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"Gathering Thinglessness": Samuel Beckett's Essayistic Approach To Nothing

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"GATHERING THINGLESSNESS":
SAMUEL BECKETT'S ESSAYISTIC APPROACH TO NOTHING

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For Ari and T-Lo

attention to every word in my proposal, his feedback has helped me to define my terms more precisely.

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PREFACE

What is Beckett's relationship to philosophy? This question has long dominated the critical discussion on Beckett's work from early existentialist and Cartesian critiques to the current trend to figure Beckett as a post-structuralist. The dominant answer to this question has been offered in a mode of identification: Beckett's writing aligns with this philosopher or that philosophical movement. The current drive toward interdisciplinarity lends itself to the idea that the barriers between the fields ought to be dismantled, yet this sense of "oughtness" fails to investigate whether the border between the fields can indeed be transgressed. That is why the purpose of my dissertation is to trouble a neat identification that often appears in the scholarship on Samuel Beckett, which suggests his writing represents a literary manifestation of philosophy, one that disrupts the longstanding separation of the two fields. Instead, I highlight the difficulty of assimilating Beckett's writing with philosophy by arguing that he maintains a circuitous relationship to philosophy that does not resolve itself into identification with one movement even while his essayistic style approximates experimental philosophical prose.

I arrive at this conclusion by first responding to the dominant strand in Beckett criticism that figures him as a philosopher whether of "existentialist," "deconstructionist," or Cartesian traditions. While such analyses are designed to undermine the "ancient quarrel" between literature and philosophy, in the first chapter, I argue that they actually serve to re-subordinate literature to philosophy since they depend on the preexisting philosophical text to explain the literary one. I thereby select a comparative approach as a way of exploring areas of intersection as well as disparity, which prevent the fields from being identified with each other.

In chapter two, I provide a theoretical basis for highlighting the difficulty of assimilating philosophy with literature. To do so, I review twentieth-century theory on the ancient quarrel

between literature and philosophy—turning to Derrida, Blanchot, Kristeva, and Levinas—to demonstrate that the figures who are often employed to support the disintegration of the disciplines actually express hesitations at such a vision of sameness. As I discuss, many of these thinkers affirm Plato's original characterization of literature as a field that remains philosophy's other since it depends on rhythm rather than a rigorous, logical methodology (Levinas and Kristeva); raises questions of ethics since it does not necessarily advocate for a moral perspective (Levinas and Blanchot); and unlike philosophy, does not argue systematically for a particular thesis (Blanchot). Furthermore, Beckett's separation of literature and philosophy, circuitously, places him in a Platonic camp.

Since the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy is such a broad one, I then take a turn to examine one philosophical and aesthetic concept, "nothing," that has long dominated discussions of Beckett's work to understand where Beckett's use of the term fits on a continuum between the two fields. In chapter three, I argue that, contrary to a longstanding tradition in Beckett studies, exemplified by Lance Butler and Michael Bennett who posit that Beckett promulgates a consistent position that the nature of being is nothing, Beckett actually incorporates multiple, inconsistent philosophical positions on "nothing" into his work. For instance, his work both suggests that nothingness is impossible and that nothingness is an attainable goal as well as indicates that language proffers no meaning and that communication through language is inevitable. Instead of consequently arguing that Beckett's preference for multiplicity indicates that he is a post-structuralist, I contend that his enduring uncertainty remains distinct from deconstruction's systematic exploration of tenable possibilities.

In chapter four, I turn to Beckett's aesthetic sources to argue that his primary contribution to intellectual history was not to make an original argument about nothing, but to alter the formal

properties that are conventionally associated with the word. For instance, while his predecessor Joyce often used the term "abyss" or "void" at moments of recognition and reversal, Beckett uses the word "nothing" repeatedly and continuously, indexing his turn away from narrative arcs. Similarly, while Baudelaire uses the word "*abîme*" to convey a sense of the terror and bliss of the sublime, Beckett's abstract and empty "nothing" takes a turn toward the philosophical in the way it moves from the natural and toward the conceptual. After all, while the "abyss" has a physical referent in the oceanic deep, "nothing" is a pure concept in the sense that it has, by definition, no physical presence in the universe. Yet Beckett may have adopted such philosophical language not to contribute to intellectual history, but to surpass his literary predecessor's negative aesthetics.

In the fifth chapter, I return to the question of the relationship between philosophy and literature in Beckett works, but this time with the goal of investigating a formal area of overlap between the two fields, the essay. While acknowledging that such a comparison on the basis of style remains incomplete, I conclude that Beckett's aggregation of inconsistent philosophical sources, his preference for abstraction, and his preference for a fragmented sentence structure mirrors the form of the Montaignian essay in the sense that it reflects the movements of an ever-shifting mind instead of a unified system of thought. In that way, Beckett's writing falls on a continuum next to philosophy since his work approximates the style of more literary thinkers such as Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Derrida, but also remains distinct from the more systematic tradition exemplified by Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. To return to the trope of nothing, Beckett's aggregations of multiple, philosophical and aesthetic sources for his use of the word "nothing" can be considered essayistic because it allows for the accumulation of inconsistent concepts without promoting their assimilation into a unified conceptual theory.

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, *"Gathering Thinglessness": Samuel Beckett's Essayistic Approach to Nothing,* responds to the dominant strand in Beckett criticism that figures the writer as a philosopher of "nothing" whether of Democritean, existentialist, or deconstructionist voids. In contrast, I argue that Beckett's literary texts approximate philosophy in their essayistic style, characterized by the incorporation of multiple, contradictory sources in a fragmented form. While philosophical analyses are often designed to demonstrate that the literary texts are the equivalent of philosophical discourse, in the first chapter I argue that they actually serve to re-subordinate literature to philosophy since they depend on the pre-existing philosophical text to explain the literary one. In the second chapter, I review twentieth-century theory on the relationship between the fields to substantiate the point that the border between literature and philosophy remains unresolved since many of Plato's original characterizations of poetry persist in varied forms. Since the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy is such a broad one, I then take a turn to examine "nothing," a concept/image that is shared by both fields of thought to understand where Beckett's use of the term fits on a continuum between the two fields. In chapter three, I argue that, contrary to a longstanding argument that Beckett proffers a consistent position on the nature of being as nothing, Beckett's actually incorporates multiple, inconsistent philosophical positions on "nothing" into his work. In chapter four, I focus on Beckett's aesthetic influences to demonstrate that his primary contribution to intellectual history was not to make an original argument about nothing, but to alter the formal properties that are conventionally associated with the word. In the final chapter, I conclude that Beckett's aggregation of inconsistent philosophical and aesthetic sources and his adoption of a fragmented structure mirror the form of the Montaignian essay in

the sense that it reflects the movements of an ever-shifting mind. In that way, Beckett's writing

falls on a continuum next to philosophy since his work adopts the style of the essay but also

remains distinct from systematic thought.

CHAPTER 1: NEAT IDENTIFICATIONS IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO BECKETT

> The danger is in the neatness of identifications. . . . Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: . . . Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals; Poetry, when most concerned with particulars. Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity—Samuel Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce," 500.

Countless articles and book chapters offer the claim that Beckett is a philosophical writer who explores the concept of nothing, but not all of them mean the same thing by "philosophical" or "nothing." It has been said that Beckett dramatizes, manifests, contributes, and offers theses on nothing: that there is no knowing[1] or meaning,[2] that there is nothing at the center of being,[3] language,[4] or the subject.[5] What many of these claims share is an assumption not only that literature can be philosoph*ical*, in the sense that it bears traces of philosophy, but that it can be philosophy itself, that differences in matters of form or aim between art and philosophy do not significantly influence their content. Yet in Beckett's own critical writings, as is evident in the epigraph above, he argued for a fundamental separation between his work and philosophy on the basis that philosophy is concerned with universals while literature is concerned with the particulars that undermine generalities. With such a separation in mind, it is worth investigating

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[1] For a discussion of the nothingness of uncertainty see Hugh Kenner's essay "Comedian of the Impasse" 67; and David Hesla's book *The Shape of Chaos* v, 9.

[2] For Martin Esslin's famous remark that Beckett's texts are marked by the meaninglessness see *Theatre of the Absurd* 21-22. Adorno's observation that Beckett's writing manifests the sense that "metaphysical meaning is no longer possible" can be found in "Trying to Understand Endgame" 10.

[3] According to Peter Boxall, Beckett "develop[s] a form that not only accommodates itself to this 'being of nothing' but is in some way derived from it, drawing its value and significance directly from an encounter with the 'nothing' 29. Alain Badiou ties Beckett's definition of being as "nothing other than its own becoming-nothingness" to his readings of Heraclitus 48. Martin Esslin argues that Beckett's existentialism surfaces in his efforts "to reach the innermost core, the nothingness at the centre of being" *The Novelist as Philosopher* 129.

[4] Linda Ben-Zvi provides an extensive discussion of Beckett's readings of Mauthner, which influenced his notion of language as a type of nothing 189.

[5] Terry Eagleton writes, "At the highpoint of its mastery, then, the modern subject confronts itself as a void" xx.

the ways in which Beckett's work has been linked to philosophy and whether the connection accounts for the "particular" representations of nothing in his texts. In this literature review, I argue that the interdisciplinary drive to topple the hierarchical relationship between philosophy and literature in the criticism on Beckett has encouraged arguments that unexpectedly re-subordinate his work to a philosopher's thesis. This observation leads me to adopt a comparative approach for interpreting Beckett's works, one that accounts for his proximity to philosophical writers while allowing his work to remain other than philosophy.

The philosophical approaches to Beckett's work can largely be broken down into three main categories: 1) "Illustrative" approaches wherein philosophers use Beckett's work to illustrate their theses 2) "Analytic" approaches wherein literary critics identify Beckett's writing with particular philosophical movement 3) "Comparative" approaches wherein critics compare Beckett's work to philosophical constructs while nonetheless highlighting his status as, primarily, a literary writer.

The "illustrative" arguments about Beckett's work by philosophers rest on the notion that the writer is philosophical because his work demonstrates the philosopher's point as a thought experiment would. These philosophers generally debate, in relation to nothing, the question of whether nihilism encapsulates the ultimate meaning of Beckett's texts or whether his texts demonstrate the inescapability of generating meaning and value through language. Philosophers who use Beckett's work to illustrate their ideas—here exemplified by Adorno, Cavell, Deleuze, and Badiou—simultaneously suggest that the work of literature communicates philosophical ideas and yet remains subordinate to the philosopher who has the capacity to identify those concepts. Defining philosophy in a general way as the pursuit of truth or knowledge, these arguments depend on a notion Derrida attributes to Nietzsche that all language is metaphorical so

that the language of philosophy is as subject to obscurity as the language of literature ("White Mythology" 217). Yet the very philosophers who seem to welcome literature as a valid medium for philosophical discourse suggest the opposite when they adapt Beckett's writing to suit their own theses.

The "analytic" arguments, on the other hand, apply a theoretical construct to the writer's works based on passages from Beckett's writing that cohere with the philosophical movement at hand. These arguments have situated Beckett an existentialist (for demonstrating that nothing exists at the core of human Being), Cartesian or Geulincxian (for manifesting radical uncertainty about what can be known), and a deconstructionist or proto-deconstructionist (for highlighting the empty center of language structures). Defining philosophy as the historical instantiation of what philosophers have argued, the "analytic" approach suggests that Beckett's similarity to particular historical schools of philosophy means that he is a member of those schools. But the idea that Beckett merely regenerates the ideas of philosophers neglects to answer one of the old critiques that Plato lists in *The Republic* that literature is "the bitch yapping and baying at her master" (Plato 76). Moreover, what this approach demonstrates more than Beckett's philosophical allegiances is perhaps the ease with which his writing can be molded to suit almost any theoretical construct.

The third type of criticism hinges upon the observation that Beckett's references to philosophers and philosophical ideas are diverse and disparate. These arguments follow a "comparative" approach, which accounts for the philosophical allusions that appear in his work while maintaining the idea that his work is primarily the product of literary modes: to entertain, to obscure, and to create something new. The comparativists highlight the ways in which Beckett's texts depart from the philosophers who influenced him, opposing these divergences

and ambiguities to the thesis-driven ideas of those he references. The work of the comparativist lies in identifying the gap between literature and philosophy, which ultimately suggests that one field cannot be assimilated into the other. I argue that the comparativist approach is the one that best coheres with an ethics of reading in which the writer's work is least modified to demonstrate a theoretical construct.

Both the illustrative forms and analytic forms of criticism rest largely on the hermeneutics of "critical pluralism," defined by Alexander Nehamas as the notion that critics are entitled to their interpretations regardless of the "author's intentions" (133). Pertinently, one of the seminal texts of critical pluralism, Michel Foucault's "What is an Author," uses a misreading of Beckett's line, "What matter who's speaking," to support the thesis that contemporary thinkers ought to be indifferent to authors (115). However, Beckett's text remains ambivalent on the question of authorial significance since "what matter who's speaking" can mean both "What does it matter who's speaking?" and "What a great matter it is who is speaking." It is precisely Foucault's interpretive pluralism, which allows the critic to select one aspect of a dualistic statement in order to demonstrate a singular thesis that leads to limited interpretations.

The "comparative" approach often follows, whether overtly or not, the theory of "critical monism," as defined by Nehamas, in which the critic may use information from letters and the entire body of work to arrive at an interpretation that best approximates the writer's meaning (133, 145). While I do not wish to return in a naive way to the "intentional fallacy" by identifying Beckett's life experiences with the details of his stories, it seems worthwhile to acknowledge, as Nehamas does, that the writer is the immediate cause of the text (144). For Nehamas, the goal of writing an "ideal interpretation," one that situates a work in context in order to "account for all of the text's features," should generate a "regulative" constraint on the

act of interpretation (144). In keeping with such a goal, the comparative approach does not subordinate Beckett's writing to a philosophical thesis, but instead allows for moments of disjuncture between Beckett's work and those he references.

Illustrative Approaches

A body of critical literature surrounds the interpretations of Beckett's work by philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze, and Alain Badiou. These interpretations often depend on a notion, as Robert Eaglestone describes it in "Beckett in the Wilderness: Writing about (Not) Writing about Beckett," that literature not only addresses philosophical concepts but does the work of philosophy as it forms logical arguments about fundamental human concerns such as being, the self, and knowing (43). For Richard Rorty, Eaglestone notes, this work entails a programmatic agenda, the movement of its audiences toward political engagement (44-5). Yet such an argument does not necessarily demonstrate the ways in which Beckett forms a philosophical argument but rather reveals a tendency by philosophers to select aspects of his writing that illustrate their own philosophical systems.

Most prominently, Beckett's work has been implicated in the debate between Theodor Adorno and György Lukács over the degree to which literature should further the Marxist agenda. While Lukács criticizes Beckett for naturalizing the alienation of modern life and therefore occluding the audience's capacity for change (40, 42), Adorno contends that the realistic work of art, which is committed to particular ideologies, becomes ineffective because of its dogmatism ("Commitment" 301, 302, 304). On the other hand, Beckett's art, according to Adorno, manifests the historical-philosophical situation of its epoch where "metaphysical meaning is no longer possible" ("Trying to Understand Endgame" 10). By emphasizing meaninglessness rather than political ideology, Beckett has the capacity to "arouse the fear which

existentialism merely talks about" and thereby, compel the type of response that Adorno

promotes ("Commitment" 301, 314-5). Whether Beckett's plays do indeed arouse fear of the

nothing remains uncertain since Beckett's plays have also been known to invoke laughter and

identification.[6] In that sense, Adorno's position on the philosophical prowess of literature does

not necessarily allow the latter to remain as autonomous as it might originally appear.

While David Cunningham credits Adorno with welcoming the data of art into his

investigations as an independent entity (126-7), it would be an oversimplification to say that

Adorno fully avoids privileging philosophy. As Jay Bernstein writes, Adorno's interpretation

approaches the danger of repeating the "celebration of meaninglessness" by existentialists that,

Bernstein argues, Beckett's work actually strives to undermine (185). By evading a discussion of

Beckett's humor, Adorno appears to "undershoot[]" the ambiguity inherent in Beckett's work in

favor of its proximity to his philosophical perspective (185). Furthermore, Simon Critchley adds,

Adorno assumes not the independence of art but its reliance on philosophy to interpret it

according to a political agenda (176). Thus, while Adorno's interpretation of Beckett may

initially appear to suggest that an autonomous work of literature can do the work of philosophy,

he nonetheless stresses the aspects of Beckett's work that supports his view of contemporary life.

Stanley Cavell falls into a similar interpretive trap when he argues for the reverse position

on the effect of meaninglessness in Beckett's work. In reaction to Adorno's claim that *Endgame*

manifests the absurdity of life without metaphysical meaning, the post-Wittgensteinian ordinary

language philosophy contends in "Ending the Waiting Game," that the play's themes and method

represent not the total failure of meaning in modernity, but "our inability not to mean what we

are given to mean," not to interpret the implications of words (117). His essay on Beckett also

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[6] Of Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, Ruby Cohn writes, "I could make no sense of it
but knew it was me." "Waiting" 152.

partially responds to Martin Esslin who, Cavell writes, applauded Beckett for "accurately registering the disintegration of meaning and language in the modern world" (115-6). Esslin, in defending Beckett's plays against charges that they were simply bad and in discussing what separated his works from conventional well-made plays, wrote that Beckett's are marked by senselessness with their "incoherent babblings" and absent climaxes (*Theatre* 21-22). In response, Cavell contends that while Beckett's characters do strive for "solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence" (156), his audience nonetheless proceeds to interpret the play as meaningful (117). Thus, to Cavell, Adorno and Esslin's defenses were unnecessary; *Endgame*'s themes and method represent not the collapse of meaning but its inescapability.

According to Cavell, Beckett contributes to the historical debate between positivists and post-positivists over the availability of meaning in modern language. In Cavell's characterization of that debate, positivists imagined the possibility of an ideal language in which everything could be said clearly and logically, while post-positivists (including Wittgenstein in his later work) state that the ordinary language people speak is perfectly comprehensible even if it is not recordable in logical systems since words have different implications for different listeners. Cavell argues that Beckett's work offers a proof for post-positivism when his characters parody logical systems and nonetheless fail to destroy meaning (117). Thus, while Beckett's plays represent a critique of philosophy through a satire of logic, they nonetheless mirror historical philosophy's critique of itself.

Specifically, Cavell's argument implies that *Endgame* may be considered philosophical insofar as it provides a demonstration, as a post-positivist thought experiment would, of the inescapability of meaning. Indeed, Cavell refers to the play as a philosophical argument for the way the characters are involved in a dialogue, which continues until one interlocutor concedes

because s/he lacks the right to question the conclusion (127). Cavell interprets this dialectic as a spoof on philosophical debate, which relies on logical premise and solid conclusions. Such a satire of philosophy follows Wittgenstein's idea that the goal of his philosophy is to bring philosophical discussion to a close (127). In that way, Beckett's works are philosophical insofar as contemporary philosophy includes the rejection of the outmoded metaphysical and analytical methods.

Yet while Cavell's thesis involves the treatment of literature as a field that contributes to philosophical debates, he has been justifiably criticized for distorting Beckett's work to demonstrate his philosophical approach. For example, Jay Bernstein, Benjamin Ogden, David Rudrum, and Simon Critchley all declaim Cavell for using Beckett's text to illustrate ordinary language philosophy rather than understand the play for its inherent meaning. Bernstein calls Cavell's interpretation an "overshooting" because it neglects the seriousness with which Beckett's work represents the difficulty of meaning in modernity (184-5). Ogden concurs that Cavell, as an ordinary language philosopher, insists in too self-serving a way on the "ordinariness" of the language and general scene of *Endgame*. While Cavell focuses on the commonplace themes of family life occurring onstage, Ogden contends that the play's ordinariness competes with what is "utterly strange" about it such as his characters' placement in trashcans (128-9). In addition to representing the discarded family symbolically, Ogden argues that the characters' language is neither entirely ordinary nor entirely strange, rather it is "poised between inscrutable nonsense and drolly quotidian chatter" (129).

Rudrum similarly claims that the "ordinary" provides an insufficient explanation for the character's language, which predominantly carries "sublime" qualities (548-9). For instance, instead of categorizing the line "now as always, time was never and time is over" as a

philosophical statement on the nature of time, Rudrum argues that such a line cannot be decoded as anything more than lyrical but empty literary language (552). Also affirming Beckett's separation from philosophy, Critchley writes that Beckett's resistance to interpretations such as Cavell's distinguishes his work in a broader sense from philosophy itself. This resistance, he claims, surfaces in the way that Beckett seems to anticipate and undermine philosophers so that their interpretations always seem excessive (165-6), as when Beckett's characters mock the audience for making meaning out of *Endgame*.[7]

Cavell's essay on *Endgame* may indeed be worthy of critique insofar as it demonstrates his hermeneutic theory rather than adheres to the confines of Beckett's text. As is outlined in the essay "Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy," Cavell promulgates the pluralistic claim that critics are entitled to their personal interpretations. What validates critics' taste, to Cavell, is not their ability to arrive at a "universal truth" but to convince others to taste what they taste (87). Following from that hermeneutic theory, Cavell includes in his interpretation the associations that arise when listening to *Endgame* as when he remarks that Hamm's statement "Did you ever think of one thing?" reminds him of Jesus' injunction "thine eye be single." In keeping with the personal nature of interpretation, Cavell writes in the first-person, "I hear a confession of failure in following Christ's injunction" (120-1). Perhaps this line leads Critchley to brand Cavell's essay as "needlessly gratuitous" (Critchley 207). More precisely, the statement indicates that Cavell is following the method he developed in "Aesthetic Problems" that requires critics to acknowledge the subjective origins of the allusions they hear.

Cavell's hermeneutic theory follows from his larger program of ordinary language philosophy, which he outlines in the introductory essay to *Must We Mean What We Say?* As he

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[7] As when Hamm asks, "We're not beginning to...to....mean something?" and Clov responds "Mean something! You and I, mean something!" 40.

remarks there, the personal implications of words are a necessary part of explication. In a Wittgensteinian sense, reminding oneself of the ordinary use of words, such as "think" and "know" contributes to close philosophical debates, such as the problem of skepticism, since we must admit that "think" and "know" have ordinary meanings that are very different than those employed by skeptics (85). Ordinary language philosophers find the definition of words not by testing them in a supposedly universal system, as the empirical philosophers did, but by asking a native speaker, consulting a dictionary, or thinking about them philosophically (21, 39). Cavell writes that when teaching a child the correct usage of "I know," we would not allow the child to say "I Know" when she means "I think" because we would not want the child to learn to speak inaccurately (16). In that sense, including what he hears in his interpretation of *Endgame* demonstrates a valid instance of ordinary language explication in which a native speaker's ability to decipher a text indicates that we do partake in a meaningful exchange of language. Yet the meaning that Cavell discovers in Beckett's texts may be considered suspect because it extends from his aesthetic and linguistic philosophy, which suggests that his essay on Beckett is designed primarily to demonstrate the validity of his own philosophical system rather than to explicate the play.

Revisiting the conversation between Adorno and Cavell about whether Beckett's work means nothing or proves that meaning nothing is impossible, Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou have also followed their predecessors in selecting aspects of Beckett's writing that illustrate their theoretical constructs. In "The Exhausted," Gilles Deleuze provides a totalizing reading of Beckett's work, as one that is "all . . . pervaded by exhaustive series" (4). He situates exhaustion in Beckett's writing as a combination of all variables in a set that, along with the renunciation of "preference," "organization," "goal," and "signification," motivates the characters to go on

aimlessly towards nothing (3-4). His argument entails reading literature as a medium that can have an epistemological bearing on the truth, which in Beckett's case involves a "great contribution to logic" in his ability to display the "physiological exhaustion" that accompanies the pursuit of "nothing" (5). Since, as Deleuze avers, what is being exhausted in this process is language itself, Beckett's textual manuscripts are said to develop an autological "metalanguage" that refers to the failure of language (7). The texts then stall in an aporia only to reach an apotheosis in the mime plays for TV, which display, through the absence of language, the capacity to "summon" or "bear[] witness to [the] void" (6-8, 9, 12, 15, 17, 20). In that way, the desire to achieve a formal artwork that manifests the nothing becomes, for Deleuze, the overarching goal of Beckett's entire *oeuvre*.

Since Deleuze claims that Beckett progressively develops from initially generating works about nothing to eventually producing images that capture the nothing, it's reasonable to argue that he imposes a teleological order on Beckett's evolution as a writer. Mary Bryden, Roger Clément, and Critchley concur that Deleuze's reading of Beckett is self-serving rather than aligned with the complexities of Beckett's later work. For instance, Bryden notes that Deleuze reads Beckett with a sense of recognition so that his essay becomes autobiographical rather than attentive (80). Clément likewise remarks that Deleuze "integrates Beckett with [his] own approach" rather than seek to discover "meaning internal to the works" (121). This is evident in the way that Deleuze ascribes a continuity of thought, from "lexical and syntactic discontinuity to the exploration of the image" onto the chronology of Beckett's work (Clément 128). While Clément celebrates this type of self-serving reading, asking "Who (and in the name of what) could deplore it?" (130), Critchley convincingly argues that Deleuze's insistence on sequential reduction blinds him to the necessity of language even in the mime plays, which depend on

written instruction and thus render silence an impossibility (180). By imposing a narrative of annihilation onto the development of Beckett's *oeuvre,* Deleuze neglects the aspects of Beckett's works that frame the nothing positively as a source of creative material; contingently as an ever present, marginal aspect of daily life; and negatively as a destination to be avoided.

For the reverse position, Alain Badiou challenges what he calls the widespread "caricature" of Beckett's efforts to materialize, "in a linear fashion," the nothingness of nihilism "of the absurd, of despair, of empty skies, of incommunicability and of eternal solitude" (15, 38). Instead, Badiou argues that Beckett wavers between being and nothing while ultimately positing an ethical gesture toward the other (2). Badiou figures Beckett's negativity as a form of subtraction that excises material possessions to arrive at the essential, what Badiou calls the "fundamental tendency toward the generic" (3-4). Such "writing of the generic" depicts the movement from "the misfortune of life and the visible to the happiness of a truthful arousal of the void" (36). While we might presume that "the truthful arousal of the void" comprises a largely negative destination, in Badiou's formulation, the void represents an interval between two beings that makes the "joy, pleasure, enthusiasm, and happiness" of the encounter with the other possible (34). As Badiou writes:

> What Beckett offers to thought through his art, theatre, prose, poetry, cinema, radio, television, and criticism, is not this gloomy corporeal immersion into an abandoned existence, into hopeless relinquishment. Neither is it the contrary, as some have tried to argue: farce, derision, a concrete flavour, a 'this Rabelais'. Neither existentialism nor a modern baroque. The lesson of Beckett is a lesson in measure, exactitude and courage. (40)

In other words, Beckett formulates the truth of being in relation to the other in his fictions to generate a unified ethical message.

While Badiou is careful to avoid a totalizing reading of Beckett's work in terms of negativity, he nonetheless approaches that problem when he reductively frames "all of Beckett's

genius" as one that "tends towards affirmation" (41). As Andrew Gibson writes, Badiou's efforts

to discover a consistent philosophical position within Beckett's writing displays "a quite

unBeckettian attachment to the clarity of narrative sequence" (126-7, 134). Specifically,

assigning a life affirming philosophy to Beckett's work requires that Badiou sidestep the aspects

of Beckett's writing that do convey a recurring interest in negation. While Beckett repeats the

motif of endurance "go on," he also writes the line, "Fuck life," and unlike Camus' life-affirming

Sisyphean hero, he stages attempts to commit suicide that only fail because of external

circumstances.[8] Instead of returning to the "caricature" of Beckett's writing as a display of

totalizing meaninglessness, it may be most accurate to acknowledge Beckett's ambivalence on

questions of being and nothing, what Gibson calls his "disunity and complicating incoherence"

(135). Perhaps such conceptual disunity has often elided the philosophers who interpret

Beckett's work because of what Anthony Uhlmann identifies as a tendency by philosophers to

transform Beckett's material into affirmations of thought, whether of meaning, language, art, or

being (*Poststructuralism* 9). Affirming what is only negative or positive about Beckett's work

may be precisely what divides literature from philosophy in the way that a literary writer such as

Beckett prefers unresolvable multiplicity to the philosopher's coherent, singular thesis.

Analytic Approaches

In the second category of philosophical approaches, critics apply a theoretical construct

such as the ideas of a particular philosopher, philosophical movement, or philosophical concept

to Beckett's work. Since the early years of criticism when Beckett was originally labeled an

existentialist and Cartesian, Beckett has since been linked to Geulincx, Heidegger, Derrida, Kant,

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[8] The phrase "Fuck life" is taken from *Rockaby* 470. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir try to hang themselves from the tree but the branch breaks 12. In *Act without Words I*, the unnamed man positions himself to cut his throat when his scissors are pulled away 100.

