

FREEDOM AND NEGATIVITY IN THE WORKS OF  
SAMUEL BECKETT AND THEODOR ADORNO

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby certify that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Natalie Leeder

## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Beckett's corpus is concerned with the fragile possibility of freedom as articulated by Adorno. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, this concern begins with an overt thematisation of freedom in *Murphy* and *Eleutheria* that ultimately leads to an impasse. In line with Adorno's claim that '[f]reedom can be defined in negation only', Chapters 2 to 5 proceed to illuminate the deeply negative expressions of freedom that pervade Beckett's post-war corpus.

Chapter 2 explores the question of aesthetic freedom—a key preoccupation of Adorno's—in relation to Beckett's *Novellas*: if art is wholly determined by its socio-political context then it makes no sense to talk about freedom in relation to Beckett's work. This chapter considers the paradox whereby art simultaneously embodies the illusion of freedom and the freedom of illusion. Chapter 3 traces the connection between freedom and evil in *The Lost Ones* and *Endgame*, analysing the systematic network of social unfreedom revealed in the cylindrical world of the former, and through the oppressive weight of history in the latter.

Recognizing the significance of the philosopher's critique of the Culture Industry, Chapter 4 takes some of Adorno's more nuanced texts as the basis for an exploration of Beckett's late media plays. It argues that the aesthetic incorporation of technology heralds liberatory possibilities in its radical reimagining of the role of technology as a mediator between subject and world. Finally, Chapter 5 considers the significance of Adorno's reconceptualisation of metaphysics in Beckett's late short prose, arguing that, while *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* manifest the horror of absolute immanence, *Company* registers the transcending impulse of thought to free itself from the existing world. So, in Beckett's resolutely negative art as a whole, a provisional and ephemeral possibility of freedom is kept alive by his abstaining from any affirmation of the existent.

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My Mum, Dad and brothers, Joseph and Simeon, have provided unending support, for which I cannot thank them enough. Love and thanks also to my Nanny, eternally proud of her granddaughter, and my Grandad, who would have loved to have seen this thesis.

I will always be grateful to David Addyman for introducing me to Beckett during my Undergraduate. Rupert Gough and the Choir of Royal Holloway deserve a special mention for accommodating my study and providing me with a wonderful space of release and fulfilment. Grateful acknowledgement is due to Royal Holloway for funding my research. I have, furthermore, been constantly overwhelmed throughout my thesis at the kindness of strangers, too innumerable to list, who have helped to smooth the path.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to Sam Hall, who has been with me every step of the way. To him I dedicate this thesis.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### SAMUEL BECKETT

A number of Beckett's texts are most accessible within collected works. For ease of reference, I allude to each individual text by its full name and include below the collection's full citation and relevant page numbers.

*The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

- *Waiting for Godot*, pp. 7–88
- *Endgame*, pp. 89–134
- *Happy Days*, pp. 135–68
- *All That Fall*, pp. 169–200
- *Krapp's Last Tape*, pp. 213–24
- *Rough for Theatre II*, pp. 235–50
- *Embers*, pp. 251–64
- *Rough for Radio I*, pp. 265–72
- *Rough for Radio II*, pp. 273–84
- *Words and Music*, pp. 285–94
- *Cascando*, pp. 295–304
- *Film*, pp. 321–34
- *Eh Joe*, pp. 359–68
- *Ghost Trio*, pp. 405–14
- *....but the clouds....*, pp. 415–22
- *Catastrophe*, pp. 455–62
- *Nacht und Träume*, pp. 463–66

*The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995)

- *First Love*, pp. 25–45
- *The Expelled*, pp. 46–60
- *The Calmative*, pp. 61–77
- *The End*, pp. 78–99
- *All Strange Away*, pp. 169–81
- *Imagination Dead Imagine*, pp. 182–5
- *Enough*, pp. 186–92
- *The Lost Ones*, pp. 202–23

*NoHow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1996)

- *Company*, pp. 1–46
- *Ill Seen Ill Said*, pp. 47–86
- *Worstward Ho*, pp. 87–116

*Eleutheria*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)  
*How It Is* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1964; repr. 1972)  
*Molloy*, ed. by Shane Weller (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)  
*Malone Dies*, ed. by Peter Boxall (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)  
*Murphy*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)  
*The Unnamable*, ed. by Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)

THEODOR W. ADORNO

AR            *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O'Connor (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

AT            *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997; repr. 2012)

CM            *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. by Henry W. Pickford (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2005)

CI            *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991; repr. 2003)

HF            *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008)

IS            *Introduction to Sociology*, ed. by Christoph Gødde, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000)

KCPR        *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001)

LND        *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a lecture course 1965/1966*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2008)

MCP        *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000)

MM        *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005)

ND        *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 2007)

- NL1*      *Notes to Literature Volume One*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nichol森, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), I
- NL2*      *Notes to Literature Volume Two*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nichol森, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), II
- P*          *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel M. Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981)
- PMP*      *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Thomas Schröder, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity, 2000)
- TMR*      *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction: Notes, a Draft and Two Schemata*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Wieland Honban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006)

*MAX HORKHEIMER AND THEODOR W. ADORNO*

- DE*          *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002)

*IMMANUEL KANT*

- R*          ‘Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason’, trans. by George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 39–216
- CPR*      *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- CPrR*      *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 133–272
- GMM*      *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 37–108



## INTRODUCTION

Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into.

—*Molloy*, p. 32

This thesis takes as its basis Theodor W. Adorno's provocative claim that '[f]reedom can be defined in negation only' (*ND*, p. 321), and argues that Beckett's writing shifts from an overt and thematic exploration of freedom to what Adorno describes as a 'determinate negation' of various 'concrete expression[s] of unfreedom' (*HF*, p. 243). I will expand upon Adorno's philosophy later in this Introduction; for now, let it suffice to clarify the term 'determinate negation', a concept that derives from Hegel, but takes on a different significance in Adorno. Hegel's conception of determinate negation is based on the idea that, *contra* Scepticism, the 'refutation of a theory leads not to nothingness, but to another theory that could not exist without the one that it refutes'.<sup>1</sup> Negation as critique leads to positivity in that what is negated is superseded rather than abstractly rejected. Adorno's concerns about this 'transfiguration of negativity as redemption' (*DE*, p. 18) lead him to adapt the term for his own purposes. For Adorno, no affirmation follows from determinate negation: rather, the process aims to divulge the truth by revealing the contradictions in play without attempting to resolve them. A determinate negation of unfreedom, then, does not place its opposite—freedom—in the palms of our hands as in a historical dialectic of progress: rather, it reveals the untruth of the existing and allows us to 'get in touch negatively with its truth'.<sup>2</sup> This negative access to truth—the possibility of freedom—is always provisional, fragile and fleeting. For Adorno, determinate negation prevents us from jeopardising that which we are attempting to salvage by prematurely converting it into a positivity. Paradoxically, we can learn more about freedom from Beckett's deeply negative expressions of unfreedom than from the portrayal of an idealized utopia that would be blind to its dependence on the given world.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv, Akademie der Künste, MS 440, 'Ästhetik' (1961), p. 127. Quoted in Bowie, p. 161 (author's translation).

Freedom in Beckett is at once a philosophical problem and a fragile, ultimately unrealizable possibility. Fundamentally, it is a condition that is never actualised as such—not even in the early works *Murphy* and *Eleutheria*, the only two of Beckett’s texts to manifest an overt and sustained engagement with the concept. Nonetheless, I argue that the interest in freedom Beckett so patently if provisionally evinces in the thematics of *Murphy* and *Eleutheria* endures in his later texts in far more intricate and nuanced ways. While a reader of mid- to late-Beckett might be excused for doubting the significance of freedom in a corpus seemingly so preoccupied with suffering, confinement and impotence, I read in these texts an intractable impulse to preserve and, where this is no longer possible, generate a minimal space of freedom that acts in direct opposition to an abjectly unfree social totality.

In this, I am sustaining a tradition within Beckett studies that, by means of disparate historical and/or philosophical routes, positions the writer as political and radical.<sup>3</sup> Such a tradition is threatened by a trend of unsettlingly conservative thought often affiliated with archive-inspired materialism and also a related revival of humanism in Beckett studies. At the heart of this former, political tradition lies Adorno, whose seminal 1961 essay, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, revolutionised the then predominant existential-humanist reception of Beckett by insisting on the play’s distinct and complex relation to its socio-political context. Beyond this, moreover, Beckett’s work became for Adorno the paradigmatic example of post-Holocaust art, testifying to its acute historical moment in the only way that would not betray it: negatively. For Adorno, while art is indisputably tethered to the world—not least in its status as a commodity—it also, through its purposelessness, opposes it and thus, as I discuss in Chapter 2, transcends it in a small but significant way. This is a

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<sup>3</sup> Paradigmatic of this tradition are Alain Badiou and Andrew Gibson, the major exponent and interpreter of Badiou’s conception of Beckett in the English-speaking world. See, for example, Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. by Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003); Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Other figures of note include James McNaughton, Tyrus Miller and Seán Kennedy. For representative parts of their work, see, respectively, McNaughton, ‘Beckett, German Fascism, and History: The Futility of Protest’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 15 (2005), 101–116; Miller, ‘Dismantling Authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the “Postwar”’, *Textual Practice*, 8 (1994), 43–57; and Kennedy, ‘Introduction: Ireland/Europe... Beckett/Beckett’, in *Beckett and Ireland*, ed. by Seán Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–22. Laura Salisbury’s work can also at times be aligned with these thinkers. See, for example, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

key point of contention in the recent work of Steven Connor, whose uncritical materialist stance in *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* is set firmly against what he sees as a current ‘lexicon of the illimitable’ in Beckett studies.<sup>4</sup> He argues instead for ‘Beckett’s radical finitude’,<sup>5</sup> so called because its acknowledgement of the ‘inescapability of limit or restriction’ supposedly ‘imposes a limit on radicalism itself’—that is, the kind of radicalism embodied in Alain Badiou, Connor’s primary antagonist.<sup>6</sup> Although Connor mentions Adorno only once in his book and in a different context,<sup>7</sup> it seems likely that he would include the philosopher as a proponent of the ‘aesthetics of the inexhaustible’ that is supposedly exemplified by Badiou.<sup>8</sup> Connor’s position exemplifies the more conservative direction of a certain kind of scholarship that severs, with zeal, the connection between the finite and the infinite, the physical and the metaphysical, the immanent and the transcendent—a problem that will be addressed in Chapter 5.

A similar issue is at stake in Matthew Feldman’s attribution of an ‘agnostic quietism’ to Beckett and his work.<sup>9</sup> The term derives from a long and dense letter to Thomas MacGreevy in 1935 in which Beckett considers the implications of Thomas á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* for his own aesthetic and ethical development. My primary reservation about Feldman’s supposedly ‘biographically apposite’ attribution of an ‘agnostic quietism’ to Beckett’s work lies in its oscillation between, on the one hand, his focus on Beckett’s ‘[e]arly development’ and, on the other, his extrapolation of what he takes to be Beckett’s early thought to his writings as a whole.<sup>10</sup> While it is perfectly conceivable that, in 1935, Beckett was grappling with the merits and

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<sup>4</sup> *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 148. I find Connor’s particular brand of materialism more problematic than the empiricism of such archivists as Mark Nixon and Dirk van Hulle—whose work is in many ways hugely valuable—fundamentally because his work raises more serious ideological problems.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197. For an critical comparison between Adorno and Badiou as regards their interest in Beckett, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Philosophizing with Beckett: Adorno and Badiou’, in *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 97–117.

<sup>9</sup> ‘“Agnostic Quietism” and Samuel Beckett’s Early Development’, in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Séan Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 183–200 (p. 184).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

demerits of Kempis’ ‘quietism of the sparrow alone upon the housetop’<sup>11</sup> in a way that would have an impact on his early work, one look at such work—*Murphy*, for instance, as I will discuss in Chapter 1—reveals Beckett’s insight into the inherently problematic nature of such ‘isolationism’.<sup>12</sup> Beyond this, Beckett’s first-hand experience of pre-war Nazi Germany, his wartime years in occupied France and his political allegiances from this time onwards, however particular,<sup>13</sup> suggest a wealth of experience that would significantly complicate the position Feldman attributes to him. Finally, it is my contention that the texts themselves—particularly those written after the war—resist Feldman’s suggestion that ‘quietism provides an ethical and, for Beckett, aesthetic approach to suffering and failure *as a spiritual purgation for living*’.<sup>14</sup> Adorno famously faced, and continues to face, similar (though differently motivated) charges of quietism,<sup>15</sup> which he addresses in his late essay, ‘Resignation’. Here he makes a crucial distinction between quietism and thought’s ‘insatiable quality, the resistance against petty satiety’ (*CI*, p. 174). It is through this minimal and barely conspicuous gap between giving up and resistance that we are able to understand the freedom of Beckett’s work.

As direct references to freedom in Beckett are scarce after *Murphy* and *Eleutheria*, an unusually explicit allusion in *Molloy* bears some scrutiny:

It was she put him in the hole, though I was the gentleman. For I cannot stoop, neither can I kneel, because of my infirmity, and if I ever stoop, forgetting who I am, or kneel, make no mistake, it will not be me, but another. To throw him in the hole was all I could have done, and I would have done it gladly. And yet I did not do it. All the things you would do gladly, oh without enthusiasm, but gladly, all the things there seems no reason for your not doing,

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), I, p. 257 (10 March 1935).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> For more detail, see Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), pp. 140–1; and also his ‘Beckett, Vichy, Maurras and the Body: Premier amour and Nouvelles’, *Irish University Review* [forthcoming].

<sup>14</sup> Feldman, p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> In 1969, after deteriorating relations between Adorno and the Student Movement, the Institute for Social Research was occupied by the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*), at which provocation Adorno called the police. For more details, see Philip Bounds, ‘Just Say No: Herbert Marcuse and the Politics of Negationism’, in *Revisiting the Frankfurt School: Essays on Culture, Media and Theory*, ed. by David Berry (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 49–70. Espen Hammer has been instrumental in refuting the dominant image of ‘Adorno as an unpolitical aesthete’ that ‘has haunted his legacy since the 1960s’. *Adorno and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 25.

and that you do not do! Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into.

(*Molloy*, p. 34)

Three freedom-related preoccupations are intertwined in this short and admittedly comic passage. First, Molloy's 'infirmity', preventing him from stooping or kneeling, is representative of a shift towards physical unfreedom in Beckett's texts. The bodily abnormalities of the early fiction grow and become more extravagant in Hamm's state of debilitation and the bizarre movement of the narrator of *The Expelled*. Such bodies manifest an overt form of unfreedom in their subordination of the mental sphere to the whims of flailing or otherwise dysfunctional limbs. However, the disruption they cause to dominant and socially acceptable modes of being is curiously subversive and, paradoxically, freeing, as the encounters with authority in *Molloy* and *The Expelled* indicate.<sup>16</sup> They are, moreover, gradually displaced by the increasing preponderance of those closed spaces that have a decidedly subordinate role in the earlier fiction, from Murphy's garret to the sealed jar that contains the Unnamable. In *Happy Days*, Winnie is first '[e]mbedded up to above her waist' (*Happy Days*, p. 138) and then later 'up to neck' (p. 160), unable to turn her head in any direction. In *Play*, the three unnamed characters are enclosed within urns. *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Ping* offer variations on the theme of an enclosed space, neutralising the singularity of the figures within, while *The Lost Ones* expands the 'rotunda' (*Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 182) into a regulative cylinder that is inhabited by an entire social community.

Second, Molloy muses on the philosophical problem of the will: 'I would have done it gladly. And yet I did not do it'. The predominance of first person pronouns in this passage—and, indeed, in the *Trilogy* more widely—mimics the typical philosophical assumption that the individual is the bearer of a free will. Molloy's

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<sup>16</sup> Molloy is accused of violating 'I don't know what, public order, public decency' with his 'attitude when at rest, astride [his] bicycle' (*Molloy*, p. 17), while the narrator of *The Expelled*, conspicuous by his 'gait'—'Stiffness of the lower limbs, as if nature had denied me knees, extraordinary splaying of the feet to right and left of the line of march. The trunk, on the contrary, as if by the effect of a compensatory mechanism, was as flabby as an old ragbag, tossing wildly to the unpredictable jolts of the pelvis' (*The Expelled*, p. 50)—is likewise stopped by a policeman, who 'pointed out to me that the sidewalk was for every one, as if it was quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category' (p. 51). In a letter written in Hanover in 1936, Beckett registers his own personal experience of subversive physicality: 'Je viens de subir une petite amende (1RM) pour m'être promené d'une façon dangereuse [I have just had a small fine (1RM) imposed on me for walking in a dangerous fashion]'. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, pp. 394–5 (5 December 1936).

confusion at his own inability to throw the dog into the hole, despite his best intentions, points to a fundamental problem in conceiving freedom as an attribute of the individual, in abstraction from his social and historical context. The Unnamable confirms this by speculating that his master—the paradox here is self-evident—is perhaps ‘not solitary like me, not free like me, but associated with others’ (*The Unnamable*, p. 287). This instance of what has been, since Isaiah Berlin’s 1958 lecture, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, defined as ‘negative liberty’,<sup>17</sup> or freedom *from* oppression, is structurally dependent on the Unnamable’s solitary and incapable state and is thereby exposed as vacuous and valueless. From the assertion in *Murphy* that all the characters, saving the protagonist, are ‘puppets’ (*Murphy*, p. 78), to the automatism of *Quad* and *What Where*, in which all spontaneous behaviour seems to have been eradicated, Beckett manifests an awareness of the contradiction between the supposed free will embodied in rational individuals and their empirical unfreedom.

