

## Samuel Beckett and the Antinomies of Author and Audience

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### Introduction: The Antinomies of Author and Audience

Any discussion of Samuel Beckett inevitably imperils the integrity of his work. As Vivian Mercier has noted, Beckett's texts are like Rorschach tests: each interpretation says more about the reader than about the text (Beckett/Beckett vii). Thus, interpretations of Beckett often begin with the cautious proviso that his texts resist interpretative frameworks. And yet the amount of scholarship devoted to explicating his work is voluminous and shows no signs of diminishing. It seems as though we need models for understanding Beckett, while the personae who inscribe his texts actively shun any outside models of meaning. A dilemma thus arises from the writer's need to express freely and the reader's need to impose interpretative structures. The author and his audience, as Beckett demonstrates, cannot simply co-exist; where other writers offer models of cooperation with their readers, Beckett only offers conflict based on the particular needs of both sides.

In Beckett, the conflict between the author and the reader plays out as a ceaseless, unresolved dialectic. In Beckett and Aesthetics, Daniel Albright offers a good analysis of these dialectics, which include "catharsis v. fun" in drama, "intimacy v. remoteness" in mass forms of communication, and (familarly to a Joycean audience) "*Nacheinander* v. *Nebeneinander*" in pictures and music. Furthermore, "behind all these antitheses is the antithesis of Failure v. Success"(8). Albright concludes that if Beckett points us toward any aesthetic, it is one in which art forever remains at variance with itself. In another important study, Bjørn K. Myskja recasts these conflicts in terms of Immanuel Kant's

aesthetic philosophy. His justification for this move lies in Kant's notion of the sublime, which arises from a kind of cognitive failure. Myskja cites Beckett's Molloy, in which Jacques Moran undoes his entire preceding narrative with a final self-contradiction. The second half of Molloy begins, "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (92), while Moran writes in the last sentence, "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" (176). This contradictory narrative, Myskja claims, in which thesis and antithesis remain unreconciled, leads to the same sort of cognitive failure we find in Kant's theory of the sublime.

Myskja's interpretative strategy, while strong, leaves us with problems that arise from almost any reading of Beckett. Myskja argues that positive ethical effects arise from the experience of the sublime in Beckett, a claim that seems somewhat antithetical to Beckett's texts. As many scholars note, Beckett rejects the Cartesianism (implicit in Myskja's reading) that purportedly constructs new knowledge from indubitable foundations. However, once we deny this move to Myskja, we necessarily assume that there *is* some other determinate meaning in Beckett, since pointing it out is the only way we can show Myskja to be wrong. With Beckett, critics usually argue by pointing out some positive meaning some other critic has found and denying that Beckett would allow such an interpretation. This approach, however, fails to get at the source of the problem, which is that Beckett's texts generate an eternal quandary as to how much they resist interpretation and how much they allow it. And once this point is allowed, it prompts the question: does indeterminacy itself become a determinate goal for Beckett?

Nevertheless, Myskja's appropriation of Kant for a study of Beckett indicates a useful way of elucidating these aesthetic problems. In the history of aesthetics, Immanuel Kant is perhaps unique as a philosopher who recognizes these conflicts in art (which he calls "antinomies") and whose aesthetic attempts to resolve the impasse. Therefore, in this thesis, I will argue that a useful model for understanding Beckett's conflicted texts can be found in Kant's aesthetic philosophy. I will not argue that Beckett was consciously working with Kant in mind. Indeed, Beckett forces us to question the elucidatory reading that summarily charts out something as vague as "influence." Rather, I believe that Kant's account of the aesthetic experience is useful insofar as it anticipates the conflict between Beckett's authors and audiences. Furthermore, just as Kant's philosophy aims to resolve the paradoxes inherent in art, a reading that begins with Kant can help us chart the various strategies Beckett employs to evade the antinomy of aesthetic judgment. Ultimately, Beckett's personae fail to satisfactorily solve the problem, and where Kant holds out some hope for resolution, for Beckett, the only possibility is a perpetual impasse.

### 1. Kant and the Problem of Imaginative Freedom

I recall sitting in the audience during a performance of Waiting for Godot (1954), where at one point, a cellular phone went off somewhere in the seats next to me. The actors both started and looked up, surprised, as if Vladimir and Estragon had received an unexpected sign of their watchers in what I thought was a brilliant improvisation. After the play, however, I learned from a stagehand that the director had deliberately planted

the offending cell ringer, and if my memory is correct, the phone went off exactly after Estragon's first words in the following dialogue:

Estragon: (*feebly*). We're not tied? (*Pause.*) We're not—  
 Vladimir: Listen!  
*They listen, grotesquely rigid.*  
 Estragon: I hear nothing.  
 Vladimir: Hsst! (*They listen. Estragon loses his balance, almost falls. He clutches the arm of Vladimir who totters. They listen, huddled together.*) Nor I.  
*Sighs of relief. They relax and separate.*  
 Estragon: You gave me a fright.  
 Vladimir: I thought it was he.  
 Estragon: Who?  
 Vladimir: Godot. (15)

By planting the ring tone in the middle of the performance, the director conveyed a Beckettian awareness of the ways in which dramatic artifice tries to hide its own constructed nature. Even if the above scene had indeed been improvised, as most of the audience believed, everyone would still have been conscious of the features of “play” that made such a scene possible in the first place. At a performance, of course, we never actually believe we are witnessing real people in their natural habitat, and yet we know that the most successful works of art create a “suspension of disbelief.” As Daniel Albright claims, Beckett construes his “craft as simultaneously a construction and a presentation of the non-existence of the constructing” (32).