Spinoza, Nietzsche, Hobbes, Wittgenstein, and many other philosophers. These forms of criticism largely fall into three main phases in identifying the relationship between philosophy and literature in Beckett's writing. The first type of argument involves tracing Beckett's influence by a certain philosopher to show how Beckett, for instance, read and annotated the works of Geulincx, in order to prove that Beckett is a Geulincxian dualist. In these arguments, Beckett does not appear to contribute to knowledge in the way we might say that Derrida does, but only replicates the ideas of others.

To overcome this problem, a second group of critics argues that Beckett actually anticipated the philosophical movements that followed him. Notably, Thomas Trezise, Carla Locatelli, and Gary Banham contend that Beckett is a proto-deconstructionist since his texts tend to waver between possible positions as in, "to tell the truth (to tell the truth!)," where the forward movement of Beckett's prose reverses prior material, suggesting that "telling the truth" is always deferred (*Molloy* 32). While this type of criticism does suggest that Beckett's work is epistemic, it is difficult to know if we would be able to name the tendency of his thought without the expository essays of the philosophers who followed him or if it is fair to link Beckett with a movement he was unaware of at the time he was writing. But the foremost problem with these analytic forms of criticism is their tendency to identify Beckett's writing with a particular movement without noting areas of slippage that allow for the comparison to all varieties of philosophy.

The arguments often run that Beckett *is* an existentialist; *is* a proto-deconstructionist; *is* a Cartesian. Since it is clear that Beckett does not convey all of these intellectual movements perfectly at once, a third set of critics have recently begun to claim that Beckett's work is structurally philosophical rather than tied in a limited way to one movement. As I argue, these

analytic approaches may demonstrate the malleable quality of Beckett's writing (it can be easily shaped to confirm a philosophical thesis) but the first two phases, at least, are unable to overturn Plato's critique of literature as a derivative form of thought since each only upholds the ability of philosophy to provide the theoretical explanation for a literary text.

One of the most prominent and enduring claims in the philosophical criticism on Beckett concerns the writer's relationship to existentialism. While Martin Esslin has been linked with the claim, perhaps unfairly, that Beckett's work stages "senselessness," Esslin also promulgated the early idea that Beckett's novels and plays manifest a "deep existential anguish" (*Theatre of the Absurd* 30). In Esslin's contribution to the book *The Novelist as Philosopher,* he argues that Beckett is an existentialist insofar as the writer is "searching for the nature of reality itself . . . to reach the innermost core, the nothingness at the centre of being" (129). Esslin associates this discovery of the essence of being as nothingness with Sartre, who, he asserts, Beckett probably did not read (142-3). He claims instead that Beckett coincidentally gave form to the theory of existentialism "as though by some mysterious osmosis" (143). We now know this not to be true, that in fact, Beckett read *Le Nausea* at least as early as 1938 ("Letter to Thomas McGreevy," 26 May 1938, 626). With that information at hand, it becomes more difficult to claim that Beckett is an original thinker of existentialism, which spawned from "his genius" and was "too personal" to allow for influences (143).

Of course the above language is rather dated and the claims are perhaps a bit too lofty; yet this type of argument persists in Lance Butler's book *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being*, in which he argues that while Beckett did not necessarily read the existentialists, his work "constitutes a series of parables which, as a matter of fact, illustrate some of the deepest ontological reality described by our three philosophical works [Heidegger's *Being and Time*,

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind*]" (4-5). Michael

Bennett limits this view arguing that Beckett's parables display a Heideggerian sense of

nothingness as open possibility, which generates a roadmap for life, rather than a Sartrean view

of nothingness as absolute negation (29-30, 33). On the opposite end of the existential spectrum,

Thomas Trezise argues that Beckett's *oeuvre* is entirely incompatible with notions of existential

humanism that either affirm human dignity or redeem the value of art but instead, Beckett's

prose indexes the failure of phenomenology (ix).

Indeed, the matter of Beckett's existentialism has been subjected to doubt since the early

days of Beckett studies. Ruby Cohn submits that while existentialism is largely based on being

and freedom, Beckett's characters "rarely know crucial moments of decision" ("Philosophical

Fragments" 176). Cohn argues that Beckett's philosophical bent is, instead, persistently

metaphysical, which is evident in the fact that he repeatedly returns to questions of mind/body

dualism, selfhood, and God (169, 176). Similarly, P. J. Murphy argues that Beckett's relationship

to existentialism is "complicated as best" claiming that while for existentialists, "existence

precedes essence," for Beckett, "expression necessarily precedes existence" (222). Murphy

instead associates Beckett's work with the thought of Spinoza and Kant, saying that the character

Murphy is a Spinozian while "Watt is a Kantian novel," since it depicts "the journey between

Kant's two houses: the house of reason and the house of supersensible reality" (225-6, 229-230).

Of course, John Fletcher had already noted in the 1960s the influence that Spinoza had on

Beckett and had claimed, as Cohn did, that Descartes and Geulincx were much stronger

influences (54).

The idea that Beckett's work primarily deals with the epistemological problem of

knowledge in light of mind/body dualism held a prominent and early position in the

philosophical criticism on Beckett. These interpretations are encouraged by the fact that Beckett references Geulincx's maxim "*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*" in his first novel *Murphy* (Beckett, *Murphy,* 101), and that he wrote a letter to Sigle Kennedy saying that that line could be considered a "point[] of departure" for the novel (Beckett, *Disjecta* 113). Nearly all of Beckett's texts also do appear to contain references to Cartesian skepticism as in, "it seems to me I am in a head . . . but thence to conclude the head is mine, no, never" (Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 221). The overt references in the texts to the work of Descartes and Geulincx have led several critics to look for deeper thematic parallels to skepticism, which would suggest that Beckett offers a consistent thesis on dualism.

Most famously, Hugh Kenner in "The Cartesian Centaur," offers a structural reading of the trilogy in which he argues that the book carries "the Cartesian process backwards" from the bodily "I am" of *Molloy*, to the stasis of *Malone Dies*, and the final "I think" of *The Unnamable* (*Samuel Beckett* 128-9). While Kenner ultimately claims that Beckett's vision is satiric and his mode is primarily literary, he neglects to incorporate parody into his own totalizing reading of Beckett's Cartesianism ("Comedian of the Impasse" xviv). Cohn similarly draws neat parallels between passages in Beckett's works and those of Descartes and Geulincx noting that the trilogy chronicles the decay of the body, which follows Descartes' idea that "that body . . . is always divisible," and that *Murphy* is a demonstration of Geulincx's maxim "*Ubi nihil . . .*" because Murphy leaves his apartment where he is worth nothing to enter the insane asylum where he wants nothing (170, 171). While she does acknowledge differences between Descartes' texts and Beckett's own—for instance, Descartes' method led him to an understanding of the self while *The Unnamable* "never arrives at the certainty of a doubting subject"—Cohn argues that Beckett's affinity with Descartes and Geulincx demonstrates his persistent interest in the

problem of dualism as an issue for metaphysics (172, 176). But the reading of Beckett as a metaphysician who explores the complexities of dualism within his prose, while illuminating, cannot encompass his entire body of work.

As David Tucker argues in his full length study, *Beckett and Geulincx*, the importance and uses of Geulincx's work in Beckett's *oeuvre* is "mutable" and "protean," not always present but apparent at certain moments in the text such as fragmentary memories (2-3). Shane Weller further cautions that, in the aforementioned letter to Kennedy, Geulincx's "*ubi nihil*" was coupled with Democritus's line "Naught is more real than nothing" as the key to *Murphy*. Weller proceeds to demonstrate that the two maxims on nothing lead in opposite directions: while Democritus's "naught" refers to the idea that "nothing" could exist, Geulincx's "*nihil*" indicates the reverse, that "nothing" is an impossibility. Weller argues that Beckett explores the space between these polarities as he aims for an art that will demonstrate both the impossibility and unavoidability of nothing (121). In that way, the polyvalence of "nothing" in Beckett's texts precludes the type of reading that fastens his ideas to those of one philosopher or one movement.

This emphasis on multiplicity has led other critics to read Beckett as a proto-deconstructionist or post-structuralism, which furthermore, suggests that Beckett's work is philosophical insofar as it was not only influenced by philosophers but also developed alongside trends in philosophical thought. For instance, Thomas Trezise charts the continuities between Beckett's work and those of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, George Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot to argue that Beckett's writing constitutes a poststructuralist critique of phenomenology: Beckett demonstrates that the subject is always implicated in interpretation (5). Carla Locatelli associates Beckett with Derrida in a positive sense when she argues, "It is obvious that the subtractive practice typical of Beckett's later works ignites a powerful

deconstructive process . . . [which] should never be mistaken for a thematics of silence" (x). Gary Banham, on the other hand, finds that Beckett and Derrida share an association with the negative because both encounter "the 'nothing' that brings both to the edge of nihilism" (56). Beckett's affinities with poststructuralism are illuminating and well-supported; Derrida, after all declined to interpret Beckett because he said they were "too close" (60).

Yet as I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, while Derrida has been credited with encouraging such transdisciplinary readings,[9] it is important to note that he avoided blurring literature into philosophy as when he writes, "Not that I assimilate the different regimes of fiction, not that I consider laws, constitutions, the declarations of the rights of man, grammar, or the penal code to be the same as novels" (*Limited Inc.* 134). Derrida's distance from Beckett may be discovered in the former's defense of "undecidability" not as a methodology designed to celebrate "relativism or to any sort of indeterminism" but to achieve "a determinate oscillation between possibilities" (148). In other words, Derrida does not advocate for "indeterminacy as such" because, in his view, there is "a right track," a "better way" (144-6). In Beckett's case, it may be more appropriate to say that he wavers between possibilities without a sense of a "better way" or even a superficial celebration of indeterminism itself since his characters remain displeased with their condition.

One way critics have recently found for accounting for the philosophical qualities of Beckett's texts without subsuming his work under one school is to argue that Beckett's work is thematically rather than historically philosophical. For instance, Robert Eaglestone in "Beckett in the Wilderness: Writing about (Not) Writing about Beckett" provides a useful overview of some of the ways of thinking about philosophical literature while acknowledging the difficultly of

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[9] Anthony Uhlmann notes in *Beckett and Poststructuralism* that "Habermas accuses Derrida of 'leveling the genre distinctions' between literature and philosophy" 7.

equating one poet with one philosopher. He notes that Beckett's work constitutes a "thinking about literature" that is "structurally philosophical" in the way that his writing probes the problem of what literature is (41). Since Eaglestone's contribution is solely theoretical, he opens the way for a critic who can explicitly connect this structural philosophical thought about literature to Beckett's works.

Richard Begam follows this method when, rather than equating Beckett with one particular school, he identifies Beckett's thought with what he calls the philosophical problem of postfoundationalism, arguing that Beckett explores "the *'fonds sans fond'*" (13). That is, Beckett follows Nietzsche in disrupting the notions both that philosophy is the master discipline and that there is a fundamental ground for meaning (12). Problematically, Begam proceeds to assign Beckett to this one philosophical concept noting that "Beckett's mind was subtle, not muddled—given to complexity, not to contradiction" (13). Yet Beckett's argument for a fundamental separation between philosophy and poetry on the basis of their oppositional tendencies in relation to universality indicates that Beckett's work exhibits a conflicting relationship to philosophy. After all, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Beckett's separation of literature and philosophy places him in the camp of Plato, that champion of foundationalism.

As may be clear by now, the problem with the analytic approach is that it strictly identifies Beckett's work with one particular person, branch, or concept to the detriment of all other approaches. Since it is logical that Beckett cannot fully be a Cartesian at the same time that he is fully an existentialist, Geulincxian, or proto-deconstructionist, it is evident that these approaches do not account for the multiplicity and perhaps incompatibility of Beckett's references. Furthermore, what this approach presupposes is the very question of the relationship of literature to philosophy that it seeks to prove: are literature and philosophy the same?

Comparative Approaches

The arguments that I am calling "comparative" contrast with the "analytic" ones in that they draw analogies or trace influences between Beckett's work and that of philosophers without strictly identifying him as a philosopher of a particular movement. Critics such as Simon Critchley, Vivian Mercier, John Fletcher, and Andrew Kennedy may be considered comparativists since they do not deny that philosophical ideas play an important role in Beckett's works; what they contest is the overarching systematization of Beckett's thought under the aegis of one method or thesis. For instance, Critchley describes prior philosophical interpretations of Beckett as sub-Cartesian, sub-Heideggerian, or sub-Pascalian absurdist interpretations as misguided saying, "it might well be that philosophically mediated meanings are precisely what we should not be in search of when thinking through Beckett's work" (166). His thesis, that Beckett's work may be "uniquely resistant to philosophical interpretation" returns Beckett's fundamental orientation toward the writing of literature where "meaning nothing becomes the only meaning" (36-37, 165, 175). The comparativist approach allows for my own ambivalent thesis that Beckett's work displays an entangled and yet troubled relationship to philosophical discourse.

In the debate about whether Beckett is a philosopher, one set of comparativists generally argue that while Beckett does incorporate the work of philosophers into his work, he is primarily a literary writer. Although Mercier argues that Beckett's work is philosophical in the sense that it dramatizes the fundamental "concept of being and refusing to be" (186), he concludes that Beckett ultimately takes an aesthetic approach, which is in keeping with one of Beckett's statements that he prefers "the shape of ideas" to strict allegiances to intellectual schools (163, 181). Similarly, Fletcher traces the various philosophers who influenced Beckett from the

Presocratics to Hume while maintaining that Beckett employed their work in a superficial and parodic manner (43, 45).

The view that Beckett uses philosophy to garner laughs is shared by Sylvie Debevec Henning, who notes that Beckett undermines the totalizing nature of philosophical systems and instead affirms the contingency of the singular creative act (1, 5-6). Beckett's work, she notes, is opposed to philosophical discourse in the sense that it occludes categorization under one thesis or perspective (7). While, as discussed above, Hugh Kenner elsewhere draws strict parallels between Beckett's thought and Descartes', in *Stoic Comedians* he claims that Beckett is primarily a satirist, motivated by the desire to fill pages with words rather than prove a significant point (xii, xviii, xviv, 80-1). On the question of Beckett's existentialism, Kennedy disavows the notion that Sartre greatly influenced Beckett to instead posit the idea that while Beckett felt a sense of loss at the absence of God, it was "a medley of philosophical ideas" from Descartes, to Berkeley, to Schopenhauer, to Buddhism that informed his thought (9). Moreover, for Kennedy, Beckett's mode is not "primarily philosophical" rather he was motivated by the modernist drive toward the new coupled with an interest in expressing personal despair (10). These critics generally claim that the literary qualities of Beckett's writing, such as his humor and experimentalism, override the philosophical concepts he references.

In contrast to the claim that Beckett's mode is primarily literary, a new type of argument acknowledges differences between philosophy and literature in his writing while maintaining that Beckett's work is still "philosophical" in the sense that the ideas that he derived from philosophers are meant to be taken seriously within his work. This perspective has been promulgated by Anthony Uhlmann who focuses on the relationship between Beckett's thought and Deleuze's while also addressing their points of divergence. Uhlmann notes that both Deleuze

and Beckett sought to separate philosophy from literature, each maintaining that while art moves from the particular to the general, philosophy moves from the general to the particular (7). He also acknowledges that although Beckett's directionality is negative, Deleuze's is positive (9).

Yet Uhlmann attempts to resolve this difference by locating a ground between these writers, where their influences, themes, and historical circumstance are shared (7-8, 23, 34-5). Uhlmann escapes the comparativist approach when finally concludes that Beckett is a philosophical writer in that he shares the post-structuralist, anti-Platonic emphasis on movement and multiplicity: "a multitude so great and so divergent from the model as to render the model meaningless" (12). Thus, while Uhlmann's approach is comparative in the sense that he affirms differences between Beckett and Deleuze's thought, he also insists, perhaps too forcefully, that the differences between philosophy and literature "must be breached" (8, 9). Contrariwise, a more felicitous philosophical reading of Beckett perhaps would acknowledge the writer's interest in issues of being, selfhood, and the nothing, without losing the sense that philosophy and literature offer divergent modes of responding to such questions. That is, while I agree with Uhlmann's claim that Beckett prefers multifarious representations of nothing to a unified vision of being, such an observation does not necessarily mean that Beckett is a post-structuralism.

The contemporary trend to transgress disciplinary boundaries has penetrated the critical discourse on Beckett and perhaps unintentionally demonstrated how problematic such an approach can be. While the desire to topple the old hierarchies that set philosophy above literature may be merited, philosophical readings of Beckett often unintentionally perpetuate the idea that the literary text functions to prove the philosophical one, thus affirming the ability of the philosopher to see more acutely than the poet. Moreover, seen through the lens of nothing, these various philosophical interpretations of Beckett's work build a chaotic and disparate

portrait of Beckett's work. That is, Beckett's work alternately uses language to mean nothing and demonstrates the impossibility of meaning nothing; his work exposes the nothingness inherent in being and the productive nothing that generates art. The disparate conclusions that these interpretations prove together are not wrong, rather they demonstrate that the polysemic quality of his language may oppose the thesis-driven approach of his critics without necessarily offering polysemy as proper response to postmodernity.

For those reasons, I will proceed in situating Beckett as a literary writer whose work remains enmeshed within philosophical discourse even while it opposes theoretical identification. This approach, I argue, best accounts for the multiplicity of philosophical references and interests embedded in his texts while submitting that Beckett's purpose may remain other than the traditional philosophical pursuit of "seeking after the truth" or "loving knowledge." Beckett's letters, indeed, tell the story of a young writer who, despite numerous documented rejections, is persistent in pursuing a career as a literary writer. He is someone who had the opportunity to become a scholar, a thinker, a philologist, and rejected that path because he had "the itch to write" even though he felt that "the idea of writing seems somehow ludicrous" ("Letter..." 111-112). That is, one way of reading Beckett's work is as a product of a person who did not read philosophy with a desire to enter into that discourse but went "phrase-hunting in St Augustine" in order to build a literary work that would be published and appreciated by scholars (Beckett, "Letter..." 62). Yet Beckett's relationship with philosophy remains entangled since, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Beckett's thoughtful separation of philosophical and literary pursuits ironically places him in Plato's cadre on the topic of the ancient quarrel.

CHAPTER 2: BECKETT'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ANCIENT QUARREL

As I covered in the introduction, the dominant strand of philosophical criticism on Samuel Beckett presents the writer as someone who does the work of philosophy in his imaginative texts. For instance, Stanley Gontarski claims that Beckett's work represents a "dramatization of a phenomenological theme" (9), while Lance Butler similarly argues that Beckett's writing presents an "ontological parable" that is "argued consistently" (8, 151). Such arguments were part of a general trend beginning in the 1960s, when as Julie Thompson Klein writes in *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice*, prominent French theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Claude Levi-Strauss initiated "a movement toward reintegration" of the humanities and social sciences (31). Yet the notion that such philosophers entirely demolished the barriers between literature and philosophy, so much so that a literary text could be said to evince a philosophy, may be an oversimplification. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical justification for my hesitation to assimilate Beckett's work with a particular philosophical movement or idea. Returning to twentieth-century literary theory on the question of how philosophy and literature are related, I argue in this chapter that "neat identifications" between the two fields remain problematic, especially in the context of interpreting Samuel Beckett's work since Beckett himself separated the fields in his conceptual writing. Beckett cannot easily be called a philosopher or philosophical writer, since he often sides with the philosophers who are most critical of literature. In that way, Beckett may be considered a philosophical writer only insofar as his negative attitude toward literature is strongly supported by philosophy itself.

Like the twentieth-century thinkers whom I will gloss—including Blanchot, Heidegger, Barthes, Derrida, Levinas, and Kristeva—Beckett often emphasizes the differences in

methodology, aims, and interpretative responses of philosophy and literature rather than their contiguity. For instance, while contemporary critics such as Martha Nussbaum highlight the similarities between the fields by arguing that despite differences in style and form, writers of philosophy and literature are both essentially concerned with life (6, 7), Beckett claims in "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce" that "form and content are inseparable" so that generic differences generate differences in meaning (502). Beckett's division of the fields undermines the branch of criticism, as Robert Eaglestone identifies it, which seeks to demonstrate how Beckett's texts do the work of philosophy (43). For Eaglestone, Beckett's works may rightfully be called philosophical not because they manifest particular arguments about the nature of truth but because they identify "problems in 'thinking about literature'" and "test the limits of our ideas about what literature is and the what [sic] foundations of 'thinking about literature' should be' (41). To take Eaglestone's thesis a step further, Beckett indicates in "Dante . . ." that he agrees with the philosophers who would differentiate the literary work from the philosophical one on the basis that the former presents the particularities of existence while the latter shapes those particularities into abstract concepts (495). In that way, Beckett's "thinking about literature" ironically aligns him not with those who would argue for the integration of the disciplines but with those who uphold their division.

The difficulty of assimilating philosophy and literature also surfaces in the writing of Badiou who discovers resistance to his initial totalizing philosophical reading of Beckett's work. While Badiou, for instance, articulates the goal of understanding how "the truth of being enter[s] the fiction," he encounters passages in Beckett's texts in which their fictionality directly contests their truth-claims (4). Badiou identifies an ethical argument within Beckett's fictional texts that, contrary to the typical view that Beckett's writing tends toward utter meaninglessness, despair,

and total skepticism, the writer actually crafts courageous parables that argue for the value of "going on" through characters who are driven by the "imperative to speak" (2, 46). Of Beckett's philosophical contribution, Badiou writes, "What Beckett offers to thought . . . is not this gloomy corporeal immersion into an abandoned existence, into hopeless relinquishment [but] the lesson of Beckett is a lesson in measure, exactitude and courage" (40). Using the language of philosophy, Beckett can be said to contribute to knowledge insofar as he offers "lessons" in ethics that, as Andrew Gibson surmises, philosophers such as Badiou then "subtract" (124).

Yet while Badiou initially argues that the literary text conveys a philosophical thesis when he remarks that "it is entirely possible to take *Worstward Ho* as a short philosophical treatise, as a treatment in shorthand on the question of being" (80), he also encounters features of Beckett's literary texts that undermine the conceptual systems they ostensibly impart. He notes, for instance, that any comment on skepticism found in Beckett's work is coupled with an irony so strong that it warps the philosophical content therein: "This is the argument of the cogito save for the ironic nuance which derives from the fact that the search for truth is replaced by the search for non-being, and, moreover, that by an inversion of values, 'the inescapability of self-perception'" (14). While, in this case, Badiou considers the slippage from "the search for truth" to "self-perception" to be incidental, a slippage of thought rather than a necessary effect of the text, his observation that figurative irony subverts the philosophical search for truth indicates that certain literary aspects of Beckett's writing obstruct his "philosophical treatise."

Badiou's discovery of a dividing point between philosophical and literary discourse becomes more clearly defined when he arrives at the conclusion that Beckett's texts are not purely philosophical but rather link "philosophical abstraction . . . and the strophic poem. The latter describes a kind of picture through the incessant repetition of the same groups of words,

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and through minute variations which, little by little, displace the meaning of the text" (40). In other words, the shifting repetitions within Beckett's texts, particularly the ones written after the Nobel Prize award, cause deviations from the conceptual material they purportedly convey. Badiou further writes that the poetic aspects of Beckett's writing obstruct the philosophical questions that they implicitly ask:

> The scraps of fiction or spectacle that Beckett employs attempt to expose some critical questions (in Kant's sense) to the test of beauty. . . . "Where would I go, if I could go? Who would I be if I could be? What would I say, if I had a voice? . . . Who am I, if the other exists." . . . The work of Beckett is nothing but the treatment of these four questions within the flesh of language. We could say that we are dealing with an enterprise of meditative thought—half-conquered by the poem—which attempts to seize in beauty the non-prescriptable fragments of existence. (41)

While Badiou's predominant effort in the passage lies in demonstrating the success of Beckett's integration of philosophical and literary material, so that Beckett's work can be called "nothing but the treatment of [Kant's] questions," Badiou nonetheless arrives at the conclusion that the poetic aspects of the work "conquer[]" the "meditative thought" within. That may be because, as Badiou notes, the artist "differs from the philosopher" in the way that "the operator of thought is the fiction within prose" (48). In other words, Beckett's fictions may diverge from the philosophical material they include insofar as they primarily concern their own formal properties.

Badiou is not alone in observing that Beckett's texts tend to depart from the philosophical ideas from which they derive. In his book *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, John Calder, Beckett's English language publisher, acknowledges the idea that the fictional aspects of Beckett's texts warp their philosophical content. In the book, Calder qualifies his central claim that "Beckett's thinking" should be classified under "meditative philosophy" when he observes that (4):

> In the plays philosophy is discussed and its concepts become the property of many of his characters, but he does not use philosophical ideas to be given human form on stage. The nature of dramatic dialogue was both a hindrance to his doing so and an opportunity simply to use his characters to speculate or discuss philosophical concepts, not to embody them. (20)

While contrasting Beckett's discussion-based approach with the trend in existentialist theatre to embody ideas in human form, Calder perhaps accidentally identifies a problem that the figurative embodiment of ideas, pervasive in literary writing, presents a "hindrance" to philosophical inquiry. In order to adequately convey philosophical concepts, Beckett's characters must, tellingly, express them directly in expository form. Calder nevertheless stresses the ultimate "opportunity" that the fictional mode offers to philosophical discourse, but what is of interest for this study is the observation that the literary aspects of Beckett's writing appear to occlude the goal of embodying conceptual thought (16). Simon Critchley arrives at a similar interpretation when he notes that Beckett's writing does not replicate philosophy, but rather remains "uniquely resistant to philosophical interpretation" (165). While Critchley argues that Beckett's resistance derives from his anticipation of philosophical interpretations (165-6), the question still remains as to which precise literary aspects of Beckett's writing fortify the resistance.

Since many studies have emphasized the philosophical nature of Beckett's texts, it is worth taking time to understand why Beckett's texts tend to preclude philosophical interpretation. To respond to that question, in this chapter, I return to the terms of the ancient quarrel between literature and philosophy—beginning with Plato and then skipping to the twentieth century debate—in order to understand how the relationship between the fields has recently been conceptualized. Using Plato's critique of poetry as a starting point, I will demonstrate that contemporary philosophers have not, as might be expected, rejected his characterizations of literary writing even as they replace Plato's consequent suspicion of such

material with admiration. For instance, while in rejecting Plato's critique of poets' whimsical processes, Heidegger frames the poet's craft as a form of thinking, Julia Kristeva and Emmanuel Levinas have affirmed the importance of a rhythmic rather than a deliberate, conceptual methodology for generating a literary work. In addition to reviewing recent theory on the relationship between philosophy and literature, I will revisit Beckett's own insistence on the categorical separation between philosophy and literature to demonstrate that Beckett's separation of the fields on the basis of their distinct ways of encoding and interpreting material suggests that the longstanding mode of interpreting Beckett's work through the lens of philosophy warrants a reexamination.

The Ancient Quarrel in the Twentieth Century

"There's an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy," so says Socrates in Plato's *Republic* upon declaring that poets should be banished from the ideal city (76; 607). In this section, I will review Plato's claims against poetry first as a whole and then individually in order to offer a platform for the twentieth-century philosophers who responded to them. For instance, while Plato characterizes poetry as a product of the "lengthy process of turning upside down . . . and cutting and pasting," he defines the philosopher as "a lover of wisdom" (*Phaedrus* 82; 278). This description of the difference between the disciplines can be broken down into four interconnecting claims against poetry: 1) It is mimetic, which is problematic insofar as the truth is not to be found in nature; 2) It lacks *techne* or rigorous craftsmanship; 3) It may provide an example of unethical behavior; 4) It is obscure and so may be interpreted incorrectly. These characterizations of art linger in current debates on literary theory even while Plato's degradation of art has been largely replaced with acceptance of literature as philosophy's other.

Representation

Probably the most famous injunction against literary writing is presented in the *Republic*, where Plato's interlocutors discuss their refusal to "admit any representational poetry" into the ideal republic (64; 595). Plato, as is well-known, finds representational poetry to be problematic on the basis that the things in the world are already representations of their "type" and therefore not "real," rendering an artistic likeness of one of those objects twice removed from the forms (65; 596-597). Moreover, mimesis troubles the pursuit of knowledge because the artist does not need to understand the composition of an object to depict its appearance (65; 596). While in the twenty-first century we are far removed from Plato's notion of a metaphysical ideal that is blurred in the experience of the material world, the notion that poets merely imitate pre-given material persists in post-metaphysical philosophy as does the perception that such imitations do not always serve an ethical or veridical function.

