, I don't know' (T, 338), it is clear that there is authenticity in impotence here, as the narrator concedes that the right manner is elusive but that ignorance is also oddly the right manner. Whereas the ability to decide results in indecision, the narrator's investment in indecision returns to a kind of decisive act. Thus, Beckett's author-narrators convey the experience of the 'non-knower' and 'non-can-er' to divulge frailties within the formerly sovereign human mind, but they also reveal a

vestigial authority in their ability to diagnose this unspeakability. In effect, Beckett's creatures acknowledge that their errant accounts are beside the point and yet necessary if they are to outline the lacunae that attest to the impossibility of bearing witness.

Obligation to Testify: Mechanics, Enunciation, Ruin

The (in)sovereign position of Beckett's author-narrators in the post-war trilogy shows that whilst sovereign indecision undermines their testimonies, they regain some credibility in the protracted and honest nature of their expressive dilemmas. The narrative voice in *The Unnamable* utters the words 'I cannot speak' and 'I shall never be silent' (*T*, 294) in an echo of Beckett's widely-cited point of view on art from his dialogues with Georges Duthuit: 'there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'.⁵¹ The obligation to speak despite the inability to speak presents a strained condition for Beckett's creatures apparent not only in their testimonies but also in their understanding of themselves as subjects. The on-going urge to do what cannot be successfully done produces precarious identities occupied with mechanical processes, composed of speaking acts and reflecting on the loss of self. This section will trace the impact that the need to speak has on the subjective existence of Beckett's author-narrators.

In their psychoanalytical and literary study of testimony, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub frequently refer to the imperative to speak. They focus on a number of examples in which articulation fails in order to convey the elliptical space underlying the act itself. Felman and Laub stress that if it is imperative to continue verbalising thoughts when psychoanalysis is employed to decipher the meaning of those words

⁵¹ Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 139.

positively, it is doubly imperative to speak when that school fails and the inadequate words are all the trauma victim has. Laub writes:

This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory* and *speech*.⁵²

The mind's incapacity to apprehend the traumatic event belies the fact that the act of speaking itself can, on the one hand, be understood as a cathartic process, a purging of everything that can be said without hitting on the crux, thereby exhausting language's power to relate the event. In conjunction with a playful reference to stupidity, Molloy alludes to this therapeutic quality: 'sorrow does more harm when dumb, to my mind' (*T*, 110). On the other hand, testimony can be the all-important act of not expelling. In this sense, the act of bearing witness is a cyclical inculcation in order to learn by rote the burden of inscribing the experience. It is this deed that discloses the survivor's inheritance from the trauma, namely the duty to speak the unspeakable.

Felman relates an anecdote about a cohort of students that assimilated the trauma they studied in her university module on testimony. She points out the students' impulse to both expel and retain the information, which, in this case, resolves itself in a faltering discourse. One student writes: 'Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer'.⁵³ There is

⁵² Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 78.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 56.

evidently a need to tell and a simultaneous compulsion not to relive, which results in a verbal non-fluency. This defective language emerges as a kind of hesitancy from these conflicting urges. However, the student's stammer is a reaction in the true sense of the word: an action provoked by and therefore congruent with the initial event. The problem is that reaction indicates an automatic consequence of an instruction and consequently lacks the personality of a wilful response. As a programmed testimony, reaction obliterates human agency in the act of bearing witness.

The continual act of speaking is crucial in order to invoke negative or coincidental testimony. If Beckett's narrators are to demonstrate the non-experience of ignorance and non-story of impotence, they must employ methods of continuation that oblige failure. However, this mode of testimony would appear to actuate automatic, insubstantial and disintegrated forms of existence. The nature of speaking the unspeakable means there is no final success, which places emphasis on the act itself, and, in turn, reduces the human element of narration to mechanical rigidity, incessant enunciation and ruinous ambivalence. The obligation to testify therefore impacts upon the subjective status of the witness, divesting him or her of an organic, progressive and unified way of attesting to oneself. When the inability to relate life and account for oneself meets the necessity to try, testimony discloses a suspended, creaturely subjectivity.

Paul Sheehan argues that an increased focus on the inhuman occurs as part of the development of a modernist narrative form. In *Modernism, Humanism and Narrative* (2002), Sheehan expounds the notion that modernist literature subverts the humanistic values of narrative, explaining that, 'implicit in humanism is the idea of autonomy, the belief that man is measure of all things and maker of all meanings; and

mastery, that he has dominion over himself and his world'.⁵⁴ This empirical and epistemological proficiency correlates with the classic image of the author, which allows Sheehan to affirm that narration 'is human-shaped. It is a uniquely human way of making order and meaning out of the raw material of existence'.⁵⁵ The ability to narrate suggests a distinctively human mode of comprehension and assessment of being in the world.

Beckett, however, plays a particularly disruptive role in the move from the humanistic order of realism to the inhuman flux of modernity. The creaturely state of (in)sovereignty in Beckett's trilogy means the author-narrators negotiate the convergence of impotence and potency that lacks dominance over positive meaning whilst producing a valuable testimony of unspeakability. Appropriately, then, Sheehan uses Beckett as an example of the narrative process going awry: 'Narrativised subjectivity is wrenched out of its human-shaped literary vessel and transplanted to something inhuman'.⁵⁶ Despite this, Sheehan understates the human catalyst in the transition to the inhuman. He perceives the inhumanity of the narrative form as a consequence of the absence of human ways of making meaning. Conversely, Beckett's narratives appear to be benighted as a result of a misguided reliance on the properties that set the human apart as a species. The creaturely hybridity of Beckett's narrators is compounded by the mental faculties, such as reasoned reflection, that Malone accredits to humanity's ascent: 'I suppose the wisest thing now is to live it over again, meditate upon it and be edified. It is thus that man distinguishes himself from the ape and rises, from discovery to discovery, ever higher towards the light' (*T*, 255). Given that Beckett's creatures pursue the wisest course of action and further

⁵⁴ Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), p. 6.

⁵⁵ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, p. 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 161.

enlightenment, their uncertain narration is actually born out of an attempt to step up to the author role. Sheehan does acknowledge this irony, noting that 'it is the pursuit of certainty that actuates the flights of rigorous logic, the mathematical gymnastics of permutation and enumeration, and the unstoppable flux of recall'.⁵⁷ Beckett's author-narrators take on the rational, unifying perspective, but, as it transpires, their brand of reason is an inadequate tool for their investigations and often results in the discord of an inhuman narrative form. Beckett's inhuman narration is therefore a product of the inefficacy of human narrative forms.

Having no alternative, Beckett's author-narrators persist with language and logic even as these faculties appear outmoded, resulting in the unproductive motions of uncanny narrative processes. This narrative form includes a mechanical aspect in its repetitive, incessant activity, but it is different to the humanistic mechanisms that Sheehan describes. The sovereign author who is able to render meaning explicit through a structured narrative is shown to be a mechanical figure in Sheehan's study, efficiently processing relevant material and fabricating a final product, whereas modernism is composed of the inconstancy of 'voice'. As Sheehan writes: 'Machine, in short, is one of the prior conditions for making narrative comprehensible, whereas voice offers the chance for difference, variation and irregularity, pulling against narrative's machinelike precision'.⁵⁸ For Sheehan, it is usually voice that fragments a text and machine that makes writing coherent, but Beckett's author-narrators show that they are subject to patterns of thought and habitual behaviours that do not yield results. Since the mechanisms of narration rotate without a satisfactory product, the Beckettian creature is condemned to a mundane and desolate process.

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator says: 'The only problem for me was how to

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 155.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 11.

continue, since I could not do otherwise, to the best of my declining powers, in the motion which had been imparted to me. This obligation, and the quasi-impossibility of fulfilling it, engrossed me in a purely mechanical way, excluding notably the free play of the intelligence and sensibility' (T, 322). The emphasis here is on continuation, as the narrator recognises a mechanical compulsion to keep speaking despite his 'declining powers'. These declining powers signal the diminishing possibility of sating the obligation, although the chance of success clearly persists, which in turn perpetuates the duty to speak. The narrator therefore faces the contradiction of being locked into allotted motions, such as the contrivances of storytelling. Malone, for one, 'appears and disappears with the punctuality of clockwork, always at the same remove, the same velocity, in the same direction, the same attitude' (T, 296). The narrator of *The Unnamable* is at the centre of a mechanism that encircles him with familiar imperatives, figures and tropes.

Yet, anticipating Derrida's use of 'free play' in his essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1966) to describe the 'disruption of presence', the narrative voice in *The Unnamable* refers to the 'free play of the intelligence and sensibility', which respond to other stimulants besides the central structure of his obligation.⁵⁹ These suggestible cognitive and sensory faculties can distract the narrator from his established motions. As such, whilst the narrator recognises that 'It's a circuit, a long circuit' (T, 414), the possibility of difference is maintained: 'the play of lights is truly unpredictable. [...] They are perhaps unwavering and fixed and my fitful perceiving the cause of their inconstancy' (T, 296). Without achieving the full comprehension or appreciation suggested in intelligibility and sensibility, the stability of the system is susceptible to misprision

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 292.

and encourages the narrator to reengage with the 'same old irresistible baloney' raised in the obligation to speak (*T*, 380).

By accounting for a sense of system and free play in the obligation, Beckett problematizes the categories of voice and machine, making them virtually indistinct. Sheehan argues that *The Unnamable* integrates both voice and machine, labelling it 'a performative example of voice as machine'.⁶⁰ He suggests that a mechanical compulsion underwrites the mercurial nature of voice in Beckett's text, thereby positing the regular patterns and repetitive cycles associated with the machine as the source of the flux. The text is based on a 'mechanical impetus that the voice cannot cast off'.⁶¹ Beckett traces the voice's vacillation with such stamina in *The Unnamable* that, without quite exhausting voice, its capricious ways become more familiar and less organic. The structure of the obligation tempers the voice's ability to diverge so that the narrator surmises: 'What prevents the miracle is the spirit of method to which I have perhaps been a little too addicted' (*T*, 305). The point to emphasise is that the machine, which Sheehan's study connects to humanistic narration but typically suggests something inhuman, is conflated with voice, which Sheehan appears to associate with the modernist shift away from the human. Since the possibilities of voice become part of a process in *The Unnamable*, the categories of machine and voice, human and inhuman, overlap to such an extent that the boundaries are obscured. The upshot is a creaturely composite, in which human and inhuman are in close proximity, or rather, the inhuman is actually what the human can become.

The admixture of machine and voice, human and inhuman, is one way of thinking through the creaturely subjectivity endemic to a process of testifying for oneself through means that obstruct positive testimony. An undertaking that fixes on

⁶⁰ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, p. 174.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 175.

the imperative to speak as much as what is spoken engenders dehumanised witnesses, consumed by the effort to give voice to human experience. Taking the language and logical mechanics of human narrative structures to their extremes shows that an inhuman being is the potential of the human. The imperative to speak in Beckett reveals the human in a broken form and this presents problems for a conventional understanding of testimony that aspires to correlate event and self. Whereas testimony typically attempts to marry tale and teller in order to assert that an individual was present at an event, Beckettian testimony questions the degree to which a human subject is present in an account.

In a variety of ways, Derrida and Agamben also illustrate how attempts to coincide identity and incident repeatedly fail, and that a juridical model of testimony is commonly unfulfilled. Nevertheless, it is through the continuous act of bearing witness to failure that the interplay between potency and impotence, machine and voice, human and inhuman, generates the outline of the human subject, even if that outline is the residue of human properties that develops through or alongside an inhuman image. Derrida, one of the most influential figures in decentring the subject, notes that 'a fable is always and before all else speech'.⁶² To tell a story is to speak, regardless of the accuracy of the tale, and subsequently, invention will always convey an oratorical activity, which in turn intimates a speaking subject. It appears that a being is present within the act of enunciation, but as Agamben explicates, this ephemeral type²³² of subjectivity is contrary to the idea of a complete identification with a stable foundation of self.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben expands upon Michel Foucault's argument that 'enunciation is not a thing determined by real, definite properties; it is,

⁶² Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 34.

rather, pure existence, the fact that a certain being – language – takes place'.⁶³ This use of language at the moment it is employed emphasises the tongue of a speaker prior to its attendant semantic value and thus evidences a state of being, or rather, a simultaneous coming into being for both language and subject. Agamben goes on to relate the particular role that the pseudo-witness performs within this event: '*The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak – that is, in his or her being a subject*' (italics in original).⁶⁴ This paradoxical condition marks the witness as the pure existence achieved through a performance of language without secure semantic value. The witness is the host and bearer of a tenanted but inoperative language, conveying only the fact that language is happening, discrete from its signification.

In Catherine Mill's essay on testimony in Agamben, she points out that the subject's 'sole point of reference is to language itself, and particularly the very taking place of enunciation'.⁶⁵ This transitory subjectivity that relies on the performance of language is a fundamental part of the precarious existential condition of Beckett's creatures. The relationship between speaking and subjectivity recurs most plainly in the fourth text of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, a series of thirteen short texts originally written in French between 1950 and 1951. Coming shortly after the trilogy, these texts are equally concerned with the means to go on speaking, but since they average a couple of pages in length, the subjects they depict are remarkably evanescent. Nevertheless, Beckett's narrator in the fourth text identifies the fact that the act of speaking appears to imply a 'life': 'There's my life, why not, it is one if you like, if you must, I don't say no, this evening. There has to be one, it seems, once there is

⁶³ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 139.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 158.

⁶⁵ Catherine Mills, 'Linguistic Survival and Ethicality – Biopolitics, Subjectification, and Testimony in *Remnants of Auschwitz*', in *Politics, Metaphysics, Death – Essays on Giorgio Agamben's 'Homo Sacer'*, ed. by Andrew Norris (London: Duke University, 2005), 198-221, p. 204.

speech, no need of a story, story is not compulsory' (*TN*, 18). The meaning of a story is unrequired since the words themselves manage to convey someone speaking. Enunciation continues to intimate a life despite the fact that who is speaking or what is spoken is unknowable. The resultant subject exists in the moment of language even as the source and substance of speech is divested from the narrative.

However, since the subject is native to enunciation but devoid of the individuality achieved through story, the act of bearing witness injects a complex double movement into the first-person pronoun. To an extent, the witness is present in the 'I' as the subject of speech, but this 'I' also conveys the distance required to refer to the self, thus making the subject a perceived object. As Richard Begam express it, 'the subject can know itself only by becoming the object of its own consciousness; but in becoming the object of its own consciousness it ceases to be itself, which is to say a subject'.⁶⁶ Furthermore, this universal and anonymous pronoun only ever replaces a more personal appellation, and is consequently an impersonal signifier used in lieu of the ability to speak from a position of complete identity. Hence, Mills describes the phenomenon of the pronoun as a synchronous possession and dispossession: 'the "I" marks the simultaneous appropriation and expropriation of the living being in language and their irreducible disjuncture'.⁶⁷ The first-person pronoun always betrays the connection and disconnection inherent to self-referential speech.

Beckett offers a distillation of this double movement in the opening lines of *The Unnamable*.^{***} The phrase 'I say I' (*T*, 293) intimates both an owned and borrowed 'I', the second of which serves to impair the authority of the initial utterance, thereby causing each to be marred by doubt. Whilst the initial self-reference implies an attachment to a person, the second 'I' is detached as a figure of speech, which

⁶⁶ Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, p. 69.

⁶⁷ Mills, 'Linguistic Survival and Ethicality', p. 205.

uncovers the representational function of both pronouns. The narrator expresses this destabilisation shortly after, saying 'I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me' (*T*, 293). Despite this, the phrase 'I say I' shows that the word 'say' remains in between the two damaged self-referential pronouns. By situating the enunciating 'mouth' in the middle of two 'eyes', Beckett appears to reveal the countenance of testimony. This face places emphasis on utterance, which is an activity that allows the speaker to discern the tenuous connection between pronoun and person, but also bears witness to this broken state of self-reflection. As a result, the witness demonstrates that testimony cannot achieve the unity of self and speech, and subsists instead as a residual subject that articulates the inability to speak.

For Beckett's narrators, the use of language and the moment of utterance, alongside the recognition of these occurring activities, mark a tension between identification and alienation. His narrators are preoccupied with the self-constructing and self-erasing movement of enunciation that Agamben notes. These tensions stem from a difficulty in negotiating the import of deixis (language dependent on context), firstly, and then the enduring connection between self and language. This moment of utterance raises a speaker, but, as a transient activity, enunciation is difficult to possess since it is predominantly without teleological direction. The lack of a proper system of semantics to allow narrative an accumulation of signification means enunciation yields a rather different view of self-identification because it relies on the present context and immediacy of speech, which discontinues reflection. There can be no development or accrued knowledge because language alone sustains the presence, and absence, of the individual. In a passage on Emile Benveniste, Matthew Calarco highlights the concurrence between self and language that feasibly restricts being to a contingent presence: 'If language is absent, there can be no self, and where there is a

self, there is always already language'.⁶⁸ Self and language are bound by their cohabitation and the mutuality of their relationship makes it difficult to view one as distinct from the other. It is impossible to individuate the information of language from the pure existence seen through enunciation. Any type of subjectivity gained through reflection will therefore be incomplete.

On the doomed metaphysical task of returning language to its subject, Agamben writes that 'precisely this impossibility of conjoining the living being and language, *phone* and *logos*, the inhuman and the human – far from authorizing the infinite deferral of signification – is what allows for testimony'.⁶⁹ Agamben perceives the human subject overcoming and surviving the partition between self and expression, or, more precisely, being partially constituted by a realisation of non-identity. He infers that the figure of testimony emerges as a 'witness to its own disorder'.⁷⁰ As we have seen, there is 'intimate extraneousness implicit in the act of speech', as the subject is at once part of and apart from the spoken word.⁷¹ According to Agamben, this kind of contradiction is also prevalent in the experience of shame, in which one simultaneously apprehends and wishes to escape selfhood: '[f]lush is the remainder that, in every subjectification, betrays a desubjectification and that, in every desubjectification, bears witness to a subject'.⁷² The red face of shame is the physiological result of being oneself and at the same time knowing oneself as an other. The pivotal idea is that shame is a sensation that includes and excludes the subject.

For Catherine Mills, shame is 'something from which we cannot separate ourselves, but which simultaneously, we cannot fully take on or adopt as ours. The

⁶⁸ Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies* (New York: Columbia University, 2008), p. 83.

⁶⁹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 130.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 106.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 117.

⁷² Ibid. p. 112.

dilemma this creates for the subject is one of simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification, wherein the subject is called to witness its own ruin'.⁷³ The subject perceives the loss of self and is reconstituted by this process, which makes testimony possible and accounts for a unique type of subjectivity that resonates with Beckett's creatures. Images of ruin pervade Beckett's trilogy to convey the psychological and physical conditions of the characters, and also echo the ability to reflect on inability that absorbs Beckett's (in)sovereign narrators. The impotent-potent hybrid returns in the identity of ruins as the creatures acknowledge themselves as splintered figures.

In *Malone Dies*, the bedridden narrator presents an arresting image of decay as both body and spirit are failing: 'give my body the old orders I know it cannot obey, turn to my spirit gone to rack and ruin' (T, 189). Malone resorts to stories to distract him for this deterioration, and yet he repeatedly recognises this division between reality and fiction as an aspect of his ruin. After a lengthy exposition of Sapo's encounter with the Lamberts, Malone remarks: 'I shall hear myself talking, afar off, from my far mind, talking of the Lamberts, talking of myself, my mind wandering, far from here, among its ruin' (T, 216-7). The Beckettian vestige of subjectivity is realised through this perpetual rambling, in both senses of the word, about the dilapidated self. Malone's self-portrait of a detached other, talking and walking in the distance, effectively says 'I am not here', which demonstrates the concomitant presence and absence of self that causes Agamben to define testimony as that which bears witness to its own disorder. Malone frequently points out this disappointed self-discovery: 'That which is seen, that which cries and writhes, my witless remains. Somewhere in this turmoil thought struggles on, it too wide of the mark. It too seeks me, as it always has, where I am not to be found' (T, 187). Though the self is elusive,

⁷³ Mills, 'Linguistic Survival and Ethicality', p. 203.

Malone continues to recognise a self that can be missed, and this kind of reflection on his state of ruin reveals traces of a subject privy to its own desubjectification.

Malone's perspicacity on his ruined identity recurs in *The Unnamable*. The narrator explains how the value of words vanish because he is no longer present in his thoughts: 'To tell the truth, let us be honest at least, it is some considerable time now since I last knew what I was talking about. It is because my thoughts are elsewhere. I am therefore forgiven. So long as one's thoughts are somewhere everything is permitted' (T, 325). As with Malone, the narrator's self-presence is split into the current speaker and the thinker elsewhere. Nevertheless, the very possibility of thought residing in a remote place means the speaker belongs to its constituent other, which sustains the narrator's partial existence as a ruin. That is, the narrator's recognition of absence preserves the sense of presence. It is this coincidental dynamic that makes the art of failure, pure enunciation and ruined identity central to testimony in that these accounts always stipulate a kind of dissociation that at least alludes to the participating subject. The identity in ruins in Beckett is the residual subjectivity from articulating the inability to speak, whereby the fracture of self becomes the substance of testimony.

Testimony of Fiction

Whilst reflection fails to unite the speaking subject and the perceived object, the continuing acts of testimony outline the absent self, or 'not-I', to throw up an impression of self that is always short of totality. This is a creaturely dimension because the subject is an identity in action, exposed to the process of creation, and, moreover, because it involves conceiving self alongside other creations or projections of the self. The circumnavigation of complete self-identification in *The Unnamable*

inspires fictional elements, which in turn contribute to the narrator's disintegration, 'ruined as I am and still young in this abjection they have brought me to' (T, 354). It is the implicit sign of testimony found in these figments of the imagination to which I now turn.

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida defines the subject as a 'finite experience of non-identity to self'.⁷⁴ However, in keeping with his philosophy of presence, which takes issue with this finitude, Derrida adopts Antonin Artaud's rubric 'subjectile', as a term that evinces the intermediate site of difference and the division of identity.⁷⁵ For Asja Szafraniec, the narrator of *The Unnamable* is a victim of the subjectile's helical infinity, condemned to a futile search for self that spawns and depletes two prosthetic guises, namely Mahood's eternal self-reflection, or not dying, and Worm's complete lack of reflection, or not being born.⁷⁶ If, as Szafraniec affirms, *The Unnamable* is the text closest to undoing the system of identity through fictional works because it is '[u]nable to close the circuit, not even by prosthesis', the conclusion must be that these fictional edifices obscure the 'real' identity that fabricates them, that these voices are simply an annex and not part of the subject.⁷⁷ It is my contention in this final section that the fictional constructs are fundamental to the ruins of subjectivity in Beckett. The author-narrators gift a voice to others in a critical attempt to efface and desubjectify themselves. Thus, the internal avatars offer the opportunity to reinforce the divided nature of enunciation. They perform the crucial role of fabling in the sense of generating speech and encourage the important

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well", or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida, in *Who Comes After The Subject?*, ed. by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991), 96-119, p. 104.

⁷⁵ See Jacques Derrida, 'Maddening the Subjectile', trans. by Mary Ann Caws, *Yale French Studies*, 84 (1994), pp. 154-171.

⁷⁶ Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida and the Event of Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2007), p. 130.

⁷⁷ Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida and the Event of Literature*, p. 127.

state of mediation within writing that is a condition of the personal and impersonal relationship with language.

Beckett attends to the filtered and kaleidoscopic composition of the subject in *Molloy*: 'Chameleon in spite of himself, there you have Molloy, viewed from a certain angle' (T, 30). Beckett refers to a changeable identity, capable of assuming different forms, all of which are components of the subject, despite the lack of a core self. Each new guise is not the sum of the authorial 'I', or a route to self-knowledge, but necessarily a persona, a manifestation of the partially desubjectified state of identity. The multiple and often fictional voices that invade Beckett's narrators are a failing gesture in the totalised vision of the subject, but it is a failure that serves a purpose in the study of the self-conscious experience of the subject. The subject must surrender its totality to self-reflectively fold back on oneself, not in a psychoanalytical sense of working through layers and depths, but in a relational sense, in order to realise the estranged coordinates of the subject. As such, this act is a detachment from self to be with self, a veritable 'inclusive exclusion', which is exemplified by the double nature of the word 'cleave': bound by an incision, intimate at the site of rupture.⁷⁸

The polyphony apparent in Beckett's trilogy is the principal focus in the late prose text *Company* (1980), and it worth a brief detour into this dissection of inner voices before returning to the trilogy to see how fictional voices can contribute to testimony. In *Company*, the narrator attempts to bear witness to the act of one's own speaking by detaching the speaking self from the spoken self. The narrator materialises in dual form through a 'pronominal *pas de deux*', as he speaks in second person to a companion who symbolises the narrator also.⁷⁹ By announcing his

⁷⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 27. In *Malone Dies*, Beckett illustrates the ambivalence of 'cleave'. Two lovers form a unity, 'cleave so fast together that they seem a single body', and are then distinctly separate beings, 'each enclosed within its own frontiers' (T, 238).

⁷⁹ Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Beckett*, p. 107.

inventions and being announced as that invention, this bifurcated perspective amounts to a comprehensive self-projection since both act and subject matter are directed towards a veiled self-reflection, or rather, self-creation. Beckett essentially offers another variation of the author as creature theme since the narrator acknowledges that he is a 'Devised deviser devising it all for company' (C, 30). Although the narrator is able to utter himself into existence and compose a vision of himself as the subject of language, the two – act and content – remain separate. By necessity, the narrator is internally alienated, keeping a united identity at arm's length and re-imagining himself before articulating the 'you' that he deceptively inhabits.

The narrator of *Company* effectively assumes roles as author and character, developing a speaking voice and listening confidante to objectify the story. The narrator's process is often available to him:

Might not the hearer be improved? Made more companionable if not downright human. Mentally perhaps there is room for enlivenment. An attempt at reflexion at least. At recall. At speech even. Conation of some kind however feeble. A trace of emotion. Signs of distress. A sense of failure. Without loss of character. (C, 17)

This characterisation is also a study of character; it is criteria for self-assessment as well as creation. In satisfying each of the specifications (reflexion, conation, emotion), the narrator improves his three-dimensional portrait and brings his ipseity into focus, revealing to himself his own capacities. *Company*, then, has the peculiar effect of presenting and effacing its subject. It throws its voice and creates the illusion of multiple presences when, in fact, a single presence has been split to establish a

conversation between its constituent parts. As such, the 'I', the enunciating person, is absent: 'Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I.' (C, 15). In turn, the narrator largely refrains from using the first-person pronoun to avoid phrases such as 'I said', which would suggest a more obvious autobiographical mode that neatly connects the present and past.

The narrator's abstract scenario in *Company* is framed by a series of memories made complex by their resemblance to Beckett's life experiences. James Knowlson's celebrated biography details several passages that 'relate' to the author's past. Even so, Knowlson is careful not to overlook their merit as artistic devices, particularly since the narrative thrusts imagination to the forefront of the tale, which tempers the inclination to see a definite correlation between implied author and narrative techniques. On the contrary, memory is seen as a protean faculty that alters details and facts with each rendition.⁸⁰ In *The End*, for example, Beckett writes: 'A small boy, stretching out his hands and looking up at the blue sky, asked his mother how such a thing was possible. Fuck off, she said' (FN, 39). The episode returns as an alternative version in *Malone Dies*, where the reply is: 'It is precisely as far away as it appears to be' (T, 270). This memory finds a marginally different form in *Company*, in which the narrator remembers 'asking her if it is not in reality much more distant than it appears. The sky that is' (C, 5). The response is more implicit: 'For she shook off your little hand and made you a cutting retort you have never forgotten' (C, 6). Although the 'fuck off' in the first appearance of the memory echoes in the 'shook off' of the third, the series of alterations leaves the episode without a fixed centre. As Knowlson notes, 'there is then considerable doubt as to which version might represent authentic memory'.⁸¹ Consequently, the narrator of *Company* is unable to use the past to explain

⁸⁰ See Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, pp. 652-3.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 652.

the present etiologically: 'How current situation arrived at unclear. No that then to compare to this now' (C, 29). Although memory appears to provide access to a former world with scenes that are fully realised and summoned at will, they are always present views of past events. As opposed to a conception of memory that founds a system of concatenation and spans the gulf between the author's and characters' voices, the power of remembrance actually occupies a place in the temporal now, subject to the witness's current disposition, contemporaneous influences and lexical decisions. Memory in *Company* is a misleading device, designed to add further voices and personae to the text.

Given the preference for the second-person narrative mode and the subsequent multiplication of figments, it can be inferred that Beckett is essentially playing with the form of a *Künstlerroman* (a novel on the formation of its artist). In one respect, Beckett's *Company* chronicles the creation of its narrator by selecting formative events and reticulating voices that imply an observing deviser. At the same time, the text also orphans the narrator, who necessarily speaks himself into a new existence that is both presence and absence. That is, Beckett presents a narrator who inserts biographical vignettes and studies himself in a kind of schizophrenic projection of self, yet filters this sense of identity with a framework of otherness that dislocates the announcing 'I', displaces the sovereign author and demands the text's autonomy. The text is oddly autobiographical, but in a way that foregrounds the creaturely dynamics of self-reflective partitioning and fictional constructs as opposed to a direct correlation between the writing and the self.

Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that 'there is not, nor has there ever been any presence-to-self that would not call into question the distance from self that this

presence demands'.⁸² It is this paradoxical nature of identity, always constituted by the space between presences, that Beckett hits upon in the last word of *Company*: 'Alone' (C, 42). This word attempts to say 'I am alone', as though the voices are 'all one', but already there is the impression of duality. 'A lone', as in a lone person, offers recognition of that isolation to split the self into the observed and the observer; the one who is lonely and the one who recognises he or she is alone. In this single word, we see the self dividing itself into object and subject, pointing out the necessary severance of self that such a self-conscious assertion would require. In effect, the narrator is making company up to and including the final utterance of the text.

In its exploration of the implicit distance within self-presence, *Company* is comparable to Maurice Blanchot's 1994 text *The Instant of My Death*. Set in 1944, the narrator in Blanchot's text reflects on a young man's narrow escape from execution at the hands of what first appear to be German soldiers but, as it transpires, are members of the Vlassov army, allies of the Nazis. Yet, as Derrida makes known in *Demeure* with the aid of a personal letter from Blanchot – an article of evidence that introduces a historical and biographical edge to Derrida's reading of literature – the narrative viewpoint in *The Instant of My Death* suggests a familiarity or intimacy with the protagonist's episode and implies that the two presences have a single source in Blanchot's own biography. Far from suggesting unity, however, this short text offers a representation of memory and autobiography by evoking the distance between the present and the said event or remembered self. As a result, Derrida recognises the liminal space between testimony and literature, and later, testimony and fiction. He writes:

⁸² Jean-Luc Nancy in Derrida, 'Eating Well', p. 102.

[I]f testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature.⁸³

As previously mentioned, testimony is rooted in uncertainty for Derrida. A witness can swear an oath, yet his or her deposition is not purely objective or direct knowledge; testimony is always the retrospective act of bearing witness encumbered by fallacy. Blanchot's evocation of this distinction encourages Derrida to trace 'the meshes of the net formed by the limits *between* fiction and testimony, which are also *interior* each to the other'.⁸⁴ According to Derrida, there is fiction within testimony and testimony within fiction. The crossover takes place due to the testifying 'I's inability to account for what the pronoun signifies without becoming, in some sense, a fictional 'I'. As Jennifer Yusin suggests, testimony reveals 'the failure of autobiography to maintain its status as biography. It would seem, then, that any attempt at autobiography becomes fiction as the I announces, as Blanchot claims, its inherent failure and absence'.⁸⁵ The error of testimony emerges in the intervals between experience, memory and enunciation, meaning that the language of testimony will always be in excess of its motivation and imply a degree of fiction.

In relation to Beckett's trilogy, the crucial point of interest in Derrida's reading of Blanchot is the way in which testimony might figure in fiction and the resultant possibility of tracing the fictional reconstruction of self – the young man or

⁸³ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, published with *The Instant of My Death*, by Maurice Blanchot, both trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2000), p. 30.

⁸⁴ Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 56.

⁸⁵ Jennifer Yusin, 'Writing the Disaster: Testimony and *The Instant of My Death*', *Colloquy, Text Theory Critique*, 10 (Victoria: Monash University, 2005), 134-149, p. 137.

the 'he' in Blanchot – back to a testifying voice of sorts as a manifestation of the suppressed author-narrator. The possibility of identifying an originary voice amongst a cast of figments queries whether the substitute voices in Beckett's trilogy are figures of prosopopoeia (a rhetorical device by which an imaginary, absent, or dead person is represented as speaking or acting), or rather heteronyms (voices imagined by a writer to produce idiomatic writing styles), as David Jones proposes. Prosopopoeia essentially gives a mask and thus a 'face' to a source, whilst heteronym poses 'other' constructed voices. Jones opts for heteronym because '[p]rosopopoeia may ultimately promise a return to intelligibility; as a rhetoric figure adopted by a particular speaker, it looks forward to the moment at which the mask will be lowered and the speaker's "true" voice restored'.⁸⁶ Beckett's narrators, in texts such as *The Unnamable*, exert themselves to consolidate the multiplicity of voices and return to the singular subject, but, strictly speaking, this endeavour is in vain if subjectivity is considered as a complete identification with self. In this latter respect, Jones' adoption of heteronym to describe the narrative dynamic in Beckett's work is a prudent position.

However, prosopopoeia remains relevant as a term that emphasises the ownership between creator and creature, ventriloquist and dummy, rather than suggesting that these voices are completely distinct and individual, which is not the impression we get in Beckett.⁸⁷ The narrative voice in *The Unnamable* suggests, 'I cannot be silent. About myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric.' (T, 296) These rhetorical figures are conjured to exercise the voice whilst the search for self is adjourned. The prosopopoeia of speaking through another is therefore incorporated

⁸⁶ Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, p. 21.

⁸⁷ Heteronymy is more congruent to David Jones' reading of *How It Is* (1964): 'In *How It Is*, specifically, it becomes impossible to distinguish the speech of the witness from the speech of the other: because the distinction between 'original' and citational discourse collapses, testimony, here, is always spoken through the other', Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, p. 70.

into the creative awareness of Beckett's trilogy. The obscure 'troop of lunatics' (T, 310) inhabits a melting pot of subjectification and desubjectification, caught between testimony and fiction, so that the creatures are not clearly demarcated from one another. These identities are mobile and interchangeable to the point that each voice appears to emanate from the last, each implying an origin, even if it is not identifiable. The initial 'M' for Beckett's narrator-authors, for instance, causes them to coalesce. These names have a strong visual and oral connection that suggests a genealogy going back to Murphy. In the trilogy itself, Beckett's characters are subject to mutation, which is evident in Moran's invocation of Molloy as Mollose (T, 113), Sapo's change to Macmann in *Malone Dies* (T, 229-30) and Basil's transformation into Mahood before the ambiguous relationship between Mahood and Worm in *The Unnamable* (T, 311, 340). Each creature begets an other and it is this metamorphosis of identity that at least indicates a path back to the source.

It might be more accurate to say that prosopopoeia and heteronymy clash in Beckett's work and in doing so, maintain an indecisive narrative, with the former fundamentally inspiring a pursuit of the host and the latter destabilising that single identity. Malone suggests as much in one of his many returns from the fictional world of Macmann back to the self-awareness of his position as a writer in the hospital room:

perhaps we'll all come back, reunited, done with parting, done with prying on one another, back to this foul little den all dirty white and vaulted, as though hollowed out of ivory, an old rotten tooth. Or alone, back alone, as alone as when I went, but I doubt it, I can hear them from here, clamouring after me

down the corridors, stumbling through the rubble, beseeching me to take them with me. (T, 237)

Malone realises the possibility of assembling the constituent voices in his mind and also abandoning the voices to reveal his solitariness. As the 'Murphys, Merciers, Molloy's, Morans and Malones' (T, 237) continue to implore the narrator, the image of ruins appears through the 'rubble' to suggest a demolished subject. By observing his ruins overrun with figments, however, some part of the self is reflecting on the uncertainty over self-presence that the voices precipitate and thus bearing witness to its own disorder. This creaturely subjectivity means that the fictional beings can act as figures of alterity that offer the host a relative value, even if his central position is inaccessible or untenable. By saying these voices do not amount to self, it seems that, rather than overwhelm the narrator, Malone gets a sustained view of himself as a deferred presence. Although the voices may stem from the narrator as figures of prosopopoeia that act in his absence, they also show that Malone is not completely absorbed in them and so these heteronymic voices are different to him, which ultimately helps to satisfy the *cogito*.

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator experiences a range of different relationships with the figments that emerge. The initial reason for developing these fictional voices is to achieve the one true voice preserved in prosopopoeia. The possibility of retrieving an originary identity is the motivation behind the narrator's attempt to indulge and subsequently disband surplus voices, which would re-establish the site of creation. In a precursor to the 'Alone' of *Company*, the narrator of *The Unnamable* recognises his precarious position from the outset: 'I shall not be alone in the beginning. I am of course alone. Alone. That is soon said. Things can be soon said.

And how can one be sure, in such darkness? I shall have company. In the beginning. A few puppets. Then I'll scatter them, to the winds, if I can' (T, 294). The narrator is uncertain whether he is alone and therefore resolves to have company. It is only the dissolution of other voices that will confirm the solitariness of the narrator in the end. That is, only after his company has departed will he recognise the vacillations of his aporetic and ephectic discourse as himself alone. As such, the narrator contemplates the crowd of past protagonists, and, in an echo of the earlier lines, remarks: 'I'll scatter them, and their miscreated puppets. Perhaps I'll find traces of myself' (T, 327). In this formulation, the voices cover a subject that lies beneath or behind their activity, but dispersing these creatures will help to identify the creator.

The narrator is impelled to refer to his fictional constructs in order to undertake a process of elimination that will recognise and dispel fiction in order to identify his reality negatively. The narrator states: 'First I'll say what I'm not, that's how they taught me to proceed, then what I am' (T, 328). The oppressive 'they' that lurk in this passage and insist that their negative technique is a passage to self-discovery is the same cohort of voices that move to usurp the narrator's presence. The upshot of the narrator's impression of reality against the touchstone of fiction is that the faintest knowledge of his situation cannot be achieved or expressed without a degree of fiction: 'All these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone. But I just said I have spoken of me, am speaking of me' (T, 305). The contemplation of his puppets here means the narrator inadvertently stumbles upon a passage dedicated to him. Thus, the narrator of *The Unnamable* can only attest to himself through the portal of fiction.

The prevalence of surrogate voices means the narrator is caught up in fiction for lengthy periods, to the extent that the voices encroach upon his identity. By focusing on what he is not, the narrator invests himself into the cohort of voices, moving from the negative identification of the elimination project to a sustained confabulation alongside heteronymic voices. It is therefore imperative that the narrator recognises these voices as substitutes if he is to maintain the possibility of an independent identity, as when he reflects: 'I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to me, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it' (*T*, 305). The narrator clearly attempts to transfer his issues to the prosthetic figures, but fortuitously they cannot be employed as like-for-like replacements. The consolation is that the incompatibility of the fictional voices allows the narrator to comprehend the identity crisis that is undoubtedly his own.

The narrator also suggests that although the fictional voices tend to efface the single authorial voice, they might also demonstrate his character in action. Rather than use the creatures as fictional others to offset his real voice, this 'dirty pack of fake maniacs' (*T*, 371) are reduced to a facet of the narrator's own personality, namely his 'inaptitude'. He says, 'Perhaps all they have told me has reference to a single existence, the confusion of identities being merely apparent and due to my inaptitude to assume any' (*T*, 333). It is significant that the narrator should take ownership of inaptitude because it means that although his creatures consume him, his subjectivity can consist in his being consumed, aware of himself buried 'behind my mannikins' (*T*, 308). Beckett offers a concise articulation of how the subject is constituted by failure in his 1930 poem 'Whoroscope' and the expression 'Fallor, ergo sum!' ('I fail,

therefore I am').⁸⁸ The more these figures take over in *The Unnamable*, then, the more the narrator realises this invasion as a repercussion of his defining property. Effectively, the narrator can testify to his role in his own ruin at the hands of his interlocutors.

As encounters with non-identity become increasingly relevant to the experience of subjectivity, the multitude of occasions in which Beckett's narrators claim that self-knowledge is banished from them and that speech is 'not-I' take on new significance. Towards the end of his assignment, Moran feels a 'growing resignation to being dispossessed of self' (*T*, 149) as he gradually deteriorates to resemble his target Molloy. Curiously, however, this transformation would not only inadvertently complete Moran's investigation by 'discovering' a Molloy-like condition, but also improve his sense of identity precisely by assimilating the stranger:

Physically speaking it seemed to me I was now becoming rapidly unrecognisable. And when I passed my hands over my face, in a characteristic and now more than ever pardonable gesture, the face my hands felt was not my face any more, and the hands my face felt were my hands no longer. [...] And this belly I did not know remained my belly, my old belly, thanks to I know not what intuition. And to tell the truth I not only knew who I was, but I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before, in spite of its deep lesions and the wounds with which it was covered. (*T*, 170-71)

Previously, Moran had prided himself on a disciplined mind-set founded on sovereignty over self and authority over his son. Yet, the more Moran's impression of

⁸⁸ See Samuel Beckett, *Selected Poems, 1930-1989* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 6.

his outward appearance slips and he loses grip of his regimented self-image, the more these ephemeral façades give way to a profound recognition of the self that lies beneath. In other words, as he becomes a ruin of his previous state he can come to recognise a constitutive difference between the ordered past and disordered present.

It is a paradoxical event in which contact with an unfamiliar version of oneself induces a strong sense of identity. Such a moment, it can be suggested, implies that the experience of desubjectification is the key component of the fictional prostheses and their oppressive voices in Beckett's work. This is a feature that doubles strikingly as a passage into testimony in that only through speaking about an other will the identity in ruins be available. In Yusin's essay on Blanchot, she goes as far as to claim that '[a]s much as testimony may assume the autobiographical voice that writes about a singular experience, it is fiction that opens the creative space in which the I is able to write as an I'.⁸⁹ Fiction indicates an acceptance of the pronoun's personal and impersonal characteristics, it confesses and performs its inherent failure, which, on the contrary, testimony tries to eschew when it employs the 'I'. As such, testimony is the bedfellow of fiction, despite its prefigured attempts to conceal this proximity. The point here is that fiction haunts every attempt at testimony and that creativity is the necessary ingredient in realising the unattainability of truth. The same holds true for Beckett, whose texts bear witness to the fact that the mediatory practice of writing as an 'I' attests to the failure of testimony. Nevertheless, Beckett's narrators come to rely on fiction for any recognition or documentation of their existence, despite it being permeated by the exclusion and desubjectification not usually related to judicial testimony.

