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## Little Creatures: Samuel Beckett and the Language of The Unnamable

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Little Creatures: Samuel Beckett and the Language of *The Unnamable*

Senior Project Submitted to  
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of Bard College

by  
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“But what matter whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, I shall go on doing as I have always done, not knowing what it is I do, nor who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am. Yes, a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image”

-Malone Dies





## Introduction

Samuel Beckett's biographer, addressing the central concern of Beckett's work, notes two major concerns: "expression of the search for being" and "an exploration of ignorance, impotence, indigence."<sup>1</sup> This expression of the search for being gives us a first indication as to a problem in one of Beckett's central themes: why go on? Why go on searching for being, and finding value in the expression of this search, when in the end this search must confront "ignorance, impotence, indigence." Beckett asks if one can find something to express, or find reason to go on, in these most desolate and infertile wastelands. He does find a reason. *The Unnamable* ends with "I must go on." However his reason is not found in meaning; instead he takes the very elements of existence, "ignorance, impotence, indigence," which make it impossible to go on, both physically intolerable and metaphysically hopeless, as the means of this expression.

Beckett doesn't locate his expression of the search in a normal narrative, in which a character searches for his or her true self, overcomes obstacles, and eventually finds the princess, or the gold, or some supposed truth. These kinds of traditional moral novels locate "expressions of the search for being" in things like love, wealth, and knowledge. They are the object of being, or a being's meaning is realized through them. Beckett takes this search and propels it into dark, unexplored oceans. His search confronts a nightmare. There is no realization, no concepts that bring meaning to being. Death makes all three goals impossible. It mocks material possession. Those who seek knowledge teeter around its murky depths in mumbling dementia. The meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Knowlson, James. *Damned to fame: the life of Samuel Beckett*. Grove Press, 2004. 324.

of the search for being can no longer be that this search is fulfilled. Instead for Beckett, it is the expression of this impossibility itself that becomes its meaning.

To understand how Beckett searches for the obscure, unusable, or incommunicable aspect of being we should look first near the beginning of the trilogy. The second part of *Molloy*, which follows Jacques Moran, a detective, whose job, to hunt down Molloy, becomes increasingly vague. The first half of the Moran section is distinct from the rest of the trilogy in that it is written with relative realism, which reflects Moran's pragmatism. As Moran's rationalism falls apart, the prose itself correspondingly becomes increasingly confused. Two outstanding features of Moran are that he is ruthlessly logical and calculating, taking almost vindictive pleasure in the following of his "rules," and that he is religious, dependent on the routine of the Sunday church service. Notably, he misses this service in order to get instructions regarding his assignment to the Molloy case. From this point on, and especially once his search is underway and he has lost his son and is stranded in the woods, his sense of logic, and especially his sense of faith, begins to disintegrate. In his search for Molloy, he starts to become Molloy. His leg begins to stiffen like Molloy's, and he inherits Molloy's proclivity for losing bicycles. He employs all methods of logic, and yet his subject matter cannot be contained by it. His reason is twisted back on itself, onto him, so that he becomes the very enigma he set out to solve.

This quote occurs at the height of Moran's breakdown, while he is looking at his reflection in a puddle:

"And on myself to I poured, so changed from what I was. And I seemed to see myself aging as swiftly as a day-fly. But the idea of aging was not exactly the one which offered itself to me. And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be. Or it was like a kind of clawing towards a light and countenance I could not

name, that I had once known and long denied. But what words can describe this sensation at first all darkness and bulk, with a noise like grinding stones, then suddenly as soft as flowing water. And then I saw a little globe swaying up slowly from the depths, through the quiet water, smooth at first, and scarcely paler than its escorting ripples, then little by little a face, with holes for the eyes and mouth and other wounds, and nothing to show if it was a man's face or a woman's face, a young face or an old face, or if it's calm too was not an effect of the water trembling between it and the light. But I confess I attended but absently to these poor figures, in which I suppose my sense of disaster sought to contain itself."<sup>2</sup>

There's one Moran sitting in his house terrorizing his son and housekeeper, and another in this quote in which he has lost his center. He seems to have suddenly realized the passing of time itself, the insignificance of a life rushing towards death. It's the catastrophe of spatial-temporal existence, a disaster Moran tries to contain in forms. Yet it exceeds his formulations, he cannot realize a clear image of himself. Moran's figure resists definition. Its form is that of a face, the orifices of which, the mouth which should speak, and the ears and eyes, which should hear and see, are nothing but wounds. He is blind, deaf, and mute. Any interpretation of the world has been cut out; his expression is that of this absence. It is an incommunicable face. Implacable pain and incomprehension are all it shows. It cannot be placed in time, no quality or attitude can be discerned without the accompanying possibility of misconception. This face, in which he tries to contain his sense of disaster, the center-less and endless death into which he has fallen, is like his language. Moran wants to structure it into a meaning of his being, a reflection and revelation of it. Yet it turns out to reflect only his own disastrous life, about which nothing can be said. The inexplicable loss of memory and limbs, of eyes, ears, and mouth, itself is never delivers him into nothingness. But he is getting closer to it, what he feels he has always really been: "a light and countenance I could not name."<sup>3</sup> The narrator's language tries to contain this face, which itself is

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<sup>2</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 143.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 143.

nameless. It expresses a primordial disaster that has condemned him forever to the poor figures of Molloy, Moran and Malone, identities which represent different manifestations of the unnamable face of being.

In this quote, Moran has a much changed view of what the rigidity of his domestic structure might have meant. It is what “protected me from all I was condemned to be.” He has recognized the falseness of his sense of self. Since Moran’s search for Molloy began precisely with the missing of Sunday mass, Molloy seems to have slipped into the place that held God. In the proceeding search, which becomes a kind of search for God, all of the structures that were secured by habit fall away from Moran. The ideal has become distorted, he no longer recognizes himself. His image of God was his ideal; it gave him a mirror in which he could see himself “in Gods image.” In its place we get an image of Molloy, a poor figure of disaster. The indeterminate object of Molloy lacks substance. It is what is reflected back at him in the water, a reflection of the collapse of “all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be.” It is an expression of his inability to express, the failure of language to make order of the chaos. In results in theses figures, which reflect back to him their terrible faces.

The human reality in which Moran tries to identify himself is in flux. Molloy is not one constant and coherent being. Anything like a true domain of being no longer seems plausible. A God behind this reality is either all powerful, in which case he cannot be all good, because of the reality of evil, suffering, and ignorance in the world. Or God is good, but not all powerful, in which case chance and accident run free. Either way, the fragmented body can make no more or less fragmented identifications. It cannot comprehend evil, nor can it understand what transcendence of evil would mean. Moran’s reality is incommensurate with his ideal. But, instead of the

subject being a reflection of the ideal, the ideal becomes a reflection of the subject: an image of Molloy, lost, mumbling and crawling through the swamp. Albert Camus, a contemporary of Beckett's, writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "We assert (. . .) the reality of the one (whatever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by this very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve."<sup>4</sup> The assertion of the 'one' is not just wrong, it appears to act in Beckett as a violence against oneself, a suppression of what one really is.

Richard Coe, in his essay *God and Samuel Beckett*, paraphrases from Beckett's story *A Wet Night*: "To 'be like God' is vain, jealous, malevolent, sadistic and half-witted." "Seeking to be God," concludes the Alba, "in the slavish arrogance of a piffling evil."<sup>5</sup> Moran emulates God in the sadistic reaction to his son, in re-enacting God's violence against his children. Moran's ideal validates his world, which is not the goal of most of Beckett's people who rebel against the pointless suffering of spatial-temporal imprisonment. They want to escape their world and their God. They know that any conception they have of an ideal is infected with the reality they are trying to escape. That any idea they have of God just reaffirms the reality they set out to escape. Pretending to know God, to be God in effect, is actually the furthest away one can be. Moran finds a true expression of himself not at church, or at home where he felt 'secure' in his identity. He really finds himself when he is on the brink of death and must stare his own blindness in the face.

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<sup>4</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Knopf, 1955.16.

<sup>5</sup> Coe, Richard N. *God and Samuel Beckett*. Vol. 24, *Meanjin Quarterly*, 1961. 95.

Camus has a possible idea of what literature must become when confronted with the breakdown of language. He thinks one must push oneself to the limit of the mind, and observe “this inhuman show in which absurdity, hope and death carry out their dialogue.”<sup>6</sup> He writes,

“when Karl Jaspers, revealing the impossibility of constituting the world as a unity, exclaims: ‘This limitation leads me to myself, where I can no longer withdraw behind an objective view which I am meanly representing, where neither I myself nor the existence of others can any longer become an object for me’ he is evoking after many others those waterless deserts where thought reaches its confines . . . The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions.”<sup>7</sup>

Beckett’s characters are examining the outermost limits of their comprehension. The narration has truly pulled itself to the farthest point of itself, to the edge of the mind’s capacity, and yet it is still caught in the traces of memory, in odd configurations of language. It cannot achieve escape and silence. It is instead confronted with the Beckettian desert, in which it tries to decode the foliage, and so persists as a strange almost mindless, almost bodiless hope; a figure of rejection and catastrophe.

Shane Weller wrote a piece collecting and commenting on Theodor Adorno’s notes for an essay on *The Unnamable* that remained incomplete at the time of his death. In it Weller says that Beckett’s characters embody “the locating of hope in figures of nothingness.”<sup>8</sup> He quotes from Adorno’s notes: “To Beckett, as to the Gnostics, the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet. As long as the world is as it is, all pictures of reconciliation, peace, and quiet resemble the picture of death.”<sup>9</sup> The Unnamable is this picture of death, or is at least the gesture of identification with and hope in figures of negation. The search

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<sup>6</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Knopf, 1955. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 8

<sup>8</sup> Weller, Shane. *Adorno’s Notes on the Unnamable*. *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 2010.192.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 381.

for Being must be a hope in this picture. For it is only in negation, or rejection, that the possibility of a better world lies. The narrator says: “feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing, that would be a blessed place to be.”<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Beckett’s characters keep going on does not make them courageous or give them a sense of human dignity; they are not heroes. Winning the transcendent pursuit was ruled out long before they started. It seems at times that it is not even them who go on, first, because we do not know if we can verify the truth of our simple categorization of a unified subject moving forward, and second because investing this ‘something’ with agency seems comical. The characters are forced to go on, and any semblance of autonomy seems to come down to the rejection of this reality, a reality which of course continues on unaffected. But whether or not he is autonomous, he is moved in a spiritual search, a compulsion to both create and follow an ideal, something he feels to be the true being that he has lost. As Adorno points out, this ideal becomes an image of death.

Needless to say this means the ideal, or attempted escape is not satisfied. Neither the ideal nor the search are at all comprehensible. He does not know what he looks for, and it follows that he therefore does not know how to look. It is an empty gesture towards a non-place. Yet in it there is a kind of creativity, something that takes place in his searching for the right words. It does not realize anything, but it gives us a sense of a something which searches, some-

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<sup>10</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 368.



thing “crawling towards a light and countenance I could not name.”<sup>11</sup> This search itself becomes the significance of being. It is the figure of the attempt and failure of hope in escape.

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In the late 1940s France, when Beckett was writing *The Unnamable*, there was a ferment of evolving intellectual ideas surrounding pressing questions of existentialism. One central question was: How does one make decisions and find meaning without the fixed and unwavering example of God. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* is one text integral to Beckett's cultural context, and perhaps one of the most relevant to our main question, why go on? He writes of the problem of suicide. How does one find a reason to go on when faced with the absurdity and suffering of the world? His absurdist adaptation of existentialism sees a world, similar to Beckett, which has no intrinsic meaning. But their responses differ in an important way. Charting these differences will give us a clearer idea of Beckett's vision.

Camus' perspective is that “there is thus a metaphysical honor in enduring the world's absurdity. Conquests or play-acting, multiple loves, absurd revolt, are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance.”<sup>12</sup> They both believe in a kind of revolt against the absurd, which itself must become absurd, or leap off of it. However, the dignity and power invested in the autonomy of the actor or the Don Juan, the archetype of “multiple loves,” would seem to Beckett to be a way Camus is secretly overcoming the absurd. Beckett

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<sup>11</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 143.

<sup>12</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Knopf, 1955. 90.

might feel Camus believes that we can stand tall and dignified in the face of an absurd world. For Beckett, there can be not even a single love in his world of universal impotence. He doesn't glorify this fight, and in fact, for him it is barely a fight. Beckett's characters never stood a chance. They do not take their loss well or find any high language by which to honor it; they are decidedly too busy suffering.

Beckett's characters can barely stand. They don't take pleasure in acting, but are instead forever disturbed by the shifting layers of their own deceptive personalities. Camus' absurd revolt does find objects. He believes you can make your own value and find meaning in fighting this losing battle. To Camus, this approach plays to his dignity. Instead, Beckett fights the same fight, but he does not come back to any kind of earthly outlet. He finds value in the expression of a search that finds no object, and doesn't know what it looks for. His creatures find no reason and no way to go on. They have something of an obligation. This creative impulse, as much as one is inclined to praise it, produces nothing but untenable abstraction. Beckett's characters revolt, if it can really be said to be anything, and this is still a question for Beckett, is a revolt against the impossibility of revolt; a fight that cannot be fought.