In post-metaphysical philosophy, the type of material that the poet imitates has shifted inward and the implication of this shift has been inverted so that poets' imitations of inner being are now largely praised. The acceptance of the artist's work coincides with the notion that artists do not represent the things in the world, but rather, as Heidegger frames it, deal in "the reproduction of the thing's general essence" (*Poetry...* 37). Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, also presents artists as imitators of the "inmost ground of the world," a concept he articulated while he was in awe of Wagner (38). Praising the artist's imitative craft as a form of thinking toward the truth, Nietzsche writes that the worldliness of poetry is precisely what allows writers to speak to truth: "The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world as a fantastic impossibility spawned by a poet's brain: it desires to be just the opposite, the unvarnished expression of the

truth" (61). Since with Nietzsche truth is no longer a transcendent form, a poet who can imitate the event of being itself has accessed the truth of the world.

While, as Paul de Man notes, Nietzsche initiated the modernist critique of metaphysics by turning to aesthetic modes of knowing, such as metaphor, it is important to recognize that Nietzsche eventually struggled against the poet over the problem of representation ("Resistance..." 7-8, "Semiology" 1375-6). Following his break with Wagner, Nietzsche, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, notes that artists are easily susceptible to corruption, as he writes, "They have at all times been valets of some morality, philosophy, or religion; quite apart from the fact that they have unfortunately often been all-too-pliable courtiers of their own followers and patrons and cunning flatterers of ancient or newly arrived powers" (538). While he does not return to Plato's ascetic ideal or metaphysics, Nietzsche, in this anti-Wagnerian moment, could no longer conceive of the poet as a "knight," who could autonomously speak to truth against mass feeling. In that way, while Nietzsche's former praise for poets' ability to imitate the inmost ground of the world became the model for a new philosophical mode, which would elevate aesthetic truth, he also returned to the idea that poets often imitate the ideas of philosophers rather than invent new modes of thought.

For all of the arguments that present Beckett as a philosopher, it may be surprising to note that Beckett's own ideas about imitation largely cohere with Plato's criticism and Nietzsche's late-stage denigration of artists. As Stanley Gontarski comments in *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*, Beckett's works contain Platonic essentialism in the premise, expressed in the monograph *Proust,* that the imitation of surfaces comprises a lesser art (4). Moreover, the Beckettian narrator of "Texts for Nothing" intones such disdain for mimetic art when he appears to refer to his own works as these "pale imitations of mine" (329).

Gontarski parses Beckett's attack on representation as a response to Balzac's hyper-realistic novels, which were too perfectly crafted to represent the world in its imperfections (9). In response, Gontarski notes, Beckett represents the chaotic experiences of being through a formal preference for uncertain rather than omniscient writing (12-3). Yet while Gontarski figures Beckett as an ontologist because of his turn inward, the idea that Beckett's work accurately represents inner chaos rather than external objects again inscribes his work within the discourse of representation (12). Likewise, the turn inward, both for Nietzsche and Heidegger, continues to frame the artist's craft within the problem of representation even if poets are said to represent interior perceptions rather than objects. Similarly, Beckett's critique of mimesis and continued representation of inward experiences suggests that he does not seek an escape from Plato's degradation of poetry but instead validates the philosopher's formulation of writing as a "pale imitation."

The Question of Craft

The imitation of feelings or materials in contrast to the logical ordering of ideas comprises one aspect of a larger problem with poetry, which is that, according to Plato, poetry is derived from a passive process instead of an active one. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates separates the philosopher from the poet by defining the philosopher as a true "lover of wisdom" and the poet as someone who composes arbitrarily, "by a lengthy process of turning upside down" (82). In the *Ion*, Plato presents the poet's process as intuitive rather than goal-directed or knowledge-based when he depicts the rhapsode as someone who receives "a divine gift" from the gods instead of mastering or understanding his own craft (47-8). In other words, poets unlike philosophers create through inspiration without knowledge or deliberation. In twentieth-century philosophy, the terminology has, of course, shifted away from the notion that the poet is inspired by the gods but

the conception that the poet works through an arbitrary rather than conceptually rigorous method has endured. Specifically, the discourse of inspiration has largely been supplanted by emphasis on the importance of rhythm to the poetic process, which validates Plato's characterization of the poet as someone who assimilates external forces rather than actively seeks to reach essential truths (*Phaedrus*, 80-1; 277).

The predominant, anti-Platonic view today that poetry can be a vessel for truth derives largely from Heidegger's characterization of poetry as a new model for non-metaphysical truth. Heidegger rejects the concept of a divine exterior Ideal to instead establish the truth as the unveiling of what beings are. Heidegger's ontological notion of truth consequently involves a reversal Plato's characterization of the poet as disorganized and inspired, as Heidegger asserts that "Making poetry" like philosophy, "is a matter of thinking" (96). Heidegger returns to the original Greek classification of art and craft as "*techne*" to demonstrate that Socrates was wrong to argue that poetry is not created through a rational process. The word "*techne,*" Heidegger defines it, does not mean "art" or "craft" but rather "signifies a 'mode of knowing'" (59). In Heidegger's ontological conception of truth, "knowing consists in *aletheia*, that is, in the uncovering of beings" in images (59). Thus, poetry is neither technical or arbitrary, but rather, through the act of naming, poetry illuminates the knowledge of what it means to be, even if "being" is ultimately devoid of essential meaning (59, 72-3, and 76).

While Heidegger opposes the notion that the poet's process is arbitrary and disconnected from truth, by following Nietzsche in moving the representative act inward, he validates the importance of unconscious rhythms of language in producing poetic material. Following Nietzsche, who affirmatively notes that melody generates the poem (*Birth* 53), Julia Kristeva, in "The Ethics of Linguistics," acknowledges the prominent role that rhythm plays in generating

poetic language. Defining rhythm as "sonorous thrusts within and against the system of

language" (30), she affirms Plato's conclusion that:

> Any society may be stabilized only it excludes poetic language. . . . The poet is put to
> death because he wants to turn rhythm into a dominant element; because he wants to
> make language perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with its matter
> independently of the sign, and free from denotation. For it is this eminently parodic
> gesture that changes the system. (31)

While she does not agree with Plato's condemnation of poets' destabilizing activity, she does

accept Plato's characterization of poetry as a non-contemplative processes that upsets political

systems.

Instead of eradicating the notion that the imaginative writer works through a non-

conceptual method, she confirms poetry's rhythmic, intuitive process precisely because of its

unsystematic and revolutionary qualities. Such is the case because, as Kristeva states, poetry

derives not only from "language, subject-producer, history, metalanguage" but also from that

which it cannot understand ("How..." 94). The poet's lack of understanding returns us again to

Plato's concern with uninformed representation, which Kristeva accepts because the poet is able

to bring infinite ideas into being ("How..." 98-9). For Kristeva, poetry's struggle between rhythm

and meaning places it on the margins of and not as a replica of philosophy, an important point to

consider when evaluating the type of argument in Beckett studies that frames him as someone

who conveys philosophical a meaning.

Instead, literary writing remains on the margins of philosophy because "sonorous

language" competes against systems of language and thought that arise around it. In "How Does

One Speak to Literature?" Kristeva writes of the fragmentation of thought into separate

disciplines that:

> Literature confirms all the hypotheses of all the human sciences . . . on the condition that
> it remain in the shadows of knowledge as a passive thing, never as an agent . . . not

specified as a *precise object*, delineated in its totality by an autonomous, circumscribed theory looking for its truth, literature does not give rise to specific knowledge, but to *applications* of doctrines that are nothing but ideological exercises since they are empirical and fragmented. (95)

While Kristeva does not endorse Plato's disdainful attitude toward poetic writing as an effective medium for teaching the truth, she critiques the approach to literature that would treat the discourse as an analytical object, which only serves to demonstrate the ideological approaches of other disciplines, as so much of Beckett criticism does. Instead, what Kristeva suggests is that the poetic discipline is not to be folded into other approaches since the poet's ability to access and convey the rhythms of the subconscious allows it to rupture such ideological systems.

Like Kristeva, Beckett interestingly affirms the characterization of poetic writing as a product of pre-conscious thinking in opposition to abstract, philosophical frameworks. In his critical essay "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce," for instance, he selects passages from Vico's writing that categorize poetry as a medium that comes closer to the raw material of life than philosophy does. Although, as James Acheson notes, in writing this work of criticism, Beckett was not necessarily trying to develop a theory of art but was rather attempting to supplement his income and support the career of Joyce, there nonetheless "emerges" from the essay an aesthetic position in the ancient quarrel (1). In the essay, for instance, Beckett's frames the differences between literature and philosophy this way:

> Poetry, [Vico] says, was born of curiosity, daughter of ignorance . . . Poetry was the first operation of the human mind, and without it thought could not exist. Barbarians, incapable of analysis and abstraction, must use their fantasy to explain what their reasons cannot comprehend. Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the sense and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual; Poetry is all passion and feeling and animates the inanimate; Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals; Poetry, when most concerned with particulars. Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity . . . poetry is a prime condition of philosophy and civilizations. ("Dante..." 500)

Beckett's categorization of poetry as a product of the primary senses that are eventually displaced by the abstract reasoning of a philosopher suggests that poetry is unphilosophical in the sense that it has not undergone analysis of itself. Beckett's assertion that "poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics" also runs contrary to the idea that Beckett is a philosophical writer who seeks to rupture the boundaries between those fields.

The latter thesis can be found in the work of Richard Begam, who argues that Beckett should be taken "seriously as a philosophical writer," insofar as his writing coheres with a "postfoundationalist" discourse (13). Defining "foundationalism" as the idea that "philosophy finds the first grounds for all other disciplines, it is a master discipline," Begam argues that Beckett's writing presents a coherent, consistent statement on the "philosophical problem" of writing itself, independent of a master discourse (12-13, 23, 33). To make his argument, Begam neglects Beckett's own affirmation of the role of philosophy in generating abstract concepts from the less thoughtfully constructed material of poetry. Asserting that the poet offers the particulars and the philosopher the universal intelligence of humanity, Beckett contrariwise suggests that, while both figures may be writing about human life, their focuses and purposes diverge. By emphasizing "particularities" over "universals" in literary writing, Beckett appears to side with those philosophers who characterize poetry as a pre-conceptual process that opposes "analysis," "abstraction," and comprehension.

Alternately, the idea that "poetry was the first operation of the human mind" has been used to support Heideggerian arguments, such as Anthony Uhlmann's, that the poetic image comprises a conceptually valid form of thought. Seeking a way to understand "how literature and philosophy might interact," Uhlmann argues that "because the image precedes and exceeds thought, it is something which is of equal importance to (but made different use of by) literature

and philosophy" ("Philosophical Image" 3). Yet Uhlmann is forced to reconcile his goal of illuminating the parallels that exist between the work of Beckett and that of the post-structuralists with Beckett's assertions about the differences between those texts (*Beckett and Poststructuralism* 4). Uhlmann is careful to seek after "resonances" instead of claiming that Beckett *is* a post-structuralist, precisely because he encounters "a problem of impurity, of interference, of mixing or overlapping" (12). That is, while Uhlmann believes that the "the rigid disciplinary boundaries between literature and philosophy (the one concerned with the particular the other with the general) must be breached," he acknowledges Beckett's own formulation of the differences between the disciplines in "Dante..." (7). While Uhlmann reaches a synthesis between his and Beckett's claims when he arrives at the conclusion that "while they are concerned with the same questions they move in different directions and approach from opposite sides; literature moving from the particular towards the general, philosophy from the general towards the particular" (8), we might contend that most fields of discourse ask about similar facets of humanity; neurobiology, psychology, and psychiatry are all concerned with the processes of human thought, but their differences in methodology and approach are what separate them. This separation is not complete but is significant in so far as it determines how they approach, test, and ask questions.

Returning to the parallels between Plato's characterizations of poetic craft and twentieth-century literary theory, Blanchot, Barthes, and Beckett also approach a Platonic view that writers do not seek after truth but rather write for the sake of writing. For instance, instead of arguing against Plato that poets write for a philosophical or ethical purpose, Blanchot remarks that the writer has nothing to say:

> Whatever he wants to say, it is nothing. The world, things, knowledge, are for him only reference points across the void. And he himself is already reduced to nothing. Nothing is

his material. He rejects the forms in which it offers itself to him as being something . . . The writer's 'I have nothing to say,' like that of the accused, contains the whole secret of his solitary condition. (5)

Here Blanchot affirms the idea that the poet gathers the things of the world, including philosophical references, into the work but does so without wishing to prove a philosophical point. To Blanchot, the best writing of the day does not celebrate art for art's sake, but rather represents the curse of speech: the writer is "condemned to speak passionately in order to say nothing" (14). Confirming, in some senses, the Platonic notion that the writer lacks the philosophical purpose of the "lover of wisdom" Blanchot writes, "The writer does not write in order to express the concern that is his law. He writes without a goal, in an act that nevertheless has all the characteristics of a deliberate composition, and his concern for it craves realization at each instant" (15). Barthes upholds the idea that writers do not produce knowledge or reach the truth when he notes that the verb "to write" has become intransitive and so means "the one who writes—absolutely" (18). Since writing itself is the goal of the work, any "message" within is incidental. A similar discovery perhaps leads Blanchot to the conclusion that "Literature is unquestionably illegitimate, there is an underlying deceitfulness in it" (22). For the themes that are said to comprise the central purpose of a work are actually red herrings intended to conceal the void of meaning within.

Beckett's thought aligns closely with Blanchot's in "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," in which Beckett affirms the idea that the aimless literary process produces material that opposes the traditional, philosophical pursuit of knowledge, truth, and goodness. In the dialogue, Beckett takes the position that the artist of the day prefers "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" (556). Interestingly, such a

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statement on art, that the artist has "nothing to express" contrasts with the notion, commonly

held in Beckett criticism, that the writer is expressing a philosophical position, whether it be

existentialist (Esslin 30), post-structuralist (Uhlmann, *Beckett...* 4; Begam 13), or even nihilist

("Enigmatic, Nihilistic..." 139). Instead, Beckett's formulation of the writer's defunct project

bears remarkable affinity with Blanchot's conception of the writer as someone who has no

message to deliver yet who is nevertheless driven by an imperative to speak on.

Instead of corroborating the arguments of critics such as Lance Butler who argue that

Beckett's texts are "ontological parables" that do the work of philosophy by offering a "unified

and self-consistent statement about existence" (154), Beckett often works to separate the aims of

poetic and philosophical modes. For instance, in a line that contests Uhlmann's view that an

image can relay an identifiable concept, Beckett writes in a letter to Georges Duthuit dated July

17, 1948 that "it is hard to believe that poetry and a self-devouring, ever-reducing thought can

exist" (86). This quasi definition of poetry and philosophy figures the former as that which

embraces complexity and the latter as that which distills thought to a singular thesis through the

process of deduction. In contrast to this form of philosophy, Beckett writes:

> I have no wish to prove anything, and watertight theories are no dearer to me than those
> that allow dear Truth to slip through. I am only trying to point to the possibility of an
> expression lying outside the system of relations hitherto held to be indispensable to
> anyone who cannot be content with his own navel. . . . I am no longer capable of writing
> *about*." (140-1)

Such a statement contrasts with Butler's argument that Beckett shows "an inclination to

reconcile and solve basic epistemological problems (8). Instead, Beckett sides with those critics

who figure the writer as someone who gathers the particularities of existence into a work in order

to write but not necessarily to prove an abstract, consistent, or unified statement on questions of

being.

Ethics

If we follow Heidegger and Nietzsche in affirming the type of art that represents inward experience, and we follow Levinas, Kristeva, Blanchot, and Barthes in affirming the importance of external forces such as rhythm in producing such writing, we return, in a sense, to Plato's original question about the ethical implications of such writing. Plato discusses the ethics of nonrational, poetic production in the *Republic*, where his interlocutors discuss the question of whether poets offer their audiences a model for achieving the good or for delighting in immorality. Socrates welcomes any poet "to try to prove that there's more to poetry than mere pleasure—that it also has a beneficial affect on society and on human life in general" (76; 607). His main target is Homer whom he accuses of depicting falsehoods such as the gods behaving immorally (57; 391). In doing so, Homer fails to teach social virtues: "to revere the gods, respect their parents, and not belittle friendship with one another" (52; 386). Poetry is, according to Plato, by definition averse to such a program since good poetry produces pleasure: "the better poetry they are, the more they are to be kept from the ears of children" (53; 387). In contrast, the appropriate exemplar would teach the value of self-discipline to resist rather than be enraptured by the pleasures of the body: "drink, sex, and food" (55; 389). The concern with poetry as a false product is then ultimately an ethical one; the poet, by imitating all of life, including raunchy, delightful material, may encourage behaviors that society would rather suppress.

The concern with the ethical ramifications of representative art has resurfaced in the work of Levinas who notes that if art merely reproduces the being of individuals or epochs, it has the capacity to reinforce evil rather than altruism, which Levinas considers to be the most fundamental aspect of human activity ("Transcendence..." 20). To arrive at this conclusion, Levinas first grants Heidegger the position that art makes ontological meaning possible when the

former writes, "Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are ontological par excellence, they make the understanding of being possible" ("Meaning..." 41). Levinas comments that if we follow the logical positivists, poets are guided by intuition, the aspect of consciousness that welcomes the internal and external data of being including "ideas, relations, or sensible qualities" (35) as well as a Beckettian "becoming of the particularities, peculiarities, and oddities" (43). A chain of comprehension, then, originates with intuition and ultimately ends with a meaningful expression, where meaning is taken to be intelligibility (35, 43). This is not to say that the artwork that represents meaning becomes a transcendent, metaphysical object, but rather the work of art is, in a Heideggerian fashion, considered a representation of the particularities of an epoch (40).

This Heideggerian notion of the ontological nature of truth in art presents difficulties for Levinas because it comprehends others by means of the knowledge of the universal rule that they are free and therefore, should be left alone; in other words, it "let[s] beings be" ("Is Ontology..." 5-6). This cold form of intellectualization concerns Levinas because it grasps the other through the knowledge of separateness while not adequately respecting alterity. The relationship with the other occurs, instead, through the idea of the infinite; it is a grasping of the ungraspable "while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable" ("Transcendence..."19). For Levinas, the freedom of the other is not the primary principle on which relationships are built; rather, people are originally first thrown into the sociality of existence, which demands "a movement within the Same in the face of the Other . . . a movement that returns us to neither violence nor fatality" nor sameness (20). Thus, Heidegger's "letting be" is dangerous because Being is nothing but "a struggle for life without ethics;" for, as Levinas writes, "the law of evil is the law of being" ("The Paradox..." 172, 176). While animals and nature may struggle to survive in this manner, he

notes, humans depart from nature and therefore, ought instead to meet the other with "curiosity . . . sympathy or love" (172, 175). In this way, the primary relation with the other should not be one of comprehension, totalization, and consequential separation but of interlocution, an exchange which has the capacity to alter both parties ("Is Ontology..." 6).

Thus, conceiving of art as a meaningful expression of the being of an epoch, according to Levinas, does not necessarily mean that such production serves the ethical function of meeting the other with love. Levinas troubles Heidegger's positive notion of poetry as a medium that grants access to the truth of being by questioning the social implications of this function: "Is not art an activity that lends faces to things? . . . We ask ourselves all the same if the impersonal but fascinating and magical march of rhythm does not, in art, substitute itself for sociality, for the face, for speech" ("Is Ontology..." 10). The vital question remains whether art can invoke an ethical response in the onlooker or whether the aesthetic pleasure of receiving an art object quiets active consciousness ("Reality..." 12). If art, formulated in a Platonic manner, is the product of passive receptivity to the external rhythms of music, images, and muses, it does not necessarily bear the face of the other that invokes the highest call to ethical consciousness (3).

Despite the ongoing concern with the ethics of literature, the latest trend in the criticism on Beckett is to refute Plato's binary distinctions between literary and philosophical forms of writing by figuring Beckett as a moral philosopher. Working against the longstanding interpretation that Beckett's work is nihilistic, Alain Badiou argues, for instance, that Beckett posits a prosocial ethical stance: "What Beckett offers to thought through his art, theatre, prose, poetry, cinema, radio, television, and criticism, is not this gloomy corporeal immersion into an abandoned existence, into hopeless relinquishment. . . . The lesson of Beckett is a lesson in measure, exactitude and courage" (40). The idea that Beckett teaches lessons in happiness also

enters the work of John Calder who argues in a chapter entitled "Prescriptions for Living:

Beckett's Ethics" that Beckett's "message" is that "if humanity . . . can learn to forego personal

ambition and think in terms of co-operation, compassion and companionship, it will be happier.

It would in fact be moving closer to the condition of the artist" (138). Calder presents Beckett as

a saintly ascetic who works without expectation of success, fame, or "self-aggrandisement" (128-

9). Michael Bennett likewise claims that Beckett offers not a Sartrean notion of nothing as

negation but rather a Heideggerian version of nothing that offers fertile ground for meaning.

Waiting for Godot then, to Bennett, provides "a simple roadmap for making meaning in life" by

teaching the audience to fill empty time with idle talk (29-30).

Yet in Beckett's own discussions about writing, he does not uphold the idea that literary

works ought to be given an ethical function. Contrariwise, in a letter to Thomas McGreevy dated

November 28, 1937, he denigrates interpretations that turn the raw material of art into uplifting

theses: "they want to make [Proust's] 'solution' a little moral triumph, the reward of endeavor &

the crown of a life of striving a la Goethe" (390). Beckett's sardonic attitude toward critics who

impose ethical narratives on texts suggests that when Badiou and others find moral lessons in

Beckett's writing, they may not do justice to the ethical ambivalence that Beckett prefers in

literary works. In other words, Beckett's own attitude toward ethical criticism may align him

more closely with Levinas and Plato than with Badiou on the question of whether literary writing

produces an ethical response. He seems to suggest in this letter, at least, that literature does not

offer moral lessons, and in contrast with Levinas and Plato, should not offer such lessons.

Instead Beckett appears to avoid moral certainty while emphasizing the formal properties

of art that exceed a philosophically consistent argumentation. As Shane Weller notes in his full

length study on the matter of Beckett's relationship to ethics and nihilism, Beckett's texts match

"the failure of both nihilism and the overcoming of nihilism" (24). In other words, there are nihilistic aspects of Beckett's works that cannot easily be surpassed by assigning to Beckett a moral occupation. While as Weller notes, Badiou's promotion of Beckett's moral stance is "a defense of art as such," the reading of Beckett as a moralist ignores the "literary" aspects of Beckett's work (19). The literary aspects of Beckett's writing are what Derrida identifies as the "composition, the rhetoric, the construction, and rhythm of his works," or that which "resists purely philosophical (or metaphysical questioning)" (qtd. in Weller 18). In that way, the argument that Beckett is an ethical philosopher fail to obtain in so far as it ignores the stylistic activities in the work that do not necessarily offer moral guidance.

Interpretation

The ethical problem with literature, according to Plato, is not easily solved by providing hidden moral lessons in stories, for children, he says, "cannot tell when something is allegorical and when it isn't, and any idea admitted by a person of that age tends to become almost ineradicable and permanent" (47). In other words, because the figures encoded in texts are not transparent, they are subject to misinterpretations that may lead their audiences to immoral ends, even if the stories are not intended to produce that effect. In recent years, the idea that literary writing obfuscates interpretation has not disappeared, but has only been displaced by the idea that philosophy may also be subject to the same criticism. Indeed, contemporary philosophers have recently looked to poetry as an example for philosophy not because the literary writer better manifests philosophical ideas but precisely because literary writing presents a model of obscurity, of interpreting the other without flattening all discourse into intellectual sameness.

The studies of Beckett that figure his work as an ontological parable, or as Bennett presents it, "a simple roadmap for making meaning in life," may misconstrue the terms under

which contemporary philosophers have welcomed poetic writing into its discourse. While Bennett's analysis treats Beckett's works as a moral and overt philosophical system, in twentieth century theory, art is more often figured as a medium that offers an alternative to philosophically systematic ways of interpreting human life. In that way, Beckett's critics—including Calder, Butler, and Bennett—may be misguided when they turn his writing into systematic, clear philosophical discourse rather than appreciate its quality of unattainability.

Deconstructionists, who are often credited with toppling disciplinary hierarchies, have indeed challenged the binary that figures poetry as a purely pleasurable form in contrast to philosophy's serious search for truth, but have done so without upholding literary writing as an easily decodable channel for philosophical discourse. Derrida, for instance, is widely regarded as the philosopher who established the foundations for philosophical readings of Beckett's work because he, as Anthony Uhlmann notes, 'level[ed] the genre distinctions' between literature and philosophy" and displaced the traditional borders between "nonserious" and "serious" writing (7).

Yet Derrida actually presents a nuanced view of the relationship between the two fields that does not assimilate one into the other. Derrida appears to establish a framework for integrating stylistic and philosophical forms of discourse in "White Mythology," where he questions the "separation" and "hierarchy" between philosophy and rhetoric (224). In *Limited Inc.*, he further investigates the idea that "Only a serious and literal language can fully realize an intention" and seems to open the door to literature as the mode of discourse that originates, accepts, and understands the metaphorical nature of language when he asks, "to what extent does traditional philosophical discourse, and that of speech act theory in particular, derive from fiction?" (77, 122). To study the structure of performative speech acts comprehensibly, Derrida

announces, the "non-serious . . . will no longer be able to be excluded, as Austin wishes, from 'ordinary' language" (*Limited* 18). When all modes of writing are accepted into the study of discourse, Derrida observes, one begins to understand an effect of speech that ordinary texts obscure: the "iterability" of speech, or the structural power that enables texts to be repeated and misunderstood when their makers are absent (*Limited Inc.* 7, 9, 109).

Such iterability is exposed especially in metaphorical language because a metaphor opens a dehiscence in meaning: a "divided opening" that "makes production, reproduction, development possible" (59). When metaphysicians separate philosophy from metaphorical language, they avoid the problem inherent not only in literature but potentially in any written work, which is that "the structural characteristic of every mark" is "infelicity," in other words, "that *all* conventional acts are exposed to failure" (17). To summarize, Derrida argues that the "loss of meaning" felt in the presence of a metaphor is characteristic of the loss of meaning inherent in the use of all iterable language ("White Mythology" 270).

Even though Derrida establishes "iterability" as a problem for all modes of discourse, that does not mean that he eradicates the barriers that might separate a work of poetry from a grocery list or a philosophical treatise, as he has been credited with doing ("Before the Law" 187, *Limited Inc.* 134). Although, as he confesses, his temptation as a philosopher is to totalize writing on the basis of its iterability, this is a "lure" he wishes to denounce ("Interview" 34). In an interview with Derek Attridge, he instead stresses the differences between literary and philosophical writing:

> On the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It's the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational. (47)

Literature's liminal status in the world and in relation to philosophical discourse returns us, to a degree, to the Platonic figuration, where the poetic work derives from external forces that are beyond logical understanding. Focusing on the iterability of texts also reconfirms interpretation as a central problem for literary writing, even if Derrida's concern primarily lies with the absence of the author during the reading act while Plato's focus lay with the misinterpretations produced by those who are uneducated (*Limited* 7). While, for Derrida, all meaning is subject to misinterpretation in the process of its iteration, not primarily in the literary epic as Plato would have it, he does not proceed to argue that the literary text and the philosophical one become identical. In other words, Derrida's identification of iterability as a central problem for writing remains opposed to the type of interpretation that would figure Beckett's works as neat parables for philosophical expression containing decodable lessons.

While Derrida does not essentialize literature on the basis of iterability or any other definition, both Heidegger and Levinas affirm obscurity and not ethical transparency as a fundamental aspect of literary writing, even while they use that quality to discuss contrary points about literary production. While Heidegger writes that the process of obscuring demonstrates the idea that truth is an event, in Levinas's formulation, the production of art involves an ethically problematic "event of obscuring" ("Reality..." 3). In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger argues that the process of making art offers access to pure being precisely because it does not involve the Platonic or Hegelian imposition of the idea. He writes, "If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work" (36). Heidegger defines truth here not as a fixed, unifying, ideational truth but the mutable "truth setting itself to work" (36). Truth, in his view is a process, an event that "happens as the primal conflict between clearing and concealing," where clearing the way to

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truth always involves "refusal and dissembling" (54-5). Art, in this sense, could be truthful if it reveals the process of pursuing the truth, which includes encountering un-truth, since, at the core of being, there is an abyss in place of universal essence (*Origins* 54, 92). Instead of presenting a metaphysical view in which art fails to cohere with the good and truth, Heidegger repositions truth so that it includes its opposite and becomes entirely historical; in other words, truth is only the evolving encapsulation of what people are, even if that includes falsehoods (76).