⁸⁹ Yusin, 'Writing the Disaster: Testimony and *The Instant of My Death*', p. 142.

This chapter has shown that Beckett's trilogy resonates with rather unorthodox concepts of testimony that focus on the spaces between seeing and saying, event and account. The fallibility of the witness and the dissociation inherent to retrospect are most intense in Holocaust testimony, but the same issues apply to Beckett's author-narrators to render them both ignorant and impotent, and yet oddly cognizant of their deficiencies. Beckett's thorough engagement with an art of failure precipitates contingent narrative and fractious subjective conditions that show up the inefficacy of epistemological and expressive modes proper to the human. The obligation to speak and inability to speak conspire to make Beckett's author-narrators creaturely subjects, bound to creation. I have introduced the term (in)sovereignty to describe the concomitant potency and impotence that makes up Beckett's creaturely aesthetic. A similar duality contributes to the identity in ruins that describes the simultaneous possession and dispossession of self that marks Beckett's creatures. Although the creaturely dynamics I have traced depart from the standards notion of a sovereign witness and human subject, Beckett's creatures offer an ontological position that retains testimonial value and subjective viability despite the crises in language and identity. Bearing witness to the event and the self inevitably leaves things unsaid or incomplete, but it is an awareness of the impossibility of speaking and knowing through the performance of language and trying to understand that attests to the lacunae left by the thing itself.

2. Power

Master-Servant Relationships

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Beckett's creaturely aesthetic undermines the artistic foundations of sovereign power and reconstitutes testimonial value from the detritus of competent practice. In the wartime and post-war context of physical hardship, ideological destabilisation and artistic inadequacy, Beckett's engagement with ignorance and impotence offers an apt focus on powerlessness. Thus far my analysis of testimony in Beckett's trilogy has concentrated on the 'sovereign as creature' dynamic that impacts individual characters. This chapter traces the abject state of Beckett's creatures back to other figures of power to explicate what it means to be a subject and a fellow creature. Instead of focusing on author-narrators, the aim here is to follow a series of attachments and confrontations between characters, or master and servant relationships, to analyse the nature of power as it is exercised, challenged and neutralized in Beckett. These master-servant relationships show how figures of authority are preserved to keep stable identities based on binaries, but also that power is frequently destabilised in codependent relationships.

The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel explicates the codependency between lord and bondsman in relation to identity thinking in the seminal chapter 'Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage' in his first major work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Hegel explains how consciousness must escape itself to gain knowledge of itself and that this '[s]elf-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness'.¹ The meeting of two self-conscious beings triggers a struggle for superiority that aims to prove the value and

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, ed. by Stephen Houlgate, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 91.

freedom of the self. Ironically, the victorious lord becomes a dependent force, reliant on the bondsman to mediate his self-consciousness. However, for Hegel, the struggle engineers the extreme conditions of 'dread' and 'fear' in which threat allows the bondsman to recognise himself. Furthermore, the bondsman's work objectifies his being, thereby allowing him to 'possess his independence in thinghood'.² Antibiosis, according to Hegel, presents a kind of symbiosis whereby antagonisms between two foreign bodies reveal the self to consciousness, causing identity to thrive.

This 'self-will, a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude' is a significant repercussion that justifies the use of the master-servant coupling over master-slave and lord-bondsman variations since it highlights the strength a servant can extract from work.³ The *OED* defines 'servant' as '[o]ne who is under the obligation to render certain services to, and to obey the orders of, a person or a body of persons, especially in return for wages or salary'.⁴ This payment is one motivation to offer service, yet the servant's usefulness to a master lends this subordinate role a power of its own. The servant has the ability to unsettle power roles, both coincidentally, as Hegel shows, and through voluntary submission, as typified by the ascetic servant of God whose self-discipline and abstention offers purpose whilst inducing reverence from others. The term 'servant' thus comes to 'express a relation to the Sovereign', as in 'servant of the state' or a 'public servant'. The servant effectively has a dual level as both anonymous worker subject to the master and influential counterpart through his or her indispensable service.

Master and servant identities are unstable, liable to oscillate or have a contradictory nature. As such, the narrative condition of (in)sovereignty, in which a position of power enfolds a position of impotence, finds an equivalent in the master-

² Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, p. 95.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴ *OED online*, <www.oed.com>.

servant relationship. Walter Benjamin asserts that the sovereign power to decide and override decisions means the sovereign is 'confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature'.⁵ In carrying out a narrative, this 'sovereign as creature' simultaneously occupies the peak of power and trough of impotence. But the sovereign creature also emerges as a social dynamic when the master relies on the servant for distinction and, in extreme cases, resorts to inhuman or monstrous levels of brutality in order to dominate an other. The master is degraded in order to rule; he is a creature simultaneously amongst and above creatures. In this way, the master-servant binary is destabilised to the extent that sovereign power encloses creaturely weaknesses and vice versa. The codependency between master and servant essentially marks a point of tension in the power struggle that can decentre power altogether.

After an exposition of the socio-political and artistic transitions in France during the early years of the Second World War, the opening sections of this chapter interpret the service granted to patriarchal forms of mastery in Beckett's *Watt* and the creaturely state of melancholy in *Waiting for Godot*. Not only do these texts represent Beckett's steps towards refreshing literary styles and content in prose and drama respectively, they also share an interest in how single figures of authority sustain power systems and dictate narrative momentum. Read together, the two texts convey the influence of absent others and the habit of projecting and preserving masters to combat the fear of abandonment. Beckett's work both invokes and undermines transcendental authority, I suggest, but whilst he deprecates metanarratives, they nevertheless remain as a potential to govern his characters.

⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 85.

The stability that an overarching narrative offers is found to a lesser extent in the distinction of binary roles. The second half of the chapter follows the movement from superhuman to subhuman others, considering the complex identity issues between the Nazis and Jews, and how the resulting conflicts relate to deep-rooted tensions between human and animal identities, to comment upon the necessary alterity in Beckett's work. As the impossibility of self-identity denies independence, Beckett's characters attempt to develop identity through externalised conflicts. In turn, the pseudo-couples are deprived of singularity and are subject to neighbourly codependency. The biopolitical tensions of these antagonistic and compulsory power struggles are the primary focus of the later sections of the chapter, which move to expound the multifaceted apparatus of authority. With reference to Michel Foucault's readings of sovereign power and Agamben's analysis of the biopolitics of the Third Reich, I address issues of territory and care in examples from a number of Beckett's texts from the immediate post-war period, including *The Expelled* (French 1946; English 1962), *The End, Mercier and Camier* (written in French in 1946; French 1970; English 1974), and *Molloy*. The organisation of space in Beckett reveals a political juncture at which welfare for the same crosses into violence towards the other. By bringing Beckett's master-servant relationships into view alongside the context of the Second World War and the Holocaust, this chapter on power serves to illuminate the artistic and extra-literary axis where compositional tensions meet socio-political and ethical issues.

Exercising Writing: Fascist Regime Against Liberal Art

During Beckett's 1936-7 trip to Germany, in which he visited many art galleries and made friends with several artists including Karl Ballmer and Willem Grimm, he wrote

to Thomas MacGreevy, noting: 'the campaign against "Art-Bolshevism" is only just beginning'.⁶ Beckett anticipated what he was to witness first-hand during his stay: the diminishing presence of art that failed to support the ideals of the totalitarian state. The Third Reich's censorship of 'degenerate' art, particularly the Commission of Confiscation of July 1937, was enforced by the *Reichskulturkammer* to temper liberal dissent. For David Weisberg, the Fascist regime called for the 'destruction of cultural freedom in order to consolidate social control and maintain the repression of democratic dissent'.⁷ He goes on to argue that this suppression of artistic freethinking conditions Beckett's political outlook since 'it threatened the only social matrix in which his writing might make sense'.⁸

Weisberg regards the open-minded and intellectual avant-garde creative scene as crucial to Beckett's reception in that the burgeoning experimentalism after *Murphy* would require an audience receptive to inventive literature. Beckett's early work in English was relatively unsuccessful, *Murphy* itself having been rejected by forty publishers and its eventual publisher Routledge selling only 618 of the 1500 first printing in the eight years after its untimely appearance in 1938.⁹ As a result, the French market would have appealed to Beckett, both artistically for the Parisian 'bohemian' sensibilities during the 1930s and commercially for a fresh start after the war, thus offering Beckett both a congenial literary community and a new potential audience. Indeed, he was very much a struggling writer before the war, and, besides developing an artistic network, Beckett's formative years were spent negotiating the

⁶ Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 387.

⁷ Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder*, pp. 43-4.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 43

⁹ Carlton Lake, *No Symbols Where None Intended: A Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts, and Other Material Relating to Samuel Beckett in the Collection of the Humanities Research Center* (Austin, TX: The Center, 1984), p. 44.

wake of his artistic precursors and the contemporaneous literary voices after the Great War.

However, in the context of Beckett's clandestine existence in the rural south of France during the Nazi occupation of Paris, his literary approach acquired an immediacy and significance that was missing prior to the start of the Second World War. Beckett mainly wrote the experimental novel *Watt* whilst taking refuge in La Croix, near the unoccupied village of Roussillon. Naturally, in the early to mid 1940s, Beckett's writing was secondary to his work with the French Resistance and his manual labour on the Audes' farm.¹⁰ Yet, the fact that Beckett continued to write suggests that creativity is a required act; it is imperative to exercise the ability to write. He later recognised how important writing was for his spell in the Vaucluse region, pointing out the mental succour it provided: 'Without my writing I would have gone mad'.¹¹ It seems that writing fiction allowed Beckett to keep his bearings on reality.

Beckett's reliance on writing during this difficult period appears to act as a private resistance to the maddening wartime conditions. Such a retreat to writing complicates George Orwell's contemporaneous view on the fate of the writer in modernity. In Orwell's 1939 essay 'Inside the Whale' on the American novelist Henry Miller, he states:

From now onwards the all-important fact for the creative writer is going to be that this is not a writer's world. That does not mean that he cannot help to bring the new society into being, but he can take no part in the process *as a writer*. For

¹⁰ See Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, pp. 324-5.

¹¹ Beckett qtd. in Rosette C. Lamont, 'Fast-forward: Lucky's *Pnigos*', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 11, Endlessness in the Year 2000, ed. by Angela Moorjani and Carola Veit (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 132-139, p. 135.

as a writer he is a liberal, and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism.¹²

Orwell suggests that to be a creative writer at all is to partake in a liberal attitude that is being denied in the mid-twentieth century. By implication, writing holds the luxuries of opposition and disagreement; it has the privilege of individual thought. Following Orwell's observations, Beckett's writing – which at this stage is a kind of outflow of writing as a non-writer – suggests that a literary protest against the totalitarian state will occur in the fact of writing as a necessary action. That is, not *as a writer* – the figurehead of forward-thinking, free expression and circulated for a likeminded audience – but as an individual in terms of an expressive survival.¹³ The writer role is called upon here not so much for its ideological qualities, or even its versatility, but for the process itself. The idea is to be liberated from the pressures of reality at the time through writing, not to be a liberal writer figure. Beckett's personal writing project constitutes a defiant act of subsistence.

Beckett described *Watt* as 'an exercise', which implies that this text allows him to preserve the act of writing despite the destabilised writer-identity.¹⁴ At this point, the question for Beckett is not how to respond artistically to world events, but how to save one's creative faculties in critical times. Accordingly, the word 'exercise' can be taken in a number of ways to mark *Watt* as a fulcrum in Beckett's career. It suggests that he is maintaining a practice of the past, in a conveyance of writing as a relic through the period of turmoil, or even a melancholic lingering over writing. It also

¹² George Orwell qtd. in Miller, *Late Modernism*, p. 38.

¹³ Ironically, the Irish Legation confirms Beckett's profession as a 'writer' in November 1940, roughly three months before he begins his 'Watt' notebooks. See John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 88. However, his difficulty to get *Watt* published with Routledge reinforces the original point; T. M. Ragg pronounced the manuscript 'too wild and unintelligible for the most part to stand any chance of publication over here at the present time', Ragg qtd. in Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 14.

¹⁴ Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2001), p. 112.

suggests that Beckett is improving his practice, working out his method to craft a new approach. In this sense, the exercise is an experimental activity. In addition, the homonymic value of the word also suggests 'exorcise', and this 'driving out' or 'getting rid' of style, convention and the sedimented idea of writing as a writer is contrary to the sense of exercising a well-established skill. Taken together, however, Beckett's approach to his novel elicits the tensions between the expressive freedom of yesteryears, the present task of maintaining his creativity and the direction to transform literature for the future.

The eight-year period of inactivity and transition during the war, punctuated only by *Watt*, ultimately leads to Beckett's turn to the French language and his foray into drama, which are the outstanding changes to his artistic practice. At the same time, he was also quietly developing his understanding and integration of the relations between power and compulsion, freedom and thralldom, in the process and product of his writing. Beckett was deliberating the pitfalls of poetics based on sovereignty, complete with a masterful author, and moving into hitherto unexplored forms of incompetence. His focus on incompetence, however, does not occlude the influence of rigid backgrounds or strict structures, like tradition, sovereignty and reason. His art of failure is inextricable from the criterion of order, as the dream of expression continues to impel the author-narrators' pursuits and offset Beckett's achievement. As noted in the contradictory idea of (in)sovereignty, Beckett evinces the interplay between strength and weakness as he attempts to discover his own unique voice: 'I don't think *impotence* has been *exploited* in the past' (my emphasis).¹⁵ He shows that his work is very much about negotiating, pursuing and trying to apply power even as it is immersed in failure. In short, there can be no sense of impotence in Beckett's work

¹⁵ Shenker, 'An Interview with Beckett', p. 148.

without an intimation of the power that is lacking, but equally the continuing act of writing in this way acts as a powerful response to the despotic context.

It is in light of the strict censorship and ideological conformity enforced during the Nazi occupation that the formal and thematic levels of mastery and service in a text such as *Watt* appear all the more apparent, innovative and radical. At a time when art is forced to fortify political ends as another vehicle for propaganda, Beckett's text protests against such systematisation by absorbing and obscuring notions of authority, order and control to deliver a defiantly experimental retort to the sanitized works that the Nazi regime approved, such as Adolf Wissel's bucolic paintings and Adolf Bartels' *völkisch* poetry. This is not the articulated liberty that Orwell suggested from the 'writer'. Rather, the on-going act of writing and exertions of language work alongside more patent content on systems of power to imply a propensity towards resistance, conflict, and as the title pronounces, questioning.

Watt the Fungible and Knott There: Objectified Servant and Absent Master

When writing *Watt*, Beckett was subject to the Vichy regime, which replaced the Republican motto '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*' (Freedom, Equality, Fraternity) with '*Travail, Famille, Patrie*' (Work, Family, Homeland). Anthony Uhlmann considers the latter to evoke 'a more medieval idea of a "natural" order'.¹⁶ It is within the context of this throwback to the feudal system that the protagonist Watt works as a house servant under the mysterious master Mr. Knott. Watt and his superior Erskine are one combination of manservant pairs from a continuous stream of servants that enter the Knott household, work for the master and eventually leave having rarely witnessed their employer. Watt is a pensive character who carries out protracted

¹⁶ Anthony Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 95.

analyses of the house rules and servants' duties in a bid to make sense of his role. The changes to the political slogan during the early 1940s help to illuminate the dynamics of the Knott household. The Vichy regime replaces the responsibility of 'freedom' in the original Republican motto with the more physical obligation to 'work', which transforms the citizen into a human resource. The change from 'equality' to 'family' stresses the domestic hierarchical structure, headed by the patriarch and founded on service to the 'house'. Whilst the word 'house' promotes the idea of a small, close-knit community, or social microcosm, it also connotes a designated zone of governance – the decisive house rules under the roof. 'Family' itself derives from *famulus* meaning servant, and the combination of work, house and servant clearly points to the duties that Watt performs. The fact that 'fraternity' is exchanged for 'homeland' expands the idea of household servants to a national level, with the government acting as the noble or patriarch, hence 'fatherland'. The implication of the Vichy motto for Watt, then, is the reduction of his individual identity, as he becomes part of a system. Watt's place in the Knott house is emblematic of the individual's role in a socio-political mechanism that has reduced its democratic, egalitarian values and accentuated sovereign, dynastic rule, which gathers impersonalised subjects together to work for the benefit of a master.

Friedrich Nietzsche uses the terms 'noble' and 'servile' in his philosophy on the will to power, but as with Uhlmann's 'natural order', Nietzsche adopts these categories from the feudal politico-economic system and naturalizes them. In his philosophical bestiary, these terms come to form a fundamental dichotomy in power relations between the courageous nobility and gregarious animals that depend on others. As Alphonso Lingis recognises, in Nietzsche, 'eagles, lions and serpents are

noble; sheep, cattle and poultry are servile'.¹⁷ Nietzsche employs these classifications not in an allegorical way, but in a kind of zoomorphic process that draws a line of continuity between humans and other species. The inherent nature of the noble and servile roles is significant in Beckett's text since, before his entrance into the Knott household, the first appearance of the eponymous protagonist gestures towards Watt's identity as an object, a thing to be used, which is a status he acquires at the expense of human semblance and attributes.

Beckett's exposition of Watt is through the eyes of three observers, Mr. Hackett and Goff and Tetty Nixon. As Watt disembarks from a tram, the reader is told that 'Tetty was not sure whether it was a man or a woman' (*W*, 14). This thinghood, the questionable status of 'it-ness' that is Watt, applies to a number of sexually ambiguous and sexless creatures in Beckett's work that reveal the author's distrust of pronouns. His writing, Beckett says, 'has to do with a fugitive 'I' [...]. It's an embarrassment of pronouns. I'm searching for the non-pronounial. [...] [I]t seems a betrayal to say 'he' or 'she''.¹⁸ This viewpoint leads Beckett to drop sex altogether in *The Unnamable*, for example, in which the lack of a name destabilises other referential determinations and becomes palpable in the redundancy of sexual classification. The initial portrait of Watt as a sexless creature then devolves to an inanimate item, with Beckett extending Nietzsche's line of servility from human to animal to inorganic matter: 'Mr. Hackett was not sure whether it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord' (*W*, 14).¹⁹ An anthropomorphised version of this image introduces

¹⁷ Alphonso Lingis, 'Nietzsche and Animals', in *Animal Philosophy – Ethics and Identity*, ed. by Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (London: Continuum, 2004), 7-14, p. 9.

¹⁸ Beckett qtd. in Lawrence Shainberg, 'Exorcising Beckett', *The Paris Review*, 29.104 (1987), 100-136, p. 134.

¹⁹ Beckett also highlights Watt's inability to self-reflectively determine himself: 'prevented him from saying [...] of the creature that still in spite of everything presented a large number of exclusively

Watt as a tall, clownish oddity, anticipating the stiff 'funambulistic stagger' (*W*, 29) depicted later. But it is the actual objects that Mr. Hackett sees that hold more significance for Watt as a servant. He is a carpet to be walked over, which suggests his submissiveness, or a tarpaulin used to cover up, which implies a practical quality. As a mundane object, Watt is set up as an article of service belonging to a domestic setting.

In Watt's likeness to a roll of carpet or tarpaulin, Beckett conveys his character's inertia, as a thing brought into service by an external force. Such articles are defined by a function assigned to them, which is a particularly creaturely state that recalls the definition of the creature as subject to another's control. The passivity of an inanimate item corresponds with the docile disposition of the creature, which is reinforced shortly after Watt's objectification: 'a milder more inoffensive creature does not exist' (*W*, 18). Given his enigmatic introduction, there is a question mark over Watt and he is doubly 'inoffensive' as a result of this blankness as an uncharacterized character. Whilst the reader learns that Watt is intriguing to Mr. Hackett and in debt to Goff Nixon, his destination is indecipherable and the trio of onlookers are ignorant of all other means of identification, such as Watt's 'Nationality, family, birthplace, confession, occupation, means of existence, distinctive signs' (*W*, 19). In this way, Beckett alludes to the very composition of his protagonist in that Watt seems to have materialized from nowhere, having no traceable origins or background. Furthermore, when Goff Nixon finally does recall a physical feature, 'a huge big red nose' (*W*, 20), it is in keeping with master Knott's criteria for 'the two types of men' to serve him (*W*, 59). Watt fits the physical description Knott stipulates and therefore this telling first appearance defines Watt as

human characteristics, that is was a man' (*W*, 79). In this passage, Watt also makes reference to inorganic material: 'he made the distressing discovery that of himself too he could no longer affirm anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone' (*W*, 79).

an archetypal servant. Beckett's exposition acts as a kind of job interview conducted through the public reconnaissance between Mr. Hackett and the Nixons, and Watt's indistinctness makes him a suitable candidate for the servile herd that continuously passes through Knott's house.

It is apt that Watt arrives as a nondescript entity since he is appointed to fill the vacancy that Arsene leaves in the Knott house, and this process of replacement stipulates a level of homogeneity and adaptability to achieve a seamless transition. Watt's emptiness, as it transpires, is occupied by the inscrutable organisation and structure of the household tasks. His inability to comprehend menial duties, such as feeding the dogs, causes him to serve blindly, in one sense, in that he satisfies his designated function without an explanation or justification of the reasoning behind it. Yet his quest for lucidity through self-reflection also results in a second blindness, which causes his provisional status as a being continually under question. Watt repeatedly fails in his attempts to name exactly what he is and he effectively remains a mystery to himself. Since Watt is an enigmatic figure preoccupied with the enigmas of the house, he decides to consider himself a man for convenience. This gendered existence offers him little comfort and is tantamount to his objectified status. The narrator says that 'for all the relief that this afforded him, he might just as well have thought of himself as a box, or an urn' (*W*, 80). Watt identifies with receptacles as much as humanity. He is equally a hollow container loaded with cremated remains, operating as a holder of nothingness.

The protean identity that amounts to naught is ideal for Watt's induction into a servile role moulded by the needs of a master since, crucially, he does not have to change or conform drastically to be assimilated into the system. He can perform his job without a massive overhaul of his personality. It is also significant that Arsene

initiates Watt, with 'information of a practical nature to impart' (*W*, 43) in his twenty-five page 'short statement' (*W*, 37), because it imposes the established order onto the new generation, thus allowing the ground-floor operations to uphold the routines of the Knott household upstairs and maintain the illusion of constancy. Despite the changes in personnel, with Watt for Arsene, Arthur for Erskine and Micks for Watt, Beckett focuses on the synchronicity of this interchange. In a rich image that offers multiple opportunities for interpretation, Beckett writes: 'for the coming is in the shadow of the going, and the going in the shadow of the coming' (*W*, 56). The seamless transitions between arrivals and departures show that the servants are fungible, trading places with one another and presumably passing on responsibilities, such as preparing, serving and collecting Mr. Knott's dinner before giving the leftovers to the dogs. Bequeathing duties in this way mimics the heritage of an ancestral house, but, for the workforce, it is the post itself that takes priority over the person that fills it, thereby withholding individuality from the servants that receive the role.

The 'shadow' of the going also suggests an inherited ignorance towards the duties the servants perform. When Watt sees 'a figure, human apparently' (*W*, 224) on his departure from the Knott house, this new figure is described in remarkably similar terms to Watt: 'a sheet, or a sack, or a quilt, or a rug' (*W*, 225). The arriving servant appears as a new inanimate object to replace the old object it resembles. As Richard Begam points out, 'Watt finally confronts an image of himself – meets himself, so to speak, face to face'.²⁰ Begam accentuates the self-knowledge of this meeting, yet the fact that Beckett offers four variations in the description to place emphasis on alternatives indicates that this is not a positively recognisable mirror image of Watt

²⁰ Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, p. 96.

that offers him a reliable reflection of himself. Although he encounters a similarly indeterminate figure, any sense of identification is through their mutual anonymity, which stresses a connection based on their unknowable selves. Indeed, Watt's inability to fathom the meaning of his actions, along with the lack of teleology in his daily undertakings, suggest that these domestic items confer nothing of his own true function, or rather, the reason for his docile performance. In effect, Watt is a servant simply because he serves, but the nature of his service is not disclosed to him. His status as a thing overwhelms his self-knowledge and yet denies any understanding of his role in the wider scheme. Watt remains unaware of the principles that govern the strict instructions of the eccentric Mr. Knott. As a result, the lack of context and cause that Watt endures divests him of an accumulative identity or idea of self, other than in the actual performance of his duties.

Whilst intimating his place in a series of characters in Beckett's corpus, Watt's position as a device in a concatenation of devices also represents the lineal arrangement of life itself. The novel begins and ends at stations that resonate on a religious level, alluding to the 'Stations of the Cross' that depict the Passion of Christ and provide a vision of life and death characterized by the throes of service.²¹ The stations in *Watt* suggest that the novel's setting is a temporary one, with a stream of travellers entering and exiting by similar means. The sequential aspect of rail transit is apparent in the connecting shadows of the 'coming' and 'going', which imply birth and death, particularly since the shadows cast in this image would require a light source from the direction of arrival and the direction of departure. This spiritual

²¹ The narrator Sam explicitly refers to Watt's likeness to a representation of Christ: 'His face was bloody, his hands also, and thorns were in his scalp. (His resemblance, at that moment, to the Christ believed by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, was so striking, that I remarked it.)' (*W*, 157). Several critics expand on the parallels between Watt and Christ. See David Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1971) p. 62; and Jeremy Parrott, 'The Gnostic Gospel of Sam: Watt as Modernist Apocryphon', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 11, Endlessness in the Year 2000, ed. by Angela Moorjani and Carola Veit (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 425-433.

representation of mortality, with divine light symbolising the passage in and out of transient earthly life, attributes a figurative value to the house, portraying it as the locale of lifetime. It also suggests that, paradigmatically, existence falls into a pattern of service to an overseeing but often unseen master, whilst the exact purpose of the routines and responsibilities continue to perplex. As Arsene informs Watt, 'in truth the same things happen to us all, especially to men in our situation, whatever that is, if we only chose to know it' (*W*, 44). In this way, the Knott house is an analogy for existence, but, more acutely, it conveys a way of life administered by 'top-down' systems, such as the religious and parliamentary 'houses' that govern and dispatch servants. Beckett's domestic setting illustrates the individual's disposable role as a puppet manipulated by the strings of obscure forces, such as the habitual routines of life and the prescience of mortality, whilst simultaneously alluding to social, political and military power structures.

Whereas servants are succeeded, the sempiternal head of the house Mr. Knott remains fixed. Before Arsene exits, the servant says that 'there is one that neither comes nor goes, I refer I need hardly say to my late employer, but seems to abide in his place, for the time being at any rate, like an oak, an elm, a beech or an ash, and we rest for a little while in his branches' (*W*, 56). Knott is the enduring pillar of the household; he is a lord who watches ephemeral bodies pass through. As the employer, he also ordains the rules that engage the subordinates, so that he looms over the house as 'the shadow of purpose' (*W*, 57). Knott's lordship evokes an ecclesiastical model of patriarchal guidance, not dissimilar to the shepherd template of Judeo-Christian scripture that organises a flock behind a leader, and is adopted by the clergy. For instance, David's psalm 'The Lord is my Shepherd' speaks of the path to righteousness and residing in the house of the Lord (Psalms 23), which details a sense

of direction and belonging. In the Gospel of John, 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep' (John 10.11) asserts that the leader protects and is responsible for his followers, and, in true pastoral service, willing to sacrifice himself. In this proverbial formulation, the shepherd and the flock supposedly offer purpose to one another and embark on an identification process that collapses the master-servant dichotomy to instil the principles of mutuality. Despite this, the flock is homogenized whilst the shepherd is individualised, which elevates a single figure above a general group. It is clear that, as a result, service is appropriated as a means to power.

For Derrida, the human organisation of power does not merely resemble a religious hierarchy, but rather supplants that former system. There is an 'onto-theologico-political structure of sovereignty', he writes in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, in which '[t]he human sovereign takes place as place-taking [lieu-tenant], he takes place the place standing in for the absolute sovereign: God'.²² In adopting authority, man is a substitute for, not a servant of, the divine power; the 'stand-in' underlines the absence of the Absolute and foregrounds its replaceability. This theocratic dynamic presents itself as servitude, with the monarch acting *Dei gratia* (by the grace of God) and the cleric preaching in the name of God, but the service is in name only since the divine power is not active and actually usurped by the 'assistance' of the representative. This deformity is particularly pronounced in the apostleship and papal jurisdiction of Catholicism, in which appointed figures assume authority, even infallibility, in translating and disseminating holy dogma. In this cynical reading, the *servus servorum dei* (servant of the servants of God) papal

²² Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, pp. 47, 54.

tradition tarnishes servitude with the possibility of power in the guise of humility. Service effectively leads to responsibility, which in turn leads to authority.

Knott's mastery over his servants conveys a similar expropriation of authority, in which he assumes a likeness to God, but also becomes a god in the monotheistic dimensions of the cloistered household. As master of the house, Knott owns the living space, defines the hierarchical boundaries, dictates the diurnal rhythms of the staff and controls the domestic atmosphere. His power indicates a strong presence, and yet his authority is not enforced explicitly through physical or verbal means. Ironically, it is Knott's absence that confirms his godliness. In Exodus, for example, the Lord promises his presence but not in the form of pure theophany: 'Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live' (Exodus 33.20). Likewise, Watt has 'no direct dealings with Mr. Knott' (*W*, 64) and, throughout his stay in the house, 'Of the nature of Mr. Knott himself Watt remained in particular ignorance' (*W*, 199). When Watt does see Knott in the flower garden, the master is still strangely aloof, with head bowed and eyes closed. This rare encounter leaves Watt sorry and glad at once: sorry that his wish to 'see Mr. Knott face to face' (*W*, 145) does not materialise but glad that his fear of doing so is not confronted. The equilibrium between desire and distance sustains Knott; a combination of fascination and mystique promotes his influence but also ensures his longevity.

The manner in which Knott remotely impels the activities in the house is a precursor to the phantom Godot from Beckett's most famous play *Waiting for Godot*. The two vagabonds Vladimir and Estragon stand by a tree on a country lane, occupying themselves with idle chatter in anticipation of a figure named Godot. The tension of the drama rests on the nonattendance of its *deus ex machina*, and Godot remains the cardinal power in the proceedings due to this tantalising absence. In a

similar manner to Godot, the master of the house in *Watt* is also influential in a negative way, as the name 'Knott' implies. He exists for the most part as an invisible force, absent in body but present as potential. Knott is defined by the presence of the things he is not and for this reason he is effectively implied in every sight and situation. For Jeremy Parrott, the dialectical relationship between presence and absence means Knott is pervasive everywhere:

[W]ithin the residual negation at the name's core nestles the plenum-void, O/zero, whence all matter comes and whither it will once again return. [...] He may therefore be considered like an endless knot in the shape of a sideways figure 8 – the symbol of infinity – comprehending within himself all possibilities.²³

Knott's name brings to mind the nothingness that marks the beginning and end of everything. He represents the complete absence to which all presence is bound. When divided into its constituent parts, 'no-thing-ness' sees the master as the intangible opposite of the servant as a 'thing'. Therefore, Watt is mindful of his counterpart Knott whilst unable to receive communion with him. This curious concomitance of absence and presence, or psychological presence despite physical absence, is harboured within the subject to uphold an objectifying other. The unseen master is a diffuse figure of faith that exists as an active rule in the mind of the servant.

The association between Knott's absence and divinity is reflected in the inability to summon or obligate a deity. In 'God is a witness that cannot be sworn' (*W*, 6), Beckett's pun on swearing refers to profanity, and serves to evoke the overlap

²³ Jeremy Parrott, "'Nothing Neatly Named': The Beckettian Aesthetic and Negative Theology", *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 13, *Three Dialogues Revisited*, ed. by Marius Buning *et al.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003) 91-101, p. 93.

between common law and canon law in the condemnation of blasphemy. Furthermore, the judicial surface meaning of Beckett's line, in which God is a witness that cannot bear witness, compares religious and legal orders to demonstrate the prevailing judgement that takes effect *de facto*. The tribunal system establishes truth beyond reasonable doubt and delivers rulings in the absence of God's verdict, despite its reverence for religious law. Yet, as with Knott, being elsewhere means the deity is perpetually unseen and potentially anywhere. As such, God comes to represent a ubiquitous force, transmuting into moral conscience and subsisting in the subject's doubt, guilt or fear. This compunction is replicated in the Knott household when Watt transgresses the house rules. Beckett writes: 'No punishment fell on Watt, no thunderbolt' (*W*, 113), which is redolent of a wrathful deity, 'But he was not so foolish as to found in this a principle of conduct, or a precedent of rebelliousness, ho no, for Watt was only too willing to do as he was told' (*W*, 113). The lack of discipline and reference to folly here indicate an approach that encourages self-government, in a kind of imposed autonomy produced by the absent but influential nature of Mr. Knott. Subsequently, Watt appears to conform on his own volition, freely obeying orders, and although he questions his duties, he does not actively challenge them. In effect, Beckett shows that compliant but ostensibly independent subjects can preserve the power of absent lords.²⁴

'A vague supplication': Melancholy in *Waiting for Godot*

In order for the 'absence' of Knott and Godot to become 'non-existence', the servants, or 'waiters', have to be immune or ignorant to the master's influence and cease to

²⁴ The act of duly maintaining absent powers is exemplified and tested in the *Shoah*. Etty Hillesum wrote in a concentration camp shortly before her death: 'You God cannot be God unless we create a dwelling place for you in our hearts', Hillesum qtd. in Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University, 2011), p. 53.

preserve divine power by refusing to submit to it. As in *Act Without Words I* (1958), Beckett's protagonists must finally resist the goading master, remain unmoved and instead take the Promethean plunge to assert *non serviam*, akin to Milton's quasi-heroic Satan.²⁵ Yet, in terms of the identification of being, George Berkeley's principle *esse est aut percipi aut percipere* (to be is both to be perceived and to perceive) continues to inform Watt and the pair Vladimir and Estragon, which stresses the reliance on witnessing, and crucially, witnessing being witnessed.²⁶ As I have argued above, this relationship of perception can partially survive through a projected master, such as the faith in the absent Knott and Godot. However, Beckett's creatures desire more than the spiritual guarantee of deism, and, as with the intervention of theism, wish to summon the master and seek confirmation of the materiality of both their service and superior, which locks them into a state of deferral, questioning and waiting. They cannot wholly achieve or accept the mantle of individual freedom and responsibility. On the contrary, Beckett's characters continually fear the creaturely state of abandonment – analogous to existential angst – that comes in the wake of familiar ideological and identity structures.

With Watt, the nostalgia for conventional order extends into a reliance on alternative determining processes, such as rational thought and 'a pillow of old words' (*W*, 115). Despite his attempts to understand the workings of the house, he is repeatedly baffled and denied access to a prevailing order. To return to the domestic metaphor, Watt suffers a kind of 'homesickness' since he is estranged from the systems of organization that should offer him stability. In rigorously testing variations

²⁵ Stan Gontarski also compares *Act Without Words I* to Stephen Dedalus's *non serviam* in Joyce's *Ulysses*. See S. E. Gontarski, "'Birth Astride of a Grave": Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words I*", in *The Beckett Studies Reader* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 29-34, p. 32. On the final page of *Act Without Words I*, Beckett repeats the stage direction 'He does not move' (*E*, 56) five times in an echo of 'I shall not be moved' from the Book of Psalms.

²⁶ See George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), pp. 25-7.

and possible solutions, he consistently turns to familiar methods, processes he is *at home with*, but this loyalty leaves him without satisfactory answers. Watt clearly yearns for reliable figures and forms of judgement, but is left with unwieldy meditations and errant signifiers. Similarly, Jeffrey Nealon's essay on *Waiting for Godot* asserts that language is the substance of Vladimir and Estragon's being. They are subject to the infinite extemporization of words, not an engineered overarching narrative. Nealon writes: 'it is the play of Vladimir and Estragon's words, not any agreed-upon meaning for them, which constitutes their social bond. Waiting for legitimization of their society in *Godot* is, from the beginning, unnecessary'.²⁷ Beckett's two creatures each perceive and are perceived by the other, and the contradistinction of their lively verbal exchanges reinforces these processes. Nevertheless, their words continue to address and anticipate a higher, more established form of validation, and the interaction that sustains the couple is deemed a temporary measure prior to the genuine purpose that the master promises.

It is evident that Beckett's characters have epistemological allegiances and are committed to progressing through customary practices, despite the pitfalls of ratiocination, logocentric cognition and sovereign monocracy. Peter Barry discusses the implicit postmodern threshold that Nealon sees in *Waiting for Godot*, noting that Vladimir and Estragon 'are trapped at the modernist stage, and hence riven with nostalgia for the whole lostness of the past'.²⁸ Initially, the terms 'nostalgia' and

²⁷ Jeffrey Nealon, 'Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Language Games, Play and *Waiting for Godot*', *Modern Drama*, 31.4 (1988), 520-528, p. 520.

²⁸ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University), p. 89. The endeavour to plot borderlines between modernism and postmodernism frequently resorts to differing views of history and the past. Frederic Jameson proposes a clear divide between the two movements: 'In modernism, [...] some residual zones of "nature" or "being," of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that "referent." Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone', Frederic Jameson *Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University, 2005), p. ix. In this commonly held view, modernism is nostalgic towards tradition and community whereas postmodernism is ironic and disconnected. Beckett's ambiguous literature and his contextual place between the 'periods' of modernism and

'lostness' appear incongruous to a play fuelled by the dramatic tension of an imminent arrival. Given that the pair persistently wait to meet Godot, and in conjunction with the fact that Beckett employs dramatic irony to elicit the tragedy of the forlorn situation, the characters appear to be trapped in a delusional state of postponed realisation. The lost is not acknowledged as gone, and, accordingly, the tense is not retrospective. Instead, the past is conducted in the present, with the characters subscribing to prospective events whilst the audience is wise to the tragic emptiness of their situation. For the majority of the play, then, the characters' 'nostalgia' – which suggests memory, or a 'return back' – lacks the closure of the mourning process to give it historical distance. Godot remains a prospect not yet arrived, and therefore a possibility still.

However, a sense of nostalgia is included in the play retrospectively when Vladimir appears to awaken from the enduring past and allude to the dramatic irony at work. As Pozzo exits, Vladimir briefly suspects that Lucky's blind master was Godot after all, before entering into a rare soliloquy:

But habit is a great deadener. [*He looks again at Estragon.*] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. [*Pause.*] I can't go on! [*Pause.*] What have I said? [*He goes feverishly to and fro, halts finally at extreme left, broods.*] (WFG, 83)

As the idea of the absent master becomes unmoored, mobile and transposed through the initial confusion between Godot and Pozzo, Vladimir subsequently assumes the role of overseeing Estragon. Whilst he watches over his companion, Vladimir also

postmodernism makes him a medial author, along with Vladimir Nabokov, Charles Olson and Louis Zukofsky, according to Jameson.

continues to imagine a witness overseeing himself, as though the patriarchal model inspired by the God of the Old Testament, or God(OT), is an inveterate default. Despite that, in this glimpse into his own somnolent state, Vladimir detaches from self to contemplate self, becoming at once observer and observed. The two final utterances in the above example – the statement ‘I can’t go on!’ and question ‘What have I said?’ – serve to condense the process of reflection through which Vladimir finds an apprehending counterpart in himself. By responding to his own statement, Vladimir effectively shifts the focus of mastery once more. Having contemplated Godot, Pozzo and himself as masters over others, Vladimir realises that he is his own master or at least the maker of his master. His self-examination allows him to realise the fact that the idea of mastery is located or created internally, within the self, which briefly deposes the original idea of Godot from a privileged position.

Vladimir’s move into soliloquy during this section of the play accentuates his independence and as the stage becomes an arena for his short-lived self-analysis, his internal drama comes to dominate the attention of the viewing audience. His momentary detachment from the others onstage means that the singular speaker briefly assumes a more direct command of the audience’s focus. Although draped in the poetics of self-reflection here, Vladimir treads the thin line between introspection and public speaking. By talking to himself alone and simultaneously selling his thoughts to the audience, the soliloquy clearly fixates on the individual whilst disseminating the individual’s view in the process. When Vladimir re-joins the antics, signposted by the remark ‘Off we go again’ (*WFG*, 84), there is a subtle but noticeable shift in Beckett’s dramaturgy from a more candid tone to the inconsequential register that characterizes the play. As a mode of address, the soliloquy highlights the power relations between the speaker and the audience in the

playhouse, signalling a level of servile passivity from the audience and the speaker's capacity to capture, persuade and instruct the listener. Therefore, this episode alludes to the word 'propaganda' itself in the sense of a religious 'congregation for the propagation of the faith', and indicates the uncomfortable proximity between dramatic conventions and political communication.²⁹

Despite dethroning Godot, Vladimir's inward gaze fails to supply a *telos* that would provide a definitive meaning and purpose to life. Whilst Vladimir's speech intimates his oratorical power, he is not in a sovereign position. His internal division marks the threshold to the infinite problem of apperception in which the subject is unable to perceive selfhood transcendently, at least other than as a perceiver. As with the identity in ruins discussed in the previous chapter, in which any knowable subjectivity is based on a simultaneous possession and dispossession of self, Vladimir's self-mastery appears to cause an internal subject-object rupture. Beckett explores this problem of self-knowledge most directly in his 1965 motion picture *Film*, directed by Alan Schneider and starring Buster Keaton.³⁰ In Beckett's visual piece, '[l]ike Godot the camera never appears, but as a metaphor of self-perception, the camera photographing itself photographing itself becomes a trope for the paradox of apperception'.³¹ The absent onlooker, or eye (E), pursues and is part of the self, or object (O), that takes flight and is pursued.³² This insurmountable disjunction, visualized as a steady distance between camera and actor in Beckett's film, inserts a barrier of alterity for Vladimir that can be projected back onto a transcendental figure in an attempt to reconsolidate the individual. The absent master, as such, becomes a

²⁹ *OED online*, <www.oed.com>.