Adorno describes this in his essay on *Endgame*, where he writes "in Beckett the concreteness of an existence that is shut up inside of itself like a mollusk, no longer capable of universality, an existence that exhausts itself in pure self-positing, is revealed to be identical to the abstractness that is no longer capable of experience."<sup>13</sup> This metaphysical abstractness collapses, it is no longer a way by which a 'subject' can understand its own experience. But Beckett cannot escape this gesture towards the universal. Instead the subject's compulsion to self-posit is a kind

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to literature*. Columbia U Press, 1991. 247.

of metaphysical hamster wheel. The subject itself cannot find a way to stop itself from producing these ideals, even when it is deprived of all means. It remains stuck in shifting illusion. The value Beckett finds is in the fact that this aspect of the self is at least a constant thing; the self as something that tries to find itself. There is, so to speak, no “I” in this “I.” All that is left is a hollowed out metaphysical solipsism. Beckett tries to find the origin to this compulsion to the abstract by fighting abstractions, stripping them away one by one until there is nothing left of experience, and yet here to, right on the brink of silence, the narrator still speaks, at the bottom of abstraction is more abstraction. While completely broken, the signifier, stripped of its meaning, mutters in the strange voice of the disaster which befell it. It neither could really have experienced this disaster nor does it contain its meaning. But its crippled signification nonetheless captures its mystery in the net of empty abstraction.

Another important voice making up the philosophical atmosphere of France at this time was Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* that “Man is always outside himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand it is in pursuing transcendental goals that he is able to exist.”<sup>14</sup> This is very similar to Beckett; man is essentially lost. The goal is always fugitive, one becomes lost in the process of looking. But this process itself, the projecting and following of ideals, which remain fuzzy, is the only way that the subject realizes itself. This is in the negative. Self-realization in Beckett is often the realization that one does not know oneself. But this still means that through this failed metaphysical attempt something like self-consciousness emerges.

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, (N.p.: Yale UP; Trade Paperback Edition Edition, n.d. Print) 52.

The narrator says, “For to go on means going from here, means finding me, losing me, vanishing and beginning again, a stranger first . . . the same as always.”<sup>15</sup> He is lost in his search, and expresses a constant feeling of strangeness. The narrator creates an image, but its meaning can only contain an image of his own hopeless searching. He realizes himself in the face of his ideal, the language he uses to express it. This is the reflection of his own incomprehensible and painful position, the gouged face that Moran sees on the water. Moran sees what he has always truly been in the face of this stranger. Beckett’s characters are lost following mirages of their own creation endlessly across the desert. They can neither stop creating this goal, nor can they really access it. It makes them who they are, it defines the passing of their time. They exist inside this language, constantly re-positing ideals. Its shifting abstractness both defies and defines them.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* loses himself in the creation of transcendental goals. He makes an image of himself, but the meaning of this image escapes him, and so his constant state, according to Sartre, is pursual. All of Beckett’s characters are in pursuit of an unnamable something, which is oneself but is outside of oneself. The pursuing of transcendental goals is like a compulsion for Beckett’s characters. It is the compulsion that, as Sartre says, brings them to existence. The image contains an idea of meaning, what Sartre calls realization. But it becomes the realization of horror, the product of a failed method of escape which suspends the subject in agonizing indeterminacy. Sartre may locate a humanism in this realization, but Beckett turns this on its head, the ideal does not reflect a self, but an inhuman show, which means the realization of the subject by means of this idealism is not the formation of being but the deferment by which all attempted escapes come to resemble pictures of death. I want to argue that this hopelessness and

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 296.

desperate position Beckett puts his characters in means that they take the impossibility of their goals as a starting point. They express the impossibility of expression. This does not mean the character finds a way out, there is no escape. But Beckett does seem to find, in the process of literature, some kind of value in the expression of this failure.

## Halley's Comet

“The expression that 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”<sup>16</sup>

Let's look closer at this voice in *The Unnamable*. Its goal is to try and explain its predicament, to somehow through language escape it. But all of its attempts are confused and derailed; logic breaks down. The narrator looks for the answer to his identity, but finds nothing but masks, disingenuous words, and unbelievable gestures. Yet, this is supposed to be him. He can only identify with his own otherness. He becomes detached, forming this fragmented image of self, becoming the voice of nowhere. The voice cannot stop creating itself, and in this compulsive self-creation, the voice does not find itself. But it does find this “nowhere,” a strange terrain which he begins to chart. The narrator identifies with the unidentifiable.

Richard Coe writes in his essay *God and Samuel Beckett*:

“(Beckett's people) Know themselves exiled from their true domain of being, alienated from their proper “selves”, imprisoned against their will in space and more particularly time. Yet their attempts to escape from these arbitrary absolutes are futile . . . (they) strive to detach their “selves” from the unhappy accident of incarnation, hoping thereby to redeem the catastrophe of spatial and temporal identity—only to discover that their “personality” against all odds survives.”<sup>17</sup>

This true domain of being is the ideal to which they must admit they are completely alienated. It seems they create it, and realize themselves through it. But Beckett's characters realize nothing except the futility of the search for being. They uncover this disaster in their personalities, as

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<sup>16</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 336.

<sup>17</sup> Coe, Richard N. *God and Samuel Beckett*. Vol. 24, Meanjin Quarterly, 1961.92.

Moran does. Their personalities survive, but as an expression of an endless cycle of suffering and death. What Beckett's characters are calling out against is their sense of self, which feel false to them. In their search for themselves, especially in the case of the narrator, they don't trust in anything they think they know about themselves. It is only through this complete disassociation with what Coe calls their pseudo-personality that they can begin an authentic search. This is something the narrator is doing when he unsuccessfully tries to free himself of manhood, or "worm." Through a process of subtraction, the voice is both becoming more and more mute and muddled, and getting closer to seeing its true self. Not to a true domain of Being, but to the acute expression of a poor figure, ravaged by time.

The first lines of Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* are "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on."<sup>18</sup> First, the three questions show that this narrator is a kind of unquantifiable substance. He does not possess the most basic information about himself. The word "Unquestioning" all alone like that seems out of place. The narrator is obviously questioning. But in this line he is confronting the way his questions fall to the ground unanswered. He might as well be unquestioning, for his questions get him nowhere. "I, say I" meets a similar fate. The second one word sentence is "unbelieving." His doubt in his "where, who, when," leads to the incomprehension of the statement "I." So from the beginning, questioning is impossible. The two "I's" fracture and proliferate into many unconnected "I's," which litter the page. The concept of "going on" presupposes a unified subject. However, more than not knowing where he

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<sup>18</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 285.

goes, he does not know who, or what, could even be said to be going. “Going” is both unquestionable and unbelievable. But arguably, he does go on. The novel does, in fact, continue. Despite its clearly stated impossibility, these lines are a beginning. Furthermore he does say I, and still continues to try, despite everything, to describe to us where he is and who he is. He tells us stories, gives us characters, none of which are actually plausible, even for a second, not even to him. However he tries to keep going. Despite the fact that all his questions and hypotheses find no traction, he still believes in questioning and pursues his being. He has an irrational hope in it. Even though he can’t find substantive content in the words “going” and “on” he continues to use them in his language. They are the fundamental structure of his narration.

The narrator says:

“What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how to proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention before going further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means. (. . .) 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 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.”<sup>19</sup>

How does one proceed in the search? There is no way to know one way is right, that one is not obviously running on in the wrong direction. It would amount to there simply being nothing but wrong turns, left or right, it does not matter. And this is proposed, and even validated by the lines, “but it is quite hopeless.” However, this isn't the end of the debate; hopelessness has a false finality. Something else is at work here. Possible “other shifts,” which undermine even the idea of aporia. He must speak even though it is hopeless. Aporia makes no sense. The only fact,

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<sup>19</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 286.



which is proposed almost ironically, is that he has to speak of things. Aporia and hopelessness are not a deadlock or an end, but an action, which he is in the constant moving state of enacting. In a sense, however, this is also the answer, or fact. His action against the impossible reveals a sound, like grinding stones or flowing water.

The voice has barely begun and already there is no way to proceed. Then we get the odd configuration of “how to proceed? By aporia pure and simple?” Which would imply a proceeding by means that prohibits proceeding. This obligation must take the very thing that makes its goal impossible as its vehicle for realization. By continuing on, the narrator contradicts the impossibility of the goal while preserving its reality. His sense of obligation and possibly hope cause a remarkable, unjustifiable leap, enacted in the very moving on of the text.

A good example of the problem of meaning comes in the lines:

“But the best is to think of myself as fixed, and at the center of this place, whatever its shape and extent may be. This is also probably the most pleasing to me. In a word, no change apparently since I have been here, disorder of the lights perhaps an illusion, all change to be feared, incomprehensible uneasiness.”<sup>20</sup>

What is this creature that must be fixed in order to be itself, and yet which must say, “I do not deny it, that I too am in perpetual motion.” He strives for meaning while having to admit that the flux of an ever-changing landscape makes such meaning impossible. We can imagine Sartre's subject as trying to fix a meaning while in motion. The narrator's “realization” is that he is moving. This is also why he can't stop talking. It could be a valiant fight as Camus suggests, but he could also be caught in the current of time and space, simply forced to move. It's questionable whether the narrator moves on because it's not clear he's going anywhere. He seems stuck in the

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<sup>20</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 289.

act of going nowhere. This calls into question the idea that he is acting on his own initiative.

What he makes on his own, out of what might be called creativity, are these ideals. But the meaning of the narrator's ideals are delusional, they falsely posit themselves as fixed.

On the one hand trying to find himself though language takes a creative force that conceives of something better beyond this world, imposing on an ever-changing world an ideal that cannot be drawn from its nature. This can therefore be said to be self-generated, although the ambiguity of the self makes this ideal correspondingly fractured and vague. The narrator creates this fixed ideal with an otherworldly passion. This conception wavers tantalizingly between this "incomprehensible uneasiness" and a hope, which still tries to organize reality, to build a harmony through language out of it. However, in Beckett's work, this is an asymptotic endeavor. Everything seems so close to coming together, to clicking neatly into place. Yet always some inexplicable protrusion, or disorder of lights, sows discord in the narrator's mind.

A hope in this center prods on the imagination, it controls the image projected onto the world. But as these projections slip, disorder shines through and the hope turns to fear. "Incomprehensible uneasiness" is like motion sickness. Words can't equalize the frenzied collapse of the center, they, too, are carried on in the ocean of indeterminacy. The narrator of *The Unnamable* says:

"So after a long period of immaculate silence a feeble cry was heard, by me . . . a little cry, stifled outright. What kind of creature uttered it and, if it is the same, still does, from time to time? Impossible to say. Not a human one in any case, there are no human creatures here, or if there are they are done with crying. Is Malone the culprit? Am I? Is it not perhaps a simple little fart, they can be rending? Deplorable mania, when something happens, to enquire what. If only I were not obliged to manifest . . . There are sounds here from time to time, let that suffice. This cry to begin with, since it was the first. And others, rather different. I am getting to know them. I do not know them all. A man may die at the age of seventy without ever having had the possibility of seeing Halley's comet."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 290.

The question of identity comes up again here. He can't organize his world. The cry could be from within or without. It cannot be labeled as human because it is "impossible to say" what it is. It could be a fart, or nothing at all. This cry is like all of the language the narrator uses. It is a sound that doesn't have a center. A trace that resembles meaning, and humanity, but which has been reduced to a mute signification. At the height of this disorientation something is still made present. He must keep on signifying. This passage is interesting because it shows how much this obligation is forced upon him. He does not want to search for his identity, or the identity of the cry, but he must. Searching within this confusion of sound becomes a "deplorable mania." It's a painful obligation to search for an identity in a world that cannot be pulled together. The self remains fragmented. He is a succession of uneasy aliases, which successively contradict each other.

The hope that is part and parcel with the narrator's obligation to language makes him keep looking. He does, after all this confusion, still try to make lists. Like Malone, who tries to list everything he owns to establish his identity for himself, the narrator maps out the sonic landscape and makes careful, if not inevitably confused notations on the frequency and kinds of sounds that occur. He tries to build a stable idea of himself out of it. The narrator still waits and he still searches, acts that both defy the inhuman and identity-less world he describes, and which he cannot separate himself from. The hope which underlies these attributes is most potently felt in the last line concerning Halley's comet, which hails the possibility of a coming escape.

The narrator goes on to write:

"I am the thing which divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two sur-

faces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I am the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I do not belong to either."<sup>22</sup>

The self is neither one thing nor the other. The sounds made in this space could belong to anyone, or no one. They could just as easily belong to the narrator, or be emanating from without. Because the line that clearly separated him from the world is blurred, he begins to oscillate, in an ever shifting displacement. He loses a physical point in which to contain himself. He is in two places at once, at home in neither. Being incapable of describing a relationship between inside and outside means his abstractions are incapable of orienting experience, they throw him in a blind dance around empty centers.

The mind's attempt to abstractly organize the world is torn apart by this vibration. But at the same time there is a strong impulse within the reality of his subjectivity, which drives it on. He cannot escape personality. Even faced with the oscillation and displacement which has befallen the subject's relation to the world, there is always a subject that reemerges, abstractly knitting itself together, as if out of nothingness. And each time with a renewed promise of unification. The world itself pushes him into mania, it is the other which he is trying to understand in order to understand himself. It makes him who he is, and is the reference by which a spatial-temporal limit is created, but it also, simultaneously creates an infinite distance between him and it. Its disorder of lights remains out of his mind's reach. So that while it creates him, at every moment it is also alien to him. He is unable either to stop his compulsion to build spatial identification or, really able to access the limitless, phenomenal world. His existence is constituted by spatial-temporal identifications, but the world does not reflect back a stable image of the self. The world

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<sup>22</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 376.

constitutes him, but is other to him, and so he becomes other to himself. Some demented interiority does remain, a core of implacable abstraction, striving for a singularity of being. He both cannot fulfill what he believes to be his true self, nor can he escape, return to the world, and fall silent. He is stuck in the middle, in language.