Although Heidegger rejects the concept that there is an eternal, metaphysical, transcendent essence at the core of each human being, his treatment of literature demonstrates that he has not entirely broken with Plato's idea that the artistic writing involves dissembling. Heidegger welcomes literature as a truth-process so long as it serves his philosophical agenda, but as he suggests, there are few poets who actually achieve this goal. He asks, "Do we moderns encounter a modern poet on this course? Do we encounter that very poet who today is often and hastily dragged into the vicinity of thinking, and covered up with much half-baked philosophy" (96)? Although these are questions and not conclusions, they serve as a reminder of the role of literary criticism in considering obscure works as objects of truth when they are, at least in Heidegger's view, undeserving. That is, the function of art as the process that can uncover being goes unrealized and is more often exaggerated except in the case of the rare poet, who for Heidegger was Hölderlin ("Letter on Humanism" 242).

Replacing the primacy of Heidegger's ontology with ethics, Levinas returns to the importance of criticism in helping to situate the obscure work of art "outside of 'being in the world'" ("Reality..." 12). In other words, Levinas affirms the role of the critic in interpreting the nebulous products of intuitive art so that they may serve a beneficial social purpose (3, 12). Revisiting the Plato's concern with the difficulties of interpreting literature, Levinas suggests

that individuals may indeed subtract ethically problematic lessons from such works. In an attempt to move philosophy to adopt a project of "total altruism" ("Transcendence..." 18), Levinas allows for a return to Platonism in the sense that he permits the philosopher to "judge civilization," including artistic production, "on the basis of the ethical" ("Meaning..." 58). In reading Levinas, we can see how the question of whether obscure literary works set undesirable social examples has not simply disappeared, nor has the difference between literary and philosophical discourses been leveled.

Contemporary Italian philosophy, Gianni Vattimo, also reclaims Plato's concern that literary writing is not easily understood, but does so to offer respect for the obscurity of the form as a hermeneutic model for undermining the tradition of subsuming the Other under a totalizing philosophical system. Like Derrida, Vattimo questions "the traditional opposition between discursive and intuitive knowledge of things" that allows art to be separated from philosophy. In contrast to tradition, he attempts to avoid the type of interpretation that uses philosophy to explain the work of art, placing the former once again in a dominant role (44). For his theory of hermeneutics, Vattimo draws on the thought of Luigi Pareyson, who argues that the "the hermeneutic character of human existence as a whole . . . appears emblematically in the experience of art" (78). Art becomes the exemplar for the interpretation of human life after metaphysics because it requires the onlooker to undertake analysis of what the art object means without being able to fall back on an authorial voice (or god figure) for an explanation (137). The otherness of the art object sets the limits of the interpretive act, as the critic in this new interpretive method asks, "Is a hermeneutic possible . . . that would really place itself at the disposal of its object instead of reducing it completely to itself?" (114)**.** The successful interpretation is, then, the one that depends on the "congeniality" of the interpreter who is open

to the alterity of the work, which can then divulge an inexhaustible supply of ontological data (84, 88). Thus, for Vattimo, if the new hermeneutics obtains, it opens a path of access to a Heideggerian notion of the truth of ontology that can be found in a literary work of art.

If we follow Vattimo in interpreting Beckett, it is not the philosophical content of the work—its existentialism or systematic ethics, for instance—that is of interest, but rather the experience of interpreting the work respectfully as an independent entity that cannot easily be explained. Beckett's own theoretical musings on aesthetic interpretation substantiate the claims by philosophers that the aesthetic work continues to be characterized by obscurity. In an often quoted letter that Beckett wrote to Alan Schneider, the original director of *Endgame*, the writer describes the play as: "Rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw" ("June 21, 1956" 107). Even in the writing of the letter itself, Beckett presents an ambivalent attitude toward meaning. Since the word claw can mean both to grasp, vex, or to destroy, Beckett could have meant that the play's language clings to the meaning of words and/or that it tears meaning apart. In this passage, Beckett indicates that the text hinges, not on an underlying theoretical purpose but rather on the capacity of the literary text to create ambivalent meanings.

There is a sense in contemporary literary criticism that the Platonic separation between the fields of philosophy and literature has been breached or "must be breached" (Uhlmann 7). Yet when we return to twentieth century theory on the relationship between philosophy and literature, what we find is that many of Plato's original characterizations of literary writing have endured, even while they have often been accepted. For example, instead of subverting the idea that poetic texts derive from a somewhat arbitrary, intuitive process and can lead to politically disruptive behaviors, Kristeva and Levinas argue with varying degrees of approval that such is

indeed the case. What is more, Beckett himself frequently applies Plato's characterizations of writing to his own texts when he asserts that they are "pale imitations," not intended to pursue truths, and distinct from the project of teaching morals. In highlighting the differences between literature and philosophy in the works of these theorists, I do not mean to fortify a strict separation between the two fields or push literature once again beneath philosophy, but rather, my purpose is to acknowledge some of the unresolved issues in the ancient quarrel, which inform my reluctance to present Beckett as a philosopher of a certain school. Just as it is worth exploring the arbitrary qualities of strict disciplinary divisions, collapsing boundaries for its own sake may be equally misguided, especially since Beckett resisted neat identifications between the fields.

CHAPTER 3: BECKETT'S PHILOSOPHICAL NOTHINGS

While I previously explored the relationship between philosophy and literature both as is discussed in literary theory and by Samuel Beckett, I will now situate Beckett's literary works within the philosophical debate on "nothing," so as to understand, in practice, how philosophical and literary material interact in his novels, short stories, and plays. There is no doubt that Beckett read the work of philosophers, and reflecting that fact, this study will offer comparisons between his *oeuvre* and the works of the philosophers who influenced him. Comparing Beckett's texts with those of his sources, though, does not necessarily answer the question of how a fiction writer may be said to offer a contribution to philosophy in the broadest sense of seeking the truth about human experience. Yet this method does lead to the conclusion that the claims of philosophers, often arguments within a system of thought, are transfigured within Beckett's writing into thematic, uncertain stories, which do not posit argumentative claims. In other words, Beckett separates the material of philosophy from its context and transfigures it so that original claims about nothing become obscure and ambivalent.

The choice of "nothing" as the philosophical concept that will serve as a point of departure for analyzing Beckett's work is motivated by the longstanding, dominant tradition of considering Beckett as a writer who sought to create a work that would manifest a philosophy of nothingness. For instance, in his seminal study, *The Shape of Chaos*, David Hesla argues that "Beckett's art is finally ontological: it asks the question, What is the being of that entity we call man" (v). According to Hesla, Beckett posits the philosophical position that "Being, as Being, is nothing fixed or ultimate: it yields to dialectic and sinks into its opposite, which, also taken immediately, is Nothing" (209). In other words, Beckett's texts ask the question, "What is being?" and offer an answer, "nothing." The idea that Beckett's works embody the nothing at the

center of being has endured in Beckett studies from Esslin's early existentialist interpretations to the current writing of Peter Boxall who argues that Beckett's characters are oriented toward "nothinghood as a generative principle" (28-9). Beckett, according to Boxall, "develop[s] a form that not only accommodates itself to this 'being of nothing' but is in some way derived from it, drawing its value and significance directly from an encounter with the 'nothing'" (28-9). Gilles Deleuze similarly encapsulates Beckett's entire project as an exhaustive pursuit of nothingness, which reaches an apotheosis in the films for TV, where his work "bears witness to its void" (4, 17). Despite some telling variations on the meaning of nothing in Beckett's work—whether it is an internal void or a suspension of the work in the nothingness of language—these critics are few among the many who have posited the notion that Beckett's entire body of work is meant to illuminate one vision of an extant nothingness.

While such critics inherently argue that Beckett must have believed that the void or nothingness, which constitutes the subject of his work, could exist, in this chapter I will emphasize the opposite point of view: that Beckett also posits the idea there is no nothing. My point is not that prior critics were wrong to argue that Beckett sought after the nothing, for the sheer number of nothings in Beckett's work suggests that absence was indeed an ongoing fascination of his. But while Beckett's work does proffer the notion that there is an extant nothing, it also importantly contains the opposite position that this "nothing" is impossible. Particularly, the varieties of philosophical positions on nothing presented in Beckett's work include responses on both sides of the questions of whether nothing can exist (it can and it cannot exist) and whether language is an extant nothing (nothing is within or nothing is beyond language). These irreconcilable conclusions embedded within Beckett's text suggest that instead of producing texts that serve systematic ends, he crafts his imaginative works in such a way that

they contribute to the view that literature remains separate from philosophy insofar as, at least in Beckett's case, it dwells in the ambivalence and the particularities of discourse rather than abstract singularities. In other words, Beckett's writing gathers contrary experiences of nothing without necessarily formulating a unified thesis about those nothings.

Critics frequently support the argument that Beckett's nothing refers to the singular notion of humankind's absent essence by citing Beckett's dialogue with Georges Duthuit, published in *Disjecta,* a scant collection of his letters, critical prose, and unfinished works. In the somewhat elusive dialogue on art, which has often been taken to represent Beckett's own aesthetics, he writes that the proper art of the day is the one that binds "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" (556). While Boxall takes this passage to mean that Beckett's work represents "the relentless effort to give expression to nothingness," even if that effort is "doomed endlessly to fail," Beckett may not have sought single-mindedly after that goal (29). In a newly published letter to Aidan Higgins dated August 2, 1952, Beckett writes upon finishing *The Unnamable,* "I used to think all [t]his work was an effort, necessarily feeble, to express the nothing. It seems rather to have been a journey, irreversible, in gathering thinglessness" (319). This letter suggests that, in contrast to Boxall's interpretation, Beckett came to understand his work not as the expression of a particular philosophical view on nothing, but as an effort to "gather thinglessness," that is to glean forms of nothingness from the history of ideas without necessarily asserting the truth of any of them.

The difference between expressing and gathering "thinglessness" constitutes a difference between assigning words to the perception of a fact, such as the perception that there is a "nothing," and drawing different notions about absence together. If Richard Coe's well-received

"art of failure" thesis is to stand, then we would have to modify his argument that Beckett's art "is by definition trying to do something that it cannot conceivably do—to create and define something that which, created and defined, ceased to be what it used be if it is to reveal the truth of the human situation: Man as a Nothing in relation to all things which themselves are Nothing" (96). While this thesis acknowledges the idea that Beckett's project to manifest the nothing becomes an impossible journey, it suggests that Beckett still may have sought after that futile end. The modified "art of failure" thesis would rather have to account for Beckett's lack of belief in the idea that reportedly drives his work—that there is a truth in the idea that nothingness exists in the world. Indeed, in Beckett's work, there are multiple, related though conflicting versions of nothing including the idea that nothing "exists," that nothing cannot exist, that literature derives from nothing, that literature does not derive from nothing, that language means nothing, and that nothing exists outside of language.

In contrast, the idea that Beckett's nothing is singular rather than disparate, interestingly, has been central to the works of criticism that figure Beckett as a philosopher. Badiou, for instance, argues that the trajectory of Beckett's work constitutes an ethical move from solipsism to the encounter with the other, or in his words, from the "program of the One—obstinate trajectory or interminable soliloquy—to the pregnant theme of the Two, which opens out into infinity" (17). In order for there to be two, he notes, there must be a void, which he defines as "an interval . . . captured in the between" (34). It is important for this void to be considered an interval of nothingness and not one of many nothings, in Badiou's view, since the void itself is a purely abstract concept: "it is a pure gap . . . nothing but its own name" (99). Badiou defines the void as another name for being: "pure, being, accompanied by its singular name: the void" (87-8). As the name for the ground of being, it is "pure gap;" it does not exist in itself (89).

Furthermore, as a pure concept, there can be no counting the void; there is no 'almost' or 'maximum' void (83, 100). In other words, "nothing" is a unified concept that stands for pure absence so that any encounter with such absence is only an encounter with a piece of the whole concept not a separate instance. In short, there can be no countable "nothings."

Yet Badiou's emphasis on the impossibility of an "almost" or countable nothing finds its opposition in *How It Is*, where it is the "almostness" of the void that comprises Beckett's subject as in: "all that almost blank nothing to get out of it almost nothing . . . almost all nothing left almost nothing . . . nothing there almost nothing . . . Pim that's all is left breath in a head nothing left but a head nothing in it almost nothing" (104-5). Beckett, like Badiou encounters the nothing as a potentially impossible concept; there cannot be "nothingness" itself in the head, only "almost nothing." But while Badiou might call this effort an encounter with an interval of the singular "void," Beckett importantly prefers the word "nothing," which unlike "the void" allows for an "almost" and becomes countable in the sheer multiplicity of meanings that the word encourages. Without punctuation, the sentences in his passage take the reader on multiple garden paths rendering "nothing" polyvalent. An uncertain "almost blank nothing" that frames nothingness as an impossibility is joined with an absolute "nothing to get out of it," which can indicate both that "nothingness" can be gotten and that "there is not anything" that can be retrieved, not even "nothingness." It is precisely this evident ambivalence about the nothing— that the nothing is both potentially impossible and definitely attainable—that marks Beckett's separation from Badiou's certain, singular, and non-existing void.

Confirming Beckett's ambivalence, Andrew Gibson remarks that "Badiou has a quite unBeckettian attachment to the clarity of narrative sequence" (134). Specifically, Gibson adds, "Beckett's treatment of the event is arguably multifarious, heterogeneous and uneven, and cannot

be encapsulated in narrative form" (135). While Gibson focuses on Badiou's totalizing reading

of Beckett's narrative, we can also apply Gibson's argument to the differences between Beckett's

preference for the multifarious meanings of "nothing" in contrast to the abstract, singular theses

about nothing found in philosophical discourse. In other words, heterogeneity and multiplicity

may be precisely that which works against the philosophical theses that Beckett presents in his

texts.

Looking at the way the philosophical concept of nothing works in Beckett's *oeuvre*

supports those critics such as Andrew Kennedy, John Fletcher, and Wolfgang Iser who argue

against the interpretations of Lance Butler, S.E. Gontarski, and Richard Begam that Beckett

offers a consistent philosophical position on nothing in his work. Kennedy argues, for instance,

that Beckett does not merely repeat the ideas of philosophy but rather "transmut[es] his own

idiosyncratic versions of received ideas into visions" (10). Such a position also follows in line

with John Fletcher's methodology, which allows for the discussion of Beckett's multiple,

philosophical inheritances while avoiding the idea that one philosophical school offers the key to

his work (2). To take these ideas one step further, I argue that Beckett's work contributes to the

idea that there is a difference between the modes of literature and philosophy insofar as the

philosophical thesis on nothing is generally transformed by its literary context. As Iser writes in

"When Is the End Not the End? The Idea of Fiction in Beckett," Beckett's texts have a tendency

to "slide away" from restricted meanings: "Their meaning cannot be pinned down (unless one

takes them to be a revelation of the limitation of 'meaning in general)" (47). In that sense, we

could read the philosophy of nothing in Beckett's work as a means toward formal literary

production, not necessarily an end in itself.

The (Non) Existence of Nothing

Although Beckett has commonly been named the writer who seeks to express the nothing, his works exhibit ambivalence about one of the most fundamental questions in the philosophical and scientific discussions on nothing: whether it is possible for "nothing" to exist. As I will demonstrate in this next section, Beckett's texts affirm both sides of this debate, positing the idea that "nothing is impossible" and "nothingness exists." This indetermination is evident in a line from *Mercier and Camier* where Beckett formulates an idiom in the negative: "It leads to nothing any more" (97). The choice of "nothing" rather than "not anything" signals a preference for ambivalence, which opens contradictory meanings as in "it leads to nothingness," and "it does not lead to anything," not even "nothing." What appears to be of primary importance to Beckett is not to present a consistent answer to the question of whether nothing is possible but to play upon the humorous and conceptually contradictory manner in which the word "nothing" doubles upon itself.

A brief overview of the historical debate on the possible presence of nothingness in the universe is necessary in order to understand both Beckett's position in the debate as well as the intellectual history to which he was responding. Beckett had studied the pre-Socratic debate on nothing, which largely begins with Parmenides (b. 515 B.C.E.), who argued that "nothing" is a logical impossibility (Gottlieb 54). From the premise that only existing things can be discussed in a way that leads to universal truth, Parmenides concluded that "nothing" cannot be discussed (Kirk 243, 245). As Parmenides claims, "What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not" (Fragment 293, Parmenides 247). Here, since Parmenides means by nothing, "what is not," it is a tautology to say that "what is not" "is not" (Gottlieb 55). Parmenides then demonstrates, through verbal logic, that as soon as you call nothing "nothing"

you turn it into something, and therefore it cannot be nothing (Parmenides 256). The cosmological significance of that conclusion is that there can be no coming into being, for whatever exists must always have been: it cannot have never existed (Gottlieb 55). Through deductive reasoning, Parmenides then arrives at the counterintuitive conclusion that change, birth, and death are all impossible.

Because Parmenides' conclusion runs contrary to nature, his follower, Democritus, (460-357), tried to account for observable flux in nature by developing the theory that the ever changing material of life is composed of unchanging and eternal atoms (Gottlieb 61, 94). While for Parmenides, there could be no motion because there was no void to move through, Democritus could make sense out of change by conceiving of atoms, which move through empty space and combine to form the objects of the world (97, 100).

The debate between Democritus and Parmenides about the possibility of the existence of nothingness has persisted through the centuries in various philosophical and scientific iterations. In his response to Parmenides, Plato contends that instead of thinking that nothingness is impossible, the mere fact that it can be discussed means that it is possible (Heath 1). The stuff of fiction, then, such as unicorns and centaurs, provides the ultimate example of the existence of "nothing" (1). Disputing Plato, Aristotle returned to the Parmenidean conception of nothing when he argued, as physicist Frank Close writes, that because two things cannot be in the same place at the same time, "nothing" cannot overlap with a coordinate "something" (10). From that point up to the seventeenth century, the longstanding philosophical, scientific and indeed theologically ordained position on nothing followed the Aristotelian conception that "nature abhors a vacuum" (Close 10). In the middle of the 17th century, however, Newton posited the idea that the Earth was floating in a vacuum of "empty space" that is unaltered by the objects that

move through it (48, 51, and 52). This conception of the universe floating in a void largely

prevailed until the twentieth century, when, as science writer Lawrence Krauss writes, Einstein's

theory of general relativity demonstrated that space was not empty and fixed but rather

expanding and full of energy. Einstein's discoveries eventually led to the formation of the big

bang theory, which again confirmed the Democritean notion that the universe could expand from

nothing (1, 5). But returning again to a Parmenidean conception of cosmological origins,

physicists today largely agree that the space that they had once considered void and empty was

now full of particles, gravitational waves, electromagnetism, and ever-present "somethings" that

occlude the possibility of an extant nothing (Close 94, 103).

The Democritean notion of an extant void, however, saw its prominence grow in early

and mid-twentieth century philosophy. In the philosophical climate in which Beckett was

writing, Sartre would have been Beckett's primary source for the popularization of the notion of

an extant void. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre reverses Parmenides' premise when he notes

that it is possible to think of "nothing" in the form of negation: as in "there is nothing left,"

"nobody came," or "it never arrived" (5). Sartre was arguing with Hegel who had conceived of

nonbeing as a pure concept that depends on being. More than a conceptual abstraction that is the

antithesis of being, Sartre argues that the nothingness, encountered through negation, is a

component of the real and even envelops being (5, 18).

Several studies have linked Beckett's work to such a Democritean position on nothing,

justifiably since Beckett does reference Democritus' atomism in *Murphy* and offers Democritus'

thought as a key to the novel. In *Murphy*, the eponymous character appears to have a

premonition of such extant nothingness:

> Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat . . .
> Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the

somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw
of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much,
but the wheel of rounds and pauses did, as Murphy with his head among the armies
continued to suck in, through all the posterns of his withered soul, the accidentless One-
and Only, conveniently called Nothing. (138)

The guffawing abderite mentioned in the passage is Democritus, often called the "laughing philosopher," who followed Leucippus of Abdera in arguing that the world was comprised of atoms and the void (Berryman n.p.). Further evidence of Beckett's Democritean bent surfaces in a letter he wrote to Sigle Kennedy dated June 14, 1967 in which Beckett offers Democritus' "Naught is more real . . ." and Geulincx *Ubi nihil vales . . .*" as points of departure for his work, even while he adds that neither one is "very rational" (Beckett, *Disjecta* 113). Following Beckett's lead, Michael Mooney, proposes that Democritus had a defining influence on Beckett's thought though Mooney remains wary of suggesting that Beckett's fiction should be subsumed under philosophy (215-6). Likewise, David Hesla contrasts Parmenides certainty that "there is no nothing" with the Democritean conclusion that the void remains a possibility to argue that Beckett's vision is ultimately Democritean, shaped by doubt (9). Yet if Beckett's skepticism is the cause of his allegiance with Democritus, Parmenides can hardly be said to represent a pinnacle of certainty since his argument—that there is no nothing and therefore no change— leads to the radically skeptical conclusion that births, deaths, and movement in the world are all illusions of the mind (Gottlieb 55-7). Mooney and Hesla's approaches use *Murphy* to situate Beckett as a writer who sides with Democritus in asserting that nothing can exist. Indeed, Beckett may very well have designed *Murphy* as a philosophical novel meant to illustrate the pursuit of nothingness. But it is important to remember that *Murphy* is an early work that is much more programmatic than his later, more ambiguous writing.

While Democritus' idea of an extant void is certainly present in Beckett's early work, Beckett's conception of "nothing" across his *oeuvre* becomes less definitive. As Shane Weller remarks in his essay "Unwords," the two points of departure that Beckett offers for de-coding his work, Democritus and Geulincx, lead to different interpretations of the meaning of "nothing." While Democritus's "Naught is more real" positions nothing as positive "nothingness," so that "nothing" becomes extant, the *"Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis"* refers to an ethical version of nothing "where you are worth nothing, you should want of nothing" indicating that a vacuum of value is impossible (107). While Weller argues a both/and position that from *Watt* forward Beckett's objective becomes the creation of "art whose object will be a nothing that is at once impossible and unavoidable" (121), Beckett may be striving for a "gathering" of various sorts of nothing, which does not amount to a consistent discourse on nothing but rather creates an assortment of "thinglessness."

In a gesture that further muddles attempts to tie Beckett's work to a single thesis on nothing, he remarks in a letter dated January 16, 1936, "I suddenly see that *Murphy* is a break down between his [Geulincx's] *ubi nihil vales ibi nihil velis* (positive) and Malraux's *Il est difficile a celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les sience* (negation). ("It is difficult for one who lives isolated from the everyday world not to seek others like himself") (299, 302). Comparing Beckett's two points of reference suggests that the particular figures who influenced him are of less importance than the fact that he combines influences to join opposites, as he signals with the gloss that what interests him are the "positive" and "negative" versions of nothing. As Vivian Mercier reports, Beckett had said to Harold Hobson "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas" (qtd. in Mercier 163). Following Andrew Kennedy's interpretation of this famous statement, Beckett may be downplaying the "facts" or truth of

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ontology in preference for the delightful symmetry that thinking of the word "nothing" as "not anything" and "nothingness" engenders (101).

My point is not that the Democritean interpretations of Beckett's work are invalid rather, it is because they are valid and because Beckett's texts also proffer the opposite Parmenidean point of view, that we may conclude that Beckett did not have a singular vision of the void. Indeed, Weller writes that Beckett recorded the Parmenides conception of nothing "there is no nothing" in his philosophical notes and Weller offers a block of text that Beckett quoted from John Burnet's *Greek Philosophy*, the source for Beckett's knowledge of the pre-Socratics (112, 115):

> In the first place, it cannot have come into being. If it had, it must first have arisen from nothing or from something. It cannot have arisen from nothing; for there is no nothing. It cannot have arisen from something; for there is nothing else than what is. Nor can anything else besides itself come into being; for there can be no empty space in which it could do so. Is it or is it not? If it is, then it is now, all at once. In this way Parmenides refutes all accounts of the origin of the world. *Ex nihilo nihil fit.* (qtd. in Weller, "Unwords" 115)

Saying that Beckett includes in his thinking and his works (as we shall see) the idea that nothing is an impossibility, counters the standard view that his work represents the quest for nothingness. Instead of consequently arguing that Beckett is a wholehearted Parmenidean, what I claim is that Parmenidean thought enters into Beckett's work in two primary ways: firstly, in the notion that "nothing" is an impossibility and secondly, as a literal adaptation of "*ex nihilo nihil fit*" or "nothing comes from nothing," which Parmenides posits as a way of saying that "something" can not come from "nothing," but which Beckett transmogrifies to figure literature as a nothing that derives from nothing.

Such a view counteracts the notion summarized by John Fletcher that Beckett's work has a singular purpose in striving toward the nothing as an extant possibility. As Fletcher posits,

Beckett's writing "progresses towards a more and more total emptiness, in which plot, characters and language itself crumble to nothing" (*Samuel Beckett's Art* 144). Such progress suggests that Beckett seeks a more perfect articulation of an extant nothing even though his acknowledgment that nothing may be impossible indicates that he found such an aim would be futile. Taking Parmenides' line literally, Beckett instead figures the talking fictions of literature that have no real existence except as black lines on a page as "nothings" that come from the nothingness of nondoing (the characters come to his mind from nowhere). In relation to the larger question of the relationship between literature and philosophy, the concept of *ex nihilo* production reflects a Platonic view of literature—that fiction does not derive from a rational process—all the while continuing in the production of the construct. In that way, Beckett can be said to adapt the language of cosmological discourse to explore the question of the nature of literature in relation to nothing as part of an ambivalence that allows for the shape and meaning of "nothing" to shift depending on the context.

Beckett's interest in the Parmenidean problem of whether it is possible to speak about "nothing" without turning it into something, appears in his novel, *Watt* where he writes of a failed attempt to articulate the elusive concept: "But to elicit something from nothing requires a certain skill . . . he could never have spoken at all of these things, if all had continued to mean nothing, as some continued to mean nothing, that is to say, right up to the end. For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something" (77). In the attempt to disprove Parmenides, to draw something from nothing, the lines express the difficulty or even impossibility of using language to speak about the nothing. But while here the possibility of "nothing" is not thwarted by such a difficulty and instead, drawing "something from nothing" is

presented here as a viable possibility, a skill that requires effort, in his later works, the ineffable quality of nothing is presented as an indomitable obstacle.

While speaking of nothing is presented in *Watt* as a skill worth mastering, elsewhere Beckett depicts the task as a necessarily impossible one. In *The Unnamable*, for instance, Beckett writes in a more Parmenidean spirit of the impossibility of expressing the nothing: "If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? . . . But it seems impossible to speak and yet say nothing, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook something" (303). Beckett here may not be trying to manifest a Parmenidian view of nothing—that as soon as you try to conceptualize nothing, it becomes something—but he does use discourse from the history of philosophy on the question of whether "nothing" can exist for a humorous effect as in "you always overlook something." As Mooney writes, drawing a strict philosophical position out of Beckett's work undermines the figure he cuts of the "sagacious clown," who voices the words of philosophers in order to laugh them down (216). Yet the humor of the lines derives from the very doubleness of the word play, the way what is being said, in a Parmenidean fashion, is negated by its saying.

By the time he wrote *How It Is* in 1961, speaking of nothing had become even less certain and less overtly referential in form. There he writes, "I yes without its being said all is not said almost nothing and far too much" (65). The saying of nothing, once a skill to be mastered, is now "almost nothing," and since "nothing" modifies "not said," the "almost nothing is not said" becomes, in formal logic, a double negative that can mean not only, "almost something is said," but also "far too much is said." Although these lines may, more than ever before, manifest the goal of saying nothing, since the text lacks punctuation, the reader is allowed to travel down multiple paths of meaning without being encouraged to decide on a single or even paradoxical

interpretation. The lines offer the play of meaning found in poetry that may derive from the thoughts of philosophers but no longer directly echo them. This is interesting considering the argument by Deleuze that Beckett's later works manifest the writer's achievement of the ultimate literature of nothing (4). Stephen Thomson rightly argues, on the other hand, that "If it all seems to point, and to work, towards nothing, what we have seen is a remarkably busy nothing" (67). Beckett's "nothings" are indeed never empty or static. Rather, the ambiguity within his prose suggests that he cultivates anything but a certain position on the issue of whether nothing exists.

To avoid suggesting that there is a neat teleology in Beckett's work from a desire to speak the nothing to a resignation of that impossibility, it is important to recognize that the question of whether nothing exists rather than the resolution of that question pervades Beckett's texts. In "Texts for Nothing," written between 1950 and 1952, after *The Unnamable* but before *How It Is* (Auster 568), Beckett writes, "Name, no, nothing is nameable, tell, no, nothing can be told" (331). The concluding clause suggests both the positive sense that "nothingness" can be discussed and the negative sense that "there is nothing including 'nothingness' that can be discussed." We could read these contradictory positions on nothing as evidence of Beckett's move to gather notions of "thinglessness" from his philosophical predecessors, suggesting that his interest lies in gleaning and co-joining multiple kinds of concepts of nothing and seeing how they play with and against each other.