Beckett shows us that works of art suffer from deep inner conflicts, thus responding to a central concern in the tradition of Western aesthetics. This tradition culminates in Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment (1790), in which Kant explicates and attempts to resolve these conflicts. Kant writes that beauty only interests us insofar as it “must always be that of nature: our interest vanishes completely as soon as we notice that we have been deceived, that only art was involved” (302). However, according to

Kant, art's inner tension between nature and artifice gives rise to the complex feeling of "purposiveness without purpose." By means of this equivocating concept, Kant believes we can successfully traverse the problems of aesthetic judgment. "A bird's song," Kant writes, "proclaims his joyfulness and contentment with his existence. At least that is how we interpret nature, whether or not it has such an intention" (302). Kant claims that nature is, strictly speaking, intentionless; nature assumes an intended character only as an appearance to us. This vague, in-between state—the appearance of "purposiveness" in the absence of a definite, concrete purpose—is Kant's resolution of the paradox of aesthetic experience.

Kant arrives at this equivocation as a way of resolving his antinomy of aesthetic judgment. According to Kant, an "antinomy" results when we can apparently prove two mutually exclusive propositions. Kant's entire philosophical project aims to solve antinomies like the fact that the beautiful must be at once natural and artificial. Another major antinomy in the Critique of Judgment (which we also find in Beckett's works) is as follows. The first proposition maintains that any aesthetic judgment must claim universal assent. When I say that an object is beautiful, I do not base that claim on purely subjective grounds; if this were the case, then all my talk about aesthetics would be idiosyncratic and personal, like my preference for particular kinds of food or drink. However, art's universal validity implies that the beautiful is judged according to a concept, and Kant claims that the aesthetic imagination must be free from concepts. Concepts carry with them the idea of some purpose, which necessarily limits their role in the imagination to the accomplishment of some given end. One of the central problems

of Kant's Critique of Judgment, therefore, is to provide a coherent account of aesthetic experience that provides both for art's universal validity and its freedom from concepts.

Kant relates this problem to the arts of speech, oratory and poetry:

*Oratory* is the art of engaging in a task of the understanding as [if it were] a free play of the imagination; *poetry* is the art of conducting a free play of the imagination as [if it were] a task of the understanding. (321)

Oratory, Kant claims, is the art of language that points toward a particular end or purpose. The orator seeks to ensnare the imagination through rhetorical trickery in order to direct it towards some purpose, whether it be financial gain, political ambition, or even some admirable moral goal. According to Kant, the imagination is never constrained by any determinate purpose in a truly aesthetic experience, even if this purpose is noble and well-meaning. Kant thus claims that oratory falsely advertises a "free play of the imagination" only to capture the imagination through artifice and direct it towards some end.

Poetry, on the other hand, never uses language for a purpose; it begins by claiming that the reader will discover determinate concepts, but ends up supplying more than it promises by conducting a free play of the imagination (321). Specifically, this "free play" is conducted by the productive imagination, our imaginative faculty that operates independently from any prior experience (Burnham 14). However, this freedom is not merely an unrestrained lack of order; rather, the free play is "one that harmonizes in form with the laws of the understanding" (327). In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant claims that these laws of the understanding are universal to human cognition; the way we perceive reality must conform to certain forms of cognition that determine every possible experience. Similarly, Kant claims that the aesthetic experience, while free from any

determinate purpose, must harmonize with these universal laws of understanding. This argument enables Kant to claim that the aesthetic experience frees the imagination from determinate concepts while demanding universal assent from everyone.

One might object, however, that poetry (as traditionally conceived in Kant's day) uses nothing but determinate concepts expressed through language. Through the poetic voice, for example, the poet adopts some persona with whom we necessarily become acquainted in order to make any sense of the poem's meaning. In oratory, we are often so charmed by the speaker's charismatic appeal that we accept whatever he says; we could also say that the poetic voice is that kind of attraction towards an end that interferes with Kant's notion of the aesthetic experience proper. Another problem arises from the free play of the productive imagination, which Kant claims appropriates nothing from past experience; it seems that in constructing the poetic voice, the poet has nothing to call upon if not past experience, which informs us of human nature in general.

Kant's answer to these challenges involves an appeal to his concept of the sublime (more specifically, the "mathematical sublime"), which amounts to something like cognitive failure. When I am in the presence of the Alps, for instance, I have before me something that is unimaginably large; as with any other object, my cognitive faculties attempt to reduce what is before me to a determinate concept, but the sheer largeness of it all frustrates my ability to do so. What the poetic voice does is similar to the experience of the sublime in nature. The poet takes some past experience—some idea of human nature, for instance—and reorients this pre-existing concept towards an expression that goes *beyond* the limits of anything we have previously encountered in experience (314). In Kant's words,

an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it. (316)

Therefore, the imagination is truly in “free play” when it attempts to locate a determinate concept where none can be found, as when the poet stretches human nature “out of bounds,” so to speak. The poet thus frees the imagination from determinate concepts while producing an aesthetic experience that lays claim to assent from everyone.

The interpretative paradoxes we find in Beckett parallel Kant’s dialectical account of aesthetic experience. As we have seen, Beckett’s texts oblige us to reconsider how much interpretation is tolerable in a given text. To what extent do I leave the text as it is, undetermined, and to what extent do I attempt to formulate a determinate meaning using my own imaginative structures? The problem, in Beckett, becomes one of the possibility of communication without a loss of imaginative freedom. In Kantian terms, the assumption of universality in the aesthetic experience (its *sensus communis*) must coexist with the free play of the imagination. However, Beckett shows us how the interaction between the author and the audience involves a necessary reduction of imaginative freedom in both of the participants; either the artist’s expression must be reduced to a function of the audience’s interpretative structures, or the reader must allow the author to restrict her freedom through an irreducible, confounding text. In contrast with Kant, Beckett denies that universal communicability and imaginative freedom can coexist at all. The author and the audience must stay silent, or else restrict each other’s freedom in their coming together.