Out of a complete lack of options, his only means of realizing himself is out off basis of a reality which makes this realization impossible. It is why he still must desperately look into the world, and in language for an idea of himself. At times this relationship to the world is actually somewhat intelligible. He has small victories, like the predicting of Moran's orbit. Of course, he never does synthesize anything fully, unaccountable happenings still happen. To keep trying can therefore seem hopeless, and in a sense it is. Yet, since this is a non-foundational world this too is not a definitive answer. There is room for hope, and a possible "other shifts," which can be waited for. There is always this possibility over the horizon in Beckett's trilogy, that the future will bring with it a resolution. But before it arrives the image of this future reconciliation resembles a picture of death. The possible coming of something is both a promise of being and the force by which being is deferred.

The wanting and searching are insufferable. But Halley's comet is a reminder of the possibility of an event to come, a final escape. It is an event which is always coming but never arrives. He therefor locates his hope in this impossibility. One could be vigilant one's whole life, but it does not seem anyone could come to an understanding, could account for all of the world's enormity. The comet is a protrusion of the inexplicable, it shows the unpredictability of the world, which suspends the possibility of a fixed being. But it's coming also hints at the possibility that someday something could come and change everything. It suggests the potentiality for

order in a figure of absence, it both brings the subject into existence through the ideal, while suspending this subject, who waits indefinitely, staring up at an empty sky. In the 1300s the painter Giotto di Bondone painted a nativity scene in which the star of Bethlehem, which reveals the coming of the messiah to the world, was depicted as Halley's comet.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Star of Bethlehem*. Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star\\_of\\_Bethlehem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_Bethlehem).

## Writing Silence

Jean-Michel Rabate wrote in his book *Think Pig, Beckett at The Limit of The Human* about the question “why go on.” “Such a radical questioning forces us to meditate on the value presupposed by the simple fact of “going on.”<sup>1</sup> Beckett calls into question all value, but “going on” is different. It is difficult even to realize it involves value. For it is compulsory, biological, and most obscurely involves the movement of time, which sweeps us along. The meaning of ‘going on’ is something presupposed in our existence. This value, whether it’s putting words in a progression or in putting one foot in front of the other, comes before all other beliefs and postulations. The narrator, even to speak, must have some belief he is telling a story that proceeds from a beginning and progresses towards an end. Presumably the story moves towards the spiritual end domain he speaks of. The narrator even writes “to me I must attribute a beginning.”<sup>2</sup> But the search for this origin becomes a torture. This novel takes place in the space before a beginning, which is not really any place at all. But he can’t stop, some demented and blind version of hope stumbles on. Beckett sees in this a basic human impulse, at the bottom of his mechanism of subtraction there is a reflexive abstractness, an obligation which is the consequence of his accidental existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Michel, Rabate. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 290.

His hope is that he can make the words of others, which he is forced to recite, his own. He hopes to realize himself through the very medium of his own destabilization. Language becomes his only hope. However it defies him, he must have hope in what is most antithetical to hope, in figures which are no longer capable of signification. But in his attempt and failure there is a muteness which remains. A signification which has been bereft of meaning, but still might tell us more about what it might mean to be human than a conceptual value ever could.

Beckett calls into question this most basic of values. Going on is not a given for him; the idea of a comprehensible middle or end is unthinkable. Because our narrator does not know who he is, when he is, or where he is, he cannot figure out how he is. Until this is settled he cannot put value in going on because he does not know what goes on. Neither does he know where it comes from nor where it is going. This does not mean he negates hope. The fundamental drive to go on is alive and well in a distinctly manipulated form. This value cannot find a plausible outlet for its creative, transcendental gesture. But this lack of a stable object, instead of being the deterrent to value that we think of it as, is for Beckett the 'object' of it.

The narrator has hope, but it is not in something; it is in looking for that something. The narrator can't have faith in truth, he can't have answers, directions, or identity, but he still believes in the search for these answers. Or at least the narrative is itself proof of an attempt. It reveals at a 'something' which searches. The hope in this search must, in Beckett's work, be placed in failure. For hope in failure is the only way to describe this need to go on based precisely on its obstacle. Having this belief itself is impossible, but it is also his necessity. Despite the problem of autonomy and will, we might still commend his inexplicable endurance.



It is a hope that takes this impossibility and tries to express it, in the hope that the expression of the failure to realize being might itself be its only valid expression. Rabate writes the narrator has a point when he observes coolly: “so they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it.”<sup>3</sup> It is in human failure that we are able to have any understanding of what the human is. The destabilization of the “I’s” narratological constancy through this collapse of hypothesis means we can’t find an answer to the question, “what is a human?” Yet through this collapse, and this failure of meaning, we do actually sense a fundamental human attribute.

The French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who wrote extensively on the problem of the other, writes: “It does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility.”<sup>4</sup> This could be a description of the narrator of *The Unnamable*. It is through the statement of the otherness of who, when, what, that the narrator realizes what he really is. Take this quotation for example:

“How, in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly? I don’t know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee. . . I add this to be on the safe side. These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don’t know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Michel, Rabate. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016.45.

<sup>4</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence*. Duquesne UP, 2009. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009.351.

First we get the statement of impossibility, “I shall not know.” As he writes, words come together that supposedly say something about ‘his’ being. But he has no idea how, or even what he is saying. His being remains other, it is elsewhere. But then we get a defiance of this first statement. It starts with the line, “Not this time,” which evokes the “other shifts” from earlier and calls on a hope in the possibility that something could change. This optimism builds into the line, “It is I who write,” which then crashes down again with the disclaimer, “who cannot raise my hand from my knee.”<sup>6</sup> This corresponds to what Levinas writes. Beckett’s writing is based off the very impossibility of writing. In this way he does actually write, if not all that clearly. It is the writing of an unmoving hand. The fact that he realizes “this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility” is manifest in the words on the page and the fact of our reading them. They at least tell us he was thinking a little. But this doesn’t minimize the impossible, which of course does not stop being impossible. This writing contains within it the impossibility of writing.

When he says “These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were or if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere.”<sup>7</sup> he is conveying that his words and the being that they try to express, are always other to him. He does not know if they even exist or not, but if they do he has no contact with them. Yet the lines, “But I am here. So I am obliged to add this,” shifts once again. He is conveying himself through language. Despite its seeming impossibility, he is expressing presence on the most indistinct and obscure level. He knows he doesn’t know where

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<sup>6</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 351.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

here is, so he expresses his “where” as elsewhere. This obligation comes up again, the value basic to the phrase “I must go on” forces him to look into the otherness for answers, in a sense to try, desperately, to build a “here” out of “elsewhere.”

This impossible task of surmounting the fact that he cannot speak, nor think, confronts the fact that he must speak, for some reason as inexplicable as everything else to the narrator, he must keep narrating. He covers the pages with implausible “I’s,” which he has barely a belief in. And yet we as readers can still speak of this voice as “here” in the most unclassifiable sense. There is a sense of a figure. The narrator appears in reading the text as one speaker. From the pile of broken hypotheses we still, despite his argument to the contrary, believe him to be human. This is partly because even he believes himself to be human, of course without justification. Every aspect of the narrator seems to slip into pre-linguistic or post-human grumblings, yet he still feels a relation to a personality, even if it is one he is actively trying to escape. This is apparent in the lines:

“Who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don’t know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be.”<sup>8</sup>

In this passage he says when he speaks and thinks it must be in relation to a self that is elsewhere. He is able to remember things, to link them into a narrative, from which he can also say something of the future. But just barely, there is a suggestion of continuity of the self here, a fuzzy ideal of an end, but this does not negate the fact that he is also at the same time hopelessly

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<sup>8</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 372.

outside of this timeline, stuck always in the present, a stranger first, forever wanting and waiting. Yet he feels he can, just a very little bit, and for reasons that are completely beyond him, think and speak about himself as if he were different. His broken memory still somehow traces a trajectory, he feels he is coming from somewhere, and is going on towards something. This is implied in the voice's very existence. He has a glimpse of his past, an armless, legless head and torso in a jar, beside some restaurant. The expression of it, in constant hypothesizing, leads only to an empty expression of time, a figure of silence transfixed in language.

Rabate elaborates on the relevance of Levinas' thought to Beckett's work in the following quotation:

"Beckett ops for an *aerte povera* underpinned by an ethics of poverty and alterity, an ethics that looks very much like the ethics of the other elaborated by Levinas exactly at the same time. What is paradoxical indeed is that the relation to the other is predicated on a non-relation: the face of the other subject reveals first of all an infinite distance"<sup>9</sup>

We must further examine the idea of an ethics of poverty. The impoverishment of Beckett's people, which steadily increases through the trilogy, cannot be overstated. They have practically nothing left. From this, at the edge of existence, Beckett is able to put them into contact with an otherness. The other is first of all elsewhere, so the relation is a non-relation, a felt emptiness, or the sound of silence. Beckett tries to build an ethic out of a wasteland, an incomprehensible otherness which he give voice to. The others who are presented, Malone, Molloy, Mahood, and the restaurant owner, all are inarticulate. Their faces resound with an infinite distance. The narrator is no longer capable of working the experience of others, and the world, into an orientation

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Michel, Rabate. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016. 93.

that can be translated into a linear experience. There is an ethic in the representation of otherness because it shows the crisis of the subject for what it is. Not knowing becomes an ethical point, ideologies always amounts to tyranny in Beckett's work. Ignorance becomes at least an honest starting point for the study of human meaning.

Michael Mundhenk in his essay *The "Dialectics of Hope and Despair"* writes:

"The link between the self and the world which in classical cosmology was of an orderly and diurnal nature, has dissolved. Today, the relationship between the changing subject and the changing object must be constantly renegotiated, thus creating a predominant feeling of insecurity and doubt. Since 'every work of art is a readjustment of this [subject-object] relationship,' modern art must no longer deny the ephemerality of contemporary reality: 'It's no good closing your eyes, you must leave them open in the dark, that's my opinion. I am not speaking of sleep, I am speaking of what I believe is called waking (Beckett).'"<sup>10</sup>

Mundhenk starts by evoking the passage concerning Halley's comet, which deals with the dissociation of the self from the world. The synthesis and flow between self and world, which allows us to say when something happened and where, gives us our "who." Spatial identification is foundational in the construction of identity. This is why Malone is trying to make a list of everything he owns. These objects become buttresses holding up his self-image. But this identity proves incomplete, objects have a mobility all their own. He accumulates something and loses something else, getting mixed up about what he is supposed to have and what he is not. Malone records ones that aren't there and misses ones that are. So his self-image begins to reflect a multiplicity of fragmented and sporadic flying objects.

A pure stasis of subject-object relation is unattainable. What begins to occur within the self-image is, like Malone, the frenzied collapse of its center. He cannot fix himself in time or place, so he is sent spinning off in a constant renegotiation with his surrounding phenomena. He,

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<sup>10</sup> Mundhenk, M. *Dialectics of Hope and Despair*. He Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.10.

too, is changed by this ephemerality, so that in a sense he dies to himself all the time. This endless, successive death, which is the moving of time, is the darkness which Beckett opens our eyes to.

The state of perusal, which Sartre claims to be our existential position, along with constant doubt and insecurity, is associated by Mundhenk with temporality. The ephemerality means the subject is unfixed. Fixed designations of meaning trying to identify with the flux are swept up in it. The narrator is unable to stabilize a center around which to organize reality. Other people cannot be grasped in any concrete sense because they, too, are ephemeral. Characters change situationally and with time; their true essence remains fugitive. The existence of such a thing itself is questionable at best. If it did exist it would be embedded deep within the mysteries of time itself, shrouded in the darkness Beckett speaks of. He draws from this blindness, a kind of vision.

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Beckett speaks of the problem of the self and the world in his essay on Proust:

“So far we have considered a mobile subject before an ideal object, immutable and incorruptible. But our vulgar perception is not concerned with other than vulgar phenomena. Exemption from the intrinsic flux in a given object does not change the fact that it is the correlative of a subject that does not enjoy such immunity. The observer infects the observed with his own mobility.”<sup>11</sup>

This is the problem by which “every work of art is a readjustment of this [subject-object] relationship.” The work of art can no longer contain a subject acting out a grounded object relation; a distance has appeared between them. They are in a non-relation, the subject is mobile, and so contact with another mobile subject will lead to almost certain miscommunication. Reality is dif-

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<sup>11</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Proust. Three Dialogues*. London; Dublin printed, 1965. 17.

ferent from different perspectives, and every perspective itself in a sense stands alone as a fragment. The constant readjustment of time and space in Beckett's *The Unnamable* takes this to the extreme. Everything is turned into its opposite, becomes a paradox, and reveals a mobility that makes the realization of ideal objects impossible. Temporality corrupts the subject. Any object the subject tries to wrestle into his ideal becomes an expression of this vulgarity. They can only express their own muteness, the mumblings of a mystery.

Rabate writes: "For Levinas, similarly (to Beckett), Proust's fiction acquires exemplary philosophical value in that its opening to otherness achieves a radical break with classical ontology. Proust "breaks definitively with Parmenides," when he opens the field of an ethic of otherness beyond mortality."<sup>12</sup> This radical break comes out of the split between the world and the self. Classical ontology posits a fixed being. Parmenides literally says, "change is an illusion."<sup>13</sup> And sometimes the narrator seems to have this outlook, posting all the changes as illusions. This comes from his hope in a fixed domain of being, but this belief doesn't lead him to a cozy delusion. Instead this 'unchanging reality' that he puts forward in different hypotheses is at every moment challenged by an otherness. Instead of a fixed ideal of any kind, Beckett's work strives to contain and express the flux of time, to emphasize, and mine, its vulgarity. Beckett's morality has to do with the accepting of this otherness, recognizing its place inside the self. It is therefore beyond morality. What he is trying to accept does not fit into a dogma, instead it is an ethic of otherness, it locating its understanding of the self in sounds heard across impossible distances.

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Michel, Rabate. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016.75.