In addition to gathering the Parmenidean notion that "nothing is impossible," Beckett departs from his source further by transmogrifying the philosopher's conception of nothing as a problem for cosmology into a problem for the production of literature so that "*ex nihilo nihil fit,*" meaning that nothingness cannot generate something, becomes a statement about literature as a nothing that comes from nothing. Connecting the capacity of language both in referencing and

obviating the nothing to the production of a fictional text, Beckett has his characters, who are only made of words and so are not physically real, voice the line "we are nothing" in his late novel *How It Is* (93). Beckett's transformation of Parmenides' *"ex nihilo nihil fit,"* into a literal description of literature itself as "a nothing that comes from nothing" suggests that when Beckett borrows philosophical concepts from his predecessors, he may be motivated by an interest in generating reflexively literary material rather than in adhering to the original context of those concepts. For, in context, Parmenides' statement that "nothing can come from nothing" refers to the idea that "nothing is impossible" and does not refer to the way in which a character can embody an extant version of "nothing" (a figment) that comes from nothing (the imagination). In other words, when Beckett uses the concept of *ex nihilo* creation, he may not be contributing to a philosophical discussion on the nature of the origin of thought but may be primarily interested in using philosophical material to shape the structure of his works. At the same time, the care with which Beckett crafts his texts implicitly works against this notion of inspiration so that the felicitous interpretation is the one that accounts for Beckett's elusiveness without attributing a thesis on the nature of nothing to his work.

Instead of interpreting Beckett's references to *ex nihilo* creation as evidence of his contribution to a pre-Socratic question of cosmology, it is possible to see how Beckett excises Parmenides' line "nothing comes from nothing" from its original context to posit literature as an example of a "nothing" that derives from "nothing. From the early novel *Watt* onward, Beckett's presumed goal is to enter into the French tradition of writing about nothing, to perpetuate "An innocent little game, to while away the time" (38). In the poetic addenda to *Watt*, Beckett makes this goal quite explicit:

> who may tell the tale
> of the old man?

> weigh absence in a scale?
> mete want with a span?
> the sum assess
> of the world's woes?
> nothingness
> in words enclose? (247)

The answer to the riddle Beckett presents may indeed be "nobody" since the ineffable is by definition unspeakable. Beckett's characters encounter the potential impossibility of speaking the nothing even as they make the saying of nothing their objective: "If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? . . . But it seems impossible to speak and yet say nothing, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook something" (*The Unnamable* 303). The presence of language thwarts the desire to refer to nothing since the word "nothing," as Parmenides notes, is always a something that occludes its nothingness.

On initial readings, Beckett's texts do appear to proffer a literal adaptation of "*ex nihilo nihil fit,*" so that art itself provides an example of a nothing that is created from nothing. In other words, the material of his works presumably arrive in his head from nowhere. Beckett's characters return to this formulation repeatedly over the course of his *oeuvre* and especially in the trilogy, which has often been taken as the apogee of all Beckett's work. There Molloy notes, "It came to my mind, from nowhere, as a moment before my name" (27). Molloy, who is an author and perhaps a version of *the* author, relinquishes responsibility for the ideas that arrive "from nowhere" both on his page and conceivably on the pages of Beckett's texts. Elsewhere, Molloy appears to confirm the idea that the creation of content arrives without purpose other than entertainment when he thinks, "Nothing compelled me to give this information, but I gave it, hoping to please I suppose" (23). This idea pervades his work, as is evident if we look beyond the trilogy to the "All Strange Away," for instance, where the narrator writes, "from nothing for no reason yet imagined," extending the claim that the substance of the imagination remains

beyond the control of the imaginer (358). If we take Beckett's works as literal transcriptions of a philosophy of art, it would seem as though he proffers the notion that the writer has no control over the material that comes to the mind from nowhere and flows onto the page.

Unsurprisingly, the idea that Beckett's work promulgates a notion of *ex nihilo* creation has already received critical traction. Paul Stewart, for instance, relates Beckett's characters horror of sex and reproduction to his troubled relationship with the artistic principle of *ex nihilo* creation (29, 63). The erotic connotations of nothing as the open, zero-shaped, creative organ can be found in Beckett's early series of short stories, "More Pricks Than Kicks," where Beckett's hero Belacqua compares a woman's pocket to the reproductive capacity of the vagina: "he forced his right hand down past the craggy coxa (almost a woman's basin in these trousers) into the glairy gallant depths and fished up a fifty" (62). What may be Beckett's disgust with life's origination in a sort of "gallant depth," can also be read in the play "Not I" where the female narrator refers to her own "godforsaken hole" (411). In interpreting such scenes, Stewart comments that Beckett replaces the messy human propagation of the species with the *pure* production of literary texts from nothing (162, 196-7). But I would contend, Beckett's relation to the concept of *ex nihilo* creation, while present, is not entirely "pure" or straightforward.

While Beckett repeatedly returns to the conception of literary production as a birth from nothing, he also presents the process of creative production as a complicated cosmology, which includes a Biblical *ex nihilo* creation as well as the Greek ordering of chaos. As Esslin reports, Beckett turned from writing in English to French in order to avoid the ready-made "glib" quality of writing in one's native tongue (38-9). In other words, writing in another language enabled him to escape the ease with which language may occur to a native speaker, so that turning to French meant adopting a constraint that would allow him not to produce *ex nihilo* but to act on the words

he received. The contradiction between what he says about his writing and what he says within his writing on the matter of the derivation of his texts creates an unresolved tension that may be of more importance than the particular cosmology that his creative production embodies. As John Pilling writes, Beckett describes his own process as "double and obscure," involving both passive and active forms of creative production: "acting is a receiving, its receiving an acting" ("On Not Being There..." 26). Pilling concludes that Beckett's notion of the creative consciousness is ultimately not creation *ex nihilo* but a "response to something there" ("On Not Being There . . ." 26). Such an argument would suggest that Beckett's works again ultimately encounter the Parmenidean view that "nothing is impossible," for he always must draw on something, namely pre-existing language.

Indeed, even in his early, more overt writings, Beckett suggests that *ex nihilo* creation may be impossible. In "More Pricks Than Kicks," his intellectual hero, Belacqua, says as a way of explaining why he has suicidal thoughts: "The simplest course, when the motives of any deed are found subliminal to the point of defying expression, is to call that deed *ex nihilo* and have done" (142). Notably, the idea that thought derives from nothing is not presented as the most accurate causal explanation, but only as the simplest, which may suggest that when Beckett returns to the concept of *ex nihilo* creation as a problem for literature in his later works, his characters may be voicing an ironic attitude about literary production rather than offering a straightforward discussion of artistic creation. Through such irony, Beckett's texts occlude an interpretation that would figure them in direct alignment or opposition to his philosophical predecessor, Parmenides.

Language is Nothing

Beckett's use of the word "nothing" has a way of multiplying so that it not only refers to one philosophical debate but reflects many disparate claims at once. For instance, in addition to drawing material from the pre-Socratic debate on the origins of the world and adapting those ideas to refer to the production of literary texts, Beckett's nothing slides into the argument about whether language has any inherent meaning. Beckett has often been associated with the project of exposing the nothingness of language itself, the idea that language is entirely constructed and therefore has no natural meaning. Peter Boxall, for example, encapsulates the common view that Beckett's aesthetics are designed to represent "the literature of the unword," which, however doomed to fail, manifests the effort to "give expression to nothingness" (29). Linda Ben-Zvi historicizes this view by connecting Beckett's concern with the limits of language to his readings of Fritz Mauthner, noting that whether Mauthner confirmed a notion he already felt or informed his linguistic stance from the outset, Beckett developed the radical position that language and reality are entirely divorced (183-185). Beckett had, according to Ben-Zvi, read Mauthner's *Critique* as early as 1932 when he was aiding Joyce in the production of *Finnegan's Wake* and was greatly influenced by the treatise on language (185). Pilling also argues in *Samuel Beckett* that "only the realm of discourse . . . is different" between Mauthner and Beckett (Pilling 128). But here I will emphasize the divergences between Mauthnerian thinking and Beckett's writing so as to ultimately understand the role that genre plays in generating ideas. As in my discussion of Parmenides, my point is not to demonstrate that Beckett's thought holds no ties to the Mauthnerian critique of language, but that Beckett's texts do not manifest a commitment to a particular perspective on language.

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Ben-Zvi, uses eight points from Mauthner's thinking to illuminate areas of intersection between his thoughts and Beckett's on the question of the relationship between language and nothing. For instance, one of Mauthner's central arguments is based on the idea that "there is only language;" there are no real, natural, or innate meanings that support the quest for transcendent knowledge (188). Since words do not have universal meanings, they signify different things for different people, rendering communication through language impossible (195). To demonstrate Beckett's affinity with Mauthner's views on language, Ben-Zvi uses a passage from Beckett's 1976 short story "Fizzles," in which Beckett writes, "All needed to be known for say is known. There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing" (412). Ben-Zvi rightly comments that this passage appears to echo the Mauthnerian thesis that "there is only language," for here, Beckett figures language inside the void (188).

It is, however, important to recognize the ambiguities within this passage, which both support and deny Mauthner's thesis. For instance, the sentence "All needed to be known for say is known" can also be paraphrased "if the word 'say' is known, then the word 'all' needed to be known" (412). This interpretation suggests that Beckett may be positing the idea that if we understand what "say" means, we must have been able to understand what "everything" means, which contradicts Mauthner's skepticism about communicating through language. Additionally, the subsequent sentences of the passage may represent both the Mauthnerian tendency of language to shift meanings within a context and the non-Mauthnerian idea that language has substance while reality does not: "There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing" (412). In the first version of the sentence, "nothing" is most likely assigned to the meaning "not anything" so that the sentence reads, "There is not anything but what is said." This paraphrase figures language as a thing of substance in contrast to the reality it is meant to signify,

which supports Mauthner's thesis that language does not touch reality. Yet the opposite paraphrase, "Beyond what is said there is nothing," allows for the interpretation that the "nothingness" itself exists outside of language. Such a formulation contradicts Mauthner's idea that language is inadequate to describe the things of the world, which do exist.

Beckett's use of the polyvalent word "nothing," then, both upholds and contradicts Mauthner's thesis on language indicating a fundamental ambivalence about the philosophy of language itself. This playfulness appears in a line further down in the passage from "Fizzles," which Ben-Zvi does not quote, where the narrator says "Beyond the ditch there is nothing" (412). Establishing "nothingness" within a deictic reference to "a ditch" generates a humorous interplay between absolute absence and the physicality of a breached space. The juxtaposition suggests that "nothingness" itself is beyond the sayable and possibly unreal while at the same time indicating that the concept of nothing becomes possible through the act of speech.

Beckett's presents the idea that there is nothing behind language throughout his work in such a way that the opposite meaning can be taken from single lines of text. In "Texts for Nothing," for instance, Beckett writes, "Name, no, nothing is nameable, tell, no, nothing can be told" (331). The idea that "nothing is nameable" or "that there isn't anything that can be named" seems to reflect a Mautherian notion that language fails insofar as things do not naturally carry the names that are arbitrarily attached to them. The line, however, is not necessarily designed to replicate a philosophical position about language, but rather to play with the idea until it becomes a paradoxical joke. The line "nothing can be told" along with its contradiction "nothing is nameable" conveys the idea that "nothingness" is a concept we can and can not discuss. While the passage depends on and emulates philosophical discourse on the concept of nothing, it also rehearses Beckett's wavering play with the ideas that language both is a failure and is not.

Beckett's ambivalence about language has rendered the importance of Mauthner to Beckett's work a matter of dispute. For instance, Kennedy posits Mauthner as just one of many, mutable influences on Beckett (6). Furthermore, in a 1978 letter to Ruby Cohn, as Pilling reports in "Beckett and Mauthner Revisited," Beckett indicates that he regarded the presence of Mauthner's work in his texts as a "red herring" since he had only skimmed the philosopher's critique of language (158). Pilling does note that Beckett responded to Mauthner in the margins of his book, though he ultimately arrives at the sound conclusion that Beckett's philosophical influences are "diverse and disparate" (159).

Ultimately, Ben-Zvi, too, cautions against the temptation of shaping Beckett's writing to fit entirely into Mauthner's system since, as she notes, Beckett's views were not only less certain than Mauthner's—after all one of Beckett's favorite words in the trilogy is "perhaps"—but that Mauthner was only one of many sources of material for his creative works (185, 192). The point is that while Beckett may have incorporated some of Mauthner's ideas into his work, he was not a vigorous Mauthnerian just as he was not wholeheartedly a Cartesian, Sartrean, or Geulincxian. In fact, the Mauthnerian elements of his writing would be in conflict with the Cartesian elements. As Ben-Zvi notes, Mauthner's premise that "What stands most clearly in the path of knowing truth is that men all believe they themselves think, when actually they only speak" undermines the cogito, which presents thought as the logical indicator of existence (188). While the Cartesian cogito demonstrates the existence of the self, Mauthner's thesis only indicates that thought proves the existence of language, so that the self remains elusive. Moreover, Mauthner's own skepticism about language does not slide into a skepticism of reality, as he writes of the problem of mind/body dualism that the problem only exists in language since "mind" and "body" are only figures of language and have no correspondent distinction in reality (194). On the matter of

whether Beckett's texts evince a philosophy of language, we might conclude that the writer

promulgates many views but maintains his distance from a thesis by avoiding such expositions

found in philosophy that would force him to confront areas of incompatibility among his sources.

In that way, his writing remains distinct from another philosopher who may have

influence his understanding of nothingness in relation to language, Sartre. In *Nausea*, which

Beckett read by May of 1938 and found "extraordinarily good,"[10] Sartre writes, "Things are

divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic, and it seems

ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them" (125). While Sartre's novel

positions such a critique of language at the center of his character's transformation, the example

of *Nausea* serves as reminder of the distance between a philosophical novel such as Sartre's and

Beckett's work; that is, while *Nausea* adheres to and demonstrates the philosophy of its author,

Beckett's characters remain unchanged by their mutable views on the nature of, in this case,

language.

The contrary interpretation that Beckett's texts posit a commitment to a skeptical position

on language found its support in a widely quoted letter that the author wrote to Axel Kaun on

July 9, 1937 to explain why translating the poems of Joachim Ringelnatz would not contribute to

this writerly agenda (702):

> More and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order
> to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! . . . To drill
> one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing,
> starts seeping through—I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer . . .On the road
> toward this, for me, very desirable literature of the non-word, some form of nominalistic
> irony can of course be a necessary phase. However, it does not suffice if the game loses
> some of its sacred solemnity. Let it cease altogether! Let's do as that crazy mathematician
> who used to apply a new principle of measurement at each individual step of the
> calculation. Word-storming in the name of beauty. (518)

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[10] For evidence of Beckett's interest in *Nausea*, see a letter dated May 26, 1938 to Thomas
McGreevy in which he writes, "I have read Sartre's *Nausée* & find it extraordinarily good" 626.

Ben-Zvi cites a portion of this letter, which had been published in *Disjecta*, when arguing that Mauthner and his idea that language is meaningless had an important influence on Beckett's thought (188). Yet now that Cambridge has published this letter in its entirety alongside the ones that Beckett sent to more personal acquaintances during that period, it becomes apparent that this letter carries a more hyperbolic tone than the ones that surround it, suggesting that Beckett's writing may not be as programmatic as he frames it.

Kaun, importantly, worked for the publisher Faber and Faber, which perhaps explains why the tone of certainty, flamboyance, and drama in the letter clashes with the more personal letters that surround it. For example, Beckett writes to his friend Tom McGreevy on August 14, 1937 in a more modest tone "I used to pretend to be working at something, going about with the preoccupied look & *de quoi érire*, but I really don't any more" (539). Beckett, in the former letter, was perhaps trying to impress his receiver so as to encourage future projects that would better suit his interests and in so doing encapsulated, a bit too heavily, his attitude toward language. After all, the end of the letter indicates that Beckett's project already involved the application of multiple and even incompatible "principles," since he notes that the abuse of language is done "in the name of beauty," which suggests an ultimate interest in the aesthetic value of the word.

There is good reason, then, why critics such as Esslin and Bennett have argued that, in contrast to the notion that language has no value, Beckett places an ultimate weight on meaningful, artistic construction in opposition to the void (Esslin 88; Bennett 2). Beckett identifies this value in "Company," where he writes, "Devising figments to temper his nothingness" (443). Here Beckett presents language construction as a fortification against the nothingness that his stories address. The speaker of *Malone Dies* takes this idea further when he

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posits, "what truth is there in all this babble? I don't know. I simply believe I can say nothing

that is not true, I mean that has not happened, it's not the same thing but no matter" (236).

Reflecting a Heideggerian notion of truth as the event of being, the character continues, "I have

only to open my mouth for it to testify to the old story, my old story, and to the long silence that

has silenced me, so that all is silent. And if I ever stop talking it will be because there is nothing

more to be said, even though all has not been said, even though nothing has been said" (236).

While the last part of this formulation articulates the idea that literature expresses nothing,

Beckett in "Company" also voices the idea that the language presented in the story ultimately is

and should be more than nothing: "if this no better than nothing cancel" (443). Of course, the

line can also be taken to mean that "nothingness" is such a desirable goal that it would be rare for

something to be better than it. In that way, to read for Beckett's position on language is to

encounter the recognition that Beckett's texts represent the unfiltered particularities of the

discussion rather than a clear thesis on the matter.

The openness of Beckett's texts may be one of the reasons why critics have found fertile

ground for demonstrating their own arguments by using Beckett's writing; as Maurice Nadeau

writes of Beckett's work, "everyone sees in it what he wants to see" (33). The ordinary language

philosopher Stanley Cavell, for instance, uses Beckett's work to argue the counter-Mauthnerian

view that Beckett's texts demonstrate the idea that communication through language remains

possible. In his essay on *Endgame,* "Ending the Waiting Game," Cavell argues that the themes

and method of the play represent not the total failure of language to facilitate in communication,

but "our inability not to mean what we are given to mean" not to understand the implications of

words (117). While Beckett's characters may joke about the audience's inability to understand

their words, as in the line, "We're not beginning to mean something?" the laugh this line invokes,

to Cavell, demonstrates the fact that audiences continue to understand the play (qtd. in Cavell 149).

Gary Adelman reaches a similar conclusion when he argues that despite Beckett's declarations that his words mean nothing, as a whole "words, paradoxically, are his only camouflage [from society], his wings, his element, the amazing spittle of words his unmistakable signature" (15). Badiou, also recognizes the tendency of Beckett's denunciation of language to encounter its opposite, which he names, "a fortunate disposition of language: a sort of phantasm of correspondence that haunts language" (97). The tendency of language to "ring true" is what for Badiou, constitutes the very center of Beckett's courage, which allows him to speak on (97). Yet while Badiou characterizes this speaking on at the core of Beckett's message as "an imperative for the sake of the oscillation or the undecidability of every thing" (2), such undecidability would run contrary to the notion, which Badiou posits, that Beckett's works offer ethical lessons since the shaping of a lesson involves a decicive prioritization of values. But instead of framing Beckett's oscillations as evidence of his reprioritization of artistic production, it may be more fitting to say that Beckett offers the event of undecidability itself, which contains rather than parses philosophical positions on the potential communicability of language.

Upon examination of his attitude about the relationship between language and nothingness, it becomes evident that Beckett does not decide whether language itself is a nothingness in the sense that it does not hold inherent truth, or that language provides the only access to truth that we have, or even that both positions are true. As with the other types of nothing in his work, such as his ambivalent contributions to the debate about whether nothing can exist, Beckett does not hold, explicate, or illustrate a philosophy of nothing but rather toys

with multiple perspectives on the matter as, perhaps, a means of generating the literary content of his works.

CHAPTER 4: BECKETT'S LITERARY NOTHINGS

As I discussed in the prior chapters, much of the scholarship on Beckett's "nothing" has been dominated by philosophical interpretations of the term, that it represents the existentialist or nihilistic void, for instance. In Martin Esslin's early essay "Samuel Beckett," Beckett is presented as an existentialist writer insofar as he is said to be "searching for the nature of reality itself . . . to reach the innermost core, the nothingness at the centre of being" (129). More recently, Terry Eagleton has argued that Beckett's work represents the "the modern subject confront[ing] itself as a void" (xx). Michael Bennett alternately claims that Beckett's works posit a Heideggerian sense of nothingness as open possibility (29-30, 33). For Gary Banham, on the other hand, Beckett, along with Derrida, approaches the "'nothing' that brings them both to the edge of nihilism" (56). The scholarly market has been so saturated with philosophical interpretations of Beckett's nothing as an issue for nihilism, as Badiou comments, the approach has become hackneyed (2, 4).

While the quantity of these interpretations does not necessarily invalidate them, in this chapter I will depart from the longstanding tradition of considering Beckett's nothing within the discourse of philosophy to instead demonstrate how Beckett's use of the word "nothing" places him within a literary history. That is, while his nothings reflect multiple philosophical inheritances, his primary intervention in the field of writing in general was to dismantle the linguistic and structural force that images of emptiness traditionally carry and to instead use the word "nothing" abstractly and repetitively. Moreover, Beckett did not produce this effect autonomously but rather he developed his style as a response to a literary tradition that includes Baudelaire, Joyce, and Proust. To establish his own voice in the literary marketplace, he departed from his predecessors by turning away from the mythological, theological implications of the

abyss as a pivotal image of redemption and instead repeatedly used the abstract word "nothing" as a reference to his philosophical predecessors. Beckett's preference for the word "nothing" is a way of transforming, as Michael Mooney argues, "philosophic material . . . into literary images" (218-9). Similarly, I argue that by using the word "nothing" pervasively throughout his texts, Beckett shifts toward the abstract and philosophical but importantly does so as a means to institute a new aesthetic mode.

Such a reading follows from Derrida's definition of literature as an institution whose main criteria for inclusion in the category is singularity. As I will discuss at length in a theoretical chapter, Derrida does not define "literature" as "the great books" but rather as the modern historical institution that developed when property rights enabled authors to claim ownership over their texts ("Before..." 214). As an institution, literary texts are the products of writers who intend to make literary texts and then are granted literary status by a legion of gatekeepers: "critics, academics, literary theorists, writers, and philosophers" (215). But the only texts that the gatekeepers will admit into the classification "literature" are those that institute new laws. Thus, paradoxically, literature is the historical institution that developed its own rules, conventions, and genres but whose primary rule is singularity, that is, the breaking of rules to generate a work that will be both related to and different than its predecessors ("This Strange..." 37; "Before..." 213). Following Derrida, J. Hillis Miller and Derek Attridge have posited the ethical reading as the one that acknowledges the singularity of the writer's work rather than tries to subsume literature into philosophy, as do the arguments that I reviewed in chapter one (Miller 4; Attridge 65).

Following from a theoretical paradigm that respects the alterity of literature and with more access to the evidence of Beckett's participation in the literary marketplace, recent critics

have situated Beckett not as a stoic, arm chair philosopher, or saintly ascetic, but as an active participant in entering into the institution of literature. For instance, using evidence from Beckett's letters and the advertising campaigns he participated in, Stephen Dilks has argued that Beckett willingly engaged in marketing strategies that would figure him as a thinker of the void so that he could gain access to the literary economy (162). Similarly, Jürgen Siess writes that Beckett proactively adopted the posture of "the exceptional writer who lays claim to a unique aesthetic project" in contrast to the philosophical literary movements such as surrealism and existentialism, which were then dominating the French field (177-9, 188). Meanwhile, by fashioning himself as an artist of impoverishment, Beckett entered into the longstanding tradition of the French *poëte maudit* (181). These interpretations may underestimate the role that Beckett's wife, Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil, played in selling his early texts to publishers, but they do help to identify the site of Beckett's innovation in his artistic production. Specifically, the recognition that Beckett intensely wanted to be a writer, as opposed to a scholar, helps to make sense out of the immense interest that critics have taken in his use of the term "nothing." That is, it may have been Beckett's ability to develop stylistic techniques associated with the word nothing—such as inversion, repetition, and abstraction—that garnered persistent critical attention and instigated so many philosophical interpretations of the word.

In this study, I will situate Beckett's use of the word "nothing" within a French and Irish literary history—specifically in relation to Baudelaire, Joyce, and Proust—to demonstrate that he strategically built upon and departed from the work of his predecessors to develop a new style. There is a large critical body of work comparing Beckett to his literary predecessors though not specifically regarding his singular use of the word "nothing." James Knowlson, for instance, documents Beckett's connection to Synge, Joyce, Racine, Chaucer, and Pope (71, 112, 383, and

576). John Fletcher in *Samuel Beckett's Art*, places Beckett in a literary continuum with Dante, Swift, Rimbaud, and Goethe (83, 106). Beckett's connections to Proust and Joyce are also well-established,[11] helped along by Beckett's critical writings on both authors (*Proust* and "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . Joyce"), his longstanding friendship and working relationship with Joyce, and discussions of both of their works in his letters. As I will discuss in the next section, a great deal less has been written in English about Beckett's connection to Baudelaire.

Sublime Inversions

While Beckett has often been associated with existentialist angst, in this section I will focus on the ways in which he developed a new style by reversing such a negative attitude toward nothingness. We might find a prototype of existentialist dread in Sartre's novel of ideas *La Nausée*, which Beckett read before May 26, 1938 ("Letter to Tom McGreevy" 626). There the aspiration for nothing is associated with a feeling of angst from which Sartre's protagonist ultimately turns in order to propel himself more fully into existence (Sartre 100). While Beckett found the text to be "extraordinarily good," his own early and middle-stage works depart from the horror of nothing to instead strive for nonexistence as a desirable goal ("Letter to Tom McGreevy" 626). Such is the case in Beckett's second novel, *Watt*, which was written between 1942 and 1945 (Pilling, *Chronology* 89-94). There he writes:

> The panting the trembling towards a being gone, a being to come . . . Then the gnashing ends, or it goes on, and one is in the pit, in the hollow, the longing for the longing gone, the horror of horror, and one is in the hollow, at the foot of all the hills at last, the ways down, the ways up, and free, free at last, for an instant free at last, nothing at last. (*Watt* 201-2)

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[11] See Barbara Reich Gluck's *Beckett and Joyce: Friendship and Fiction*; *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative*, ed. Colleen Jaurretche. Daniel Albright's *Beckett and Aesthetics*. Nicholas Zurbrugg's *Beckett and Proust*. James Reid's *Beckett, Proust and Narration*.

Here the achievement of the nothing provides a peaceful freedom from the "trembling," "gnashing," and "horror" normally associated with the existential void. In that way, Beckett departs from his philosophical antecedent preferring to invert the conventionally negative implications of total emptiness. Such a reversal does not necessarily derive from a particular desire to carve a new philosophic position but to build upon the work of another literary predecessor whom he also admired, that is Charles Baudelaire.

Baudelaire's series of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, often include moral inversions of abyssal imagery, turning the dark, hellish, negative image into a positive, liberating form for humorous effect. Beckett follows Baudelaire in reversing the moral implications of abyssal imagery, but he develops a new voice when he prefers the philosophical term "nothing" (relating to the pre-Socratic question of how "nothing" can be "something") to the theological term "abyss" (relating to the theological image of primordial origins).

In the English criticism on the literary contexts for Beckett's themes and style, very little has been said about his relationship to Charles Baudelaire. This is surprising since Beckett's critical monograph *Proust*, which has largely been used to tie him to the eponymous writer, contains a substantial discussion of Baudelaire in relation to the idea of involuntary memory. In the monograph, Beckett interprets Proust's figuration of memory's abyss as a Baudelarian "*gouffre interdit à nos sondes*" ("gulf you cannot sound") (Beckett 31). Beyond recall in the abyss, inaccessible memories allow the Baudelairian speaker and the Beckettian interpreter to be liberated from remorse. As Beckett writes, "The good or evil disposition of the object has neither reality nor significance. . . . The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for to-day's (13). Beckett's reference to Baudelaire's amoral gulf may indicate that Beckett emulated and surpassed Baudelaire when he transforms nothingness into a desirable goal.

Along with the monograph *Proust*, Beckett's connection to Baudelaire is well-documented in his letters, where Beckett frequently quotes the poet as a source for his negative aesthetics. Writing to Morris Sinclair on January 27, 1924, Beckett jokingly advises his cousin to comfort his sulky horse by reciting to him a line from Baudelaire's "*Madrigal triste*," that is: "*Que m'importe que tu sois sage? / Sois belle! et sois triste!*" ("What does it matter whether you are wise? / Be beautiful! and be sad!").[12] Referring to Baudelaire's prose poem, "*Le Gateau*," he continues, "*Mais puisque la tristesse ajoute toujours à la beauté, puisqu'elle le 'devin gâteau', du moins à mon avis, j'aimerais mieux que notre cheval reste fidèle aux attitudes, boudeuses et mélancoliques, que je lui ai toujours connues*" (178) ("But since sadness always adds to beauty, since it is the eternal, invariable element of what Baudelaire calls the 'divine cake,' in my view at least, I would prefer our horse to remain faithful to the pouting, melancholic attitudes that I have always know him to have") (Trans. Richard Howard 181, 184, Note 4). Beckett refers to Baudelaire throughout his letters revealing his affinity for Baudelaire's ability to generate beauty out of darkness.