## 2. Beckett's Refusal of Irony in *Murphy* and *Watt*

Omniscience and ignorance form an uneasy dialectic in Samuel Beckett's first two major novels, Murphy (1937) and Watt (1945). In these novels, the narrators deliberately scramble the usual epistemological norms by which narrators enable the reader to find his way around the text. This maneuver, which deprives the reader of an ironic standpoint, seeks to prevent any possible inroads for interpretative reduction. The reader, however, habituates himself to Beckett's unfamiliar textual practices, a move that eventually results in some definite structure of meaning. These conflicts parallel Kant's antinomies, and in these two works, neither Beckett's authors nor his readers are able to successfully traverse the conflicting needs of reduction and autonomy.

The uniqueness of the narration in Murphy lies in its explication of its own ironies. In a more conventional novel, the writer would count it a virtue to merely hint at the ironies of a given situation. Instead, the narrator in Murphy takes away the reader's privilege to find ironies, sarcastically explicating his own text:

All this was duly revolting to Murphy, whose experience as a physical and rational being obliged him to call sanctuary what the psychiatrists called exile and to think of the patients not as banished from a system of benefits but as escaped from a system of fiasco. (178)

Throughout the novel, the narrator seems intent on pointing out any possible irony in the situations he presents. Describing Murphy's desire for a garret, he declares, "The reason for this eccentricity does not seem a very good one" (161). This sort of normative judgment is also a feature of Mercier and Camier, where the narrator informs us that the duo "should have felt the better for [the] glow of distant days when they were young, and warm, and loved art, and mocked marriage, and did not know each other, but they felt no whit the better" (10-11).

We do not normally think that narrators need to point out ironies like the futility of Murphy's search for the perfect garret or Mercier and Camier's Proustian anxieties, since the pleasure of reading traditionally comes from the assumptions the reader provides in order to judge the character's situation. Dramatic irony requires a character who is in some crucial way ignorant of his own situation, and an objective observer (the audience) who looks down on the fictive world. Unraveling this discrepancy between the facts as the character sees them and the facts as we know them is usually the basis for meaning in literature. Usually, narratives affect a realist transparency and merely indicate ironies instead of explicitly stating them. The narrator in Murphy, however, makes explicit what is implicit, bringing his own commentary, which ordinarily should be provided by the reader. As Booth notes, Beckett's "intended ironies are all quite clearly stated, on the surface" (260).

This narrator leaves us with a text that is, as Wolfgang Iser might say, totally formulated; it leaves us without any room to supply our own judgment. In a sense, the stance the narrator takes towards his audience serves as an emancipation, since if the narrator leaves a finished product before us, then we have little work to do ourselves; all we have to do is sit back and allow the machinery of the narrative to do its work. The narrator continually remarks how various necessities need to be fulfilled, such as the long digression on Murphy's mind and a few remarks on Ticklepenny, which the narrator informs us "will not take many moments" (87). A view of storytelling thus emerges as an arrangement of various facts such that the reader needs merely to be present so that the narration can operate. This, according to Kant, is the antithesis of the aesthetic experience proper; however, in Beckett, art consists only of reductions and enslaved

imaginations. We can view the artist as the kind master upon whom we depend for the aesthetic experience, but we do this at the expense of our imaginative freedom, while the artist remains bound to the forms that are most likely to leave an impact on the reader.

Furthermore, the fact that Beckett's narrator makes himself so conspicuous shows the impossibility of a completely omniscient viewpoint from which to judge ironies. By seeking to deny the reader of the pleasure of irony, the narrator produces a whole other set of ironies of which he himself is the subject. He seeks to deny the reader the task of explication, but in so doing he makes himself the target of ironic judgment. His dual narrative status as objective observer and observed character shows that the final irony has as its victim the reader, who, like the characters in any fiction, is ultimately just as ignorant of his own situation. An irresolvable conflict thus arises from the narrator's stance in Murphy. The narrator attempts to prevent the reader's interference through sarcasm and deliberate exposition of irony; the reader, too, tries to avoid being "read" by the text, or being reduced to a function of the narrator's ironic gaze. Each side attempts to deflect the other's tendency to reduce him to a determinate concept.

In typical narration, irony operates from inequalities in knowledge between the reader and the character. In Beckett, omniscience and ignorance forge an uneasy coexistence when his totally formulated texts shun irony. Sam, the narrator of Watt, claims that he is ignorant of the novel's events so far as Watt informs him (125-126), while presumably Samuel Beckett could just make up new material to fill Sam's knowledge gaps. In a sense, Watt's disparity between Beckett, writing it, and Sam, reporting it, permits us, reading it, a peculiarly omniscient point of view, since anything we possibly could know in this narrative world is already given. One may object that

there are many things we don't know throughout the novel: for example, the way in which Watt gains access to Erskine's room. But we know exactly how he does this: "Ruse a by, he said, and as he said, Ruse a by, he blushed, until his nose seemed a normal colour, and hung his head, and twisted and untwisted his big red bony hands" (128). Watt remains exactly the kind of being that he is, a figment of Beckett's imagination, so it is no trouble at all that he should gain access to the room according to the natural laws that hold in this particular novel. As Sam's footnote informs us, "Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work" (102).