<sup>13</sup> "Parmenides." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [www.iep.utm.edu/parmenid/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/parmenid/).

An example of the constant renegotiation of the “I,” and the “doubt” and “insecurity”

Mundhenk sees as permeating its subjectivity, comes in this long passage of *The Unnamable*:

“I strained my ear towards what must have been my voice still, so weak, so far, that it was like the sea, a far calm sea dying—no, none of that, no beach, no shore, the sea is enough, I’ve had enough of shingle, enough of sand, enough of earth, enough of sea too. Decidedly Basil is becoming important, I’ll call him Mahood instead, I prefer that, I’m queer. It was he told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head. I don’t know how it was done. I always liked not knowing, but Mahood said it wasn’t right. He didn’t know either, but it worried him. It is his voice which has often, always, mingled with mine, and sometimes drowned it completely. Until he left me for good, or refused to leave me anymore, I don’t know. Yes, I don’t know if he’s here now or far away, but I don’t think I’m far wrong in saying that he has ceased to plague me. When he was away I tried to find myself again, to forget what he said, about me, about my misfortunes, fatuous misfortunes, idiotic pains, in the light of my true situation, revolting word. But his voice continued to testify for me, as though woven into mine, preventing me from saying who I was, what I was, so as to have done with saying, done with listening. And still today, as he would say, though he plagues me no more his voice is there, in mine, but less, less. And being no longer renewed it will disappear one day, I hope, from mine, completely. But in order for that to happen I must speak, speak. And at the same time, I do not deceive myself, he may come back again, or go away and then come back again. Then my voice, the voice, would say, That’s an idea, now I’ll tell one of Mahood’s stories, I need a rest. . . . But it would not be my voice, not even in part. That is how it would be done. Or quietly, stealthily, the story would begin, as if nothing had happened and I still the teller and the told. But I would be fast asleep, my mouth agape, as usual, I would look the same as usual. And from my sleeping mouth the lies would pour, about me. No not sleeping, listening, in tears. But now, is it I now, on me? Sometimes I think it is. And then I realize it is not.”<sup>14</sup>

This sea, which is impossibly far, is dying. The apparition of a sea denotes the the flow of time, its “dying” refers to the constant death implied by this flux. He identifies himself with this voice, while at the same time being subsumed in its oblivion. Its calm is the silence of nothingness, no more earth, sand or anything else. We should remember that the face of disaster, which Moran looks into, is described as possessing this same eerie calmness. It is an identification with the cold, dead ocean deep. Through the process of identification with what is unidentifiable he drowns, becoming the voice of “a far calm sea dying.”

The narrator wants no more of these descriptions of nature. He cannot reestablish the classical cosmology, although his turn to Mahood is an attempt to do just that. Mahood is osten-

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<sup>14</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 305.



sibly a character, but he is unlike anything you would find in a traditional novel. Mahood seems to be a piece of the narrator's "I," which has taken on a kind of autonomy and pseudonym of its own. He is antithetical to this state of indeterminacy. His stories bring with it all this nature, the sand, earth, and even the ocean. Mahood establishes the world. But his world is dying, starting to slip away. The stories of Mahood do not accomplish what they set out to, they do not establish being. They become an empty lesson, forcing our narrator to speak a language he does not understand, and can barely hold on to. His voice becomes the voice of otherness.

Mahood has a symbolic side in which he represents a social reality, a world of 'manhood.' The language of humanity, and the stories it tells itself through this language, are not something the narrator can choose not to absorb. We all inherit language. It is not ours, but was given to us. The Unnamable narrator references Mahood as if he is his own voice, interwoven into his being. He is the language the narrator uses, the very structure of story telling, for he is the teacher of stories. But this language is other, it belongs to others, and so it's impersonal. It is the only way by which he knows himself, and yet it is Mahood's voice, not his. Trying to make it his proves impossible. The recognition of this insurmountable distance begins the designation of its meaning.

The narrator says, "When he was away I tried to find myself again, to forget what he said about me."<sup>15</sup> The voice of Mahood, which sometimes completely takes over the narrative, and which is indistinguishable from the narrator, actually is obstructing the narrators search for himself. All the stories that he told, in which the world and the self were unified, "are preventing me

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 305.

from saying who I was, what I was, so as to have done with saying, done with listening.”<sup>16</sup> He essentially is Mahood. He says, “he testifies for me,” but Mahood is not him. The narrator believes himself to be done with saying, done with listening, outside of this world of false identity. The narrator believes Mahood speaks through him, suppressing his true identity. Our narrator is trying to destroy Mahood’s language, to find holes in it, and to push it to its limit, so as to find a way out into his own original expression.

Since he cannot find being in this world of “Man” and “Ideas” he tries to push away, to find some new words. He does not successfully escape socialization, nor can he make the words he is taught his own. They structure his memory, and yet it does not succeed fully in making him feel like a man. The misspelling of manhood denotes a slippage. He turns away from it, yet he cannot escape it. In looking for his ‘real’ being he always ends up back in stories and in language that become increasingly full of air. Yet he does have hope that if he keeps talking he will be able to disentangle his voice from Mahood. But to do this he must use Mahood’s language, and so paradoxically, he must search for his own voice by means of the voice of the other. This is the cause of the fragile identification he makes with the voice of the dying.

He is never successful in breaking free, but his attempted identification with the very otherness which is defying him creates a language of its own. A sort of degeneration of Mahood’s ‘meanings’ into the voice of otherness, which actually does say something about the state of his “I.” He thinks he is the “teller and the told,” but this unity is broken by the impersonality of the voice that moves through him. He writes, “But I would be fast asleep, my mouth agape . . .

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 305.

from my sleeping mouth the lies would pour.”<sup>17</sup> He is separate from the words that come out of his mouth. He is asleep, not in control of the mechanism of speech. Yet something speaks through this dark sleep. They are the lies of Mahood, which might actually be the story we are currently reading. In a sense any semblance of story is Mahood. He is the pseudo self that can’t be shaken off. For when he remarks about the story stealthily beginning, we are forced to realize we are reading a story that has begun, however falsely. Later on in the novel, the narrator tells us some of Mahood’s stories that are full of lies, failures of meaning, “misfortunes, fatuous misfortunes, idiotic pains.”<sup>18</sup> The narrator’s justification for telling these stories is that by telling them they might set him free. He is trying to rid himself of the personality of Mahood, but he can’t escape the lies or the stories. We are stuck in the world of suffering and illusion, which becomes reflected in the increasingly absurd prose.

They are his words, but they are other to him, they belong to Mahood or later on to Worm. They show a sort of human existence, a cast of characters and a plot. But since, as we noted earlier, the temporality of this existence makes change and contradiction the rule, none of these voices can fulfill the ontological search for his true self. However, this external voice in some capacity simply represents the external world. Worm especially symbolizes a natural force that is speaking through him. It is the voice of the other, who was Mahood, before his meanings collapsed. Our narrator’s sense of self is therefor made up of this alienating language, and yet through it in the strangest way, he does seem to be finding his own voice, in the language of the

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<sup>17</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 305.

<sup>18</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 364.

unnamable. Mahood's stories, in all their depth of failure, are all that he is. In this heap of broken hypotheses, we can trace his figure.

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Rabate writes about the importance of the problem of language to Beckett in the lines:

“Beckett has added to Sartre's and Camus's existentialism the missing element, a medium that for them remained invisible, and whose admission had dire consequences: the constitution of subjectivity by language, a theme that came to prominence with Maurice Blanchot...”<sup>19</sup>

Beckett sees how language is central to the construction of the self. The narrator of *The Unnamable* explicitly references the way his sense of self is determined by his language, and simultaneously with his questioning of the words “who, when, where,” “going,” and “on,” his subjectivity changes, becomes unclear in definition. The construction of his self through language does determine him. But he also loses himself in it. Since language has come to contain the indeterminacy of the world, this self has lost its foundation. But something is still stuck in of this language. A voice that keeps talking, which still seeks to find itself with the now unnamable language which constitutes it. In this way, Beckett brings language to bear on its own mystery, burrowing down to the level of mute utterance, he realizes a strange displacement in the heart of the constitution of subjectivity. Part of the Trilogies' descent into increasing absurdity is an approach to the origin of language, to find the place where nothingness begins to speak.

Blanchot describes this in his review of *The Unnamable*: “What is this void that becomes the voice of the man disappearing into it? Where has he fallen? ‘Where now? Who now? When

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<sup>19</sup>Jean-Michel, Rabate. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016. 44.

now?”<sup>20</sup> As Rabate points out, Beckett extends Sartre and Camus’ philosophy, both of whom question the continuity of the subject and the fixedness of value. He makes the form match these ideas, so that language itself is made to express the confusion of meaning in its syntactical structure. Camus talks about a confrontation with the absurd, but when he does so in *The Myth of Sisyphus* he still uses the language of a classical philosophical tradition. Although his meaning is a radical break with this tradition, his form re-enforces it. Sartre even more so in *Existentialism is a Humanism* lays claim to words like “freedom” and “goodness” directly, calling up a tradition of philosophers assured in these descriptions of the human who comfortably lists their “who, what, and when.”

Blanchot’s idea of a “constitution of subjectivity by language” means that these very statements of “who, what, when,” make up the subject. Blanchot references a fundamental problem he and Beckett have in common when he says “What is this void that becomes the voice.” Blanchot signals at an opaque obscurity at the base of language. Beckett might be said to be trying to bring language to witness on its own “primordial obscurity,” by method of subtraction. He does strip it down to the most basic elements, and in his first line calls these fundamentals into question. “Going” and “on” are the basic premise on which any sentence is constructed. The linearity it presupposes can no longer really contain the meaning of the man who is disappearing. He reveals the void hiding under the basic declarative phrase. Its meaning generally cannot hold, not at least in any traditional form. The voice is of the void, and the man is disappearing through the language that is spoken. He does not realize himself through it. Identity is not established by

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<sup>20</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1999. 29.

language here. Instead its meaning, if it has one, is connected to this void, and to the way in which language somehow expresses it.

Probably the best example of “the constitution of subjectivity by language” in *The Unnamable* comes in the passage:

“You don't feel your mouth any more, no need of a mouth, the words are everywhere, inside me, outside me, well, well, a minute ago I had no thickness, I hear them, no need to hear them, no need of a head, impossible to stop them, impossible to stop, I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I'm the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, come together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, that I'm something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts.”<sup>21</sup>

What is being expressed in language is a kind of metamorphosis out of the body into language, which is described like a kind of molecular substance. There is no body, “no need for a head.”

Our basic subjectivity, which is supposed to be expressed in language loses itself in that language. The man falls into the voice which comes from the void. In these lines, the narrator becomes enmeshed in all of language, turns into nothing but language. He is not established by it, but melts into its infinity of associations. We can't imagine what he looks like. Here he describes himself as having no mouth; later he sees himself as an egg with nothing but a mouth. Although he says he has no eyes, he still sometimes cries. He becomes nothing but words that slide around in a traction-less, self-referential whirlpool. Subjectivity might be constituted by it, but here it is also essentially lost in its enormous labyrinth of associations. What is it, where does it come from, what does it conceal? He realizes himself in it, and is only able to exist by it, but when he

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<sup>21</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 380.

looks into it deeper he does not find a comforting platform on which to securely stand and survey the world. Instead of finding himself, he becomes the whole world. An inhuman sea of strange particles, pulling him apart in its ebb and flow.

Beckett asks these simple questions, and because of the silence at the root of our basic presuppositions in language like “who,” “what,” “where,” he cannot establish a meaningful subject. Nor can he take the position of the writer, for it is unclear whether it’s some obscurity deep within language itself, that speaks through him, that is at work. The otherness of this language, which nonetheless is all that he is, comes in the lines, “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others.” The words belong to others, and so, being made of words, he belongs to this otherness. And so he goes on listing the things he is, “the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I’m the air, the walls, the walled-in one.” He is all of these things, walled up inside language, reverberating around in the entirety of its associations. But in this way he is nothing at all except the mute possibility of language.

Blanchot writes of *The Unnamable*, “when the talking stops, there is still talking; when the language pauses, it perseveres; there is no silence, for within that voice the silence eternally speaks.”<sup>22</sup> Being made of “all these words, all these strangers” is unstable, and this instability translates into Mahood, who is supposedly talking about experience, but is so lost, full of assumptions, lies, and preconceptions, that his meaning begins to ring false. The narrator looks deeper into these words, which are supposed to constitute identity, and his mind swims with contradictions, endless paradox, suffocating word games. He finds within these words the mystery of the material world. The narrator wants to escape, he tries to strip it away, to get down to its ori-

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<sup>22</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1999. 132. 128.

gins in hope of finding being. But down through language, at the end of an impossible exhaustion of subtraction, there is, as Blanchot says, more language. Language that he says springs from “primordial obscurity.” The voice that he is calling the “speech of silence” seems represented in the lines, “everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I’m all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder.”<sup>23</sup> There is a kind of obscure movement, almost a naturalistic image of wind and snow, or the forming of the particles of the universe.

In a way this shows a kind of genuine root to Mahood. The narrator’s attempt to signify is rooted in a sort of eternal point of endless language, circling around a non-center. This is perhaps as close as we will get to an essence in this novel. Confusingly, this obscure point, or origin, seems almost to be interchangeable with non-being. It is from this point of extreme otherness, which the search for origin draws to, that our narrator’s voice comes forth, from nowhere and no one in particular. The narrator’s words may not make any sense on the surface, but they carry a secret something of this impossible place.

Blanchot describes this in the lines “The Unnamable, a being without being, who can neither live nor die, neither begin nor leave off, the empty site in which an empty voice is raised without effect, masked for better or worse by a porous and agonizing ‘I.’” This space of otherness it touches through a kind of non-relation is different from the scatological “I’s” that make up the “empty voice.” It is described in the realization at the end of the above quotation:

“That I’m something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 380.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* 380.