Finally, Molloy articulates a possible solution to his ponderings—‘Can it be we are not free?’—before ingenuously suggesting: ‘It might be worth looking into’. The irony that philosophers and theologians have been (one might say, fairly inconclusively) ‘looking into’ the problem of free will for thousands of years would not be lost on Beckett. However, this is far more than a philosophical soundbite or an amusing jibe at the futility of an endless abstract problem, because it is not long until Molloy finds himself empirically unfree. His description of his brief and not unpleasant imprisonment utilises language pertaining to a far more troubling situation:

I went to the door. Locked. To the window. Barred. [...] They had shaved me, they had shorn me of my scant beard. [...] I must have fallen asleep, for all of a sudden there was the moon, a huge moon framed in the window. Two bars divided it in three segments.

(*Molloy*, pp. 36–7)

Taken out of context, this passage could easily be seen as referring to the plight of a prisoner, political or otherwise. The vaguely menacing and non-attributable ‘They’ submit Molloy to a potentially dehumanising process of shaving and confine him to a

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in *Liberty*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 166–217 (p. 177).

locked and barred room. The fact that the real situation is rather different does not detract from the unease generated by this physical imprisonment and the language used to describe it. Molloy's supposedly abstract and inconsequential musings on the question of freedom take on a more significant bearing in the light of this apposite reminder of the empirical reality of unfreedom.

I begin, then, by elucidating Adorno's understanding of the concept of freedom. His characteristically unsystematic approach renders it impossible to isolate a formal theory of freedom—which, in any case, would be wholly incongruous with Beckett's subtlety. Adorno's work may seem to flit arbitrarily from one thought to another, but in fact proceeds according to the immanent contradictions of the matter at hand: in this case, freedom. Moreover, Adorno heavily relies on his extensive knowledge of Kant, a knowledge that he assumes his reader shares, and is, therefore, not always fully expounded. I will attempt to rectify this omission in this Introduction and more broadly throughout the thesis by elaborating on those elements of Kant's philosophy that provide material for Adorno's critique. Such an explication is all the more compelling given Beckett's own documented interest in Kant and his works,<sup>18</sup> an interest that has received scant critical attention. Very little has changed since P. J. Murphy's 1994 claim that 'Kant's influence on Beckett has been almost totally underestimated'<sup>19</sup>—an influence that Murphy argues is 'vision-shaping'.<sup>20</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fill this prodigious gap, but Kant can be seen as a provocative intermediary between Beckett and Adorno, with their disparate intellectual backgrounds. One such preoccupation in which this comes to the fore is the Kantian insistence of the limits of knowledge—what I will call, following Adorno, the 'Kantian block' (*K CPR*, p. 75). Murphy suggests that while Beckett is struck by Kant's recognition that 'the direct relation between the self and—as the

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<sup>18</sup> In January 1938, Beckett ordered and received '[t]he entire works of Kant' and in May that year comments in a letter to Arland Ussher that 'I read nothing and write nothing, unless it is Kant (de nobis ipsis silemus) and French anacreontics', an activity that is reaffirmed in September, when he ruefully claims: 'I read an average of an hour a day, after an hour the illusion of comprehension ceases, Kant, Descartes, Johnson, Renard and a kindergarten manual of science'. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, p. 581 (5 January 1938); p. 622 (12 May 1938); p. 643 (27 September 1938). Beckett additionally took extensive notes on Kant in his 'Philosophy Notes', based on Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*. For more details, see P. J. Murphy, 'Beckett's Critique of Kant', in *Beckett / Philosophy*, ed. by Matthew Feldman and Karim Mamdani (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2015), pp. 261–78 (pp. 261–4).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in 'Beckett and the Philosophers', in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. by John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 222–40 (p. 229).

<sup>20</sup> 'Beckett's Critique of Kant', p. 262.

Italians say—*lo scibile*, the knowable, was already broken’,<sup>21</sup> he is unable to accept unreservedly ‘the limitations of the Kantian approach: ‘to create new worlds through “pure forces of the imagination” dialogically engages Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*’.<sup>22</sup> While Murphy argues that ‘this is nowhere more decisively the case than in Beckett’s “war novel” *Watt*’,<sup>23</sup> and offers a striking account of the Kantian moments in the novel,<sup>24</sup> I am more interested in Beckett’s late prose, in which, as I discuss in Chapter 5, the Kantian block is visualised and ultimately defied in a way that reflects Adorno’s own ambivalence towards it.

After establishing the significance of Kant to Adorno’s thought on freedom, I will offer a critical account of the literature relating Adorno and Beckett as it is relevant to this thesis. The abundance of this criticism points to an acute critical awareness of the significance of Adorno’s philosophy for a reading of Beckett (and, indeed, vice versa). However, no previous book-length study has attempted an extensive reading of the interplay between the two corpuses as wholes. This justification of my thesis leads into a rationale of its scope and a chapter-by-chapter summary.

## I

Adorno’s most extensive work on the concept of freedom is found in the *History and Freedom* lectures of 1964–1965, which were published posthumously in German in 2001 and translated into English in 2006. These lectures offer a far simpler but by no means less meticulous account of the issues that would only a few years later provide the basis of his notoriously elliptical *Negative Dialectics*, in which appears a condensed version of what he terms the Freedom Model. For some time, the significance of a concept of freedom to Adorno’s philosophy received limited critical attention in the English language. But Colin Hearfield’s 2004 *Adorno and the Modern*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 266–71. See also ‘Beckett and the Philosophers’, pp. 229–35; and P. J. Murphy, *Beckett’s Dedalus: Dialogical Engagements with Joyce in Beckett’s Fiction* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 122–50.



*Ethos of Freedom* and Martin Shuster's more recent *Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* to a certain extent filled this gap. Hearfield's work perhaps suffers from having been composed prior to the English translation of the *History and Freedom* lectures. The study considers Adorno's work in relation to that of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Habermas. It argues that Adorno develops a 'negative dialectics of freedom' by negotiating the supposedly oppositional modes of a 'conceptual *ratio*' and an 'existential *poiesis*'.<sup>25</sup> Only Adorno, Hearfield concludes, is able to successfully mediate both positions. Despite the study's clear contribution to the field, it is hindered by being, as Timo Jütten puts it, 'a project of gigantic aspirations'.<sup>26</sup> Its breadth is staggering, which unfortunately shifts the focus away from Adorno. While Hearfield is attentive to Adorno's aesthetics, even summarising 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*',<sup>27</sup> his expansive philosophical context prevents him from engaging with any particular instances of the play he discusses, or expanding its scope. This forms the main point of departure of this thesis, which proceeds immanently from Beckett's work itself, using Adorno's twists and turns on the topic of freedom to offer an analysis of the complex landscape of negativity in Adorno and Beckett, which puts paid to any simplistic account of negativity as simply the opposite of positivity, nothing rather than something.

Shuster positions Adorno's work and its Idealist predecessors (primarily Kant and Hegel) in dialogue with the contemporary Anglo-American analytic tradition. Rather than considering freedom in all its breadth, his focus is on autonomy, the critique of which he considers to be at the heart of the dialectic of enlightenment. His reading of Adorno sees the philosopher offering a radical reformulation of autonomy on the basis that 'I must carve out a space outside my subjectivity, outside myself'.<sup>28</sup> Shuster's position is one with which I have a lot of sympathy, and this thesis continually emphasizes Adorno's stress on the perils of uninhibited subjectivity. Once again, however, my emphasis is on the aesthetic dimensions of Adorno's thought, bringing his philosophical concerns to bear on the nodal point of Beckett's radical art.

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<sup>25</sup> Colin Hearfield, *Adorno and the Modern Ethos of Freedom* (Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> 'Logic, Experience and Freedom: Hegel and Adorno', *Hegel Bulletin*, 61 (2010), 101–10.

<sup>27</sup> See Hearfield, pp. 163–5

<sup>28</sup> *Autonomy After Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 41.

What these studies do articulate is the paramount importance of an idea of freedom to Adorno's wider philosophical concerns. This is primarily the case precisely because of his enduring conviction that the modern world as we know it is characterised by oppression, false consciousness and the particularity-demolishing principle of exchange, and is therefore almost incapable of fostering any kind of freedom for its subjects. I say 'almost' because, for all his pessimism, Adorno does retain a glimmer of hope that a free condition could arise. His philosophy is committed to the critique of existing conditions—from the apparently insignificant minutiae of daily life to the grand systems developed by the German Idealist tradition. Such a critique diagnoses the sicknesses of society while attempting to carve out space for what Adorno elusively calls 'something different' (*HF*, p. 55). This is by no means an evasion of the central problematic of establishing freedom, but rather an acknowledgment of something that lies at the heart of Adorno's conception of freedom: that it cannot be envisaged positively. There are a number of reasons behind this claim, and these are inextricably intertwined with Adorno's other philosophical and sociological concerns.

First, Adorno insists on the historical nature of all abstract concepts. The predominant perception of such concepts as static and timeless is what repeatedly leads to repression: 'there is no category', Adorno argues, 'no valid concept that might not be rendered invalid at the moment when it is cut off from the concrete context to which it really belongs' (*HF*, p. 61). Freedom is no exception: it 'is itself the product of history and has altered with history' (*HF*, p. 180). Although the concept obviously has a 'core meaning that remains constant' (*HF*, p. 180), its historical manifestation constantly changes, to the degree that '[w]hole epochs, whole societies lacked not only the concept of freedom but the thing' (*ND*, p. 218). This claim does not lead to relativism—the idea that freedom is whatever a given individual considers it to be. It relies on Adorno's theory of negative dialectics, which is concerned with the way in which 'the concept enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers' (*LND*, p. 7). The concept is at once less and more than what is subsumed under it. It is less because it fails to account for the manifold diversity of its referent, instead abstracting one characteristic from it and defining it accordingly. It is more, on the other hand, insofar as the concept contains an speculative element that

transcends the empirical referent. Freedom is the example Adorno uses to explicate this in his 1965 *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*:

If, for example, I think and speak of ‘freedom’, this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution. Rather, in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to.

(*LND*, p. 7)

There is, then, what Adorno terms a non-identity between the concept and its referent. Because the relationship between them is dialectical, each influences the other, without, however, resulting in a synthesis (as in Hegelian dialectics). The concept of freedom is, accordingly, impacted by changes in the empirical world, without losing its core meaning. Empirical instances of freedom, on the other hand, always maintain a non-identical element that cannot be integrated into the abstract concept: this is the irreducible singularity of the object. As a historical concept, freedom ‘need not remain what it was, and what it arose from’ (*ND*, p. 275). It is therefore impossible to pin it down positively and fix it into place: to do so would be to suppress the inherent dialectical movement propelled by the ultimate non-identity between concept and referent.

Second, Adorno emphasises that the nature of social reality makes it increasingly difficult to envisage what a free life would consist of. Though he continues to use the Marxist term ‘ideology’, Adorno admits that ‘[w]here ideology is no longer added to things as a vindication or complement—where it turns into the seeming inevitability and thus legitimacy of whatever is’ (*ND*, p. 268)—it becomes useless as a tool to distinguish between the true and the false. Adorno notably diagnoses modern life as ‘damaged’ in the subtitle to *Minima Moralia*. The greatest obstacle to freedom in such a society is the difficulty of securing ‘a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence’ (*MM*, p. 247), an endeavour that Adorno characterises paradoxically as ‘the simplest of all things’ and ‘the utterly impossible thing’ (*MM*, p. 247). Such a standpoint is so problematic because it presupposes, first, individuals who have the ability to disentangle themselves from what Adorno describes as the ‘spell’ (*HF*, p. 177) of unfreedom—a

spell that is disseminated at every level of existence—and, second, knowledge that is not ‘marked [...] by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape’ (*MM*, p. 247). Adorno’s writings on freedom demonstrate an acute awareness that modern subjects are, to a worrying extent, blind to the structures of unfreedom that govern their lives; however, he also acknowledges his own inevitable entanglement in such structures. With this in mind, Adorno’s emphasis that ‘[f]reedom can be defined in negation only’ (*ND*, p. 321) becomes all the more significant. An immanent critique of ‘the concrete form of a specific unfreedom’ (*ND*, p. 321) is the only option open to us, and even this is fraught with peril. Adorno ends *Minima Moralia*, however, with an uncharacteristic and admittedly oblique glimpse of hope: ‘beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters’ (*MM*, p. 247). That is, the desired end of redemption itself is ultimately occluded by the significance of the means by which it could be reached: speculative, undogmatic thought. This is another crucial manifestation of the minimal yet decisive gap between resignation and resistance I discussed above. The very act of critique—the frustratingly paradoxical attempt to ‘be at every moment both within things and outside them’ (*MM*, p. 74) in a reflection of ‘Munchhausen pulling himself out of the bog by his pig-tail’ (*MM*, p. 74)—is in itself an aspect of the very freedom it is trying to reach.

If our understanding of freedom, then, can only be wrenched from the empirical unfreedom of given conditions, then it is no wonder that a large proportion of Adorno’s explicit account of the concept is dedicated to an immanent critique of Kant, whom Adorno considers to be the archetypal bourgeois philosopher of freedom. The following by no means attempts to offer an exhaustive account of Kant’s notion of freedom;<sup>29</sup> rather, it expands on those elements of Kant’s philosophy that are relevant to Adorno’s metacritique. In brief, Adorno’s departure from Kant must be understood as the foundation of a new and different kind of thinking about freedom, one that takes seriously not only historical atrocities but also the more insidious context of unfreedom that is no less pervasive now than it was fifty years ago.

Kant’s third antinomy attempts to resolve, at least in the realm of possibility, the problem of reconciling natural causality and free will. Such an endeavour is far

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<sup>29</sup> For this, see Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; repr. 1995).

from mere theoretical speculation. In the second analogy, Kant established that natural causality is ‘the ground of possible experience’ (*CPR* A201/B246). The stakes of the third antinomy are therefore high: if freedom cannot be proved to be reconcilable with natural causality, then it must be discarded and, with it, all legitimating grounds for morality. Kant begins, then, by offering a thesis that posits the necessity of freedom: ‘Causality in accordance with laws of nature is not the only one from which all the appearances of the world can be derived. It is also necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them’ (*CPR* A444/B472). The following proof assumes the contrary position—that ‘there is no other causality than that in accordance with laws of nature’ (*CRP* A444/B472)—so as to test the thesis: if this contrary position leads to rational contradictions then the thesis is proved. Kant argues, then, that the concept of natural causality—the doctrine that ‘everything **that happens** presupposes a previous state’ (*CPR* A446/B472)<sup>30</sup>—is dependent on an infinite regress, with no original cause. For this reason, Kant concludes that ‘the proposition that all causality is possible only in accordance with laws of nature, when taken in its unlimited universality, contradicts itself, and therefore this causality cannot be assumed to be the only one’ (*CPR* A446/B474). Another causality must be assumed that impedes the infinite regress: this must be ‘an **absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself** a series of appearances that runs according to natural laws’ (*CPR* A446/B474). This causality is transcendental freedom—‘the cosmological idea of a spontaneous first cause’<sup>31</sup>—and this assertion concludes the proof of the thesis.

Kant’s antithesis posits that ‘There is no freedom, but everything in the world happens solely in accordance with the laws of nature’ (*CPR* A445/B473). Once again, the proof attempts to establish a contrary argument, positing the existence of transcendental freedom as the prime or unmoved mover. This, Kant argues, contradicts the formerly proven law of natural causality in that it ‘presupposes a state that has no causal connection at all with the cause of the previous one, i.e., in no way follows from it’ (*CPR* A445/B473). Since the existence of transcendental freedom is inherently contradictory within the limits of reason, the antithesis is proved. Kant is

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<sup>30</sup> All emphases are Kant’s own.

<sup>31</sup> Andrews Reath, ‘Kant’s Critical Account of Freedom’, in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. by Graham Bird (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 275–90 (p. 279).

therefore in a position in which both the thesis and the antithesis of this apparently irreconcilable antinomy can be proved *a contrario*. Within the limitations of transcendental realism, this situation cannot be resolved—and, since natural causality is already an established fact by this point in the *Critique*, the very possibility of freedom is under threat:

Thus the only question is whether, despite this, in regard to the very same effect that is determined by nature, freedom might not also take place, or is this entirely excluded through that inviolable rule? And here the common but deceptive presupposition of the **absolute reality** of appearance immediately shows its disadvantageous influence for confusing reason. For if appearances are things in themselves, then freedom cannot be saved.

(CPR A536/B564)

Kant's resolution of the third antinomy is based on the fundamental distinction between appearance and reality—or, as Kant also describes it, between phenomenon and noumenon, and a subject's empirical and intelligible character. If these are identical, then we are forced to sacrifice freedom, because freedom—as the antithesis proves—simply cannot be posited in an empirical world governed by the law of causal determinism. Transcendental idealism neutralises the antinomy by attributing freedom to the intelligible character, which 'does not stand under any conditions of sensibility and is not itself appearance' (CPR A539/B567), and causality to the empirical character, which acts in accordance with the laws of nature: 'Thus freedom and nature, each in its full significance, would both be found in the same actions, simultaneously and without any contradiction, according to whether one compares them with their intelligible or their sensible cause' (CPR A541/B569).