Even though his narrators seek to deny vital information to the reader, Beckett shows how we actually know everything there is to know in any narrative, since narration operates according to certain laws to which the author binds himself. Sam's narrative enacts the way in which we become accustomed to these laws in the long section where Watt inquires after the existence of a bell in Erskine's room. This episode has the element of a particularly mischievous kind of humor: the so-called "shaggy dog" joke. This sort of joke is one that develops for an extended amount of time, going through several prolonged permutations of an initial setup, before ending in anticlimax. The point of a shaggy dog joke lies not in its punchline; rather, the trick occurs in the way that the teller has fatigued and finally disrupted the listener's desire for a satisfactory conclusion. In this narrative model, the story is *inflicted* upon the audience for the narrator's sole amusement. Sam, the narrator of Watt, is deliberately exploiting the audience as the backdrop for his long-winded games. His narratives are a form of self-amusement, rather than a cooperative exchange with the reader. As Hugh Kenner notes, "The analyst whose stock-in-trade is his skill at putting his author's matter before his reader in pithier or less

redundant language will find no purchase” (76) in attempting to reproduce Sam’s elaborate rambles in neat summaries. The elliptical nature of conventional narrative, which selectively arranges the facts most likely to elicit a certain response from the reader, is a practice almost entirely purged from the pages of Watt. Rather, Sam seeks independence from the reader’s gaze by fatiguing our sense of what is normally acceptable in a narrative.

However, we must be careful regarding the distance we are willing to place between ourselves and the text in our analysis of Watt. By the time we get to Watt’s inquiry into the existence of a bell in Erskine’s room—an extensive treatment of a mundane, trivial matter—we already expect that some wild narrative experiment will be just around the corner. After reading a few dozen pages, we come to understand that we are in Beckett’s laboratory. We therefore disrupt Beckett’s attempt at a true shaggy dog joke when we realize that Watt is an atypical novel. When it emerges that “There was a bell in Erskine’s room, but it was broken” (128), our response is not likely to be one of annoyance; rather, we laugh because by now we are familiar enough with Beckett’s joking around that we know that this is all part of the game. We find ourselves in a quandary upon first approaching the convoluted world of Watt; the only way to circumvent this bewilderment is to habituate ourselves to the unfamiliar setting.

This is a problem for Beckett, since the response to an artwork that operates from the habitual is an imaginative stricture; in Proust, he shows this habituation to be the central anxiety in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. Habit functions in Proust as the individual’s strategy for coping with the insecurity that comes with new surroundings. Habit, however, is also “the guarantee of a dull inviolability, [...] the ballast that chains

the dog to his vomit” (19), and we necessarily sacrifice some of our freedom in order to obtain the fixity that comes with habit.

Recognizing the limitations of Proust’s work to overcome the challenges of habit, Beckett once remarked that “[Proust] is so absolutely the master of his own form that he becomes its slave as often as not.”<sup>1</sup> Beckett, too, is so good at creating a narrative world of unfamiliarity that it eventually becomes familiar. In Watt, we struggle to regain our composure as Beckett undoes every narrative convention we have come to expect. Part of this struggle involves becoming accustomed to the norms that characterize this particular work. The initial perplexity with which we approach Watt is circumvented by the stronger need to have some sense of footing within the text. By the time we get to Watt’s inquiry into the bell, we are far too used to the laws of this novel to be surprised when the episode abruptly ends.

We can now see why it is so difficult for novelists like Beckett to present the new and not merely rehash the old. Any attempt to express oneself freely, with complete originality, will always fall prey to the reader’s habit, which reorients anything new into old hat. “Not the least remarkable of Murphy’s innumerable classifications of experience was that into jokes that had once been good jokes and jokes that had never been good jokes” (65); from this point of view, storytelling of any kind is a stultifying activity, since anything we could possibly tell is no longer “good” once we have told it. This is another way in which Beckett shows how the author’s imaginative vision is necessarily diluted when it comes into contact with an audience.

Like Wolfgang Iser’s notion of a “text that is unformulated and nevertheless intended” (31), Kant’s fine art exhibits “purposiveness without purpose.” Kant overrides

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, pp. 121.

the dilemma between determination and freedom in an aesthetic of complementarity, where the artist and the audience both come away without any loss of freedom. In Beckett, however, either habit converts our freedom into stale concepts, or else the act of communication fails to occur at all. Beckett's texts are either unformulated or intended, purposive or purposeless—never both.

### 3. Beckett's Trilogy: The Aesthetics of Antinomy

We have seen how Beckett's work elicits a response from the reader, who reconfigures anything new into an inert habit. In Molloy (1951), Malone Dies (1951), and The Unnamable (1954), Beckett pushes his narrators a little further to see whether they can possibly curtail the habituating impulse of the reader. The narrators of the Trilogy are no longer openly hostile to the reader, as in Murphy, nor do they recast the game of communication as a solitary diversion, as in Watt. Instead, Molloy, Jacques Moran, Malone, and the Unnamable attempt to speak themselves by radically blurring the categories of narrator, author, character, and reader. Thus they attempt to circumvent Kant's antinomy between reduction and autonomy by uniting all the participants in a discourse into a single mode of being within the text.

Throughout the Trilogy, Beckett explores what it means to "be" within and in relation to a text. "There were times," Molloy says, "when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be. Then I was no longer that sealed jar to which I owed my being so well preserved" (49). "Forgetting to be" is precisely the demand that writing places on the narrator and that reading places on the reader, since according to the Kantian aesthetic, we can only be free in relation to a text when our cognition loses its

ability to reduce experience to determinate concepts. This idea of forgetting the tendency of texts to determine for us a certain mode of “being” is central to the possibility of circumventing the problem of aesthetic interaction.