The narrator is something beyond language, a wordless being--less silence. He says he seeks it. But he is stuck orbiting around its null-site in the empty mask of words, where he seeks in perpetuity like “a caged beast born of caged beasts” his unnamable origin in silence. He is this silence but he can't reach it. He is imprisoned in the word, in the image of a little creature. He breaks the silence in its search for it, and so is stuck in an absurd circularity of inarticulate animalism.

Blanchot, speaking on this same quotation writes in his essay on *The Unnamable*:

“It is this approach to *origin* that makes the experience of the work still more dangerous, dangerous for the man who bears it, dangerous for the work itself. But it is also this approach that assures the experiment its authenticity, that alone makes of art an essential research, and it is by having rendered this approach evident in the nakedest, most abrupt manner that *The Unnamable* has more importance for literature than most ‘successful’ works in its canon. Try listening to ‘this voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says, too old perhaps and too humiliated ever to be able to say at last the words that might make it stop.’ And try descending into that neutral region where the self surrenders in order to speak, henceforth subject to words, fallen into the absence of time where it must die an endless death.”<sup>25</sup>

This approach to origin gives the work an authenticity, the expression of which in literature, perhaps gives us the only real reason found in the book to keep going on. It is an impossible origin, it is outside of any beginning, and is other to space and time. It is a neutral region, a null site, “a hard shut dry cold black place.” But even this betrays it, for first and for most it is unnamable.

Beckett's search takes him to the brink of this unknowable elsewhere.

To do this the narrator must undergo a “self-surrendering in order to speak.” This means to become the voice of this origin, the voice of its silence, he must abandon all ideas of conventional identity. He succeeds in this, as Blanchot puts it, by “continuing with increasing purity from book to book by rejecting the very resources, meager as they are, that might permit it to

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<sup>25</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1999. 132.

continue.”<sup>26</sup> The narrator rejects subjectivity, trying to surrender himself, to become nothing but a neutral voice, fallen into the absence of time. But this possibility of expression is also a cursed obligation, in which he is ultimately trapped, living out an “endless death” in language. This new voice, which proceeds off the impossibility of proceeding, is dead, empty, a non-being. But what makes its exploration “essential” artistic “research” is that Beckett expresses this mute pre-human language, which is the approach to origin, in “the nakedest, most abrupt manner.” The expression of this signifies something beyond the human. The language he discovers in this search has borne witness to some primordial disaster, language here holds the traces of this original trauma.

In another essay, *Literature And The Right to Death*, Blanchot talks about the importance of a literature that strives for the obscure origins of existence, in the lines:

“When literature refuses to name anything, when it turns a name into something obscure and meaningless, witness to the primordial obscurity, what has disappeared in this case—the meaning of the name—is really destroyed, but signification in general has appeared in its place, the meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word as expression of the obscurity of existence, so that although the precise meaning of the term has faded, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning—a strange impersonal light.”<sup>27</sup>

The title *The Unnamable* itself suggests Beckett has set out to write literature that refuses to name anything, a literature whose goal has become to write what is unwritable. When the narrator says he is someone called Mahood who lived in a jar, or Worm, who has not yet been born, or Malone, who circles in orbit, or Molloy who can’t find his bicycle, he is turning a name into something obscure. Molloy, becomes Moran who becomes Malone, Mahood down to worm. But in the end, he too is thrown away. The trilogy descends into less and less stable voices with more

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<sup>26</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1999. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Blanchot Reader*. Blackwell, 1995. 329.

and more obtuse names and processes of naming. The meaning of the name disappears, but something still persists in the place that held it. Blanchot calls it the “meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word.” This embedded meaning is the language of primordial speech, a pre-linguistic sound which persists in the endless possibility of signification. In his search for being he finds this silent other, which speaks through him. This voice of otherness, which he finds at the heart of himself, is his origin. What is asserted is the truth of his condition, which can be summed up, not in an identity, or a way out, but in the empty power to create, which is itself the meaning of the meaninglessness.

## A story

Earlier I mentioned that, despite the narrator's intention to evade Mahood, and to free himself of the voice of the 'others', it is still the only language he has to complete the task he feels is his obligation: to say what he really is. The narrator is telling Mahood's story. This story tries to convince him that he is human. That this story he is telling is the story of a person who lives in a place and leads such and such a life. It is an indoctrination into being human. In one sense the narrator wants to believe this, he struggles to find his own authentic, personal human voice. However, he also calls this human meaning a lesson he is forced to repeat. He is trying to forget that it is not his voice, but he can't; he is constantly reminding himself that the story he is telling comes from something, or someone else. This is disturbing to him. When he looks at his reality, and then goes over what he has been taught to tell himself about the world, there are innumerable disparities.

The story of the narrator's human life is a kind of pre-set algorithm for being, a kind of grammatical structure of meaning. It is given to him by collective conventional language, and culture. We can see the third person 'other' as the incarnation of this constellation of human conditioning. But when it is emptied out, and the story is revealed as a kind of porous shell, incapable of containing the definitive meaning of being, these lessons are exposed as artificial delin-eations in realities fluidity. The neutral force of endless natural variation, ancients, and the general randomness of existence, breaks up the signification of language, while at the same time this force reanimates the fragments that remain. This broken grammar emptily signifies a faceless existence that cannot fall silent. It is the language of the force of this inescapable place of non-

place, which will never arrive, but is always coming. The language begins to express this non-place through a kind of contradiction and absence. This force, which suspends the subject in this perpetual displacement, is also other. It undoes Mahood. It is the memento mori lurking in his story.

Yet having nothing but this voice of Mahood, our narrator is thrown back every time from the strange non-space on the verge of nothingness into Mahood's idea of reality. One of the strangest aspects of this novel comes from this theme of reincarnation. Beckett's characters all seem to be a succession of the same creature, which dies, and is reborn. The unnamed narrator seems to be the last in this line, only missing another limb or two, and slightly more mentally afflicted. When Malone goes through metamorphoses into the "Unnamable" character, it seems as if through each revolution a subtraction occurs. His incarnation becomes more horrifying. It is stripped of its defenses. There isn't a progression towards enlightenment, but instead an endless devaluation from man to worm, a regression back into the earth. This gesture almost reaches complete silence, but it suddenly, right on the brink, is thrown back into obligation towards the world. In this novel there is a horror that comes from the endless obligation to existence, the final and true form of which is always deferred. Things do not progress towards a goal, they have simply taken another of an endless series of increasingly enigmatic and painfully contorted forms.

Whereas most of *The Unnamable* takes place much closer to an inexplicable almost black, almost silent wasteland of strangely orbiting, and colliding things, these few pages are closer to the physical and temporal existence of the previous characters. Beckett's characters are trapped in time, and while the unnamed narrator tries to push, or is pushed to the brink of physi-

cal and temporal space, its limits still contain him. As a rule his attempt to escape and transcend these bonds through the refusal to recognize the validity of “perpetual motion,” lands him right back inside these limitations, perhaps closer to a ‘final stage,’ but just as likely further away.

Here he slides back into relation with a world, something he long ago had decided was a lie of Mahood’s. He can’t escape this reality; he is reincarnated again, into a new form, which faces collapse and death, to be reborn and die again. Mahood’s viewpoint is countered by this torturous cycle of death and reincarnations, which breaks the linearity of his story. This becomes the image of self which he can neither stop expressing nor find meaning in.

The narrator writes, “None will ever know what I am, none will ever hear me say it, I won’t say it, I can’t say it, I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I’ll say it, even with their language, for me alone, so as not to have lived in vain, and so as to go silent.”<sup>1</sup> Two things are important here. First, we get one of the clearest statements pertaining to the question of ‘going on.’ The illuminating configuration, “so as not to have lived in vain” shows an intolerance towards the meaninglessness of earthly existence. The narrator is a creature who needs a reason to live, to be in a sense going somewhere. It tells us that, regardless of his inability to find this reason in the world, he can be defined by his need for such a reason. Although we should be skeptical of his hope, it often resembles the rote lessons of Mahood. “So has not to have lived in vain,” is a kind of platitude, a ready-made phrase that in reality our narrator does not understand. However the strength of his need for a meaningful life is shown in his ‘perhaps,’ which defines the logical impossibility he has just finished establishing. This leap the narrator takes uses the lan-

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 319.

guage of others, these stories of Mahood's. He tries to realize his goal through them. One can see how this puts an emphasis on art, the locus of his energies of escape rests in creative defiance, his leap is an imaginative rejection, an attempted recreation of the possible.

Previously, the narrator tries to forget everything Mahood said, mostly because they were lies that laid claim to the meaning of his life while ostensibly obfuscating any real meaning. However, now, out of apparent desperation, and since he can't get Mahood to stop talking through him anyway, the narrator decides to lie in order to find truth. This marks his return to an earth-like atmosphere, where he takes on what is supposedly a stable self despite the fact that he assures us that he is not really this person, just as he was not Molloy, or Malone. The narrator says:

There's no getting rid of them without naming them and their contraptions, that's the thing to keep in mind. I might as well tell another of Mahood's stories and no more about it, to be understood in the way I was given to understand it, namely as being about me.<sup>2</sup>

He must use their names, and their language in order to be rid of them. At times Mahood seems like a vast bureaucracy, regulating him in every way. But this force of Mahood has a spiritual dimension associated with a creator who has given him this life and is forcing him to live it. This is interwoven into a kind of human world of laws and regulations, which in a sense really do bring him into existence by teaching him language. Whatever this abstract and ultimately unnamable Mahood is, we know its stories constitute a reality of selfhood that gives him a sense of existence in space and time. But the fixed self he is supposed to recite slips into a different and confused narrative in which space and time don't constitute a secure self but are the force by

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<sup>2</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 320.

which this self is scattered. Dennis A. Foster, in his book *All Here Is Sin: The Obligation in The Unnamable*, lays out the underlying state of this supposedly stable 'self' in the lines: "But the 'I' of *The Unnamable* refers to no unified subject, to no single, creating mind that can shape the words into a whole. Who says 'I'?"<sup>3</sup> Yet once he begins telling Mahood's story this "I," which was a porous stand-in for disparate fragments of consciousness, becomes stuffed into the illusion of one more or less unified mind, which occupies a fixed, if ambiguous, physical situation: living in a jar, without arms or legs.

The narrator says "I'll recite it. This will leave me free to consider how I may best proceed with my own affair."<sup>4</sup> He wants to trick Mahood into thinking that he is telling the story earnestly, but in secret he plots his plan of escape. Behind this story, and in a way through it, runs this same spiritual inclination to find true being, to fall silent, so to speak. He is telling it in the hope that when he says he is fixed, reality will correspond. But he also knows that behind this illusion he is a multitude of selves, which he is unable to unify through language. Although in the story he believably commits to the part of an earthy thing, secretly there is a part of him that he feels is elsewhere. The narrator then says definitively: "It will be the last story. I'll try and look as if I was telling it willingly, to keep them quiet in case they should feel like refreshing my memory, on the subject of my behavior above in the island, among my compatriots, contemporaries, coreligionists and companions in distress."<sup>5</sup> The narrator tells the story as a guise under which he can escape. He wants it to look like the recital, too, is authentic. A new dimension of Mahood

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<sup>3</sup> Foster, Dennis A. *All Here Is Sin: The Obligation in The Unnamable*. Duke U P. 1983. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 320.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 320.



emerges, a strict schoolmaster who, indoctrinating him in edict, keeps an eye out for even the slightest hint of dissent. These words, “compatriots, contemporaries, coreligionists” have an ironic, forced, and over-exaggerated sense of human camaraderie. He does not feel any real sense of this connection, so he overdoes it to seem genuine. In reality, he can’t put real feeling behind it; he does not stand on stable enough ground to be able to truly feel this connection.

The narrator pretends to be happy, content with human reality, while at the same time his reality is painfully obvious. He is marginalized and dehumanized. He loses his sense of reality, even saying about his new home: “The island, that’s all the earth I know. I don’t know it either, never having had the stomach to look at it.”<sup>6</sup> The narrator feels an inexplicable uneasiness, yet the story he is supposed to tell, and tries to in these lines, posits him as fixed, and even happy. Since Mahood brought him into self-consciousness, which he feels is false consciousness, he wants to be let go. Ironically, he must appease Mahood, for he thinks since Mahood brought him to language only he can set him free. The narrator does get free, but only in the sense that his language succeeds, not in escaping reality, but in exposing the true horror that lies under Mahood’s facade of fixed identity. Mahood’s lie can be heard in our narrator’s voice in the lines:

But at this period I refer to now this active life is at an end, I do not move and never shall again, unless it be under the expulsion of a third party. For of the great traveler I had been, on my hands and knees in the later stages, then crawling on my belly or rolling on the ground, only the trunk remains (in sorry trim), surmounted by the head with which we are already familiar, this is the part of myself the description of which I have best assimilated and retained. Stuck like a sheaf of flowers in a deep jar, its neck flush with my mouth, on the side of a quiet street near the shambles, I am at rest at last.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 320.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 321.

This lie of fixedness is an important one, especially since moments before the narrator is saying things like “And my course is not helicoidal, I got that wrong too, but a succession of irregular loops.”<sup>8</sup> He corrects his assumption of a helix movement because it is much too neat an assertion to describe his mess of jerky, irregular movements. It’s dismissed on the grounds of having a stability he is simply incapable of experiencing. ‘Irregular loops’ sums up his purgatory, endlessly moving on, but where, when, and who are all randomized fleeting curves that are not repeated. There is no continuity on which to build a sense of linearity through time. Without repetition no two points on his supposed lifeline connect. The narrator can have no memory without the cultivation of habit and the redundancy of consecutive uniform loops. Consequently the memory he does have left feel like those of someone else, he cannot verify their authenticity, nor can he be sure they really do belong to him.