Far from following Kant in attempting to defuse the contradiction between causality and freedom in the third antinomy, Adorno roots both in their social context. He suggests, arrestingly, that 'the validity of causality disintegrates correlatively to the decline of the possibility of freedom' (ND, p. 268) and that such a decline is manifest in modern capitalist society. As society becomes increasingly 'monolithic' (ND, p. 267), contracting into 'totality' (ND, p. 267), it becomes increasingly difficult to attribute effects to causes and vice versa. We are in a situation, Adorno argues, 'in which not only the machineries of production, distribution, and domination, but economic and social relations and ideologies are inextricably interwoven' (ND, p. 267), which renders it impossible to maintain Kant's simplistic causal chain—or,

indeed, the Marxist division between base and superstructure. Unfortunately, ‘today’s disappearance of causality signals no realm of freedom’ (*ND*, p. 268): the total society that destroys the concept of causality by making it impossible to identify its mechanisms is equally as fatal to the possibility of freedom. Kant’s very terms presuppose what Adorno describes as the ‘uncomplicated surveyability of small town conditions’ (*ND*, p. 266), an evasion of the complex web that is empirical reality.

Moreover, for Adorno, the third antinomy is prompted by an actual historical contradiction that cannot be neutralised by abstracting freedom from empirical reality and confining it to the intelligible sphere. He diagnoses Kant’s contradictory desire simultaneously to secure a place for freedom and limit its power as representative of bourgeois society, whose ‘attitude towards freedom was antinomian through and through’ (*HF*, p. 195). On the one hand, the rise of the bourgeoisie is synonymous with the claim to freedom:

It meant freedom from the restrictions and dependencies that the feudal system had imposed on the bourgeois order, the bourgeois class. In raising the question of freedom, the youthful, increasingly self-confident bourgeois class felt it essential to ground freedom in the nature of man.

(*HF*, p. 194)

On the other hand, the bourgeoisie, while continuing to posit the absolute value of freedom and its status as existing, is disturbed by its subversive potential—that very quality that enabled the rise of bourgeois society in the first place—and carefully limits it. For Adorno, Kant’s ‘Thesis represented the interest of the emancipated bourgeois class in freedom, while the Antithesis incorporates what has recently been expressed accurately, repeatedly and in various places as the fear of freedom’ (*HF*, p. 196). Kant’s Third Antinomy, then, is *objective* for Adorno: that is, it articulates a historical contradiction that lies at the heart of the society we have inherited from the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Kant succeeds in saving the possibility of freedom, but only by neutralising its subversive potential by restricting it to the intelligible sphere.

Kant’s achievement in the third antinomy is preliminary: it establishes space for freedom within natural causality’s monopoly on empirical experience. It demonstrates that, when considered in the light of transcendental idealism, the theses of free will and natural causality are not, in fact, mutually contradictory. It therefore establishes freedom as a *possibility*—one that can be reconciled with rational

thought—but by no means a *fact*. It is not until the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* that Kant approaches the *proof* of freedom. In both of these texts, Kant is driven by what Henry Allison calls the ‘Reciprocity Thesis’: ‘the claim that morality and freedom are reciprocal concepts’.<sup>32</sup> However, while in *Groundwork* III, Kant attempts to prove freedom and, from it, deduce the existence of the moral law, in the second *Critique* he reverses his strategy, rooting his deduction of freedom in the givenness of the moral law—a step that, as Adorno establishes, has significant consequences for his conception of freedom.

Kant’s first step in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is to establish the difference between practical principles and practical laws. The former ‘presuppose an *object* (matter) of the faculty of desire as the determining ground of the will’ (*CPrR* 5:21); that is, they ‘come under the general principle of self-love or one’s own happiness’ (*CPrR* 5:22). Practical laws, on the other hand, are not determined by their content or matter—an object of desire, for example—but by their *form*. A practical law can only be considered as such if, regardless of its content, it can be extrapolated into a universal law. Practical principles are determined by the senses; practical laws are determined by reason. Kant continues:

But if no determining ground of the will other than that universal lawgiving form can serve as a law for it, such a will must be thought as altogether independent of the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of causality. But such independence is called *freedom* in the strictest, that is, in the transcendental, sense. Therefore, a will for which the mere lawgiving form of a maxim can alone serve as a law is a free will.  
(*CPrR* 5:29)

A will that is determined by the moral law ‘must be thought as altogether independent of the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of causality’ because it acts according to reason rather than ‘the subjective condition of receptivity to a pleasure or displeasure’ (*CPrR* 5:21). Such independence can only be described as freedom: the will that acts according to practical laws (determined by form rather than content) can therefore be described as a free will. Kant goes on to confirm that, as a ‘fact of reason’ (*CPrR* 5:31), it is ‘the *moral law* [...] that *first* offers itself to us and, inasmuch as reason presents it as a determining ground not to

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<sup>32</sup> Allison, p. 201.



be outweighed by any sensible conditions and indeed quite independent of them, leads directly to the concept of freedom' (*CPrR* 5:29).

Adorno has significant reservations about Kant's asserted proof of freedom: 'it turns out that the more theory urges the need for freedom, and the more theory insists that human beings are essentially free and that they have absolute responsibility for themselves, then the more readily theory lends itself to repression' (*HF*, p. 197). Such repression is most apparent in the sphere of legality, in which individuals are held entirely accountable for their actions, and such theories as Kant's allow this punishment to be 'metaphysically justified' (*ND*, p. 215). The very real unfreedom of modern capitalist society is so apparent to Adorno that he sometimes seems to take it as a given. In no way, however, does he suggest that unfreedom is ontologically or metaphysically necessary, part of the human condition. Adorno's specific work on freedom is inextricably bound to the rest of his philosophy, which is remarkably consistent throughout his career. It is his extensive work on the Culture Industry—spanning the period from the 1930s to the 1970s—that contain Adorno's principal arguments for the systematic unfreedom of society. In these texts, Adorno suggests that the supposedly democratic and liberating culture of the masses is in reality a mechanism of deception. Consumers are encouraged to exercise their apparent individuality by choosing between near-identical products—and assured that in doing so they are utilising their freedom. One of the most pervasive examples of this deception is in the institution of free time, which is as functional as work. When Adorno suggests that '[o]rganized freedom is compulsory' (*CI*, p. 190), he is alluding to the way in which society 'foists upon you what your free time should be' (*CI*, p. 190). He continues:

People have been refused freedom, and its value belittled, for such a long time that now people no longer like it. They need the shallow entertainment, by means of which cultural conservatism patronizes and humiliates them, in order to summon up the strength for work.

(*CI*, p. 193)

Freedom is denigrated into free time, the insidious nature of which means that 'the majority of unfree people are as unaware of this process as they are of the unfreedom itself' (*CI*, p. 188).

Adorno's entire philosophy can be said to be dedicated to a demystification of the 'spell' (*HF*, p. 177) that prevents individuals from penetrating the depths of their own unfreedom. In such a world, any appeal to an existent freedom such as Kant's is not only profoundly hypocritical in its failure to factor into its rationale the empirical unfreedom of individuals, but also dangerous as it necessitates 'the unconditional responsibility of individual subjects' (*HF*, p. 197), a responsibility that they cannot possibly live up to in a fundamentally unfree society. Outside of the sphere of legality, 'the thesis of free will burdens the dependent individuals with the social injustice they can do nothing about' (*ND*, p. 263): for all their formal freedom—which, indeed, Adorno in no way trivializes, citing his own experience 'of what the world looks like when this element of formal equality is removed' (*HF*, p. 253)—subjects are in practice powerless to effect change: 'the formal liberty of all individuals in bourgeois society must be contrasted with their actual unfreedom in reality' (*HF*, p. 83).

Adorno does not, however, conclude from this assessment of the state of freedom in modern capitalist society that people are wholly or necessarily determined. Such a claim 'amounts to a metaphysically extended rule of the status quo' (*ND*, p. 263); it hypostatizes the current state of affairs into a timeless given. Indeed, Adorno roots our modern understanding of determinism solidly in capitalism:

Determinism acts as if dehumanization, the totally unfolded merchandise character of the working capacity, were human nature pure and simple. No thought is given to the fact that there is a limit to the merchandise character: the working capacity that has not just an exchange value, but a use value. To deny free will outright means to reduce men unreservedly to the normal merchandise form of their labor in full-fledged capitalism.

(*ND*, p. 264)

Far from an immutable given, determinism itself is revealed to be a historical—and hence necessarily changeable—concept. Under capitalism, determinism becomes indistinguishable from exchange, the absolute system of which neutralises any recourse to use-value. Finally, Adorno argues that 'a factually consistent determinism would sanction the *bellum omnium contra omnes*; if all men were equally predetermined and blind, every criterion of actions would fall by the wayside' (*ND*, p. 217). Not only would determinism obliterate the concept of morality, which is the very concern that led Kant to sketch out a space for freedom in the third antinomy, but

society itself would never have been possible. Adorno argues, then, that the antinomy Kant erects between free will and determinism is itself at fault—or, to put it another way, the antinomy reveals the empirical contradiction at the heart of the concept of freedom. Shunning the logic of non-contradiction, Adorno asserts the very real possibility of the subject being ‘both free and unfree’ (*ND*, p. 240).

Adorno also accuses Kant of abstracting freedom from the empirical world. In the third antinomy, he restricts freedom to the intelligible sphere, leaving some unanswered questions about how the intelligible character and the empirical character are related (if at all). In his discussions of practical freedom, however, Kant’s attempts to purify freedom from the taint of the empirical world become increasingly problematic for Adorno. I have already outlined the process by which Kant proves freedom in the second *Critique*, which rests heavily on his distinction between practical principles, which are subjective and based on one’s desire for happiness, and practical laws, which are formal and determined by reason. This principle of reason within the subject permits it to make decisions that are not defined by ‘impulses of sensibility’ (*CPrR* A533/B562)—lust, covetousness, greed, for example. In the *Religion*, Kant expands on this:

[F]reedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into its maxim* (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself); only in this way can an incentive, whatever it may be, coexist with the absolute spontaneity of the power of choice (of freedom).

(*R* 6:24)

Unlike in natural causality, in which events necessarily take place because of a prior cause, the capacity for reason allows subjects to *choose* which incentives to incorporate into their maxim, that is, their basis of conduct. The Kantian free will is wholly independent of heteronomous forces—which result in the will’s ‘dependence upon the natural law of following some impulse or inclination’ (*CPrR* 5:33)—*because* it is capable of acting according to the principle of reason: that is, capable of extrapolating an incentive into a universal law (or practical law). To recall, in the second *Critique*, Kant determined on rooting freedom in our innate consciousness of the moral law. The significance of this move, as Michelle Kosch explains, is that it results in ‘a dependence of our knowledge of our freedom on practical reason’s

demand that we be able to do what we are obliged to do'.<sup>33</sup> Freedom, for Kant, is in fact synonymous with obedience to the moral law. Subjects only truly exercise freedom when they submit themselves to the moral law because such a law, far from being imposed externally, is the law of reason authored by rational people. If they ignore the moral law (to which all individuals have innate access), then they are operating under heteronomous forces that can ultimately be reduced to the underlying principle of self-love.

For Adorno, then, Kant's mistake is to try to abstract freedom from the empirical world, 'seeking to cleanse it of all impairments' (*ND*, p. 256) in the form of heteronomous forces. The outcome is that 'freedom is necessarily reduced to obedience to lawfulness' (*HF*, p. 248). Hearfield notes that this paradox is replicated in Kant's 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in which 'the maturity or freedom of being able to speak with a critical voice in the public domain jars with the apparent unfreedom of necessarily submitting to one's everyday social roles and duties'.<sup>34</sup> 'What has come out of this', Adorno argues, 'is the intolerable mortgage imposed on post-Kantian philosophy: that freedom without law is not freedom, that freedom exists only in identification with the law' (*ND*, pp. 248–9). Such supposed freedom 'has its basis in unfreedom' (*HF*, p. 245). For Adorno, Kant's inability to 'visualize the concept of freedom otherwise than as repression' (*ND*, p. 256) is another expression of the bourgeois antinomy described above, in which freedom is simultaneously posited as the ultimate value and restrained.

Adorno argues that, despite Kant's best efforts to extricate freedom from the empirical world, he cannot help but link the two. This is most apparent in his *experimenta crucis* in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which represent the paradoxical attempt to, on the one hand, demonstrate the applicability of free will to reality and, on the other, 'create chemically pure conditions' (*HF*, p. 223) by stripping away, as far as possible, the empirical context in which the actions would make sense. For Adorno, Kant wants to 'have his cake and eat it too' (*HF*, p. 224):

The logical error lies, I believe, in failing to recognize that such a thought experiment would only be compelling in empirical conditions in which real people exist, while, on the other hand, as soon as you introduce a degree of

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<sup>33</sup> *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> Hearfield, p. 17.

reality into the experiment, you inevitably introduce elements that would deprive the example of its cogency.

(*HF*, p. 222)

Kant's thought experiments are at once too abstract and not abstract enough, 'incompatible with reality' (*HF*, p. 222) by their very artificiality and saturated with 'determining factors [...] from outside' (*HF*, p. 223). This is particularly evident in the 'gallows case', in which a lustful man is supposedly able to control his desires if he is threatened with death, while the same man would, at least conceivably, accept death if the alternative was dishonour. This very precisely delineated case clearly adheres to Adorno's charge of artificiality, while it also fails to conform to psychological reality: '[i]t is not', for example, 'necessarily true that the immediate prospect of the gallows will deter men from obeying their instincts' (*HF*, p. 224). In *Groundwork* III, Kant is similarly forced to acknowledge that 'the drive to freedom is [...] produced by that same sensible world' from which he attempts to extricate it.<sup>35</sup> This is where he attempts to demonstrate that even 'the most wicked scoundrel' (*GMM* A 4:454) ultimately desires to follow the moral law:

[F]rom that wish he can expect no gratification of desires, hence no condition that would satisfy any of his actual or even thinkable inclinations [...], but he can expect only a greater inner worth of his person. This better person, however, he believes himself to be when he transports himself to the standpoint of a member of the world of understanding.

(*GMM* A 4:455)

Adorno argues that the 'mere consciousness of being a better person' (*HF*, p. 210) is here shown to be extra-rational and hence, according to Kant's own precedent, a heteronomous motivating force for the supposedly free decision to follow the moral law. Kant is therefore shown to be incapable of successfully isolating the pure free will from the empirical world.

In contradistinction to Kant, Adorno argues that freedom only makes sense when we consider it as part of the natural and social world, even though, paradoxically, 'freedom has never yet been made a reality in the entire realm of historical and natural experience so far as this is known to us' (*HF*, p. 178). This encapsulates the significance of Kant's 'efforts to purify freedom' (*HF*, p. 178): 'All the difficulties of Kant's doctrine of freedom are based on our need, on the one hand,

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

to respect the non-existence of this freedom but, on the other hand, not to deny freedom' (HF, p. 178). Adorno uses Kant's *experimenta crucis* as a spring-board to explore his own theory of the 'additional factor' (HF, p. 183) or 'addendum [*das Hinzutretende*]' (ND, p. 226). *Contra* Kant's equation of the will with rationality, Adorno argues that what the *experimenta crucis* really demonstrate is that 'decisions of the human subject do not simply glide along the surface of the chain of cause and effect. When we speak of acts of will, we experience a sort of jolt': an 'impulse' (HF, p. 228). Even in the paradigmatic situation of Buridan's ass—'which found itself having to choose between two identical bundles of hay' (HF, p. 222)—the ass 'still has to exert itself, to make a gesture of some sort, to do something or other that goes beyond the thought-processes or non-processes of its pathetic brain. That is to say, it experiences some kind of impulse' (HF, p. 228). Far from being purely rational and autonomous, then, as Kant would have us believe, the will contains an irrational, somatic moment—one that is, crucially, non-identical with pure reason—and this, far from inhibiting freedom, is actually its precondition. Freedom, Adorno emphasises, 'would need what Kant calls heteronomous' (ND, p. 237): the 'invasion' of 'countless moments of external—notably social—reality' (ND, p. 213) into supposedly autonomous decisions.

Indeed, Kant's emphasis on the individual as the bearer of a free will is, for Adorno, at once problematic—in that 'the empirical subject that makes those decisions [...] is itself a moment of the spatial-temporal "external" world' (ND, p. 231) from which it is supposed to be separated—and indicative of a tendency towards a reified celebration of individualism inherent in bourgeois society. This is the focus of Eric S. Nelson's exploration of libertarianism's 'pathologies of freedom',<sup>36</sup> in which he suggests, following Adorno, that the concept of negative liberty—that is, as discussed above, 'independence from an arbitrary external will and authority' that essentially amounts to 'the separation of freedom from freedom in society',<sup>37</sup>—only succeeds in moulding a 'pathologically conformist' individual who cannot live up to the ideals of autonomy that nonetheless govern his life.<sup>38</sup> The more such a society

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<sup>36</sup> 'Against Liberty: Adorno, Levinas and the Pathologies of Freedom', *Theoria*, 10 (2012), 64–83.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 64; 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

celebrates the illusory freedom of the ‘heroic virile individual’,<sup>39</sup> the less real individuals are free, as they are manipulated into emulating a non-existent model of being that destroys any hint of spontaneity. The supposedly free individual is fundamentally free only to consume: to choose to buy certain products within a coercive capitalist system. Adorno is scornful of the idea that freedom is merely the concept that ‘everyone should have enough money with which to buy a fridge and go to the cinema’ (*HF*, p. 182). Such an idea of freedom in reality maintains the real state of unfreedom that dominates capitalist society rather than transcending it. This is not to say, however, that Adorno disdains the material element of freedom. On the contrary, he emphasises that on a basic level, the very real ‘potential for freedom [...] consists in the fact that the state of the forces of production today would allow us in principle to free the world from want’ (*HF*, p. 182). To this degree Adorno reveals himself as a classical Marxist: ‘[t]he concrete possibilities of making freedom a reality are to be sought [...] in the forces of production’ (*HF*, p. 182). Nonetheless, as this thesis will show, he displays an acute awareness of the mechanisms of unfreedom—and, occasionally, the means of resistance—that take place within the superstructure, the relation of which to the base is far more dialectical than vulgar Marxism would allow.