Beckett’s personae, however, are unable to shake their awareness of “being” within the texts they inhabit. Molloy’s conception of being is essentially textual; at one point, he speaks of himself as the title of a work called “Molloy, or life without a chambermaid” (59). Similarly, the second novel of the trilogy comes to us with the title, Malone Dies. In both of these titles, the two beings—Molloy and Malone—are presented as extra-temporal concepts. As in most novels, the presentation of events coincides with a conception of a reader whose standpoint is extra-temporal. We speak and write of narrative events in the present tense, which reinforces the attitude of omniscience we bring to the text. Molloy reminds us of this artificiality: “I speak in the present tense, it is so easy to speak in the present tense, when speaking of the past. It is the mythological present, don’t mind it” (26).

However, in order to experience things as the narrator perceives them, we should ideally remain ignorant of the tale’s outcome. We have a text that comes to us with the title, Malone Dies; and yet, how do we know that Malone dies? It seems that why or how Malone dies is the wrong question, since Malone’s idea of reading is one where the reader becomes the writer: “if you simply must speak of people you simply must put yourself in their place, it is not difficult” (270). To be in Malone’s place, we cannot know what form his end will take. We have some final words, which seem to be a sputtering out: “never there he will never / never anything / there / any more” (288). But it does not seem that we have any right to the claim “Malone dies” other than what the

title of the work tells us, and for all we know, the title could be imposed by someone other than Malone. Alternatively, Malone knows just as we do that he will die *at some point*, but ultimately we are in the same narrative position, ignorant of the exact form his end will assume.

Beckett thus blurs the boundaries between the reader and the narrator by placing them alongside one another in the narrative progression. However, an incongruity arises between being “inside” the text, working our way through along with the narrator, discovering things as he does, and standing at a point “outside,” whereby we can judge and pass on determinate concepts from a privileged standpoint. Beckett’s narrators have a need to think of themselves as completed narratives; as Molloy says, only from “the tranquility of decomposition” (25) can he have the privileged vantage point that would allow him to reduce his life to a determinate concept. Of course, by that time, we are “never anything / there / anymore,” and thus this standpoint is non-existent. Any attempt at establishing this determinacy, therefore, limits the freedom we should enjoy in the midst of life. “My life, my life,” Molloy says, “now I speak of it as 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?” (36).

Molloy tries to overcome this paradox through a distinctly Kantian move. At one point he speaks of his world as “at an end, in spite of appearances”; he continues, “its end brought it forth, ending it began, is it clear enough?” (40). Molloy thus distinguishes between the world as it appears to him and the world-in-itself (“in spite of appearances”). As Kant claims, the world-in-itself exists independently of time (a category of the human mind) and is thus always at an extra-temporal end. Similarly, Molloy overcomes the

need both for an end and for the absence of ends by appealing to a distinction between the world as we see it and the world as it is. Applying this distinction, Kant posits the existence of human freedom in the world-in-itself, since nature appears (to us) to behave mechanistically and therefore precludes our freedom. By dividing his existence into two separate realms of appearance and reality, Molloy harmonizes his need to survive as a free, existing being and as one whose narrative has come to an end.

However, Beckett shows how Molloy's distinction still fails to overcome the basic need to define his being. Theodor Adorno, in his study of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, discusses Kant's distinction between the thing-in-itself and the thing-as-appearance. Adorno claims that this maneuver attempts to "salvage" pure knowledge from the dangers of empirical skepticism by making it in some sense "objective" (2).

This sort of idea can also be found in Beckett's Trilogy:

Not to have been a dupe, that will have been my best possession, my best deed, to have been a dupe, wishing I wasn't, thinking I wasn't, knowing I was, not being a dupe of not being a dupe. For any old thing, no, that doesn't work, that should work, but it doesn't. (314)

"Not being a dupe of not being a dupe" is the highest knowledge the Unnamable can salvage from his stifling subjectivity. Like Socrates, the only thing Beckett's characters can know is that they know nothing beyond the fictions they create about themselves. Here, finally, we have a kernel of truth in Beckett's barren world, but it is hardly an issue of triumph; it is closer to anticlimax. For Beckett's characters, the search goes on for some definitive account of their situation.

By the time Beckett reaches The Unnamable, his speaker remains aware of all the previous attempts at speaking himself without falsifying the account. He often mentions characters from Beckett's past: Malone, Watt, Murphy, Mercier and Camier. After all

these failed attempts, he asks, “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving” (291). Beckett’s *incipit* illustrates the impasse he has reached after producing characters, narrators, and readers who have all placed unsurpassable imaginative structures on one another. Molloy forgets to be; the Unnamable’s resolution involves “unquestioning” and “unbelieving”—or perhaps more accurately, his work is a process of “un-questioning” and “un-believing” that can provide some glimpse into his primary, unfettered self.