As John Paul Riquelme writes in his article, "Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism: Dark Modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett," Beckett cultivates his sense of internal malady through the intervention of Baudelaire (586-7). This aesthetic of negativity, as critics often note, is what helped Beckett to develop a voice that would distinguish him from the other writers of his period. In "The Rapture of Vertigo," Paul Lawley follows Knowlson, Coe, and Acheson in claiming that Beckett experienced a transformative moment in which he decided to develop his own voice by allowing his negativity to shape his texts (28-9). This epiphany is often said to have entered into the play *Krapp's Last Tape* in the line "What I suddenly saw then

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[12] My translation unless otherwise indicated.

was this . . . that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—" (Beckett 226). While the vision of the epiphany supports the romantic conception of the aesthetic, autonomous genius? the idea that he would find his poetic voice by accepting the darkness within him? his artistic development may have also been encouraged by his predilection for Baudelaire's melancholy aesthetics.

Specifically, in relation to images of emptiness, Baudelaire's abyssal imagery, like Beckett's nothing, tends to proliferate, not necessarily manifesting a singular, philosophical vision but drawing an aesthetic principle from the perception of nothing everywhere and in everything. Baudelaire indicates as much in a journal entry he wrote near the end of his life:

> In the moral as in the physical world, I have been conscious always of an abyss, not only of the abyss of sleep, but of the abyss of action, of day-dreaming, of recollection, of desire, of regret, of remorse, of the beautiful, of number...etc. I have cultivated my hysteria with delight and terror. Now I suffer continually from vertigo. (*The Intimate Journals* 106)

His perception of manifold abysses and the feelings of "delight and terror" they evoke is prevalent throughout *Les Fleurs du Mal,* which contains thirteen "*abîmes*" (abysses), twenty-three "*gouffres*" (gulfs), and thirteen "*enfers*" (hells) (Cargo). While Beckett may very well have borrowed this tendency to multiply images of nothing from Baudelaire, here I will focus on Baudelaire and Beckett's shared "delight" in abyssal images.

For a brief background on Baudelaire, the poet was writing at the periphery of Romanticism, Catholicism, and Modernity so that his particular position among these discourses has been greatly debated. One older interpretation of Baudelaire's work, by biographer Enid Starkie, figures Baudelaire as a theological writer with the claim that his poems "evoke the spiritual crisis of modern youth" but do not advocate for such rebellion (307). For W.H. Auden, though, Baudelaire was ultimately a modernist because he developed as a writer in response to

the collapse of religious autocracy "after the mutation of the closed society of tradition" (22). Baudelaire, who it should be noted, faced charges that his book offended public morality (Starkie 307), defended the moral purpose of his work by claiming that the structure of the collection holds a theological purpose: it represents the Catholic idea of man's vice when he is separated from divine grace (Aggeler xxxvi). Damian Catani, bridging the gap between these religious and secular interpretations of Baudelaire's work, observes that the poet waffled between philosophical and theological paradigms though he ultimately pursued a unified goal of accepting the value of negativity (993). Whether for the purpose of presenting a theodicy or for the pure delight of rebellion, Baudelaire's poems often invert the theological definition of the abyss as the site of hell and the romantic definition of the gulf as the site of natural consciousness, and it is these heretical, perverse abysses that serve as a point of departure for Beckett's own aesthetic of nothing.

Such inversions are evident in Baudelaire's poem, "*Alchimie de la Douleur*" ("Alchemy of Grief"), where instead of converting lead into gold as an ordinary alchemist would, Baudelaire's speaker exchanges the most highly valued metal for the most common one: "*Par toi je change l'or en fer / Et le paradis en enfer*" (316) ("Through you, I change gold into iron / And heaven into hell"). Baudelaire enacts this reverse alchemy again in the poem "*Le Voyage*," where the journey, a common metaphor for life, becomes a plea to Death to deliver him and his affiliates into the afterlife, whether that be heaven or hell. Voicing this distaste for existence, he writes, "*Nous voulons . . . Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?*" (Baudelaire 400) ("We want . . . to plunge to the depths of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, what does it matter?"). Connecting the abyssal waters to the classical Greek conception of hell as a watery underground, the speaker upends reigning hierarchies of pleasure over pain, morality over immorality, life over

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death, and heaven over hell. He does this when he draws an equivalence between hell and heaven

on the basis that they both represent death, the eternal "*fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du*

nouveau!" (400) ("the depths of the Unknown to find something new"). With a shrug of

indifference he upholds newness as the value that trumps all the old ones, since it at least

provides an escape from boredom.

Following Baudelaire, Beckett, for humorous effect, also inverts the dark, hellish,

negative image of nothing into a desirable goal. The comic inversion of nothing's negative

connotations can be found in *Endgame*, where Clov responds to Hamm's idiomatic statement

"nevertheless, better than nothing" with its reverse "Better than nothing! Is it possible?" (68). It

may be no coincidence that Beckett was reading Baudelaire poetry while he was writing

Endgame ("Letter to Pamela Mitchell," 22 July 1955, 522*)*. Beckett's use of the desire-for-

nothing trope also appears in *Mercier and Camier*, where the narrator associates their aimless

meanderings with a desirable sense of oblivion: "blessed sense of nothing, nothing to be done,

nothing to be said" (87). Probably the most famous and overt passage that illustrates a longing

for nothingness can be found in *Murphy*, where the titular character finally achieves the peaceful

oblivion he had been seeking in the asylum:

> Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat. . . .
> Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the
> somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, that which in the guffaw
> of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much,
> but the wheel of rounds and pauses did, as Murphy with his head among the armies
> continued to suck in, through all the posterns of his withered soul, the accidentless One-
> and Only, conveniently called Nothing. (138)

As with Baudelaire, Beckett figures the nothing not as an angst-ridden image to be avoided but

as an end worth seeking. But while Baudelaire's inversions of the abyss as the site of the afterlife

inscribe him within the Catholic discourse of original sin as well as the aesthetic discourse of

sublime terror, Beckett's use of nothing in this passage situates him between two philosophical claims—the Geulincxian "where you are worth nothing, you shall want nothing" and Democritean "nothing is more real than nothing" (*Disjecta* 113). In other words, Beckett develops an original use of nothing but moves away from Baudelaire's theological and natural sublime and toward a more abstract, conceptual version of nothingness.

While Baudelaire's abysses and gulfs connect him to the Christian idea of original sin in nature as well as the codification of theological power relating to the romantic sublime, even if only as a means of protecting himself from further liability, by turning to an image of absolute nothingness, Beckett breaks away from the theological or naturalistic implications of abyssal images. When Baudelaire turns the abyss of primeval origins and hellish ends into an object of delight, he is working against the romantic tradition of associating the gulf with natural goodness to instead posit nature as a source of original sin. As Baudelaire describes in "*L'Idéal,*" the highest form of beauty is achieved only when the artist unflinchingly depicts humankind's perverse nature:

> *Je laisse à Gavarni, poët des chloroses,*
> *Son troupeau gazouillant de beautés d'hôpital,*
> *Car je ne puis trouver parmi ces pâles roses*
> *Une fleur qui ressemble à mon rouge idéal.*
>
> *Ce qu'il faut à ce coeur profond comme un abîme,*
> *C'est vous, Lady Macbeth, âme puissante au crime. . . .* (253)

> To Gavarni, the poet of chloroses,
> I leave his troupe of beauties sick and wan;
> I cannot find among those pale, pale roses,
> The red ideal mine eyes would gaze upon.
>
> You, Lady Macbeth, a soul strong in crime,
> Aeschylus' dream born in a northern clime . . . (Trans. F. P. Sturm 25)

Beauty here is not to be found in nature, as is suggested by "the flocks of beauties from the hospital," but in humankind's criminal essence. The delight that Baudelaire takes in abyssal depths, derives partially from his affinity for the work of Edgar Allen Poe and his rejection of Rousseauian political philosophy with its turn to nature as the source of the good. Baudelaire, following Poe, whom he considered a "spiritual brother," developed the idea that nature was not inherently innocent but rather represented the original sin of humankind, which could be celebrated (*Notes Nouvelles* 13, 30). In his *Notes Nouvelles Sur Edgar Poe*, published in 1857, Baudelaire reveals his own pessimism about humankind and nature's essence:

> But more important than anything else: we shall see that this author . . . has clearly seen, has imperturbably affirmed the natural wickedness of man. There is in man, he says, a mysterious force which modern philosophy does not wish to take into consideration; nevertheless, without this nameless force, without this primordial bent, a host of human actions will remain unexplained, inexplicable. These actions are attractive only *because* they are bad, dangerous; they possess the fascination of the abyss . . . such is the thought, which, I confess, slips into my mind, an implication as inevitable as it is perfidious. But for the present I wish to consider only the great forgotten truth,—the primordial perversity of man,—and it is not without a certain satisfaction that I see some vestiges of ancient wisdom return to us from a country from which we did not expect them. It is pleasant to know that some fragments of an old truth are exploded in the faces of all these obsequious flatterers of humanity, of all these humbugs and quacks who repeat in every possible tone of voice: "I am born good, and you too, and all of us are born good!" Forgetting, no! Pretending to forget, like misguided equalitarians, that we are all born marked for evil! (Baudelaire 125-6)

In describing Poe's work, Baudelaire voices perhaps his own preference for the idea that humankind was not born with a propensity for good but with a Hobbesian and rather Catholic "primordial perversity." Baudelaire's rejection of Rousseauian philosophy is made overt in another passage where he writes:

> But these illusions [idea that there is a positive progress] which, it must be added, are selfish, originate in a foundation of perversity and falsehood,—meteors rising from swamps,—which fill with disdain souls in love with eternal fire, like Edgar Poe, and exasperate foggy minds like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in whom wounded and rebellious

sensibility takes the place of philosophy. . . . Nature produces only monsters, and the whole question is to understand the word savages. (129)

While Rousseau had instigated the romantic quest for truth in natural settings such as the sea, Baudelaire would convey the idea that evil is inherent in nature by characterizing the gulf as a hellish, abyssal zone.

Romantics often employed watery imagery to represent the inward depths of the soul where one could attempt to reconnect with natural goodness, as Douwe Draaisma writes:

> The unconscious appeared in psychology and in literature as "depth." In the topography of the Romantic's soul "inward" generally meant "downward," down the shafts, to the "subterranean gardens" [or] to the depths of the sea, as in Heine's *Die Nordsee*: "I love this sea like my soul. Often I even feel as if the sea is really my soul itself; and just as in a sea hidden water plants grow which rise to the surface only at the moment when they bloom and when they finish blooming disappear again into the depths, so occasionally splendid images of flowers float up from the depths of my soul." (76)

The sea, for romantic poets, symbolized humankind's inner life—it was a source of inspiration, evidence of free will, and a point of connection to the purity of nature. Baudelaire, on the other hand, would, in *L'Albatros,* depict the watery depths as "*gouffre amer*" or "the cruel sea" (240). Perhaps because he grew up following the disappointments of revolutions in France (Starkie 190-1), Baudelaire revisited the depths of the mind and found not Heine's "splendid images of flowers" but "*les fleurs du mal*," the flowers of sickness or evil.

While Baudelaire's use of the "*gouffre amer*" in a positive fashion separated him from his romantic predecessors, such a formulation does have its roots in the proto-romantic theory of the sublime (Frye 66). For the conservative thinker, Edmund Burke, the ocean is the quintessential symbol of the sublime because of its vastness, depth, apparent infinity, and eternal repetition (53-4). For Burke, the great depth and width of the ocean causes a "delightful horror," the emotional response that serves as a "test of the sublime" (67). The person who looks upon the seemingly

infinite deep will feel delight because his imagination is allowed to wander without check over the boundless waters (67). But the site of the boundless sea also causes "astonishment . . . that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (53). The fear of danger incited by the vastness of the sea, importantly for Burke, manifests itself as paralysis, which serves to solidify the political or religious power of those who wield it (59-60). Although Frederic Jameson has called Baudelaire's use of the abyss or gulf an "artificial sublime," one that parodies romantic longing rather than directly emulates it (qtd. in Teukolsky 712), what is noteworthy in comparing Baudelaire's work to Beckett's is that the former inverts images that are associated with the sublime but continues to use romantic symbols: seas, gulfs, and chasms.

Whether by choice or force, the poems Baudelaire added to the 1867 edition of his collection, after the morality charges, more often reflect "terror" in response to the sublime than his original delight. Baudelaire's speaker still champions the perilous plunge into the gulf but now warns against becoming entranced by the abyss. The desired reader is the one whose eye "*sait plonger dans les gouffres*" ("knows how to plunge into gulfs") "*sans se laisser charmer*" ("without being charmed") (403). The danger of being charmed by infinite and destructive ideas is expressed most explicitly in his late poem "*Le Gouffre*," where the speaker conveys a mood of despair at being now located within a figurative abyss:

> *Pascal avait son gouffre, avec lui se mouvant.*
> *—Hélas! Tout est abîme, —action desir, rêve,*
> *Parole! Et sur mon poil qui tout droit se relève*
> *Mainte fois de la Peur je sens passer le vent.*
> . . . .
>
> *Et mon esprit, toujours du vertige hanté*
> *Jalouse du néant l'insensibilité*
> *—Ah! Ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres!* (Baudelaire 407-8)

> Pascal's abyss went with him, yawned in the air—
> Everything's an abyss! Desire, acts, dreams,
> Words! I have felt the wind of terror stream
> Many a time across my standing hair.
> . . . .
>
> My spirit, haunted now by vertigo,
> Years for extinction, insensibility.
> —Ah! never to be free of Being, Ego! (Trans. Jackson Mathews 193-4)

While in his earlier poems the abyss was most often figured below and occasionally up in heaven, in this later poem, a terrifying infinitude surrounds the speaker. The reference to Pascal is pertinent, for after proving the possibility of a vacuum, Pascal grew interested in a second infinity, God. In his journal, he wrote that the person who perceives his position in the middle of the abyss of nothingness and the abyss of infinity will experience a feeling of awe:

> Anyone who considers himself in this way will be terrified at himself, and, seeing his mass, as given him by nature, supporting him between these two abysses of infinity and nothingness, will tremble at these marvels. . . . Equally incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges and the infinity in which he is engulfed. What else can he do, then, but perceive some semblance of the middle of things, eternally hopeless of knowing either their principle or their end? All things have come out of nothingness and are carried onwards to infinity. (Pascal 90)

Pascal had opened for Baudelaire the possibility of a vacuum, an absence of meaning and value that could be lingering all around. As also with Pascal, who famously took his chances on the existence of God, a few years after Baudelaire wrote "*Le Gouffre*," he became a Jansenist. At that point, he wrote in his intimate journal: "Hygiene. Morality. Conduct. Too late, perhaps! . . . My humiliations have been the graces of God" (Baudelaire 109). As with the terror of the sublime, the anxiety felt at the nothingness of God's absence was a powerful enough force, if his journals are to be believed, to compel theological acceptance. As such, Rachel Teukolsky ultimately considers Baudelaire's vision to be Victorian because his sense of doubt is always coupled with such "gothic spiritualism" (716).

One manifestation of Beckett's departure from Baudelaire rests in the ordinary rather than sublime quality of his nothing. The indifference of nature in Beckett's works, can be understood quite explicitly in the early novel *Watt*, where the narrator writes:

> And all the sounds [of nature], meaning nothing . . . the little sounds come that demand nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing, propound nothing, and the short necessary night is soon ended, and the sky blue again over all the secret places where nobody ever comes, the secret places never the same, but always simple and indifferent, always mere places, sites of a stirring beyond coming and going, of a being so light and free that it is as the being of nothing. (39)

Beckett turns away from the theological implications of the abyss as hell and from the romantic associations of the abyss with the inspiring sea to instead draw on the playful, conceptual word "nothing," a word he uses to indicate the idea that truth is not to be found in nature. The Shakespearean echoes apparent at the beginning of the passage surface more overtly in *The Unnamable* where the narrator writes two iterations of the line from *Macbeth* "noises signifying nothing" (351) and "all this noise about nothing" (376). Unlike the sublime abyss, which has a referent in the oceanic space, "nothing" is a humorous, abstract word that refers to an absolute emptiness signifying an absence of meaning to be found in nature.

Turning to "nothing" serves another function; it provides a way of talking about infinite absence without the political and aesthetic baggage of the sublime with its connotations of transcendence through nature and affirmation of theological or regal power. As Franz Maier writes, Beckett replaces the sublime with the banal thereby exposing the appearance of the abyss in the work of Baudelaire as a literary spectacle (376). Beckett's awareness and rejection of the romantic sublime is evident in *Molloy*, where the narrator writes:

> The treacherous hills where fearfully he ventured were no doubt only know to him from afar, seen perhaps from his bedroom window or from the summit of a monument which, one black day, having nothing in particular to do and turning to height for solace, he had paid his few coppers to climb, slower and slower, up the winding stones. (*Molloy* 9)

Here the sublime experience of gaining perspective from the height of the mountaintops is pursued only as an escape from boredom and is associated with base monetary exchange. In one of his rare uses of "the abyss," Malone, perhaps Beckett's most bourgeois character, uses the word to refer to an object of human construction rather than a vast object of nature: "I can scarcely even see the window-pane, or the wall forming with it so sharp a contrast that it often looks like the edge of an abyss" (*Malone Dies* 208). The character here is probably drawn to the vertiginous aspect of the window as a pathway to suicide, but by endowing a constructed window with such sublime qualities, Beckett is perhaps undermining his predecessor's naturalistic aesthetics.

As his *oeuvre* unfolds, his language shifts from such Baudelairian images of sublime abysses and heights to iterations of the word "nothing" in an expository and playful manner, expository in the sense that the words on the page remain abstract, disconnected from the things of the world. In "Texts for Nothing," he writes,

> How is it nothing is ever here and now? It's varied, my life is varied, I'll never get anywhere. I know, there is no one here, neither me nor anyone else, but some things are better left unsaid, so I say nothing. . . . I would know that nothing had changed, that a little resolution is all that is needed to come and go under the changing sky. . . . Leave it, leave it, nothing leads to anything, nothing of all that, my life is varied. (314)

His choice of the word "nothing" instead of "not anything" instigates a double reading, which could refer to the production of fiction itself as a source of more nothings as in "how is it nothing is ever here and now," meaning both "how is it that the nonexistent material of the imagination is manifested on the page" and "how is it that nothingness itself is ever here and now." While the abyss has a referent in hell, in the gulf, and in primeval chaos, the "nothing" here conveys the language of the mind as it appears on the page. In other words, Beckett's aesthetic ingenuity may

be identified in this linguistic shift from the naturalistic sublime to the abstract, polyvalent, reflexive, and repetitive use of the word "nothing."

As the above passages and his letters suggest, while at first Beckett may have used Baudelaire as a model to develop his own negative aesthetic, by the 1940s when his style was solidifying, he came to mock the hyperbolic qualities of Baudelaire's work. In one letter, for instance, Beckett reverses Baudelaire's text when he writes to Charles Monteith, an editor at Faber and Faber, that he will probably not write a memoir because "*J'ai moins de souvenirs que si j'avais six mois*" ("I have fewer memories than if I were six months old"). This reference, as the editor of the letters notes, inverts a line from "Spleen": "*J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans*" (603) ("I have more memories than if I was a thousand years old"). Such a reversal may reflect a larger turn in Beckett's work from the "terror" and political baggage of the abyss to "nothing," a word that allowed Beckett establish a more purely abstract way of taking delight in absolute absence without divinity. Since, whereas the abyss is still connected by implication to the watery gulf of creation and romantic inspiration, the word "nothing," as I discussed in the previous chapter, has a source in philosophical inquiry.

Narrative Dissolution

Beckett is also able to distance himself from mythological associations with the abyss of primeval origins by dispensing with the structural weight traditionally given to images of absence. In mythological figurations, an image of the abyss usually appears at a turning point in the text indexing the nadir from which the plot moves toward resolution. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, the descent into the abyss of hell constitutes a turning point in the story since it is only through Odysseus' meeting with Tiresius that the former gleans the knowledge necessary to arrive home (Homer 170-1). As Northrup Frye writes, "to gain information about the future, or

what is 'ahead' in terms of the lower cycle of life, it is normally necessary to descend to a lower world of the dead, as is done in the nekyia . . . in the eleventh book of the Odyssey" (321). Dante, importantly for Beckett, similarly descends into the depths before climbing to Purgatory and Paradise. That is because, in classical formulations, the depths are a site of the renewal of life through the contemplation of death as well as a site of origins, since, as in the Bible, the narrative is drawn out from creation (Frye 315). This pattern repeats itself, perhaps surprisingly, in the modernist works of Joyce and Proust, which contain plots that pivot around images of nothingness.

Beckett's connection to Joyce and Proust is well-known: Beckett was friends with Joyce, conducted research for *Finnegan's Wake*, wrote a critical essay on Joyce at his request, wrote his only scholarly monograph on Proust, and even applied to a doctoral program at *Ecole Normale* with the intention of writing a thesis about Proust and Joyce ("Letter to Ecole Normale," 5 Oct. 1929, 9-10). The scholarship on Beckett's relationship to Joyce and Proust though generally concerns Beckett's turn away from the former's encyclopedic style and his critical essay on the latter but does not specifically address their lexical divergences regarding the word "nothing." Yet Beckett considered *Proust* to be an immature essay bearing less relevance to his work than Democritus and Geulincx. In a letter to Thomas McGreevy dated February 3, 1931, he says of his work on Proust that it is "disgustingly juvenile—pompous almost—angry at the best. Tant pis" (65). In a letter to Sigle Kennedy dated June 14, 1967, Beckett further distances himself from both Joyce and Proust, "I simply do not feel the presence in my writings as a whole of the Joyce & Proust situations you evoke. If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the 'Naught is more real . . .' and the '*Ubi nihil vales . . .*' both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational" (*Disjecta* 113).

Some critics have taken Beckett's rejection to heart and consequently avoided Joyce and Proust as literary precursors. For instance, Martin Esslin echoes Beckett when he says that Beckett did not incorporate Joyce's tendency to synthesize material or Proust's tendency to analyze it, but rather Beckett "does neither of these things: he is searching for the nature of reality itself" ("Samuel Beckett" 129). While Esslin conceived of Beckett's "genius" as "too personal" to allow for influences (143), an appropriate response to Beckett's letters is to acknowledge that Beckett was not trying to emulate Joyce or Proust, and it is precisely in his awareness of their work and his departure from them that he was able to develop a work that would achieve the status of literature. Beckett's effort to distance himself from Proust can be read in a letter to Thomas McGreevy from the summer of 1929 where he writes of *Swann's Way* that he finds the work, "strangely uneven . . . Some of his metaphors light up a whole page like a bright explosion, and others seem ground out in the dullest desperation" (11). With such a statement in mind, we can begin to conceive of Beckett's departure from Proust as a stylistic movement away from climactic unevenness and toward a toneless approach to nothing.

Scholars who compare the work of Joyce and Beckett have typically agreed that the two writers move in quite stylistic opposite directions though Colleen Jaurretche equates Joyce and Beckett's thematic interest in nothing, saying that for both and for modernists generally "negation is the dark metaphysical heart of . . . literature" (11). Contrariwise, James Acheson, Barbara Gluck, and Richard Coe have all named Beckett's aesthetic an "art of failure" in contrast to Joyce's celebration of knowledge (Acheson 96, Gluck 97). Beckett signaled as much in an often quoted interview with Israel Shenker, in which he said, "[Joyce is] tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past" (qtd. in Dilks 165). As Stephen Dilks comments, while

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previous scholars have taken this quote to mean that Beckett's "impotence" is a genuine "art of failure," the key word of the passage may be "exploited" because it attests to Beckett's efforts in distancing himself stylistically from Joyce for the sake of establishing a unique posture in the literary marketplace (165).

Dilks's thesis is substantiated when we review the negative reception of Beckett's early works and his subsequent shift in style. As a young writer, Beckett had been criticized and even rejected for publication because his editors considered his style to be too Joycean. In a letter that Charles Prentice wrote to Thomas McGreevy, the former writes that "the Joyce bit" in a Beckett story that would eventually appear in *Dream of Fair to Middling Woman,* was "not his own style" (*Letters Vol. I,* 82, Note 1). Prentice later rejected *Murphy* as well, citing similar reasons, including "Beckett's frequent abstruse allusions and his generally somewhat recondite manner of writing" (353, Note 6). Beckett's subsequent shift toward a minimalistic style that generally lacks direct philosophical allusions may stem in part from such rejections.

In relation to the nothing, Beckett would depart from Joyce's structural and linguistic use of the terms "abyss" and "void" not necessarily to posit a new or original notion of nothingness but to develop his own style? one that would be accepted by publishers, audiences, and philosophers? by drawing attention to the linguistic and conceptual problems inherent in the word "nothing." Beckett's exasperation at being denied publication and, what follows, his desire to be accepted by the gatekeepers of literature can be identified in an early letter to Thomas McGreevy dated January 3, 1930 in which he responds to a rejection letter with sarcasm, "As if I were trying to sell him a load of manure or a ton of bricks" (19). Perhaps out of a desire to see his work valued, Beckett, in his middle and late-stage works subsequently avoided the structural turn that classically follows the image of nothing.

The classic narrative pattern of using the word "abyss" at the site of recognition and reform, appears in the heretical reverse in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* at the point when Stephen rejects religion. In Chapter three, Father Arnall delivers a sermon on hell that propels the narrative of the *Künstlerroman* forward: "And through the several torments of the senses the immortal soul is tortured eternally in its very essence amid the leagues upon leagues of glowing fires kindled in the abyss by the offended majesty of the Omnipotent God. . . . The yells of the suffering sinners fill the remotest corners of the vast abyss" (106). Joyce modeled the speech after the genre of "The Spiritual Exercise," which was designed to produce an ekphrastic experience of hell so that, "the fear of the pains may help me not to come into sin" ("St. Ignatius of Loyola" 278). In the speech, the abyss is the site of eternal damnation that awaits sinners who do not repent, and as it appears in the novel, the image signals the point of departure for the shift in Stephen's relationship to the church.

Scholars have tended to agree that Joyce uses the "Sermon on Hell" as a structural pivot point marking Stephen's turn from Catholicism to artistic pursuits. As James Thrane observes, while the harrowing sermon initially serves its intended purpose of drawing Stephen closer to the church, the coercive use of terror ultimately repels him from entering the priesthood and ultimately solidifies his identity as an outsider and artist (172). John Paul Riquelme also writes that section three—including the sermon, Stephen's temporary acceptance of Catholic doctrine, and his eventual rejection of it—comprises the turning point away from the first section of the book and toward "the climactic fourth part" (308), so that, as Kenneth Burke observes, while the mathematical center of the book takes place in the sermon on hell, chapter four in which Stephen finds his new vocation as a writer receives the greater emphasis (322). The use of the descent into hell to accelerate the Künstlerroman indicates that Joyce is both emulating and inverting the

classical scheme of the return home from hell since the end goal here is not achieved through

devotion to God but through rejection of religion.

The structural shift from theology to aesthetics is also marked by a linguistic shift from

"abyss," signifying hell, to the secular word "void," signifying the now empty space that had

been previously occupied by religion. After Stephen "had fallen" he thinks, "[His soul] flickered

once and went out, forgotten, lost. The end: black cold void waste" (Joyce, *Portrait* 122).

Lacking a soul, the body is now empty and, in keeping with such a formulation, the sentence

structure shifts from the heightened, eloquent syntax of theological oration to the mundane,

broken, unpunctuated syntax of aesthetic modernism.

Joyce's preference for the word "void" surfaces again in *Ulysses*, where he uses the term

to substitute the mythology of origins from nothing for a scientific notion of the spatial void.

This shift away from the cosmology of primeval chaos is apparent in the line "world founded on

the void" (207), which, according to the editors of *Ulysses Annotated*, becomes a secular

replacement for "the church founded on the void" and for the mythic vortexes "Scylla and

Charybdis" (Gifford and Seidman 9.840-42, 241). Joyce associates the concept of the world

founded on a void with a newfound epistemological uncertainty, "a conscious rational reagent

between a micro- and a macrocosm ineluctably constructed upon the incertitude of the void"

(*Ulysses* 697). He also replaces the primordial abyss with the scientific concept of the macro and

micro voids of particulate and planetary space: "the universe of human serum constellated with

red and white bodies, themselves universes of void space constellated with other bodies . . .

nought nowhere was never reached" (Joyce 699; Gifford and Seidman 17.1064-69, 582). But

while the Joycean hero would be "a conscious reactor against the void incertitude" (Joyce 734), a

void that has the potential to produce and sustain the material of the universe and of knowledge, Beckett's characters would seek absolute, ever present nothingness.