³⁰ The title *Film* itself conveys an engagement with self-knowledge, as a nomination that is caught up in its medium whilst also identifying the piece.

³¹ Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, p. 194.

³² See Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall and Other Plays for Radio and Screen* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 97.

representation of everything the subject cannot perceive or confront through reflection.

In contrast to Vladimir's inescapable mirroring, the absent master promises a totalising narrative extraneous to the characters that can redeem the ruined subject. Through Vladimir's return to the 'Godot' paradigm, he holds onto the original state of potential objectification and continues to cultivate a buried prospect. When Godot's messenger boy arrives to inform the pair the master will not be coming, it is Vladimir who pre-emptively says, 'He won't be coming this evening', but who also states, 'But he'll come tomorrow' (*WFG*, 84). Vladimir does not accept Godot as a manifestation of the desire for wholeness, but as a real validating figure who will complete him. Vladimir turns back to the tree and country lane overshadowed by Godot, 'to remain mad' as Beckett's famous maxim suggests (*WFG*, 73). As a consequence, the couple Vladimir and Estragon reactivate a ruined history, they 'keep their appointment', and return to a relative comfort zone: 'Yes, one thing in this immense confusion is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come' (*WFG*, 72). Having peered through the artifice at his ignorant self, Vladimir immediately reverts to an unconscious condition now consigned to the past. Thus, these Beckettian creatures refuse to accept their identity in ruins or the testimony of fiction since they re-subscribe to a soteriological solution to their plight in the guise of the saviour Godot.

As a result of Vladimir's brush with clarity, it is clear that throughout the play Vladimir and Estragon wish to incarnate a lost idea, and in doing so endure what Walter Benjamin calls 'melancholy immersion'.³³ In *The Origin of German Tragic*

³³ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 232. Matthew Feldman notes that Beckett read Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and, as Mark Nixon makes known, Beckett's German diaries show that he planned to write a prose piece entitled 'Journal of a Melancholic'. In conjunction, these points indicate that Beckett was interested in ideas and terms associated with the creaturely preoccupation with the past from the late 1930s onwards. See Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's*

Drama, Benjamin focuses a section on melancholy, describing how 'in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them'.³⁴ Although Benjamin's melancholy resembles a nostalgic preoccupation with the past, it places emphasis on the proximity and immediacy in reanimating bygone material. In *Waiting for Godot*, this reconnection with the past catapults Vladimir beyond waiting towards an active desire for the lost authority that could validate his existence. He becomes a victim of the rosy retrospection principle *memoria praeteritorum bonorum* (the past is always well remembered) that he previously called 'unpleasant' (*WFG*, 79), perhaps because it ensnares people in reflection and replicates the kind of static nostalgia that Vichy France held for agrarian life.³⁵ Accordingly, Vladimir swiftly begins to resurrect a familiar wrathful figure, stating that Godot will punish them if he is dropped and save them when he arrives (*WFG*, 86-7).

For Eric Santner, melancholic fixations are a component of the creature. In particular, he highlights the pause over absence in his study of creaturely life: 'melancholy retards adaptation, attaches itself to loss; it says no! to life without the object (or ideal)'.³⁶ The ideal for Vladimir and Estragon is a figure of meaning for their future and the charade that Godot embodies provides a suitable distraction from their abandoned state. For them, holding on to Godot preserves the idea of a natural order that would offer intrinsic meaning for their lives. Vladimir therefore refuses to take on the existential angst that realises the artificiality of this order. He would rather believe in the construction than be cast adrift into a physical life without the

Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes', p. 60; and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-37* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 110.

³⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 157.

³⁵ See Shannon L. Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009), p. 33.

³⁶ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 89.

possibility of higher meaning. Vladimir's deflection of abandonment ironically continues to retrieve a sense of genesis and original motivation from Godot, rather than recognise himself as a co-creator of a play of language that ultimately generates their melancholy condition.

Vladimir does not acknowledge himself as a free agent because his play of language with Estragon cannot deliver this revelation in an intelligible way. As Nealon goes on to discuss in his essay, Lucky's tirade parodies the idea of a totalising narrative that could perceive and express the manifold complexities of ontology.³⁷ Lucky's final thought on the fragments of academic and philosophical dross is 'unfinished...' (*WFG*, 38), and this open end implies that the incomplete account will recommence, that further attempts will be made to 'think' the conclusion. The deluge of words and thoughts in Lucky's sustained form, but also the pseudo-couples' rapid-fire crosstalk and Watt's permutations, shows that the silence of metaphysical realisation cannot be finally articulated or brought into being as part of the narrative, but only experienced as abandonment. Although the creatures exist through their words, they cannot use words to apprehend the conditions of their existence once and for all.

The covenant of totality subsists in the absence of Godot, yet when the reality of their orphanhood beckons, Beckett's characters cannot provide an alternative unifying structure through self-reflection and self-expression. Consequently, they slide back into the creaturely space of melancholy immersion. Andrew Slade's description of melancholy elucidates this relapse that Beckett's characters experience: 'a melancholic subjectivity remains bound to the lost object of its history resolutely holding to the traces of its memory and seeking to find it again, repetitively missing

³⁷ Nealon, 'Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern', p. 523.

it'.³⁸ This recurring lack inflicts a cycle of loss, retrieval and belief that unfolds in the struggle to express and understand in Beckett. These creatures are exposed to an enterprise that refuses to accept the loss of the desired state and therefore protracts the unspoken entropy that remains underneath.

Godot does not positively represent, but instead elicits a constant lack, a lacuna that is unable to be tenanted or assimilated into the characters' knowledge. Beckett's depiction of absent masters illustrates that, for him, the idea of a transcendental vantage lingers in and around the problematic of subjectivity that denies oneness and resorts to contingent, albeit hollow, safety measures. His creatures are bound to decrepit conventions, feeding nostalgia for the ruined past. They are abandoned at a point of interregnum, but claw their way back from this bewildering state to enter a survival state with the hangover of previous orders of authority. In the face of a lawless, meaningless existence, *Watt* and the pair in *Waiting for Godot* continue to subscribe to the established illusions of a truant figure. Beckett's creatures project a master figure to fill the lacuna that they inevitably confront in self-reflection and self-expression.

Master-Servant Context: The Holocaust and the Jewish Creature

A master narrative that rises above disparate perspectives to arrange an objective whole is a dangerous concept according to Beckett. During his time in Germany, he was wary of this totalising presentation of history and commented to Axel Kaun:

I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos any more than I am in the 'clarification' of the individual chaos, and still less with the

³⁸ Andrew Slade, *Lyotard, Beckett, Duras and the Postmodern Sublime* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 3.

anthropomorphism of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know. [...] Rationalism is the last form of animism.³⁹

Beckett suggests that a single explanatory account of reality is akin to an inflexible worldview anchored by supernatural powers. The fastidious diary that Beckett kept during his Germany trip is testament to these misgivings, as he prefers to note empirical details without arranging them into a coherent account. Beckett found that the Nazi tendency to totalise history, particularly the 'interminable harangues' of Hitler and Goering, eclipsed the reductive accounts he saw in German history books.⁴⁰ For Beckett, these oratory displays had the ring of faith-mongering. Mark Nixon notes that 'Beckett's correlation between Nazi discourse and biblical "truth" appears several times in the pages of his diary'.⁴¹ In Beckett's references to animism and truth, then, he identifies a messiah complex in Nazi historiography and political addresses. Beckett compares political propaganda with religious dogma to suggest that the polemical and rhetorical style of the Nazi campaign against racial intermixture invokes the supreme judgement of divinity.⁴²

Although Beckett's observations predate the Nazis' so-called Final Solution, the correlation between autocratic and biblical authority is most evident in the sovereign power applied against the Jews. James McNaughton argues that the 'anthropomorphism of inhuman necessities' to which Beckett refers 'was in its worst

³⁹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 244.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 238.

⁴¹ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries*, p. 85.

⁴² Hitler referred to God's will directly in his final radio speech: 'My duty consists solely in this: to work and fight for my people. I can only be released from this duty by him who called me to it. Providence spared me from the bomb that exploded only five feet from me on 20 July. It was intended to wipe me out and end my life's work. I see the Almighty's protection on that day as proof of the duty I have been given', qtd. in Randall L. Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism* (College Station, TX: A&M University, 2008), p. 166.

allegorical simplification the Jew, who was the necessary scapegoat for a rational system of history that could not reconcile Germany's supposedly divine Germanic destiny with its egregious historical failures, such as losing World War I'.⁴³ The Nazis created a palpable figure of German downfall, a diabolic figure stemming from two-thousand-year-old anti-Semitic prejudices, to provide a readily digestible narrative that would explain German history and determine their future actions. As Victor Klemperer attests, '*the Jew* is in every respect the center of the LTI (*lingua tertii imperii* or language of the Third Reich), indeed of its whole view of the epoch'.⁴⁴ In its singular, reductive approach, Nazi anti-Semitism indoctrinated a holistic view of history that was expedient to inculcate as the definitive account. This tactic contributes to Beckett's mistrust of master narratives, which is clearly seen in his derisive jab at the Führer's messianic position. In a 1938 letter to George Reavey, he writes 'I heard Adolf the Peacemaker on the wireless last night. And thought I heard the air escaping – a slow puncture'.⁴⁵ Beckett refers to Hitler's 'peace or war' ultimatum to Czechoslovakia here and recognises the hostility behind the Nazi rhetoric on protection and intervention. He also wryly implies that Hitler's speech is hot air and that the Führer is slowly deflating under the pressure of his own fanaticism. Beckett sees through this narrative, then, but he also recognises that Hitler's political front is collapsing into all-out war.

Beckett's (in)sovereignty largely undermines the veracity of master narratives, and yet, as in *Watt* and *Waiting for Godot*, the authority of a panoptic perspective has a residual influence in his work. Whereas author-narrators such as Molloy, Moran and Malone struggle to produce sovereign narratives, Watt, Vladimir and Estragon appeal

⁴³ McNaughton, 'Beckett, German Fascism, and History', p. 107.

⁴⁴ Victor Klemperer, *To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1942-1945*, trans. by Martin Chalmers (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 321.

⁴⁵ Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 642.

to others in order to maintain the idea of absolute rule. As such, the aspiration towards testimonial and ideological authority continues as an oppressive fixture. Parallel to these influential conceptual structures, however, is a more physical version of the master-servant relationship. After the war, as the iron-fisted biopolitical nature of the Nazis' *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) policy seeps into public consciousness, Beckett's creatures also display more rudimentary power struggles based on territory and violence. Mastery persists as an abstract presence in the guise of obscure voices and imperatives, but Beckett often depicts the corporeality of power. These bodily tensions begin with the organisation of space, as living environments and social domains are limited to distinct groups, and this segregation culminates in the violent application of sovereign power. In a harrowing echo of Nazi radicalisation, the master Pozzo from *Waiting for Godot* points out the move from expulsion to extermination. Referring to Lucky, Pozzo says: 'The truth is you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them' (WFG, 25). It appears that the pursuit of power and the racial hierarchy that gripped Europe in the middle of the twentieth century gave Beckett an acute awareness of the more aggressive aspects of social and political relations.

The nadir of the catastrophe, the Holocaust, is an extreme example of the antibiosis between masters and underlings. The systematic nature of the killing, the efficiency with which modern technology terminated life and transformed the intimacy of death into a shared experience, in conjunction with the sheer amount of casualties, sets its scale and intent apart from previous mass murders. The Nazis reasoned that the genocide of the Jews, alongside gypsies, homosexuals and the mentally and physical disabled, was necessary to eliminate inferior beings, regarded

as a drain on resources, as well as a social and genetic dilution of the superior race.⁴⁶ It is not clear what knowledge Beckett had of the Nazi rationale behind the concentration and extermination camps, but it is probable that he was aware of the German persecution of Jews from radio broadcasts and newspapers. Lois Gordon's biographical text on Beckett offers some assessment of the sources and experiences that informed his view. She notes that Beckett's half-Jewish uncle Boss Sinclair had left Germany for Dublin by 1933 owing to safety concerns, and she goes on to suggest that Beckett's enduring compassion towards downtrodden Jews was instilled prior to the war through his friendship with James Joyce:

That Beckett was interested in the Jewish plight is certain; as Richard Ellmann notes, forty years after the war the subject of Jewish suffering made Beckett weep. That Beckett would have empathized with the Jews as a persecuted people even before his London days is also likely. In addition to his general 'sensitiv[ity] to the suffering around him', his friend and hero James Joyce, who had forged an epic figure in the Jew Leopold Bloom, often spoke of himself as a Jew. Joyce equated the Jews and Irish as persecuted peoples ('Israelite-Irish').⁴⁷

Although Gordon settles for a simple equation of Jewish and Irish persecution, Joyce's depiction of Jews in *Ulysses* (1922) remains a contested issue.⁴⁸ Despite Joyce claiming to 'have written with the greatest sympathy about the Jews', it clear from the nationalist citizen's mockery of Bloom and the Jewish faith in the 'Cyclops' episode

⁴⁶ See Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 1-28.

⁴⁷ Lois Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett 1906-1946* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998), p. 106.

⁴⁸ For a detailed account of Joyce's portrayal of Jewishness, see Neil R. Davison, *James Joyce, Ulysses and the Construction of Jewish Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998).

of *Ulysses* that Joyce also risks reinforcing anti-Semitic Jewish stereotypes in his writing.⁴⁹ It is fair to say, however, that Beckett shares Joyce's fascination, if not identification, with Jewish culture and the Jews as a persecuted people. The Nazis' treatment of Beckett's Jewish friend Paul Léon (who was Joyce's personal assistant) certainly serves to galvanize Beckett's empathic leaning towards oppressed communities. Tellingly, Beckett joined the Resistance in 1941, the month after the Gestapo arrested, starved and tortured Léon.⁵⁰

However, despite any historical insight into persecution or personal affinity with the persecuted, Beckett's knowledge of the Holocaust itself is dominated by the death of a key figure in his Resistance cell, Alfred Péron. Beckett's friend was arrested by the Gestapo in 1942, deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp in north Austria and died in Switzerland shortly after liberation in 1945.⁵¹ Beckett quite possibly discovered more about Péron's ordeal at Mauthausen from Georges Loustaunau-Lacau's first-hand account of the camps entitled *Chiens maudits: Souvenirs d'un rescapé des bagnes hitleriens* (Cursed Dogs: Memories of a Survivor of Nazi Labour Camps), which was published in 1945 and therefore one of the earliest Holocaust accounts available to the public.⁵² As a non-Jewish civilian who escaped deportation, Beckett could only imagine the physical and emotional suffering based on the limited information he could access, including reports and tributes in *The Irish Times*. Yet as a friend, sympathizer and resistance member, it is legitimate to claim that the Holocaust profoundly affected Beckett on a specific, personal level as well as a broader anthropological level. Not only did he witness the disaster's demolition of

⁴⁹ James Joyce qtd. in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University, 1982), p. 709. See also James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), pp. 280-330.

⁵⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 304.

⁵¹ Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 16.

⁵² See Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 381.

the idea of humanity, his way of life had also changed and cherished people were now gone.

In 1983, Rosette Lamont asked Beckett about the political connotations of his literary imagery in relation to Auschwitz, and although the author avoided the direct enquiry, he spoke of Péron: 'At the time of liberation he was still alive. He started on a trek in the direction of France. On the roads, survivors resorted to cannibalism. Péron died of exhaustion and starvation'.⁵³ Beckett describes the transformation of humans into desperate competitors stripped of civilised standards as they struggle to return to the normality of home. The horrific image of enervated and emaciated figures feeding on the dead or dying shows a cruel twist of irony in that the ingestion of the human produces a savage inhuman other. Beckett's sympathy goes out to these suffering creaturely victims as they journey back to humanity.

It is significant that Beckett should concentrate on this particularly inhuman experience because this reduction was at the centre of the Nazis' ambition. The incarnation of the inhuman other from the human goes back to the original devaluation of egalitarianism in the concentration and death camps. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 that culminated in genocide present a clinical endeavour to confirm the status and improve the security of the self-identified master race. The legislation effectively divided people into orders of worth, divested human life of its universal sanctity and reserved importance for a designated group. This filtering of life, predicated upon the developed and sophisticated social and medical science of modern civilisation, boils down to a biopolitical activity that introduces sovereign political calculations into the materiality of life.

⁵³ Rosette C. Lamont, 'Samuel Beckett's Wandering Jew', in *Reflections of the Holocaust in Art and Literature*, ed. by Randolph L. Braham (Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1990), 35-53, p. 43.

In Giorgio Agamben's terms, biopolitics means to invest *zoē* – the term used to describe life outside a particular way of life – into the sphere of *polis*.⁵⁴ This implies that there is a political dimension to 'bare life' at a point where the simple fact of living is transformed into a totalised version of life, such as the concentration and extermination camps as the consequence of Fascism. In these conditions, the lifestyles and cultures known as *bios* are funnelled into a single vision of *zoē*. For Agamben, these exemplary biopolitical sites cast judgements on types of life to pursue a supreme version of life worth living. Sovereign power over life considers undeserving beings exempt from the political measures for preserving and improving the quality of life, thus rendering the Jews outlaws. In its most extreme form, this political neglect develops into biopolitical activity, whereby the extermination camps enforce the notion of 'life that does not deserve to live'.⁵⁵ The subalterns are separated from the master race, distinguished as biopolitical material and thus rendered expendable creatures.

On a biopolitical level, the Nazis' sovereign decision on the fate of the Jewish people elevates and asserts the claims of the Aryan 'race'. Since the superiority of one cannot be confirmed without the inferiority of the other, the Nazi propaganda campaign constructed an image of the Jew as an infectious disease ('racial tuberculosis') and commensal organism ('world parasite').⁵⁶ In the 1940 Fritz Hippler propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, Jewish people are depicted as rats, with the Nazis battling an infestation of unclean vermin. Whilst presuming supremacy over the target, Nazi propaganda is also replete with fear-mongering images of threat and corruption. This use of animal symbolism in a hierarchical method of identification, and the extermination that sought to concretise the supposed superiority, appropriates

⁵⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 136

⁵⁶ G. G. Otto, *Der Jude als Weltparasit* (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1943).

the human-animal binary to reinforce the relationship between superior masters and subordinates. One particularly contentious debate arising from this parallel is the extent to which the Holocaust is comparable to livestock slaughter. A thorough examination of the differences and similarities in the relationship between the Nazis' treatment of the Jews in the Holocaust and human treatment of animals in factory farming is beyond the scope of this thesis. Such ethically sensitive material is rightly the subject of several dedicated monographs and articles.⁵⁷ However, the fact remains that the very existence of this debate means that the human-animal polarity in the Nazi invectives against Jewish people, particularly the association with primitive, hidden or rapidly breeding creatures, highlights a familiar identification tactic that focuses on heterogeneity to allay the uncomfortable proximity with a perceived other.

In order to link Beckett's creatures with the contemporaneous dehumanisation properly, it is worth stressing how, in the most general sense, alterity positions are exploited to promote individuality and gain status in identity struggles. The idea of an identity in ruins and the author-narrators' fictional prostheses found in Beckett's trilogy show that the acknowledgement of an other retains a sense of subjectivity for the individual, albeit through a necessary experience of desubjectivity. That is, a part of the subject is dispossessed in order to preserve a relative coordinate with which to partially identify oneself. The examples of division noted in chapter one occur within the individual, but, in a more tangible way, they translate into the power dynamics between characters in Beckett's texts. It is not difficult to see the lordly Pozzo and his slave creature Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* as an instance of how masters rely on the possible subordination of an other to elevate themselves and dispel any parity. Pozzo

⁵⁷ For example, Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern, 2002); and Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich – Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York: Continuum, 2000). For a discussion of the differences and similarities between Jews and animals as 'figures', see Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2010).

laughs at the idea that Vladimir and Estragon are of his own kind: 'You are human beings none the less. As far as one can see. Of the same species as myself. [*Laughs.*] Of the same species as Pozzo!' (WFG, 15). Whilst it is amusing for Pozzo to think of himself on a par with these poor creatures, he does not extend the same status to Lucky. Knowlson notes the contextual significance of this identification tactic: 'Pozzo's treatment of Lucky reminded some of the earliest critics of a *capo* in a concentration camp brutalising his victim with his whip'.⁵⁸ Pozzo's whip certainly recalls the head prison guards in the Nazi camps and the violence used to assert their authority. I would add that, alongside the rope passed around Lucky's neck, Pozzo's treatment of Lucky also illustrates how the slave recalls the animal. Whereas Lucky is a 'human being' (WFG, 20), or at least a 'cretin' to Vladimir and Estragon (WFG, 18), he is a dancing 'hog' and a thinking 'pig' to his master (WFG, 16). Therefore, Pozzo's lordship over Lucky evokes human mastery over animals and applies to the power hierarchies between human others. The power dynamic in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* traces human social tensions as well as interspecies relationships. This ambivalence creates a plausible comparison with the Nazis' persecution of Jewish people, in which the phenomenon of radical difference has passed from anthropocentric identification into racial persecution.

The Nazis' extreme separation of identities is physically enforced to reinstate a master-servant binary. In a crude and selfish protection of individuality, the peril of conflated identities and reshuffled boundaries initiates a return to a fixed monadic state through dependable polarised roles. However, whilst the endeavour to elevate a group in this way echoes the anthropocentric project to distinguish humans from animals, the warped Nazi perspective does not exactly promote the Holocaust and

⁵⁸ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 380.

livestock slaughter analogy since the value of noble animals often exceeds that of the Jews in Nazi ideology. In a massive contravention of the Hippocratic oath, Nazi doctors used prisoners as *Versuchspersonen*, test subjects or human guinea pigs, often in place of animals. Medical professionals justified this type of treatment with biopolitical rhetoric, as physician Fritz Klein exemplifies when he infers, '[t]he Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of humankind'.⁵⁹ The Third Reich also introduced a range of measures to ensure that animals were respected and killed humanely.⁶⁰ Furthermore, as a dog owner and a vegetarian himself, Hitler contributed practically to animal liberation, as Peter Singer relates: 'Becoming a vegetarian is a highly practical and effective step one can take toward ending both the killing of nonhuman animals and the infliction of suffering upon them'.⁶¹ In keeping with the ethical treatment of animals, but also a discriminating view of life worth living, the Nazis extend compassion to nonhuman animals whilst inflicting severe human suffering.

The expulsion and extermination of the Jews is not repeated in kind for animals, which indicates that Nazi ideology is comfortable with the stability of the human-animal distinction, or rather, it lauds particular qualities in living creatures to shift the self-other boundaries. Boria Sax suggests that the species difference was not a primary concern for the Nazis: 'In their nihilistic perspective the important distinction was not between "humans" and "animals", at least in any traditional way. It was between victor and vanquished, between master and slave'.⁶² The peculiar implication is that Nazi animal rights convert inhumane forms of mastery over animal commodities into a guardianship that promotes animal husbandry and the master-pet

⁵⁹ See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 154-9. Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* (London: BBC Books, 2005), p. 185.

⁶⁰ See Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich*, p. 35.

⁶¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: Pimlico, 1995), p. 161.

⁶² Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich*, p. 23.

intimacy for certain noble animals. The treatment of the Jews, then, can be considered a pursuit of otherness within humans that modifies anthropocentrism to revolve around the Aryan, whilst the human-animal alterity is secure enough to grant custody to an equivalent class of animal. This view holds that modern violence does not treat people like animals identically, but that human groups are exposed to the same compulsion to assert identity that delineated humans from the base collective term 'animal'. From a Nazi perspective, the Jew is part of a new inferior class that includes servile animals and constitutes the necessary other. The focus on identifying *against* as opposed to identifying *with* means the aspiring power imposes a state of otherness on the counterpart in an attempt to gain distinction and organise difference hierarchically.

It is this sense of a necessary other that is intrinsic to the power politics of Beckett's codependent pseudo-couples, and the grotesque relation and revulsion that informs the biopolitical exclusion of his characters. As I now move on to discuss the biopolitical struggles that appear in Beckett's work, I want to reiterate the claim that the concept of animality consistently haunts the alterity thinking behind social and racial identification. In *Malone Dies*, Beckett offers a most explicit reference to how human mastery over animals is reflected in the human mastery over other humans. Malone himself relies on the 'goodness' of his nurse (T, 185) and Malone's character Macmann is under the charge of 'his keeper' Moll (T, 261). It is the relationship between Macmann and Moll that conveys the subordination of animals that underlies human power struggles. Malone writes that 'Moll's lips puffed and parted in a dreadful smile, which made Macmann's eyes waver like those of an animal glared on by its master and compelled then finally to look away' (T, 260). Moll's intimidating expression reveals Macmann's vulnerability, which makes him distinctly animal-like

under her control. This type of reaction shows how the animal other is invoked as the subject is dehumanised by another in the pursuit of power. As such, the victim is made to feel like an animal because the master wants to be dissociated from that status. As soon as human weakness is exposed or exploited, the human is redolent of the animal. Agamben asserts that animality remains an ineradicable element of the human's composition and that the Jew, as 'the non-man produced within the man', is synonymous with 'the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form'.⁶³ Like Foucault before him, who argued that 'it is animality that reveals the dark rage, the sterile madness that lie in men's hearts', Agamben suggests that the animal continues to exist as a trope for the deplorable and errant aspects of human behaviour.⁶⁴ In conjunction, Foucault and Agamben recognize how the well-rehearsed human-animal divide is interior to the human and reproduced in society; the animal's legacy continues between humans and within humans riven by identity wars.

Biopolitical Struggles: Territory and Custody

Beckett's master-servant relationships present both the corporal battles of social nature and the internal battles held within the self. The hostility and dependency between his characters depicts the physical conflicts between adversaries and counterparts, and alludes to individual psychological conflicts in a purgatorial state of subjectivity. Adorno mentions how these internal affairs spill over into the external world in his essay on *Endgame*:

As soon as the subject is no longer doubtlessly self-identical, no longer a closed structure of meaning, the line of demarcation with the exterior becomes

⁶³ Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, p. 37.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Routledge, 2001), p. 18.

blurred, and the situations of inwardness become at the same time physical ones.⁶⁵

As noted above, in *Watt*, this overlap causes the protagonist to confuse his identity with objects, namely a pot. In Beckett's master-servant relationships, the psychological disunity in self is also manifest as domination over another, often in the form of violence and abuse, but also custody and service. Hence, Beckett's term 'pseudo-couples', which he uses to describe Mercier and Camier in *The Unnamable* (T, 299), encapsulates the bind and bond of the necessary other. The term implies a problematic togetherness between two entities since the relationship is at once required and antagonistic. Adorno goes so far as to argue that the pseudo-couple in *Endgame* lack independence and are therefore without personal distinction. He writes that '[e]ven the outlines of Hamm and Clov are one; they are denied the individuation of a tidily independent monad'.⁶⁶ In other words, they are a veritable pseudo-couple, a false twosome, in the sense that they constitute a bipartite singular. Esslin's more explicit reading in *The Theatre of the Absurd* compares *Endgame* to Nikolai Evreinov's *The Theatre of the Soul* (1915) to suggest that Beckett's play is a monodrama, which represents 'different aspects of a single personality'.⁶⁷ The ambiguity over the physical denotation or psychological connotation of Beckett's plays appears to support the idea that issues of subjectivity and identity are local to both body and mind. Since it is difficult to determine whether the pseudo-couple are real people in a room or abstractions in a 'skullscape', the result is that the self-other binary pervades public and private spheres.⁶⁸ In this way, Beckett's pseudo-couples

⁶⁵ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 129.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 144.

⁶⁷ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn, p. 66

⁶⁸ Linda Ben-Zvi, *Samuel Beckett* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), p. 4.

act as a device to convey psychological duality and its propagation in social interaction.

As beings subject to the non-synthesis of self that leads to subsequent pursuits of difference amongst others, Beckett's creatures do not exactly conflate the homo-hetero tensions seen in either internal self-consciousness or the external human-animal divide. Contrary to hybrid figures that emerge as the original progeny of two distinct parents, Beckett's characters are vessels for duality to co-exist and they reveal this schism within the self in their antibiosis with others. Molloy recognises the interplay between his more autotelic animal self and idealistic human self: 'For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible further on. [...] And these inseparable fools I indulged turn about, that they might understand their foolishness' (T, 48). Molloy's selves jostle within him, with the prospect of knowing only the asininity of their condition. This tension between the static and progressive sides of Molloy is reflected in his dealings with external others. When he meets the charcoal-burner in the forest towards the end of his narrative, there is a conflict of interests as Molloy wants to continue on his quest and the stranger wants him to stay. Their inability to communicate verbally underlines the antibiosis between them: 'Either I didn't understand a word he said, or he didn't understand a word I said, or he knew nothing, or he wanted to keep me near him' (T, 84). Molloy resolves this conflict through violence, kicking the charcoal-burner to death and thereby mastering a situation he could not master internally. In this way, there is a correlation between the identity tensions of the internal sphere and the tensions surrounding the pursuit of difference between humans and animals, or self and other. The symbolic human and animal *within* each individual is illustrated *between* individuals.

The basic theme of elevating and demarcating one's individual or group identity translates from primal creatures to modern power struggles. The executions of power that stalk distinction are an intrinsic part of a bioprocess: the survival of self. In the movement from raw life material to a refined elite, from anonymity to sovereignty, the self is perennially detaching from peers and emphatically reforming itself anew. In *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (2003), Richard Kearney studies how alien, divine and grotesque others satisfy the necessary alterity that grants the subject identity by virtue of relativity. In his discussion of Heidegger, Kearney notes that 'each mortal remains a cleft creature with one eye on its terrestrial genesis, the other on its celestial aspirations'.⁶⁹ Caught between earth and sky, this cleft creature struggles with its lowly past and inglorious beginnings whilst striving towards its divine end. As such, the pursuit of power over difference is a process that appears as a step in evolution; it is a way of advancing, defining or safeguarding oneself or one's group.

Fin de siècle social Darwinism took this biological connection to affirm that the laws of natural selection explain human hierarchies as well as plants and animals. The shift from terrestrial to celestial spheres is most apparent when the Nazis integrate notions of selectivity and evolution – particularly the theories of biologist Ernst Haeckel – into their political policies, thereby turning natural selection into the active *Selektion* of the death camps: 'Their political dictionary was replete with words like space, struggle, selection, and extinction (*Ausmerzen*). The syllogism of their logic was clearly stated: The world is a jungle in which different nations struggle for space. The stronger win, the weaker die or are killed'.⁷⁰ The continuity between humans and

⁶⁹ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), p. 167.

⁷⁰ Joseph Tenenbaum, *Race and Reich – The Story of an Epoch* (New York: Twayne, 1956), p. 211. Patterson outlines Haeckel's view: 'Ernst Haeckel, whose ideas had a strong influence on Nazi ideology, maintained that since non-European races are "psychologically" nearer to the mammals (apes

animal ancestors in Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), for example, shows that 'man is descended from some less highly organized form' but 'if he is to advance still higher he must remain subject to a severe struggle'.⁷¹ Whilst these power dynamics become more complicated and obscure as psychological, social, political, ethical and metaphysical tensions, they continue to hark back to a primordial struggle. Each onward step evokes primitive competitions and early forms of domination.

For Beckett, however, who considered Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) 'badly written catlap', the Victorian idea of evolution as a narrative of improvement is false.⁷² These on-going, animalistic struggles are not directed towards idealism, but instead signal a kind of biotic stasis since the ever-present contest for power arrests the humanist vision of development.⁷³ In *How It Is* (French 1961; English 1964), Beckett highlights the retrogression that attends the pursuit of advancement through his explicit portrayal of the exertion of power and violent control in the master-servant relationship between the narrator and Pim. Beckett began writing what turned out to be his last novel-length work the year after *Fin de Partie* (the French original of *Endgame*) was published in 1957, and completed it two years later in 1960. In a letter to Donald McWhinnie, Beckett explains the basic premise: 'A "man" is lying in the mud and dark murmuring his "life" as he hears it obscurely uttered by a voice inside him'.⁷⁴ It is tempting to interpret this imagery, as Adelman does, as 'an apocalyptic world like that of soldiers dying in the mud of no-man's land

and dogs) than to civilized Europeans, we must, therefore, assign a totally different value to their lives', Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, pp. 25-6.

⁷¹ Charles Darwin, *Darwin – Evolutionary Writings*, ed. by James A. Secord (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), pp. 319, 331.

⁷² Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 111.

⁷³ Although Darwin is a key figure in the literature mediating the historical period between Beckett and Schopenhauer, the struggles in Beckett have a distinctly Schopenhauerian flavour. For example, we can compare the German's belief that 'everywhere in nature we see contest, struggle, and the fluctuation of victory' with Beckett's line in *Malone Dies* 'the trees are at war with one another, and the bushes, and the wild flowers, and weeds, all ravening for earth and light' (*MD*, 277). See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 146.

⁷⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 461.

between the trenches, murmuring their prayers'.⁷⁵ Despite this, Beckett's inverted commas suggest that the narrator is not exactly a 'man' or a figure with a recognisably human 'life', and that these terms are only employed to refer to some relatable form of being.

Although Beckett's imagery recalls the barbarism of war, its primitivism also stretches back through 'vast tracts of time' (*HII*, 3). The narrator's description of crawling in the mud, 'the cord sawing my neck the sack jolting my side' (*HII*, 39) evokes the depiction of Lucky from *Waiting for Godot*, tethered and equally bogged down by the bag, basket and stool. These afflictions connect the narrator of *How It Is* with the animal-like treatment and oppressive situations that Beckett's other creaturely servants endure. As a result, the narrator, the eventual master, first appears as a similarly primitive, browbeaten creature, and this reminds the reader that the narrator and his eventual servant Pim are essentially of the same primordial origin. Consequently, the narrator's sovereignty over Pim is an imperious display of power over his own kin, which signals a pivotal stage in the development of differentiation and individuality. Since verbal communication between the pair appears to be beyond their capability, the narrator stabs, thumps and scratches his counterpart to physically assert his superiority. As mud dwellers, both the narrator and Pim resemble mudskipper fish, or Gobies, and this reinforces Beckett's nod to evolution in that these animals neatly illustrate the step from a purely aquatic life to an amphibious one.⁷⁶ The narrator displays this evolutionary process in his belief that although he is a creature, he can at least be less of a creature than Pim: 'the wish to be less wretched a little less' (*HII*, 8). Despite this, the pursuit of highness appears bound up with

⁷⁵ Gary Adelman, *Naming Beckett's Unnamable* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 2004), p. 199.

⁷⁶ Beckett refers to Ernst Haeckel in this text (*HII*, 34) and brings to mind the controversial and now disproved 'recapitulation theory', commonly expressed as 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny', which states that the development of an individual from embryo to maturity reflects the evolution of its species.

downfall: 'progress properly so called ruins in prospect' (*HII*, 17). This is not the upward trajectory of historical progress, but a progress that incorporates its own decline. It seems Beckett is undeterred by the epic scale of this principle so long as it undercuts itself, predicting its own collapse. In kind, the title *How It Is* itself suggests both an axiomatic statement and the contingency of the present tense.

Despite Beckett's distrust of master narratives, then, his narrators evidently lodge views of a similarly grand magnitude and survey immense temporal and historical patterns. Prior to *How It Is*, the unnamed narrator in the seventh text of *Texts for Nothing* refers to the cycles of memory as 'the same return, like the spokes of a turning wheel' (*TN*, 30) and later, in text nine, the narrator briefly dollies back from the busy foreground of existence to perceive a permanent backdrop when he utters 'what vicissitudes within what changelessness' (*TN*, 37). These phrases have a profound resonance, and yet Beckett often faces the scale of philosophical thinking whilst refusing the authority of the philosophical form. His narrators are tasked with untangling the bewildering human condition from within that bewildering human condition. That is to say, the characters are unable to transcend themselves to reflect on an ontological axiom. The narrators in both *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is* are consumed by an insistent performance, evidenced by the line 'I say it as I hear it' (*TN*, 22; *HII*, 3), and this overwhelms the possibility of any indubitable wisdom. As such, these passing insights do not allow them to improve their knowledge, alter their approach, surpass their constitutive conditions or gain a metaphysical truth, but rather haunt and ruin them periodically. It appears that Beckett's clearest glance at a master narrative is in its repeated return and collapse.

The idea that ancient traits remain in the present, lingering and resurfacing, is noticeable in the images of crawling and creeping figures in Beckett's post-war

writing. These depictions serve to prostrate the upright human and reduce him to a primitive creature. For example, Beckett describes Molloy 'crawling on his belly like a reptile' (T, 90) and bluntly calls to mind lice in the name Lousse (T, 33). The word 'reptile' itself stems from the Latin for 'crawled' whilst the alternative name given for Lousse in *Molloy*, Sophie Loy, gives credence to the idea that civilization is a façade for barbarism. 'Sophie' derives from the Greek for wisdom, as in philosophy, and the Irish pronunciation of 'lie' reads phonetically 'loy'. The lie of wisdom therefore gives way to Lousse, or louse, suggesting the primacy of parasitic insects, or contemptible and unpleasant creatures. Estragon brings these crawling and louse images together in *Waiting for Godot* when he exclaims 'All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud!' (WFG, 52). Furthermore, in *Endgame*, Clov discovers a flea, or crablouse, from which humanity might start again (E, 22) and Hamm says: 'Dig my nails into the cracks and drag myself forward with my fingers' (E, 41). Although moving forward, crawling is an undignified and taxing mode of transit that betrays a constant barbarity and therefore declines the idea of evolution as progress to suggest that primitivism accompanies humanity's onward trajectory. In this way, the Nazis' depiction of the Jew as a primitive being, as the 1941 propaganda poster exclaims 'Jews are lice; they cause typhus', backfires onto humanity in general for Beckett. His creatures effectively carry the evolutionary archive with them as baggage into an unavoidably ancient modernity.

Beckett's portrayal of master-servant relationships points to basic and chronic systems of governance, such as physical strength and intimidation, as well as the primal psychology behind these systems, such as self-interest. Although his depictions of power avoid a specific political critique, he nevertheless grasps the drives at the core of governance and ascendancy that find their epitome in the Holocaust. Beckett

includes various encounters with authority that display a level of order and control based on territory – on making and managing space. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault makes a clear distinction between territorial sovereignty, which allows life and threatens death, and biopower, which allows death and fosters life.⁷⁷ Despite this, policed spaces are a preliminary step towards a biopolitical level when considered as part of the Nazis' determination to create *Lebensraum* (living room) for their people. As the state nurtures the select population, it produces the adverse effect of excluding others from the political, and eventually the physical, territory. Agamben points out such an overlap in which 'an unprecedented absolutization of the biopower to *make live* intersects with an equally absolute generalization of the sovereign power to *make die*, such that biopolitics coincides immediately with thanatopolitics'.⁷⁸ As people exiled and displaced from the governed space, Beckett's creatures illustrate the biopolitical threshold that appends passive neglect and active abuse.

Beckett's narrators in *The End* and *The Expelled* are never settled in their surroundings or belong to a place. Written in the year immediately after the war, these novellas follow the narrators as they are evicted from homes and gradually ostracized from society. The final act of charity towards the narrator in *The End* suggests the beginnings of isolation and self-sufficiency:

This is a charitable institution, he said, and the money is a gift you receive when you leave. When it is gone you will have to get more, if you want to go on. Never come back here whatever you do, you would not be let in. (FN, 39)

⁷⁷ See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, pp. 135-145.

⁷⁸ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 83.

Beckett's narrator is a subject of territorial sovereignty since the state has abandoned him. He is no longer a concern for the welfare system and thus left to fend for himself independently. However, this end of care is the start of his voyage out of society altogether, which surely guarantees his demise. The narrator is told that he 'must not loiter in the cloister' (FN, 39), that he is not welcome in the sheltered space. Moreover, the word 'loiter' resonates on both a narrative and physical level, implying that the idea of nomadic progression is paramount, as his wonderings and wanderings are enforced as a result of a sovereign decision. Hence, his peripatetic movements are administered firstly and then monitored: 'One day I had a visit from a policeman. He said I had to be watched, without explaining why. Suspicious, that was it, he told me I was suspicious' (FN, 43). This vague oppressive authority serves to coerce the threatening narrator out of the governed sphere and make him a vulnerable outlaw. At times, the public is complicit in this banishment, and even prioritise their useful animals over fellow human beings. A landlord ejects the narrator from his home for this reason: 'He said he needed the room for his pig which even as he spoke was catching cold in a cart before the door and no one to look after him' (FN, 44). Although this kind of human devaluation is outrageous, the domestic and social spaces in *The End* are nevertheless the domain of a discriminate sovereign rule that orders humans into types and excludes its deviant subjects.

The policing of territory is more punctilious in *The Expelled*, which is a text that bears the status of Beckett's homeless figures in its title. The narrator is evicted from his house in the opening pages in a manner that recalls pest control: 'A thorough cleansing was in full swing. In a few hours they would close the window, draw the curtains and spray the whole place with disinfectant' (FN, 5-6). The extent of this purification suggests that the authorities wish to erase the narrator's filthy presence

and that he is a stain upon society. Once expelled, the narrator decides to walk on the road so as not to inconvenience the people on the pavement. He says, 'A policeman stopped me and said, The street for vehicles, the sidewalk for pedestrians. Like a bit of Old Testament' (FN, 8). This blunt rule resounds like a biblical commandment, as though it is an elemental law that also applies to the narrator for his safety. Yet a second policeman approaches: 'He pointed out to me that the sidewalk was for everyone, as if it was quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category' (FN, 8).⁷⁹ The narrator is not included in the precise organisation of space, diverted from the street to the sidewalk, but is instead dissociated from the public in general. He is alienated from the community and sundered from the Everyman as an aberration. This ideological separation is later enacted as a bodily distance when the narrator spends a night in the stables with a cab horse and finally retreats into the sunset until he is 'down among the dead' (FN, 16). Beckett's itinerant narrator lacks the solicitude granted to the working animal and is banished to the dark periphery of biopolitical responsibility. As a subject of territorial sovereignty, he is initially a black sheep, a disgrace to the social group, but as he becomes an isolated biopolitical pariah, he is a scapegoat in the wilderness beyond provisions.