In order to report this primary given of experience, the narrators, characters, audience, and even “Samuel Beckett” himself blur together to produce a single amalgam of “unnamable” subjects. The trilogy’s progression of narrators—Molloy, Moran, Malone, and finally the Unnamable—reveals Beckett’s deepening quest to evade the reader’s reduction to interpretative concepts. As Leo Bersani notes, the qualities that we find most endearing in Molloy—his inimitable colloquialisms, his absurd yet engrossing attention to trivialities—are precisely what Beckett must abandon in his quest to avoid any speech that “violates the purity of being with the accidents of personality, language, and time. To be *anything* is not to be” (323). In other words, we can’t even *like* Beckett’s work without imposing an unbearable set of demands on his speakers. The following passage, which reflects these anxieties, might reasonably be taken as Beckett’s view of his own authorial achievement:

That’s the bright boy of the class speaking now, he’s the one always called to the rescue when things go badly, he talks all the time of merit and situations, he has saved more than one, of suffering too, he knows how to stimulate the flagging spirit, stop the rot, with the simple use of his mighty word alone, even if he has to add, a moment later. But what suffering, since he has always suffered, which rather damps the rejoicings. But he soon makes up for it, he puts all to rights again, invoking the celebrated notions of quantity, habit-formation, wear and tear,

and others too numerous for him to mention, and which he is thus in a position, in the next belch, to declare inapplicable to the case before him, for there is no end to his wits. (376)

Any esteem of Beckett's achievement necessarily limits its power due to the processes of "habit-formation" that he explicates so superbly. This idea belongs essentially to Kant, whose aesthetic experience must remain unsullied by any attraction towards a narrative persona. We could say, "The Unnamable is a wonderful example of Beckett's artistry," whenever we want to recall the aesthetic experience we had some time ago, but this aesthetic response is merely habitual and depends merely on a liking for Beckett's personality.

Yet Beckett obviously cannot repel his audience to the point that they shun any contact with his work. Beckett needs to equivocate somehow, and he does this by paring away the "accidents of personality, language, and time" until the reader and the writer are united in one textual mode of being. And yet, even if Beckett accomplishes this amalgamation, he still has not solved the central problem of being within a text. Any view that posits itself as absolute must itself be subsumed under some other point of view. Even if we have artistic representations that purport to give the direct pathway to another's frame of mind, as in any interior monologue, this representation would still have to be subsumed under a reader's scrutiny. As an attempt to depict the first-person subject, therefore, the Unnamable's project remains impossibly flawed, since it necessarily becomes a third-person subject when a reader approaches it.

The gradual paring away of identity over the course of the Trilogy reflects Beckett's deepening quest to evade the reader's reduction to interpretative concepts. This project ultimately fails due to the inescapable condition of approaching any text, which

requires that text to be reduced under someone else's gaze. In the trilogy, the notion that we should avoid pretending to an outside perspective from which to impose determining concepts is exactly that, a determining concept from a pretended outside perspective. In The Unnamable, the speaker expresses the way in which all the identities that converge in a text are bound up within this predicament:

It's all a bubble, we've been told a lot of lies, he's been told a lot of lies, who he, the master, by whom, no one knows, the everlasting third party, he's the one to blame, for this state of affairs, the master's not to blame, neither are they, neither am I, least of all I, we were foolish to accuse one another, the master me, them, himself, they me, the master, themselves, I them, the master, myself, we are all innocent, enough. (375)

“The everlasting third party” eventually damns everyone in The Unnamable—Worm, Mahood, all the different “masters,” ourselves as the readers—to second-hand status as determinate objects.

#### 4. *How It Is* and *Worstword Ho*: Struggling to Struggle on with Next to Nothing

Despite the impressive failure of The Unnamable, Beckett still finds it necessary to go on. His next major novel, How It Is (1961), is Beckett's next attempt at “struggling to struggle on from where the Unnamable left [...] off, that is with next to nothing.”<sup>2</sup> Beckett pushes the limits of expression even further in the late prose piece, Worstward Ho (1983). In these works, Beckett deepens his quest towards unimpeded expression, free from the reader's reductions to determinate concepts, by giving a language of absolute certainty. Like Descartes with his Cogito, Beckett's narrators aim to provoke automatic agreement in everyone to whom the thing is stated. In terms of our Kantian

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, pp. 413.

thesis, Beckett's narrators are searching for indubitables in order to extract acknowledgment from the audience and thus to avoid their interpretative quibbles.

“In philosophy,” Wittgenstein writes in his Philosophical Remarks, “we are always in danger of giving a mythology of the symbolism, or of psychology: instead of saying what everyone knows and must admit” (65). As for Wittgenstein, Beckett's project eventually becomes an all-out search for the absolutely indubitable, and the superfluities of our language that generate these “mythologies” about ourselves and the world must be wiped out if the project is to arrive at any degree of success. An example of this quest for certainty arises from Beckett's characters' obsession with mathematics. In his review of The Unnamable, Vivian Mercier writes of Beckett's characters' fascination with mathematical “permutations and combinations” (“Limit” 145). Alfred Alvarez interprets Beckett's mathematical digressions in Molloy as the quest for unalterable certainties (15), ideas with which, as Wittgenstein would say, we cannot help but agree. “Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself” (30), says Molloy after calculating his approximate number of farts per hour, a calculation that, as it happens, is incorrect. Molloy's attempt to ground himself in mathematics parallels the way in which many philosophers (including Kant) point to mathematical truths as paradigm examples of certainty.

In his post-Trilogy works, Beckett's language omits the contingent features of identity, situation, and even grammar in order to uncover this absolute certainty. This quest contributes to one of the most confounding features of How It Is: its use of unpunctuated fragments instead of complete sentences with subjects and predicates. H. Porter Abbott shows how our habitual need for structure alters the sense of these words

when he takes a passage from How It Is and constructs a more intelligible sentence according to grammatical norms. As Abbott notes, “Most commentary on How It Is is based implicitly on this kind of normalization” (118). This move is understandable, since we require some way of coping when Beckett purges *any* accommodation we find in his previous works. The text is visually intimidating; reading the words aloud cannot help much, since we must sacrifice our normal rhythms of speech in order to avoid distorting the text. We must either leave the text alone, or risk imposing a fiction from structures of our own making, thus destroying the purity of the Kantian aesthetic experience.