The ideology of the autonomous individual provides the basis of Adorno’s claim that ‘[t]he human subject is bewitched by the idea of its own freedom as if by a magic spell’ (*HF*, p. 220). Such an exaltation of the individual subject unremittingly promotes what Adorno terms identity-thinking: ‘the intrinsic aspiration of all mind to turn every alterity that is introduced to it or that it encounters into something like itself and in this way to draw it into its own sphere of influence’ (*LND*, p. 9). As Nelson argues, ‘[t]he narcissistic liberty of the self becomes the harshest legalism applied to others, as genuine difference is reduced to the identity of exchange in the name of the abstract individual’.<sup>40</sup> The glorification of the individual and its supposed freedom is also predicated on the repression of non-identity within the self. As Nelson notes, this identity compulsion is modelled on the model of exchange that has saturated relations in modern capitalism. The exchange relation presupposes absolute equivalence between its objects, which must be self-identical in order to survive. This

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

provokes integration rather than freedom, and destroys the very concept of individuality that it so ardently celebrates, leaving only ‘a mockery of true freedom’ (*ND*, p. 262). Adorno concludes that the very premise that freedom is located within the individual is extremely limited:

In ourselves, by introspection, we discover neither a positive freedom nor a positive unfreedom. We conceive both in their relation to extramental things: freedom as a polemical counter-image to the suffering brought on by social coercion; unfreedom as that coercion’s image. [...] Whether or not there is autonomy depends upon its adversary and antithesis, on the object which either grants or denies autonomy to the subject. Detached from the object, autonomy is fictitious.

(*ND*, p. 223)

*Contra* Kant, Adorno insists on freedom’s dependence on heteronomy. Kant’s effort to extract empirical reality from the consideration of freedom is deluded because it fails to recognise that the very concept of freedom only makes sense as a socio-historical category. Adorno turns to society to diagnose its mechanisms of unfreedom that ‘destine [...] the individuals to be what they are’ (*ND*, p. 219). Freedom, he acknowledges, is historically dependent on the ‘formation of the individual in the modern sense [...]—in the sense meaning not simply the biological human being, but the one constituted as a unit by its own self-reflection’ (*ND*, p. 218). There is no freedom in the absence of free empirical people. Nonetheless, freedom cannot be sustained as an unreflective concept that is ontologically rooted in the individual.

Within this context of unfreedom that Adorno relentlessly diagnoses, freedom ‘for the time being [...] is never more than an instant of spontaneity, a historical node, the road to which is blocked under prevailing circumstances’ (*ND*, p. 219). It is primarily, though not solely, within art that Adorno locates these elusive flashes of spontaneity that radically reconceptualise the world. As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, art provides for Adorno an enigmatic locus of opposition to social reality. It is enigmatic because it remains outside the logic of commitment—to an ideology, cause or ethical position—and therefore cannot be ‘de-coded’ as such. Nonetheless, it can, and, indeed, must, be supplemented by philosophy, ‘which interprets it in order to say what it [art] is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it’ (*AT*, p. 94). Beckett’s work is, in this sense, profoundly ‘ill-said’ (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, p. 80).



## II

Adorno delivered ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’ as a lecture in Frankfurt on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1961. Beckett was not looking forward to the engagement, which was arranged in his honour by Suhrkamp;<sup>41</sup> in a letter to Barbara Bray several months previously, he writes that his commitment was the result of some uncharacteristic enthusiasm while inebriated: ‘drank too much whiskey and agreed to be present, now don’t see how to get out of it. What the hell anyway’.<sup>42</sup> Knowlson relates Dr Siegfried Unseld’s recollection of the event that has by now become commonplace in Beckett studies:

Adorno immediately developed his idea about the etymology and the philosophy and the meaning of the names in Beckett. And Adorno insisted that ‘Hamm’ [in *Endgame*] derives from ‘Hamlet’. He had a whole theory based on this. Beckett said ‘Sorry, Professor, but I never thought of Hamlet when I invented this name’. But Adorno insisted. And Beckett became a little angry. [...] In the evening Adorno started his speech and, of course, pointed out the derivation of ‘Hamm’ from ‘Hamlet’ [adding that ‘Clov’ was a crippled ‘clown’]. Beckett listened very patiently. But then he whispered into my ear—he said it this in German but I will translate it into English—‘This is the progress of science that professors can proceed with their errors!’<sup>43</sup>

Barthes’ proclamation of the ‘death of the author’ is perhaps harder to sustain when the author is alive and well in the audience;<sup>44</sup> nonetheless, this third-hand account of Beckett’s sentiments has been taken rather too seriously. Dirk van Hulle notes that ‘[a]s a consequence of this account, Adorno tends to be better known in Beckett studies as the “critic” who failed to listen to Beckett’ and quite reasonably points out that ‘the reference to Hamlet in his essay [...] is only a relatively insignificant passage’.<sup>45</sup> Most significantly, he shrewdly notes that Adorno’s phrasing in the original German essay, ‘Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen’, literally translates as ‘Hamlet becomes varied [*Hamlet wird variiert*]’. Michael T. Jones’ later translation,

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<sup>41</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 478.

<sup>42</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1957–1965*, ed. by George Craig and others, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), III, p. 371 (5 November 1960).

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, p. 479.

<sup>44</sup> ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142–8.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Adorno’s Notes on *Endgame*’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 19 (2010), 196–217 (p. 199).

which, as van Hulle explains, ‘has played an important role in its reception in the Anglophone world’,<sup>46</sup> states ‘Hamlet is revised’.<sup>47</sup> This omits the musical connotation of ‘varied’, which, to an ear as musically attuned as Adorno’s, would be most likely intentional. Variation form (*Variationenform*) consists of a theme that is repeated in various modified forms: the term ‘varied’ resonates very differently to the more brutal concept of ‘revision’, which implies correction and alteration. Adorno writes:

In music before Beethoven [...] the procedure of variation was considered to be among the more superficial technical procedures, a mere masking of thematic material which otherwise retained its essential identity. Now, in association with development, variation serves the establishment of universal, concretely unschematic relationships. The procedure of variation becomes dynamically charged with newly gained dynamic qualities. In variation, as developed up to this point, the identity of the thematic material remains firmly established—Schoenberg calls this material the ‘model’. [...] But the meaning of this identity reveals itself as nonidentity.

(*PMM*, p. 40)

The over-simplified and anti-intellectual view of Adorno as an obtuse philosopher stubbornly refusing to be guided by Beckett is one that stems at least in part from this mistranslation and hence fails to acknowledge the complex mechanisms at work in the minutiae of Adorno’s texts. In isolating this most superficial of semantic links, Adorno utilises specific musical terminology that goes to the heart of his philosophy’s concerns. The variation on Hamlet that Adorno attributes to *Endgame* is no simple identity, for variation, he insists, ‘serves the establishment of universal, concretely unschematic relationships’: it is a dynamic category. The Hamlet instance, indeed, acts as a synecdoche for the thrust of Adorno’s work, which is committed to non-subsumptive relationships with its particular objects of interpretation: that is, it attempts to preserve the particularity of the object—literary or otherwise—from the universalising tendencies of the concept. He transposes Schoenberg’s concept of a ‘model’—the thematic material that undergoes variation—from its original musical context to a means of analysing ‘a specific, selective and, if you like, restricted complex of problems in such a way that light falls on all the aspects that cannot be treated fully if one is reluctant, as I am, to elaborate a total, comprehensive system’ (*HF*, p. 184). Such a concept is not only useful when understanding (or trying to

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

understand) Adorno's philosophy, but also when approaching Beckett's work, which toys relentlessly with the systematic intentions of thought.

Since its publication, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' has been the subject of many articles and book chapters—not to mention being glossed by an inordinate number of books on Adorno and Beckett respectively. Such a wealth of resources on the topic may give the impression that the Adorno-Beckett relation has been exhausted, but, on the contrary, this area of research has barely left the starting-line. This is primarily due to its narrow focus on Adorno's reading of *Endgame*. While this has prompted a number of sensitive and subtle dissections of what is, admittedly, an extraordinarily complex essay, the emphasis has remained the same: what we might, after Shane Weller, call 'Adorno's Beckett',<sup>48</sup> as exemplified primarily in 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', but also in passages of *Aesthetic Theory*. While this thesis does not wholly ignore Adorno's Beckett—that is, Adorno's particular understanding of Beckett's significance—it does attempt to neutralise its hegemony, allowing it to recede into the background so as to allocate space for new, more productive intersections between the two writers.

Some Beckett critics have taken Adorno's essay as a subject in its own right, grappling with its obscurity. This has prompted such article titles as David Cunningham's 'Trying (Not) to Understand' and Matthew Holt's 'Trying to Understand Adorno's Reading of *Endgame*': the focus here is on the problem of understanding Adorno as much as it is about trying to understand *Endgame*.<sup>49</sup> Others

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<sup>48</sup> *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> Cunningham dwells on the problem that 'understanding' is predicated on the logic of identity and considers the 'risk [...] run by Adorno's attempt to understand a meaning of Beckett's negation of meaning'. 'Trying (Not) to Understand: Adorno and the Work of Beckett' in *Beckett and Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Lane (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 125-39 (p. 137). Holt emphasises Adorno's social and aesthetic significance, agreeing with Richard Wolin that 'he has become a necessary ballast to the current tendency of art to be the "uncritical mirror image of the happy consciousness of late capitalism"'. His outline of 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' focuses on the three levels of catastrophe that Adorno isolates in the play—literal; metaphysical; and aesthetic—and the autonomy of form. 'Catastrophe, Autonomy and the Future of Modernism: Trying to Understand Adorno's Reading of *Endgame*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004), 261–75 (p. 263). See also W. J. McCormack's 1986 article, which is unequivocally positive about Adorno's contribution to Beckett studies and explicates some of the central claims of his essay. 'Seeing Darkly: Notes on T. W. Adorno and Samuel Beckett', *Hermathena*, 141 (1986), 22–44; Chris Conti, whose emphasis lies on Adorno's negotiation of the problem of meaning in *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. 'Critique and Form: Adorno on *Godot* and *Endgame*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004), 277–92; and Andrea Oppo, who dedicates a significant portion of his 2008 book to a discussion of Adorno's aesthetics, though he

offer a shorter and less rigorous summary as support for their own claims about Beckett's work.<sup>50</sup> Philosophical perspectives on the Adorno-Beckett relation tend to emphasise the significance of Beckett's work for Adorno, unpacking the significance of 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' in relation to other Adornian texts, notably *Aesthetic Theory*.<sup>51</sup> James Martin Harding is unusual within Adorno studies for offering a sustained analysis of a Beckett text that is not *Endgame*. He takes as his basis Adorno's more sporadic 'digressions' on *Waiting for Godot*,<sup>52</sup> arguing that the relationship Didi and Gogo have to the always absent Godot recalls the master-slave dialectic between the Jews and God, which Hegel viewed unfavourably because it demonstrated an 'unresolvable subservience' to the law.<sup>53</sup> This dialectic is juxtaposed

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concludes that 'Adorno's analysis [of Beckett] remains to be completed'. *Philosophical Aesthetics and Samuel Beckett* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 148.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Peter Boxall's exploration of the binaries of waste and abundance in Beckett and DeLillo, which uses Adorno's account of the wasting-away of philosophy in *Endgame* as the basis for an attempt to 'find a means of articulating this Beckettian residue, this abundant surplus that is born from the death of culture'. "'There's No Lack of Void": Waste and Abundance in Beckett and DeLillo', *SubStance*, 37 (2008), 56–70 (p. 62); Jackie Blackman's account of Beckett as witness. 'Beckett's Theatre "After Auschwitz"', in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Seán Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 71–88; and Andrea Oppo's interest in Adorno's concept of 'organized meaninglessness' in relation to his exploration of the extent to which literary texts can pose philosophical questions. 'Black Holes: A Philosophical View on *Endgame*'s and *Bartleby*'s Stalemates', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 23 (2011), 307–17 (p. 313).

<sup>51</sup> See Jay Bernstein's early and thorough explication of 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' in relation to *Aesthetic Theory*. 'Philosophy's Refuge: Adorno in Beckett', in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. by David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 177–91; Lambert Zuidervaart's summary of 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' in one of the definitive texts on Adorno's aesthetics. *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991; repr. 1994), pp. 152–60; Michael Rothberg's exploration of Adorno's Auschwitz chronotope that considers historical memory in art. 'After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe', *New German Critique*, 72 (1997), 45–81; Eva Geulen's and Nigel Mapp's respective accounts of Beckett's relation to 'end of art' narratives. 'Endgames: Reconstructing Adorno's "End of Art"', *New German Critique*, 81 (2000), 153–68 and 'No Nature, No Nothing: Adorno, Beckett, Disenchantment' in *Adorno and Literature*, ed. by David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 159–70; Shane Weller's brief but interesting exploration of Adorno's defence of Beckett from the charge of nihilism. *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), pp. 81–5; Will Daddario's account of Adorno's interest in Beckett's work as performance. 'From Pseudo-Activity to Critique: Adorno, Philosophy, Participation', *Performance Research*, 16 (2011), 124–35; Deborah Cook's reading of the Hamlet–Hamm connection in light of the dialectic of enlightenment. 'The Rise and Decline of the Individual in Adorno: Exit Hamlet, Enter Hamm', in *Individualism: The Cultural Logic of Modernity*, ed. by Zubin Meer (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 227–33; and Lorraine Markotic's emphasis on the significance of aesthetics—as particularly exemplified in 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*'—for Adorno's philosophical project. 'Enigma, Semblance, and Natural Beauty in Adorno's Epistemological Aesthetics', *sympløke*, 20 (2012), 293–307.

<sup>52</sup> 'Trying to Understand Godot: Adorno, Beckett, and the Senility of Dialectics' in *Adorno and 'A Writing of the Ruins': Essays on Modern Aesthetics and Anglo-American Literature and Culture* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 51–64 (p. 51).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

with a later historical variation of the master-servant dialectic in the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo. The resurfacing of the supposedly superseded Jewish dialectic attests to the recent historical atrocities that make a mockery of Hegelian progress. Didi and Gogo are condemned to wait ‘because they are emblematic of an unresolvable dialectic’.<sup>54</sup> As intriguing as Harding’s interpretation is, it delivers itself all too easily to the accusation of reducing a literary text to a systematic philosophical meaning. As Beckett himself cautioned, ‘the danger is in the neatness of identifications’.<sup>55</sup>

A small number of critics use Adorno’s essay—and, indeed, some of the philosophical responses to it—as evidence of philosophical, sociological or political failure in the face of Beckett’s work. Within this group there are those who have a genuine respect for Adorno’s work but see it as faltering in the face of the sheer resistance of Beckett’s texts to interpretation. Simon Critchley, for example, describes ‘Adorno’s piece on *Endgame*’ as ‘the philosophically most powerful and hermeneutically most nuanced piece of writing on Beckett’, before going on to conclude that ‘ultimately it tells us more about Adorno’s preoccupations than those of Beckett’s text’.<sup>56</sup> Other critics—Leslie Hill, for example—have more serious concerns about the efficacy of Adorno’s philosophy with regards to Beckett:

This is arguably why Beckett's writing is so resistant to sociological readings. It's not that these are impossible; but for the most part, despite their best intentions—even Adorno!—they turn out to be distressingly reductive. Why? Because they are an exercise in conceptual appropriation. Sociology not only assumes it knows what politics is, it believes it knows what art is too.<sup>57</sup>

This fear is not to be taken lightly. However, if sociology, as Hill argues, ‘believes it knows what art is’, Adorno certainly does not: the opening of *Aesthetic Theory* candidly states that ‘[i]t is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist’ (*AT*, p. 1). This acknowledgement of philosophy’s limits—set alongside Adorno’s

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce’, in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983; repr. 2001), pp. 19–34 (p. 19).

<sup>56</sup> *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 165.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Beckett, Writing, Politics: Answering for Myself’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 9 (2000), 215–21 (p. 220).

emphasis that he is only ‘trying’ to understand *Endgame*; that philosophical interpretation, while necessary, ultimately fails to speak the non-identical art object—recalls Beckett’s claim that he works with ‘impotence, ignorance’.<sup>58</sup> While Adorno’s assured and sometimes grating tone may imply the opposite, his philosophical project is in fact dedicated to a non-repressive relation between subject and object, one that, in its always tentative attempt to salvage the non-identical, is predicated on the concept of failure and weakness.