The comparisons between unassimilated beings and animals complicate Beckett's marginalised figures, notably in *Mercier and Camier*. Written around the same time as the four *nouvelles* in 1946, this text shares the same movement between city and countryside. Whilst in a public garden, a ranger referred to as a 'maleficent being' (MC, 8) drives two copulating dogs away from the pagoda. He proceeds to order Mercier and Camier to move on from the shelter, thus creating a parallel between the animals and the men. The law rather comically interferes with the dogs

⁷⁹ Jackie Blackman considers this unassimilated figure to reflect the Jewish situation, particularly the pre-war political status of a rabbi that Beckett's cousin Deirdre Sinclair witnessed in Germany. See Blackman, 'Beckett Judaizing Beckett', p. 328.

on a biological level, stopping them in the act of procreation, and the government of territory suggests a similar, yet subtler, biopolitical action towards the men. Mercier and Camier initially think the ranger does the dogs a 'service', and question whether he has served them also. Mercier says 'Can it I wonder be the fillip we needed, to get us moving?' (*MC*, 9), which implies that petty rules and regulations keep the social mechanism turning, in the same way that they ensure Mercier and Camier's narrative unfolds. But, as with the dogs pulling in opposite directions, Beckett's original pseudo-couple are sent off without a sure purpose and ultimately meander aimlessly to a bridge on the edge of the town, where they remember the animals they have recently encountered. They think back on Helen's talking parrot, which is a peculiarly liminal being as an animal capable of mimicking human speech. This parrot coincides with the bridge as an interstitial structure to reflect the pseudocouple's own ambivalence and mobility between the suburban fringes and the rural hinterlands. Furthermore, the liminal creature and interstitial structure signify the pair's crossover into a state of biopolitical vulnerability. Mercier claims the parrot 'will haunt me till my dying day' (*MC*, 20), thus suggesting that the present memory of the bird might portend his imminent demise. Ominously, the parrot is remembered at the point Mercier approaches the countryside in the dark, where he says 'I have a feeling he was dead the day she told us she had put him out in the country' (*MC*, 100). Like abandoned domesticated animals, it seems Mercier and Camier stray onto the edges of an abject and fatal state that the absence of biopolitical guardianship induces.

Beckett's vagrants are subject to more indirect forms of power that benefit appointed social circles but cause inequity, limit opportunities and restrict the well-being of others. This idea of control expresses the crux of power for Foucault:

In effect what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.⁸⁰

The dominant force divests the other of influence and efficacy, and effectively monopolises active power. In *Molloy*, this 'action upon an action' renders Beckett's protagonist a social misfit. When Molloy rests on his bicycle, a policeman asks 'what are you doing there?' (T, 20) and suggests that Molloy's inert occupation of valuable space is a 'violation of [...] public order, public decency' (T, 20). Molloy's mere presence transgresses the law and, in a physical sense, he is clearly refused sanctuary. He is also excluded from the bureaucratic system because he is literally 'without papers' (T, 24) and is therefore effectively without certain human rights but not totally without human support.

As a result of the vague oppression of biopolitical power, Molloy receives his care elsewhere, namely through Lousse. Nevertheless, Lousse's brief custody of Molloy is also entangled in a Foucauldian sense of power as care becomes an act that must be accepted. Molloy points out that beggars cannot be choosers: 'Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. [...] To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth' (T, 24). The needy are at the mercy of their benefactors and are predominantly biddable subordinates, expected to abide by the established protocols. This influence takes on a more forceful, sinister hue when Molloy attempts to depart the house: 'doubtless she had poisoned my beer with something intended to mollify me, to mollify Molloy' (T, 47). Lousse tries to make Molloy a more

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 3, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2002), 326-348, p. 340.

malleable, submissive patient, which suggests that care is an alternative means of controlling people. It is evident that custody is integral to the anatomy of power when Molloy resists Lousse's supervision, and that her matronly control attempts to acquire the type of dedication that Molloy displays in the dogged pursuit of his mother. Molloy's custody at Lousse's home presents maternal care as a veiled form of dominance that reveals the intimacy between mastery and service.

The power dynamics raised in Molloy's encounter with a figure of care corresponds with the relationship between pets and owners to further elucidate the master-servant binary. Judging by Lousse's adoption of Molloy, it appears that indigents and domestic pets are incapacitated with support; they are helped to the point of subordination. Molloy is associated with dogs in particular, as he effectively replaces Lousse's pet dog Teddy, having accidentally killed him. The parallel is confirmed at the dog's interment when Molloy thinks, 'On the whole I was a mere spectator, I contributed my presence. As if it had been my own burial. And it was' (*T*, 37). Molloy implies that the dog's passing marks his own death and the birth of Lousse's dog-man. In place of Teddy, Molloy is a human pet, a creature to care for and lord over through a coinciding sense of responsibility and ownership.

Notably, Molloy's own obligation to replace Teddy evokes the Irish mythological figure Cuchulain. Whilst maintaining the human-canine proximity, this legend balances the scales of power considerably given that Setanta, the warrior son of the god of light Lug, volunteers to act as Culain's guard in place of the hound he killed in self-defence. The legend retains ideas of servitude and ownership since Setanta becomes Cuchulain, which literally means 'Hound of Culain'. Considering the gregarious nature of the human-canine relationship, the legend also reflects loyalty, friendship and mutuality. The power of care appears to extend both ways here, and

thus the dog is 'the animal that perhaps more than any other runs to and fro between the human and animal worlds, simultaneously marking and crossing the boundary between them'.⁸¹ Such is the mobility of canine company between civilization and savagery that commander Kurt Franz ordered his dog to attack prisoners at the Treblinka death camp using the words 'Man, bite the dog'.⁸² Here, in a reversal of lycanthropy, the hierarchy is thoroughly confused, treating the dog as a man and elevating the animal to the level of a loyal fellow, and at the same time deriding the prisoners with the derogatory term 'dog'.

In Beckett, the dog's ability to traverse human and animal worlds brings together the two distinct spheres to show that power is shared between master and servant. Returning to *Molloy*, Lousse needs to care for Molloy to feel purpose and belonging. Molloy explains, 'I would take the place of the dog I had killed, as it for her had taken the place of a child' (*T*, 47). This sequence of replacement aligns Molloy with both animal and infantile dependents, but it also highlights how Lousse requires a dependent subject. Her gain from the caregiving role is made clear when Molloy observes how Lousse sells 'the benefits for both of us if I would make my home with her' (*T*, 48). The suggestion that the arrangement is mutually beneficial indicates how the subordinate provides a vital service to the master that leaves the master in debt to and reliant on the subordinate. Giving care is akin to gaining responsibility, but receiving care means to inherit the status of the necessary other and therefore an oddly powerful role as an identity position. The effect is that Beckett's pseudo-couples develop a level of codependency that obfuscates the boundaries between mastery, service and companionship.

⁸¹ Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 17.

⁸² Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich*, p. 22.

In Beckett's *Endgame*, control and dependence are similarly inextricable, which results in a deadlock between the pseudo-couple Hamm and Clov. Eric Santner points out that the title of this play evokes the 'turbulence of sovereignty, the rise and fall of kings and queens (on the chessboard of battle)'.⁸³ In this sense, *Endgame* also suggests the strategic contest for territory, although these sovereign struggles are in a stalemate. On one hand, the blind master Hamm has the trump card in the larder combination and its contents, and therefore has a dependent subject in Clov. On the other, the lame but motile Clov has the power of care, symbolised by the painkillers, and therefore takes control in making Hamm dependent on his service. Their relative identity is notable when Hamm demands to be 'Bang in the centre' of the room (*E*, 19). Although it posits Hamm as the primary focus of attention, the audience witness that Clov places him there, which centres the master only in relation to his satellite servant. As Adorno puts it, 'Hamm is the king, about whom everything turns and who can do nothing himself'.⁸⁴ This turnaround in the master-servant relationship discloses the power of the other and accentuates the codependency that unsettles the power distribution.

The ruling force requires a subordinate to actualise the hierarchy and without a reference point, the master lacks an outlet to exercise such power and is only theoretically potent. The toy Pomeranian, for example, whose servitude and obedience are very much illusory, reveals the falsity of Hamm's position without Clov. In an exhibition of megalomania, Hamm believes the stuffed dog is gazing at him and begging for food: 'Leave him like that, standing there imploring me. [*Clov straightens up. The dog falls on its side.*]' (*E*, 26). Beckett's stage directions show that the inanimate toy is beyond the realms of authority, whereas Clov duly follows orders.

⁸³ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. 251.

⁸⁴ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 146.

Unlike Gertrude Stein's 'I am I because my little dog knows me', Beckett's formulation sees Clov become Hamm's little dog as he sits the prop up.⁸⁵ But like Stein's insight, the subordinate position becomes key to identity. Maud Ellmann explains that '[i]f the 'I' depends upon the knowledge of a little dog, this is not a neuter, neutral universal I, but a contingent subject rooted in relations with human and inhuman others'.⁸⁶ In this respect, the master relies on the servant to give dominance meaning; there is no dominion without a minion. Separately, each party lacks the context, the gaze, or the all-important dialogue that the other affords. As a result, Beckett's pairs are contracted to one another in mutual dependence. Before Clov halts at the door, they verbalise their bind:

HAMM: I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your services.

CLOV: [*Turning, sharply.*] Ah pardon, it's I am obliged to you.

HAMM: It's we are obliged to each other. (*E*, 48)

This obligation has the double sense of requirement and service, 'I oblige you' and 'I am obliged to you'. At once, Hamm and Clov shows their needs and know they are needed in a bind that both gives and takes power. It is a tension of the master-servant relationship that Beckett captures in Clov's suspended departure in the final tableau of *Endgame*.

Beckett's portrayal of power struggles between masters and servants navigates religious models, social relations, evolutionary processes and biopolitical activity. These tensions and conflicts are destined to continue in Beckett's vision since they search for a centred unity that is essentially non-existent; the necessity of the contest

⁸⁵ Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America, or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 111.

⁸⁶ Ellmann, 'Changing into an Animal', p. 83.

itself disputes such a sovereign reconciliation. Despite this, his figures refuse to renounce the possibility of polarised identities, and are therefore imprisoned in a melancholic state of relative being and the act of relation – in dialectical modes that govern their social and experiential narratives. The various figures of superiority and inferiority covered in this chapter, expressed in terms of human and animal figures, self and other, master and servant, reveal a paradoxical relationship that is antagonistic and yet loaded with elements of compatibility, cohabitation and collaboration. Although control and degradation make creaturely figures in the hands of power, riving a lowly and lofty binary, the real creaturely state is trapped in the process of being made, in the interminable clash of required alterity and the on-going failure to tessellate. The transcendent level of power, whilst an aspiration still, is a myth that leaves Beckett's creatures redrawing the lines of territory, identity and fellowship.

3. Humour

Failure and Degradation

Over two decades after the end of World War Two, in 1969, Beckett experienced what his partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil described as a 'catastrophe': he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.¹ Beckett adjudged the ensuing publicity and pressure to publish a disaster for his private life and writing career. He did not accept the award in person, but in the philanthropic spirit of the award, he gave the prize money away, which was a generous act characteristic of the man.² Within the confines of Beckett's writing though, it is not immediately clear how he fulfils Alfred Nobel's general criterion for an award to someone who has 'conferred the greatest benefit on mankind', and specifically in literature, to 'the most outstanding work in an ideal direction'. Humanism and idealism are not commonly associated with Beckett's work, certainly not as defining characteristics in the public consciousness of his writing. Karl Ragnar Gierow's awarding speech recognised the grim pessimism of Beckett's works, but claimed that '[f]rom that position, in the realms of annihilation, rises the writing of Samuel Beckett like a *miserere* from all mankind, its muffled minor key sounding liberation to the oppressed, and comfort to those in need'.³ Given Gierow's reference to mercy, emancipation and solace in the face of extreme human misery, the absence of any direct mention of the humour of Beckett's post-war work is a peculiar omission. The ability to laugh in the face of adversity seems to be an obvious point to reinforce the relief that the Nobel Prize committee find in Beckett.

Seven years prior to Beckett, John Steinbeck became the sixth American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, and the presentation speaker Anders Österling

¹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 570.

² Ibid. p. 572.

³ Sture Allén, ed., *Nobel Lectures in Literature, 1968-1980* (London: World Scientific, 1994), p. 20.

noted that, '[t]here is in him a strain of grim humour which, to some extent, redeems his often cruel and crude motif. His sympathies always go out to the oppressed, to the misfits and the distressed'.⁴ This description of Steinbeck also befits Beckett and shows that the Nobel committee appreciates humour, even grim humour, as an element of human compassion. In contrast, Gierow's speech for Beckett merely touches on two elements that happen to figure in Beckett's humour: paradox and degradation. In Beckett's writings, the breakdown or inefficacy of logical structures sits alongside persistent human indignity and atrophy as common sources of humour. As such, the inspiration for these aspects of Beckett's humour derives from the wider aesthetic schema of ignorance, impotence and indigence. The Swedish Academy fails to address this relationship between deficiency and humour, perhaps owing to the ambivalence of laughter in and at Beckett's work. The difficulty with Beckett's humour is that he engages with and problematizes theories of superiority, relief and incongruity laughter as he obscures or multiplies the targets of humour to complicate the relationship between the audience and the character.

Thomas Hobbes gives an early definition of superiority laughter as he surveys human passions in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (1640). In a rare mention of laughter, Hobbes says it is 'nothing else but *sudden Glory* arising from a sudden conception of some Eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the Infirmary of others, or with our own formerly'.⁵ Alexander Bain reconsiders this definition of laughter to focus on the degradation and relief that superiority implies, and, furthermore, consider ideas, practices and organisations as targets of derision. In *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), Bain asserts that 'Laughter is connected with an outburst of the sense of Power or superiority, and also with a sudden Release from a

⁴ Horst Frenz, ed., *Nobel Lectures in Literature, 1901-1967* (London: World Scientific, 1999), p. 574.

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (New York: Oxford University, 1999), p. 54.

state of constraint'.⁶ Beckett's humour certainly engages with the infirmity and constraint in these theories of laughter, but the eminency and power suggest a detachment from the object of humour that is at odds with the universal humanism of the Nobel ethos. One of the questions Beckett asks about the status of the human as he interrogates the motives and meaning behind laughter is whether the reading and viewing audience can empathise with his characters and at the same time feel above another's misfortune.

Bain's contemporary Herbert Spencer concentrates on the notion of release in his theory of relief laughter in 'On The Physiology of Laughter' (1860). Spencer describes laughter as a means of channelling excess nervous energy and notes that 'laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small – only when there is what we may call a descending incongruity'.⁷ This type of relief is clearly connected with the incongruity humour advanced by Immanuel Kant in his famous definition of the laugh in 1790 as 'an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing' (*italics in original*).⁸ Beckett would have been familiar with the incongruity theory having read Schopenhauer's work in the 1930s. In a brief chapter on laughter in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), the German philosopher claims that it is simple and easy to understand that 'laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation'.⁹ The notion of descending incongruity in the shift from high expectations to base revelations is closer to Beckett's post-war humour.

⁶ Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), p. 259.

⁷ Herbert Spencer, *Essays on Education* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1911), p. 310.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), p. 161.

⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, p. 59.

As we shall see, Beckett produces some sophisticated incongruity humour by pairing technical language, spiritual ideas or cultured references with descriptions of orifices and their workings. This dichotomy between the products of the mind and the processes of the body relies partially on privileging the mind over the body. As Ruby Cohn notes with reference to Flemish philosopher Arnold Geulincx in her second monograph on Beckett: 'The Mind alone is rich and graceful, adds Geulincx, but it is fastened to a dying animal'.¹⁰ This view holds that the human mind occupies a powerful, elevated position whilst the body is a lowly biological vessel prone to decay. For Beckett, however, it seems the mind-body duality is unstable and that the psyche is as equally fallible and fragile as the physical self. Beckett's depiction of the mind, then, often involves equalising the levels between the cerebral and the terrestrial, which means embodying the processes of the mind, situating signs of intelligence alongside depictions of the vulgar body and highlighting language's contribution to physical humour.

Going back further in the history of humour, Aristotle claimed that no animal but man ever laughs, and although this assertion has not gone without dispute, humour has long been perceived as a component of the human, the *homo ridens*.¹¹ As with the justification of Beckett's Nobel Prize, Beckett scholars, most notably Simon Critchley, cite humour as a consolation to the received nihilism of Beckett's literary world, with laughter offering a form of boundary and resistance. In Suzanne Dow's essay on the laughable but persistent negativity in Beckett, she recognises that 'Beckett's humour is often taken to be a lucid reckoning with a horizon, the taking

¹⁰ Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1973), p. 5.

¹¹ Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, trans. by James G. Lennox (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), p. 70. For discussions of animal laughter, see Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), p. 46; and Max Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Laughter* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2008 [1936]), pp. 15-40.

cognizance of a limit'.¹² In this respect, humour in Beckett is inherently human and deemed to be an instrument of perseverance, called upon in humanity's continual confrontations with the harsh realities of mortal life. Although it might seem improper to focus on humour alongside the context of the Second World War and the Holocaust, it can also be said that the respite of humour is most vital in these despairing times. As Terrence Des Pres expresses, 'humour counts most in precisely those situations where more decisive remedies fail'.¹³ But whilst there are certainly instances of the sword, shield and succour of humour in Beckett's work, in the context of his netherworld in which going on is never particularly desired, humour's actual incapacity to change or cleanse negativity make it strangely complicit in incarcerating the human.

The dark underbelly of humour has the potential to compromise the supposedly defiant laugh sounded in Beckett and the neat formulation of humour as a resistant or subversive force, thereby intimating an altogether more affirmative negative, which actually accepts, confirms and reinforces misery. It is this humour that suggests a creaturely element in that the laugh no longer merely reflects on the human predicament but contributes to it. The detached assessment of the world slides into an actual experience of that world. In this way, humour is 'the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories'.¹⁴ In revealing and responding to unhappiness, Beckett's humour occupies a paradoxical space since the laugh is both a conscious recognition of the situation, as though an interruption of life as a result of perceiving life, and an action indistinct from the situation, as though laughter is

¹² Suzanne Dow, 'Beckett's Humour, from an Ethics of Finitude to an Ethics of the Real', *Paragraph*, 34.1 (2011), 121-136, p. 122.

¹³ Terrence Des Pres, 'Holocaust Laughter?', in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 216-233, pp. 217-218.

¹⁴ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 29.

another part of the life to which it supposedly responds. Humour appears to slip between human cognition and animal immersion. It is this limbo of indeterminacy that engenders the concomitance of the highly comic and deeply tragic in Beckett's work.

In the context of the thesis as a whole, this chapter retraces the themes of testimony and power explored in previous chapters to reframe issues of failure and degradation in light of Beckett's humour. I make use of a number of influential theories on humour to interpret the degrading elements of Beckett's humour, including the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. The initial focus of the chapter is the comic failures of Beckett's author-narrators and their stories. I discuss the humour of linguistic and narrative excess as Beckett's author-narrators persist with errant modes of description and explanation. They effectively perform humorously confusing acts that bring communication into the realm of slapstick comedy to deride diegetic modes of storytelling. The result is a series of textual spectacles that narrow the gap between the mind and the body, and between subject matter and formal considerations. Beckett's humour, I argue, is an expression of the unspeakability that emerges in the breakdown of language and should therefore be considered in relation to the Beckettian pursuit of silence. The following section inverts Beckett's textual evocation of the body to analyse how words are performed on stage. Using Beckett's *Endgame*, I examine how Hamm and Clov's language materialises as a component of the physical humour of the play, namely through the joke of their bodily entrapment, or creaturely suspension. In the penultimate section, the focus on degradation develops into a discussion of Beckett's tragicomedy, particularly how the relationship between comedy and tragedy unsettles the laughter of superiority and produces spontaneous, delayed and stifled types of laughter for the individual and the collective audience. Furthermore, I propose that Beckett's

metanarrative techniques produce a creaturely movement between captivation and realisation that embroils the audience in the profound joke of being. The concluding section explores Beckett's version of gallows humour to pose the idea that laughter, as both a gesture of resistance and preservation, is conducive to endurance for Beckett as it defies despair and sustains unhappiness. The humour of failure and degradation does not decisively purge the anxieties of mortal life, or the socio-political constraints therein, through a return to the finitude of the materiality of being. In its transient assuaging, the laugh is a coping strategy, not a long-term solution. Whilst it helps to avoid capitulating to despondency, it cannot finally come to terms with the human condition.

Humour in Failure

Having written *Watt* from a Roussillon farm during the Nazi occupation of France, much of the literature Beckett produces during the post-war period revolves around destitute figures in scenes characterized by failure and disappointment. The characters are at the mercy of insatiable compulsions, futile tasks and maddening goals, made torturous by the Sisyphean, cyclic form of stasis that these pursuits assume. The eponymous heroes of Beckett's first post-war novel *Mercier and Camier* wander without direction or purpose in and around the city, filling time with inconsequential episodes and quotidian paraphernalia, and bound by a vague impulse to continue. Camier says, 'if I have any light to throw it is rather on what we are going to do, or rather again on what are going to try and do, than why we are going to try and do it' (MC, 47). The deadbeats of the four novellas *The Calmative*, *The Expelled*, *The End* and *First Love* are all outcasts and misfits, unable to settle in domestic quarters or integrate with society, thrown into confusing and unfriendly situations, and left to

roam. The narrator of *The Expelled* sums up their bewilderment: 'Poor juvenile solutions, explaining nothing. No need then for caution, we may reason on to our heart's content, the fog won't lift' (FN, 7). The quests in Beckett's trilogy of novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* are also without discernible success, both in terms of the physical journeys, such as Molloy's search for his mother and Moran's search for Molloy, and the narrative journeys in the form of stories, reports, memoirs, and speech. Similarly, in the two dramas *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm and Clov all seek out means to grant the termination of their enduring struggles. Words are unsuccessful, as Clov complains to Hamm: 'I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent' (E, 28). In each of these works, the minds and bodies of Beckett's characters are deteriorating and ineffective, and these psychological and physical conditions serve to highlight the perpetual nature of their unfulfilled desires; they are abject figures subject to the thrall of foundering pursuits.

Although Beckett's work is unremitting in its immersion in protracted failure, his writing is not blind to the humour in failure. His works are funny because his author-narrators often imitate the idea of the human in their efforts to succeed. They adopt reason, language, narrative and consciousness in their pursuit of success, but these faculties are exaggerated, misused and ultimately broken in the hands of Beckett's creatures. The image of the human is destabilised, and yet the creatures largely persist with this paragon, which engenders a grotesque version of the human, at once disconcertingly familiar and amusingly different. It should be noted from the outset, however, that the intentional turn to inefficacy in Beckett's writing is markedly different from Theodor Adorno's notion of humorous artistic inadequacy. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), the posthumously published text Adorno had intended to dedicate to

Beckett, he identifies a type of humour that arises as a by-product when the author's agenda is conveyed through inadequate or explicit means.¹⁵ Accordingly, Adorno generally refrains from engaging with humour since it does not coincide with the successful truth content in Beckett from the collapse of meaning. He argues that:

Beckett's *oeuvre* gives the frightful answer to art that, by its starting point, by its distance from any praxis, art in the face of mortal threat becomes ideology through the harmlessness of its mere form, regardless of its content. This explains the influx of the comic into emphatic works. It has a social aspect. In that their effectively blindfolded movement originates exclusively in themselves, their movement becomes a walking in place and declares itself as such, just as the unrelenting seriousness of the work declares itself as frivolous, as play.¹⁶

Besides social critique through the impact of form, works of art are reduced to rhetorical ideology, which appears ridiculously affirmative or absurdly facile. The overt and subsequently weak attempt at the serious renders it laughable, but, as a result, it is not light-hearted. Instead, the explicit work of art is a truly comic failure, achieving humour only in its obvious effort. The explicitly light-hearted is also reduced to a recognisable commodity, too easily identified as a contrived appeal, and thus loses its joyous quality. If Adorno is to register his support for Beckett's formal innovations and at the same time address the humour of Beckett's work, he must highlight a sense of humour that is generated by means delineated from the definite

¹⁵ See Lambert Zuidervart, 'Theodor W. Adorno', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/adorno/>> [accessed 11/4/2012], para. 26 of 42.

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 250.

and clearly intentional seriousness or comedy that Adorno describes as 'emphatic works'.

In contrast to Adorno's insight into the ridiculous quality of serious art and the weakened humour of obvious comedy, Beckett's humour of failure presents the antithesis to the transparency of emphatic works. Andrew Gibson notes that in the 'Three Dialogues' with Georges Duthuit, Beckett 'makes it quite clear that he is consciously rejecting an art that "pretends to be able"'.¹⁷ Beckett holds up the ideals of prelapsarian language as an aspiration for his narrators, with its perfect correspondence between signifier and signified, intent and expression, and, in contrast, has them endure the inability that their expressive weaknesses impose. He introduces a sense of humour on a narrative level through what Gibson describes as a 'comedy of description' or simply 'wastage', which protracts the problems in employing language and the difficulties in relating information.¹⁸

Beckett's early use of pun contains the rudiments of this foolish narrative excess. In paronomastic humour, the polysemy of language opens up multiple significations for each word, whereby a comic alternative undercuts the expected meaning. In the 1938 novel *Murphy*, Beckett presents a protagonist particularly receptive to puns owing to his deep thoughtfulness and great erudition. The opening image of Murphy tied to his rocking chair portrays him as a thinker, set free in his mind when his body is restricted. The narrator remarks that Murphy studied under Neary, a philosopher who can stop his heart at will, and that 'Murphy was one of the elect, who require everything to remind them of something else' (*M*, 40). Murphy is clearly attuned to the allusive quality of words, yet as Ruby Cohn notes, of the 124

¹⁷ Andrew Gibson, 'Comedy of Narrative: Nabokov, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet', *Comparative Literature*, 37.2 (1985), 114-139, p. 116.

¹⁸ Gibson, 'Comedy of Narrative', p. 118.

puns included in the novel, the majority comes from the narrator.¹⁹ It is Beckett's narrator who embraces the pun as a fundamental part of the world when he says, 'In the beginning was the pun' (*M*, 41). This joke mimics the first verse of the book of John to mock the idea of a stable, pre-created meaning grounded in God. It suggests that using 'Word' as a metonym for 'God' already entails the unpredictability of language.

However, Beckett's narrator in *Murphy* tends to exploit the proliferation of meaning for comic effect in a conscious way in this early novel. The narrator can draw on language's capacity for other meaning privately, without allowing the narrative to digress. For example, he says that Neary's servant 'Cooper never sat, his acathisia was deep-seated and of long standing' (*M*, 69). The use of a medical term here makes this an esoteric pun, causing the joke to rely heavily on the reader's vocabulary or willingness to consult a dictionary. It suggests that Cooper's restlessness is well established whilst implying the symptoms. This type of highly intellectual display in *Murphy* shows a more personal type of humour that can exclude the reading audience. Murphy exemplifies a similar self-satisfying humour when he tells his partner Celia a joke:

'Why did the barmaid champagne?' he said. 'Do you give it up?'

'Yes,' said Celia.

'Because the stout porter bitter,' said Murphy.

This was a joke that did not amuse Celia, at the best of times and places it could not have amused her. That did not matter. So far from being adapted to

¹⁹ Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 82.

her, it was not addressed to her. It amused Murphy, that was all that mattered.

(*M*, 81)

Murphy pleases himself with the wordplay but Celia does not appreciate this linguistic humour. He delights in the joke's homophonic value and neglects the fact that it lacks sense. The question 'Do you give it up?' also reveals Murphy's smug victory in revealing the punch line. Together, the medical pun and this aural pun show that certain information and tastes must be shared in order for the pun to avoid alienating the audience.

Whereas the arcane pun in *Murphy* shows a competent narrative voice conducting a level of humour that can exclude the reader, Beckett's later puns in *Molloy* reserve the knowing grin for the reader and for Beckett. In the second part, for example, Moran encounters a dim man one evening and describes how the man's face and body are appropriately matched. Moran notes, 'If I could have seen his arse, I do not doubt I should have found it on a par with the whole' (*T*, 150). Beckett increases the crudity of his humour as he turns to the monologue. The verbal dexterity displayed in *Murphy* is reduced in this instance and the lack of a third-person narrator generally ensures that puns no longer occur from such a position of sovereignty over possible meaning. Instead, the alternative meaning appears accidental and serves to divert the intention of the sentence towards new and unwanted significance, without the smile of omniscience. This type of ignorant pun that avoids esoteric words and resorts to crudity is easier to detect for the reader.

Although Beckett tones down the erudition of his humour in the example above, he continues to employ cultured references and learned ideas to produce an eclectic, and indeed comic, mix of highbrow thinking and bodily reality. In Cartesian

dualism, the body is distinct from the superior component of being, the mind. It is the mind, or the *res cogitans*, that constitutes the person fundamentally whilst the body, or the *res extensa*, is a sensory machine.²⁰ French philosopher Henri Bergson addresses a similarly hierarchical conception in his study *Laughter*, first published in French in 1900. He writes: 'When we see only gracefulness and suppleness in the living body, it is because we disregard elements of weight, of resistance, and, in a word, of matter; we forget its materiality and think only of its vitality which we regard as derived from the very principle of intellectual and moral life'.²¹ This positive image of the body is actually achieved by seeing past the normal properties of the material form, but when the body *qua* matter is recognized, it is a source of laughter: 'No sooner does the anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared'.²² These basic anxieties about the body are widespread and do not necessarily rely on access to specific cultural codes or social conceptions of the body. The physical state is a shared condition and therefore a common source of humour. From a later anthropocentric perspective, the mind remains the pride of the human, capable of symbolic thought and language systems far in advance of the capacity of nonhuman animals. The body, on the other hand, reminds us of the shared materiality of living things and what Judith Butler describes as 'mortality, vulnerability, agency', which can be extended to the animal kingdom, as Cary Wolfe has pointed out.²³

Since Beckett's humour navigates between, on the one side, elite language and learned culture, and, on the other, the universal fact of the body as matter and process, Beckett offers a sophisticated juxtaposition of mind and body that not only involves

²⁰ See Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), pp. 51-64.

²¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Kobenhavn and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), p. 49.

²² Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 51.

²³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 27. See Cary Wolfe, *Before The Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), pp. 18-21.

the nuanced texture of supposedly high and low subjects, but also conveys the tensions of a duality that makes up the human being. As Agamben suggests, 'man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element' whereas we should 'think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements'.²⁴ In this context, Beckett's humour involves what I call 'degradation' or 'debasement' in the sense of situating the abstract or superior alongside the physical or natural. That is, in terms of deposing the human mind from its pedestal and bringing the immaterial back to down to earth. Whereas the pun in *Murphy* uses a technical term to make a joke about a physical condition, Beckett undermines elevated language in *Molloy* by pairing it with base content for a bathetic comic effect. This paves the way for a marginally more magnanimous approach to humour since the cruder material gives the audience a common ground in the 'horrors of the body and its functions' (*T*, 118). There nevertheless remains an intellectually demanding aspect to Beckett's incongruity humour as his candid assessments of the body and bodily processes are often filtered through or placed alongside technical language and erudite material.

On entering the forest, Molloy contemplates his physical weaknesses and refers to his 'arse-hole' before long: 'Jesus-Christ, it's much worse than yesterday I can hardly believe it's the same hole' (*T*, 79). The use of a spiritual icon stands out as a humorous, and indeed blasphemous, outburst in the context of Molloy's bodily issues. Molloy appears to recognise the crudeness of this topic, only to replace the religious reference with an artistic tradition: 'I apologise for having to revert to this lewd orifice, 'tis my muse will have it so' (*T*, 79). Beckett juxtaposes a vulgar

²⁴ Agamben, *Open: Man and Animal*, p. 16.

reference to the body with the romantic notion of a creative inspiration that recalls the daughters of Zeus in Greek mythology. Since Molloy implies, scurrilously, that the 'muse' is fixated on his arsehole, Beckett effectively connects a figure of inspiration to a site of expulsion for a comic sense of incongruity. As Molloy continues to list his bodily afflictions, he also employs medical and scholarly language: 'But my prepuce, sat verbum, oozes urine, day and night, at least I think it's urine, it smells of kidney. What's all this, I thought I had lost the sense of smell. Can one speak of pissing, under these conditions? Rubbish!' (T, 81). By employing the technical name for foreskin and following it with the Latin adage meaning 'a word to the wise is sufficient', Molloy signals the obscurity of his wording through an equally elitist phrase. Hence, Beckett still demands a high level of knowledge from the reader for the incongruity between the technical language and body part to be fully understood. The difference here is that 'oozes urine', 'kidney' and 'pissing' make the missing subject relatively obvious. Beckett applies sophisticated language to a more vulgar scene to make a mockery of the cultured style whilst allowing the gist of the humour to be recognised. This incongruity is itself a sophisticated form of humour about the body, although the intellectual weight of 'prepuce' or 'sat verbum' is less in light of the more plainspoken later parts of the passage. Beckett effectively retains the difficulty of the high modernist imperative in his use of cultured references and bookish terms to depict the body, but also includes more vernacular descriptions to produce challenging and surprising comical contrasts.

Beckett's art of failure complements these humorous juxtapositions as the narrators often respond with confusion to their own fragments of intellect. Obscure words are still deployed but their meanings are not definite, so that esoteric language is subsequently filtered through the narrator's uncertainty. At the beginning of *Malone*

Dies, after the repeated use of 'perhaps' when Malone is devising his writing plan, he employs a technical word but is unsure whether it is appropriate. Malone surmises, 'There I am back at my old aporetics. Is that the word? I don't know' (*T*, 181). There is a double sense of humour in this line in that Malone's narrative incompetence is amusing for uninformed readers whereas informed readers recognise that the 'I don't know' reinforces the 'aporia' of the text. Beckett returns to this comic illustration of an apparently unknown word in *The Unnamable*. Again, Beckett's narrator uses the technique at the beginning whilst deliberating how to proceed: 'I should mention before going any further – any further on – that I say "aporia" without knowing what it means' (*T*, 293). The narrator dwells on an empty word that actually develops the static conditions he is attempting to identify with 'aporia'. His use of the word without knowing its meaning contributes to the impassable path that involves speaking despite the inability to positively communicate. In this turn to ignorance, Beckett opens up his imitation of narrative and linguistic frailties to the audience, directing the confusion away from the reader and towards the narrator. He therefore focuses on bodily materiality in two ways that each democratise his humour: directly referring to the body, which draws attention to a shared condition, and subverting mental faculties, which lessens the alienating effect of erudite language. Beckett diminishes the authorial intelligence seen in *Murphy* through an emphasis on trying to employ words in a state of common ignorance in the trilogy to make the humour more accessible. Nevertheless, the sophisticated subject matter that Beckett addresses ensures an intellectual and textured sense of humour.

The pun is effectively a microcosm of Beckett's amusing narrative tone, or 'syntax of weakness' as he described it, that developed in the 1940s and 50s.²⁵ The

²⁵ Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1970), p. 445.

reader is frequently invited to observe the humorous potential of language whilst Beckett's narrators are excluded from the joke in their attempts to relate stories sincerely. Sigmund Freud calls this type of inadvertent humour 'naïve' in his 1905 study *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud's analysis of humour builds on Spenser's relief theory but suggests, in part, that humour is either 'tendentious' or 'non-tendentious'. The former is the product of an aggressive impulse that engages oppressive or forbidden material to grant a psychological release. Non-tendentious humour on the other hand lacks the same hostile drive, and is therefore tame or innocent. Freud defines this division through the phrase '[a] joke is made, the comic is found', although he does suggest that naïve humour can sound like a joke despite lacking intention.²⁶ On occasion, Beckett's narrators chance upon what they consider to be a joke but is actually closer to the comic in the Freudian sense, such as when Malone vows to write his memoirs despite his short memory: 'When I have completed my inventory, if my death is not ready for me then, I shall write my memoirs. That's funny, I have a made a joke. No matter. There is a cupboard I have never looked in' (T, 184). Malone has not made a joke here, but rather found the comic element of his naivety. This seldom occurs in Beckett's first-person narratives, and humorous moments are frequently left undetected or unremarked. Malone's reflections are in fact littered with humorous glitches in language and thought, such as 'My body does not yet make up its mind' (T, 198) and 'let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise' (T, 236). Despite this, Beckett's characters largely fail to appreciate or construct humour, and tellingly, a distracted Malone indicates that jokes might be another unexplored 'cupboard'.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 239, 240.

The reader's vantage of knowledge in the comprehension of a joke, or the 'in-joke' at the narrator's expense, injects a voyeuristic aspect into the relationship between teller and receiver, which exposes the narrator's awkward communication and fumbling narrative style. The inefficiency with which Beckett's narrators conduct their stories is paramount to his humour in the prose. Gibson recognises that the narrators 'refuse to conform to the convention of salience which so often governs description in the classic text. Salience becomes a pose, adopted only to be travestied'.²⁷ This digressive technique halts the action to dwell on a single, often superfluous, piece of information. Aporia stifles any possibility of developing significant events and the narrative progression ebbs as a consequence. Three examples across Beckett's work serve to highlight humour's presence in the exercise and interrogation of reason and language in his narrative form. Firstly, in *Watt*, Arsene's lengthy induction of the new arrival Watt shares the title character's penchant for permutations and commitment to excessive explanation. As Arsene traces their predecessors in the Knott house, he follows a logical process but forgets the content:

For Vincent and Walter were not the first, ho, no, but before them were Vincent and another whose name I forget, and before them that other whose name I forget and another whose name I forget, and before them that other whose name I forget and another whose name I never knew, and before them that other whose name I never knew and another whose name Walter could not recall [...]. (*W*, 58)

²⁷ Gibson, 'Comedy of Narrative', p. 118.

The sustained attention to variations in *Watt* satirises the attempt to present information comprehensively. Arsene is unable to retrieve the names of the servants as he concentrates on the system. The repetition of 'forget' in the above example parodies the repetition of 'begat' in the first chapter of the gospel of Matthew to show how a repetitive form can supplant meaning. In the Bible, Matthew employs the word 'begat' thirty-nine times over fifteen lines, moving forward in time from Abraham to trace Christ's ancestry (Matthew 1.2-16). This fixation on one word suggests a type of pedantry, which Schopenhauer describes as 'that clinging to form, the manner, the expression and the word that is peculiar to pedantry, and with it takes the place of the real essence of the matter'.²⁸ Similarly in Beckett, the process overwhelms the point of the passage. Beckett's text echoes the advancing 'begat' with the receding 'forget', thereby reversing the flow of time as it moves back into an increasingly obscure past whilst maintaining the pattern of thought. He shuns the implicit etcetera that conscientious readers would expect with repetition and patterns, and instead, the rigorous mental practice replaces elliptical spaces, which effectively fills the text with hollow, predictable and unnecessary passages. These exhaustive attempts at explanation are a waste of effort and comic in their ignorance of sufficiency.

Beckett develops these textual shortcomings for comic effect in *Mercier and Camier* when the two heroes repeatedly miss one another having appointed a meeting time and place. Beckett writes out the scene in full, before summarising:

In other words:

	Arr.	Dep.	Arr.	Dep.	Arr.	Dep.	Arr.
Mercier	9.05	9.10	9.25	9.30	9.40	9.45	9.50
Camier	9.15	9.20	9.35	9.40	9.50		
(MC, 4)							

²⁸ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, p. 60.

Evidently, the 'other words' to which Beckett resorts is a timetable. The reason for Mercier and Camier's failure to meet is simple: one waits whilst the other walks, the other waits whilst the first one walks. Despite that, the written description complicates the scene, making it difficult to track the characters' movements. The table elucidates the matter with more efficiency and signals the failure of description in words, but the narrator is not content with this perspective, suggesting it is overly contrived when he says 'What stink of artifice' (*MC*, 4). Indeed, timetables are devised to organize and be efficient, and, as Foucault affirms, serve to 'establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, [and] regulate the cycles of repetition'.²⁹ This type of structured layout certainly clears up the scene but also makes it sterile, which implies that although the written description fails to elucidate the sequence of their non-coincidence, it is at least a more organic expression of the wayward protagonists. The contrast between convoluted prose and clear tabulation is a patent source of humour that allows the narrative to move forward whilst heralding the inadequacy of this compromised mode of 'progression'.

Molloy also resorts to numbers to surmount a narrative impasse and proceed with his ramblings. Beckett's narrator hibernates for winter in swathes of newspaper, noting 'The Times Literary Supplement was admirably adapted to this purpose, of a never failing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it' (*T*, 30). The implication is that literary criticism is stringent and closed off, but also flatulent in the figurative sense. In any case, Molloy is not concerned with the written content of the book review and values it only for the insulating properties of the paper it is printed on, perhaps sharing the disdain of Vladimir's cutting retort 'Crritic!' in

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 149.

Waiting for Godot (WFG, 67). On the other hand, mathematics offers Molloy a reliable insight into himself, although this science is merely used to calculate the rate of his flatulence:

Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself. (T, 30)

Mathematics is used to analyse his past and is preferred over language alone. The numbers have fixed values and, in relation to the scale of time, Molloy can quantify and contextualise his being using averages to divide periods of existence into fathomable parts and thus gain a level of perspective. Words are laborious and confusing whereas mathematics acts as reliable shorthand and is an appropriate, efficient mode of expression for problems and solutions. Despite all this, Beckett's creatures persevere with words and consign scientific thought to the vulgar body. Molloy reduces mathematics to mere 'trumpery' as he uses his show of arithmetic to discuss trivial matters. In this way, Beckett confronts 'the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear'.³⁰ This humorous degradation of language into lengthy digressions and the use of rational thinking for base subject matter shows that Beckett situates sophisticated disciplines alongside a benighted dimension of the human that society tries hard to

³⁰ Beckett qtd. in Valerie Topsfield, *The Humour of Samuel Beckett* (New York: St. Martin, 1988), pp. 25-6.

censor. Beckett's humour of failure indulges ineffective narrative techniques that mimic human modes of meaning to present a distorted caricature of the classic author.

Textual Performances

I have traced the decline of the word as Beckett's narrator-authors descend from the erudition of the sovereign mind to the waste products of narrative and debased language. In different ways, Beckett's narratives halt when attempting clarification and in each case there is a humorous failure of language, whether through excessive use of explanation, novel emergency measures or superficial revelations. Furthermore, the form underpins the comic element of the content, as seen in the vague and forgetful manner used to track Vincent and Walter's precursors in *Watt*, the numerical 'other words' in *Mercier and Camier* and the arithmetic used to calculate farts in *Molloy*. Beckett degrades language and evinces the petty utility of words through the incongruity between high intellect or mental rigor and the minor or base material to which it is directed. The mind's abstract constructions and conceptual powers may offer sanctuary from the physical world, but these illusions merely set up the mind to plummet back to a recognition of its weak corporal vessel and poor expressive vehicles. The point I want to stress in this section, however, is not the body as a site of finitude, but how the body is invoked at the limits of communicative language to express a language of its own, a body language so to speak. The tension between content and form in Beckett helps to produce a level of humour that traces the limits of the word whilst continuing to traverse them *in corpore*, thereby deferring the complete failure of language and the complete acceptance of physical finitude. In short, Beckett's language-body formulation creates a creaturely state of suspension as

laughter occurs at the limit of the language performance, but it does not realise the dream of transcendence.

Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the downward movement from the elevated, abstract level to the lowly, bodily level in *Rabelais and his World* (1965). His work on the carnival and grotesque realism holds degradation as an essential principle. Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnavalesque' describes the humorous festivities of the people as they unite against the official culture. The community resort to the grotesque to resist the governed world, which 'exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate'.³¹ This subversion of power promotes the lower stratum, associated with 'food, drink, defecation, and sexual life', which is easily understood and shared by others in order to produce a collective atmosphere.³² Bakhtin explains that this rebellion against authority is a form of 'grotesque realism', which entails 'the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' so that symbols of the upper stratum, such as the heavens, the face and the mind are reduced to the lower stratum of the earth, the genitals and the buttocks.³³ In this respect, the bodily element is 'deeply positive' since it is 'something universal, representing all people'.³⁴ Similarly, in Beckett's world, the cerebral level is equal to the terrestrial. Yet, whereas the downward movement of degradation in Bakhtin has a purely 'topographical meaning', Beckett's humbles the elevated sphere of the mind that anthropocentrism and humanism privileges.³⁵ Reason, language, narrative and consciousness prove to be as ineffective as the body, but suffer a steeper degradation in comparison to the already 'grounded' physical self. As Beckett explores the weaknesses of the metaphysical

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984), p. 303.

³² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 18.

³³ Ibid. p. 19.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 19.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 21.

alongside the physical, and effectively amalgamates the mental sphere of his monologues and the bodily sphere of his drama, Beckett's humour of failure disrupts the mind-matter duality. The bathetic interplay between the mind's faculties and the body's crude workings suggests that the noble is reduced to the common, and that 'laughter degrades and materialises'.³⁶

The degradation from the upper to the lower strata indicates a parallel between Beckett's prose and drama. Beckett turned to drama in the late 1940s with his first (unperformed) play *Eleutheria*, which uses the Greek word for 'freedom' for its title. Although Beckett resorts to actual performances on stage, the appearance of his texts on the page and the experience of reading the prose offer textual equivalents to the physical clowning he explores in the drama. Much has been written about the physical humour of Beckett's prose and drama, particularly the ribald and scatological sides of the imperfect body.³⁷ Yet, on separate occasions, both Shane Weller and David Houston Jones have examined the point of crossover between physical abjection and textual abjection. In Weller's book *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity* (2006), he introduces the idea that laughter *at the other* is always the laughter *of the other* to assess the extent to which Beckett's humour includes an ethical principle. Weller rightly suggests that the abject body in Beckett 'does not possess the power of resistance to the official or normative that Bakhtin claims for the Rabelaisian body'.³⁸ Beckett does not celebrate the body nor grant it the unifying or subversive quality of the carnival. If the body is a common ground for people, it is also an embarrassing fact that is socially repressed and a burden for Beckett's decaying creatures.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 20.

³⁷ For example see Manfred Pfister, 'Beckett, Barker, and Other Grim Laughter', in *A History of English Laughter – Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, ed. by Manfred Pfister (New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 175-189, and Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2012).

³⁸ Shane Weller, *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 115-6.

Nevertheless, Weller does briefly follow the idea that in Beckett's brand of 'wordshit', literature itself becomes an abject body.³⁹ Beckett's prose gives physicality to intellectual processes inasmuch as his narratives deliver a formal impact that renders and imposes cognitive movements through amusing textual performances. Watt's lexical loops, Mercier and Camier's timetable and Molloy's calculations are all textual spectacles, whereby linguistic forms translate the metaphysics of reason into a visual and experiential substance. These passages fall short when transmitting information through the semantic value of language, and yet each example continues to offer a textual embodiment of the mind since they execute language's execution. As such, language is a suitable tool to demonstrate the inability to communicate effectively as it bears out its own deficiency. As the reader encounters stories devoid of generic narrative capabilities and books that lack the messages of conventional writing, Beckett's prose manages to replicate creaturely chaos rather than expressing sovereign order to render the protagonist's cognition and perspective. In essence, Beckett presents a grotesque and abject textual body.

As with the crude humour of the wretched body, the textual performance of the grotesque and abject in Beckett carries humorous undertones. Molloy's attempt to solve the problem of his sucking-stones is a prime example of how Beckett causes words to appear virtually senseless through an excess of reason and at the same time offer a humorous formal display. As Molloy attempts to find a way of sucking each stone in turn by circulating them around his various pockets, his description of this process mimics the rearrangement of the stones. Words too are rearranged into similar but different patterns as he replaces 'left' with 'right' and 'greatcoat' with 'trousers' (*T*, 69). Molloy's 'Watch me closely' (*T*, 72) marks the beginning of his show,

³⁹ Weller, *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity*, p. 116. See also David Houston Jones, *The Body Abject: Self and Text in Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

implying that the solution he describes is a kind of close-up magic trick that necessitates concentration and eagle-eyed vigilance to follow. On stage, the rotation of Molloy's sucking stones would equate to Vladimir and Estragon's hat-cycle skit. As it is, Molloy's fidelity to logic verges on nonsense since the profusion of repeated words and recycled syntax largely makes his reasoning confusing for the reader. Molloy's careful and extended consideration of the rearrangement of his sucking-stones is at once amusing and frustrating. Molloy appears to recognise as much when he says 'Do I need to go on?' and replies 'No', and yet he does persist with his maddening reasoning. Crucially, immediately after this scene, Molloy remembers a woman who approached him on the beach and then returned to her companions 'Huddled together like sheep [...], laughing no doubt, I seem to hear laughter far away' (T, 75). This laughter suggests a sardonic reaction to Molloy in the context of his performance and the reference to 'huddled sheep' indicates a crowd, particularly a mindless or biddable audience. In the same way that theatre audiences laugh at the pratfalls and slapstick antics of *Waiting for Godot*, Molloy perceives a plausible group reaction to his own performance and, by implication, himself. This laughter of superiority highlights the failure of Molloy's intended explanation, and indicates that his attempt to elucidate in fact achieves the opposite and is therefore risible.

The distance of the laughter after Molloy's sucking stones performance suggests it is from an outsider and not from the implied spectator that he initially addresses. The audience is no longer in league with the performer, but rather laughing from afar in a detached, judgemental way. More than this, the distance of the laughter and the uncertainty in the word 'seem' implies that Molloy is paranoid about his performance, that he reflects mentally on the impression he gives to others and imagines an obscure laughter directed at himself. The failure of Molloy's reason

actually provokes a self-conscious reaction, a kind of phantom laughter analogous to feelings of embarrassment and shame. Therefore, this distant laughter echoes the reading audience's laughter at Molloy's textual acrobatics and conveys the laughter that Molloy imposes upon himself. The result is that Molloy becomes a part of the crowd that closely watches his performance.

Beckett's bedridden protagonist in *Malone Dies* reinforces the human mind's relationship with the physical self that Molloy introduces. Malone describes how Macmann's carer Lemuel strikes himself on the skull with a hammer because the head is 'the seat of all the shit and misery' (T, 269). Beckett clearly contradicts the Roman physician Galen who considered the head the source of reason. He also appears to draw from Greek mythology here, parodying the birth of the Goddess of wisdom Athena from the head of Zeus. The head as 'seat' conjures a clever depiction of the degradation of the mind, playing on the term to indicate buttocks, which marries the head and arse to create a comic image of the headspring of worthless and contemptible drivel. The lofty head is at once the seat, or the centre, and the bottom, or the butt of the joke. In addition, 'seat' refers to the sedentary position and intimates a viewer. As with Molloy's distant laughter, the seat has double relevance as source and audience, culprit and witness, as though the brain sits and observes the misery of the body it controls and to which it belongs. The head is therefore implicated in the plight of the human as the seat of nonsensical reason, the coordinating centre of the wretched body and the reflective capacity that laughs at it all.

In Beckett's prose and plays alike, humour stems from the rigidity of the respective targets, with physical humour exposing the inflexibility of the body whilst textual humour unhinges the systematic rational mind and contorts narrative conventions. In Bergson's study *Laughter*, he theorises rigidity as a source of humour,

focusing chiefly on physical humour. He writes: 'We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing'.⁴⁰ Bergson's example is the inability to adapt when falling over, noting that the body appears simply as an object in time and space, subject to physics, and thus stripping the human momentarily of an ideological value and anthropocentric ascendancy. He proposes that absent-mindedness and ignorance of self are measures of humour, and, in this state, human agency collapses into automatism: 'The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine'.⁴¹ This 'thingness' extends to human faculties and their limits for Beckett, which reduces modes of thought and expression to empty frameworks and redundant customs. Hence Beckett's characters trip up figuratively in the prose, stumbling on epistemological and communicative obstacles. Beckett applies Bergson's mechanics of the body to the mind's operations, presenting automatic, lengthy and unsuccessful workings of rationality in a laughable attempt to resolve contradictions and settle on reliable information.

However, from the trilogy onwards, Beckett's narrative mode offers a further alternative version of Bergson's notion of absent-mindedness. The monologues are self-conscious and self-reflexive projects, situated within the individual mind. Despite this introspection, the inward glance in Beckett withholds complete self-knowledge and preserves psychological blind spots so that, in effect, levels of the mind remain absent. This principle is noticeable in Molloy's contemplation of the dog in the A and C scene. Molloy is perched high on the hill, overlooking two men walking in opposite directions. Man A or man C (Molloy is unsure which) is walking a small dog: 'a pomeranian I think, but I don't think so. I wasn't sure at the time and I'm still not

⁴⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 32.

sure, though I've hardly thought about it. [...] Yes, it was an orange pomeranian, the less I think of it the more certain I am. And yet' (T, 12). Doubt repeatedly returns to make Molloy a casualty of the voices in his mind and the more he thinks, the further he is dragged into a cognitive oblivion. The humour of absent-mindedness in Beckett's version is that vacuity is demonstrated through the narrator's psychological self-examinations. The narrator of *The Unnamable*, for example, is entangled in a web of contradictions in the attempt to unravel his meditations on the self: 'If I say anything to the contrary I was mistaken. If I say anything to the contrary again I shall be mistaken. Unless I am mistaken now' (T, 347). For all of the narrator's efforts to make sense of experience, pay attention to detail, be alert to one's position and invest in the structures of language and logic, the result is a humorous circumnavigation of the crux, which amounts to a lacuna akin to Bergson's absent-mindedness. Essentially, the failures enclosed within the body of the text emerge as the concretised evidence of the mind's presence, but only in its inefficacy.

In both body and mind Beckettian Man is a degraded version of the humanistic ideal; he is *Homo incapacitus*. By reducing the constitutional properties of humankind, typically held as evidence of human supremacy, Beckett presents an altered vision of humanity that cannot be considered elite. The humour inherent to this failing figure rests on the detritus of epistemology and expression that foregrounds the lower stratum of the body. In turn, the attention to degradation in Beckett's humour of failure reveals his resistance to signification in favour of aesthetic impact. The (in)sovereign inability to master meaning triggers the debasement of the high intellectual realm and emphasises the low physical realm that is parallel to Beckett's

aesthetic impact, or what Adorno calls the 'shock of the unintelligible'.⁴² That is, both the emptiness and effect of Beckett's work comes through a formal experience that rejects any explicit meaning through diegetic content.

The emphasis on form and enactment in Beckett prompts Adorno's reading of *Endgame*, in which Adorno identifies truth content in incomprehensibility and the absence of meaning. However, as Simon Critchley comments, Adorno underestimates the comic element consistently to the extent that Beckett can 'make a philosopher as subtle and intelligent as Adorno appear slightly maladroit and flat-footed'.⁴³ Admittedly, Adorno bluntly states 'the only comical thing remaining is that along with the sense of the punchline, comedy itself has evaporated' in Beckett's *Endgame*.⁴⁴ Considering that Adorno seldom addresses Beckettian humour, it is tempting to accept this as the sum total of Adorno's thoughts. Critchley focuses heavily on this statement and asserts that

humour is this very experience of evaporation, which is the evaporation of a certain philosophical seriousness and interpretative earnestness. Humour does not evaporate in Beckett; rather laughter is the sound of language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so, which is what is so tragically comic.⁴⁵

Critchley refers to two points in this extract that I will unpack at length in the following sections, namely the 'tragically comic' and the 'experience of evaporation',

⁴² Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 240-258, p. 243.

⁴³ Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), p. 160.

⁴⁴ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 135.

⁴⁵ Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, p. 157.

but I introduce these ideas briefly here to elicit their relation to Beckett's textual performances and humour's contribution to the unsayable. At first, Critchley identifies a sense of humour engendered by its desiccation, and, as Shea Coulson emphasises, this part of Critchley's interpretation means 'the evaporation of humour is necessary for that evaporation to be humorous'.⁴⁶ The evaporation of humour returns to a comic sensibility through humour's failings. In effect, humour displays its paradoxical nature here since it can continue to exist within irreconcilable differences. When humour is seemingly non-existent, the serious or humourless context can result in infectious laughter and the very intolerance to comedy can be intensely funny. Coincidentally, Adorno acknowledges a related point in 'Is Art Lighthearted?': 'Humour is salvaged in Beckett's plays because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair'.⁴⁷ Thus, the insignia of humour, the laugh, becomes a mark of the serious as humour is desiccated and reconstituted simultaneously.

According to Critchley, humour is not evaporated altogether in Beckett; it remains as language attempts to mute itself, as an employed language tries to articulate and theorise its own end, never satisfying the teleological goal of philosophical seriousness and interpretative earnestness. The laugh, as 'the sound of language trying to commit suicide', implies that language is active and valuable, albeit preoccupied with self-obliteration. Therefore, the laugh is not the end of language, but the perpetual coda of language. It is the interstice between the termination of language and the goal of Beckett's language, namely silence. The laugh is an utterance that is

⁴⁶ Shea Coulson, 'Funnier than Unhappiness: Adorno and the Art of Laughter', *New German Critique*, Arendt, Adorno, New York, and Los Angeles, 100 (2007), 141-164, p. 157.

⁴⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, trans. by S. W. Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University, 1992), p. 253.

anchored in the on-going reduction of language structures and always a product of language as it tries to silence itself.

In *The Unnamable*, Beckett returns to textual performance in order to convey the disintegration of language into a more primitive semantic code based on sentence:

that's how it will end, in heart-rending cries, inarticulate murmurs, to be invented, as I go along, improvised, as I groan along, I'll laugh that's how it will end, in a chuckle, chuck chuck, ow, ha, pa, I'll practise, nyum, hoo, plop, psss, nothing but emotion, bing bang, that's blows, ugh, pooh, what else, oooh, aaah, that's love, enough, it's tiring, hee hee, that's the Abderite, no, the other, in the end, it's the end, the ending end (*T*, 412)

The narrator disgorges a range of inarticulate but emotionally charged sounds. He predicts that the laugh will finally burst out and signal the end of the expressive dilemma, but evidently the laugh requires skill. The narrator is unable to laugh on demand and must 'practice' the art of laughter. Ironically, the curtailed chuckle released here is precisely an art; it is artificial or 'invented', which suggests that the narrator actually requires a more spontaneous or 'improvised' laugh that responds to the situation without hesitation or contrivance. The narrator needs a laugh that moves towards the end of language and in closer proximity with silence. Tellingly, the narrator's reference to the Abderite invokes the Ancient Greek philosopher Democritus. Commonly known as the laughing philosopher, Democritus is associated with 'scoffing' and famously pronounced 'no thing is more real than nothing'.⁴⁸ In this allusion to 'scoffing' and 'nothing' in *The Unnamable*, Beckett intimates

⁴⁸ Beckett refers to Democritus' aphorism in *Murphy*, 'the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real' (*M*, 138) and in *Malone Dies*, 'Nothing is more real than nothing' (*T*, 193).

laughter's role in mocking language and evoking ineffability. The laugh stands between the matter of language and the vacuum of silence.

Critchley's notion of 'laughter as the sound of language trying to commit suicide' also evokes Walter Benjamin's aphorism in *The Arcades Project*: 'Laughter is shattered articulation'.⁴⁹ Far from being altogether unintelligible, Benjamin suggests that laughter is the breakdown of the formerly successful, stable and clarified structures of communication. The laugh is not the after-effect of shattered articulation either, but is itself a gesture of lucidity in pieces. Although Critchley forwards a more dilated and dramatic version of Benjamin's phrase, both emphasise that laughter does convey meaning, however scantily. Similarly, the narrator of *The Unnamable* pronounces how the end will occur but nevertheless continues to emit a series of rudimentary sounds that have expressive value. As Sara Crangle rightly points out in her chapter on laughter in *Prosaic Desires* (2010), sound 'is an expression of knowledge, meaning, or emotion and, fundamentally, meets a basic and continuous human longing for communication'.⁵⁰ The narrator of *The Unnamable* bypasses knowledge and meaning to an extent to insist upon 'nothing but emotion', and yet these sounds have the intention of silence behind them and are therefore related to the thousands of words uttered before, each aiming to say the end. But even the most reduced forms of expression, including outbursts of emotion, contain a paronomastic quality of excess. As Beckett himself exemplifies when he explains to Alan Schneider that his work is 'a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended)', sounds, like

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999), p. 325.

⁵⁰ Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires – Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2010), p. 130.

words, reveal more or other than intended.⁵¹ They fill the void with a parenthetical supplement that holds off the nothingness of silence.

However, the narrator of *The Unnamable* is correct in suggesting that laughter is related to the end of language, and it is particularly noticeable in the term 'gag'. Referring to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), Manfred Pfister picks up on laughter's relation to silence:

It is a laugh beyond, or at the far side of, tears, a pathological laughter. And what it expresses – like the silence, like being struck dumb, to which it is closely related and which it disrupts – is utter helplessness and the most radical protest against the horrors of existence and the failure of language to express them discursively.⁵²

Laughter, like silence, is expressive, but laughter is also an incursion on silence and, as such, it denies the absence of sound. The laugh can therefore be valid as a non-discursive expression that reacts to context and indicates a communicative value. It can also desecrate silence to help punctuate and perpetuate the obligation to speak. As the voice in *The Unnamable* demonstrates in its spluttering and coughing performance, words and sound partake in the unending end of language in an attempt to claw towards the final expression of utter silence. The paradox here is that the act of speaking is motivated towards the silence that it also denies. Adorno is well aware of this insurmountable problem: 'The words resound like merely makeshift ones because silence is not yet entirely successful, like voices accompanying and disturbing

⁵¹ Beckett qtd. in Maurice Harmon, ed., *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1998), p. 24.

⁵² Pfister, 'Beckett, Barker, and Other Grim Laughter', p. 185.

it'.⁵³ These words, like the obscure sound of laughter, say the unsayable, but are not a guillotine for expression as a whole. They postpone complete silence with the remnants of meaning to sustain the impact of degradation and failure. Beckett realises that 'every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness' and yet he also knows he 'could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence'.⁵⁴ Since silence is not entirely successful, the fundamental joke of Beckett's humour of failure is that the failure is never complete. The expressive dilemma cannot arrive successfully at the terminus of a failed language. Laughter, as the shattered and suicidal throes of language, fails to achieve the silence and is unable to cease staining silence. Laughter, then, can be seen as a part of the unspeakable that testifies to the catastrophe. At the limits of comprehension and articulation, the sound of laughter signals the nervous energy and sense of vulnerability that attests to the magnitude of the event and how it exceeds verbal communication. In this way, the laughter in and at Beckett's work is parallel to the way a stutter might physically react to the urge to speak and not speak. Far from the simple expression of pleasure, the laugh is associated with the spoken silence that connects Beckettian testimony to the Holocaust.

Words and Flesh in *Endgame*

Beckett's humorous textual performances offer a textual embodiment of the human subject's rational and linguistic failures. Beckett degrades the representative powers of language to the visual, aural and formal impacts that evoke the physicality of a spectacle. In this context, laughter is a vocal and physical expression that occurs at

⁵³ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 137.

⁵⁴ Beckett qtd. in Mary Bryden, 'Sounds and Silence: Beckett's Music', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 6, Crossroads and Borderlines, ed. by Marius Buning *et al.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 279-288, p. 279. Beckett qtd. in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 681.

language's limits. It conveys the simultaneous obligation to speak and inability to speak that constitutes Beckettian testimony, which I have previously related to the act of bearing witness to the Holocaust. I now want to follow this descent in which language is bound up with bodily issues, not in terms of Beckett's debased novelistic content or textual performances, but rather how words are part of the physical humour of creaturely suspension as it appears on stage. In Beckett's theatre, the dialogue ensures that characters' physical presences are maintained; whilst they are speaking they stay put. The restless verbal exchanges therefore underwrite the physical joke in Beckett's plays, namely that words prolong the creatures' physical incarceration. When language is uprooted from its human ability to make sense effectively and efficiently, it is transplanted into a more visceral, inhuman capacity. The words lose much of their semantic value and become the minimal stimulus required to continue the characters' fettered bodily conditions on stage.

In Maud Ellmann's essay 'Changing into an Animal', on what she perceives as the dehumanising process of writing in Joyce's composition of the 'Circe' episode in *Ulysses*, she highlights language's connection to materiality in its ability to make the author a medium. Ellmann writes that '[r]eason, consciousness, free-will – those "wideawake" attributes supposed to elevate the human over the inhuman – give way to animal drives and mechanical compulsions, while language, rather than transcending those automatisms, dances to their epileptic rhythm'.⁵⁵ Language appears to be subject to the convulsive energies associated with the nervous system, thereby framing words as involuntary reflexes originating in the unconscious. She goes on to say, '[l]anguage, far from transcending the body, is present as a form of discharge, comparable to the hallucinations of the Freudian dream, in which impulses

⁵⁵ Ellmann, 'Changing into an Animal', pp. 75-6.

discharge themselves as spectacles'.⁵⁶ For Ellmann, this degradation of words to the body suggests a kind of anxious outflow that recalls both rejected animality and the automatism of the mind.

Beckett stages similar verbal discharges, most famously in Lucky's seven-hundred word tirade in *Waiting for Godot*, but also in more sustained forms, such as the 1964 stage piece *Play*, in which three figures in urns take turns to rapidly meditate on their triangular love affair, and the 1972 dramatic monologue *Not I*, in which a stream of words spew from an illuminated mouth. The effect is called *logorrhoea*, which describes an excessive outpouring of language and highlights the reduction of words to waste. I suspect Joyce and Beckett did not often resort to such a reflex writing method that bypasses consciousness and causes an efflux of words. For these authors at least, the impression of an instinctive or unconscious free writing is likely a contrivance as opposed to a natural occurrence. Nevertheless, the valid point remains that the delivery of language can accentuate the materiality of the word over its meaning to develop more physicalized spectacles. Beckett's bathetic movement from high to low subject matter, and from representation to the formal impact of the unspeakable, are testament to this evocation of the body through language.

The relationship between the symbolic level and its possible physical manifestations is one that Eric Santner develops in his study *The Royal Remains* (2011). Santner makes use of an eclectic range of complex sources in order to trace how 'the normative pressures injected into human life by way of one's inscription into a symbolic order are imagined to return as real bodily impingements and violations'.⁵⁷ Drawing on the sovereign's duality as a divine icon and mortal being, as well as the modern biopolitical development from a single royal subject to the collective

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 91.

⁵⁷ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. xiv.

sovereign citizenship, Santner argues that representative value translates to the physical self. Broadly put, the significations housed in the mind and the word materialise through the workings of the brain and nerves. In his epilogue to the text, Santner refers to Beckett's theatre as 'a unique kind of convergence of *language* and *physical comedy*'.⁵⁸ In an echo of the sovereign transition from the symbolic order to a bodily incarnation, he claims that Beckett's characters and settings are strangely abstract and concrete. In terms of the creature, this existence as both idea and thing pertains to the creaturely junction between the human constructed world, invested with conceptual content, and the animal open, with its carnal, corporal form. As such, 'in Beckett's theatre, the time of creaturely life invades the space of the play, *Trauerspiel* is not so much elevated to the dignity of tragedy as it is lowered to the comedy of an *Endspiel*, in which a rather new sense, flesh becomes words and words take on the agitations of the flesh'.⁵⁹ The psychosomatic relationship that Santner develops suggests that the contingency of creaturely life contributes to the humorous physical dimension of Beckett's drama.

Santner asks whether Beckett's Hamm and Clov, amongst others, are 'figures in and through which the verbal and physical twitches of creaturely life, [...] take centre stage?'.⁶⁰ I have already considered the idea that, on a figurative level, Beckett's *Endgame* depicts a 'skullscape' occupied by two components of a single identity and, on a literal level, depicts two characters in a room. In this way, the physical situation and the psychological monodrama are blurred as Beckett's play conveys both private and public spheres. In Santner's suggestion, this type of convergence of body and mind applies to the action and words of Beckett's creatures, particularly how the tensions of the endgame are perpetuated through language to

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 251.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 251.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 251.

realise the physical joke of their entrapment. Beckett's protagonists in *Endgame* are enclosed in a shelter, with each other for company and nothing but the grey remains of a world outside. The possibility of a swift release is the prevailing comic tension in the play, as Hamm points out in one of his few laughs: 'I imagined already that I wasn't much longer for this world. [*He Laughs. Pause.*]' (E, 33). Life is agonisingly prolonged, and as Hamm and Clov encounter new avenues of discussion to stretch out their denouement, the language works to reveal their physical situation. The more inconsequential the dialogue becomes, the more the creatures develop a vacuous but neurotic quality that emphasises their bodily stasis. These digressions play a fundamental part in the mutual obligation the pair have to one another, which grounds them in the room. In effect, the irresolution of their language games marks the amusing physical element of the play.

However, the convergence of language and physical comedy in *Endgame* is not an easily exemplified idea since every instance of speech is implicated in Hamm and Clov's on-going plight. When language is employed to say nothing in particular, but to dwell on the fact that things are still being said, the focus turns from the value of words to the act of speech. As with the pure existence of enunciation, the semantic level collapses into the *action* of language. Consequently, the entire speaking relationship between the pair reveals their need to talk in order to carry on together. The physicality of language is therefore intimated as soon as Hamm wakes up at the beginning of the play. He says, 'Enough, it's time it ended, in the shelter, too. [*Pause.*] And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to... to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to—[*He yawns.*]—to end' (E, 6). The hesitation here forms a stutter, which magnifies the twitching action of the body through the words. The repetition of 'hesitate' reveals Hamm's convulsive reaction to the tension between the desire to end

and the reluctance to end. In an echo of Hamlet's famous question 'to be, or not to be', Hamm's uncertainty shows his pressing existential dilemma 'to end, or not to end', which materialises in the faltering verbal expression. The body is appropriately present within this briefly disruptive hesitation that sees him clutching onto his bodily existence. Hamm's stuttering language performance demonstrates the agitations of his physical predicament.

At the same time, Hamm's entrapment is very much dependent on the vital stimulation and objectification that language provides. The ability to respond to his own words, evident in the 'Yes, there it is' cited above, helps to sustain his physical existence by allowing him to perform his hesitation again, this time with another telling involuntary action, the yawn. Since the focus is on the act of speaking, Hamm effectively confirms that he is hesitating in order to speak again, but a sign of fatigue invades his sentence the second time around to remind him of his bodily presence also. As with the stutter of hesitation, the yawn arises through language, as though the body tenants and responds to the uttered words. Since it is vital for Hamm to talk in order to induce these bodily actions, it is no surprise that he later associates the end of his entrapment with the absence of language: 'It's finished, we're finished. Nearly finished. There'll be no more speech' (*E*, 31). The repetition of 'finished' and the modifier 'nearly' shows how language is liable to postpone his physical end. The restless pulse of energy in this recurring and variable combination of words maintains Hamm's animated presence.

Hamm equates speech with his existence as a physical entity, but more important are his conversations with Clov, such as the one that keeps Hamm from returning to bed in the first place: 'I can't be getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes, I have things to do' (*E*, 7). Once Hamm is awake, however, it is

the master who refuses to let the servant leave. The dramatic tension of *Endgame* begins with Clov's threats to leave, but as his threats are repeatedly shown to be empty or easily ignored, this non-departure becomes a running gag. The physical comedy of not leaving is also bound up with the continuation of the words, so that what Clov actually *does* is speak with Hamm. On nine separate occasions, Clov says 'I'll leave you' and each time Hamm manages to distract him, often with questions, such as 'So you remember when you came here?' (E, 24), 'Is my dog ready?' (E, 25), and 'Have you had your visions?' (E, 26). This deflective tactic is employed to keep Clov talking and consequently keep them both there. Yet these are questions that require minimal mental activity for Clov to answer. He exclaims, 'All life long the same questions, the same answers' (E, 7) and 'You've asked me these questions millions of times' (E, 25). Since Clov is often reduced to stock responses, he is called upon as an active speaker and not so much as a thinking presence. Hamm engages Clov as a co-speaker in a way that incites an emotional response and emphasises the delivery of the words as opposed to their conceptual meaning.

Towards the end of the play, Hamm makes his dependence on speech and the dialogues with Clov more explicit:

CLOV: I'll leave you.

HAMM: It's time for my story. Do you want to listen to my story? (E, 30)

CLOV: I'll leave you.

HAMM: No!

CLOV: What is there to keep me here?

HAMM: The dialogue. (*E*, 36)

CLOV: I'll leave you. [*He goes towards door.*]

HAMM: Before you go... [*Clov halts near door.*] ...say something. (*E*, 47)

If the act of speaking helps to incarnate Hamm's life conditions, it is a listener to his stories and an addressee in dialogue that objectifies him. The physical anchor of language is most evident in the second example, although this time the weight of the word also applies to Clov's existence. The dialogue 'keeps them here', but at this juncture in the play it is rather strained and desperate. Hence Hamm abandons the prompts of his distracting questions and simply exclaims 'No'. It is now that the agitations of their conversations really reflect the frustrations of being trapped in the room, tethered to each other. Beckett's stage directions suggest that Hamm and Clov's exchanges get 'anxious', irritable, 'very agitated', angry and 'violent'. Whilst the jerks of inner hesitation intimate nervous energy, it is the inane dialogue between Hamm and Clov that exhibits how the slight mental stimulation of their words gives primacy to their bodily conditions. Although the words are all but empty, venting them remains necessary. As with relief laughter, then, the pair channel their excess nervous energy, but they do so through charged words rather than bursts of laughter. These exchanges are certainly amusing for the viewing audience, yet Hamm and Clov rarely bridge silence with laughter unless an obvious joke arises. Instead, they resort to saying things that implore or oblige the other to reply. The tension in the language between master and servant therefore coincides with the suspended physical conditions that mark the comedy of *Endgame*. The postponed departure is invested into the fraught language of the play.

Hamm's blindness also contributes to the necessary physicality of the words. Since Hamm experiences a sensory detachment from the physical world, he relies on Clov's descriptions to make it known. The blind master can only imagine his environment and situate himself in it through the commentary that his servant provides. Clov's words act as Hamm's eyes and this arrangement injects a tangible quality into the language as it renders the place that Hamm inhabits. At the same time, this relationship agitates both Hamm and Clov, and again their physical frustration is highly apparent in their dialogue. It is worth quoting a longer passage of dialogue to illustrate this correlation between their verbal tensions and bodily transfixion:

HAMM: Open the window.

CLOV: What for?

HAMM: I want to hear the sea.

CLOV: You wouldn't hear it.

HAMM: Even if you opened the window?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Then it's not worth while opening it?

CLOV: No.

HAMM [*Violently.*]: Then open it! [*Clov gets up on the ladder, opens the window. Pause.*] Have you opened it?

CLOV: Yes.

[*Pause.*]

HAMM: You swear you've opened it?

CLOV: Yes.

[*Pause.*]

HAMM: Well...! [*Pause.*] It must be very calm. [*Pause. Violently.*] I'm asking you is it very calm! (*E*, 39)

This kind of double act is funny in the way they quarrel over trivial details and the fact that Clov was correct to begin with. It is notable that even though there is no purposeful reason to do things, these futile actions are all they have. Through the pointless opening of the window, Hamm and Clov can continue to bloviate, which emphasises the very breath in speaking over the content of what is said. The whole comic dynamic of them being there is therefore entangled in their conversations, as they act out the words that constitute their stationary lives. Beckett's play is not exactly a case of words and action coexisting in a dual or even complementary layering of meaning. Rather, the action in *Endgame* is so intimately bound with language as to showcase the creaturely combination of words and flesh. The words become the senseless action that occupies the creatures.

As language and physical comedy merge in the stimulations of *Endgame*, it is possible to see how creaturely contingency applies to Hamm and Clov. These figures are subject to the pressures of performance as they cultivate or revisit opportunities for speech in anticipation of the end. They are dependent on words, and therefore afflicted with a particularly human property, but it is this language, the realm of the signifier, that translates into Hamm and Clov's physical state of becoming, or realm of the signified, that will not finally let them be. For Santner, this kind of discomfort emerges at an interstitial point, namely the tension of an endgame between idea and thing, which questions the possibility of ever sitting comfortably in the 'office' of the human. It can be inferred that to be human is to be caught in a state of vicissitude between words and flesh that cannot be accepted as human. In other words, the human

is subject to the duality of Man and man, representation and actuality, which denies him a singular position. Santner goes on to refer to Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853) and the inhuman declaration 'I prefer not to' to describe how the only way to endure, and perhaps even enjoy, this tension is to 'experience its pressures—its twitching—as a *Lachkrampf*, a paroxysm of laughter that simply cannot—and ought not—be held down. Bartleby could thus be seen as the harbinger of a new sort of "divine comedy" of creaturely life, one created out of the troubles that plague the office of the human'.⁶¹ In reacting to the tension between ideas and things with a convulsive outburst, the laugh refuses to resolve the pressures and instead strikes against them. In *Endgame*, this comic tension is apparent through the sustained codependence of Hamm and Clov. Their twitching materialises through the leases of language that keep them physically restrained. It is this intimacy between words and flesh that produces the comic dynamic that Santner sees in the dual pressures applied to the human. Hence, Santner deems comedy the 'genre par excellence of a *troubled monism*'.⁶² It is the art form that reveals the combination of symbolic and physical strains on the subject. Laughter and the humour in the convergence of language and the body in *Endgame* are products of such a disturbance of unity.

Metanarrative Tragicomedy

Beckett finds humorous material in the protracted struggles of his characters as they enact a grotesque vision of the human. Failure and degradation are sources of comic energy, and the phosphorescence of decay spares his work from uniform darkness. But Beckett does not anesthetise the tragic suffering of his creatures. In the physical humour of the agitations and frustrations between Hamm and Clov, there is an

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 247.

⁶² Ibid. p. 109.

undeniable unhappiness. Though it constitutes the humour of the play, the fact that Clov and Hamm are incarcerated is a sad state of affairs. Moreover, Beckett embroils the audience in a joke that is at the same time a miserable truth. The 'leaving' that underpins *Endgame*, for instance, captures the predicament and anticipates the reaction of a stultified audience, especially since Hamm concedes that the dialogue is the sole point of interest. As such, Beckett's audience is not detached from the poignant tragedy of the creatures' plight, and whilst the characters' melancholic immersion clearly contradicts the catharsis of Greek tragedy that Aristotle outlines in *On The Art of Poetry*, there is room still for emotion and empathy.⁶³ This hypothesis on Beckett's humour conflicts with one of Bergson's three tenets of laughter: 'Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion'.⁶⁴ Beckett's work complicates Bergson's argument, if only because his characters are familiar subjects with hopes and dreams. As John Orr notes, Beckett's 'heroes are at times pathetic creatures, but through aspirations which will not die they still achieve a genuine pathos we cannot take away from them'.⁶⁵ Beckett manages to uphold the tension between pity and passivity, solidarity and superiority, as the audience relates to and recoils from Beckett's figures. This section of the chapter contends that Beckett's humour gains its full impact from the way both the characters and audience members feel.

The subtitle to *Waiting for Godot* offers a clue to Beckett's balance of the laughing Democritean and weeping Heraclitean dispositions. The play is set up as a 'tragicomedy', with the serious and the humorous as codependent as the play's two protagonists. The collocation of the solemn and the trivial is entrenched in the play to

⁶³ See Aristotle, *On The Art of Poetry*, trans. by Ingram Bywater (London: Oxford University, 1920), p. 35

⁶⁴ Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ John Orr, *Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture: Play and Performance from Beckett to Shepard* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 6.

the extent that the characters have formal full names, Vladimir and Estragon, as well as the clownish nicknames Didi and Gogo. The audience witness tramp-like figures wearing ill-fitting shoes and hats, but, like the clown, they are not altogether derelict. Beyond the façade of their comic interplay lies the vague suggestion of upstanding, intelligent men with past lives and relations. Vladimir says, 'You should have been a poet' to which Estragon replies, 'I was. [*Gesture towards his rags.*] Isn't that obvious' (WFG, 4). Although the reference to this particular vocation offers a metatheatrical joke that serves to withhold the idea of a real back story, it also comes after Estragon's recollection of the maps of the Holy Land and his plans for a honeymoon by the Dead Sea, which increases the possibility of him having a past. Admittedly, there is not a great deal of this kind of background in Beckett's play, and the repetition of events and the characters' defective memories nullify lineal temporality somewhat. The word 'again' appears four times on the very first page, but the past is hardly distinguishable from the present, the events are too similar and the power of memory not strong enough to break out of the time capsule to recall details that would clearly differentiate then from now. Nevertheless, Beckett's woebegone creatures and their vaudeville routines are tinged with loss, and in their few references to the Eiffel Tower, to days when they were 'presentable' (WFG, 2), to the Macon country and River Rhône (WFG, 53, 47), there is a 'dead and buried' other world (WFG, 47), a sadness at having been dislodged from time and the hope that eventually there will be a release.²³³

It is Pozzo, the privileged aristocratic figure of the play, who spells out the tragicomic balance: 'The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. [*He laughs.*]' (WFG, 26). When Pozzo laughs, Vladimir, Estragon and Lucky do not join

him. All the others are members of the non-laughing population, which is necessary for Pozzo's own burst of joy. Beckett isolates the laughter in this instance and causes an imbalance between laughter and solemnity. Since the majority lies with the three non-laughers, group mentality might place the audience in league with the subjugated figures. Pozzo's position of superiority and joy, on the other hand, might encourage a similar laughter in the audience. It is certain that if Beckett's humour does not achieve a blanket laugh or silence from the entire audience, the tragicomic balance asserts itself in the auditorium. One spectator can laugh, whilst his neighbour acts as a counterbalance to that laughter. This juxtaposition means the laughing spectator is confronted with his non-laughing counterpart, whilst it is difficult for the non-laughing spectator to yearn for a place on the other side of the scales knowing it will be at the expense of another's solemnity. In the conscientious person, the constant balance of laughter and weeping presents an ethical conundrum that interrupts pure joy and underpins it with guilt.

Beckett's play shows that the two genres, comedy and tragedy, do not simply meet and cohabit, but rather rely on one another to produce a new tonality, as Verna Foster recognises:

A tragicomedy is a play in which the tragic and the comic both exist but are formally and emotionally dependent on one another, each modifying and determining the nature of the other so as to pronounce a mixed, tragicomic response in the audience.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Verna Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 11.

When the audience find comic value in Beckett's play it is accompanied by the tragic and vice versa. For example, when Pozzo says 'Can't you see he wants to rest? Basket!' (*WFG*, 19), what at first appears to be a defence of Lucky rouses empathy. Pozzo initially performs an uncharacteristic act of sensitivity that the audience can agree with. Yet the barked order 'Basket!' is the punch line that restores Pozzo's true colours and underscores Lucky's poor treatment. This glimpse of tenderness serves to confirm the persistent hardship Lucky suffers, but still the audience can laugh despite the pathos. In effect, Beckett orchestrates a divided reaction that exploits the ambiguity of tragicomedy. There is a chuckle at the irony and a shake of the head at Pozzo's hypocrisy. As a result, Beckett is often described in mixed terms, as 'an alarming comedian' with a 'gloomy, humorous view'.⁶⁷ Essentially, the bisected mask of Thalia and Melpomene that depicts drama is shown to be part of the same countenance in Beckett.

The tragic undercurrent of the situation in Beckett's plays, as well as the pitiful and pathetic figures that populate them, cause a tragic aspect to occur within the laugh. The German reception theorist Wolfgang Iser builds upon this mixed reaction in his notion of the stifled laugh.⁶⁸ In Iser's experience, Beckett's audience members are unsure when to laugh, laugh at different things and suppress their laughs depending on the collective response. Most audience members only acknowledge the tragedy after self-consciously reflecting on their initial outburst of laughter. As an inappropriate but entirely organic occurrence, the stifled laugh confronts natural reaction with social awareness. Iser clearly takes his impetus from the characters' situation:

⁶⁷ Morton Gurewitsch, 'The Comedy of Decomposition', *Chicago Review*, 33.2 (1982), 93-99, p. 94; Topsfield, *The Humour of Samuel Beckett*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theatre', in *Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (London: Pearson, 2000), 201-229.

[VLADIMIR breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.]

VLADIMIR: One daren't even laugh any more.

ESTRAGON: Dreadful privation.

VLADIMIR: Merely smile. (WFG, 3)

Vladimir curtails his laughter again moments later:

[Laugh of VLADIMIR, stifled as before, less the smile.]

VLADIMIR: You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited.

ESTRAGON: We've lost our rights?

VLADIMIR: [Distinctly.] We got rid of them. (WFG, 11)

The audience-response and communal aspects of Iser's reading is present within these two examples. Each instance implies that laughter is consciously restrained, not naturally absent. Terms such as 'privation', 'daren't', 'prohibited' and 'rights' all suggest obligations beyond that of the individual. These two exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon reveal the characters' awareness of social propriety and ethical codes, and nod to the incongruity of laughter in times of catastrophe, which waits in the wings in *Waiting for Godot*. In this way, Beckett evokes the totalitarian censure against the subversive power of laughter, such as the 1942 Nazi Germany propaganda posters directed at Roosevelt's administration and German Jews, which exclaim 'They

Will Stop Laughing!!!' (Das Lachen wird ihnen vergehen).⁶⁹ Beckett makes the audience laugh in tragic contexts where the very freedom of laughter is at stake.