With the linguistic shift to nothing, Beckett also divorces his works from the mythological structure that, in Joyce's novels, positions the void as a hurdle to overcome. Beckett uses the word nothing as an atonal motif that pervades his texts and is not followed even by aesthetic redemption. In *Waiting for Godot,* for instance, nothing appears at the beginning of the play "Nothing to be done" (2), in the middle "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful (43), and as a source of humor at the end: "It's like nothing. There's nothing. There's a tree" (99). Constituting a dwelling within and about nothing, Beckett's characters maintain a close connection to nothingness instead of the quasi-redemptive filling of a void or the turn away from the abyss that can be found in the work of Joyce. By turning to the abstract nothing, Beckett is able to draw on the philosophical and linguistic problem of nothing as an impossibility; after all, there is no nothing, "there's a tree."

Beckett may have learned to use "nothing" as a philosophical referent through his readings of Proust, who utilized the term "*néant*" to describe an absence of consciousness. As Walter Benjamin writes in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Proust's depiction of preconsciousness alludes to Henri Bergson's theory of "involuntary memory" (Benjamin 157). In *Swann's* Way*,* Proust describes this pure memory, which collects every detail of life independent of consciousness, in metaphorical terms, as a rope let down from heaven over an abyss. This rope becomes not only the starting point for conscious experience, but also the starting point of the novel, which is drawn out from memory. Thus, while Proust and Beckett both bear a debt to philosophical precedents in their uses of term nothing, in Beckett's thematic, the repetitive use of nothing also runs contrary to Proust's classical use of nothing as a starting point for the work of

literature. In other words, while Beckett is not the first to draw a work of literature out of the

philosophy of nothing, his work becomes innovative insofar as it eschews the connection

between the word "nothing" and narrative progress.

As with Joyce in the *Portrait*, the presence of nothingness in *Swann's Way* signals the

point of departure from which the product of literature arrives, reflecting a mythological

cosmology of literary origins. Prior to the flood of memories that direct the content of his novel

onward, Proust's overture documents Marcel's experience of momentary nonbeing as he moves

from sleep to consciousness. Unable to reorient himself by himself, pure memory, acting as his

savior, "*venait à moi comme un secours d'en haut pour me tirer du néant*" ("would pull me from

nothingness like help from on high") (Proust 14). This passage has most often been taken to

reveal Proust's conception of the centrality of involuntary memory in giving a person a sense of

self. According to Benjamin, in this passage, Proust was testing Bergson's theory of experience

that there is an ideal, pure memory that contains the content of the past and is deposited in the

mind at moments of inattention (Benjamin 157; Bergson 175). This pure memory lies dormant in

the infinite mind and enters consciousness spontaneously (Bergson 178, 182, 187). Following

Benjamin's interpretation, in the moment between waking and being fully conscious, the narrator

of *Swann's Way* is not yet himself and the narrative is not yet written until his memories appear.

In that way, the image of nothing serves as catalyst for the memories which constitute the plot of

the novel.

Beckett's departure from narrative ebbs and flows is evident if we compare his early

work, which generally follows the conventions of plot, to his later prose and plays, which eschew

narrative development. In *Murphy*, which is probably Beckett's most overtly philosophical novel

in the sense that it manifests an idea, Beckett does use images of nothing to signal turning points

in the text, much in line with Proust and early Joyce. Beckett transcribes Geulincx's dictum "where you are worth nothing, you will want nothing" almost verbatim as a way to describe Murphy's journey over the course of the book: "it was not enough to want nothing where he was worth nothing" (102). Ruby Cohn posits the importance of this line for determining the direction of the novel, when she writes, "Murphy departs from the room he shares with his prostitute-mistress, where he is worth nothing, in order to meditate in the heated garret of an insane asylum, where he wants nothing" (170). Although it's worth noting that Geulincx's line is presented as inadequate—"it was not enough"—Beckett does appear to use the word "nothing" here to foreshadow Murphy's impending demise. After losing at chess to Endon, as quoted above, Murphy has a vision of nothingness itself that prefigures his eventual death (*Murphy* 138). Murphy finally achieves nothingness as death; whether by suicide or accident, the narrator reports, "Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free. The gas went on in the wc, excellent gas, superfine chaos. Soon his body was quiet" (142). In this, Beckett's first novel, we can see that he may have emulated the classical and early modern structural importance given to the image of nothing as a point of departure and tragic ends.

But unlike Joyce and Proust, Beckett would later use the word nothing repeatedly and pervasively in his texts, not at the usual climactic point of turn. An example of this can be found in almost any passage of Beckett's middle and late stage texts but I will take one from the *The Unnamable* where there is an especially abundant series of nothings that do not lead anywhere but on:

> All for nothing again. Even Mahood has left me, I'm alone. . . . All lies. 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. (314)

Beckett repeatedly uses the word "nothing" in this passage to play of its double sense as "not anything" and "nothingness itself" so that the character is saying he "does not have anything to say" and "he has nothingness itself to speak of" (24). The production of the text does not arrive after "nothing," as it does in *Swann's Way*, but rather in the midst of these multiple meanings of the word "nothing."

The use of the nothing as a playful, repetitive motif becomes musical (in the variety of Philip Glass) in the play *Cascando*, written in 1963, in which "Music," "Opener," and Voice" form a trio. Reflecting on his own function in the play "Opener" speaks the line: "They say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it's in his head . . . they say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it's in his head. . . .There is nothing in my head" (346). This character, if we can call "Opener" that, plays here with the multiple meanings of his essential function as that which opens the text and with the word "nothing." In the negative sense of the word as "not anything," he does not have anything to open: the text itself is not worth anything. In the positive sense of the word as "nothingness" his head and the play are themselves manifestations of "nothing." By preferring the word "nothing," to the "void" or "abyss," or even "nothingness," Beckett is able to draw attention to the slippery quality of language while reflexively positing literature itself as a nothing that is something. If this were a Proustian story, the lines might be followed by an epiphany of the self that propels the story forward, but instead what follows is more nothing, or more nothings.

Instead of perpetuating the mythological and theological association between the abyss, hell, the sublime, and narrative structure, Beckett uses the word "nothing" pervasively, playing off of its multiple philosophical and linguistic senses. While he did draw from the work of philosophers in his turn toward "nothing," as I discussed in the third chapter, perhaps his greatest

claim to originality derives not from such allusions, but from his development of new formal techniques associated with the word, namely abstraction and repetition without redemption. Yet interestingly, these traits may once again place his work in proximity to philosophical discourse since they indicate that he tends to dwell reflexively and in an almost expository manner on conceptual material. Moving away from concrete, naturalistic images and narrative form, Beckett maintains an enduring interest in nothingness itself that, as I will argue in the next chapter, places his work on a continuum with the format of the philosophical essay.

CHAPTER 5: BECKETT'S ESSAYISTIC MODE AS A BRIDGE FORM

Thus far, I have sought to trouble a line of criticism that presents Beckett's work as a consistent, philosophical argument on nothing.[13] As I have contended, such a thesis that posits a systematic, philosophical purpose at the heart of Beckett's *oeuvre* presents a problem insofar as Beckett's use of the term "nothing" is multifarious, polyvalent, inconsistent, and moreover, primarily designed to surpass his literary predecessors rather than his philosophical ones. He has, in the words of *How It Is*, "no nothing to prove" (97). To make such a claim, I have relied on an implicit definition of philosophy as a genre characterized by singular, consistent arguments in contrast to non-purposive modes of discourse. Yet the notion that Beckett's writing is not philosophical because he does not offer a consistent argument on being may itself be overly simplistic considering Derrida's interrogation of the binary that defines philosophy as a singular, serious system in contrast to literature as an ambiguous mode of play (*Limited* 18, 77). With a recognition that there are areas of overlap between the discourses, I will now seek to understand the intersection of philosophy and literature by comparing Beckett's work to a genre that exists in between the two, the essay. In this chapter, I argue that Beckett's work bears an uncanny affinity with the essayistic mode, in their shared reliance on stylistic tropes of uncertainty—including parataxis, contradiction, digression, and a personal voice—that is worthy of remark insofar as the comparison helps to clarify the proximate relationship between Beckett's work and philosophical discourse in terms of style.

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[13] For instance, Fletcher articulates the idea that "Beckett's work has a unity that is not the result of chance, but rather of a consistency of approach that is extraordinary over so many years. His fiction progresses towards a more and more total emptiness, in which plot, characters and language itself crumble to nothing" 144. Similarly, Butler argues that Beckett creates parables that directly illustrate philosophical themes such as the nothingness of being 4-5. Instead of demonstrating a nihilistic position, Bennett argues that Beckett revolts against meaningless by creating parables that display a Heideggerian sense of nothingness as a ground of possibility so that "nothingness and emptiness create[] a fertile ground for meaning" 2, 27, 33.

My previous argument relied on a Habermasian definition of philosophy, summarized by Anthony Uhlmann in *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, that "Philosophy is that discipline which is supposed to be serious and to search for truth, the single meaning, through logic alone while literature requires ambiguity . . . uncertainty, several meanings at once" (7). In that sense, Beckett's work may be rightly separated from single-minded philosophical discourse insofar as his multifarious "nothings" display a preference for the literary modes of "ambiguity," "uncertainty," and polyvalence. Yet following a poststructuralist approach, Uhlmann has argued that the fields of writing share characteristics, as he writes, "a problem of impurity, of interference, of mixing or overlapping" occurs particularly strongly when comparing Beckett's work and philosophy (7, 12). While Uhlmann and other critics such as Locatelli and Begam have taken a post-structuralist approach in claiming that the collapse of boundaries between literature and philosophy in Beckett's work renders him a proto-deconstructionist (Locatelli x; Begam 21), such a notion, as I have argued, reconfirms the idea that Beckett's work is only philosophical in the sense that his writing serves as an example of a particular branch of philosophy.

With an interest in investigating an area of intersection between the fields of philosophy and literature but without further subsuming Beckett's work under another philosophical movement, this chapter presents a formal comparison between Beckett's work and the essay, a medium that experimental philosophical discourse sometimes takes. The essay derives from the writing of Michel de Montaigne who called his prose works "*essais*," as a way of characterizing them as "attempts" or "experiments" designed to test ideas rather than convey particular arguments (Philip Lopate, "What Happened..." 76). Following Montaigne, as Wendell Harris notes, the essay genre largely split into two main contiguous modes, formal and informal essays, with formal essays being the programmatic, argument-based inquiries that may be immediately

associated with systematic, philosophical discourse and informal essays being personal, apparently freestyle explorations that tend toward the literary in their emphasis on style (937). There are, however, philosophers who employ a less formal, essayistic style in their performance of open dialogue; for instance, we might consider Derrida an informal essayist when he follows the method of wavering between point and counterpoint. György Lukács identifies Plato's dialogues and Kierkegaard's imaginary works as examples of philosophy written in an essayistic mode since their open, dialogic formats allow for the testing of ideas rather than neat argumentation (3). Plato's dialogues may be considered literary in the sense that they use a dramatic format to relay the experience of open conversation. For his part, Kierkegaard creates multiple personas to achieve a dialectic between aesthetic, ethical, and religious phases of thought. Turning to the essay as a mode at the intersection of literary and philosophical discourse, then, presents a method for paying deference to the shared implications of the genres as sites of conceptual experimentation while respecting the formal differences of their styles. After all, the essay form does not entirely breach the formal boundaries between literary and philosophical discourse, but represents a mode of experimentation akin to philosophy and occasionally adopted by philosophy.

As I will discuss in greater detail, the informal essay may be thought of as a hybrid form between philosophy and literature since it appears in the guise of non-fiction, with an apparently candid voice articulating the ideas of the author, while remaining highly literary in conveying such candor through a persona who employs rhetorical strategies such as fragmentation, digression, and contradiction. In that way, the essay subsists at a site of contention over whether philosophy derives from a formal, methodological system or could instead comprise a literary performance, a demonstration of the discontinuous quality of thought itself. As such, the essay

provides an exemplar for troubling the equivalence between Beckett's work and philosophy while exploring areas of intersection.

Rhetorically speaking, the difference between the more philosophical, formal, programmatic essay and the more literary, informal, experimental essay can be attributed to their diverging logical patterns, which Harris identifies in the formal essay's reliance on deduction for narrowing an argument to a singular point in contrast to the informal essay's reliance on induction for conveying the organic movements of the mind (944). At the syntactic level, this disparity results from an essayist's primary preference either for a hypotactic or paratactic style. Common to the philosophical argument, the hypotactic style indexes logical relationships between clauses with subordinating conjunctions such as "while," "because," and "if." Hypotaxis generates the analytic effect of a speaker who, according to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, remains "somewhat detached from the immediacy of the action . . . [providing] a more reflective account of its meaning" (650). Parataxis, on the other hand, includes both the effect of fragmentation achieved through the absence of conjunctions and the "coordinate" or "additive" style produced through the use of serial coordinating conjunctions such as "and," and "but" (650). Writers employ this style when they wish to portray "thoughts and actions from the urgent perspective of a participant caught in the immediate flow of events" (650). While the informal essay produces an effect of a free-flowing, naturalistic, authentic voice unbounded by the conventions of genre (John Snyder 150; Lukács 1), essayists achieve such an effect through their deliberate, adoption of the additive style (Adorno 151-2; Klaus 12-3).

Using such a stylistic preference as a point of departure, in this chapter I demonstrate that Beckett's imaginative works bear an affinity with the Montaignian mode of informal experimentation. In doing so, I am following Adorno's characterization of essayism as a mode of

performative experimentation designed to manifest the discontinuity of consciousness and a consequent uncertainty about what can be known. In quoting Max Bense, Adorno conveys the idea that the essayistic mode can extend beyond its traditional home in nonfiction:

> He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing. (164)

In that way, the essayistic mode, as a mode of experimentation, is not restricted to nonfictional prose writing but may be said to appear in fictional works when the process of composition emulates the fluctuations of a changing mind.

Bense's definition of essayistic writing, then, justifies a reading of Beckett's fictional works in terms of the Montaignian tradition. It would be more conventional to interpret Beckett's critical monograph as an example of essayistic writing, but his early book, *Proust,* displays a more assured, programmatic voice than his later novels. There, he writes in a declarative voice that the self *is* discontinuous "We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we *are* other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday" (emphasis mine, 13). In his fictional works, however, he eschews certainty by relying on contradiction to convey rapidly shifting thoughts "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning" (291). The narrator here expresses uncertainty through a series of coordinated questions only to undermine the interrogation by offering an answer in the form of the humorous inversion "unquestioning." Such an essayistic contradiction, essayistic in the sense that the author includes reversals thoughts, subverts the notion of a unified, consistent self not through a declaration but through a stylistic performance.

In addition to Beckett and Montaigne's analogous styles, there is some historical evidence available to warrant the comparison between the two writers. Beckett's awareness of

Montaigne's essays is evident in a letter he wrote to Thomas McGreevy dated August 14, 1937 in which he criticizes the writer Denis Devlin for using "ye olde," a remnant from Montaigne's writing (541). Contrary to expectation, Beckett's distaste for the appropriation of Montaigne's language, or more accurately, the Elizabethan translation of his writing, does not necessarily mean that Beckett abhors the Montaignian tradition but only that he finds it misplaced in twentieth century prose. Ironically, Beckett's critique of nonnatural language places him squarely in the essayistic tradition, at least according to Virginia Woolf, who argues that the essay calls for a plain style: "the essay must be pure—pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter" (810). As part of a program to display the genuine patterns of thought, Woolf calls upon essayists to "think your own thoughts . . . and speak them as plainly as you can" (812). As if in alignment with such a call to avoid recycling antiquated language, esoteric, long words are rare in Beckett's post-war works, after he developed a sparse style.

Beckett would have also gained familiarity with the essay through the mediation of Samuel Johnson whom he greatly admired. Indeed, Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon report in *Samuel Beckett's Library* that the works of Samuel Johnson comprise the "largest number of books in Beckett's library" (32). Johnson's writing apparently had a formative influence on Beckett, as Stephen Dilks notes in "Samuel Beckett's Samuel Johnson." According to Dilks, Beckett began reading Johnson's work after Joyce as a way of separating his voice from his more immediate literary predecessor (268, 289). Dilks argues, moreover, that Johnson, with his fame for being a "lexical stabilizer and staunch defender of the political and literary status quo," served as an antidote to Joyce's destabilizing approach (287). Counterbalancing Joyce with Johnson did not, of course, render Beckett a formal essayist, but rather, as Dilks further

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comments, Beckett fashioned "his own version of Johnson" one that avoided the codification of established knowledge and instead focused on the personal horrors that Johnson suppressed (291). For example, whereas Johnson claimed to believe that "mere existence is so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain" (Fehsenfeld 511, note 9), in a letter to Joseph Hone dated 3 July 1937, Beckett reads into Johnson's assertion that he "must have had the notion of positive annihilation" (509). In other words, Beckett ignores Johnson's rejection of complete nonexistence to instead appreciate the fact that at least Johnson considered nothingness a possibility. His insertion of doubt into Johnson's work and biography reflects his larger dissatisfaction with codified knowledge and preference for uncertainty as becomes apparent in his adoption of an aesthetics of uncertainty.

More to the point on the philosophical allegiances between Beckett and Montaigne, several critics have identified Heraclitus as a common link between the writers. Shane Weller remarks in *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* that both Beckett and Montaigne pair Democritus and Heraclitus as thinkers who offer the void as an extant possibility (2). Alain Badiou similarly argues that the linguistic inability to capture a shifting thought compels the Beckettian speaker to speak on, which places him in a Heraclitean tradition for, "as soon as it is named that which is and of which we are obliged to speak escapes towards its own nonbeing. This means that the work of naming must always be taken up again. On this point, Beckett is a disciple of Heraclitus: being is nothing other than its own becoming-nothingness" (48). In connection with the essay, Carl Klaus notes that Montaigne's espousal of experimentation comes in reaction to the great systematizers of knowledge: Aristotle, Cicero, and the medieval scholastics. By initiating the posture of the essayist as an independent skeptic who seeks to

understand the slippery nature of the self, Montaigne, according to Klaus, falls into a Heraclitean cadre (10).

Indeed, Heraclitus's well-known epigram "As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them" (Gottlieb 45) captures the version of truth that Montaigne assumes: that truth is discovered by observing the constant flux of the self. In "Of Repentance," Montaigne articulates in a characteristically peripatetic fashion this version of truth that his essays perform:

> I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. I may presently change, not only by chance, but also by intention. This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subject in different circumstances and aspects. So, all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict. If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial. (610-11)

Montaigne here espouses, through content and style, a desire to depict a version of the truth, which involves the portrayal of the self as it shifts. He manifests such a principle through a stylistic performance that uses right branching syntactic additions that contradict prior material. In doing so, he formally demonstrates that recording consciousness reveals the apophatic quality of thought as in "I do not portray being: I portray passing" (611). Essays following in the Montaignian tradition, commonly called familiar, informal, or personal essays follow his approach of qualifying rather than "resolving" an author's idea. Such essays, then, appear to unfold according to the organic fluctuations in the writer's consciousness, allowing for contradictions and rapid shifts in focus. But it is important to recognize that while the claim of

the Montaignian essay is one of non-generic liberality, the form nonetheless adheres to a specific version of the truth that bears an affinity with the Heraclitean philosophy of flux.

Beckett likewise signals his affinity with a Heraclitean notion of the self when he remarks in a passage from *Proust* that "The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for to-day's" (13). In this model, the desires of the past are lost with the consciousness that invented them since, as Beckett says, the self depends on the ever changing objects that surround it (13). But as I have noted earlier, while in his earlier works, Beckett's declares this point emphatically, his middle and late stage works appear to illustrate this point stylistically, through their essayistic organizational patterns. For instance, in his earliest novel *Murphy*, Beckett conveys his mastery over the plot by using an omniscient narrator: "Soon he would have to make other arrangements, for the mew had been condemned," he writes, highlighting the knowledge he has about what future events would unfold (5). In the past perfect, the narrator also reveals information that only an omniscient consciousness could know: "Celia spreadeagled on her face on the bed. A shocking thing had happened" (62). Beckett would later substitute the sense of complete knowledge signified by the use of the third-person, past tense with the use of the essayistic first-person, singular present to exhibit a greater sense of an uncertain "I" speaking on the page. Though he does not connect these characteristics to the essay, Edmund Smyth comments that Beckett utilizes the first-person present to construct "a discourse which presents a vivid formal and stylistic metaphor for disintegration" (156). Judith Dearlove similarly comments that for Beckett "Style and form become content, become surrogate characters and plots," which convey, at least in the trilogy, the sense that the narrator is "recording the sounds of the mind . . . struggling with its words" (105-6). As I will parse in this chapter, Beckett achieves such a stylistic metaphor for discontinuous consciousness through four primary essayistic

modes—parataxis, contradiction, digression, and presence—that place his writing on a continuum alongside experimental philosophical discourse.

Parataxis

Despite the rich critical conversation on the correspondence between Beckett's rhetoric of discontinuity and Heraclitean philosophy, there are few studies that connect these characteristics with the essay. Porter Abbott compares "Texts for Nothing" with the Montaignian tradition because of the way the series of short stories trades narrative progress for "the broad nonnarrative genre of the meditative personal essay" (Abbott 90). In her chapter on "*Textes pour rien*," Cohn adopts Abbott's thesis and subsequently identifies "fragmentation of thought" and contradictory, negative words as key stylistic features of the non-narrative texts (195). Going beyond the narratology of the "Texts," pairing the essay with Beckett's broader *oeuvre* is a way of specifying an argument that has been latent in Beckett studies since the sixties: that Beckett's texts use syntactical strategies such as parataxis to perform the unsystematic qualities of consciousness in order to undermine the possibility of unified knowledge.

For instance, while not directly comparing Beckett's work to the essayistic mode, Hugh Kenner, in his now classic text *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians*, identifies a source of the similarity between the two forms; namely, the reader of Beckett's trilogy encounters the thoughts of the narrator "in the immediate act of occurring to a mind, which appeals to us by its very proximity" (85). As Kenner implicitly notes, Beckett's work manifests a proximate consciousness through a stylistic preference for parataxis: "the writer's pen setting down words, and then setting down more words, and then setting down the same words over again, so that we have before us a piece of writing, and a piece of writing with little of great importance to communicate" (80-1). Building on Kenner's observation that Beckett's writing

tracks temporal shifts in thought, identifying the informal essay as a generic mode that shares this stylistic trope of "coordination" aids in understanding how Beckett's work relates to philosophy since the fragmentary style is said to manifest epistemological uncertainty.

Beckett frequently utilizes a fragmentary, coordinate style to stage the narrator's nonlinear thought patterns, including aporias, doubts, contradictions, and digressions. In such a coordinate style or "essay style" as Stanley Fish defines it, "successive clauses and sentences are not produced by an overarching logic, but by association; the impression the prose gives is that it can go anywhere in a manner wholly unpredictable" (62). Evidence of such a style in Beckett's writing can be found prior to the "Texts" in *The Unnamable*, where the narrator voices an associative flow of thoughts: "quiver and hurry on, all life before me, on and forget, what was I saying, just now, something important, it's gone, it'll come back, no regrets, as good as new, unrecognizable, let's hope so, some day when I feel more on high-class nuts to crack. On" (312). Beckett's use of short, fragmentary clauses, and even interruptions, as in "what was I saying," closely resembles the essayistic style with its tendency to track the thoughts of the author in the present tense.

Another example of such an essayistic style can be found in the *Malone Dies*, where the narrator uses right branching additions to convey the tortured movements of the mind: "Decidedly this evening I shall say nothing that is not false, I mean nothing that is not calculated to leave me in doubt as to my real intentions" (207). While the initial clause here conveys certainty about the narrator's ability to speak the truth in the future, the second part of the sentence reverses course as it draws his ability to speak the truth into doubt. Beckett's syntactical procedure in both these instances represents his broader tendency to use additive clauses to

undermine preceding material in order to perform the messy operations of thought without staking a conceptual position.

Melanie Foehn argues a similar point without identifying the essay as a mode of comparison when she ties Beckett's rhetorical strategies to those of Pascal. In "A Rhetoric of Discontinuity: On Stylistic Parallels between Pascal's *Pensées* and Samuel Beckett's *L'Innommable*," she notes that Pascal and Beckett share an "aesthetics of discontinuity" or writing that emulates the chaotic nature of reality in the formation of sentences (127). Specifically, she claims that Beckett may have gleaned Pascal's use of contradictions and oxymorons to generate an "aporetic effect," one that conveys radical uncertainty about what can be known (125). For evidence of the connection between the two writers, Foehn joins Beckett's statement of his "mocking attitude towards the word, through the word" with Pascal's "*la vrai éloquence se moque de l'éloquence*" (true eloquence mocks eloquence). We could easily extend their parallel statements on unaffected language to Montaigne's own preference for artful artlessness. As Klaus notes, Montaigne "often characterizes his prose as being natural, simple, ordinary, plain, or free, rather than artificial, affected, pedantic, studied, or strained" (9). Such a naturalistic bent surfaces in a line from his essay, "A Consideration Upon Cicero," where he writes of his own style, "I naturally drop into a dry, plain, blunt way of speaking. . . . I am prone to begin without a plan; the first remark brings on the second" (186). While Montaigne claims to transcribe his thoughts in the plain style of his thought, the perfectly placed semicolon that enacts his description of a linked fissure between initial and subsequent thoughts indicates a level of syntactical deliberation that undermines his claim of happenstance.

The "natural" voice that Beckett and Montaigne employ stems from a stylistic pattern, which as Foehn identifies as a coordinate mode of writing. Foehn notes that Pascal and Beckett

achieve the effect of naturalness through particular stylistic effects: "juxtaposition, repetition, ellipsis, aposiopesis—a rhetorical artifice in which the speaker comes to a sudden halt, as if unable or unwilling to proceed—parataxis . . . syncopated rhythm to suggest the broken movement of thought" (127). This sense of fragmentation, achieved through the absence of transitions that Foehn connects to Pascal's style, is also precisely the effect Montaigne achieves in the sentence "I am prone to begin without a plan; the first remark brings on the second" where the semicolon exchanges a verbal connector with a semiotic break. Essayistic writers, of whom Beckett is arguably a part, use such stylistic abrogations to manifest the fragmentary, organic qualities of thought.

Beckett's preference for the additive style and distaste for methodical thinking also surfaces in his jocular use of the subordinate style of deductive logic, the stylistic antithesis of coordination. The subordinate style, in contrast to additive one, proceeds through logical sequences marked by transitional words such as "thus" and "so." As Fish writes, unlike the coordinate style, the subordinate style conveys a sense that the text has been pre-arranged and sorted into a classification system (50-1). Throughout his works, Beckett often satirizes the subordinate, logical style found in analytic philosophy. In *Watt*, for instance, he writes, "The fact of his having requested the tram to stop proves that he did not mistake the stop, as you suggest. For if he had mistaken the stop, and thought himself already at the railway station, he would not have requested the tram to stop" (19-20). Here, Beckett employs a deductive style signaled by conditional language such as "if," "proves," "would," to reach a banal conclusion that did not require logic to draw.

Likewise, in the trilogy, he repeatedly mocks Descartes's cogito, using variations on the subordinating format of "I think therefore I am" to reach several self-evident conclusions:

It follows at least that I am not in the basement. (219)
That I am not stone deaf is shown by the sounds that reach me. (295)
Since, having always been here, I am here still. (302)
I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open. (304)

These sentences begin conventionally enough but turn toward the unexpected when they exchange the abstract discourse of philosophy "I, of whom I know nothing," into the humorous and tangible "I know my eyes are open." Such lines have received a great deal of attention as proof of Beckett's position in the field of skepticism, since he often uses logic to demonstrate his character's doubts about material reality. Gontarski, for instance, argues that such lines indicate that Beckett and his characters are epistemologically skeptical since they realistically represent the experience of being uncertain (5, 9). Kenner, in "Comedian of the Impasse," likewise remarks that a "note of uncertainty plagues the whole Beckett cosmos" (67). But while Kenner elsewhere rightly suggests that Beckett's vision is satirical, he does not apply his own thesis to the recognition that Beckett satirizes skepticism itself in his mocking use of logic (xiv).