The most interesting work on this subject has emerged from a handful of critics, mainly within Beckett studies, who have strayed from the well-trodden and by now predictable paths that link Beckett and Adorno, and whose methods and conclusions have proven extremely beneficial to the development of this thesis. Tyrus Miller is one such critic, whose work has demonstrated an enduring preoccupation with possible lines of enquiry between Beckett and Adorno. In ‘Beckett’s Political Technology: Expression, Confession, and Torture in the Later Drama’, Miller considers the predominance of ‘scenarios of torture and interrogation’ in Beckett’s late work.<sup>59</sup> He acknowledges a common interpretation of ‘the inquisitorial scenario as a self-reflexive allegory of the creative process’, but argues that this ‘falls far short of explaining the disquieting nature of the concrete contents of this repeated scene’.<sup>60</sup> A more sophisticated account, he suggests, would consider the concept of artistic expression and its relation to suffering, a gap that I seek to at least partly fill in my account of evil in Chapter 3. This article goes some way towards negotiating the

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<sup>58</sup> Samuel Beckett, interviewed by Israel Shenker, *New York Times*, 5 May 1956. Quoted in ‘An Interview with Beckett (1956)’, in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 146–9 (p. 148).

<sup>59</sup> ‘Beckett’s Political Technology: Expression, Confession, and Torture in the Later Drama’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 9 (2000), 255–78 (p. 257). See also his ‘Dismantling Authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the “Postwar”’, which considers the concept of mass death in relation to ‘The Lost Ones’ and *Endgame*. Torture is also the basis of essays by David Cunningham and Jonathan Ulliot. The former explores *How It Is* in relation to Adorno and Horkheimer’s juxtaposition of Kant and Sade in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, focusing on the formal dimensions of the relations of torture in Beckett and Sade. This formalism, he suggests, responds to the formalism of the empirical world. “‘We have our being in justice’: Formalism, Abstraction and Beckett’s “Ethics””, in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. by Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 21–37. Ulliot’s article also focuses on *How It Is*, commenting on a slippage in *Aesthetic Theory* between the title of Beckett’s *Comment c’est* and Adorno’s concept-name ‘Comment c’est’. Despite an original approach to the relationship between Adorno and Beckett, Ulliot leaves himself wide open to Miller’s critique of those who dismiss concrete instances of ‘interrogation, persecution, and torture’ (p. 256) as mere allegories of the writing process. Ulliot’s real contribution to this area of study is his call for a dialogical reading of Adorno and Beckett. ‘Adorno’s *Comment c’est*’, *Comparative Literature*, 61 (2009), 416–31.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

problematic relationship between art and social reality—a relationship that forms the basis of Adorno’s aesthetics and that will be of paramount importance to this thesis. While Miller does not consider the concept of freedom directly, his subtle analysis of the very concrete mechanisms of unfreedom that pervade Beckett’s texts in the form of instruments of torture provides a useful platform from which to tease out a negative image of freedom in Beckett.

Catherine Laws’ 2005 article ‘Beckett and Kurtág’ approaches the relation between Beckett and Adorno obliquely and, indeed, almost parenthetically, through an analysis of the Hungarian composer György Kurtág, who has composed three Beckett-based works. Laws builds on a suggestion by Alan E. Williams that ‘Adorno’s concept of the “sedimentation” of musical material is useful in fully understanding the role of musical influence and reference in Kurtág’s work’ to suggest that such sedimentation could be an interesting tool with regards to Beckett’s use of intertextuality.<sup>61</sup> While Laws leaves this intriguing suggestion somewhat in the air as a topic for further analysis—‘suffice it to say that the musicality of Beckett’s texts and the related approach to meaning perhaps needs to be explored more carefully in relation to Adorno’s ideas’<sup>62</sup>—she certainly opens up an interesting line of enquiry that could productively relate Beckett’s enduring interest in music to Adorno’s own extensive musicology. While this thesis by no means claims to exhaust such an expansive topic, it does take it extremely seriously, understanding Adorno’s musicology as a crucial part of his philosophy.

Marta Figlerowic locates an ethical productivity in the ‘anxiety caused by [the] loss of stable personal boundaries’ in Beckett’s characters,<sup>63</sup> which she claims to set against ‘Adorno’s ethical analyses of Beckett’s plays’,<sup>64</sup> the specifically ethical content of which remain largely unelucidated within the article. She agrees with Adorno that ‘the world constructed by Beckett denies any essentialist definitions of individualism’,<sup>65</sup> but suggests that the anxiety provoked by this awareness permits ‘these characters to perceive others as beings equally full and complex as

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Beckett and Kurtág’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 15 (2005), 241–56 (p. 252).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Bounding the Self: Ethics, Anxiety and Territories of Selfhood in Samuel Beckett’s Fiction’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34 (2011), 76–96 (p. 91).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves'.<sup>66</sup> This is a reaction against what she describes as 'a purely passive, deterministic vision of the late capitalist individual' exemplified by Marxist thought (within which Adorno seems to lie).<sup>67</sup> This article is intriguing, while flawed, because of its implicit link between the preponderance of reified and disconnected individuals in Beckett's work and (a Marxist brand of) determinism—one that Figlerowic is keen to oppose. She resolves this problem with an uncomfortable return to a humanist Beckett: she describes the 'strange dignity and complexity his characters have' in an attempt to establish a tenuous basis for ethical relations.<sup>68</sup> Her skewed reading of Adorno portrays him as a proponent of social determinism, failing to see beyond his admittedly pessimistic prognosis of modern capitalism. Nonetheless, her insistence on seeing the Beckettian 'individual as more than just a symptom of society' points us in the right direction.<sup>69</sup> Although it is seldom the individual in Beckett that provides a locus of freedom, Figlerowic recognises, if obliquely and too optimistically, the significance of freedom as a counterbalance to the 'world of manipulated objects and mechanical exchanges'.<sup>70</sup>

Duncan McColl Chesney, deploring the lack of a 'critical rapprochement between Beckett and Adorno',<sup>71</sup> offers a broad if compressed account of the affinities between the two thinkers in relation to the themes of his book: 'silence and the minimal'.<sup>72</sup> While he attempts to move beyond *Endgame* by considering *Embers*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*,<sup>73</sup> his analyses seem, in the main, disconnected from their supposed Adornian framework. It is not until his final discussion of Beckett's 'ethical modernism'<sup>74</sup>—the term deriving from Jay Bernstein—that an intriguing 'rapprochement' is approached. Here, McColl Chesney attempts to isolate an ethical dimension to Beckett's texts through Adorno's conception of 'metaphysical experience'.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, his brief account of Adorno—filtered through

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>71</sup> *Silence Nowhen: Late Modernism, Minimalism, and Silence in the Work of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 155.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> See, respectively, *Ibid.*, pp. 170–1; pp. 171–4; pp. 174–80.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.



Bernstein—is undeveloped and ultimately insufficient for the kind of deeper understanding of the Adorno-Beckett relation he is hoping to accomplish. Nonetheless, McColl Chesney goes further than any other critic in his more expansive gaze.

Despite the broader engagement of some isolated articles and book chapters, however, as I have said, the critical response to Adorno and Beckett remains fettered to ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’—a position that ultimately fails to appreciate the paratactic nature of Adorno’s thought, which cannot be subordinated to any one major concept or theme. This thesis seeks to fill a major gap in Beckett studies by moving beyond this essay to Adorno’s philosophy as a whole. It works with a selection of Beckett’s texts representative of different phases of his corpus so as to demonstrate that freedom is an enduring preoccupation in his work, though it is approached in decidedly different ways. Similarly, it engages with Adorno’s major texts as well as some slightly more unfamiliar ones. Chapter 1, ‘Freedom and its Limits’ interrogates the thematics of freedom overtly presented in two of Beckett’s earlier works: *Murphy* and *Eleutheria*. Beckett’s aesthetic of failure—later enigmatically encapsulated in *Worstward Ho*’s ‘Try again. Fail again. Fail better’ (*Worstward Ho*, p. 89)—is provisionally and openly set out in these accounts of two discrete failures to attain freedom. Beckett submits the positive accounts of freedom espoused by Idealism and existentialism to a relentless and humorous critique, paving the way for his more nuanced exploration of freedom in later texts. This chapter simultaneously establishes the philosophical and aesthetic ‘limits’ of freedom: on the one hand, Beckett undermines philosophical accounts of freedom as an attribute of the individual; on the other hand, the texts themselves attest to the ‘limits’ of a thematic presentation of freedom.

In Chapter 2, ‘The Illusion of Freedom and the Freedom of Illusion’, I explore the possibility of aesthetic freedom in relation to Beckett’s four *Novellas*. This hinges on the paradox evoked in its chiasmic title. Art’s dependence on *Schein*, which might be translated as illusion, appearance or semblance, prevents it from effecting real change in the world. It is only ever an *illusion* of freedom: powerless in the face of reality. However, through Adorno’s dialectic of seriousness and lightheartedness—supplemented by Friedrich Schlegel’s complementary concept of

romantic irony—it is possible to redeem *Schein* and demonstrate the freedom inherent in illusion, that supposedly ineffectual concept. This chapter is crucial to the overall claims of my thesis: if art is wholly determined by its socio-political context then it makes no sense to talk about freedom in relation to Beckett's work at all, except as a thematic concern. If Beckett's work is indeed capable of offering a determinate negation of unfreedom then it must do more than reflect the society from which it springs.

Chapter 3, 'The Scars of Evil', takes a closer look at the unfree society Adorno theorises, tracing the connection between freedom and evil in Beckett's more disturbing works of the 1950s and 1960s. This necessitates a transposition of what were originally theological questions to a post-Auschwitz, secular era. This chapter follows Adorno in arguing that, far from being anachronistic, the concept of evil is in fact decidedly relevant to modern society, though, as with the concept of freedom, we must revise our understanding of it. Rather than being localised in the human will, evil is manifested in a systematic network of social unfreedom. In the light of this context, I consider the hellish world of *How It Is* and the autonomous and intricately managed cylinder of *The Lost Ones*, revealing the extent to which manmade constructs take on a life of their own. This chapter then offers an alternative Adornian reading of *Endgame* to Adorno's own: it explores the philosopher's critique of Hegel's theodicy, which attempts to redeem evil by an affirmative account of Spirit's progression towards freedom. *Endgame*'s manifest preoccupation with eschatology offers an alternative history from the perspective of its victims, freeing humans from preordained roles in a constricting narrative of progress. At the same time, it manifests the unfreedom faced by individuals in the light of the very real oppression of history. *Endgame* gives us reason to return to Hegel's contentious claim that '[t]he wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind'.<sup>76</sup> the scars of the play are as patently visible as they are unhealed.

The unfree capitalist society that provides a consistent context for Adorno's philosophy is characterised to a large extent by technological advances. Adorno's avowed resistance to the Culture Industry is often seen as a blind-spot that forecloses the liberatory potential of modern technology. Without underestimating the

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<sup>76</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 407.

significance of Adorno's critique of the Culture Industry, Chapter 4, 'Virtual Freedom', explores the more fundamental problem of technology's role in the domination of nature that characterises humanity's relationship to the natural world, internal and external. Through a reading of Beckett's late media plays, I suggest that their aesthetic incorporation of technology heralds liberatory possibilities in radically reimagining the role of technology as a mediator between subject and world. Not only does this have environmental implications, but it also gestures towards a way of breaking the cycle of self-preservation that is as detrimental to the subject as it is to the objective world.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I consider Beckett's late prose in light of Adorno's materialist metaphysics. I argue that *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* manifest the horror of our modern trajectory towards an absolute immanence that swallows speculative thought. The paradoxical attempt to imagine the death of imagination in these texts offers a shockingly visual image of increasing unfreedom, while salvaging a remnant of hope through the existence of the imaginative act of writing itself. Such hope is, I suggest, more apparent in *Company*, in which the dark immanence is interrupted by moments of what Adorno describes as metaphysical experience: glimmers of transcendence that are nonetheless rooted in the 'smallest intramundane traits' (*ND*, p. 408) of life. The metaphysical resonance of Beckett's work does not bespeak the empty fantasy of a life beyond the existent, but thought's negation of the given world in pursuit of a freer one.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS

Nowhere in Beckett's corpus are freedom's limitations explored so explicitly and intensely as in his first published novel, *Murphy*, and his original and often forgotten foray into theatre, the posthumously published *Eleutheria*. In these texts, Beckett stages the respective failures of Murphy and Victor to attain freedom, which while desperately desired remains a somewhat nebulous concept. Both characters position themselves in opposition to the empirical world—figured in *Murphy* primarily as a place of exchange and associated in *Eleutheria* with a post-war ethic of commitment—in the vain hope of circumventing its demands altogether. Though *Murphy* ends with a bang—with Murphy 'delivered up to the third zone by a flush of the cosmic toilet'<sup>1</sup>—and *Eleutheria* with a whimper, the texts are united in their emphasis on the inherent limitations of their protagonists' endeavour. Primarily, by isolating themselves from the legitimately despised bourgeois world, Murphy and Victor fail to recognise that everything they do is mediated by it—and in a far more profound way than their ironic acceptance of handouts from their respective families.

Beckett's interest in limits, moreover, extends to the philosophical systems invoked by these densely allusive texts.<sup>2</sup> It is, I suggest, through an Adornian framework that we can best understand Beckett's, admittedly non-systematic, metacritique of philosophy in *Murphy* and *Eleutheria*. In these texts, Beckett invokes philosophical positions only to undermine them, so it is imperative to see beyond the dense pattern of allusions to the broader questions that are being addressed. This mode of critique is characteristic of Adorno's own philosophy, which is concerned with following the philosophical claims of others to the point where they undo

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> C. J. Ackerley's *The Annotated Murphy* presents a detailed and unsurpassed commentary on *Murphy*'s complex and intricate network of philosophical allusions. *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

themselves. This may seem derivative, or even parasitic, but Adorno's careful attentiveness to the meanderings of philosophical thought not only exposes conceptual crevices on that philosopher's own terms, but also reveals the extent to which abstract thought is dependent on the empirical reality it so often shuns in search of immutable truths. In *Murphy*, then, the protagonist appropriates the extreme Cartesianism of Geulincx and the rationalism of Spinoza for his own narcissistic ends. His relentless and ingenuous perversion of their principles exposes their inherent limitations as philosophical systems while simultaneously pulling the rug from beneath his feet by undermining the basis of his own pursuit of freedom. Far from endorsing Murphy's use of these philosophies, the narrator adopts a heavily ironic tone towards its protagonist's pursuits, allowing us, with Adorno's conceptual framework, to dissect their inherent limitations. If, above all, *Murphy* concerns itself with the relationship between subject and society, then Murphy's explosive failure demonstrates how entrenched the ideology of individualism is and how it acts as a mounting obstacle to freedom.

Victor's withdrawal from society in *Eleutheria*, on the other hand, is manifestly positioned against Sartre's advocacy of commitment as not only the ethical response to our absolute freedom but also the sole means of securing universal freedom. Here I trace a convergence between Beckett and Adorno, the latter of whom manifests a similar scepticism regarding Sartrean freedom and its ethos of commitment. *Eleutheria*'s parodic subversion of existentialism, however, is unable or unwilling to offer a viable alternative: Victor's quiet resignation to his condition of 'limbo' (*Eleutheria*, p. 164) is never fully endorsed by the text, even though it escapes the mocking explosion of Murphy's pretensions to freedom.

Finally, Beckett's interrogation of the limits of his protagonists' search for freedom and the philosophical systems they invoke or respond to leads to a more fundamental limitation: that of the thematic presentation of freedom. Beckett circumvents the inexorable problem of directly representing freedom by locating it in what Richard Begam, with reference to *Murphy*, describes as the "absent" center' of the texts:<sup>3</sup> that is, freedom is at once the desired state of the protagonists, one that is never actualised, and the unrepresentable theme around which the texts compulsively

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<sup>3</sup> Begam, p. 58.

circle. To this extent, *Murphy* and *Eleutheria* reveal a logic of negation: a refusal to present, falsely, freedom as a positive given. Nonetheless, they are constrained by their exploration of freedom on the level of content alone. With this in mind, this chapter concludes by considering the significance of Adorno's dialectic of form and content for Beckett's post-war shift away from traditional representation. Ultimately, I suggest, the limitations of *Murphy* and *Eleutheria* catalyse Beckett's experimentation with new and increasingly minimal ways of approaching that elusive concept of freedom.

## I

Murphy's quest for freedom is an unmitigated failure that ends in his undignified death and obsequies. Within what is at times 'a riotous pot-pourri of many metaphysical systems',<sup>4</sup> Murphy adapts and distorts philosophies for his own ends, making it impossible to align him categorically with any one thinker. This is not, however, to underestimate the significance of these perverted philosophies for the novel as a whole or for Murphy's own catastrophic journey. Murphy's crude, instrumental application of Descartes, Spinoza and Geulincx certainly results in a humiliating failure, but the novel's satirical force equally brings the philosophies themselves, and their basic ideological assumptions, hurtling down to the ground. Fundamentally, I argue, the qualities that limit Murphy in his search for freedom can be traced back to the systems of thought he modifies and, beyond that, to the social world he refuses to recognise as his own. That is, following Adorno, I insist on the necessity of understanding philosophy and the empirical world as dialectically mediated. The elevated ideas of seventeenth century rationalism and bourgeois socio-economic conditions are interdependent, each maintaining and legitimating the other. Cartesian dualism offers Murphy the terms with which to detach himself from the world in a hypostatisation of his consciousness of subject-object alienation—or the gap between the 'little world' (*Murphy*, p. 112) of his mind and the 'big world' (p. 6) outside it. This prepares the ground for his warped acceptance of the bourgeois

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<sup>4</sup> John Fletcher, 'Samuel Beckett and the Philosophers', *Comparative Literature*, 17 (1965), 43–56 (p. 47).