For Foster, it is through tragicomedy that the tragic mode found an appropriate form of expression in post-war literature. As she points out, 'tragedy presupposes form and our world has none; tragedy presupposes individual guilt and responsibility, but these qualities have eroded; tragedy, finally is predicated on an audience that is already a community, and this, too, no longer exists'.⁷⁰ The tragicomic mode, however, reinstates some of the qualities that the serious voice has lost. If the connection to community has been severed in the serious mode, the trivial still unites people, albeit negatively, and with recourse to Iser's observation, it is possible to see how the stifled laugh introduces a community of individuals. Normally, the audience might join in with laughter, as Robert Provine asserts in his study on the behaviour of laughter: 'When we hear laughter, we become beasts of the herd, mindlessly laughing in turn, producing a behavioural chain reaction that sweeps through our group, creating a crescendo of jocularity or ridicule'.⁷¹ In the spontaneous impulse to laugh at Beckett's work, however, the laughing spectator can be isolated and in order to return to the community the laugh must be suppressed, 'cut-off, so to speak in mid-guffaw'.⁷² In this moment, the guilt of laughing without the synchronicity of the audience leads to a tragic element. From the individual laugher's perspective, the other audience members are not only a non-laughing community, they are an anti-laughing community, condemning humour and bespeaking the tragedy within the

⁶⁹ See images section in Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008).

⁷⁰ Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy*, p. 31.

⁷¹ Robert Provine, *Curious Behaviour: Yawning, Laughing, Hiccupping, and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2012), pp. 40-41.

⁷² Iser, 'The Art of Failure', p. 203.

laugh. The spectators are aware of the tragedy through the laugh, as Iser's reading implies, but they are also contributing to the tragedy by laughing.

Beckett achieves tragic undertones in his comedy, and yet he is also acutely aware of the comic potential of tragedy. If the purity of the comedy has been compromised, so too has the tragedy as it reveals its own brand of laughter. As Nell phrases it in *Endgame*: 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness' (*E*, 14). It seems that misery propagates humour for Beckett. His comment on *Waiting for Godot* in a letter to Roger Blin offers a better insight into this dynamic than Nell. Beckett insists that in the scene where Estragon's trousers fall down, they must drop to his ankles. He explains: 'The spirit of the play, to the extent to which it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic'.⁷³ 'Grotesque' is not typically interchangeable with 'funny' despite the comic elements to its meaning, but the term does encapsulate the divided quality of Beckett's humour. In Bakhtin's work on the grotesque, he asserts that 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style'.⁷⁴ It is this sense of the familiar but alien in the grotesque that produces the simultaneous condition of relation and revulsion in humour. In the grotesqueness of tragedy, then, Beckett points out the relief experienced at the expense of others' misery, which recognises tragedy as a human predicament but also detaches from and laughs at the particular situation. This type of humour brings together feelings of relief and unease, or as Vladimir puts it, 'Relieved and at the same time... appalled' (*WFG*, 3), before he utters the word 'funny' shortly thereafter. It engenders a state of compassion and self-centredness that recognises tragedy as a general possibility and yet deflects its specificity. Therefore, Beckett's vision of the grotesque in tragedy realises both the tragedy and the comedy; each

⁷³ Beckett qtd. in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 453.

⁷⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 303.

aspect is found in the other to create the tragicomic tone that binds together conflicting feelings.

The laugh that unhappiness stimulates is the third type of laughter Beckett mentions in *Watt*:

The bitter, the hollow and—Haw! Haw!— the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout—Haw!—so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy. (*W*, 46-7)

The mirthless type is a remote laugh that undermines and satirises the action of laughing. Rather than counter sadness or tragedy, it finds fault in laughter's composition and alters the tenor. In one sense, this laughter devoid of cheer is akin to the howls and wails, or 'modes of ululation' (*W*, 46), that suggest a release of emotion or tension. Yet the dianoetic snort 'down the snout' is not intuitive, and this indicates a more deliberate and deliberated personal affair. In relation to Beckett's audience, the mirthless laugh favours the textual form, as the experience of humour in Beckett's novels and drama on the page is different to that on stage. Beckett's texts elicit the mirthless laugh more readily because they privatise the jokes, thus allowing the deriding smile to go unnoticed and the dianoetic laugh to resonate without fear of condemnation from the theatre audience. In other words, the reader can focus on the laugh at unhappiness as opposed to fellow spectators.

If, as Bergson notes, 'laughter is always the laughter of a group', it follows that the mirthless laugh deviates from conventional laughter in that it does not feed off the present community.⁷⁵ Its pessimism is not contagious like a funny sight, sound or implanted thought. The laugh at the laugh prevails over and silences the Bergsonian communal type of humour, as the 'silence please' in *Watt* indicates, and works to reveal another side of laughter. To return to Nell's 'nothing is funnier than unhappiness' in *Endgame*, the less-quoted second part of her speech alludes to the silence in which mirthless laughter can also emerge: 'we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more' (*E*, 14). When the unadulterated, hearty guffaw is no longer operative or appropriate, the mirthless laugh can replace it. In this respect, the mirthless laugh can reside in the aftermath of the stifled laugh; it still exists in the absence of the reflex laugh.

Beckett's humour probes the substance of laughter as it shifts instantaneously in tone. In one of Beckett's standout incongruity jokes, Clov looks in the trashcan at Nagg and announces 'He's crying' before Hamm replies 'Then he's living' (*E*, 38). The impulse is to laugh at the character in a detached way, and this initial phase contributes to the existential tragedy of Sisyphean 'hellish hope' (*T*, 133), or the 'old joke of being' as Beckett describes it.⁷⁶ As the laugh matures or fades, it develops into a mirthless laugh as the spectator apprehends the shared nature of the characters' dilemma. Although this example might not provoke a laugh from the entire audience, those that do laugh respond to a personal realisation of the parity between themselves and the character. Since each laugher does this, it can be described as a common laugh

⁷⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Beckett replied to Alan Schneider's questions on *Happy Days*: "'Old joke" not Winnie, rather the joke of being that is said to have caused Democritus to die of laughter. To be related also if you like to Nell's "nothing is funnier than unhappiness etc." Same idea in *Watt* (the 3 smiles)'. Beckett qtd. in Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'*, p. 61.

directed at individualisation, which conveys a mutual understanding of conditions that are universal and at the same time must be felt as particular. To underline this complicity, Beckett has his characters poke fun at the reading and viewing audience's own dire situation. He does this through the waiting, repetition, endurance and boredom on page and stage that is the shared human condition. He also resorts to metatheatrical pointers, which embroil the audience in a joke that recognises the style and duration of the prose and drama as a demonstration of the human condition. Consequently, Beckett's humour moves from the fictional level that laughs at the other, to that which is felt *in esse* and laughs as an other at the self.

According to Carla Locatelli, Beckett's post-war prose displays his second phase of humour, which she labels 'metanarrative'. In this period, Beckett creates 'an art whose shortcomings are amusing, enjoyable even if they are ridiculed'.⁷⁷ Jonathan Greenberg goes a step further to argue that 'laughter is something the reader can cling to in the oceans of possibilities in which Beckett's prose immerses her'.⁷⁸ As with Beckett's use of pun, the reader can identify instances of communicative incapacity and be entertained by the misuse and abuse of convention. Laughter is a welcome retreat from the overwhelming indecision of Beckett's narrators and the tedium of their narrative tasks. However, laughter also tricks the reader into drawing out the perpetuity, or humouring the narrator's weakness. The reader's privileged position of knowledge outside of the text could be enjoyed if the story progressed regularly and the momentum stalled only intermittently, but on the contrary, Beckett's humour derives chiefly from a realisation of the irony that 'literary production grows on the

⁷⁷ Carla Locatelli, 'Comic Strategies in Beckett's Narratives', in *Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince, (London: Pearson, 2000), 233-244, p. 239.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel* (London: Cambridge University, 2011), p. 180.

shortfalls of literary self-reflection'.⁷⁹ The humour of narrative failure is effectively locked into the monotony of its own downfall. Since the narrators identify narrative and expressive weaknesses, seen clearly in Malone's ironically repetitive 'What tedium' (T, 187, 189, 216, 219, 254) as well as 'Mortal tedium' (T, 218) and 'This is awful' (T, 191), the awareness of a fumbling artistry, or mastery of failure, means the reader is no longer distanced from the joke but ensnared by it. The metanarrative joke of Beckett's post-war prose is that the reader is cast as an object of humour.

In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai proposes that the incessant torrent of inanity in literature produces a shocking or boring effect, or both, that amounts to a stupor. Ngai coins the portmanteau 'stuplimity' to capture the essence of this awesome tedium, or the 'simultaneously astonishing and deliberately fatiguing' that Beckett demonstrates.⁸⁰ The double bind of Nagai's 'stuplimity' grasps the wider joke in Beckett, in which the overwhelming commitment to failure is woven into the textual fabric of the work and, as such, is without a punch line. Beckett's readers are made to endure the stupidity and stupor that do not frequently offer the impact of a revelation. Of course, the reader can choose when to consume the text and for how long, but the death grip of Beckett's work tends to repel and impel the reader at once, thus evoking the 'I can't go on, I'll go on' of *The Unnamable* (T, 418) throughout the reading experience. In turn, the joke that Beckett's prose applies to the reader actually highlights his author-narrators' writing approaches. The aesthetic accentuates the mutual struggle to progress – in the mould of Beckett's own experience of reading Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (German 1926; English 1930), 'I must say it was difficult to get to the end' – although it is a struggle fragmented by intermission for the reader.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Locatelli, 'Comic Strategies', p. 239.

⁸⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2005), p. 260.

⁸¹ Beckett qtd. in Adelman, *Naming Beckett's Unnamable*, p. 147.

The real-time of theatre, on the other hand, exacerbates Beckett's drawn-out humour and his metatheatrical techniques actualise an experiential joke, as opposed to the illusion of synchronicity between character and reader in the textual equivalent. The auditorium doubles as a cage as Beckett forces the observer to undergo inaction and participate in boredom. In a staging of *Waiting for Godot* at the Criterion Theatre in London, an audience member responded to the line 'What shall we do now, now that we are happy?' (*WFG*, 51) with 'I'm not happy, I've never been so bored in my life'. The actor Hugh Burden, playing Vladimir, released the tension of this heckle, which is itself a common feature of stand-up comedy, with 'I think that was Godot'.⁸² Inadvertently, the actor replicates a technique that Beckett himself employs to subtly pierce the barrier of performance between stage and audience. Beckett has his characters seemingly reflect on the situation and allude to the audience to relieve the bind of 'stuplimity' on several occasions in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir's assessment 'This is becoming really insignificant' (*WFG*, 60) and the refrain 'We're waiting for Godot' show an awareness of the situation for character and audience alike. Similarly, the audience is invoked when Estragon faces the auditorium and surmises 'Inspiring prospects' (*WFG*, 6), and later as Vladimir gestures to the front announcing 'There! Not a soul in sight' (*WFG*, 66). The moments when Beckett's figures threaten to break out of the façade of performance combine to remind the audience they are implicitly connected to the characters and cast as extras, subject to the protagonists' plight. Yet the recognition of this kinship lightens the tedium momentarily, shifting the emphasis towards a cognizant and playful tone, tantamount to an authorial wink, rather than an outright bore owing to artistic incompetence. The audience can appreciate Beckett's hand in constructing a play that captures the audience but purposely does not engross.

⁸² David Bradby, *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), p. 78.

Although there is no punch line, then, there is comic relief that punctuates the extended joke of failure.

The tedium that Beckett's aesthetic inflicts moves his work into creaturely territory. As Santner understands the concept, by way of Agamben, boredom paves the way to the realm of the creaturely as it recognises humanity's proximity with animal captivity in 'the open'.⁸³ For Agamben in particular, human existence constitutes a paradoxical state of enlightened consciousness that delivers humanity from, and realigns it with, an animalistic being: '*Dasein* is simply an animal that has learned to become bored: it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation'.⁸⁴ The cleft that boredom precipitates between the human and animal conjures the creaturely for Santner, as the boundaries of classification are destabilised and inclined to overlap. Beckett's characters, readers and viewing audience are subject to a similar profound boredom that is made noticeable by humour's ability to throw one out of a stupor, to shock one into consciousness. Yet the initially amusing and ultimately paralysing aesthetic of Beckett's work underpins these humorous jolts, offering only a short relief from the context of enduring failure. As incessant failures and humorous interjections numb and enliven the reading and viewing audience, the effect is to draw the audience into the characters' creaturely suspension. Faced with the degraded cerebral sphere and the grotesque investment in language and reason, Beckett's audiences are forced to reflect on the fabrication of art through humorous metanarrative techniques. The creaturely shift from dull captivation to conscious captivation replicates the reading and viewing audience's participation in and distance from the narrative goings-on, whereby the audience is in and out of proceedings, facilitating the old joke of being and alienated by the artistic recognition of artifice.

⁸³ See Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, pp. 10-12.

⁸⁴ Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, p. 70.

Beckett's humour captures the audience in the physical joke of entrapment and then intermittently pierces this incarceration with humorous metanarrative asides that reveal the tragicomic creaturely captivation.

'turd waiting for the flush': Gallows Humour

The foregrounding of failure and degradation in Beckett takes the unpleasant or unwelcome negatives in life and turns them into an absurd joke. This experience of living through the joke and at the same time being aware of the joke forms another bifurcated tension, what we might again label the 'sovereign as creature', or (in)sovereign, dimension. In the same way that Beckett's creatures reconstitute testimony by articulating the inability to speak, and are codependent in their master-servant relationships, humour fashions a convergence of potency and impotence as the subject recognises a hopeless situation but attempts to reign over it through an ironic assessment. Steve Lipman describes how laughter 'kept countless persons from taking their own lives or slipping into the zombie-like state of the "Muselmanner"'.⁸⁵ Those that could reflect on their dire situation and laugh had the capacity to endure it better. In extreme cases of destitution, the Holocaust victims used humour as a tool to persevere, but in the aftermath, when the human has revealed its capacity for such devaluation and the sanctity of human life is in pieces, humour appears to act as a measure to survive in a vacuum of meaning. A sense of humour is a vital resource for deflecting incomprehensible and destabilising events. Last-ditch bouts of laughter attest to the affront to reason that such an event produced and respond to the threat facing the idea of the human. In this way, humour and laughter can appear as ways of moving on, of negotiating the fragments of meaning and ruins of culture left in the

⁸⁵ Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell – The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), p. 12.

wake. Indeed, Des Pres proposes that certain works on the Holocaust that include humour might break out of the impasse facing attempts to find meaning from the catastrophe. In such texts, 'what survives is the integrity of an imagined world that is similar to, but deliberately different from, the actual world of the Holocaust. Our knowledge of history is not denied but displaced, and we discover the capacity to go forward with, so to speak, a foot in both worlds'.⁸⁶

However, in this section I argue that humour is not a lasting solution to the human predicament, but rather a complicit fixture in the enduring struggle with the hardships of life. Suzanne Dow asserts that 'Beckettian comedy does not allow us to laugh off the negativity of senescence, decrepitude, death, finitude, nothingness etc. that intrudes or impinges upon life; it invites us to laugh at this egregious excess, this *in*finitude, that sallies forth or seeps, and which refuses to be shaken off or staunch'd'.⁸⁷ To take this persuasive argument a step further, I contend that Beckett's humour is a necessary component in the perpetuation of negativity as it contributes to the cycle of release and restoration that sustains failure and degradation.

For Sigmund Freud, the different levels of the psyche allow consciousness to protect itself from the full weight of the stark realities it must confront. In his essay 'Humour' (1927), Freud finds a particularly impressive example of this defence mechanism in the levity of gallows humour, a type of humour that posits self as both subject and object in the joke, thus taking ownership of a situation but diminishing its severity. 'The grandeur in it', Freud writes,

clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality,

⁸⁶ Des Pres, 'Holocaust Laughter?', pp. 220-21.

⁸⁷ Dow, 'Beckett's Humour, from an Ethics of Finitude to an Ethics of the Real', p. 133.

to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.⁸⁸

Freud views humour as a hedonistic activity, associated with good feelings and enjoyment, although the drive to pleasure is not necessarily concerned with the empirical world or conducive to pragmatic productivity. In this instance, the pleasure in gallows humour derives from an apprehension of one's reality admixed with a detached perspective on that reality. Unusually, this humour renders its subject both victim and victor, since it comes from and is directed towards a single party. On the edge of annihilation, gallows humour revels in the self-centredness of narcissism, at once cognizant and dismissive of reality, responding with the authority of wit to one's grave situation. The example to which Freud refers reads: 'a criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarked: "Well, the week's beginning nicely"'.⁸⁹ This gallows humour is ironic and can only feign its distance from reality, as the joke relies on the context and betrays its position of knowledge. Indeed, '[t]hese jokes may be a form of bravado, a kind of necessary defence mechanism, designed to articulate genuine fears and at the same time partly allay terror through humor'.⁹⁰ This bravado is a projection of superiority and an outward performance of immunity. In its self-possession, gallows humour anaesthetises the reflex action and rationalises an alternative perspective. Therefore, as gallows humour moves to deflect the seriousness of the circumstances, the display of control only makes sense as a knowing refusal to

⁸⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 21 (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 159-166, p. 162.

⁸⁹ Freud, 'Humour', p. 161.

⁹⁰ Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild, 'Auschwitz Jokes', *Western Folklore*, 42.4 (1983), 249-260, p. 249.

collapse in despair; otherwise it is simply a tragic ignorance of the impending events. In this way, Freud's celebration of the interiority of gallows humour and the capacity to resort to the mind's superior detachment actually borders on delusion. For this reason, the Freudian terms 'triumph', 'victory' and 'refusal' are synonymous with fantasy and evasion.

However, the original self-awareness at the centre of gallows humour is not completely detached from the situational context since the triumph of narcissism stems from seeing oneself in the world. In its incongruity, gallows humour is clearly a manifestation of the fear and anxiety that befits imminent death. As such, the liberation that gallows humour offers is questionable. Paul Lewis observes that the subject 'experiences a moment of detachment from his fear or anxiety, but as Freud notes, since this humor works by denying or evading reality, by definition the joke can do nothing to change the reality it evades'.⁹¹ In fact, the escape from reality helps to deliver the victim to the fate of reality. The tragicomic element of Freudian gallows humour, then, is that it is packaged as a rebellion but displays docile acceptance. This is evident in self-abasing Jewish humour, such as the compliant Jew before the firing squad who says to his fellow detainee, 'Take a blindfold. Don't make trouble'.⁹² This coping mechanism replaces the furniture of distress with that of pleasure, but it is a counterfeit pleasure, since humour's 'release' is into inevitability. It steps obediently into physical captivity under the pretence of psychological ascendancy.

It is clear that humour in Beckett's prose and drama does not strictly adhere to the gallows variety. Within the texts, his characters do not make light of imminent death and their circumstances are not as pressing or clear-cut as the gallows.

⁹¹ Paul Lewis, 'Three Jews and a Blindfold: The Politics of Gallows Humor', in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, ed. by Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1993), 47-58, p. 49.

⁹² Lewis, 'Three Jews and a Blindfold', p. 47.

However, in Antonin Obrdlik's study of Nazi oppression and the resultant humour in Czechoslovakia, he uses the term gallows 'in a more general sense as referring to humor which arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situation'.⁹³ Beckett's work is more consistent with this view as his characters endure bodily afflictions and mental duress. Many are in purgatorial states, subject to goading lives that dangle death over them. Gurewitch suggests that gallows humour, as 'the kind of humor that transforms into joke material both the fact of catastrophe and the threat of death – resonates in the repeated self-derogations of Beckett's disaster-ridden voyagers and immobilized inmates of calamity'.⁹⁴ The difference is that life is the source of suffering and misery in Beckett; life is a slow demise on death row. The result of this is that Beckett's creatures have incongruous views and inverted valuations of life and death that are bountiful sources of black humour.

Like the descending incongruity of the relief laugh, black humour distorts the typical view of things. Andre Breton describes this dark sense of humour in his 1938 *Anthology of Black Humour*, drawing on a fellow soldier named Jacques Vache, who was active in the First World War: 'In Vache's person, in utmost secrecy, a principle of total insubordination was undermining the world, reducing everything that then seemed all-important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path'.⁹⁵ Beckett's pessimism is also humorous in its sheer devaluation of life. Molloy's take on life as 'air in a water-pipe' (*T*, 53) and especially Moran's aphorism on existence as 'that of the turd waiting for the flush' (*T*, 163) are comic in the way they relegate human being and conflict with the common inclination to appreciate life. Beckett treats death with the same inverted principle for comic effect, and, as opposed to ignoring

⁹³ Antonin J. Obrdlik, 'Gallows Humor – A Sociological Phenomenon', *American Journal of Sociology*, 47.5 (1942), 709-716, p. 709.

⁹⁴ Gurewitch, 'The Comedy of Decomposition', p. 95.

⁹⁵ Andre Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997), p. vii.

impending death as gallows humour does, Beckett's characters embrace it as a merciful release. In *Malone Dies*, for example, Malone says, 'The end of a life is always vivifying' (T, 212), and in a more graphic image, 'The feet are clear, already, of the great cunt of existence. Favourable representation I trust' (T, 285). The reflection at the end of this second example recognises the misogyny of this representation, but it also relates to the transposed values of life and death. Beckett's aberrant and vulgar depiction of death introduces a note of levity on profound issues and this kind of surprising oxymoronic approach is ludicrously humorous.

Nevertheless, Beckett's black humour in the disdain for life and morbid fixation on death is also saddening in that it reinforces his creatures' incarceration. In terms of gallows humour's enlightened superiority over grave situations, Beckett's characters are mindful of their destitute conditions and helpless to actually alter them, but they are also unable to mitigate them through witty humour, and are therefore not typical gallows victims. Although they understand life as a grave situation, that apprehension does not allow them to alleviate it. Beckett's dark humour is rooted in their risible existence, the fact that they are still trapped in moribund lives with the hope against hope and cannot manage a perceptive, wry twist on serious circumstances in the way that the gallows victim can liberatingly ignore foreknowledge. Martin Esslin makes the point that '[t]he *dianoia*, the insight of the classical tragic hero, is denied to these paradigmatic figures who clearly stand as metaphors for humanity itself, enmeshed, as we all are, in a web of self-deception, illusion, and deliberate repression from our consciousness, of the harsh realities of the human predicament'.⁹⁶ Esslin alludes to the melancholy immersion that fixates on a preferable state in order to distract from the bitter existential truth, as seen in

⁹⁶ Martin Esslin, 'Dionysus' Dianoetic Laugh', in *As No Other Dare Fail: For Samuel Beckett on His 80th Birthday*, ed. by John Calder (London: Calder, 1986), 15-23, p. 18.

Vladimir's melancholic subscription to Godot. It is true that Beckett's creatures are not released from their plights through tragic realisation, but it is not simply the case that Beckett's creatures allay their suffering through self-deception. They certainly do not combat misery with the protective irony associated with conventional gallows humour. In fact, their dire predicaments are often rooted in their commitment to quests bound to failure, in which they realise the futility but must carry on regardless. Beckett's creatures simultaneously acknowledge their failures and continue to submit to their imperatives, which might be construed as self-deception, but actually reveals that they perceive no other choice. This mixture of awareness and necessity leads Beckett's creatures to articulate miserably distorted perspectives on life that are humorous, albeit inadvertently, and at the same time carry out the physical tragicomedy of their incarceration.

Beckett's characters are amusingly pessimistic not simply because they mock states of being and finitude, but because they are clearly suspended in the conditions of life, experiencing the hardships of mortal existence as subjects in the lifelong gallows. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir consider hanging themselves to end it all, yet even this morbid exchange is wrapped up in practical considerations that trivialise the scene. Estragon explains the problem: 'Gogo light – bough not break – Gogo dead. Didi heavy – bough break – Didi alone' (*WFG*, 10). Vladimir soon asks, 'Well? What do we do?' and Estragon replies, 'Don't let's do anything. It's safer' (*WFG*, 10). As with the well-known gallows joke in which an inmate steps up to the electric chair and asks his executioner 'Are you sure this is safe?', Beckett plays on the word 'safe', not to joke about the risk of death but the risk of loneliness. Similarly, as Estragon wonders if they should 'strike before the iron freezes' (*WFG*, 10), his negative philosophy towards life is a mirror image of the quasi-positivity in gallows

humour prior to death. Death is a possibility before it ceases in Estragon's case, as opposed to an opportune moment to seize. This configuration of the aspirational idiom is so pessimistic as to inspire laughter whilst at the same time retaining the sad remnants of the original rallying cry. Beckett's characters do not use humour that discerns or escapes from reality, then, because every funny moment is bound up with their adversity. They demonstrate a kind of gallows humour that comes not in spite of life or in flight from life, but in the grim conditions of living. That is, humour is contained in the horror; it is not seen from afar, but always an integral part of the tragic experience.

However, the audience does benefit in part from a kind of universal gallows humour as it is played out and endured before them, with Beckett repeatedly embroiling and releasing the audience from the existential joke through bouts of tedium and humour. His characters do not knowingly compose gallows jokes, and are therefore riveted to their predicament. Nevertheless, they are naively humorous and convey humour in a way that their lives actually condition, that ridicules and is ridiculous in the sustained experience of suffering. Towards the end of *Molloy*, in the final scene before Moran makes his way back home, Gaber relays Youdi's words 'life is a thing of beauty, Gaber, and a joy forever'. Moran is sceptical and asks, 'Do you think he meant human life?' (T, 165). Moran clearly fails to equate human life with beauty and joy. This is not apparently meant as a joke since there is no laughter from either character. Despite this, the reading audience can at least appreciate the insinuation that the human lives they lead are miserable, thereby transforming it into a source of pleasure. When Beckett jokes about human life, then, it allows the reader to either enjoy the surprisingly sacrilegious devaluation or simply laugh in agreement with the truth of his assessment.

In Iser's essay on Beckett's stifled laugh, he recognises that humour can help to distance anguish as the laugh confronts pain. Iser initially suggests that humour can 'face up to unhappiness, which in being faced is no longer exclusively itself but appears in the perspective of its being perceived'.⁹⁷ The laugh gives the impression of observing unhappiness rather than feeling it. However, he questions the longevity of this once-removed position, asking 'are we really able to free ourselves from unhappiness by facing up to it?'.⁹⁸ It is doubtful for Iser, as he suggests that the subject has an urge to cultivate or revert to states of captivity in order to continue the possibility of liberation, without entering into the actual bewildering state of freedom. It is the tension between the alleviating effect of laughter and the resumption of unhappiness that comes closest to describing the joke of entrapment in Beckett's work. Beckett's humour feeds on negativity and this ensures that his work does not perish in the depths of arrant despair. Yet it is clear that humour does not convert or remedy suffering, but rather sustains suffering as the source of its own existence. Humour and suffering are therefore self-perpetuating; the laugh is the sadistic knot of perseverance that forms a loop of pain.

The laugh at gallows humour is never simply defensive, particularly when it pokes fun at the life one must endure and not the oblivion one must ignore. As noted above in the discussion of Freud, gallows humour is also damning in its concession to the horror of reality. Lisa Colletta touches on this fact in her reassessment of humour in modernism. She writes: 'In dark comedy, rooted as it is in gallows humor, change – even survival – is beside the point. The point is to wrest from pain a momentary victory in laughter; it makes no other claims'.⁹⁹ Similarly, in Beckett, the bitter truth

⁹⁷ Iser, 'Art of Failure', p. 222.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 225.

⁹⁹ Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel* (Gordonville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 11.

contaminates the fantasy and evasion of gallows humour. Laughter is less about protecting the self and escaping reality, and more to do with the diminishing space of untruth to hide in. Therefore, it is no surprise that Beckett's characters rarely laugh in a purely joyous spirit and that laughter is increasingly curtailed, ambivalent and silent. In a more obvious example of gallows humour, Moran contemplates his failure to find Molloy and comments that 'at the thought of the punishments Youdi might inflict upon me I was seized by such a mighty fit of laughter that I shook, with mighty silent laughter and my features composed in their wonted sadness and calm' (*T*, 163). Moran experiences the convulsive nature of laughter as it silently dominates his body and leaves a pensive countenance. Humour is still present, but the laughter is contradictory, at once hysterical and reposed, dramatic and muted. This is a composite outburst that reveals its miserable origins and coping strategy in equal measures.

If conventional gallows humour releases the subject, with the ego under the protection of the superego, Beckett's gallows humour focuses on the actual possibility of deriving humour from the worst, not in conciliatory or tendentious tones, but as part of the engagement with and experience of struggle. Freud works to separate the psychological levels of gallows humour and trace their interaction, whereas Beckett takes up the idea of division that Freudian psychoanalysis advances but channels out the mental sense of liberation. Beckett brings the poles of joy and sorrow into contact, whereby relief from pain betrays further pain, every interlude to suffering renews suffering and each end marks a point of survival. These repeated imperious gestures of victory, the next last laugh, give way to the persistent toil of reality, which actually refreshes unhappiness, dressing wounds only to open them again. Beckett dissociates humour from superiority, and instead utilises it as part of an amusing and depressing

phenomenon that effects a convergence of mind and body, Man and man, comedy and tragedy, potency and impotence, to offer different levels of light and shade to the general gloom.

4. Survival

Incompleteness and Continuation

In the previous three chapters I have described the various modes of creaturely life that appear in Beckett's work. In chapter one I introduced the creature through the notion of subjectivity suspended in action, as the author-narrators perform (in)sovereign testimonies in order to bear witness to the unspeakable. In the second chapter I examined the melancholic and biopolitical power struggles with interior, projected, and actual figures of alterity. In chapter three I set out the tragicomic texture of humour as it helps the subject to persevere and yet perpetuates the ability to suffer. The obligation to testify, the insoluble tensions between codependent masters and servants, and the awakening to captivation through humour, are all ways in which Beckett's creatures appear to be encumbered and yet manage to live on. This chapter will dwell on a shared characteristic of these creaturely elements, namely the survival evident in the sense of continuity in deadlock that Beckett's inscribes in his work.

Gary Adelman argues that the spirit of survival marks a watershed in Beckett's literary development. In *Naming Beckett's Unnamable* (2004) Adelman avers that 'Beckett's Unnamable narrator merged in his mind with the idea of the Jew survivor of the Holocaust, giving him a powerful analogy for exploring the plight of the artist'.¹ Beckett's artistic approach, according to Adelman, is itself evidence of an engagement with the extreme figures of survival who endured the horrors of the camps. Beckett produces an aesthetic of survival whereby his creatures manage to keep speaking through figments, attachments to real and projected others, and the supplement of humour, despite their narrative failures and identities in ruins, which

¹ Adelman, *Naming Beckett's Unnamable*, p. 79.

not only parallels the real survival of the context but also appears to recognise the status of art after Auschwitz. The obligation to speak despite the inability to speak in Beckett is the artistic predicament after, and artistic equivalent to, the historical climate of survival.

Adelman continues to assert that the voice in the final text of the trilogy 'is the interior life of the *Muselmann*, who is neither living nor dead, refusing, resisting both life and death'.² It is in the context of this suspension between life and death, and knowledge of the possibility of such a survival, that Beckett addresses the extent to which survival is burdensome. The fact of the matter is that Beckett's creatures are 'festooned with lifebelts, praying for rack and ruin' (T, 342). They are possessed of an existence of sorts, as though an authority, creative or otherwise, has issued survival. This vision of the Beckettian creature sees it going on and not going on, *doing* nothing when there is nothing to be done. The theme of survival in Beckett, then, conveys a dimension of being that evokes the suspended existence of the *Muselmann* and yet also appears to bespeak humanity's endurance during a period of great destabilisation after the Holocaust.

In this chapter I trace how Beckett's post-war texts bear out a kind of straightened artistic vitality, which, I argue, evokes the idea of survival as an affliction experienced by beings whose meaningful lives have evaporated. In particular, the perseverance at the point of impasse, or 'stirrings still' as Beckett expressed it late in his life, relates to Eric Santner's notion of 'undeadness', a term that plays an integral part in Santner's theorisation of creaturely life. Whether survival is desired or not, the creature is consigned to a performative being that conveys the inhuman potential to experience a symbolic death in the absence of recognised value and subsist as raw

² Ibid. p. 81.

matter beyond meaningful life. After a reading of the incomplete narrative structures and aesthetics of continuation in Beckett's *Molloy*, I examine how the creaturely author-narrators in this text reveal the excess spirit of the human, whereby religious, political and social systems are remote, and yet the creature remains subject to the power of their absence. This exclusionary dynamic governs Beckett's abandoned creatures as they repeatedly attempt to adhere to networks of meaning that fail to acknowledge them as ideologically valuable or redeemable. Beckett's creatures are not exactly dissidents, then, but rather inadvertent eccentrics owing to their ignorance of the governing system's essence. They are unconventional by nature of their exclusion from the logic behind these conventions, as opposed to being purposely aberrant. Thus, Beckett's creatures exist in an endless spiral of nonfulfilment in their actual detachment from and psychological reprisal of the idea of sovereign order.

'oh all to end': Beckettian Stirrings Still

Survival means that life goes on, that finality has not arrived, but it does not obviate the possibility of experiencing a type of death. Jean-François Lyotard contends that 'the word "survivor" implies that a being who is dead or should have died is still living'.³ This survival after death, or cheating death having accepted it, illustrates how survival transgresses the divide between life and death. Similarly, in Beckett's work, his creatures subsist despite their profound inertia; they continue in deadlock, living out peri-mortem lives. The end, whether silence or death, is not something that finally occurs in Beckett but is rather endured. The purpose of this first section is to describe Beckett's expressions of survival as they recur over the course of his work and explain how survival varies between texts to become a more general artistic preoccupation.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Survivor', in *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. and trans. by Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1993), 144-163, p. 144.

Throughout his career, Beckett repeatedly expresses the ideas of incompleteness and continuity that constitute the spirit of survival in his writing. His work after 1945 up until his last texts in 1989 finds various ways of refiguring aporia to extend the exploration of stasis and evoke the capacity to persist. In his dialogues with Georges Duthuit in the late 1940s, Beckett offers a prescient point: 'There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said'.⁴ Around the same time, however, Beckett also shows his awareness of the diminishing creative opportunities for his writing in the reflective 'Where now? Who now? When now?' (T, 293) that begins his text *The Unnamable*. These questions depict the narrating voice at a loose end, without a specific place, subject or time. Indeed, the following word of this opening line 'unquestioning' suggests the narrator has abandoned an earnest pursuit of these narrative foundations. As discussed in the first chapter on (in)sovereign testimony, Beckett's work reflects on expressive dilemmas as a means of speaking without necessarily having anything to speak about: 'Yes, in my life, since we must call it so, there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that's what I've had to make the best of' (T, 400). As Beckett distils his art of failure, the narrators negotiate the shrinking creative forum as well as they can.

In the 1955 interview with Israel Shenker, Beckett claims that this approach is at its limit:

For some authors writing gets easier the more they write. For me it gets more and more difficult [...]. In the last book – 'L'Innommable' – there's complete

⁴ Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 144.

disintegration. No 'I,' no 'have,' no 'being.' No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on.⁵

Beckett's dismantling of the text has seemingly ushered him to a grammatical dead end. Yet *The Unnamable* itself suggests otherwise in the last line 'I can't go on, I'll go on' (T, 418). The narrative voice vows to continue, but it does not happen in this text, as the last full stop leads into the desolation of the blank white page. The affirmation 'I'll go on' appears to be false, but the metafictional value of this line implies that it is Beckett who will go on, and of course, Beckett does continue to write. In the same interview with Shenker, Beckett describes *Texts for Nothing* written in the early 1950s 'as an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration'.⁶ Beckett clearly seeks ways of progressing beyond a tapering form, but he concedes that this series of thirteen false starts ultimately 'failed'. As Beckett himself recognises, he continues with a process of disintegration that was thought complete after *The Unnamable*, which indicates that there is further creative substance to decompose. His assault on the pretence of narrative lacks the absolute degree zero as it entails reduction but not extinction.

As much as Beckett attenuates, he is unable to produce silence to get beyond the language that allows surviving figures a lifeline. Indeed, in Christopher Devenney's essay 'What Remains?' on Beckett's departure from an atomising literary approach, he argues that 'the path of escape is continually obscured by the images, the voices, the figures, the characters and identities, the endless proliferation of shapes, narratives, and narrations, that suggest the outline of a legible and identifiable

⁵ Shenker, 'An Interview with Beckett', p. 148.

⁶ Ibid. p. 148.

presence'.⁷ In the pursuit of less, Beckett's testimony of fiction conjures material that refuses to be totally lifeless. As *Texts for Nothing* shows, Beckett is inclined to re-iterate the questions: 'Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me?' (TN, 17). Beckett employs a hypothetical register here that is always available. Therefore, these texts in favour of nothing are not exactly nothing themselves since writing fosters irrepressible activity even as Beckett minimises the extent of this textual sustenance.

In kind, Beckett's eponymous characters make cameo appearances in other texts, as though their survival is not limited to a prescribed sphere. In *Malone Dies*, for instance, Beckett's prophetic title appears to confirm that Malone's dwindling account of Lemuel on the last page represents the narrator's own demise: 'never there he will never / never anything / there / any more' (T, 298). But this is predominantly a novel about the process of dying and the present tense of the title connotes that Malone's death is continuous or prospective. When Malone appears in the following text *The Unnamable*, it is clear that the names are transferable, that Beckett's characters can transcend their texts and survive beyond their ostensible deaths. This kind of overlapping contributes to a sense of continuity across Beckett's body of work as it assimilates the individual survivors in each text into a broader *oeuvre* of survival.

Beckett repeatedly returns to the degree to which creative forms entail a level of survival, but as his work gets shorter and more abstract, his already relatively sparse characterisation recedes further to leave only obscure voices and stark presences. Although there is a distinct absence of the protagonists' appearances, backgrounds, occupations, nationalities, motivations and aspirations, the tendency to subtract in Beckett's later texts still reveals the survival spirit. The three-page text

⁷ Christopher Devenney, 'What Remains?', in *Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political*, ed. by Henry Sussman and Christopher Devenney (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 139-160, p. 144.

Imagination Dead Imagine, written in French and translated into English in 1965, exemplifies Beckett's engagement with residual life in otherwise sterile environs.⁸ As light and heat rise and fall, two bodies lie murmuring on the ground. The scene begins with 'No trace of life anywhere, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine' (TN, 86). The phrase 'imagination dead imagine' contains a directive to envision the death of creative powers, but as with Beckett's use of language to interrogate language, the death of imagination can only be imagined, thereby ensuring its own survival. Thus speech and imagination soon populate the lifeless space with a presence that observes. This kind of unavoidable attendance has a particularly Freudian resonance, relating to a psychoanalytical view of morbid thoughts. In his 'Timely Reflections on War and Death', Freud asserts that '[o]ur own death is indeed unimaginable, and however often we try to imagine it, we realize that we are actually still present as onlookers. Thus, the psychoanalytic school could venture to say: fundamentally no one believes in his own death or, which comes to the same thing: in the unconscious each of us is convinced of his immortality'.⁹ As with the spectator witnessing the death of a projected self, the implicit point of view that comes with thought and speech continues to accompany Beckett's etiolated works.

The type of residual presence that Beckett evokes endures the movement towards nothing and is manifest in his most concentrated works. In the 1983 text *Worstward Ho*, Beckett pares down the impetus that underlies many of his texts to 'On' (C, 1). Even when the inclination turns to despair in the later 'nohow on', Beckett's qualifier 'said nohow on' confirms the continuation of the voice that

⁸ According to Beckett, this text is the 'residue precipitate' of the abandoned work *All Strange Away*, which itself suggests that unfinished ideas have a tendency to re-emerge (TN, xiv).

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 183.

performs, and thus contradicts, the inability to go on. The saying always undermines the end, so that not going on is appropriated as a means of going on. In a textual sphere that conspires to reduce the presence of beings, Beckett's creatures abide as they observe and express their deterioration. This survival fails to suggest extrication from a single accident or ordeal, but rather a continuous paralysed existence. It is the creaturely self in ruins that occurs when the subject is a witness to the loss of self, or desubjectivity, that persists here.

Incompleteness and continuation occupy Beckett right up until *Stirrings Still*, his last expression of activity and inertia. Written between 1983 and 1987 in English and French, this final prose piece is nine pages in length, divided into three parts, and attests to Beckett's propensity for less. However, as the title suggests, Beckett never stopped writing and his minimalism never arrived at naught. 'Stirrings still' makes it known that an impassioned level remains, that stirrings occur 'even now'. Whilst there continue to be stirrings, the pun on 'still' as adjective, intensifier and verb also implies that the stirrings cease. As an oxymoron, Beckett's phrase indicates that the work 'provokes' stillness, in terms of conjuring and disturbing it, and that stirrings occur despite or through stillness. Such variation on a similar theme has been the basis of a whole body of writing for Beckett. Since it occurs at the very end of Beckett's career, the phrase 'stirrings still' is significant in the way it connects his artistic revision with the thematic concern of survival. Beckett's corpus has circled the idea of death without becoming entirely 'corpsed' itself (E, 20).

In *Stirrings Still*, a familiarly hatted and coated protagonist exists in a strange elevated place, 'high above the earth' (C, 107) but unable to look down and 'seeking the way out' (C, 108). Trapped within his four walls, the narrator ceases to listen and look, despite hearing and seeing. In this passive sensory condition, he decides to seek

sanctuary in thought. The protagonist's desire to escape means that existence appears as an imposed condition. As he observes himself rising and leaving, his attitude is one of 'half hoping when he disappeared again that he would not reappear again and half fearing that he would not' (C, 108). This split self clearly repeats the Freudian spectacle of imagined death as the figure remains as an onlooker, but the remaining figure is split again between the desire for his other self both to depart and return. The result is that Beckett's creatures exist in a suspended predicament in which survival is intractable as it exceeds powerlessness and the unity of self. Without finishing or progressing, disappearing or returning, the creatures endure in the equilibrium of competing inabilities and hopes.