Importantly, Beckett's syntax satirically conveys the dubious ends to which logic can be drawn in proving that nothing can be known while avoiding, as is evident in his rhetorical savvy, the conclusion that he and his characters are authentically, truly, or purely skeptical. In other words, while we might consider Beckett's adoption of an essayistic mode as a means to perform uncertainty, it may be overreaching to consider Beckett, as I will discuss in greater detail in the final section of this chapter, a philosopher of skepticism. As Ruby Cohn argues, Beckett's writing remains distinct from Descartes in that the latter's skepticism led him to knowledge of the self while the voice of *The Unnamable* "never arrives at the certainty of a doubting subject" (172). On the relationship between satire and skepticism in Beckett's work, Simon Critchley remarks that the laughter of Beckett "arises out of a palpable sense of inability, impotence and inauthenticity . . . [where] the condition of possibility for the hypothesis 'if....then...' is an

impossibility. Beckett's sentences unfold by falling apart in what he calls his 'syntax of weakness'" (*On Humour* 106). Although Critchley does not name it, the syntactic form he is describing is an essayistic one in which the experience of the inability to unify thought manifests on the page in the effects of fragmentation, contradiction, and digression. Such a syntax indexes the failure of philosophical logic to adequately mirror the experience of uncertainty while also avoiding the codification of such failure by stressing the stylistic performance at their core. In other words, Beckett's dominant use of parataxis may not be a natural expression of epistemological skepticism, but rather a rhetorical strategy designed to produce particular responses such as laughter.

Contradiction

The appearance of an essayistic rhetoric also surfaces in Beckett's use of contradictions to indicate that a veracious representation of consciousness includes reversals in thinking. While Foehn attributes the appearance of such an effect in Beckett's writing to his readings of Pascal, it is also possible to trace the style to Montaigne, whose use of contradiction initiated the essay tradition as one that favors the juxtaposition of opposites over systematic unity. For instance, Montaigne's inclusion of inconsistencies appears within the organizational structure of his appropriately titled essay "On the Uncertainty of Our Judgment." In the essay, Montaigne begins with an argument against overconfidence: examples from antiquity indicate that those who rest on their laurels become vulnerable to attack. The text then reverses position to consider the wisdom of the opposite argument: people also open themselves to danger when they continuously strive for further gains. By alternating between a claim and its counterclaim, Montaigne's structure implicitly unseats the possibility of having certain rules about how to

behave in war (and by analogy, life) so that as he writes on the theme of uncertainty, his essay also leaves the reader with doubts about what can be known (205-209).

Such a structural display of uncertainty can be found in Philip Lopate's contemporary essay, "Against Joie de Vivre," where he undermines a peremptory claim with mounting self-analysis. Lopate opens the piece with a declamation of a social behavior he disfavors: "What rankles me is the stylization of this private condition [*joie de vivrism*] into a bullying social ritual" ("Against..." 142). He then takes a turn to expose bits of autobiography that serve to undermine the argument he originally presented against joyful living. After declaiming the *joie de vivrist* as an "an incorrigible missionary," Lopate rotates toward self-analysis: "A warning: since I myself have a large store of nervous discontent (some would say hostility), I am apt to be harsh in my secret judgment of others, seeing them as defective because they are not enough like me" (143). From here the essay features an autobiographical account of "when [his] dislike for *joie de vivre* began to crystallize" ("Against...143). These personal meanderings embody what Lopate elsewhere refers to as the personal essayist's "dialectic of self-questioning or 'thinking against oneself'" that characterize this apparently organic mode of discourse and undermine any singular argument that might be found in more formal essays ("Introduction" xxix-xxx).

Beckett likewise uses additive syntactical arrangements in such a way that latter clauses reverse former ones, conveying the sense that the mind recorded in the process of thinking generates inconsistencies. A passage on the opening page of *Molloy* exemplifies Beckett's use of oppositional thinking: "All I need now is a son. Perhaps I have one somewhere. But I think not. He would be old now, nearly as old as myself. It was a little chambermaid. It wasn't true love" (7). Here, the forward movement of the prose indicates that the plot of the story consists not in

the delivery of a factual narrative or an argumentative thesis but in the representation of the

tortured movements of a dissembling mind that perpetually negates prior truth claims.

Digression

Beckett further undermines formal logic by contextualizing systematic thinking within an

essayistic structure of digression. Klaus defines digression as the "repeated, unanticipated shifts

of attention from one subject to another. Frequent enough to create the impression of a

consciousness so absorbed by its kaleidoscopic interests as to be almost oblivious of an audience.

A mind turn in upon itself. Digression—the rhetorical outcome of free association" (24). As

Klaus further remarks, Montaigne employs such digressions to avoid "the tyranny of a single

image, idea, memory, or problem," a thesis we might extend to Beckett for his use of digression

to draw the text on rather than to prove a cohesive message (24). As Montaigne acknowledges in

"A Consideration upon Cicero," "I pile up only the headings of subjects . . . bear[ing] outside of

my subject, the seeds of a richer and bolder material" (185).

One of the great digressions of Beckett's work may be the sucking stone episode, where

Molloy famously devises a system for sucking each of his four stones by circulating them

through his four pockets (69). For the description of the combination game, Beckett employs the

hypotactic style, evident in the use of three subordinate clauses beginning with the word

"which," which he places in one sentence:

> Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I
> replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my
> trousers, *which* I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, *which* I replaced
> by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, *which* I replaced by the stone which was
> in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. (emphasis mine, 69)

The six-page digression of which this passage is a part humorously concludes with subverting

indifference: "And deep down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each

time or always the same stone, until the end of time. For they all tasted exactly the same," which

suggests that the passage is not designed to narrow an idea deductively toward the truth but

rather to pass the time (74). Moreover, the text's subsequent shift toward the confessional with "I

don't remember having been seriously molested" suggests that the logical game has all along

been designed to avoid an uncomfortable memory, one that will fade in the forward movement of

text (74).

By framing logic within the essayistic mode of digression, Beckett suggests that the

deductive style delays and occludes a fuller representation of human consciousness. Connecting

such a program to the representation of the self, Smyth remarks that Beckett's narrators often

employ the strategy of digression to represent the inner workings of consciousness stylistically,

or as he writes, to "explore the meanderings of a disintegrating consciousness, and thus deviate

from any unified concept of subjectivity, in order to translate the fragmentation of the self in a

discourse characterized by repetition, instability and fracture" (156). Beckett's tendency to

subvert logical sequence by placing it within the structure of digression may also be considered

part of a larger project of "abandon[ing] linear argument," according to Gontarski, who argues

that Beckett's texts ultimately convey not a sense of prearranged perfection but the chaos of the

composing process (4, 7). In that way, Beckett's essayistic proximity to philosophy occurs not at

the site of argumentation about the self but rather in the performance of an uncertain "I" that

destabilizes the logical structures of the text.

Presence

The sense that the self lacks control over the process of thought relates to another key

feature of the essay, what Wendell Harris identifies as a sense of the author's "presence" on the

page (934). As Harris writes, informal essays derive from the author's perspective and so follow

"unexpected turns" of thought as the author implicitly declares 'here *I* stand, *this* is where my honestly described thoughts lead me" (936). The perception that the written words are falling out of his mind onto the page occurs, for instance, in *Molloy*, where Beckett writes:

> And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, But how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means but it's the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind. (13)

The first-person interruption that highlights a gap in thought "free, yes, I don't know what that means" conveys a sense that the writing itself represents the uncontrollable process of thinking and, as such, derails the notion of an accountable, unified self.

The sense that Beckett explores his own elusive selfhood in his fiction writing has encouraged a strand of criticism that relates his work to autobiography. In his 1977 book *Beckett/Beckett,* Vivian Mercier comments that Beckett's switch to first person indexes a newfound "deep personal involvement with his material," so that the "I" on the page could be said to reference the voice of the implied author (169). More recently, Carla Locatelli has argued that *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Not I* can be read as autobiographies because the reader "can relate the name of the author (on the first page) to the text, seeing them as . . . correlated figures of self-portraiture, and of autobiographical understanding" (68, 70). Drawing a connection between Beckett's autobiographical mode and his philosophical contributions, Anthony Uhlmann argues in "Samuel Beckett and the Occluded Image" that Beckett adopts Geulincx's concept of autology, the "inspection or examination of the self, which leads immediately to . . . disregard for the self and its power" (88). While Uhlmann claims that Beckett appropriates Geulincx's process of self-examination as part of a broader process of generating philosophical images (88), Beckett's exposure of the self as an unsteady concept can be more precisely compared to the persona constructed in the essay, which figures the author as a literary construction.

When Locatelli and Gontarski argue that Beckett's work is autobiographical, they use the word "autobiography" loosely to refer to Paul de Man's concept that all writing inevitably involves self-representation (Locatelli 70). While such a broad definition of autobiography provides a useful medium for recognizing instances of self-portraiture in Beckett's work, the type of self-fashioning found in the personal essay more closely aligns with that found in Beckett's *oeuvre*. That is because the personal essay offers a more nuanced definition of representation, one that accounts for the intimate voice of the author without ascribing the historical details of the author's life to that persona. Following a narrower definition of autobiography than Locatelli utilizes, Lopate remarks that while autobiographical writers exhaustively divulge specific details of their lives in a narrative fashion, personal essayists only use vignettes of autobiographical experience to move outward from the individual persona to the universal (Lopate xl, xxix). While Lopate's claim to universality may be overshooting, the key point is that the essayist's claim to authenticity is always undercut; the performance is only ever of a partial self, a persona, Klaus remarks, that derives as much from "self-dramatization" as from "a masking and an unveiling, a creation and an evocation of the self" (47).

As Virginia Woolf writes, the essayist highlights the artifice of its own creation through an emphasis on style so that such writers are "Never to be [themselves] and yet always" (qtd. in Klaus 79). While the events in an autobiographical work are ostensibly designed to require a literal interpretation of the writer's life, the personal essayist's appearance as a persona demands a literary inquiry into how such an artifice was constructed (Klaus 13). The contingent quality of the essay's persona, then, renders the genre a more useful model for analyzing Beckett's work since the author does not consistently appear, as Locatelli would have it, in such a way that the reader "can relate the name of the author (on the first page) to the text" (70). For, as P. J. Murphy

asserts, Beckett fashions "versions of the self" rather than depictions of himself in his imaginative works (224). Beckett's characters may indeed be more akin to personas; after all they diverge strikingly from his biography: they murder, they are buried in sand, they commit suicide, etc.

Whereas with autobiographical writing, the relationship between the narrating persona and the authorial name is presumably one of identification, even if that identification remains incomplete or suspect, there is a greater implied gap between the author's name and the narrating voice in works of fiction and in essays. As Foucault notes in his own discussion of the intentional fallacy (123-4), Beckett did not advocate for the idea that writers claim final authority over their texts. As such, he offered few clues to decoding his work and when he did, they undercut his own ability as the author to reveal intimate truths about his texts. For instance, in a letter to director Alan Schneider dated December 29, 1957, he writes of *Endgame*:

> It would be impertinent for me to advise you about the article you are doing and I don't intend to. But when it comes to these bastards of journalists I feel the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind. That's for those bastards of critics. And to insist on the extreme simplicity of dramatic situation and issue. If that's not enough for them, and it obviously isn't, or they don't see it, it's plenty for us, and we have no elucidations to offer of mysteries that are all of their making. My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, *nec tecum nec sine te*, in such a place, and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could. (*No Author...* 109)

Following Beckett's approach, even if that means consequently ignoring Beckett's instructions not to follow his approach, undermines the theory that Beckett's writing is autobiographical in the sense that the mysteries of a character's actions cannot be traced back to a writer who takes responsibility for their historical origins.

It is undeniable that there are moments of self-representation in Beckett's texts, and the personal essay provides an apt model for recognizing the disconnect between the narrating

persona and the historical writer while acknowledging those personal elements. In *The Unnamable*, for instance, the reader might easily assume that the author wonders aloud why he has refracted himself into multiple characters when he asks, "Why did I have myself represented in the midst of men, the light of day? . . . We won't go into that now. I can seem them still, my delegates" (297). Comparable admissions appear in *How It Is*, where the narrator/author writes, "how can I efface myself behind my creatures" and "I say it as I hear it," suggesting that the material on the page derives from an unfiltered transmission of overheard material within Beckett's thoughts (52, 93).

Beckett's apparent acknowledgement that he created characters to represent aspects of himself led Gontarski to argue that Beckett's works are autobiographical insofar as he and his characters struggle to represent an unsteady "I," one that remains uncertain about the veracity of its identity (4, 5, 17). But Beckett's impersonations of the voice of the author expounding on the page more closely resemble the sense of presence cultivated by personal essayists. For example, in *Molloy*, Beckett writes:

> For to contrive a being, a place, I nearly said an hour, but I would not hurt anyone's feelings, and then to use them no more, that would be, how shall I say, I don't know. Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition. (28)

Stylistically, the lines, with their second guesses, such as "I don't know," align with Virginia Woolf's assertion in "The Modern Essay" that the effect of immediacy comprises an integral part of the familiar essay whose "present is more important than its past" (809). Woolf demonstrates this sense of intimacy on the page in "The Death of the Moth" where she tracks the activity of a moth and her thoughts about it as they overlap in her observation of an unfolding event:

> The helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But as I stretched out a pencil,

meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again. (267)

Even though this passage is written in the past tense, the story unfolds with a sense of surprise as the writer appears to react to the moth's death in sequential time. Similarly, we are meant to presume with Beckett's clause "how shall I say" that the writer is placing words on the page as they enter his thoughts.

E. B. White cultivates a similar feeling of immediacy in his essay "Once More to the Lake" where his memories of visiting a lake in Maine appear to fall on the page in the immediate act of their retrieval: "I have since become a salt-water man, but sometimes in summer there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind that blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for he placidity of a lake in the woods" (246). Through use of serial conjunctions, White performs the additive quality of his memory where one image engenders the next. Through such techniques, White and Woolf's essays typify what Harris identifies as the sense of intimacy, reliability, and presence on the page that are vital to developing the familiar persona of the personal essay (934). In other words, what separates these works from autobiography is that the historical facticity of their narratives becomes less important than their stylistic displays of immediate thought.

Such lyrical displays of reminiscence can be found in Beckett's 1958 play *Krapp's Last Tape* where his protagonist literally replays his memories on a tape recorder. Locatelli names the play one of Beckett's autobiographical texts (70), and many critics have identified within the play Beckett's own epiphany that he would cultivate a singular voice by accepting the darkness within him (Lawley 28-9). The epiphany scene runs as follows:

> Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this

evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . . [hesitates] . . . for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—[*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again]*—great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind‑gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most— (226)

Here, Beckett uses a familiar style to achieve what Klaus refers to as the essayistic effect of the "mind in the process of thinking" (Klaus 8). Through right-branching additions, Beckett accumulates not only the vivid memory of a particular place including, unusually for Beckett, its temperature and natural features, he also displays the intimate voice of the one who remembers, who qualifies, hesitates, and builds momentum. Of course, Beckett's version of recollection is less forthright than E. B. White's as the former mediates the act of remembering through the intervention of a future self who impatiently skips ahead, perhaps highlighting the editorial work of the personal essayist in shaping his or her persona.

Before we conclude, as David Lodge does, that Beckett, fully presents "a narrative voice talking to itself, or transcribing its own thoughts as they occur" (221), it is important to return to the idea that the essayistic sense of "presence" on the page is an effect of the genre deliberately chosen to achieve the appearance of immediacy not entirely to convey a philosophical point about the elusive nature of knowledge or the self. Indeed, as Harris comments, "even the most personal of essays creates a persona," so that sincerity becomes a generic goal (941). The idea that personal essayists use particular stylistic tools to achieve a sincere tone contrasts with John Snyder's characterization of the essay as "textuality untrammeled by generic boundedness" (150). That is, Snyder claims that the essay "deploys power freely" demonstrable through the fact that the end goal of the essay appears to be "unintended," which suggests that the representation of the self in the essay runs closest to the truth of self-representation (151). In

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arguing as much, Snyder may mistake the verisimilitude of freedom for the actual freedom of its writer when he asserts that "the art of the essay is liberationist artifice" meaning that the essayist writes without constraint, "chooses not to choose, wills not to will, shirks stable identity, directs himself or herself not to find but to be surprised" (150).

Contrariwise, Klaus demonstrates that personal essayists endow their texts with the appearance of sincerity by performing his own activation of a Montaignian voice. He first notes that even Montaigne "openly espouses a policy not of naturalness but of studied casualness or, to be more exact, of artful artlessness" (12). To substantiate this point, Klaus refers to a passage from Montaigne's essay "Of Vanity": "Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem" (761). Following in the Montaignian tradition, in his chapter on the "discontinuous" structure of personal essays, Klaus introduces a "muddle" of questions referring to an incident with a librarian; he then marks the text with a typographical line, proceeds to puzzle over the typographically segmented text of E. B. White, includes another typographical line, and then admits that he's been "playing dumb" to enact his surprise at reading E. B. White in the 60s before the traditional structure of the essay had been challenged (31-2). The effect is unmistakable: authors can and do deliberately give their works a personal voice in order to enter into the tradition of essay writing. Thus, to say that the Montaignian essay "is pure prospect—groundless, wide open, empty, like the Platonic matrix," as Snyder does, is to ignore the stylistic choices that make the appearance of artlessness desirable (152).

In relation to Beckett's work, the recognition of a personal as opposed to an autobiographical voice is a way of distinguishing between the manifestation of an authentic voice of consciousness purely representing ideas on the page and the mediated voice of an author

who obfuscates direct interpretation. Smyth arrives at a similar conclusion when he asserts that instead of reading Beckett's trilogy as a "confessional narrative," which underscores the "completeness of the inner self," it is more accurate to recognize that the compilation was constructed as a highly reflexive piece of literary writing of which its authorial persona is one fiction (166-7).

The obvious fictional aspect of Beckett's work also elicits the acknowledgement that both autobiography and the personal essay are imperfect modes for understanding his writing. As Gary Adelman remarks in *Naming Beckett's Unnamable*, critics often ignore the most basic recognition that Beckett is primarily a fictional storyteller (13). Adelman rightfully argues that despite Beckett's prominent dislike of the usual conventions of narrative storytelling, his attachment to style indicates that "words, paradoxically, are his only camouflage [from society], his wings, his element, the amazing spittle of words his unmistakable signature" (15). Not purely an essayist, Beckett's work is voiced by more than a persona, but by characters who ostensibly originate not from his historical self but *ex nihilo*. In other words, Beckett claims to bear little responsibility for generating his fictions since his ideas reportedly come to the mind from nowhere.

Despite the imperfect means of comparison, Beckett, to a greater degree than most other imaginative writers, approaches the non-fiction essay in the way he often employs the direct, personal language of the essay, which, as Adorno remarks, works through the mode of "telling" rather than "showing" (165). In *Molloy*, for instance, the narrator expresses distaste for the conventional means of producing fiction when he asks the personal question, "Must I describe her?" (35). Answering no, Beckett's writing often appears essayistic because he prefers a mode of abstract telling as in *The Unnamable*:

> All lies. 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. (314)

The language of the above passage contains the expository, abstract nouns, and first-person pronoun often found in the personal essay. Most relevantly, Beckett repeatedly uses the abstract word "nothing," as in "I have nothing to do," to refer not to a material reference point but to a pure concept that morphs into many related ideas. Perhaps with such passages in mind, Adelman acknowledges that Beckett's works are also not purely fictional since they do rely on modes of telling found in the "confessional monologue" (67). We might further compare Beckett's mode to the essay because of the sense of authorial presence that nonetheless depends on persona that surfaces in the line "No one compels me to, there is no one, it's an accident, a fact." This passage perhaps indicates that there is no author compelling the narrative forward; there is only an authorial persona that operates through the mode of trial and error found in the essay.

The Essay and Philosophy

Until now, I have been comparing Beckett's work to the familiar essay without exploring the relationship between the form and philosophical discourse in depth. It might be tempting to conclude that analytic philosophers employ the hypotactic style with its subordination of ideas into logical order, while Beckett's writing, with his reliance of parataxis represents a stylistic performance of nonpurposive experimentation. Additionally, I have suggested that the personal essay conveys a sense of uncertainty through its use of a familiar, coordinated syntactic style that emphasizes the progression of thought with all of its inconsistencies. In that way, his essayistic style may be said to manifest a philosophy of skepticism because it suggests, as Kenner writes, that what the mind knows is constantly shifting and grasping at knowledge that it cannot obtain

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(*Flaubert...* 79). At the same time, it is important to recognize that the logical effect of hypotaxis and the doubt-ridden effect of parataxis are both just that, effects of discourse, rendering the comparison between Beckett's work and philosophy, as ever, incomplete and yet proximate.

The question arises as to whether the formal or informal style provides a more appropriate medium for the philosophical pursuit of truth. Following Montaigne, as Harris writes, the placement of programmatic essays at one end of a continuum and personal essays at the other end largely depends on their distinct primary purposes (937). We might situate philosophy with its primary purpose of seeking truth and knowledge at the formal end of the continuum while noting, as Harris does, that the purpose of the personal essay is primarily archival; the informal essayist records rather than asserts ideas (936, 937, 944). Yet in some ways, the informal essay actually provides a more appropriate medium for dialectic philosophy than the formal essay, since, as Levinas, Adorno, and Lukács discuss, its open format mirrors the conceptual flexibility that certain philosophers wish to portray. In that sense, the essay is implicated in the debate over whether philosophy represents the pursuit of truth best when its form mirrors its results; and, it is at that site of contention that Beckett's writing finds its parallel, unresolved tension.

The essay, as has been said earlier, provides capacious room for thought to grow, expand, contract, and reverse itself. As such, it allows for lengthy exposition and digression, explanations, and experimentations with thought. The sense of openness that the essay creates led Levinas to consider the format to be more conducive to philosophy than fiction. That is because the enclosed world of fiction, in which a distant author does not directly contribute to the themes being discussed, conveys a sense of conceptual closure. As Levinas writes:

> That the characters in a book are committed to the infinite repetition of the same acts and the same thoughts is not simply due to the contingent fact of the narrative, which is

exterior to those characters. They can be narrated because their being *resembles* itself, doubles itself, and immobilizes. Such a fixity is wholly different from that of concepts, which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic. By its reflection in a narrative, being has a non-dialectical fixity, stops dialectics and time.

> The characters of a novel are beings that are shut up, prisoners. Their history is never finished it still goes on, but makes no headway. (10)

As he posits, while the direct discussion of concepts in an essay allows for dialectical engagement, the thematic treatment of ideas found in fiction occludes ideational flexibility. In that way, the familiar style of the experimental essay, in contrast to both fiction and doctrinal writing provides the format most conducive to Levinas's philosophical project of remaining open to the Other.

Adorno similarly elevates the informal essay as the form that most closely mirrors the content of post-metaphysical philosophy while devaluing the results produced by the formal style. He claims that while the strategy of hypotaxis aids in the producing the semblance of logical, planned hierarchies, making the form desirable for systematic metaphysical philosophers, the hypotactic effect lacks the capacity to represent the truth of experience as effectively as the informal essay does. He writes:

> Since the airtight order of concepts is not identical with existence, the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine—deeply rooted since Plato—that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against that ancient injustice toward the transitory, by which it is once more anathematized, conceptually. The essay shies away from the violence of dogma, from the notion that the result of abstraction, the temporally invariable concept indifferent to the individual phenomenon grasped by it, deserves ontological dignity. (158)

According to Adorno, the informal essayist's preference for the coordinate style, where transitions derive from internal associations, represents the experience of uncertainty more realistically than the "airtight deductive systems" of metaphysical philosophy (163, 169-170).

Epistemologically speaking, he argues, the essay, more authentically than other forms, embodies the feeling in contemporary life that we cannot know anything outside of our own

experience of reality. Instead of concealing the subjective origin of ideas by presenting them in

subordinate, prepared, objective systems—a problem Adorno ascribes to Descartes and Hegel—

essayists highlight "self-revelation" by depicting thought in fragments (163, 166). As Adorno

writes, "[The essay] thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by

moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over" (164). The unfinished

thoughts on the page found in the essay, which are conventionally regarded as the hallmarks of

untruth, then represent the truth as an inclusive process, for as Adorno writes, "the essay

becomes true in its progress" (161, 166). The truth of the essay, then, for Adorno, is a

performative one in which its "methodically unmethodical" form manifests the unvarnished

patterns of thought (161). That is, the informal essay may be considered philosophical in the

sense that its characteristic "luck," "play," and display of "childlike freedom" manifest the

uncertainty of perceived experience more accurately than other modes of discourse (151-2). In

that sense, the essay can be considered philosophical only insofar as we may define philosophy

broadly as a manifestation of the representative truth of the event of subjective being.

Before we conclude that Beckett's writing, through its comparison to the essay,

represents the truth of subjective experience, it's important to recognize that Adorno may

overemphasize the philosophical capacity of the essay mode, which does not necessarily depict

reality more accurately than the subordinate style. As Stanley Fish notes, the claim of the essay,

that it, *in opposition to* analytic philosophy, better manifests the shakiness of a mind at work,

sidesteps the notion that both styles are rhetorical effects of a deliberate strategy; neither is

purely mimetic or planned (62-3). Klaus similarly remarks that writers following in the

Montaignian tradition actively adopt the stylistic strategies discussed here—including parataxis,

contradictions, digressions, and authorial presence—in order to achieve a representation of the

mind at work in a seemingly authentic fashion (12-3). The word "seemingly" is important in the recognition that the essayistic mode does not actually depict reality in a more authentic manner than other forms.

Instead of fetishizing the essay as the mode that most accurately records the writer's perceptions, we might more realistically frame the essay as the generic site of controversy over what mode best represents the traditional philosophical pursuit of truth, with truth either being the derived result of a logical system or a process of experimentation that recognizes deception as an integral part of the truth telling process. Not quite philosophy, the informal essay, in Adorno's view, holds a middle ground between rigid, programmatic scientific discourse on one side and "the empty and abstract residues left aside by the scientific apparatus," which enter into philosophy (170). The essay, through its emphasis on critique, provides concrete examples that contradict abstractions and emphasize contingent experiences (170). Not quite philosophy because it lacks a rigorous methodology, the informal essay is also not quite literary fiction since it claims to express the candid voice of its author.

The in-between status of the essay interested Lukács who considered the essay to be a hybrid form, an entity that combines elements of philosophical and literary writing while eliding identification with either (2, 13, 151). Lukács separates philosophical and literary writing on the basis that the indirectness of literary writing, with its preference for symbols, distinguishes it from philosophy, which is concerned with direct signification (3-5). Lukács further notes that the essay's inclusion of messy stylistic flourishes elides "the icy, final perfection of philosophy" (1). Yet essayists can also never be identified with poets since they, as critics, only comment on the forms that artists shape (1, 9-10). Adorno likewise distinguishes the essay from both art and theory while claiming that the essay does achieve "aesthetic autonomy." He argues that the essay

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"resembles art" in the way that the essayist is conscious of the disconnect between form and content; in other words, the form of the essay does not entirely relate back to its content in the way a tightly constructed poem might (165). While essayists do write in a literary register of high style, such writers otherwise relate "exclusively to theory" in the way they work through direct telling rather than showing (165). Yet the essay remains distinct from philosophy since its primary purpose is, according to Adorno, not to deliver a thesis but to place everything into doubt (166). Lukács and Adorno encourage the conclusion that the essay holds a middle position between literature and philosophy on the basis that it relies on direct modes of telling while inhering in its own style and critiquing the work of all others.

The essay, then, provides a model for understanding the entangled and yet distinct relationship between Beckett's writing and formal philosophical discourse. His work may be considered essayistic in the sense that he frequently utilizes parataxis, contradictions, digressions, and a personal voice to portray an organic process of thinking that performs perpetual doubt, even satire of doubt, without aligning with a formal philosophical thesis. Perhaps Beckett's texts have often been considered philosophical because they share many generic qualities with the essay, the mode that includes both the format of formal philosophical discourse and the informal meanderings of prose in the Montaignian tradition. Not quite philosophy in the sense that he illustrates ideas through a stylistic and persona-driven performance; his work also flouts conventional literary practices in the way he often prefers modes of personal telling to image-making.

To return to the question of nothing in relation to the essay, we might consider Beckett's adoption of the abstract word "nothing" in response to his predecessors' use of the theological "abyss" and scientific "void," as is discussed in chapter four, as part of a broader turn toward the

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essayistic mode of "telling" rather than "showing." Moreover, his use of multiple, contradictory, philosophical sources on nothing, as is covered in chapter three, may be part of a larger tendency to gather perspectives on "nothing" without necessarily arriving at a firm conclusion about any of them. Furthermore, his position that literary writers have nothing to say, as is explored in chapter two, may be reflected in his use of an essayistic style that tests ideas to fill pages with words rather than to derive theses on philosophical matters. Overall, Beckett's essayistic approach to nothing is expressed in his tendency to gather images of "thinglessness," not necessarily to prove a singular, consistent message about them, but to write on.

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VITA

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