Spinozan virtue of self-preservation, the perversion of which places Murphy at the system's divine centre in a state of narcissistic self-affirmation. Far from escaping the external world and its values, his retreat into self only serves to confirm its power. His long-awaited freedom is revealed to be uncannily similar to the particular brand of determinism expounded by Geulincx. Only when he stares into the eyes of Mr. Endon, confronted with nothing but his obdurate self, does Murphy finally recognise the tautological horror of his little world, its dependence on the social world and its utter inability to provide anything resembling freedom.

Neary's prognosis that Murphy's 'conarium has shrunk to nothing' (*Murphy*, p. 6) is not far from the truth—or, at least, from Murphy's truth. Murphy's system—his perception of himself and his relation to the world—is predicated on a belief in dualism, but, crucially, a dualism without mediation: without the benefit of Descartes' conarium or pineal gland.<sup>5</sup> Thus 'Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without' (p. 69), an image that is bathetically prefigured in Murphy's 'holeproof' suit that 'admitted no air from the outer world' and 'allowed none of Murphy's own vapours to escape' (p. 47). More revealingly, perhaps, it is later compared by Murphy himself to a padded cell, 'windowless, like a monad' (p. 114), exposing Beckett's own awareness that the so called 'century of reason' is an absolute misnomer: 'they're all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraisonnent!* They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak'.<sup>6</sup> These deflations of Murphy's naïve philosophical system highlight its fundamental irrationality, preventing us from wholly coinciding with his antipathy towards the mercantile world. It is precisely Murphy's relationship with this world—his emphatic rejection of it—that is so problematic, and which is the occasion for much of the novel's irony. The dualism Murphy intuitively feels to be the case can be understood in Adornian terms as reflecting 'the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development' (*AR*, p. 139). Murphy's alienation from the capitalist world is perfectly justifiable. However, Adorno continues:

the resulting separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant. [...] The separation is no sooner established directly, without

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<sup>5</sup> The conarium, as Ackerley notes, is a solution to 'the Cartesian conundrum' (p. 121) of how the supposedly discrete entities of body and mind can interact.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in P. J. Murphy, 'Beckett's Critique of Kant', in *Beckett / Philosophy*, ed. by Matthew Feldman and Karim Mamdani (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2015), pp. 261–78 (p. 265).

mediation, than it becomes ideology, which is indeed its normal form. The mind will then usurp the place of something absolutely independent—which it is not; its claim of independence heralds the claim of dominance. Once radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself.  
(AR, p. 139)

Primarily through the use of a sardonic narrator, *Murphy* maintains an ironic distance from the views of its protagonist. Hence Murphy's legitimate alienation from the abhorrent world of '*Quid pro quo*' (p. 3) is complicated by his insistence upon universalising it as an absolute. In the long awaited 'section six' (p. 4) mentioned on the second page of the novel, we see how Murphy ontologizes his mind. In this way, his sense of estrangement from the external world is attributed not, fundamentally, to the profoundly unfree nature of capitalist society, but to the ontological fact of his mind as 'a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own' (p. 70). The novel's detachment from this view is made abundantly clear by the disclaimer at the beginning of the chapter: '[h]appily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was—that would be an extravagance and an impertinence—but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be' (p. 69). Adorno insists that such hypostatisation as Murphy exhibits generates a deceptive belief in the mind's independence and supremacy. And, indeed, Murphy's absolute conviction that 'his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own' (p. 70) leads to a 'claim of independence' that is at once hubristic and facile, since it does not account for the significance of the empirical world. Murphy's astrological leanings provide a case in point. Suk's 'Thema Coeli' originally provides Murphy with a '[c]orpus of deterrents' (p. 24): guidance (admittedly absurd) as to how to live his life. As he increases his commitment to the 'little world' of his mind, the 'ludicrous broadsheet that Murphy had called his life-warrant, his bull of incommunication and corpus of deterrents, changed into the poem that he alone of the living could write' (p. 60). The pattern continues:

The more his own system closed round him, the less he could tolerate its being subordinated to any other. Between him and his stars no doubt there was correspondence, but not in Suk's sense. They were *his* stars, he was the prior system. [...] Thus the sixpence worth of sky changed again, from the poem that he alone of all the living could have written to the poem that he alone of all the born could have written.

(pp. 114–5)



Finally, Murphy finds himself ‘cold, tired, angry, impatient and out of conceit with a system that seemed the superfluous cartoon of his own’ (p. 118). He ‘swallows’ the astrological system whole by affirming his own priority over it, a priority that is fundamentally premised on his absolute self-absorption.

Murphy’s association between this self-love and his commitment to freedom is established early on in the novel: he binds himself to a rocking chair, an act that supposedly ‘set[s] him free in his mind’ (*Murphy*, pp. 3–4). The ‘pleasure’ (p. 4) that this induces—not to mention the accelerating rocking motions leading to a desired climax—has a distinctly masturbatory quality: the ‘little’ world of his mind is one in which ‘he could love himself’ (p. 6). It is hardly surprising that such narcissism is explicitly positioned against his reluctant love for another, Celia, whose ill-timed telephone call interrupts Murphy in the midst of his bodily stimulation: ‘The part of him that he hated craved for Celia, the part that he loved shrivelled up at the thought of her’ (p. 7). Within the binary divisions that govern Murphy, mind, self-love and freedom occupy the positive side, while body, extra-personal love and world are discarded as negative. Murphy is unable to reconcile or mediate these oppositions. Thomas J. Cousineau has noted that ‘Murphy’s quest for freedom is shadowed throughout the novel by the similarly catastrophic journeys of Icarus and Ulysses’,<sup>7</sup> and identifies Murphy’s rocking chair as a ‘transformation of the ship that carries Ulysses to his doom’.<sup>8</sup> While I acknowledge the thrust of the allusion, I would suggest that Murphy’s self-induced binding to the rocking chair echoes in a more specific way the Sirens episode of Homer’s *Odyssey*:

Then they bound me fast, hand and foot, with the rope-ends tied to the mast itself. [...] So they sang with their lovely voices, and my heart was eager to listen still. I twitched my brows to sign to the crew to let me go, but they leaned to their oars and rowed on.<sup>9</sup>

He sat naked in his rocking-chair of undressed teak. [...] Seven scarves held him in position. Two fastened his shins to the rockers, one his thighs to the seat, two his breast and belly to the back, one his wrists to the strut behind. Only the most local movements were possible.

(*Murphy*, p. 3)

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Demented vs. Creative Emulation in *Murphy*’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 18 (2007), 335–65 (p. 363).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *The Odyssey*, trans. by Walter Shewring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980; repr. 1998), p. 147.

The allusion seems to be parodic: in his diary entry of January 1937, Beckett described Murphy as the ‘fundamental unheroic’<sup>10</sup>—a far cry from Homer’s epic hero. However, Adorno and Horkheimer’s interpretation of the Sirens episode in their 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers an insight into Murphy’s self-obsession. In their allegorical reading, they describe Odysseus as ‘the prototype of the bourgeois individual’ (*DE*, p. 24), suggesting that his decision to be bound to the mast of the ship so as to resist the allure of the Sirens’ song betrays the bourgeois drive of self-preservation at all costs. This ‘maxim of all Western civilization’ (*DE*, p. 22) is articulated in Spinoza’s claim that ‘the endeavour of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue’ (quoted in *DE*, p. 22), to which I shall return. The price of Odysseus’ act of self-preservation, however, is impotence and immobility: as Adorno expresses it in *Minima Moralia*, ‘self-preservation forfeits its self’ (*MM*, p. 230). That is, the desperate preservation of the self actually prevents the subject from experiencing the world: the bourgeois mechanism of self-preservation—the safeguarding of one’s future self—as self-sacrifice, or the renunciation of the desires of the present self, defers pleasure to an illusory future. ‘All who renounce’, Adorno argues, ultimately ‘give away more of their life than is given back to them, more than the life they preserve’ (*DE*, p. 43).

This paradox is beautifully expressed in *Murphy*, although not, significantly, by Murphy himself, but by the novel’s emblem of exchange, Celia, who comes to the realisation that ‘[s]he could not go where livings were made without feeling that they were being made away’ (*Murphy*, p. 44). The pun on the word ‘living’ as, on the one hand, a means of income for the preservation of existence and, on the other, the experiential state of human life, demonstrates the novel’s dissatisfaction with the capitalist London it presents. Nonetheless, despite himself, Murphy is an unlikely proponent of the bourgeois virtue of self-preservation. His scathing rejection of the ‘mercantile gehenna’ (p. 27) obscures the continuity between that world and his deep commitment to his selfhood. The visual similarity between Odysseus tied to a mast and Murphy bound to his chair allows us to plumb the depths of the latter’s self-obsession: his desire to preserve his beloved self at all costs. In an ironic fusion of Geulincx, ‘a philosopher of negation and ignorance’, and Spinoza, ‘the extreme

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ackerley, p. 36.

example of a philosophy of affirmation’,<sup>11</sup> Murphy exercises the bourgeois value of self-preservation precisely by retreating, as far as possible, into his mind. ‘An atheist chipping the deity’, as the narrator notes sardonically, ‘was not more senseless than Murphy defending his courses of inaction’ (p. 26). Murphy does not so much refuse ‘Spinoza’s *conatus essendi*, the life lived as a pursuit of interest’, as Andrew Gibson claims,<sup>12</sup> as *reinterpret* the dictum so as to preserve the part of him that he loves: his mind, ‘hermetically closed to the universe without’ (p. 69). Murphy’s irrational affirmation of his selfhood, couched in the language of negation, illustrates the ‘compulsive character of self-preservation’ (*DE*, p. 23) in a time when it serves no biological function.

Murphy’s self-obsession, moreover, is expressed in overtly Spinozan terms in the epigraph to Chapter 6: ‘*Amor intellectualis quo Murphy se ipsum amat*’ (*Murphy*, p. 69). This, as P. J. Murphy points out, ‘combines Propositions XXXV and XXXVI of the Fifth Part of the *Ethics*’,<sup>13</sup> irreverently replacing the original ‘God’ for ‘Murphy’. Discarding God from the equation altogether, Murphy places himself at the centre of the Spinozan system, conforming, in blissful ignorance, to the bourgeois individualism of the world he longs to escape. Beyond this blasphemy, he crucially perverts the significance of the propositions, which conclude that ‘God, insofar as he loves himself, loves mankind, and, consequently, that the love of God towards men, and the mind’s intellectual love towards God are one and the same’.<sup>14</sup> Unlike God’s expansive intellectual love of himself that extends to mankind, Murphy’s narcissism is narrow and limited to the bounds of his mind. This hermeneutic corruption of Spinoza colours the description of Murphy’s mind in Chapter 6 and, more importantly, its ‘treasures’ (p. 71). It reveals what Gibson describes as the ‘fake grandiosity’ of what dresses itself up as a sophic search for freedom,<sup>15</sup> but which is in fact an onanistic detachment from the world. Indeed, Adorno suggests that, inherently, ‘the human subject’s interest in his freedom is narcissistic’ (*HF*, p. 209):

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; repr. 2008), p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Beckett and the Philosophers’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. by John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 222–40 (p. 225).

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, in *The Essential Spinoza: Ethics and Related Writings*, ed. by Michael L. Morgan, trans. by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), pp. 1–161 (p. 158).

<sup>15</sup> *Beckett and Badiou*, p. 147.

In the light of the social coercion to which the ego succumbs, the self forms the idea that it would be better to be different, that it would be better to be free. In this web of delusion it adopts a kind of compensatory role in the sense that, having once surrendered to external compulsion, it imagines that it can still define itself as a free being, inwardly at least. [...] This inner kingdom consists in the idea of an internal life that is supposed to be a haven of peace and quiet, largely independent of the factors that determine the external world. (HF, p. 220)

What the narcissistic subject, infatuated with the idea of his own freedom, fails to realise is that, paradoxically, it is ‘the organization of the world, the nature of the world, that actually determines the extent to which the subject achieves autonomy’ (HF, p. 222). Freedom—or, indeed, the very concept of the individual—makes no sense except in relation to the very objective world from which Murphy flees.

It is in the ‘Magdalen Mental Mercyseat’ (*Murphy*, p. 99)—the ultimate withdrawal from the (ostensibly) rational world—that Murphy is able to wholeheartedly indulge in his self-destructive narcissism. Once again, the chapter epigraph offers a valuable insight: Malraux’s ‘*Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens*’ (p. 99). As David Tucker argues, far from desiring a community of like-minded souls as Malraux’s idealistic formulation would suggest, Murphy is interested in the patients ‘only in so far as they reflect (he hopes, precisely mirror) his own sense of self’.<sup>16</sup> His sense of ‘respect and unworthiness’ at the patients’ supposed ‘self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world’ (p. 106) is maintained only by ignoring the ‘frequent expressions apparently of pain, rage, despair and in fact all the usual [...], suggesting a fly somewhere in the ointment of Microcosmos’ (p. 112). Hence, of course, Murphy’s gratification at being told by Ticklepenny that he ‘had a great look of Clarke there a minute ago’, Clarke having ‘been for three weeks in a katatonic stupor’ (p. 121). It is, however, Mr. Endon—whose name, meaning ‘within’, offers Murphy a seductive example of nominative determinism—whose psychosis attracts Murphy ‘as Narcissus to his fountain’ (p. 116). The simile is not out of place. Mr. Endon is, for Murphy, merely an idealised reflection, and one in which he gazes with increasing obsession: ‘Nor did he succeed in coming alive in his mind any more. He blamed this on his body, [...] but it was rather due to the vicarious autology that he had been enjoying

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<sup>16</sup> *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx: Tracing a ‘Literary Fantasia’* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 63.

each morning, in little Mr. Endon and all the other proxies' (p. 118). The patients at the MMM are no more than 'proxies' for Murphy's blinkered self-study. The reflection-motif of the Narcissus myth is repeated when Murphy gazes into Mr. Endon's eyes and sees, 'in the cornea, horribly reduced, obscured and distorted, his own image' (p. 156). This is a crucial moment of realisation for Murphy, the consequence of which is his decision to return to Celia and the 'big world'. Throughout the novel, Murphy has been entranced by his own self, convinced that in the 'little world' of his mind he can achieve freedom. This last encounter with Mr. Endon unveils the true nature of this longed-for padded cell as a space of alienation and nescience that is a far cry from Murphy's impulse to transcend the 'big world'. His supposed freedom is exposed as an imprisonment in a hardened self that has never escaped capitalism's logic of individualism. It is unsurprising that the description of Murphy's third mental zone, in which he feels himself to be 'a mote in the dark of absolute freedom' (p. 72) appears here in similarly 'obscured and distorted' form: 'Mr. Murphy is a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen' (p. 156). 'KNOW THYSELF' is the Geulingian exhortation designed to prompt a humble acknowledgement of our incapacity for action.<sup>17</sup> But for all Murphy's 'vicarious autology', he never succeeds in attaining self-knowledge. As Adorno suggests, 'the individual, [...] who has come to be his own be-all and end-all, falls victim to the delusion of an individualistic society and thus fails to know himself' (*HF*, p. 264). Murphy's retreat from the world of capital—'where *Quid pro quo* was cried as wares' (p. 6)—is utterly defined by its terms, all the more so because of his blinkered state.

For Tucker, who traces *Murphy's* 'uses and abuses' of Arthur Geulincx's work,<sup>18</sup> it is Murphy's narcissism that prevents him from fulfilling the Occasionalist maxim of '*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*' (*Murphy*, p. 112): 'Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing'.<sup>19</sup> He argues that Murphy 'cannot bring himself to want nothing in the big world',<sup>20</sup> due to 'his deplorable susceptibility to Celia, ginger, and so on' (p. 112). A life free from desire, as encapsulated in Geulincx's 'beautiful Belgo-Latin' (p. 112), remains for Murphy 'the unattainable, a

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Tucker, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Ackerley, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> Tucker, p. 59.

futile hope of freedom'.<sup>21</sup> Tucker therefore suggests that it is precisely Murphy's lack of humility—his inability to accept his powerlessness and hence worthlessness<sup>22</sup>—that prevents him from reaching the freedom for which he strives, arguing that 'Murphy's occasional access to his Occasionalist nothingness [is] an index of his freedom'.<sup>23</sup> This hypothesis that Murphy's failure lies merely in his perversion of Geulingian principles implies that if they were exercised correctly, they would induce an authentic freedom. And there is no doubt of the seductiveness of the Geulingian maxim as an alternative to the sphere of exchange, where everything has a price and a 'worth'. The strength of *Murphy*, however, is that it does not make any such commitment to Occasionalism, despite Murphy's own distorted faith in it. As L. A. C. Dobrez asserts, 'one cannot envisage a world where all is kept in motion by God'—Geulincx's world—'except as a world bereft of free will'.<sup>24</sup> In *Molloy*, Beckett echoes Geulincx's own effort to salvage freedom within his own system: 'I who had loved the image of old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. That is a great measure of freedom, for him who has not the pioneering spirit' (*Molloy*, p. 50). In light of this image, Tucker himself admits that Geulingian 'submission that is both metaphysical and ethical [...] endangers the viability of both actual free will and freedom to intend'.<sup>25</sup> Even the humblest of Murphys could not attain freedom by submitting to Occasionalism. Its absolute determinism precludes any real freedom, even for those who lack the 'pioneering spirit'.