Despite all evidence he himself has given us that he is unfixed, these passages tell a different story. He posits himself as fixed. At first this seems synonymous with the ‘silence’ or ‘nothing’ he has idealized and turned into goals. For he makes it out as if now, on this island, he can finally rest eternally. Here we actually get one of the longest of the few and far between moments in which we get a “who:” a head in a jar, a “where:” on a quiet street behind a restaurant on an island, and a “when:” his sawdust is changed weekly. And a few pages later he even says, “and today.” Yes, these are ambiguous markers of time, but they are quite a leap from the confused temporality, punctuated by sporadic sounds and lights, in which he first describes himself. In short, in this story he has established a world, unbelievable and cartoonish as it might be. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 320.

world his movement is over, “this active life is at an end.”<sup>9</sup> The story of Mahood that he tells himself is his own life. In the above lines he draws a narrative arc through his ‘life’ in which all his pitiful and crippled movements lead up to a point of immobility. His search is given meaning and trajectory; at its end he finds himself at rest.

This jar is important. It evokes a need the narrator tells us of early in the novel. He must imagine himself at the point around which everything orbits while he sits unmoving at the center. At the time he reminds us that he must admit he is in perpetual and erratic motion. But here this is flatly denied. Although this third party he speaks of does allude to something that might send him spinning off again. If we think about the relationship he has to himself we could say, as much as this third party could be Mahood, or the passing of time, that he is also a third party to himself, capable of undermining his own identity. Part of him is not him, an otherness undoing him from inside.

The narrator feels an incongruity within himself, a feeling of dissociation unravels the story. We must remember that before he started telling this story, he told us that part of his consciousness was hiding behind the scenes, thinking intently on the possibility of escape. So as much as he, in telling us Mahood’s story, tells us he is at rest forever, that he will not move of an agency of his own will, there is something working within him simultaneously undoing or working against this supposedly restful existence. And we can’t help but feel there is some irony in the fact that after stating he feels the ultimate pleasure of this final fixed resting place, he does nothing but complain about his discomfort. What is interesting about this story is that while Ma-

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<sup>9</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 321.

hood says he is stable, or at rest, our narrator's experience contradicts this. This creature, who calls out to Mahood to let him die, is forced through the most painful of mutations. Molloy crawling through the bog lands in search of his mother, or Malone rolling through the desert, or this final, undeniably uncomfortable manifestation, a trunk in a jar, pining after the woman who, about three or four times a year when it snows, covers his head with a tarp.

What is most strange is that Mahood is our narrator, while at the same time our narrator refers to him as an external force. Part of this force is undoubtedly a kind of creator that has forced him into time and space. He implores this force, trying to figure out how it is he came to exist, and more importantly why does he suffer, and will it ever stop? The narrator wants to know if this suffering is part of his masters' plan, if the being that brought him into existence had ordered it so that he progressed towards enlightenment, or if this being was absent, leaving him stuck in chaos for eternity. But Mahood's voice doesn't contain an answer. He is basically an amalgamation of all the forces that have made the narrator, which he has no control over. It is a kind of automatic voice which covers his own. But it is not really, as much as this element is stressed, a force that is immediately present in the voice. Its presence is indirect, and we can only sense it through its concealment. Mahood's voice eventually becomes the neutral and mute language of phenomena. But again, only indirectly, it reaches that point through the collapse of the reality of its idealism. But here, Mahood's voice is actually mostly the voice of human reality.

This ideology, which the narrator can't shake from his language, is Mahood. He can plainly see that Mahood's vision of an ordered universe is not reality, which is why he denies it to the point of almost total solipsism. But this world has seeped into his self-understanding, he can't escape it. At this point, the narrator's fight to find his own identity outside the untenable

abstractions of Mahood, leads him to confront Mahood, to tell his story, to try and fulfill some undisclosed commitment, satisfying Mahood so that it will finally let him go. Instead his story falls apart, but before it does, we get one of the only human interactions our narrator has in this novel. The story he tells goes:

Once a week I was taken out of my receptacle, so that it might be emptied. This duty fell to the proprietress of the chop house across the street and she performed it punctually and without complaint, beyond an occasional good natured refection to the effect that I was a nasty old pig, for she had a kitchen-garden. Without perhaps having exactly won her heart it was clear I did not leave her indifferent. And before putting me back she took advantage of the circumstance that my mouth was accessible to stick into it a chunk of lights or a marrow bone.<sup>10</sup>

This woman who takes care of him without complaining shows him something like goodness and compassion. How he got to her restaurant is unclear; he himself describes a lot of irregular spinning, at which point he finally simply lands there. The randomness of his location is important to their relationship because she has no obligation towards him, they are in effect strangers to each other. Yet she does clean his jar, and she probably got it for him in the first place. The woman feeds him and even talks to him, although he is mute and has few ways of gesturing to her. Basically she adopts and protects him, which perhaps metaphorically relates to his indebtedness to Mahood.

The ideal is born out of Mahood story, which is why the narrator relies on it for its completion. He is both brought into idealism through Mahood's ideology, and is unable to find an answer within it. He must disregard it in order to try and fulfill it. But the possibility for such a leap starts with this image of a heart, and the suggestion that the world might be a compassionate

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<sup>10</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 322.

place. The narrator's relation to her, described at the beginning of the story, evokes an ideal and friendly world. But reality is different. On the one hand he says on the previous page:

And even those sufficiently unhinged to be affected by the spectacle I offer, I mean upset and temporarily diminished in their capacity for work and aptitude for happiness, need only look at me a second time, those who can bring themselves to do it, to have immediately their minds made easy. For my face reflects nothing but satisfaction of one savoring a well-earned rest."<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand we know this fixed location of rest is a lie. It is difficult to believe the narrator is content or comfortable at all. If we think about his condition, without arms or legs, sleeping outside, eating bones, and later flies, we might think that the first look of the passerby might have been more honest. The voice itself, when it is not pretending to be satisfied has no aptitude for happiness, could not work not only from a lack of limbs, but from a mental condition designated here as unhinged. His reality has lost its practical human shape, he himself is defined by the one human in his life as a pig. His regression into more animalistic forms contradicts Mahood. Although in the end Mahood too is dragged down and renamed "worm." This symbolizes the decent of Mahood's rhetoric into the mud of the pigsty. It also shows the way Mahood, while intrinsically being a stranger, is still our narrator. The regression the designation "worm" implies is tied to our narrator's own physical condition; a torso without arms or legs looks like a worm. In trying to aspire to Mahood's sense of reality, the narrator brings it down with him. This abstract stand-in for his identity is slowly morphing into an unnamable something.

The narrator is, here, on the border of the human, trying to cling to its meaning. He is consumed by his relationship to this proprietress, it is the last thread connecting him to someone else. While his dreams of her remain powerful, another part of him calls into doubt the nature of

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<sup>11</sup>Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 321.

this reality. He is shrinking, becoming closer to the earth, losing touch with the supposedly good relationship he had with her. He becomes suspicious, and just when it seems he has been convinced of her love for him, he becomes disillusioned and is unable to trust her or the reality she represents.

The narrator says: “And when snow fell she covered me with a tarpaulin still watertight in places. It was under its shelter, snug and dry, that I became acquainted with the boon of tears, while wondering to what I was indebted for it, not feeling moved.”<sup>12</sup> This is the fulfillment of a motif that started back with Molloy, who is searching for his mother. Later, the narrator says that this snow is the only thing that brings out a maternal instinct in the proprietress. But this safe world, which is snug and dry, makes him cry. He says he does not feel anything for her, and yet she does affect him. He says he likes the tarp, and tries to convince her, through mute gestures, to cover him more often. His connection to her in Mahood’s story is based in love, or at least he is trying to get her to love him. He even hopes she will keep his jar when (and if) he ever dies, and perhaps in “the place now occupied by my head she will set a melon.”<sup>13</sup> The reason for this is that “then I shall not quite vanish.”<sup>14</sup> He wants to be remembered, enshrined in a human ritual, which gives meaning to death and suffering. The moral of Mahood’s story is that his relation to her is one of love, safety, goodness, and open communication. Supposedly he is moved to tears by this goodness. But there is a problem. When he says he was “not feeling moved,” a detachment occurs, he unhinges. His experience of her reality is exactly like the “tarpaulin,” supposed-

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<sup>12</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 322.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 323

<sup>14</sup>*ibid* 323.

ly a thing comfortable and totally secure, but in reality it is “watertight in places,” meaning that it leaks. In reality there are gaping holes, which could symbolize philosophical assumptions in Mahood’s story that are unsubstantiated. But, in the narrator’s more immediate circumstances, the leaking tarp could also pertain to the continuity of the woman’s intentions. What seems to be airtight human goodness is undermined by the fact that she is not really helping him as much as he thinks he is being helped. And, her communication with him generally has holes in it; misunderstanding leaks through their relationship. The meaning of her words, and of his “I,” becomes porous.

Going back to the tears, the first meaning they appear to have is to show the narrator is emotionally moved. However, this is now questionable. If we think about it, the tears could just be dripping water. He is not only not moved, his own physical response is misread. What at first seemed to be natural causality, his tears responding to her goodness, could now be seen as a pure misinterpretation of what he felt. She might not be that good, for her tarp is inadequate and she does not cover him more often. The narrator might be out of touch with his own physicality, perhaps miscategorizing the melted snow as tears. He thinks he is snug and dry but surely in reality he is soaking wet. Both of these mistakes come from Mahood. He lies to himself to try and establish the world the way he was taught it was supposed to be, but this reality of goodness and comfort is not watertight.

Our narrator begins to doubt if this woman is acting in good faith. He says, after describing the tear-inducing tarpaulin: “was this supposed to be treated as an effect of gratitude? But in this case should I not have felt grateful? Besides I realized darkly that if she took care of me thus, it was not solely out of goodness, or else I had not rightly understood the meaning of goodness,



when it was explained to me.”<sup>15</sup> The narrator appears in effect to be grateful. So we are surprised that he says that this seemingly genuine emotional response to being covered is in fact false. Perhaps he is also confused about what gratitude means. Another way to look at it is that he is simply lying when he says he is ungrateful. The more we read on the more we see him calculate out how he might get more from this woman. He is not ambivalent to her presence. He hangs on to even the slightest of her gestures, over-reading their meaning endlessly in apparent gratitude at her presence. Later he plays a trick on her, where he hides his head in his jar, making her think he has disappeared, so that at the last moment he can jump out like “a jack-in-the-box.”<sup>16</sup> This is all part of a theatrical game he is trying to play to communicate that he would prefer to be covered more often. That seems to imply he is grateful, or at least likes the little she has done for him.

So why does the narrator say he is not grateful? It seems he does love her, and would be grateful if only he could believe that she was doing what she does out of genuine goodness. He goes on to say that he believes her ulterior motive for being nice to him boils down to his usefulness as an advertising post for her restaurant. He can’t call what he feels grateful because he can’t access her feelings about him. The possibility she has darker motives inhibits his ability to identify his own feelings. He does not know her intent, so can’t understand how he should feel. He is split. Is she purposefully emasculating him, or does she care for him? Her signs can be interpreted in both directions, emptying the word ‘goodness’ of its significance. Because of the split in identity between Mahood and our narrator, what Mahood taught him about goodness is not corroborated by reality.

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 322.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 235.

What seemed to be a simple and indisputable relationship, according to what Mahood taught, has been undermined, perhaps, by our narrator's own misunderstanding. He knows what words he is supposed to use at what points in the story, but he doesn't understand them. Arguably, words like 'goodness,' which point to an abstract ideal, don't correspond to the actual feelings in play. Who says that what is defined as human actually captures what is essential to this creature? The narrator is trying to find the right words to describe himself, but he can't adequately define his own emotion according to Mahood's significations. The narrator's experience defies language's strict definitions, which, after all, he can't remember anyway. The possibility of misunderstanding her motivation means he can't define the relationship, for he can't stuff the indeterminacy of its reality into a neat signifier.

That the woman's goodness can't be substantiated in turn suspends his gratitude. He thinks she might not be doing good, but this could just as easily be a misinterpretation or misremembering of what goodness actually means. The abstractions that point to Mahood's ideal world, like goodness, are relational and relative. Because of their natural instability he can't pin them down as either wholly this or that. 'Goodness' has myriad meanings and possibilities of interpretation based on context. This is important because these ideas are necessary fuel for his story, which needs a single purpose and intention. The classical, "she did this because of that" turns into 'maybe she did this or that, and it might have been because of this, but it could have just as easily been because of something else.' The established human relationship constitutes a sense of a shared reality in which, through the medium of language, things make common sense. But the inability to actually share her perspective leaves him with a sense of doubt. Language, as the fa-

bric of this connection, fails him, and his inarticulate struggle to be understood only pushes him further away from this sought-after shared human reality.