The majority of *Stirrings Still* meditates on a handful of recognizably Beckettian motifs: light and dark, cries and silence, waiting, time, memory, and reason. Yet the text practises the title's interplay between torpor and stimulation, as Beckett writes: 'soon weary of vainly delving in those remains he moved on [...]. So on unknowing and no end in sight' (C, 113). Although he contemplates recurrent images and themes, the protagonist is also restless, which inscribes a sense of motion into the text. It is his weariness that moves him on, so that he exhausts things and searches for something else. As with the bouts of tedium and vigour that cause a creaturely state of suspension in Beckett's humour, this fluctuation between enervation and invigoration frustrates completion to make the 'stirrings still' dynamic an excruciating continuation:

Perhaps thus the end. Unless no more than a mere lull. Then all as before. The strokes and cries as before and he as before now there now gone now there again now gone again. Then the lull again. Then all as before again. So again

and again. And patience till the one true end to time and grief and self and second self his own. (C, 110)

Every encounter with what seems like finality is actually an interval that can restore activity. This passage is suffused with the repetition of 'again' and 'before', which focuses attention on going back to life to resume past conditions but in the present. Beckett accentuates this present vitality with the frequent use of 'now' to highlight the being-in-the-moment that survival encompasses. The survivor must struggle through each moment, but does so in anticipation of a better future, whether that is 'the one true end to time' as suggested here, or an alternative experience of living without the intense pressures that survival implies. The use of repetition to evoke sameness and difference, as well as the relationship between past and present, is a point addressed later in this chapter along with the prospect of the 'one true end' through forbearance. For now it suffices to note that the desire for an end evident in this passage confirms that survival is undesired. For instance, the word 'lull' recalls sleeping and the idiom 'lulled into a false sense of security' to indicate the temporariness of his pacified condition. Each agitation therefore returns the protagonist to the pressing 'strokes and cries' of survival. Hence, the provisional 'perhaps thus the end' gives way to the wishful exclamation 'oh all to end' (C, 115) in the final line of *Stirrings Still*.

Since each supposed limit is illusory, the abiding experience for Beckett's figures appears to be perseverance in spite of themselves; they consciously pursue an end whilst subject to a conflicting will to continue. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben also questions whether the capacity for survival is desirable. Agamben discusses Xavier Bichat's distinction between the 'animal', the aspect of being engaged with the world environment, and 'organic', the biological substance of

being.¹⁰ Bichat suggests that the animal can perish whilst the organic survives, as in the comatose patient. However, Bichat also imagines an organic death whilst the animal survives, in a type of immaterial consciousness from the excess of human spirit. Agamben's conclusion is that '[w]hether what survives is the human or the inhuman, the animal or the organic, it seems that life bears within itself the dream – or the nightmare – of survival'.¹¹ Bichat's division asserts that a being can survive without its animal or organic aspect, and, for Agamben, this means life contains the hopeful or horrific potential for survival.

Agamben goes on to place this type of fragmented continuation in the context of modern biopolitics and its exemplum the Nazi concentration camps, which aim to rive the inhuman from the human to activate pure survival. The dream of survival appears to apply to world-conscious beings 'surviving' under the wing of the state, complete with military protection and the insurance of medical science. The nightmare of survival sees continued life forced upon ostracized creatures denuded of all human value and subjected to a state worse than death. It is this desensitisation, demoralisation, and negation of all human value that reveals the biological level of bare life that is pure survival. In other words, the Nazis extinguish the human to expose the inhuman survival of the *Muselmann*. Theodor Adorno had already expressed his horror at this ontological dimension exposed in the camps. In his 'Notes on Kafka', Adorno writes: 'In the concentration camps, the boundary between life and death was eradicated. A middle ground was created, inhabited by living skeletons and putrefying bodies, victims unable to take their own lives, Satan's slaughter at the hope

¹⁰ Xavier Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), pp. 200-206.

¹¹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 155.

of abolishing death'.¹² Modern biopolitics therefore declares the 'survival' of the included citizen as the justification for the real biological survival that follows the exclusion of others. The supposed 'survival' of the insider is more like a will to power and progress, or an excess of resources that ensure life, whereas the desperate survival of the degraded outsider actually traverses the edge of death. It is this latter nightmare of survival that induces the plea for an end to life in the camps, which chimes eerily with the last line of *Stirrings Still*: '[In Auschwitz] only death could bring deliverance, the final rest, oh rest'.¹³

Both Agamben and Beckett refute the idea that survival is desirable, and instead suggest that it can be a *pensum* – a task set as a punishment. In Agamben, this survival punishment is the biopolitical consequence of Nazi ideology. In Beckett, the literary beings who appeal for an end to their suffering clearly resonate with the imposed survival conditions that Agamben relates to Auschwitz. But survival in Beckett also extends to an oppressive thanatology that sees mortal subjects born into death, as the prospect of the end overshadows life and renders human existence an agonizing meantime. Life already contains the survival dynamic that finds its most odious form in the concentration and extermination camps as the Nazis turn the will to life against their victims. Survival is therefore a nightmare, devoid of the desirable human values and meaning of a good life, and exposed to a state of incompleteness that denies life or death.

Yet, in one remarkable case, Beckett implores that one of his creatures be given the right to a completion of sorts, in order to avoid going on indefinitely in a state of abandonment. In 1946, Beckett learnt that a truncated version of the story

¹² Theodor Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 211-239, p. 227.

¹³ Tadeusz Stabholz qtd. in Boaz Neumann, 'The National Socialist Politics of Life', *New German Critique*, 85 (2002), 107-130, p. 129.

'Suite', the French version of the short story *The End*, was to be printed in the magazine *Le Temps Modernes*, thus leaving his character unfinished. Beckett's acting literary agent submitted half of the story to editor Simone de Beauvoir who published it under the impression it was an entire text. Beckett reacted angrily, writing a candid letter expressing the gravity of the situation as he saw it:

I am thinking of the character in 'Suite', denied his rest. [...] [I]t is quite impossible for me to evade the duty I feel towards a creature of mine. Forgive these grand words. If I were afraid of ridicule I would keep quiet. [...] You are immobilising an existence at the very moment at which it is about to take its definitive form. There is something nightmarish about that.¹⁴

The voice of a writer determined to protect his work is distinct here and it is no exaggeration for Beckett to regard his creatures as living beings in the making. The publication process has clearly interfered with the form of a life, leaving this stifled being a formless nightmare. It forces an open end upon him, but as something curtailed and therefore always *in potentia*.

However, it is striking that Beckett posits 'denied rest' alongside 'immobilisation' in the letter, which brings to mind a survival dynamic analogous to the activity and paralysis in his own conclusion to the short story. Beckett's 'end' in *The End* is to contemplate the other stories the narrator might have told, which could have related the conditions that resemble his life more accurately, namely an existence 'without the courage to end, or the strength to go on' (FN, 57). Beckett depicts a type of being not altogether finished or developing in this line. The creature lacks certain

¹⁴ Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 2, pp. 41-2.

heroic attributes that would grant him an end or a means of progression. It is notable, then, that Beckett's sense of duty to his beings involves enabling them to survive finally, to be fully incomplete, in a manner that would properly sustain the creatures and grant them their stirrings still.

Creaturely 'Undeadness'

The opening section on Beckett's ability to rejuvenate limited themes shows that a contradictory mix of vitality and inertia pervades his work. In *On Creaturely Life*, Eric Santner's notion of 'undeadness' theorises the kind of life-death amalgam demonstrated in Beckett's 'stirrings still'. Santner's term refers to a tenacious revenant that shares the proximity with death but resistance against finality that characterizes survival in Beckett. Santner derives the term from Walter Benjamin's 'petrified unrest' and it is therefore worth glossing Benjamin's idiosyncratic views of allegory and natural history in order to elucidate Santner's concept sufficiently. In the 'Central Park' drafts on Baudelaire, Benjamin borrows the phrase 'petrified unrest' from Gottfried Keller's poem 'Lost Right, Lost Happiness'. Benjamin uses the phrase twice, noting firstly that '[a]llegory holds fast to the ruins. It offers the image of petrified unrest' and later that '[p]etrified unrest is also the formula for Baudelaire's life history, which knows no development'.¹⁵ The idea of petrified unrest is part of Benjamin's complex writings in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* on the temporal differences between the symbol and allegory. The symbol accesses the 'mystical instant', achieving a momentary glimpse of totality, whereas Benjamin claims that allegory produces a series of moments in the friction between religious, literal

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. and trans. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), 161-199, pp. 169, 171. The phrase appears a further five times in *The Arcades Project*. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 319, 325, 326, 329.

meaning and secular, other meaning.¹⁶ As with Benjamin's famous 'dialectics at a standstill', the idealist project of synthetic progress is halted.¹⁷ Instead, the clash of signification in allegory between denotation and connotation dislodges transcendent value and produces artefacts that continue to exist but outside of their meaningful place.

Benjamin's dissection of allegory has wider implications in terms of human life and an understanding of historical time. Through the antisystematic imprint of allegory, he poses a melancholic subject that is thrown out of the hegemonic thought space and into the creaturely expanse of 'natural history'. Santner notes that the word *Naturgeschichte* in Benjamin's work means that 'the artefacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life'.¹⁸ In this sphere, the 'creaturely life' that Santner develops from Benjamin's 'creature' survives as an anachronism, hence the paradoxical state of suspended animation that is 'petrified unrest'.¹⁹

In Benjamin's study, allegory is a key element of *Trauerspiel*, the mourning play. Like architectural ruins, in which the structure is both shattered and preserved, the melancholic disposition of the mourning play sets up an alternative history that bears witness to a kind of 'still life' that transfixes the dialectical abrasion between types of meaning. Beatrice Hanssen suggests that, in Benjamin's view, 'the mourning play no longer pointed to a "higher life" or realm of transcendence. Instead it was caught in an infernal game of reflections destined to display the empty mirror image

¹⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 165.

¹⁷ 'Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill', Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 10.

¹⁸ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 16.

¹⁹ 'Benjamin argues that the melancholy affect "emerges from the depths of the creaturely realm" and "is the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses"', Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 16.

of transcendence, which it infinitely reflected and deflected'.²⁰ Unlike the messianic fulfilment of time that Benjamin later formulated, the inauthentic time of allegory and the mourning play demonstrates a repetitive turning about that finds no real progress or closure.

The expression 'still life' suggested in the 'petrified unrest' of Benjamin's interpretation of *Trauerspiel* grasps the peculiar concomitance of motion and stasis in Beckett's work. It encompasses the same mixture of cessation and continuation that Beckett implies in 'stirrings still'. Whilst the visual art genre 'still life' depicts inanimate subject matter, Beckett's use of the term in *Ill Seen Ill Said* injects activity into this inertia. In this 1981 text, an old woman resides in a cabin surrounded by twelve sentinels that stand in the pastures. The narrator imagines lambs on a moor, and briefly describes their behaviour: 'Still. Then a moment straying. Then still again. To think there is still life in this age' (C, 48). Stillness and liveliness oscillate here to form this Beckettian 'still life' that indicates both a halted existence and a remaining existence. In Mary Bryden's discussion of Beckett's relationship with the 'dynamic still' of painterly art, she remarks that the expression 'still life'

draws into collocation two tendencies which, though *potentially* mutually exclusive, are in fact part of an uncomfortable continuum in Beckett's scenic world. As well as being an adjective, 'still' can be a noun. A 'still' denotes an image which, while not being cinematographic, may be applied to a frame, or series of frames, from an ongoing reel of pictures.²¹

²⁰ Beatrice Hanssen, *Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), p. 58.

²¹ Mary Bryden, 'Beckett and the Dynamic Still', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 14, After Beckett, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann *et al.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 179-192, p. 182.

Bryden argues that the contradiction in still life is not simply equal to stagnancy, but to a sense of movement within confines that works to intensify the image. This is evident in the brief tableaux that begin and end *Endgame*, which draw on the traditions of the *tableau vivant*, or 'living picture', to capture the life present in a single moment. In Beckett's play, this captivation in a moment is entirely relevant to the characters' experiences of life, and the tableaux serve to magnify the paralysing tensions of their lingering existence.

However, there is a specific type of survival intimated in 'still life' that I want to stress, which evokes the ruins and lack of development evident in Benjamin's 'petrified unrest'. Still life suggests both suspension, as in the frozen single frame, and continuation, as in the implied series of frames. Hence, Bryden surmises that '[i]mplicit in the mobility is the immobility and *vice versa*'.²² The result of this dialectic is that life is always in tension with stillness, and it is this dynamic in Beckett that relates to Benjamin's notion of historical time. There is movement but no progression, as all activity is tethered to virtually static points. This sense of excess energy that revolves around past things and unviable meanings marks the suspended animation of Beckett's creatures.

Moran embodies the concomitance of motion and stasis during young Jacques' trip to buy a bicycle in Hole. Moran waits restlessly at the shelter, occasionally exploring the near surroundings: 'But each time I had to retrace my steps, the way I had come, to the shelter, and make sure all was in order, before I sallied forth again. And I consumed the greater part of this second day in these vain comings and goings, these vigils and imaginations' (*T*, 148). Moran is moving to and fro, but from a wider perspective he is actually static. His movements are restricted to the shelter and the

²² Bryden, 'Beckett and the Dynamic Still', p. 182.

process of 'retracing' shows him literally going over old ground. Since Moran reviews what has already been done, he effectively consumes time with his vacillations rather than using it productively. This physical motion between the shelter and the wilderness reflects an attachment to the past, fixated on the shelter of the old, even as he attempts to venture forth into the unknown future. In this way, Moran is simultaneously continuing and suspended, as he survives to demonstrate there is still life, but is caught in what is essentially a still life.

As much as the restricted movement intensifies the survival conditions of Beckett's creatures, it nevertheless incorporates a deadening activity. The exposure to a life stuck in a rut, subject to the competing forces of activity and inertia, implies the kind of purgatorial state seen in Benjamin's inauthentic time. In the tensions of allegory and pensiveness of mourning, the artefacts of history fall into perpetual destruction, as Howard Caygill notes: 'The events of historical time are inauthentic, repeats and copies of earlier repetitions. There is no possibility of an authentic "source"; historical time drains its events of any significance. There is no moment or place where the "passing over" of tradition can be gathered; its sole issue is ruination and dispersal'.²³ Benjamin compares this irresistible decay to a sign of death in life and the spiritual plane of the undead. He asserts firstly that 'in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape'.²⁴ Allegory is the 'death face' of the past, a countenance that stands for the throes of historical meaning. Benjamin takes this a stage further, noting that '[g]hosts, like the profoundly significant allegories, are manifestations from the realm of mourning; they have an affinity for mourners, for those who ponder over signs and

²³ Howard Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-31, p. 11.

²⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

over the future'.²⁵ These agitated spectres from the past drag their histories with them, unable to rest in peace. In the same way that the obligation to testify, melancholy immersion and perseverance through humour noted in previous chapters all contribute to Beckett's 'hell of stories' (*T*, 383), the sepulchral monuments of allegory and the mourning play present a vision of enduring death.

The unfinished business of allegory and *Trauerspiel* leads Santner to propose the term 'undeadness' as a description for the aesthetic, but also historical and political movements, that Benjamin describes. In Santner's reading, petrified unrest is a mesmeric combination of excitation and numbness as a result of the repetitive motions of modern capitalism's production culture. He refers to the alienation and fetishization outlined in Marxist and Freudian discourse to explain humankind's entry into natural history. In turn, the term 'undeadness' refers to the state of living that remains in the overflow of manic activity. Santner connects this lingering being to an extra capacity within the human: 'Man's subordination to the course of natural history is a consequence of a spiritual supplement that separates man from animal while in some sense making him more animal than animal, this "more" being the very seal of his "creatureliness"'.²⁶ The human slips into the contingent level of natural history by virtue of a subsisting drive, more habit than instinct. This detachment from the human constructed world, which stops short of the animal open, suggests a 'sur-vival' in the etymological sense of additional life, a substrate of human existence levied by the accretion of the human repetition compulsion.

The work of German writer W. G. Sebald acts as Santner's paradigm for tracing the creaturely void found in Benjamin's notion of natural history. The presence of historical remains in Sebald's images of decay and spectres of memory,

²⁵ Ibid. p. 193.

²⁶ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 105.

and particularly his focus on dust, ash and sand, captures the inexorable spirit of undeadness. Santner writes that 'for both Benjamin and Sebald creatureliness signifies a materiality dense with "deposits" of unredeemed suffering'.²⁷ Benjamin and Sebald refer to this process of 'deposition', or the layering of sediment, to evoke the logic of disintegration and perpetuation in simultaneously transient and persistent historical artefacts. This type of engagement with the past is also highly apparent in the disintegrated material substances with which Beckett depicts perpetuating denouements. As Clov announces unconvincingly that it is 'nearly finished' at the very beginning of *Endgame*, he realises that the near end will continue indefinitely as a series of moments that will never constitute a whole but always form a 'heap' of single particles. He says 'Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap' (*E*, 6). Hamm recognises the same problem late on in the play, noting, 'Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of... (*he hesitates*) ...that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life' (*E*, 42). Clov and Hamm continually anticipate the wholeness of a life, as if they could survey the cairns of their complete existences.

Despite this elusive finality, there is the impression that dying pastimes envelop Clov and Hamm. In an echo of T. S. Eliot's 'heap of broken images' in *The Waste Land*, Beckett's impossible heap suggests his characters are subject to a fragmented experience of life, forced to draw on and add to a mound of dilapidated ideas in an 'Old endgame, lost of old' (*E*, 48). In this respect, the heap also evinces an intertextual legacy, a history of literary traditions and their products that resurface in subsequent generations.²⁸ Beckett engages with a particularly modernist idea as he draws attention to these nostalgic and allusive aspects of the present in his image of

²⁷ Ibid. p. 114.

²⁸ See T. S. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), p. 58.

positive entropy. But as the past comes to occupy the present as memory, the irresistible flow of time means the past is infinitely transposed into new contexts and perceived from fresh perspectives. The past is always being reshaped by the present, so there is always more material for Clov and Hamm to pile on the heap, thereby forestalling totality. As the chess term of the title suggests, *Endgame* stretches out and is locked into a final stage so that life has seemingly passed but death itself remains a formality, allowing the characters to continue playing.

Beckett employs the image of layering in both of his other major dramas after *Endgame* to describe the bearing of past experiences on the present. In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), Krapp listens to and reflects on annual tape recordings that capture his past thoughts on earlier recordings in a process that adds layers of commentary to his life in a growing archive of spools. On tape, a thirty-nine year old Krapp refers to the composition or editing of his writing as 'separating the grain from the husks' and says: 'The grain, now what do I mean by that, I mean ... (*hesitates*) ... I suppose I mean those things worth having when all the dust has – when all *my* dust has settled' (*K*, 5). Krapp implies that he wishes to leave the kernel of his writing as a legacy, free from all superfluous paraphernalia, but his autobiographical project on tape does not settle on the past, but rather disturbs the memories and appends the archive. The present is simply an interpretation of the recorded past, meaning he lives through the cannibalisation of his memoirs. As Krapp's name indicates, he is immersed in material he has already digested once. Most notably, in *Happy Days* (1961), Winnie is embedded up to her neck in a mound that signifies her imprisonment in a 'world without end' (*HD*, 35) complete with the existential pressure to be stoic, but also, more specifically, the societal expectations of women, hence the daily cosmetic and sartorial routine. As she brushes her teeth and applies lipstick, Winnie's monologues

are peppered with references to Shakespeare and Milton, so that she effectively recites the 'exquisite lines' of the 'classics' to subsist (*HD*, 35).²⁹ Winnie is therefore stuck in the repetitive patterns of life and an inherited stockpile of quotes from literary history.

This brief sketch of the temporal deposits in Beckett serves to show that the past continues to impact his creatures in the present, but not in a perspicuous way that catalogues memory from a superposition. As with Benjamin and Sebald, the movements of time and history disobey linear chronology for Beckett. In a metaphorical sense, these heaps and mounds are not simply accumulations of experience, thought, and memory, as if the characters behold their pasts as a panorama from the summit of their lived lives. These sediments are transient moments, stirring in the memory but decaying with the subject; they symbolise the attachments to traces of life that bury his creatures alive. Clov, Hamm, Krapp and Winnie cannot sift through their life material and extract specific grains of experience at will. Instead, the heap of history is all around Beckett's creatures. They are inhabitants not curators of their time, at once estranged from the past but haunted by revisiting images. In effect, their past lives are both irretrievable and engrossing as they submit to autobiographical and fictional projects, attempt to relate the story of their lives and the lives of figments, but revolve around the empty spaces of lost experiences and absent selves. Immersed in the temporal deposits of creaturely life, the characters themselves stand as ruins of their pasts, evoking history and enacting their survival as they struggle to account for the detritus of their being.

The creative process of memory and the habitual re-enactment of the past is key to the survival of Beckett's creatures. In one of the most explicit comments on

²⁹ For example, 'Woe woe is me to see what I see' (*HD*, 7) refers to Ophelia's 'O, woe is me, To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!' in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (3.1, 164-165). 'O fleeting joys oh something lasting woes' (*HD*, 8) refers to 'O fleeting joyes. Of Paradise, deare bought with lasting woes!' in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (10.741-742).

memory in Beckett's work, the narrator in *The Expelled* underlines how recalling the past can be deadly but how frequent remembering can also make the past so unrecognisable as to bury the truth. After the narrator is thrown out of his place of residence, down a flight of stairs and into the vestibule, he tries to remember the number of steps to the staircase, before stating: 'Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, for if you don't there is the danger of finding them, in your mind, little by little. That is to say that you must think of them for a good while, every day several times a day, until they sink forever in the mud' (FN, 3). Firstly, these killing memories suggest that a melancholic absorption in the past is an enervating existence. A disproportionate indulgence in memory stagnates life through the repetitive engagement with the bygone. Secondly, the narrator suggests that in actively pursuing memories, the past experience is distorted and the essence remains elusive. This particularly Proustian conception of intentional recollection accesses a selective or censored version of the past, complete with the interpretative embellishments of the subject. When the actual memory is lost, then, it is the loss of memory that is not forgotten. Beckett's characters remember *that* they have forgotten, but not always *what* has been forgotten. Hence, the ad hoc memory unravels the past and can thwart any possibility of gleaning its essence, thus making the past irretrievable but also, crucially, allowing 'the long sonata of the dead' (T, 32) to play on. Beckett's characters engage with the infinite lacunae of the past, which occupies them in the present and encourages their continuation. In this way, they reveal the survival in undeadness as they are absorbed in senescent personal histories and sustained by the missing essence of the misremembered past.

Repetition and Performance

The repetitive nature of undeadness means that existence persists in the restless fixation with the past. The survivor is largely detached from the original meaning of a formerly authentic life that he tries to recuperate, so that survival is composed of an obsession with bygone things. As such, the survivor effectively endures a symbolic death as the repetition compulsion is affixed to a meaningful life that has died. Whilst Santner's undeadness presents survival as a state additional to meaningful life and beyond a symbolic death, Derrida develops a contrasting line of thought in which survival is immanent to life. In a 2004 interview with *Le Monde*, conducted whilst Derrida was terminally ill with pancreatic cancer, he asserts: 'I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is *not to be added on* to living or dying. It is originary: *life is living on, life is survival*'.³⁰ At the end of the interview, Derrida reaffirms that

survival is an originary concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*, if you will. We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace and of the testament. [...] Surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, and my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, is the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible.³¹

In no uncertain terms, Derrida asserts that survival is intrinsic to the structure of life. It does not derive from life, nor is it an excess of life. Instead Derrida argues for an

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Learn to Live Finally – The Last Interview*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 25.

³¹ Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, p. 52.

intensity of life in all forms of survival, as though even the repetition compulsion could still constitute a powerful vitality. In contrast to Benjamin's 'petrified unrest' and Santner's subsequent 'undeadness', Derrida's survival is always unsettled and does not simply enact an unsettled past. As such, he does not consider surviving as the remnants of what was before, as if there could be an index of life force. According to Derrida, anything that survives is alive as the greatest manifestation of life possible in the present.

Santner's term 'undeadness' is a particular mode of survival that is activated with the loss of settled meaning, whereby viable life forms are nullified to produce the suspended animation of a repetition compulsion. Since undeadness is triggered, it follows that there is still an alternative form of life existing beyond the realm of this agitated survival. On the other hand, in Derrida, unsettlement is fundamental so that survival is a ubiquitous condition of being. Although more sweeping than Santner in his discussion of survival in general, the implication of Derrida's view is that there is no alternative to survival – life can never be relieved from the urgent pressures of 'living on'. If survival is not a remnant or leftover as it is in undeadness, the conditions of life appear all the more pressing since survival is not a substrate of human existence but an ontological necessity.

In his post-war drama, Beckett sustains the tension between the possibility of achieving a viable form of life that Santner's undeadness contains, and the unconditional survival described by Derrida. Beckett prefigures both views of survival in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* as he negotiates the benumbing monotony and revitalising presence of repetition. Through the respective waiting for a non-attendee and exposure to the abiding end, Beckett's two plays navigate the restricted conditions of undeadness and call upon deconstruction's infinite play of difference. As such,

phases of vigour temper the inertia, as Vladimir exemplifies: 'We were beginning to weaken, now we're sure to see the evening out' (*WFG*, 86). A comparable perseverance drives *Endgame*, as when Hamm says, 'This is deadly' and Clov replies 'Things are livening up' (*E*, 20). As Beckett's characters get caught in the bottleneck of repetition, they begin to lack the affirmation of life that Derrida sees in survival and verge instead on the still life of undeadness. Yet, as iteration discloses contrast, an indefatigable life force resurfaces so that whilst undeadness appears petrified, the type of volatility that Derrida traces underwrites its unrest.

The verbal sparring that occupies Beckett's characters exacerbates the sense of deferred resolution in both plays. As Vladimir and Estragon anticipate Godot's arrival, and Hamm and Clov await the resolution of the end times, they rely on discursive crosstalk with one another to distract themselves. Each word bears witness to Beckett's characters going on whilst simultaneously revealing stasis through the repetitive phrases that emerge. The line 'waiting for Godot' appears nine times over the course of Beckett's play, serving as a catchphrase to remind the characters of their default position and restart their fatuous chatter. Nevertheless, each repeated utterance contains a negligible difference. Although the repeat is identical to the previous version, it is displaced from the original site and subsequently acknowledged as a reproduction. Derrida finds this transference of the same expression to different contexts intrinsic to communication in 'Signature Event Context' (1972). He names this possibility 'iteration', noting that *iter* comes from the Sankrit for other and that his entire essay 'may be read as the exploitation of the logic which links repetition to alterity'.³² Derrida elaborates on iterability in 'Limited Inc a b c...' (1977) to explain that

³² Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1977), p. 7.

the structure of iteration [...] implies *both* identity *and* difference. Iteration in its “purest” form—and it is always impure—contains *in itself* the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration. The iterability of an element divides its own identity a priori.³³

This iteration applies in Beckett’s play to make the same phrase ‘waiting for Godot’ include a difference with each appearance. Every recurrence identifies with its namesakes but is at the same time other. These minor incongruities between repeated utterances convey transit, but they also serve to accentuate the essentially unchanging circumstances. Words are duplicated yet the context only alters superficially so that linear time is obscured owing to the general lack of change.

Likewise, in *Endgame*, Beckett introduces the elderly Nagg and Nell endeavouring but failing to kiss, after which Nell says, ‘Why this farce, day after day?’ (*E*, 12). Clov repeats Nell’s question halfway through the play only for Hamm to reply ‘Routine’ (*E*, 21). The question itself includes the idea of imitation in the word ‘farce’ and emphasises monotony in the repeated element ‘day’. Furthermore, the two references to this question during the play indicate the repetitive structure of their activities to underline both similarity and difference. The overall situation remains the same, which precludes the end, and yet Beckett’s characters are subject to time, represented by their physical decay and the dimming light, which implies procession. The difficulty with labelling Beckett’s work either dynamic or static is that the reliving of the past is a process that occurs in the present, thus making the repeat a current view of the past that is never fully identical to what went before. This

³³ Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p. 53.

rendition of the past injects a level of liveliness into repetition that contradicts the idea of a static immersion in the past. The iteration of the words betrays the movement of difference as well as stagnancy of similarity. Beckett's use of repetition and refrain effectively produces the inertia and activity of 'still life'.

Whilst Beckett marries tedium with renewal through his repetitive techniques, he also manages to balance habit and spontaneity in these plays to create the metatheatrical blurring of performance and reality. Indeed, Beckett is already eradicating the distinction between action and acting in the repetitive elements noted above. In their catchphrase, Vladimir and Estragon appear to insist that they are waiting for Godot and *Waiting for Godot*; the pair seemingly accept that they are subject to an imperative and constitute the play itself. Equally, Hamm the ham-actor recognises his situation as a 'routine', thus indicating the repeat performances of theatre productions. These kinds of references are numerous and serve to underline the fact that the characters' 'lives' are perilously close to exhibitions. The characters appear to speak from habit at times, particularly in the use of stichomythia, which suggests scripted and rehearsed lines. These exchanges are often delivered with unnatural rapidity that presumably bypasses thought. However, the characters are lost for words on occasion too, as if defective memories call for improvisation. For example, after a swift passage of dialogue, Estragon says 'That wasn't such a bad little canter' before Vladimir replies 'Yes, but now we'll have to find something else' (*WFG*, 56). These hiatuses in conversation call for impromptu shows to fill the meantime, but the emphasis remains on performance.

In *Waiting for Godot*, as the pair guess what period of day it is, Vladimir says 'it is not for nothing I have lived through this long day and I can assure you it is very near the end of its repertory' (*WFG*, 78). Each day is thus an act made up of several

stock pieces, and although Vladimir suggests he is at the end of his repertoire, the rendition is likely to return tomorrow. Similarly, as Clov removes the sheet to reveal Hamm in his chair, like a second curtain rising from the stage, Hamm's first yawning words are 'Me ... to play' (*E*, 6). His life is framed as a tiresome performance since there is minimal variety to his existence. Each day is a recapitulation of the well-worn routine, or as Clov puts it, 'All life long the same questions, the same answers' (*E*, 7). As this reference to the futility of their actions shows, the authenticity of the characters' everyday existences is contaminated by issues of performance, which suggests they are going through the motions as opposed to actually living through completely new events. Therefore, the idea of continuation through reiteration that occurs within the two plays is a microcosm of the play itself continuing through multiple performances.

Taking these metatheatrical links to performance into consideration, it is notable that survival for Beckett's characters involves echoing their own existence, with the repeated awareness of the waiting and unending mimicking an actual experience. As they reflect on their predicaments and operate within a trite range of actions, Beckett's creatures continue in a state of replication. Godot and the end appear as postures as the characters recite previous utterances and imitate the suspense of an impending release from banality. In fact, Beckett implies that Vladimir has already met Godot, that Hamm has experienced the end, and that existence continues in a state of nostalgia for these past junctures. Before the audience is introduced to the boy messenger, Vladimir indicates that Godot himself arranged to meet them 'by the tree' on 'Saturday' (*WFG*, 6, 7), which differs notably from the infinitely renewable 'tomorrow' the boy later uses (*WFG*, 44). Likewise, in *Endgame*, Hamm refuses to call their existence 'life', labelling it 'this... thing' (*E*, 28) before he laments 'The end

is in the beginning and yet you go on' (E, 41). Beckett keeps open the possibility that the desired moment has gone and is being replayed. Therefore, he supports both the deferral of the desired event and the idea that desire actually transcends the experienced event in a retrospective yearning for the past. The creatures' onward momentum shows that survival can occur as an excess of life after the end of the ideal life, which compels the subject to perform a rendition of the possibility now passed.

In terms of survival, the pertinent issue from this simulation of self is the degree to which Beckett's characters lose their fictional bearings to become hollow interlocutors. The focus on repetition distorts the causal chain of events of realist narratives that represent human life. Rather than depicting 'realistic' personal experiences, Beckett's texts are concerned with their status as constructed performances, or what Hamm calls the 'prolonged creative effort' (E, 37). According to Beckett, this kind of self-awareness is crucial for the staging of his plays. When directing the 1975 production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Schiller Theatre in Berlin, he explained:

It is a game, everything is a game. When all four of them are lying on the ground, that cannot be handled naturalistically. That has got to be done artificially, balletically. Otherwise everything becomes an imitation, an imitation of reality [...]. It should become clear and transparent, not dry. It is a game in order to survive.³⁴

Beckett is obviously intent on minimising the naturalistic elements of his plays, but what it is that actually survives remains ambiguous. Although Beckett might refer to

³⁴ Beckett qtd. in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 607.

the spectacle of the play itself, 'survival' inevitably evokes organic life. Beckett insists that the figures are precisely choreographed but the games resist total impersonality, as they appear to have continuation in mind. Hence, the slapstick pile-up in *Waiting for Godot* is not a natural coincidence, but Vladimir and Estragon must still perform these diversions to busy themselves. Despite yearning to be 'saved' (WFG, 87), the characters are nevertheless impelled to survive in the meantime, which lends each new playful game an existential weight. It is difficult for survival to escape its ontological resonance, even if that being is alienated distinctly from a recognisable reality.

In Steven Connor's discussion of Beckett's metatheatrical techniques, he argues that '[a]ll these features induce consciousness not of the stage simply itself, but of the stage as representation – even if it is the minimal representation of itself. No matter what is stripped away from character, plot and setting on the stage, there always persists, within the most reduced performance, a residual self-doubling – the stage representing itself *as stage, as performance*'.³⁵ Connor makes the point that in acknowledging the medium, the plays reflect on the dramaturgy and come to represent dramatic performance. The plays are therefore about performance, making use of *mise en abyme* to return to the contract of performance as depiction, if only as a representation of itself. The characters even appear to realise this tendency to satisfy a mimetic function and acquire meaning. Vladimir observes 'This is becoming really insignificant' and Estragon replies 'Not enough' before adding 'We always give ourselves the impression we exist' (WFG, 60, 61). Likewise, Hamm queries 'We're not beginning to... to... mean something?' (E, 22). As much as Beckett leans towards

³⁵ Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett – Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 124.

metatheatre to eliminate representation, the performance and performers rebel against their vacancy to retain the semblance of life.

As with *The Unnamable*, Beckett includes non-endings in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in the respective 'Let's go. [They do not move]' (WFG, 87) and 'You... remain' (E, 50) to encourage a sense of continuity and sustain the promise of resolution. Although the expectations of these eventualities diminish, it is patent that the creatures have 'resumed the struggle' (WFG, 1) and that 'life goes on' (E, 40). With this possibility in tow, the implication is that despite the repetitive nature of the plays, Beckett's creatures survive as the hypothetical interruption of the repetition process. As Beckett himself notes, '[t]he key word in my plays is "perhaps"', and it is this uncertainty that nurtures the possibility of real life aside from the surface play of repetition.³⁶ In other words, they are passengers in a performed life but can potentially disembark, at least according to the models provided by 'Godot' as a validating figure and the 'end' as a liberating event.³⁷ This potential means that Beckett's creatures are beings in waiting, as yet unformed and thus continuous. Nevertheless, they require the active performance of the suspended self to sustain the hope of an authentic life.³⁸ The possibility of achieving a non-survival state, such as authentic living or termination, actually drives their continuation; they are stuck in survival due to their hope for a more meaningful life. The repetitive survival is therefore peculiar in Beckett in that the desired condition that will emancipate the creatures from survival is also the aspiration that binds them to it.

³⁶ Beckett qtd. in Tom F. Driver, 'Beckett by the Madeleine', *Columbia University Forum*, 4 (1961), 21-25, p. 23.

³⁷ As Steven Connor notes, in terms of subjectivity, the extrication from repetition into an authentic life means '[t]he self will pursued as though it were a locatable essence, or presence, even though that pursuit is to reveal the self as difference', Connor, *Repetition, Theory and Text*, p. 49.

³⁸ In response to a world of mechanical reproduction that Benjamin identified, Beckett's creatures are afflicted by what Jean Baudrillard calls 'the nostalgia for origins and obsession with authenticity'. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 2005), p. 80.

Forms of Activity and Stasis in *Molloy*

Beckett conveys the animated impasse of undeadness throughout *Molloy* and this creaturely dimension forms an integral part of the aesthetic, subjective and testimonial significance of Beckett's post-war work. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to the ways in which Beckett's novel *Molloy*, particularly the first part on Molloy, evokes survival on aesthetic and ontological levels. Beckett develops several narrative techniques ranging from the internal dialogues of uncertainty to the cyclic structure of the text in order to enact both activity and stasis. The inability to speak together with the obligation to speak sustains his author-narrators, but these same conditions mean they persist in unproductive, enervating tasks. Beckett's creatures are therefore exposed to the 'excitations' noted in Santner's concept of undeadness, which result in a rechargeable deadening process that allows them to survive without really living.³⁹

Although confined to a footnote, Santner suggests that this type of creaturely existence finds a parallel in the *Muselmann*. He writes: 'The *Muselmann* is, it seems, the figure whose being has been fully reduced to the substance of a "cringe," whose existence has been reduced to its pure, "protocosmic" being, who is there yet no longer "in the world." What remains, that is, at this zero degree of social existence, in this zone between symbolic and real death, is not pure biological (animal or vegetable) life but rather something like the direct embodiment of creaturely life. We might say that the *Muselmann* is the human in the neighborhood of zero'.⁴⁰ In the sections that follow, the structural and existential modes of survival I analyse in Beckett's *Molloy* are evocative of the *Muselmann* as the 'direct embodiment of creaturely life'. Locked into repeating stories and drifting into psychical worlds, Beckett's creaturely forms and beings enact the peculiar type of lingering life that

³⁹ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 25.

relates to the *Muselmann*. Yet, these repetitive narrative structures and moribund lives also intimate the precarious state of the human after Auschwitz. As Slade recognises, the 'survivor ethos is the effect of material losses related to traumatic historical events, and the effect of the loss of an idea, the idea of the human'.⁴¹ With the symbolic value of the human in ruins after the Holocaust, the human category is shown to be a hollow construction made evident by the very performance of the now defunct model of humanity. The remaining two sections lay bare this curious type of survival as it appears in Beckett's novel.

Beckett wrote *Molloy* in French between May and November 1947 during a concentrated period of creativity after the war that he called the 'siege in the room'.⁴² He translated the novel into English, in collaboration with Patrick Bowles initially and then alone, before receiving some final assistance from Maria Perón. It is divided into two monologues, capturing the confused perspectives of the increasingly decrepit narrators Molloy and Moran as they move from town to countryside and back. In part one, Molloy attempts to relate his meandering journey on foot and bicycle in search of his mother, in which he experiences a series of incidents, including the meeting of two figures A and C, a run-in with the police, accidentally killing a dog and custody at Lousse's residence. Molloy eventually finds himself slowly deteriorating in the wilderness, where he assaults a charcoal-burner and ends up in a ditch. In the second part, the agent Jacques Moran is a strict Catholic who leads a comfortable lifestyle centred on his stringent parenting. The messenger Gaber delivers word from the mysterious Youdi that Moran is assigned to track down Molloy and report his findings. Moran and his son Jacques Jr. venture covertly into the countryside, but Moran gets injured, asks his son to purchase a bicycle and in the meantime clubs a

⁴¹ Slade, *Postmodern Sublime*, p. 4.

⁴² Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 367.

respectable looking man to death. His son returns with the bicycle but soon abandons Moran, who eventually manages to return home alone despite his worsening physical condition.

Molloy is an appropriate example of the survival that Beckett's work evokes since the text is contemporaneous with his realisation that the future of his writing was in 'incompleteness'. Beckett's mother May died in 1950, the year before *Molloy* was published, and her demise clearly informs Molloy's search for his mother. The deterioration of this influential maternal figure also appears to lead Beckett towards a new approach to writing. He recalls seeing his mother when she was stricken with Parkinson's disease:

Her face was a mask, completely unrecognizable. Looking at her, I had a sudden realization that all the work I'd done before was on the wrong track. I guess you'd have to call it a revelation. Strong word, I know, but so it was. I simply understood that there was no sense adding to the store of information, gathering knowledge. The whole attempt at knowledge, it seemed to me, had come to nothing. It was all haywire. What I had to do was investigate not-knowing, not-perceiving, the whole world of incompleteness.⁴³

As a result of this 'revelation', *Molloy* features ignorant and incognizant protagonists embedded in expressive and epistemological graves. I have already drawn on Beckett's creatures as examples of the 'non-knower' and 'non-can-er' in my analysis of Beckett's art of failure in chapter one. I examined how the (in)sovereign testimonies that the author-narrators carry out exhibit the creaturely indecisiveness

⁴³ Beckett qtd. in Shainberg, 'Exorcising Beckett', p. 106.

that results from attempts to adhere to the human way of prioritising and ordering meaning. As such, they exemplify the 'sovereign as creature' dynamic that relegates Beckett's creatures from a position of narrative power to a predominantly impotent narrative condition. This culminates in the 'incompleteness' that pervades *Molloy* on a narrative level, and induces the creaturely modes of continuation seen in melancholy immersion and humour, which evoke the excess being of natural history that Santner identifies. As Molloy and Moran try to follow the bewildering social and expressive conventions that isolate them, they appear as artefacts removed from a meaningful sphere but persist as creaturely life in the void.

In part one of *Molloy*, there is a cyclic pattern to Molloy's odyssey that involves different motivational intensities ranging from purposeful imperatives to idle stopgaps. Although generally preoccupied with his mother, Molloy notes that 'these were ancient cares and the mind cannot always brood on the same cares, but needs fresh cares from time to time, so as to revert with renewed vigour, when the time comes to ancient cares' (T, 64). As such, the cycle in Beckett's novel lurches onwards:

the buckled wheel that carried me, in unforeseeable jerks, from fatigue to rest, and inversely for example. But now I do not wander any more, anywhere any more, and indeed I scarcely stir at all, and yet nothing is changed. And the confines of my room, of my bed, of my body, are as remote from me as were those of my region, in the days of my splendour. And the cycle continues, joltingly, of flight and bivouac, in an Egypt without bounds, without infant, without mother. (T, 66)

This example encompasses both the narrative rhythm of Beckett's *Molloy* and the sense of survival in the absence of a governing system. The reference to Egypt, according to Knowlson, evokes the many 'Rest on the Flight to Egypt' paintings that Beckett viewed in European galleries.⁴⁴ For example, Caravaggio's baroque version depicts an angel in a violin recital, Joseph holding the musical score, the mother Mary cradling the infant Jesus and an inconspicuous donkey in the background. In contrast, the 'without infant, without mother' line in Beckett's evocation suggests that the relationship between the 'infant' Molloy and his mother is elided whilst the rest and flight routine goes on. Beckett removes the maternal care present in many of the paintings that depict the escape from Herod the Great, and instead retains an impression of the journeying, the burdensome 'donkeywork' in the patterns of 'flight and bivouac'. On a greater scale, the whole religious iconography of the Madonna and Christ-child images is absent. Considering that this iconography conveys divinity on earth in human form, its absence leaves only the boundless struggles of a secular world. The consolation of religious meaning is gone, and yet life continues nonetheless. It is worth noting at this juncture that whilst my initial point is that Beckett's intermittent narrative movement suggests a mode of continuation, my subsequent claim is that Beckett's creatures are surviving in the aftermath of or exclusion from fundamental ideological systems.