Far from presenting Murphy's failure to adhere to Geulincx's principles, what Beckett illuminates through his protagonist's occasional Occasionalism is the convergence between absolute freedom and determinism. In line with Dobrez's observation that Murphy's third zone of freedom is 'indistinguishable from

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> As Uhlmann explains, Geulincx's use of the Latin *valeo* 'carries the meaning both of "to be able to, to have force" and "to be worth"' (p. 53). Tucker suggests that this ambivalence allows Geulincx 'to firmly situate his metaphysics in the realm of incapacity, while also connoting a relationship already there between this incapacity and humility, thanks to *valeo*'s intimation of worthlessness' (p. 19).

<sup>23</sup> Tucker, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> *The Existential and its Exits: Literary and Philosophical Perspectives on the works of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Tucker, p. 121.

necessity',<sup>26</sup> Adorno argues that, '[i]n their inmost core, the theses of determinism and of freedom coincide. Both proclaim identity. The reduction to pure spontaneity applies to the empirical subjects the very same law which as an expanded causal category becomes determinism' (*ND*, p. 264). Murphy's pursuit of a God-like freedom and Geulincx's prescription of absolute humility in response to a world in which we 'have no capacity for action',<sup>27</sup> are not, then, so far apart as they might seem: in the terms of Beckett's re-imagining of Geulincx's explanation of freedom, the pioneer Ulysses and the 'sadly rejoicing slave' (*Molloy*, p. 50) converge. Ultimately, neither acknowledges the necessity of mediation between subject and object, self and world. Both are therefore in thrall to the logic of identity that, for Adorno, characterises modern capitalism and its primacy of exchange that Murphy finds so abhorrent, but which he is ultimately unable to transcend.

Gibson argues that the 'uneasy irony' of *Murphy* can be located precisely in the novel's simultaneous 'indifference to the economic claim' and uncertainty that 'any plausible alternative to the logic of the market-place exists'.<sup>28</sup> I would suggest that such irony is exacerbated by Murphy's inability to move beyond the framework of the economic world and its social corollary of individualism. His retreat into the sanctuary of mind is always circumscribed by its narcissistic compulsion towards self-preservation, definitive of the bourgeois individual. Murphy's failure is not his lack of humility, as Tucker suggests, but his refusal to countenance a dialectic between '[i]nner and outer' (*HF*, p. 187). He is never able to acknowledge himself as *belonging* 'to the external world to which [he knows himself] to be contrasted and counterpoised' (*HF*, p. 187) and is therefore oblivious to the extent to which the doctrines of individualism according to which he lives his life are rooted in the world he rejects. Not only, Adorno insists, is 'the self entwined in society', but it 'grows richer the more freely it develops and reflects this relation, while it is limited, impoverished and reduced by the separation and hardening that it lays claim to as an origin' (*MM*, p. 154). In this sense we can see the legitimacy of Martin Schuster's claim that the definitive outcome of the dialectic of enlightenment for Adorno is that

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<sup>26</sup> Dobrez, p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> Tucker, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Beckett and Badiou*, p. 146; p. 147.

‘I *must* carve out a space outside my subjectivity, outside myself’,<sup>29</sup> an ambition that is, for Murphy, completely unfathomable, but a space in which freedom, albeit of a negative sort, inheres. This does not, however, neutralise the critique levelled by Murphy at the mercantile society he so abhors, but it does significantly complicate his justifiable if ineffectual ambition to escape its context of unfreedom. *Murphy* articulates these deeper limitations at the heart of its protagonist’s own spectacular failure to attain freedom, but offers no discernible route out of their impasse. Adorno offers a compelling framework within which to understand Murphy’s self-defeating actions, one that brings to the fore the complexities of the novel’s engagement with freedom and its immersion in the empirical world.

## II

In the immediate post-war period in which Beckett was writing *Eleutheria*, existentialism, Gibson notes, ‘reached the height of its popularity’,<sup>30</sup> and, indeed, became what Nicholas Hewitt describes as the ‘official philosophy of the Fourth Republic’.<sup>31</sup> Gibson goes on to explore Beckett’s wariness of the post-Liberation atmosphere of blind optimism and Gaullist unity. While he emphasises that there was no unproblematic alignment between existentialism and de Gaulle’s establishment,<sup>32</sup> he suggests that Beckett was sceptical of their shared rhetoric of commitment and responsibility. In this context, Victor’s withdrawal from society in *Eleutheria* can be understood as a targeted response to Sartrean existentialism—one that in striking ways coincides with Adorno’s own dogged critiques of existential philosophy. Victor’s refusal to commit to a project marks *Eleutheria*’s attempt to trace out an alternative route to freedom in direct antithesis to the values propounded by Sartre. However, the text does not simply endorse Victor’s efforts to be ‘the least possible’

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<sup>29</sup> *Autonomy After Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944–49: *L’Innommable* and *En attendant Godot*’, *Limit(e) Beckett*, 1 (2010), 1–26 (p. 8).

<sup>31</sup> ‘The Literature of the Right and the Liberation: The Case of the Hussards’, in *The Liberation of France: Image and Event*, ed. by H. R. Kedward and Nancy Wood (Oxford: Berg, 1995), pp. 285–96 (p. 90).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944–49’, p. 9.



(*Eleutheria*, p. 149), but rather subverts the coercive logic of the decision altogether. Reading *Eleutheria* alongside Adorno's explicit critiques of existentialism not only offers a provocative point of convergence between Beckett and Adorno—one that can be seen to follow on from Adorno's contrasts between Beckett and the existentialists in 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*'—but also permits a nuanced reading of *Eleutheria* that does not underestimate the significance of its struggles with the problematic of freedom.

Sartre's *The Age of Reason*, the first book of his trilogy, *The Roads to Freedom*, was published just two years before Beckett wrote *Eleutheria*. The parallels between the two texts are striking, with both exploring a man's desperate struggle to attain freedom. Although Mathieu, Sartre's protagonist, does not withdraw from the world in the way that Victor does, his very life is structured around an avoidance of commitment. As his brother argues:

“You condemn capitalist society, and yet you are an official in that society; you display an abstract sympathy with Communists, but you take care not to commit yourself, you have never voted. You despise the bourgeois class, and yet you are a bourgeois, son and brother of a bourgeois, and you live like a bourgeois”.<sup>33</sup>

Both Victor and Mathieu are caught up in structures of bourgeois society that they attempt to evade—Victor by renouncing it altogether and Mathieu by refusing to live with or marry the woman he loves. However, they are not motivated by political or social beliefs but rather by a rather nebulous personal desire to be free. Although Mathieu's yearning is observed and discussed by the other characters, he still displays reluctance and almost embarrassment when discussing it:

“Listen,” said Mathieu, “there's a misunderstanding here: I care little whether I'm a bourgeois or whether I'm not. All I want is”—and he uttered the final words through clenched teeth and with a sort of shame—“to retain my freedom”.<sup>34</sup>

In the same way, Victor's begrudging revelation—‘I have always wanted to be free. I don't know why’ (*Eleutheria*, p. 147)—is only dragged out of him at the threat of torture. However, these superficial similarities are undermined by the texts' larger

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<sup>33</sup> *The Age of Reason*, trans. by Eric Sutton (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

concerns. While Christina Howells rightly warns against reading Sartre's novels as 'a mere simplification or popularization of his philosophical theories',<sup>35</sup> *The Age of Reason* is in essence an existential novel, into which Sartre's major theories are distilled; Mathieu, for example, realises that he is 'condemned for ever to be free',<sup>36</sup> a direct quotation from *Being and Nothingness*<sup>37</sup>, while in the third volume of the trilogy, the 1949 *Iron in the Soul*, his commitment to a final stand against the German soldiers invading France is couched in overtly existentialist terminology: 'He fired. He was cleansed. He was all-powerful. He was free'.<sup>38</sup> *Eleutheria*, on the other hand, satirises Sartre's theories to mount a critique of the existentialist concept of freedom. M. Krap, for example, deflates the existentialist belief in the absurdity of life, which cannot be chosen:<sup>39</sup> 'I am the cow who arrives at the gate of the slaughterhouse and only then understands all the absurdity of the pastures' (p. 20). Far from exhibiting a 'sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition',<sup>40</sup> Beckett satirises contemporaneous existential discourses of the absurd. Similarly, he offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of Sartre's claim that consciousness is 'wholly body', with 'nothing behind the body',<sup>41</sup> in Dr Piouk's polite insistence that Mme Meck is her organs '[w]ithout the slightest residue' (p. 31).

*Eleutheria*'s saturation with existentialist motifs has not gone unnoticed. Werner Huber notes that references 'to "human existence", "mankind", and "absurdity" are over-determined', rendering the 'philosophical-historical background

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<sup>35</sup> Sartre: *The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> *The Age of Reason*, p. 290.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 462.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Iron in the Soul*, trans. by Gerard Hopkins (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), p. 245.

<sup>39</sup> See *Being and Nothingness*, p. 501.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin, 1980), pp. 23–4. Despite waning critical interest in the existential relation, it is undeniable that Beckett was heavily engaged with the intellectual arena of Paris that Sartre also inhabited. He Beckett read, and was published by, *Les Temps Modernes*, described Sartre's *Nausea* as 'extraordinarily good' and Camus' *L'Étranger* as 'important', and offered to introduce his cousin to 'Sartre & his world'. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), I, p. 626 (26 May 1938); *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*, ed. by George Craig and others, 4 vols (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), II, p. 32 (27 May 1946); p. 22 (21 October 1945).

<sup>41</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p. 329.

to which Beckett is responding [...] more than obvious',<sup>42</sup> while Mariko Hori Tanaka's comparison between the play and Sartre's *The Flies* emphasises Beckett's 'critical and negative views of Sartre's notion of freedom'.<sup>43</sup> However, I suggest that Adorno's explicit critique of Sartre allows for a more rigorous and revealing explication of the play's specific subversion of, and possible alternative to, the hypostatising category of the Sartrean 'decision'. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno opposes Sartre's central claim that man 'is wholly and forever free',<sup>44</sup> arguing that the 'notion of absolute freedom of choice is [...] illusionary' (*ND*, p. 50). Sartre explains the free decision as follows:

Thus we shall not say that a prisoner is always free to go out of prison, which would be absurd, nor that he is always free to long for release, which would be an irrelevant truism, but that he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action.<sup>45</sup>

The example of the prisoner neatly explicates the notion of Sartrean freedom. Freedom, for Sartre, is *not* the ability to do whatever you want (the prisoner cannot simply leave the prison); nor is it a purely intellectual phenomenon (the prisoner could *wish* to be out of the prison but this would not accomplish anything). Rather, freedom is the ability, and, indeed, the compulsion, to determine the meaning of the 'situation in which I am born' and act accordingly (the prisoner can 'learn the value of his project').<sup>46</sup> For Adorno, Sartre urges the 'category of decision the more exclusively, the smaller the objective chances left to it by the distribution of social power' (*ND*, p. 49). He argues that Sartre radically underestimates the objective power of society that renders freedom an ever-diminishing possibility that is never guaranteed: indeed, '[w]hole epochs, whole societies lacked not only the concept of freedom but the thing' (*ND*, p. 218). The absolute sense of responsibility that Sartre demands is therefore a cruel appendage to the powerlessness already experienced by individuals. Thus, for Sartre, a person with an inferiority complex has *chosen* it: 'to

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<sup>42</sup> "'Why this farce, day after day?'" On Samuel Beckett's *Eleuthéria*' in *Self-Reflexivity in Literature*, ed. by Werner Huber, Martin Middeke and Hubert Zapf (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), pp. 125–134 (p. 132).

<sup>43</sup> 'The "Freedom" of Sartre and Beckett: *The Flies* versus *Eleutheria*', in *Beckett in the Cultural Field*, ed. by Jürgen Siess, Matthijs Engelberts and Angela Moorjani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 59–73 (p. 71).

<sup>44</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p. 463.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>46</sup> Christine Daigle, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 46.

*choose* inferiority does not mean to be sweetly contented with an *aurea mediocritas*; it is to produce and to assume the rebellion and despair which constitute the revelation of this inferiority'.<sup>47</sup> Adorno, on the other hand, argues that the presence of such neuroses provides an insight into one's 'unfree side': '[t]his truth content of neuroses is that the I has its unfreedom demonstrated to it, within itself, by something alien to it' (*ND*, p. 222). Neuroses mirror the unfreedom of society.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, for Adorno, the 'paper-doll leaders' (*NL2*, p. 81) who supposedly control society are equally determined by its objective forces; he claims that Sartre's mistake is 'in weaving the veil of personalization, the idea that those who are in charge, and not an anonymous machinery, make the decisions, and that there is still life on the heights of social command posts' (*NL2*, p. 81). Sartre's 1947 assertion that '[i]n whatever circumstances, at whatever time, and in whatever place, man is free to choose himself as traitor or hero, coward or conqueror'<sup>49</sup> would be, for Adorno, dangerously naïve.

Citing Adorno's claim that 'a free man would only be one who need not bow to any alternatives' (*ND*, p. 226), David Sherman reiterates the same criticism that was levelled against Adorno in the late 1960s, charging him with resignation.<sup>50</sup> As Adorno puts it, 'a person who in the present hour doubts the possibility of radical change in society and who for that reason neither takes part in nor recommends spectacular, violent action is guilty of resignation' (*CI*, p. 171). Sherman identifies two ways of interpreting Adorno. The weak reading would claim the following:

Adorno only means to say that thought must not shirk its responsibility to continually think through changing social circumstances in the process of aligning itself with the most emancipatory political alternative, which it then seeks to positively affect.<sup>51</sup>

The strong reading, on the other hand, interprets Adorno as arguing that 'one must not even critically and self-consciously choose to align oneself with the best alternative within a "coercive structure" (which, historically, is, of course, ubiquitous)'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p. 494.

<sup>48</sup> In light of this, it is notable that after Victor agrees to return home—'I can't go on living this kind of life' (*Eleutheria*, p. 151)—and then retracts his decision, Dr Piouk diagnoses Victor's condition as 'schizophrenia' (p. 165).

<sup>49</sup> Howells, pp. 89–90.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in David Sherman, *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 258.

<sup>51</sup> Sherman, p. 258.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Arguing that this strong reading more convincingly captures the thrust of Adorno's argument, Sherman accuses the philosopher of attempting to 'dodge moral responsibility by refraining from political practice'—a charge of resignation.<sup>53</sup> This claim is partly based on the fact that Adorno 'abstains from participating in the new left',<sup>54</sup> a correlation that places Sherman firmly in the Sartrean camp, with its manifesto: 'I ought to commit myself and then act my commitment, according to the time-honoured formula that "one need not hope in order to undertake one's work".'<sup>55</sup> Sherman presents an overly simplistic account of Adorno's view, failing to take into account the extent to which he wrestles with the problem of active engagement with a bad totality. Moreover, Adorno offers an alternative to the 'category of the decision' (*ND*, p. 49) hypostatized by existentialism—an alternative that is framed by the 'controversy' (*NL2*, p. 76) between committed and autonomous art. For Adorno, this binary opposition cannot be maintained:

Each of the two alternatives negates itself along with the other: committed art, which as art is necessarily detached from reality, because it negates its difference from reality; *l'art pour l'art* because through its absolutization it denies even the indissoluble connection that is contained in art's autonomy as its polemical a priori.

(*NL2*, p. 77)

Each position precludes mediation with reality: committed art purports to offer an unmediated representation of the world, thus refusing to acknowledge its status as art, while autonomous art falsely professes its complete isolation from the sphere of existence. Paradoxically, then, Adorno argues that true commitment can only take place through autonomy, but an autonomy that is acutely aware that its 'detachment from empirical reality is at the same time mediated by that reality' (*NL2*, p. 89).

This aesthetic argument finds its social corollary in *Minima Moralia*, in which two adjacent aphorisms address the problem of engagement with the world. The first argues that '[t]here is nothing innocuous left' (*MM*, p. 25). Nothing, Adorno insists, is 'exempt from the responsibility of thought' (*MM*, p. 25): the cinema is an instrument of the Culture Industry, fostering conformism; the beauty of a 'blossoming tree' (*MM*,

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 258–9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1996), p. 47.

p. 25) belies the damaged world surrounding it; and sociality is a sham. In light of this, Adorno argues that ‘inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity’ (*MM*, p. 26). The next aphorism, as its title, ‘Antithesis’, would suggest, offers the opposite viewpoint: ‘He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest’ (*MM*, p. 27). Adorno’s resolution of this antinomy is that while ‘[t]he detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant’—concurring with Sherman that ‘we are always already up to our elbows in blood in the “coercive structure” in which we find ourselves’<sup>56</sup>—the former gains ‘insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such’ (*MM*, p. 27). This freedom is elsewhere attributed to the refusal to be bound by the necessarily constraining options provided by society that are reflected in the ‘absolute’ (*ND*, p. 49) Sartrean decision:

A free man would only be one who need not bow to any alternatives, and under existing circumstances there is a touch of freedom in refusing to accept the alternatives. Freedom means to criticize and change situations, not to confirm them by deciding within their coercive structure.