Mahood's story becomes flawed, our narrator, while trying to tell it believably, can't help seeing the cracks, like the holes in the tarp. There is a gap between the word *goodness* and the woman's unknowable, and possibly sinister motivation. His first given definition of goodness does not hold, making the concept suddenly a malleable thing, just as easily capable of meaning its opposite. The devolution of Mahood's story back into the barely delineated and contradictory space our narrator has occupied for the majority of the narrative starts here and builds into a confrontation with the woman. He wants her to love him. His fixed ideal of goodness is stable, snug, and at rest, but in reality, these things he declares himself don't ring true. If they were true, and he did feel this way through and through, he would not begin questioning the definition of goodness, nor would he implore her to put the tarp over him more often. The problem is that the weather, which brings about her gesture, is indeterminate. Therefore the maternal instinct this snow (and apparently nothing else) brings out in her, is not a stable thing, it's as unpredictable as the weather. His ideal is stable, he is supposedly at rest, never to move again, but in actuality he wants something more, he feels an emptiness. The ideal of goodness is sporadically fulfilled, but really this is not true fulfillment. It leaves room for him to begin to doubt her. His actual state is the wanting of goodness. He then tries to overcome this instability with language, and he reaches out to her across the gulf, attempting to ask her to cover him more often, which goes predictably bad, since he has already told us he can't speak:

No other form of fitly weather lets loose in her the maternal instinct, in my favor. I have tried to make her understand, dashing my head against the neck of the jar, that I should like to be shrouded more

often. At the same time I let my spittle flow over, in an attempt to show my displeasure. In vain. I wonder what explanations she can have found to account for this behavior. She must have talked it over with her husband, and probably been told that I was meanly stifling, that is just the reverse of the truth. But credit where credit is due, we made a balls of it between us, I with my signs and her with her reading of them. This story is no good, I'm beginning almost to believe it. But let us see how it is supposed to end, that will sober me. The trouble is I forget how it goes. But did I ever know?<sup>17</sup>

This relationship is a goal for him, but its infrequency prevents him from feeling real gratitude.

Again we see the constant motion of things as preventing any completion of an identity. The transcendental goal possibly embedded in his desire for this connection has to do with the search for origin, as symbolized by the mother, but it also gestures beyond her to something like the creator of the universe. He is trying to communicate with a God, imploring this creator for protection. But there does not seem to be one, no fixed force has organized his life. His image becomes a picture of his own mobility. What we get in this scene is an allegory depicting an existential situation. He's trying to find a fixed reality with meaning in it, calling out to whoever put him in this jar. Asking if possibly there is some point or goal to the suffering of this existence? Getting no response he is left, at least, with the human world and its meaning. However, putting all of his hope in this meaning he is suddenly dumbfounded by a gulf, which comes about as a consequence of the relativity of this communication. In the reality he experiences, there is little to substantiate the claims made on reality. That it has this or that characteristic is a matter of perspective, and will change with time.

The narrator, therefore, can't discern motivation. The woman may cover him because she likes him, or she may be keeping him as an animal for fertilizer, or as a landmark attraction for her restaurant. Our narrator's condition, on the brink of being human, brings another relativity

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<sup>17</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 323.

into play: what is or is not human? We see this line blur quite often in the novel. The restaurant owner refers to him as a pig and one of his last fragmented personalities is worm. He is sinking into the earth, drawing a line from the primordial mud to humans, but also more importantly calling into question the deep assumptions of the distinction of the human, something normally seen as clearly delineated from the animal kingdom. From the narrator's vantage point the human concepts of love and connection, of law and order, are not tangible. His experience is of something closer to the earth. From down there he cannot understand her signs. He tries to, but he must conclude that what she thinks is the opposite of the truth. She thinks he is stifling, but he is not.

Our narrator is on both sides of a fault line. It's a situation similar to Molloy, who is with his mother while at the same time searching for her. It arrests language. As we look closer at this creature in a jar, we are forced to admit that no combination of opposites even begins to account for what is supposedly there. This is the more real reality that he comes to witness in the darkness of his dissociation. In the quotation in which the people passing by become demoralized when they look at him, he says, "but look a second time and you will find that I'm really different." He wants them to see he is content and at rest. I imagine on this second look a thousand hypothesis spring into action in the passerby's mind, trying to neutralize this amorphous and inexplicable protrusion in their otherwise consistent lives. And they succeed in containing it, much like he himself is contained in a jar. The narrator's existence is normalized through language. But what this language now really contains is, like the contents of the jar, still a painful enigma. Language fails to pacify his reality, but it does form its inexplicable existence into expression.

This state is painful because it is the point at which the passerby's ability to generate an aptitude for happiness and work is broken. The practical function of language cannot apply to something like this creature, who doesn't really have a function, or a reason for being. Beyond practicality, words begin to signify their own emptiness. Language can give a relational and functional meaning like "the tree is over there," but it falls short when confronted with "what is a tree?" He is looking for stability in a system where meaning is based on relativity and functionality. He is looking for something purely personal and essential within a symbolic system whose meaning is created through relation and comparison, for example: the tree is only a tree because it isn't a rock.

This lack of an essential reason, and consequently of definition, is dangerous. It points to the unresolved impossibility of truly naming things. This is symbolized in the narrator's attempts at communication. His sign to the restaurant owner, banging his head against the wall, is sub-communicative, and she does not correctly interpret it. But what is he really trying to communicate to her? Yes, he would like to be covered more often, but really he would like her to define him. The whole story is his understanding of himself based on her perception of him. She makes him real to himself, and so is a materialization of Mahood, a voice that tells him stories about himself that he then repeats to himself. The fact that an external unfixed force is how he understands himself is the very reason for the impossibility of this understanding.

The narrator cannot reach the restaurant owner, that much is clear. He is slipping below this identity, which he had based on their connection, back into fragmentation. His voice is mute, full of spittle, utterly incoherent. His signs are in the most primitive, barely audible language. But we are forced to compare him to her, and we find, surprisingly, no more clarity of communi-

cation. Her signs turn out to be just as relative, and we see that his inability to understand or articulate does not come from him being an un-functioning vagrant, but from a slippage occurring within language. Her perspective is relative, it cannot actually tell him who he is. It is a fragment which itself he can interpret multiple ways, a mobile object, as Beckett puts it in his Proust essay.

She could be his protector, because she's fond of him, or she could be the prison guard who puts an uncomfortable metal collar around his neck so he stops jumping out and scaring her. Her signs can be interpreted so that he is alternatively a victim of her greed or indebted to her with gratitude. The narrator's own sense of identity changes based on these shifts. In a sense, his much more human interlocutor is just as inarticulate, and is so because of circumstance. This infects him, causing an internal collapse. They live in a world of change. Sometimes it snows, sometimes it doesn't, and she is a different person in each case. Reality itself morphs these contingencies. Without a point that is, like the jar, a stable center of reality, you only get the creature inside it, which shrinks, loses limbs, in short, never stops changing. The narrator's signs in essence don't have the meaning he is looking for, but they do contain the imprint of these changes, which might tell us something about the obscure forces that make up this un-foundational world.

At the end of this passage the narrator ironically says: "But credit where credit is due, we made a balls of it between us, I with my signs and her with her reading of them. This story is no good, I'm beginning almost to believe it."<sup>18</sup> We must remember that he is telling one of Ma-

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<sup>18</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 323.

hood's stories, and in these lines he breaks the fourth wall, explicitly referencing that he is telling a story. He is ironic here, his signs are not interpreted, and yet for Mahood in this story, the two of them are supposed to communicate. This problem with human communication has arisen against the very scheme of storytelling, rendering our narrator untenable. No such thing as the correct perspective from which everything is in order exists. Instead we have perspectives without a shared reality, making it possible for our narrator to claim a disbelief in the matter of his own experiences.

Before the story began, the narrator was displaced. The story never started the way it was supposed to, or perhaps never started at all. This is as close as we get to a "reality." But from the beginning it is unbelievable. We see it coming apart at the seams. It steamrolls on by inertia, but we must admit that it does so without basis. For our most fundamental of questions regarding "why?" remains unanswered. This seed, which was there from the beginning, has slowly unwound reality, throwing him back in the mind-bending twilight from which most of the novel is told, where human reality has become impossible.

Our narrator tries to maintain the story of being a man, what he calls the story of Mahood. But it is indicated in the name Mahood that the story of Manhood has lost something, is in a sense castrated. Ironically, the narrator's penis is the only appendage he has left, and when he rediscovers it at one point, he is forced to admit its impotence. He can't even masturbate, for lack of arms. Something in the language slipped, the story was told misspelled, or otherwise somehow distorted. There are two ways of viewing his subsequent slide back into chaos. In the first version, we see it as the anonymous third party battering him in its whirlwind. He is passive, thrown into a jar and then back out into chaos. The second is a purposeful method of subtraction



imposed by Beckett in order to go back through language. He utilizes this slide into the ether as a means of exploration. Reality, in the human sense, has been lost, but in its place is still a world, which our narrator can't help but reflect, himself being a part of it.

For this reason the narrator is reduced to a struggle with the fundamentals of time and space. He begins disassembling reality in search of the meaning behind these most subtracted and basic elements. This new language proves no better. It does not establish what reality was supposed to be, according to Mahood. But it is better at telling us what reality actually is. Beckett puts us in touch with a world of mute and murmuring things. He shows us a language, whose signs are the banging of the head, spittle, and the spasms of disorientation.

The narrator cannot tell the story without disbelief. No longer understanding his surroundings, he desperately tries to regain traction in these dizzying winds of abstraction, to find something concrete. He is sliding quickly into a pre-language, a path that is shown in this passage of the story, in which he loses his ability to speak about his relationship to the woman, and tries to find comfort in the few things that still do make some kind of sense to him:

And the jar itself, so that the passer-by might consult with greater ease the menu attached to it, had been raised on a pedestal at her own expense. It is thus I learnt her turnips in gravy are not as good as they used to be, but that on the other hand her carrots, equally in gravy, are even better than formerly. The gravy has not varied. This is the kind of language I can almost understand, these the kind of clear and simple notions on which it is possible for me to build, I ask for no other spiritual nourishment. A turnip, I know roughly what a turnip is like, a carrot too, particularly the Flakkee, or Colmar Red. I seem to grasp at moments the nuance that divides bad from worse. And if I do not always feel the full force of yesterday and today, this does not detract much from the satisfaction I feel having penetrated the gist of the matter.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 322-323.

Here, the narrator's worst fears about her and the reality the restaurant owner represents seem confirmed. She is undoubtedly using him to her advantage as an advertisement, and, since she wants to preserve his spectacle, she would not want to cover him, for fear of losing the attention of would-be customers. She is using him, possibly even understanding his signs and disregarding them because of her separate agenda. Although he does seem to find it touching that she paid for his pedestal herself, he cannot help but feel it to be the cage of a circus animal. She is no longer his benefactress but his ring master.

Losing faith in his restaurant owner, and ultimately in Mahood, the narrator begins to regress. His relationship to her, and consequently to himself, devolves into an insurmountable distance. In the above passage he is trying to convince himself that his decreased sense of reality is no big deal. But a void opens between them. Without a reference point or social context, he is unraveling. He tries to regain balance through language. He is trying to find solace through the building up of little meanings, but the very words he is using to do so work against his ideal of "satisfaction." We sense this when he says, "this kind of language I can almost understand," this 'almost' signals a problem. Similarly to "this does not detract much," which shows that something is slightly off, an undertow of failure has pulled him ever so slightly off kilter. In desperation he tries to situate himself, to find less abstract, and more firm footing in an alphabet of turnips, carrots, and the passing of days. However, these terms, far from being signifiers of a spiritual meaning, signal the simple inarticulate face of the phenomenal world.

The narrator's language brings him closer to the earth, it calls our attention to the dirt and the things that grow in it. He is pointing to this reality, buried in the dirt, as closer to his own capacity for understanding. He himself is a ball of consciousness, buried in the dark. The extreme

limitation of the turnip expresses his own. He does not pretend to understand it, transfixed within its image is a simple inexpressibility. It is only from the perspective of this buried vegetable that he can hope to express anything. It is the only point of departure any longer possible, a beginning to a story that cannot begin, that can only express the impossibility of expression.

The narrator's understanding is still wrong, and the gist of "yesterday and today," that simple passage of time, is in no way within his grasp. The relatively 'normal' temporality we see in the story of Mahood is in sharp contrast to the confused place he operates in during most of the narrative. Whenever a statement of "where" is contradicted by an "elsewhere," where he also is. Yet here he feels he can find the "spiritual nourishment" that has been the goal of his search for the whole trilogy. He locates this key in the unlikely image of a turnip. There is no revelation of the essential turnip. However, in this failure he seems to connect with the image on a different level. It doesn't have a lot of substantive theoretical sense to it. It is just a turnip, he cannot read a sign into it. But it does signal *something*, it has a shape and substance: round, bitter, white, purple etc. It is much like him in this way, an inexplicable manifestation of existence, an unexplained mass of shapes and colors.

The turnip does not prove stable nourishment for an enlightened language. He can't really build with it as he says he can. Its image contains a primordial mystery. But the turnip can also work to represent this phenomenon. It does not fulfill him spiritually, but perhaps represents his spiritual situation. Its phenomenal existence is much like his, buried in the dark. Its closeness to the earth represents his attempt to get back to the soil of his being, to find his origin. With sub-human language, the narrator burrows down into the obscurity of existence. He finds a face, the strange apparition Malone sees in the water, which is not unlike the turnip: deaf, dumb, and

blind. This expresses both a failed attempt to find spiritual escape, and at the same time something like an answer to the question of being, a figure in which the indeterminacy and strangeness of the subject is transfixed.

## Conclusion

“I have nothing to do, that is to say, nothing in particular. I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. No one compels me to, there is no one, it’s an accident, a fact. Nothing can ever exempt me from it, there is nothing, nothing to discover, nothing to recover, nothing that can lessen what remains to say, I have the ocean to drink, so there is the ocean then.”<sup>1</sup>

Mahood has disappeared. All that is left of the human interactions he had proposed are the others, who function as an abstract placeholder for an enigma. Our narrator’s connection to this other is strange. He has felt pushed by Mahood to speak, the story is an example. These words that he must speak don’t belong to him. He is depersonalized. The meaning of Mahood becomes a forced recital. He is this language, but he loses himself in its ocean. Language no longer encases him in the meaning of identity. It is impersonal, while at the same time being the only perspective from which he can understand himself. Language is supposed to give him a singular sense of self, but out of it he can only create a caricature. He cannot understand himself outside of this image. But the image has begun to change, his reflection of himself in his words depersonalizes him, from the perspective of language his own awareness is impersonal. The descriptions he uses to categorize himself are like a kaleidoscope of shifting, nebulous light refracted through this ocean. His “I” disappears in a vortex of currents; through language he has be-

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<sup>1</sup>Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 308.

come nobody. He becomes the other to himself. In the end there is no one, the language comes from nowhere and does nothing. It is an expression of an ancient and a fact.