The spirit of continuation in Beckett includes contextualizing intervals that revitalize the impetus and consequently highlight the tedium of the enduring imperative. The Beckettian predicament is not a single monotonous activity, or, to invoke Benjamin, a mystical instant capturing eternity. Rather, it is a dialogue between phases that serves to emphasise the repetitive nature of the cycle. This

⁴⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 375.

contrast means that Beckett's creatures are perpetually worn down as each new lease of life eventually dwindles only to be resuscitated and so on *ad infinitum*. Beckett's prose style pays testament to this renewable energy, deploying the logic of alternatives to take detours away from each creative cul-de-sac. The idiosyncratic Beckettian collocation 'don't know' occurs 46 times and the adverb 'perhaps' 192 times in the 78,000 words of *Molloy*. In James Joyce's slightly longer text, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), at around 85,000 words, these examples appear 7 and 38 times respectively.⁴⁵ Beckett clearly intensifies ignorance and possibility, yet he combats complete stagnancy through his repeated use of 'but', particularly to begin new sentences, and 'not', which he employs approximately twice as frequently as Joyce.⁴⁶ This ability to keep talking in contrasting and negative registers allows the narrators to say double without doubling the amount of meaning. On the contrary, Beckett effectively reduces the text to ruins when exercising this contradictory mode; his narrators sabotage any claim to verisimilitude, professing their unreliability and cancelling out statements. Despite the restrictive position of ineptitude, Beckett's writing reveals ways of reflecting on and responding to itself as the author-narrators accentuate their uncertainty to juggle different possibilities and proffer new suggestions that counter, modify or converse with old ones.

Beckett cultivates an aesthetic of ignorance to leave trains of thought open and posit his creatures in a world of incompleteness. Molloy, for example, is partial to internal dialogues that encourage further speech. At the end of the A and C episode, in which Molloy observes two passing strangers, he describes an ambiguous meeting with one of the two men. It is unclear whether this is an imaginary or actual meeting, but after the man has left, Molloy returns to thinking of himself:

⁴⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1996).

⁴⁶ 'But' appears 749 times and 'not' appears 865 times in *Molloy*. The words appear 355 and 448 times respectively in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but, how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means but it's the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind (*T*, 13)

Molloy's thinking is plagued with digression here as he suggests ideas that he either denies or accepts and poses questions to himself. This type of dithering narration makes Molloy an unreliable narrator. His meditation is reduced to fragments of thought as he fumbles around for the right idea. Although the meaning is all but submerged in cognitive waste, it is this inconclusive expressive and mental practice that sustains Molloy's narrative. The internal dialogue of doubt in Molloy allows him to perpetuate his account as he negotiates different formulations in pursuit of the precise expression.

The ability to continue despite the incapacity for positive statements extends to Molloy's analyses of self. Beckett's creatures manage to reflect on their conditions despite recognizing the limits of self-analysis. Whilst in the Lousse house, Molloy recalls having tried to find a meaning for the human condition in the disciplines of astronomy, geology, anthropology, psychiatry and magic. This last school of supernatural phenomena and mysterious trickery is the final straw for Molloy; his absorption in magic has the 'honour' of his ruins, consigning him to a confused shambles of being (*T*, 39). This deteriorated self

is not the kind of place where you go, but where you find yourself, sometimes, not knowing how, and which you cannot leave at will, and where you find yourself without any pleasure, but with more perhaps than in those places you can escape from, by making an effort, places full of mystery, full of the familiar mysteries. I listen and the voice is full of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too. And I hear it murmur that all wilts and yields, as if loaded down, but here there are no loads, and the light too, down towards an end it seems can never come. For what possible ends to these wastes where true light never was, nor any upright thing, nor any true foundation, but only these leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away, beneath a sky without memory of morning and hope of night. (T, 40)

The broken subjectivity that Molloy sketches is a result of the lack of meaning or explanation for existence and an inability to discover the truth of the human experience. In contrast to the other science-based disciplines, the magic that brings about this condition is synonymous with alchemy, the occult transformation of matter. Alchemy includes the *nigredo phase*, a darkening chemical process that reduces substances to black *prima materia*. Jungian analytical psychology adopts the *nigredo phase* to discuss the mind as it confronts the chaos of its inner shadows.⁴⁷ This initial stage in a process of individuation, or wholeness, is associated with the self-examination of melancholy.⁴⁸ Similarly, Molloy associates the obscurity of magic

⁴⁷ See C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 14, 2nd edn, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 497.

⁴⁸ At the end of *The Spirit Mercurius*, Jung acknowledges his debt to Freudian psychoanalysis: 'Approaching the problem for a scientific angle, and innocent of any religious aim, Freud uncovered the abysmal darkness of human nature which a would-be enlightened optimism had striven to conceal. Since then psychotherapy, in one form or another, has persistently explored the extensive area of

with his exposure to the welter of the human condition. His engagement with the perplexing illusions of magic and the self only direct him to the abyss of being, riddled with echoing voices, lost memories and unexplainable impressions. But the result is not totally distasteful since, unlike the 'familiar mysteries' of the human self and metaphysical truth, there is no prospect of escape when resigned to this formless being. His study of magic enters him into a state of ruin, or 'the indestructible chaos of timeless things' (*T*, 40), in which there is no longer magic or mystery. If '[a] final overcoming of melancholy is not possible', in Beckett, and 'the *nigredo* phase is endless', the ability to surrender to this chaos would at least exempt Molloy from the alternative pursuit of positive knowledge.⁴⁹

Self-examination is a Platonic exercise to remove ignorance, as Ernst Cassirer asserts: 'Man is declared to be that creature who is constantly in search of himself – a creature who in every moment of his existence must examine and scrutinize the conditions of his existence. In this scrutiny, in this critical attitude towards human life, consists the real value of human life'.⁵⁰ Molloy and Moran exemplify the scrutinizing part of this attitude through their questioning inclinations. Moran, the more meticulous of the two narrators, produces three fifths of the questioning material in *Molloy*.⁵¹ He says: 'to kill time I asked myself a certain number of questions and tried to answer them' (*T*, 154). In one passage, Moran even includes a list of thirty-three

darkness which I have called the shadow', see C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 13, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 244.

⁴⁹ Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs – As Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism* (New York: Sternberg, 2008), p. 81. Beckett's interest in Jungian psychology is significant in the context of 'undeadness'. Walter Asmus describes how '[i]n the thirties C. G. Jung, the psychologist, once gave a lecture in London and told of a female patient who was being treated by him. Jung said he wasn't able to help this patient and for this, according to Beckett, he gave an astonishing explanation. The girl wasn't living. She existed but she didn't actually live'. See Walter Asmus, 'Rehearsal Notes for the German Premiere of Beckett's *That Time* and *Footfalls*', in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1986), 335-349, p. 338.

⁵⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University, 1972), p. 6.

⁵¹ Question marks appear 345 times in *Molloy*: 140 times in Molloy's part and 245 times in Moran's part.

questions, which is a technique that keeps him thinking as the answers elude him or generate more questions (*T*, 167-9). Molloy on the other hand employs the question mark for a series of suggestions: 'For otherwise how could I have reached the enormous age I have reached. Thanks to moral qualities? Hygienic habits? Fresh air? Starvation? Lack of sleep? Solitude? Persecution? The long silent screams (dangerous to scream)? The daily longing for the earth to swallow me up?' (*T*, 80-1). Molloy's approach, like Moran, fails to identify information, but nevertheless manages to maintain activity through deliberation. Through their inquiries, Beckett's creatures can adopt a probing attitude that avoids the certain knowledge that would pacify contemplation. For Beckett also, the question mark fills the text with doubt, which resists the quietus of totality but essentially revolves around the same enigmas.

In contrast with Cassirer, however, Beckett's work does not sustain the exaltation of self-examination nor accept it as a defining human property. The scrutiny of human existence and subjectivity in Beckett only proliferates ignorance, foregrounding the incompleteness of the self. It is unable to transcend the infinite mirroring of self-reflection to perceive such practice as a veritable human value. Thus, the 'place' that Molloy discovers is, in part, the prison of self-reflection and the cage of the *cogito*. Indeed, this constant search is precisely the creaturely condition of incompleteness, which is a fact that Molloy appears to accept as the lesser of two evils – the inescapable, ruined self over the familiar mystery of the meaning of the human. This is not to say that Molloy finishes with self-examination, but that he is open to the logic of disintegration and the 'endlessly collapsing world' that ensues. In fact, he is unusually lucid about his entropic condition, diagnosing 'leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away' from a place 'where true light never was'. Although Molloy often insists upon his fallaciousness, noting 'I express without sinking to the

level of *oratio recta*, but by means of other figures quite as deceitful, as for example, 'It seemed to me that, etc., or, I had the impression that, etc.' (T, 88), he actually recognizes his tentative approach and is surprisingly eloquent when describing his ruination. Consequently, Molloy is in a frozen world with an equally frozen sky, the 'frozen' suggesting a particularly melancholic self-examination. His exploration of the ruins of self keep him at a standstill, but this condition is nevertheless fuelled by the half-light of comprehension represented by the pale sky, which preserves the subject in the very process of obliteration, immanent in its effacement.⁵² It is this kind of reflection on his state of ruin that reveals traces of a subject privy to its own desubjectification. This aporetic activity, 'without memory of morning and hope of night' (T, 40), lacks an origin and terminus, *arche* and *telos*, meaning that Molloy is suspended in the limbo of narrative scepticism.

Although the buckled wheel image captures the disrupted revolutions around a fixed point experienced in Molloy's search for his mother and Moran's search for Molloy, the structures in both parts of *Molloy* convey a more complex helical shape to the narrative movement. Molloy's account ends with him in a ditch, 'Molloy could stay where he happened to be' (T, 91), but presumably he is then transported to his mother's room, 'perhaps in an ambulance' (T, 7), since this is where he writes his account. In the chronological *fabula* (the elemental materials of the story) of Molloy's journey, the initial framing paragraph is the last event to take place, with Molloy the author-narrator in his mother's room discussing the writing process.⁵³ The second paragraph and indeed the remainder of Molloy's tale are retrospective, representing

⁵² Beckett offers some explanation of this chiaroscuro in his work: 'If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable', Beckett qtd. in Driver, 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p. 23.

⁵³ Definitions of Russian formalism narrative terminology are taken from M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (London: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), p. 181.

the events leading up to the scene in the first paragraph. Beckett advertises the fact that this is the *syuzhet* (the concrete representation used to convey the story) and that Molloy lives in the text twice, or rather is twice removed, firstly in the confused experience of events and secondly in the unreliable account. In effect, the story loops, yet in a way that allows the repeated cycles to worm forward in a parallel real time. In other words, the account is repeated, but there is the sense that time is not simply repeated but wasted as the old eats up the new. Molloy is therefore perpetually searching for the object of his narrative, his mother, which sustains his own demise. As Molloy replays his quest, he effectively languishes in a past event.

In the second part, Moran's final words are: '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' (T, 176). The penultimate lines declaring the rain at midnight repeat the opening lines of part two, which insinuates that the account the reader has read is Moran's submitted report. However, in conjunction with the last eight words, asserting that it is no longer midnight or raining, the reiteration of the first sentences reminds the reader of the previously narrated events and encourages one to see Moran writing the rest of his report again, similar to the account just read but with the added knowledge of a parallel present forming a subtext to the narrated past events. Accordingly, there would be an eventual return to the writing of the report at the 'end' again, where the evocation of the beginning would occur again. The implication is an ever-increasing series of loops progressing on a forward-moving timeline, projecting the same story or memory into the future, which would mean the target Molloy is preserved in thought and yet always elusive. In this way, Moran's report anticipates the paradox of simultaneously not going on and going on explored in *The Unnamable*.

In the Beckettian helix, the composition process undercuts the related account and intimates the teller behind the tale. In the tradition of the oral tale, Molloy and Moran's stories are reiterated and repositioned, but the same absence is invested into each new generation of the text. Like a zoetrope in which still images appear animated when glimpsed through the apertures of the rotating wheel, the performative quality of *Molloy*, the sense of *doing*, gives the impression of the active hand behind the writing. As the stories revolve, the written subjects Molloy and Moran are reprised, appearing repeatedly in the narrative loops, whilst Beckett's narrators appear as vague figures trapped behind on a single coiled path that insinuates a perpetually destructive activity. In this way, the compositional real time is swallowed in the literary other time; both past and present are lost and lost again in the writing. This is the loophole of Beckett's iteration process, in which the explicit foreground and implicit background work in tandem to produce cyclic repetition on a degrading trajectory.

Retelling the moment he sets off for Molloy country, Moran recognises the truly Sisyphean aspect of his duty to report the past as though present: 'For it is one of the features of this penance that I may not pass over what is over and straightaway come to the heart of the matter. But that must be again unknown to me which is no longer so and that again fondly believed which then I fondly believed, at my setting out' (*T*, 133). Moran's account means the past has not passed, but is reanimated. In Benjaminian terms, temporality in *Molloy* is inauthentic as the fulfilment of historical progression is emptied to reveal duration, or evanescent moments that spin out into a melancholic frozen time. For Beckett's characters, then, the past is not an accessible archive of distant experiences. It is an overflow of time that saturates the present with anachronisms to give rise to the suspended animation of undeadness.

'finish dying': Death Without Death in *Molloy*

Whilst Benjamin's conceptions of time and history have Marxist-inflected preoccupations with materiality at the root, he is sensitive to the psychological implications of ruins that Beckett's novel tends to emphasise. As Santner notes, 'what Benjamin refers to as petrified unrest pertains to the dynamics of the *repetition compulsion*, the psychic aspect of the eternal recurrence of the same that for Benjamin defined the world of commodity production and consumption' (italics in original).⁵⁴ Beckett's 'stirrings still' also threaten the very idea of the originary or unique aura as Molloy and Moran's narratives mime the process of reproduction, stuck in a making and breaking oscillation. These creatures survive in an annular pattern that poses as life, as Molloy expresses: 'If I go on long enough calling that my life I'll end up by believing it. It's the principle of advertising' (*T*, 53). Yet, as both Steven Connor and James O'Hara note, the repetition compulsion evident in the sceptical imperative of Beckett's work is indicative of the Freudian death-drive – the thanatological urge towards the inorganic material form.⁵⁵ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), Freud poses the idea that 'all instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things', but owing to the convergence of the preservative instinct and the death-drive, he adds that each 'organism wishes to die only in its own fashion'.⁵⁶ As Beckett's characters recommence their quests and repeat their stories compulsively, they display this magnetism towards a singular death and enter into a drawn-out negotiation between the pleasure principle and the death drive that delineates the very precise death immanent to the subject.

⁵⁴ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 81.

⁵⁵ See Connor, *Repetition, Theory and Text*, pp. 9-11; and James Donald O'Hara, *Samuel Beckett's Hidden Drives: Structural Uses of Depth Psychology* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 133.

⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 594-625, pp. 612, 614.

In *Molloy*, the obsessive repetition of stories causes physical and psychological decay that sees the protagonists ailed and addled. The combination of a diminishing and enduring will translates to the body, which is subject to the atrophy caused by psychological absorption. The lame Molloy crawls on his front, 'racked by a kind of chronic arthritis' (*T*, 89), whereas Moran is diseased with a 'sick leg' and 'failing flesh' (*T*, 165, 166). Such physical afflictions are apparent in Agamben's sketch of the associations and physiological consequences of melancholy, which, given its parity with decline in Beckett, is worth quoting in full:

In medieval humoral cosmology, melancholy is traditionally associated with the earth, autumn (or winter), the dry element, cold, the north wind, the color black, old age (maturity); its planet is Saturn, among whose children the melancholic finds himself with the hanged man, the cripple, the peasant, the gambler, the monk, and the swineherd. The physiological syndrome of *abundantia melancholie* (abundance of melancholy humor) includes darkening of the skin, blood, and urine, hardening of the pulse, burning in the gut, flatulence, acid burping, whistling in the left ear, constipation or excess of feces, and gloomy dreams; among the diseases it can induce are hysteria, dementia, epilepsy, leprosy, hemorrhoids, scabies, and suicidal mania.⁵⁷

Beckett's infirm tramps are riddled with similar symptoms; they are senile cripples with palpitating hearts, oozing body fluids and bristling with skin conditions. Their bodies deteriorate whilst the mind is gripped in the saturnine state. More than this, however, the grotesque physical symptoms that Agamben notes in the medieval views

⁵⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), p. 11.

of melancholy serve to offer an outward representation of the purely psychological self-evaluation that dominates Freud's definition of melancholy. In 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), Freud writes, '[i]n mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become less so. The patient describes his ego to us as being worthless, incapable of functioning and morally reprehensible, he is filled with self-reproach, he levels insults against himself and expects ostracism and punishment'.⁵⁸ For Freud, melancholy is based on an assessment of personal inferiority, not physical infirmity. Yet, when read together, Freud's psychoanalysis and Agamben's overview suggest a psychosomatic melancholy that harvests self-hatred and shows on the body. Certainly, in Beckett's case, the melancholy that begins internally is manifest as an external deterioration in *Molloy*. The material self is a casualty of the cyclic repetition of Molloy and Moran's imperatives as they externalise the inner emptiness and disappointments that pervade their doomed but dogged quests.

Freud concludes this view of melancholic self-deprecation with the thought that '[t]he image of this – predominantly moral – sense of inferiority is complemented by sleeplessness, rejection of food, and an overcoming of the drive – most curious from the psychological point of view – which compels everything that lives to cling to life'.⁵⁹ Freud identifies a disregard for life, and yet a lack of self-preservation does not necessarily mean that death automatically ensues. Although Freud's melancholia relinquishes the preservative life force and precipitates an existence open to the death-drive, the ruined body evokes a kind of living death. This is not quite an absolute lack of will at every level of the psyche or a determined pursuit of death, but rather an

⁵⁸ Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, pp. 205-6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 206.

organic existence after life that is snagged on the retrogressive slide towards death; it is the enduring being of the worthless life divested of the Eros principle.

Beckett also engages with this idea of an apathetic living death in the second part of *Molloy*. As a mirror image of 'libido', the Obidil figure suggests a reversal of desire and the antithesis of the life instinct. The lack of an actual meeting with Obidil, however, implies that Moran never achieves or fully subscribes to the death-drive towards non-will. After his son abandons him, Moran reflects, 'And with regard to Obidil, of whom I have refrained from speaking until now, and whom I so longed to see face to face, all I can say with regard to him is this, that I never saw him, either face to face or darkly, perhaps there is no such person, that would not greatly surprise me' (*T*, 162). With wry self-consciousness, Beckett pokes fun at the fact that Obidil fails to materialise. He plays with fiction's capacity to incarnate a psychological drive and jettison this embodiment at the same time. If Obidil is a personification of the death-drive, it seems that Moran questions the very existence, or at least his acquaintance with, this particular Freudian phenomenon. The absent Obidil, the figure representing the radical absence of desire, exists on the edge of Moran's consciousness, held in check by a lingering life force. As such, Moran is consigned to a level of survival and not to the inorganic state that his material deterioration forecasts.

At times, both Molloy and Moran speak as though they have already endured a death and survive beyond it. As Moran departs his house having introduced the region of Ballyba, he takes a short walk from his living quarters, 'twenty-paces from my wicket-gate', to visit the graveyard (*T*, 135). Moran says:

Sometimes I went and looked at my grave. The stone was up already. It was a simple Latin cross, white. I wanted to have my name put on it, with the here lies and the date of my birth. Then all it would have wanted was the date of my death. They would not let me. Sometimes I smiled, as if I were dead already.

(T, 135)

It is significant that Moran's house is close to his grave as it indicates the space between life and death in Beckett's work, ranging from a narrow margin to a distorting crossover. The fact that Moran's headstone has already been erected confirms the grip that mortality has on Beckett's creatures. It invades Moran's consciousness and commands his prospective view. Adorno asserts that this fixation on death is characteristic of Beckett's *Endgame*, in which '[a]ll existence is levelled to a life that is itself death, abstract domination'.⁶⁰ The oppressive shadow of death is also evident in Moran's fascination with the graveyard, especially his own resting place, as if the thought of dying suffocates his life. However, the cross is anonymous and undated, which suggests that Moran cannot prepare for death or take control of it. Whilst death waits on the horizon as a potential, his demise nevertheless remains deferred. Yet, more disconcertingly, Moran's date of birth is also refused, as though life is only determined on expiry. In one sense, Moran has not lived until he has died, but equally, if he does not have a birth and is not living, he cannot truly die. Furthermore, through the strange smile 'as if I were already dead' at the end of this excerpt, Beckett gives the impression of rictus, which is a fixed grimace associated with the countenance of death. Moran's corpse-like expression confuses the appearances of vitality and inanition so that he effectively endures death but is unable

⁶⁰ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', pp. 145-6.

to finally die. Moran is clearly a creature susceptible to the obfuscated boundaries of life and death.

Similarly, on the opening page of part one, Molloy aims to 'finish dying', which implies that he has died partially already but, like his mother, wants to die 'enough to be buried' (*T*, 7). For Molloy, this mode of existence is a mystery:

My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that? Watch wound and buried by the watchmaker, before he died, whose ruined works will one day speak of God, to the worms. (*T*, 36)

Firstly, Molloy refers to the expressive and temporal difficulties of his existence as his undeadness confounds both the logic of grammatical tenses and time frames. He must necessarily speak of his past life as though it is total, which seems to imply that his death is present in every living moment. If Molloy cannot talk about what life is and chronicle it, he is destined to perform as a middle voice, shuttling indifferently between death and life, between the refusing 'no' and the insistent 'on'. Since Molloy is over in one sense but goes on in another, he evinces an ontological status of survival that exists between different types of life and death. The autobiographical tense wants to address life as a complete experience but every reflection on that life exposes the fact that his life is incomplete. Molloy is therefore subject to a survival that sees many 'deaths' as each new word extends and replaces his life.

Molloy is also subject to a symbolic death that sees the collapse or removal of a meaningful mode of being and entails the suspended, anachronistic existence of

creaturely life. In Beckett, the parameters of life and death are not only determined by the physical limits of the human body, they are also a question of existential value and identification with worldly worth. If a person cannot find a sense of meaning for their life, they endure the death of their valuable existence, which places emphasis on the human as a bare, melancholic entity. Beckett's reference to the watchmaker analogy implies that Molloy is on the edge of such an existential crisis. In *Treatise on Man* (1664), Descartes offers a mechanistic conception of the living body, arguing that internal 'functions (including passion, memory, and imagination) follow from the mere arrangement of the machine's organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels'.⁶¹ The components of the living body interact like a machine, with the implication that, like a timepiece, the human machine is evidence of a maker. The English theologian William Paley employs the watchmaker analogy in *Natural Theology* (1802) in his argument for the divine design of the universe. He infers that since the intricacies of a watch imply that 'there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it', the same principle applies to the intricacies of nature.⁶² In *Molloy*, the presence of a watchmaker would guarantee Molloy an origin and purpose as part of a pre-determined mechanism fashioned by intelligent design.

However, Molloy points out that the authorial presence is dead and therefore his own function is forever unknown. Since the creator figure is not with him now, Molloy is an abandoned creature, charged with life and left to survive. As with Beckett's elision of the religious elements in his allusion to Mary and Jesus's 'flight and bivouac', the validation offered by a totalising system of thought is absent for

⁶¹ Rene Descartes, *Treatise on Man*, ed. and trans. Edward Steele Hall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1972), p. 113.

⁶² William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), p. 8.

Molloy, leaving only a terrestrial existence devoid of higher meaning. He is as much evidence of divinity, or the absence of divinity, as other primitive earthbound creatures. The transcendental meaning of being is therefore stripped, and yet Molloy subsists undeniably as a vulnerable, rootless life. As a buried ruin in a secular world with only the memory of an origin story, he demonstrates that 'life can persist beyond the symbolic forms that gave it meaning'.⁶³ Molloy has died according to the idea of the human as a meaningful part of a divine plan, which moves him closer to the raw matter of mere existence.

Although the loss of a divine governing figure suggests a rather commonplace existential reading of Beckett, this sense of alienation is enacted on a more local level in the vacuum of biopolitical care that takes place for Beckett's creatures. In chapter three on master-servant relationships, I argued that a process of territorial sovereignty excludes Beckett's creatures from a state of biopolitical protection. This kind of segregation and devaluation took place at an unprecedented level during the Third Reich and ultimately led to designated spaces of exclusion, the concentration and extermination camps, in which the detached *Muselmann* was forced into being. Molloy describe such an experience of exclusion:

But I entered the first shelter I came to and stayed there till dawn, for I knew I was bound to be stopped by the first policeman and asked what I was doing, a question to which I have never been able to find the correct reply. But it cannot have been a real shelter and I did not stay till dawn, for a man came in soon after me and drove me out. And yet there was room for two. (*T*, 60)

⁶³ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 17.

Molloy appears as a misfit when he comes into contact with other people in society. Although Lousse takes him in, Molloy is subjugated and pauperized by her charity, and given that the policemen treat him as a second-rate citizen, Molloy lacks the value of respected subjects. The policemen in particular, as representatives of the state, reveal the official policy on these subaltern creatures. Clearly, this exclusion pertains to a survival mode for Beckett's creatures as they exist on the periphery of state welfare, but there is another sense of survival that occurs as they try to adhere to social and legal structures. Alongside a bodily survival that attempts to secure a less vulnerable position by achieving the immunity and respect granted to other citizens, Beckett's creatures also attempt to comply with the ideas and ideals of a civilised world to gain a sense of ideological belonging. Since this status is denied to them in various ways, their enduring attachment to the template of meaning precipitates their creaturely suspension, or what could be described as the survival of undeadness.

After Molloy's first encounter with the police in which he is briefly detained for violating public decency, threatened with a cylindrical ruler and impudently interrogated, he insists: 'I have only to be told what good behaviour is and I am well-behaved, within the limits of my physical possibilities' (T, 25). As far as his bodily limits go, Molloy exemplifies the Latin maxim *necessitas non habet legem* (necessity has no law). He is governed by physical necessity at times and incapable of abiding by certain rules, particularly 'no loitering'. However, it is not only Molloy's physical infirmity that makes him transgressive. His need to understand the underlying principles that produce the intricacies of public order is also problematic. Molloy is not apprised of the nature of these statutory laws, and therefore exists in an inapprehensible snare he is bound to trigger. He argues: 'if I have always behaved like a pig, the fault lies not with me but with my superiors, who corrected me only on

points of detail instead of showing me the essence of the system' (T, 25). Molloy requires the founding reasons of the structure in order to extrapolate the correct action in any given situation. In stark contrast, he is subject to the mechanics of authority that preclude his ability to conform and integrate. As such, he subscribes to the rules but is unable to abide by them fully as he is refused access to their logic. The point to stress is that Molloy is at least willing to conduct himself according to propriety in order to fit in and is therefore not purposely rebellious. The idea of conforming is still active for Molloy even though the system of thought rejects him or no longer applies to him. Consequently, Beckett's creatures exemplify the survival of undeadness as they repeatedly appeal to a mode of living that is untenable for them and subsist as a surplus nostalgic energy.

In *The Royal Remains*, Santner alludes to the collapse of a viable worldview when he notes that creaturely life is an exposure, not 'simply to the elements or to the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community'.⁶⁴ Beckett's creatures are subject to the fragility of biological life, but in their inadvertent perversity they also threaten to expose the entire system as an absurd contrivance. The civilised construct appears unable to accommodate a creature like Molloy and whilst he endeavours to be assimilated into the order, he ends up revealing the limitations of this form of life. As he is released from the police station, Molloy recognises his transgressive quality: 'Were they of the opinion that it was useless to prosecute me? To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter. It can be done, but reason is against it' (T, 24). Such peculiar creatures seem to upset the system not because they are especially fractious, but because they

⁶⁴ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. 5.

are ignorant subjects, without the vigorous body or docile mind courted by the state. Crucially, Molloy's thoughts on the destabilisation of propriety come as a result of his proximity with a kind of death: 'I was in the dark, most of the time, and all the more completely as a lifetime of observations had left me doubting the possibility of systematic decorum, even within a limited area. But it is only since I have ceased to live that I think of these things and the other thing' (*T*, 25). Although Molloy ceases to live as a subject in this ideological domain, he nevertheless tries to reengage with it, and in his confrontations with order, Molloy ultimately serves to unsettle the status quo. He survives in a 'raglimp stasis' (*T*, 26) as a dehumanised pariah after his viable life in the civilised world.

Molloy's mode of being intimates a symbolic death and invokes the additional capacity for existence noted in Santner's undeadness. Survival in Beckett does not completely avoid death, then, but rather distends the last relics of vitality in an otherwise moribund life bereft of import. Nevertheless, the fact is that Molloy treks through the wilderness of the forest and lapses into a ditch, at which point he hears that 'help' is coming and says that 'other scenes of my life came back to me' (*T*, 91). As noted above, he subsequently finds himself in his mother's room, which is where his account begins. Therefore, Molloy's investment in a former mode of life occurs in the mind, through habitual narratives, memories and imaginings. He does not simply cultivate a physical attachment to a particular way of life, as though he obstinately hangs around the town, hoping to learn from his encounters with the police, make himself a less indigent figure and acquire a meaningful sense of being. Instead, the helical structures of the novel explain how Molloy repeatedly traces his engagements with lost ideological models through virtual recitals. He replays the possibility of finding his mother and restoring her as a figure in his life. At the same time, Molloy

relives the memory of his past endeavours to comprehend the governing structures of the biopolitical domain that would offer him a life worth living. It is through the idea of undeadness that Beckett's aesthetics of continuation and the incompleteness of the narrative structure convey a psychological state, in which Molloy survives as still life by repeating his pursuits of now dead figures of meaning.

Molloy is estranged from meaningful domestic, social and political worlds, and descends into the abyss of thought. He persists in this mental space through the ruined performance of past meaning structures, such as the guarantee of a source in his mother and the value of a dignified social existence. Despite being disconnected from the structure of a governed realm and resembling biopolitically worthless material, Molloy survives in a spiralling narrative that finds him absorbed in the act of bearing witness to the past, complete with a projected alterity figure and a platform for humour. All of these creaturely modes contribute to this survival that subscribes to the possibility of stable meaning even whilst it is shown to be elusive. They maintain the creature's contact with previous ideals, and although this continuation sustains the present possibility of restoring the past, it also suggests that creaturely life is composed of a moribund rendition. In this way, the natural historical artefact outside of viable life emerges as a psychological repetition compulsion fixed on lost sources and past structures. Beckett's creatures are disposed to inaccessible but still aspirational models of meaning that leave them surviving with the remnants of history and shows that there are stirrings still beyond the values attributed to a life worth living.

Epilogue

At the beginning of this thesis, I quoted an extract from a letter that Beckett wrote to Georges Duthuit on 12th August 1948. In this letter, Beckett apologizes for the 'unbelievably silly letter' he had sent previously to Duthuit in which he offers some near inscrutable thoughts on art, before noting that: 'One must shout, murmur, exult madly, until one can find the no doubt calm language of the no, unqualified, or as little qualified as possible'.¹ As Beckett picks up momentum in this earlier letter he stops himself, saying: 'But I'm starting to write'.² Beckett's correspondence drifts into his current creative direction, which suggests some parity between his fiction and the request for pardon in the next letter:

Forgive me now and always for all my stupidities and blanknesses, I am only a tiny little part of a creature, self-hating vestiges, remains of an old longing, when I was little, for rounding out, even on a small radius. That shuts you in your whole life long. And one drives in vain towards figurelessness.³

This short extract covers several of the creaturely dimensions raised over the course of this thesis. The 'stupidities and blanknesses' to which Beckett refers parallel the ignorant and incompetent testimonies of his author-narrators. He appears to recognize the same asininity and lacunae in his letters that constitute his art of failure and attest to the impossibility of bearing witness. The idea of being 'part of a creature' itself recalls the creaturely subjectivity that emerges when the subject is present at its own desubjectification. Beckett describes himself as a fragmented being in the way

¹ Beckett, *Letters*, Vol. 2, pp. 102, 98.

² *Ibid.* p. 98.

³ *Ibid.* p. 102.

Beckett's creatures are sundered as they articulate their own disordered identities. 'Self-hating vestiges' and 'remains of an old longing' offer a striking depiction of a melancholic figure, particularly the ruined result of a sustained saturnine disposition. Similarly, Beckett's creatures are the disintegrated subjects of the unfulfilled desire for resolution and subscription to previous templates of meaning. The fact that Beckett's longing is for 'rounding out' evokes the manner in which humour helps to persevere with failure and contribute to a perpetual cycle of relief and suffering. As the laugh relieves the pressures at the limits of language and the tolerance of monotony, the creature is granted a reprieve that allows further misery to ensue. More than this, the idea of rounding out 'on a small radius' betrays the kind of exacting economy that characterizes the aesthetic trajectory of Beckett's *oeuvre* but maintains the creaturely spirit of survival. These small spaces of vitality precipitate the futile drive 'towards figurelessness' that renders Beckett's characters enervated and etiolated creatures, but resists complete liquidation.

The complex shape of creaturely life in Beckett is dominated by what I have repeatedly called 'suspension' and 'survival'. A number of tensions give rise to the suspended lives of Beckett's creatures: the incapacity to speak together with the obligation to speak; the urge towards distinction and ascendancy together with the reliance on a necessary other; the pursuit of an end to words together with the laugh that signals and forestalls conclusion; and the inability to go on together with the act of going on. These contradictions create figures subject to open-ended processes, often repeating the same in the hope of change and subsequently surviving on the small differences of iteration that prevent the creatures' completions. Beckett depicts subjects engaging a past they cannot fully comprehend or express, burdened with the search to make sense of and validate their lives, and driven by the prospect that a

resolution will come. The creature is therefore carrying a past it cannot quite grasp and a future it cannot quite realise. Beckett's creatures live on encircling the loss, or worse, the absence, of a meaningful life.

This reading is significant in the way it deploys a particular trope, the creature, as a means of accessing the historical and biopolitical relevance of Beckett's work. The creature traverses the borderline between aesthetic and extra-literary levels to show how Beckett's art of failure is attentive to the way models of expression and epistemology are destabilised in the wake of catastrophe. Adorno describes the artist's predicament in *Aesthetic Theory*, asserting that 'externally art appears impossible whilst immanently it must be pursued'.⁴ For Adorno, the Holocaust has a profound impact on the very validity of art, philosophy, language and knowledge. This kind of enlightened culture effectively pulls the rug from under its own feet to appear barbaric in light of recent history. Thinking through Beckett's work in terms of the suspended but surviving creature encompasses the contradiction of this creative impasse in which art is undermined but must endure all the same. The stirrings still of Beckett's creatures implies a process of persevering under these difficult conditions, in which the success of a final product is denied and whereby the creature emerges as a persistent figure of failure. Yet this failure is itself an ethical and empathic response to the catastrophe. Beckett's writing enacts 'a writing of terrorized disempowerment as close as possible to the experience of traumatized victims without presuming to be identical to it'.⁵ He confronts the impossibility in the challenge facing art after Auschwitz and conveys the fact that speaking will always be *instead*, as a powerless secondary witness.

⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 320.

⁵ Dominic La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University, 2001), pp. 105-6.

The creature is particularly related to the biopolitical nature of the Holocaust. The creaturely aesthetic based on ignorance and impotence in Beckett's work offers an oblique response to the contemporaneous climate in which the value of the human was the focus of a political ideology that interfered with the bodily conditions of its subjects. In terms of the narrative obligation itself, Beckett's creatures are bound to a necessity that sees their very existence dominated by their negotiations with the complete overhaul of the idea of a valuable human life. As Agamben writes: 'One of the essential characteristics of modern politics [...] is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside'.⁶ This effort to decide upon a new criterion for life worthy of political significance relates to Beckett's aesthetic firstly, as his creatures pursue a field of meaning that is perennially denied to them. As they employ language and reason in their accounts, their narrative endeavours clearly lack the human ability to master positive meaning and the author-narrators are instead stranded in the creaturely world of insistent creation. On the level of words, then, Beckett's creatures offer an implicit critique of certain key humanist assumptions.

Beckett's creatures are also subjected to more explicit biopolitical exclusions on a social level, which I have outlined in this thesis. In Santner's brief mention of Beckett in the epilogue of his book *The Royal Remains* he refers to the phrase 'merely human' to describe Beckett's subaltern characters. He writes: 'Recalling Arendt's account of the stateless, one could say that Beckett's characters acquire their particular strangeness by being rendered merely human'.⁷ In the footnote, he adds that 'Arendt's great insight was that being rendered "merely human" results in becoming

⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 131.

⁷ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. 251.

something *less than human and yet not simply animal*'.⁸ Santner refers here to the exclusion from viable forms of life that engenders debased creaturely life, 'a dimension *created*, in a word, by a process of destitution'.⁹ Though Beckett's creatures are refused human belonging in the biopolitical sense, they are not united with the natural world in the way the animal is with the open. Rather the creature is estranged from the world through consciousness and alienated from socio-political value as a result of biopolitical order. With an awareness of their exclusion from both spheres, Beckett's creatures drift in between, closer to the raw matter of a biological entity but with awareness of the potential for human meaning. This 'merely human' state is the uncanny proximity of the creature to the progressive human and autotelic animal.

On the edge of these human and animal modes of being, the creature subsists in negotiating the remains of the former frameworks of value and meaning. The biopolitical interference in classifying types of people ruptures the idea of humanity founded on civilised standards, universal rights and the sacrosanctity of human life. In this way, the creature offers a rather global perspective in which '[m]aking sense of the senseless remains the essential element in recovering the idea of humanity after the holocaust'.¹⁰ This process of refiguring the human in a post-human era discloses the human's creaturely potential. As we have seen in Beckett, human components are distorted: language is inadequate, reason is defective, power is dependent, laughter is tragic and life is a death. These properties do not have the same authorial efficacy or organic quality, and can appear to be antithetical to themselves. Thus, as the creature seeks to be readmitted from its double poverty in world, it acts out a human template

⁸ Ibid. p. 251.

⁹ Ibid. p. 57.

¹⁰ Robert Fine, 'Hannah Arendt: Politics and Understanding after the Holocaust', in *Social Theory after the Holocaust*, ed. by Robert Fine and Charles Turner (Liverpool: Liverpool University, 2000), 19-46, p. 23.

subject to reconfirmation, which, to use Beckett's phrase, shows that 'Humans are truly strange' (*FN*, 65). In adhering to the human after the model has been undermined and made incongruous, the survivor unveils the creaturely dimension of the human.

However, as Beckett wrote in 1946 for a Radio Erin broadcast called 'The Capital of the Ruins', about the rebuilding efforts at Saint-Lô in Normandy: "Provisional" is not the term it was in this universe become provisional'.¹¹ Since Enlightenment humanism has been destabilised, in its place is a strange performance of that ideal. Evidently, Beckett recognises that everything is subject to a continual meantime, that systems of thought can be revised or refuted and that the human condition effectively becomes the conditional human. In offering a kind of grotesque simulation of the human, then, Beckett's creatures convey the *pro tem* conditions between the outmoded stability of the past and the unforthcoming solution to the crisis. This creaturely life is suspended in transition after the fall and before any satisfactory replacement. It is effectively an afterlife of waiting for life to come, as Beckett shows in *Endgame* when Clov asks 'Do you believe in the life to come?' and Hamm replies 'Mine was always that' (*E*, 30-31).

Although Hamm has the last word in this exchange, Clov's more anticipatory question pervades Beckett's work. If the mid-twentieth century saw the perversion of the human cosmos, it is not necessarily the absolute end to these former systems. Beckett's work indicates that the spectre of the human goes on in the habitual repetition of its own ruined model. It still attends the creaturely life of trying to reconstitute a viable sense of meaning. In the final passage of 'The Capital of the Ruins', Beckett's ambivalence towards this salvaging process surfaces:

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, 'The Capital of the Ruins', in *As No Other Dare Fail: For Samuel Beckett on His 80th Birthday*, ed. by John Calder (London: Calder, 1986), 71-76, p. 75.

[S]ome of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realizing that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. These will have been in France.¹²

The idea of humanity is one that is repeatedly destroyed and what survives is a re-conception of a broken image. In a kind of token of humanism, however, Beckett suggests that the lesson for humanity appears to be within its own ruins, which might offer the opportunity for the human condition to be reconsidered. As Andrew Slade notes, '[t]he ruins of St. Lô are not just in St. Lô, they will be the material with which thought must grapple if it is to re-think its condition without falling into the amnesia of repetition or the conscious repetition of remembrance'.¹³ Despite this, the phrase 'thought again' is itself deeply equivocal as it envelops both perpetuation and transformation. The creaturely disposition would indicate a relapse into the habitual performance of the disaster-bound human. Equally, the creature is dissatisfied with perpetual reversion. It awaits a better future, holding onto the possibility of change and an implied otherwise: 'The fact is, it seems, that the most you can hope is to be a little less, in the end, the creature you were in the beginning, and the middle' (*T*, 32). In the melancholic fixation on past models of meaning, then, Beckett's characters are not completely bare, but creaturely, surviving as a haunting echo of meaning, a remnant of the past and a hope for the future. Indeed, it is this progressive desire without the means of progression that engenders a creaturely state of suspension. The Beckettian creature is an anti-humanist figure that emerges from a ruined humanist

¹² Beckett, 'The Capital of the Ruins', p. 76.

¹³ Slade, *Postmodern Sublime*, p. 58.

ideal, but retains, even if only negatively, an element of humanism that cannot be expunged.

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