Judith Dearlove’s analysis of How It Is points out similarities to previous Beckett works, claiming that since “everything in How It Is depends upon the diffuse, narrating voice, the form in which the voice creates its universe is as important as the content of that universe. Style literally is meaning. In a world without past or future, cause or effect, there can be no order, no subordination” (115). Here, Dearlove echoes the young Beckett’s declaration that “form *is* content, content *is* form” in Joyce’s Work In Progress (“Dante...Bruno. Vico.. Joyce” 14). The error to which Dearlove commits herself, however, is to write of the world of How It Is as if it were contingent, only one out of the many possible worlds Beckett might have chosen to express. After all, the title of the work is How It Is, a fact that should point to the notion of necessity under which Beckett is laboring. In emptying this narrative world of causality, temporality, and identity, Beckett is attempting to salvage the faithfulness of report that narratives purport to offer us. “I say it as I hear it,” goes one of the narrator’s frequent refrains.

And yet it seems that “saying it as it is heard” is another paradox that expresses the unavoidable impasse in a work of art. For to hear something is to listen, to have one’s

senses imposed upon by an outside source. When “it” is spoken, it becomes something completely different from the “it” that is heard. Saying something as it is heard implies a restriction imposed by an outside source of determinacy. “in me that were without when the panting stops scraps of an ancient voice in me not mine” (7), continues the voice, showing that any framework that hopes to express the immediate necessity of experience remains nonetheless a contingency imposed by the accidents of time and place.

Limitless ambiguities thus arise from the unresolved dialectic of saying and hearing, disrupting the search for a language of incorrigibles. Beckett exploits these ambiguities further in Worstward Ho, where the voice gives us several images of a life, perhaps memories, which are nevertheless “Whither once whence no return” (92).

A place. Where none. A time when try see. Try say. How small. How vast. How if not boundless bounded. Whence the dim. Not now. Know better now. Unknow better now. Know only no out of. No knowing how know only no out of. Into only. Hence another. Another place where none. Whither once whence no return. No. No place but the one. None but the one where none. Whence never once in. Somehow in. Beyondless. Thenceless there. Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there. (92)

The passage is an aural example of how hearing distorts what is spoken. The confusion between “no” and “know” becomes apparent if this passage is read aloud, leading to a breakdown between the “sense” as perceived by the ear and the “sense” in which the words are intended. In an early draft of Watt, the conversation between Mr. Hackett and the Nixons includes an exchange where someone asks the name of the title character: “‘Watt.’ ‘What?’ ‘Watt!’ ‘What?’” etc. This deleted passage anticipates Watt’s verbal flip-flops, from which Sam is forced to piece together the story out of an unintelligible mishmash of syllables. In all of these examples, the dexterity of spoken language is lost when someone hears it.

These ambiguities become rich sources for the reader seeking to produce his own interpretation, despite Beckett's quest for a language to which nothing can be added and nothing taken away. According to William Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity, literary language derives its richness from the multiplicity of meanings that can be mined from deliberately ambiguous wording. Much of the meaning in Worstward Ho derives from these ambiguities, these tenuous interpretative footholds. The title, since it could be taken as "worstword ho," is one example, reflecting both the speaking voice's sense of direction towards a goal and its search for the worst forms of expression possible.

The voice in Worstward Ho attempts to curtail these ambiguities, cutting off the reader's impulse for interpretation at its source. When the voice realizes that all saying is, at best, mis-saying, this insight leads to a search for "better worse" expressions. "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (89), it concludes, showing that Beckett's concern is no longer with finding the *best* expression, as in the attempted necessity of report of How It Is, but rather, the absolute *worst*:

Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse. (106)

This passage reaches towards the possibility of the worst idiom, the "Unnullable least." It thus makes a strenuous effort to pare down experience to its most remote constituents, a project that forever eluded the narrators of The Unnamable and How It Is. This passage turns the entire enterprise of linguistic certainty on its head, since the search for the indubitable underpinnings of human knowledge is now "too much to hope" (91).

Ultimately, the quest for the best expression language has to offer becomes a way of charting its inadequacies.

In the following passage, Beckett shows how the ambiguity in language nullifies even the pursuit for the absolute worst expression. “How better worse so-missay?” the voice asks in its pursuit of language’s worst possible elements:

Add others. Add? Never. Till if needs must. Nothing to those so far. Dimly so far. Them only lessen. But with them as they lessen others. As they worsen. If needs must. Others to lessen. To worsen. Till dim go. At long last go. For worst and all. (101-102)

The ambiguities in this passage gradually unravel the movement towards the worst expression. “But with them as they lessen others. As they worsen”: in these fragments, the lessening and worsening could refer either to the “them” or to the “others.” Furthermore, an ambiguity lies in the lack of a distinction of “lessen” and “worsen” as transitive or intransitive verbs. That is, Beckett makes no distinction between the thing lessening in itself and the thing applying the lessening action to something else. One result of the ambiguity, therefore, is that the others lessen the “them” while the others themselves are worsening—perhaps by the agency of still others. “Others to lessen. To worsen”; the voice thus continues the worsening activity, which continually undoes both itself and any other efforts towards an absolute worst. An infinite regress plagues the effort to finalize the worst expressions, since “others” could always extract a potentially worse interpretation from the latent ambiguities of language. The very use of *both* words, “lessen” and “worsen” (either of which “would do as ill” [93]), shows the tendency of language to dampen its own enterprise by plowing the subject under well-meaning but ultimately crippling verbiage.