We realize that this force he called out against, the orchestrator of his suffering is absent. This force had at least implied intelligent design, something that gave his language for a divine purpose. But This absence is a much more terrifying reality than the most vindictive imagined creators. This absence, ‘this no one who compels me to,’ this ‘there is nothing’ which is the fact of his existence, means being compelled to speak is empty. There is nothing to discover, nothing to recover, the goal of speech, to find his own words, will never happen. The narrator can’t drink the whole ocean, he is lost in its random possibility. He can never reach the end of language, or exhaust the abstractness of his own personality.

This giant emptiness itself is a real reality. The narrator at least knows there is this ocean. At the end of the quotation we get the lines, “nothing that lessens what remains to say,” which tells us that he has committed himself to this eternity, not that he had much of a choice, but he has found an active relationship to language within the passive dislocation and impersonality of his words. In the narrative this becomes unfulfilled obligation, but for Beckett, from the perspective of literature, this search for being which does not stop in its going nowhere, arrested in mobility as it were, does not any longer speak of subjectivity, but of an ocean. His resigned closeness to this world does not lessen the cry that calls out against it. He tries to use this closeness, to drink its impossible depth, to find something in the darkness. This is the meaning of the meaninglessness, which the characters of Beckett, those poor figures, can’t see. It is not a truth that redeems them, but the expression of life’s face as exposed by art.

Beckett's characters become this ocean, and, as the subject drowns, Beckett finds in the anonymous something-ness a voice that does not come from anyone, but still speaks the hollowed story of an endless instability, a world of accidents, which ebbs and flows. Beckett's characters must speak in a sense because there is this ocean. The world exists, his voice is its voice. It relays no meaning, just the sound of the waves, the strange shape of the sea creatures, worms, turnips, and all the rest of these others who he can't stop talking about. He is himself one of them. He becomes less a unified identification than an expression of this oceanic multiplicity.

In his book entitled *Think Pig*, Rabate writes about Beckett's relationship to his friend, and mentor, James Joyce, who profoundly influenced Beckett's approach to literature. Through Joyce we can better understand a major influence on Beckett's perspectives, which keeps returning to a kind of closeness to the earth:

Here is the root of the new humility one can discern in the later Joyce, a humility shared by Beckett ... Humility does not mean moral abnegation or abasement but a reconciled sense that one will remain close to the Earth, an Earth that contains the ashes of all the dead along with the fertilizing humus for future plants.<sup>2</sup>

This humility manifests itself in both authors differently; Joyce through a great synthesis of myths, and deep knowledge of his material, embraces these associations and histories, and in a sense builds a monument to them in *Finnegans Wake*. Beckett goes the other way. Clearly trying to outrun Joyce's shadow he finds humility in not knowing, in exploring ignorance, looking for the places of absence, exploring what exists in the regions of existence closet to nothingness. Not because he thinks he will succeed, but because he feels an obligation to it. There is a kind of res-

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<sup>2</sup>Jean-Michel, Rabate. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016. 45.

possibility, based on a feeling of closeness, not of a understanding, or a moral standpoint, but of a connection with the world, with the genealogy of plants and the cycles of life and death.

The ashes of the dead also evokes a line from Molloy which goes: “All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead.”<sup>3</sup> The dead are already in a way present, they are in the words, the ‘dead things’ which he structures into the song of suffering and oblivion. Beckett says in his essay “DANTE... BRUNO. VICO... JOYCE” about *Finnegans Wake* that, “His writing is not about something, it is that something itself.”<sup>4</sup> For Beckett what the words know ‘in themselves,’ has been imprinted on them in the passing of time. As everything changes, words contain the impression of this passing. The constant death that comes with the flow of reality is preserved in the story. Its voice crystalizes in “the well-built phrase, the long sonata of the dead.” In the end, all that these words do is contain the mystery of the non-foundational world they are physically a part of.

In his book *Into the Breach, Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*

Thomas Trezise makes a supporting point:

Articulating a universe whose principle is essentially other than the distinction or separation on which humanism and its reduction of literature are founded, the Beckettian *oeuvre* transforms our understanding of both literature and humanity by transforming the very conditions of that understanding. To summarize the ‘lesson’ of the trilogy, one could say, paraphrasing Liberson, that while literature cannot change the world, it remains nonetheless the world's alteration.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1St Edition edition, June 16, 2009. 308.

<sup>4</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Dante ... Bruno. Vico ... Joyce*. In *Transition*, 1929. 16-17 vols. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Trezise, Thomas. *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*. Alibris, 29 Apr. 2017.169.



This universe can't be described through the clear distinctions of humanism. The idea of human separateness from nature is not tenable. Also the conceptual framework of binary opposition in the abstract vocabulary of humanism, which ascribes fixed universal qualities to the human, is out of touch with what Beckett describes: A universe lacking causality or clearly fixed delineation in movement through time. The living turns into ash, and fertilizes the plants. This reality is non-directional, there is a proliferation of possibilities but they do not build to some greater meaning. They are that meaning. Beckett says of Joyce's universe in "DANTE... BRUNO. VICO... JOYCE:" "movement is non-directional — or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back."<sup>6</sup> It is stagnation through motion. Thomas Trezise sees Beckett's trilogy as a polemic against humanism in favor of what Rabate calls a new humility, and what is above referred to as a perspective that "transforms our understanding of both literature and humanity by transforming the very conditions of that understanding." He shows us the unintelligibility of our condition, and therefore through literature he transforms the way we see reality.

This perspective is unique to literature, a medium "with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase" that tells a story. Literature functions automatically within the narrator; he can't not tell a story. He organizes himself in the world by means of story. But Beckett deprives him of all tenable points of reference, and the story is reduced to a kind of story of death, an ode to the dead. The narrator finds something to express in the emptiness, a story that articulates absence. By finding a way to speak about this aspect of being. Literature remains "the world's alteration," and so in this sense gives voice to the voicelessness of the world.

Michael Mundhenk in his essay *Dialectics of Hope and Despair* says:

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<sup>6</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Dante ... Bruno. Vico ... Joyce*. In *Transition*, 1929. 16-17 vols. 1.

"The twentieth century artist lives in an essentially ambiguous world where "the object of representation always resists representation." There is only moving and becoming, things are never manifest, but always in the process of manifesting. In this world of constant heterization, the artist (as well as his product) is only a phenomenon in a grid of phenomena: he is not an expert, but an inventor, a re-inventor of the world. Beckett himself puts it this way: "We don't write novels any more, I don't like to talk about it, but it is an imaginative work, a work of imagination . . . it is a question of imagination. Of the attempt to escape the disorder [of things]."<sup>7</sup>

The imaginative, constant reinterpretation of the world is the new mode of expression to Beckett, by which we can see this reality. It's akin to an ocean, flowing "moving and becoming" in a state of "constant heterization" and bare unstable phenomena. This is the form that Beckett uses to account for the mess. Creativity seems to be the only way to express what it means to be human, a being categorized by an imaginative attempted escape from the disorder of things. Which itself becomes an exhausted and inexhaustible series of attempts, while at the same time building this series into literature. Beckett plunges into the most paradoxical aspects of reality. At the limit of the human, he still finds a creature locked up in abstraction, trying to build into words what always remains unsaid. This attempt to escape through language, to find a true being, is alive in his obligation to keep talking. Deprived of all "spiritual nourishment," what we see is that human beings in Beckett's world generate meaning, and cannot escape this fact. It is an impossible task, to build a song out of what resists order. The reality of the dead is mute, is more of a felt emptiness than anything. The sonata of the dead is an attempt, through inventing and reinventing the world, to give the world meaning and an order it lacks. In the end, this does not change the world, it illuminates it. Beckett sees the artistic drive to escape through creativity into another world. But in its failure to do so, he also recognizes its ability to capture the world as it

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<sup>7</sup> Mundhenk, M. *Dialectics of Hope and Despair*. He Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.

is. Language is physical, it is a real thing in the world, as are we, “a phenomenon in a grid of phenomena.”

Georges Bataille uses this quotation in *Molloy* containing the sonata image, which we have already looked at, to make a point about language in Beckett’s work. He quotes Molloy:

“‘All I know,’ says Molloy (or author), Is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. And truly it little matters what I say, this or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept.’ ( . . . ) Language is what determines this regulated world, whose significations provide the foundation for our cultures, our activities and our relations, but it does so in so far as it is reduced to means of these cultures, activities, and relations; freed from these servitudes it is nothing more than a deserted castle whole gaping cracks let in the wind and rain, it is no longer the signifying word, but the defenseless expression death wears as a disguise.”<sup>8</sup>

We get a repetition here of the quotation where he speaks of the ocean, “it matters little what I say, this or any other thing” is akin to “I have nothing to do, that is to say, nothing in particular.” There being nothing to invent, nothing to discover or recover, is a consequence of a reality that reduces the well-built phrase of meaning into the ashes of the dead. In a world that’s always changing, in the end, all there is to record is death, there is nothing else that the words contain, once they are emptied of a value. Once words have no use as a means in a cultural signification; once the narrator’s language of spitting and banging his head no longer performs the function of communication, this language is freed from its servitudes and shows its true face. Beckett finds in the emptiness of language the song of the dead, the sounds the winds and rains make whistling through Bataille’s deserted castle.

There is nothing to invent, which is why Beckett is stuck always reinventing, always in the state of becoming. Bataille points also to a place in which the impossibility of art itself be-

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<sup>8</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press; 1st Edition edition, June 16, 2009.62.

comes a means of expression, in the lines: “it is no longer the signifying word, but the defenseless expression death wears as a disguise.” Through twisting and distorting language to the point of total decontextualization, the total loss of “this regulated world,” “of (our) cultures, our activities and our relations,” Beckett turns the word into something that is no longer the “signifying word.” But it still signifies. It is the “expression death wears as a disguise.” We must look back at what Blanchot said about this kind of expression: “the meaning of the name—is really destroyed, but signification in general has appeared in its place, the meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word as expression of the obscurity of existence.”<sup>9</sup> The meaning of the name is destroyed, like our narrator it becomes unnamable. What is left is strange and impersonal, it belongs to the others, or to no one in particular. It is an exposé of the strange disguises that death assumes. It is itself the expression of death, its voice, so to speak. In a sense Beckett’s work explores death to find its form, to articulate the gestures it assumes, to find within this zone of being a kind of meaning beyond meaning. As Thomas Trezise says, literature is able to show us reality, but even more than this by altering the world through signification Beckett opens us up to a new dimension of our own reality, to the voice of the void behind it.

Lois Gordon writes: “Beckett’s landscapes would resound with articulate silence, and his empty spaces would collect within themselves the richness of multiple shadows—This resounding articulate silence is “all that exists in absence.”<sup>10</sup> It is purely impersonal and impossible; a neutral place of non-relation. Yet it has a sound, a shadow, a consume, or a fragment which enshrines it. Beckett’s words are the heaps of ash, or little sum, which collect in the emptiness. The

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<sup>9</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Blanchot Reader*. Blackwell, 1995. 329.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, L. (1996). *The World of Samuel Beckett*. Yale University Press. 6.

richness of what Gordon calls “negative particles”<sup>11</sup> is built into the ready-made phrase. Beckett turns this phrase inside out trying to expose them. Channeling this expression, he finds a value in artistic creation. Rabate finds in Beckett a humility, and a feeling of obligation and reconciliation with the world, in Beckett’s attempt to take the worst most desolate places and the most abject suffering, and find in them something beautiful. Harold Pinter voices this sentiment best:

The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don’t want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He’s not fucking me about, he’s not leading me up any garden path, he’s not slipping me a wink, he’s not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he’s not selling me anything I don’t want to buy — he doesn’t give a bollock whether I buy or not — he hasn’t got his hand over his heart. Well, I’ll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful.<sup>12</sup>

Beckett doesn't show truths, instead we get the “shit,” all “the dogmas, creeds, ways out” are gone, he does not pretend for it to be otherwise. The only motivation seems to be this remorseless, the need to look, to keep one’s eyes open in the dark, to try though creativity to account for every worm, and all the smallest and most pathetic things. To try and find the voice of the suffering and loneliness of the universe. To portray the unnamable mess, and the articulate silence of the dead. Beckett does not give us a reason, no escape or path, just a portrayal of beauty in figures of obscurity, disfigurement, and oblivion.

This searching voice, which resounds from nowhere, holds the mark of the impossibility it attempts to defy. Through this confrontation and failure Beckett reveals to us the traces of a presence. He looks into this nothingness, listens to the silence of suffering, and makes music out of

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon, L. (1996). *The World of Samuel Beckett*. Yale University Press. 6.

<sup>12</sup> “Pinter on Beckett.” 2 Nov. 2010, [notesfromaroom.com/category/pinter/](http://notesfromaroom.com/category/pinter/).

it. Beckett's gesture is a paradox. A defiance and transformation of disorder and suffering that, in its failure, encapsulates and expresses the actuality of man's condition. Through his contortion of language into figures of emptiness, Beckett expresses a beauty emanating from the depth of despair. As Graham Gargett, a French scholar, writes, "Beckett has remarked: 'when you're up to your neck in shit, all you can do is sing.'" <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gargett, Graham. *Heroism and Passion in Literature*. Rodopi, 2004. 211.

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