In order to effect their independence from the reader's damning gaze, Beckett's narrators are after the Holy Grail of language, a statement about which no one could possibly disagree. In this search for indubitables, Descartes and Berkeley are two philosophers who are often cited as influences on Beckett; each has a sort of motto that serves as a defining credo concerning with the nature of being and its defining criterion. *Cogito ergo sum* is the one phrase everyone knows from Descartes, while Berkeley's defining statement, *Esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), is the epigraph Beckett adopts for his Film. Both phrases are attempts at naming the stark necessity that everyone cannot help but admit, and Beckett undoes both projects in his works by showing the impossible flaws in the search for incorrigibles. In the end, the troubling dream that revealed to Descartes that he could no longer trust the report of the senses becomes, in Beckett, a long nightmare from which no indubitable maxim can save us. Automatic agreement, which Kant provides for by assuming universality in aesthetic judgment, gives way only to indeterminacy and the endless prospect of having one's imagination reduced.

#### Conclusion: Meditations on "First Love"

In an early story, "First Love," Beckett depicts the simultaneously liberating and objectifying force of sexual desire that parallels the complicated negotiations that go on between the author and reader. The speaker remains aware of these dilemmas, since all his attempts at a true "first love," with all its wonder at the onrush of indescribable emotion, are inscribed by pre-packaged concepts he is compelled to accept. Loving for the first time is an ideal that forever eludes the speaker, since any love he encounters is

already marked out by the hackneyed concepts of love that society imposes on the imagination:

Yes, I loved her, it's the name I gave, still give alas, to what I was doing then. I had nothing to go by, having never loved before, but of course had heard of the thing, at home, in school, in brothel and at church, and read romances, in prose and verse, under the guidance of my tutor, in six or seven languages, both dead and living, in which it was handled at length. I was therefore in a position, in spite of all, to put a label on what I was about when I found myself inscribing the letters of Lulu in an old heifer pat.

But what kind of love was this exactly? Love-passion? Somehow I think not. That's the priapic one, is it not? Or is this a different variety? There are so many, are there not? All equally if not more delicious, are they not? Platonic love, for example, there's another just occurs to me. It's disinterested. Perhaps I loved her with a disinterested love? But somehow I think not. Would I have been tracing her name in old cowshit if my love had been pure and disinterested? (34)

In Plato, the ideal of love serves a dual philosophical function as a romantic ideal and as an aesthetic. Two participants in love, or the artist and the audience, come together in a free and equal exchange, and no sacrifice of autonomy results from the interaction. The Platonic model of complementary exchange, however, remains an impossible ideal in Beckett, since the very phenomenon itself has already been described by innumerable, faceless others. The generic models by which we habituate ourselves to a new situation govern our reaction to it, ensuring the end of our freedom.

Since the genuine possibility of romantic love remains unrealizable, Beckett's characters turn to masturbation. This is something Moran feels he must hide from his son, since "Father with yawning fly and starting eyes, toiling to scatter on the ground his joyless seed, that was no sight for a small boy" (102). When the Unnamable suddenly remembers that he has a penis, he sets out to see "whether there might still be something to be wrung from it":

With a yo heave ho, concentrating with all my might on a horse's rump, at the moment when the tail rises, who knows, I might not go altogether empty-handed away. Heaven, I almost felt it flutter! Does this mean they did not geld me? I could have sworn they had gelt me. But perhaps I am getting it mixed up with other scrota. Not another stir out of it in any case. I'll concentrate again. A Clydesdale. A Suffolk stallion. (332-333)

Both of these onanism show what happens when aesthetics becomes a matter of self-amusement. Moran is stifled by the thought of himself as a bad fatherly example, while the Unnamable cannot function after confusing himself with "other scrota," or other determinate identities that others have imposed. The anxiety about masturbation arises from the possibility of being reduced to a determinate concept, and therefore reflects the Kantian antinomy of aesthetic judgment. The thought of someone else walking in on the moment is an embarrassment that destroys the proper mood, since such an experience requires total freedom from another's determining gaze. We can thus see why Beckett's narrators are so reluctant to let readers in on their secrets; they want to be sufficiently free to have their own experience, unsullied by the ruinous thoughts of other gawkers.

In response to the moralizing detractors of his Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov writes that in truly pornographic works, "action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust" (313). In such works, Nabokov claims, the reader concentrates on himself as an object in the text; only by doing so can he perform the masturbatory act of fulfilling his self-centered desire. In Beckett, the author and the reader attempt to wrest control of the text from the other as a way of defending their imaginative freedom. Kant's aesthetic philosophy attempts to mediate the conflict through equivocating concepts like "purposiveness without purpose." In the Kantian model, art never operates according to a definitive purpose, under which the artist or the audience could arrange the elements of a work for

their own selfish ends. This, however, is exactly what happens in Beckett's texts, where each participant is engaged in the masturbatory act of self-amusement. In contrast with Kant's ideal of complementarity, Beckett's narrators attempt to leave a monolithic whole that admits no input from the reader, while the reader invariably finds *some* way of imposing structures of his own making. For Kant, no artifice that operates according to someone else's pre-formed concepts can claim to be art; for Beckett, these conceptual contests between the author and audience are the *sine qua non* of textuality.

In the end, Beckett's prose works are devoted to the possibility of a balance between the author's need for free expression and the reader's need to interpret. However, Beckett must leave unsolved his central antinomy: that interpretation is at once impossible and necessary. For art must exist as a self-contained whole, or at least that is what Beckett's narrators wish to be the case. And yet, for the reader, the need to explain and interpret with concepts is a habitual condition of approaching any text. The exchange between author and audience becomes a precarious balance between allowing for the imaginative freedom of its participants and avoiding the reduction to interpretations, or determinate concepts. Beckett's narrators and characters inevitably fail in this enterprise.

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