(*ND*, p. 226)

This refusal to adhere to the ‘prescribed form of the alternatives’ (*NL2*, p. 79) and commit to one or the other or them does not necessitate resignation; nor does disengagement from a society obsessed with ‘pseudo-activity’ (*CI*, p. 173) amount to capitulation to the status quo. ‘When the doors are barricaded’ (*CI*, p. 173), Adorno argues, what is required is thought, the ‘force of resistance’ (*CI*, p. 175) that opens our blinkered eyes.

As Peter Boxall notes, *Eleutheria*’s very title has a strong political resonance: ‘it originates from the word “Eleutherian”, a title given to Zeus which names him in his specific capacity as protector of political freedom’, and ‘has come to signify a transgressive desire for political liberty’.<sup>57</sup> This situates Victor’s emphatically apolitical search for freedom both within and against a Sartrean context of commitment and, indeed, what Gibson describes as the ‘morality of *engagement*’ that

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<sup>56</sup> Sherman, p. 259.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Freedom and Cultural Location in Beckett’s “Eleutheria”’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 7, 1998, 245–58 (p. 250).

overwhelmingly characterised post-war France.<sup>58</sup> The play is propelled forward by an intensifying insistence that Victor must ‘explain’ (*Eleutheria*, p. 141) his withdrawal from home and society. As the reasonable bewilderment of his friends and family is supplemented by the burning curiosity of strangers and audience members, the play itself threatens to disintegrate, as though Victor’s inexplicable retreat has damaged the very mechanisms of the work-a-day world.

Victor is positioned against the ideal of the committed man propounded by Sartre. His passivity and indifference threaten the play’s other characters, who insist on reinscribing his non-decision into a personal ‘project’:

GLAZIER [...] [W]hat is all this bullshit? We need feelings, for Christ’s sake! Naturally you love your mother, naturally you love your fiancée, but... *but* you have your duties—to yourself, to your work, to science, to the party, to I don’t know what else, which make you a man apart, an exceptional being, which don’t allow you to enjoy the pleasures of family relationships, of passion, which clap a cellophane mask over your face. To have feelings, to have feelings—and then to reject them, that’s your mission! To sacrifice everything, to your fixed idea, to your vocation! And only then do you start living. No one would want to lynch you any more. You are the model of the poor young man, the heroic young man. People see you dying like a dog at thirty-three, exhausted by your labours, by your discoveries, ravaged by radium, prostrated by sleepless nights and privation, killed in the performance your duty, shot by Franco, shot by Stalin. Everyone applauds you. Your mother dies of a broken heart, so does your fiancée, but what does that matter, we need men like you, men of ideals [...].

(*Eleutheria*, p. 87)

The Glazier does not compel Victor to take a particular course of action; rather, he charges him to commit to *something*. He expounds the existential belief that, as a man ‘condemned to be free’ in a godless world, Victor has an obligation to create his own values and make decisions accordingly.<sup>59</sup> His withdrawal from society is only socially comprehensible as a consequence of his free commitment to ‘work, to science, to the party’. Even Jesus, who was supposedly crucified at ‘thirty-three’, is referenced as a political figure who died for his beliefs. Victor is permitted to throw his life away if he does so through a sense of ‘duty’. Sartre argues that man’s free choices place ‘the

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<sup>58</sup> *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 108.

<sup>59</sup> *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 38.

entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders'.<sup>60</sup> However, man's responsibility does not rest here; in Kantian terms, Sartre insists that he is 'responsible for all men. [...] [I]n choosing for himself he chooses for all men'.<sup>61</sup> By committing to a course of action, Victor would, implicitly or otherwise, be an advocate for that path. Since, for Sartre, freedom is 'the foundation of all values', 'the actions of men of good faith have, as their ultimate significance, the quest of freedom itself as such'.<sup>62</sup> Sartrean commitment is communal: it extends beyond the self towards 'the liberty of others'.<sup>63</sup> According to this logic, Victor's personal search for freedom through withdrawal is not only self-deceptive but fundamentally unethical.<sup>64</sup>

Victor himself is acutely aware of what the family, friends and strangers who 'persecute' (*Eleutheria*, p. 144)—another loaded term—him want. He recognises that '[s]aints, madmen, martyrs, victims of torture—they don't bother you in the least, they are in the natural order of things' (p. 145). These are carefully chosen examples. Saints and martyrs, like the 'men of ideals' in the Glazier's speech, have carried out actions that are comprehensible as part of their project. The reference to 'madmen' and 'victims of torture' allude pointedly to two of Sartre's more provocative claims: first, that madmen are in bad faith—he stated in 1964 that he considered 'mental illness as the "way out" that the free organism, in its total unity, invents in order to live through an intolerable situation'<sup>65</sup>—and, second, that 'even the red hot pincers of the torturer do not exempt us from being free'.<sup>66</sup>

That Beckett satirises the Sartrean ethic of commitment is evident, but it is questionable how far the text validates the alternative presented by Victor. Tanaka

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>64</sup> In fact, these two things are inextricable in existentialism. Sartre responds to the question of how existentialism, which claims that there are no universal values, can posit standards of living by insisting that while the specific decisions that others make cannot be judged, their self-deception can be. The self is deceived when it refuses to acknowledge its absolute freedom. See *Ibid.*, p. 38; p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in R. D. Laing and D. G. Cooper, *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre's Philosophy 1950–1960* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p. 527. This statement was strongly criticised by Herbert Marcuse, who claimed: 'The anti-fascist who is tortured to death may retain his moral and intellectual freedom to "transcend" this situation: he is still tortured to death'. 'Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *l'Être et le néant*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 8 (1948), 309–36 (p. 331). Adorno later agreed that 'Marcuse provided the correct label for the philosophical idea that one can accept or reject torture inwardly: nonsense' (*NL2*, p. 79).



presents Victor as a straightforward mouthpiece for Beckett by claiming that ‘[i]f Sartre believed positively in the freedom of action as a means for responsibly changing society for the better, Beckett clearly sought for freedom of inaction as a right of human beings’.<sup>67</sup> However, if we have learnt anything from Adorno’s critique of Sartre, it is that we do not have to—and, indeed, should not—acknowledge a false alternative such as Tanaka erects. *Eleutheria* would certainly be simpler if, as the Spectator suggests, ‘its characters had clear heads and fresh mouths, the two lives, the two principles, faith and pleasure, faith in no matter what and the minimum of displeasure’ (*Eleutheria*, p. 136). However, as Adorno argues, when ‘committed works of art present decisions to be made and make those decisions their criteria, the choices become interchangeable’ (*NL2*, p. 80). *Eleutheria* is a play about commitment and decision-making, but it does not genuinely offer the audience a choice between alternatives, for all the Spectator’s efforts to twist the play into something eminently logical: ‘Either it’s life, with all the... all the... subjection it entails, or it’s... the great departure, the real one, to use one of the metaphors you’re so fond of. Isn’t it?’ (p. 151). In fact, it is ultimately unclear what the somewhat nebulous freedom so prized by Victor actually amounts to. He accuses the Glazier and Spectator of feeling ‘the furious hatred old maids feel for whores. Your own liberty is so miserable! So paltry! So threadbare! So ugly!’ (p. 148), but his very metaphor betrays the ‘threadbare’ nature of his own supposed freedom: prostitutes are no more free from the world than old maids. In fact, one of the most revealing lines in the play comes from the Spectator, who gloats: ‘Dead or alive, he belongs to us, he’s one of us again. That’s all we had to prove. That basically there’s only us’ (p. 152). This ‘ignominious adaptation’ (*MM*, p. 99) to reality divulged by the man who claims to represent ‘a thousand spectators, all slightly different from each other’ (p. 128) is a fundamental polemic against the very possibility of freedom, and one that Victor ultimately resists by refusing to either return home or kill himself. He evades the absolute decision—couched in existentialist terminology but perverting its principles—offered to him by Dr Piouk: ‘Come on! The great refusal, not the lesser one, the great one, the one that only man is capable of, the most glorious one he is capable of, the refusal of Existence!’ (p. 161). He accepts the tablet whilst refusing to take it—‘I don’t need it. I shall keep it, though’ (p. 163)—and returns to his original condition of ‘limbo’ (p.

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<sup>67</sup> Tanaka, p. 70.

164). It is perhaps an unsatisfactory and even unsettling ending, but the play's circular structure should not obscure the extent to which Victor has gained a privileged 'insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such'.

### III

Negativity is inscribed within Beckett's work as early as *Murphy* and *Eleutheria* in their recognition of the impossibility of directly presenting freedom. Even the three zones of freedom depicted in *Murphy* are carefully framed by what Murphy's mind 'felt and pictured itself to be', in contradistinction to how 'it really was' (*Murphy*, p. 69): as David Weisberg observes, '[t]he private, subjective realm in which such freedom becomes visible is antithetical to the narrative perspective, which can only look in at a mind, an "apparatus", looking at itself'.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Murphy's failure is preordained by the narrator's very first lines: 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, *as though he were free*' (p. 3; my italics). Freedom cannot be positively presented in art, Adorno argues, because it 'is something that cannot be found in the realm of factual reality':

[I]f we wanted, paradoxically, to uncover its empirical, factual roots, it would lead us to a void, a deficiency—namely to the experience that freedom has never yet been made a reality in the entire realm of historical and natural experience so far as this is known to us.

(*HF*, pp. 177–8)

In this respect, freedom converges with utopia: 'the yet-to-exist' (*AT*, p. 178). Like utopia, it cannot be concretized in thought or art, 'in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation' (*AT*, p. 41). In fact, Adorno argues, '[t]he Utopian impulse in thinking is all the stronger, the less it objectifies itself as Utopia—a further form of regression—whereby it sabotages its own realization' (*CI*, p. 175). Beckett extricates himself from this dilemma by honing in on the failure of his protagonists to attain freedom, the concept itself figuring as an elusive emptiness

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<sup>68</sup> *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 41.

at the heart of the texts. Its very inexpressibility is encapsulated in Victor's final and incoherent explanation of his life, the tantalising hints of which are undermined by his dogged insistence that it 'isn't the truth' (*Eleutheria*, p. 150). However, ultimately this negative logic that preserves the texts from betraying freedom by portraying it does not go far enough, because it is confined to content alone.

For Adorno, form and content (*Inhalt*) are dialectically related.<sup>69</sup> It is impossible to extricate one wholly from the other, given their 'entwinement' (*AT*, p. 185), but this is not to say that their relationship amounts to an undifferentiated identity. In explicitly Kantian terms, Adorno argues that absolute form or absolute content would be, respectively, 'empty or blind, self-sufficient play or raw empiria' (*AT*, p. 194), even assuming that the one could be utterly disentangled from the other. Within the dialectic, however, 'the scale [...] tips toward form' (*AT*, p. 191): Adorno stresses that '[a]s little as art is to be defined by any other element, it is simply identical with form' (*AT*, p. 186). Since every dialectic is historically mediated, we should see Adorno's self-conscious leaning towards the primacy of form as a reaction, first, against the Communist Georg Lukács's dogmatic inheritance of Hegel's 'aesthetics of content [*Inhalt*]' (*AT*, p. 196) and, second, to the objective conditions of reality: if form is the means by which art 'separates itself from the merely existing' (*AT*, p. 187), then the content of a disenchanted and alienated world requires intensified mediation if it is not to degenerate into affirmation within the artwork. The significance of form for Adorno lies in its 'transformation of what is given into something *other*, that is, something unreal, nonidentical'.<sup>70</sup> With this in mind, he notes that 'while the concept of subject matter [*Stoff*] remains a concern of art, in its immediacy as a theme that can be lifted over from external reality and worked upon, it has, since Kandinsky, Proust, and Joyce, incontrovertibly declined' (*AT*, p. 196).

Following Lukács, Adorno describes the novel as 'the literary form specific to the bourgeois age' (*NL2*, p. 30). Since its inception, the novel has 'had as its true subject matter the conflict between living human beings and rigidified conditions' (*NL2*, p. 32): that is, as David Cunningham explains, it is '*essentially* defined by its

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<sup>69</sup> 'For the English "content" German has both "Inhalt" and "Gehalt", which, in aesthetic contexts, serve to distinguish the idea of thematic content or subject matter from that of content in the sense of import, essence, or substance of a work'. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *AT*, p. 19 n. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, 'On the Conundrum of Form and Material in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 66 (2008), 225–35 (p. 225).

modern, alienated character, directing itself towards the (historically new) “inner experience” of the bourgeois subject’.<sup>71</sup> It is a genre defined by the historical phenomenon of individualism. However, as Benjamin suggests, the very invention of the novel is the ‘earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling’.<sup>72</sup> That is, the novel form contains within itself the liquidation of ‘the very category of the *individual* itself, around which [it] was historically constituted’,<sup>73</sup> because this very individual was always already an alienated self, formed by the logic of capital. Within this trajectory, the novel’s mode of representation must inevitably change so as to be equal to the increasingly disenchanting world it is part of, but which it also critiques. *Murphy* acts as a pastiche of an earlier (and now historically defunct) form of the novel by combining an individualist narrative, with all the trappings of the nineteenth-century novel in the Neary *et al.* subplot, with an omniscient but self-reflexive narrator who is aware of the impossibility of his stance in the absence of ‘[t]he identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity’ (*NL2*, p. 31). The novel thematically expresses the alienation felt by the subject—Murphy—in relation to the world, but within an aesthetic framework in which there is still an individual to feel alienated and pursue his own ends in defiance of the external world. The self-preserving and thereby self-destructive individualism that is cleverly and complexly thematised in *Murphy*, and which ultimately literally blows up in the protagonist’s face, is reflected in a form that only parodies rather than entirely deconstructing the logic of individualism at the heart of the novel. For this reason we can say that *Murphy*’s form lags behind its content. It fails to register that ‘the experience of the disintegration of experience evade[s] direct presentation’<sup>74</sup>—that which Beckett’s later texts are so acutely aware. If Beckett’s stated aim in 1961 is to ‘find a form that accommodates the mess’,<sup>75</sup> the pre-war *Murphy*’s form accommodates the mess a little too neatly, retaining too much of the aesthetic unity it consistently mocks on the level of content—for example, in the ‘closed system’ (*Murphy*, p. 38) of desire:

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<sup>71</sup> ‘After Adorno: The Narrator of the Contemporary European Novel’, in *Adorno and Literature*, ed. by David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 189–200 (p. 190).

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>74</sup> Chris Conti, ‘Critique and Form: Adorno on *Godot* and *Endgame*’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 14 (2004), 277–92 (p. 282).

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Tom Driver, ‘Beckett by the Madeleine’, *Columbia University Forum*, 4 (1961), 21–5 (p. 23).

Of such was Neary's love for Miss Dwyer, who loved a Flight-Lieutenant Elliman, who loved a Miss Farren of Ringsakiddy, who loved a Father Fitt of Ballinclashet, who in all sincerity was bound to acknowledge a certain vocation for a Mrs. West of Passage, who loved Neary.

(p. 5)

The form of an advanced work of art, as Fred Rush explains, is 'barely [...] able to contain the disintegration of that world' it mediates.<sup>76</sup> While *Murphy* is in many ways an exciting and experimental novel, its critical force *qua* art is limited by its form, which does not sufficiently stray from its subverted models to inaugurate a new and sufficiently radical mode of representing and opposing the world.

Adorno compares the traditional novel 'to the three-walled stage of bourgeois theatre. This technique was one of illusion. The narrator raises a curtain: the reader is to take part in what occurs as though he were physically present. The narrator's subjectivity proves itself in the power to produce this illusion' (*NL2*, p. 33). As a 'highly satirical, melodramatic, bourgeois comedy',<sup>77</sup> *Eleutheria* parodies the popular nineteenth-century 'well-made play'.<sup>78</sup> It brashly subverts the 'illusion' of bourgeois theatre, breaking the fourth wall by the entry of the Spectator, the huffy exit of the Prompter and such self-reflexive comments as Victor's irritated '[i]mpossible to break anything' (*Eleutheria*, p. 66)—as Boxall notes, 'Victor recognises that his attempts to destroy his environment are always absorbed into his belonging to and inclusion in the stage space'.<sup>79</sup> Visually speaking, the third act of the play sees the expansion of Victor's side of the stage, forcing the Kraps' salon into the orchestra pit. Nonetheless, *Eleutheria*, like *Murphy*, remains tied to the very conventions it subverts. Boxall argues that the text ends with Victor's 'acknowledgement of his ineluctable containment within the cultural and theatrical references which bring the stage that he occupies into being';<sup>80</sup> such an acknowledgement could as easily be attributed to Beckett himself, who would never again write a play so subordinate to traditional theatrical forms.

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<sup>76</sup> 'Literature and Politics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. by Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 496–516 (p. 512).

<sup>77</sup> Marius Bruning, 'The "Via Negativa" and its first stirrings in "Eleutheria"', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 9 (2000), 43–54 (p. 50).

<sup>78</sup> Huber, p. 128.

<sup>79</sup> Boxall, p. 253.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Adorno argues that '[f]orm is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom' (*AT*, p. 189). For all their obsession with freedom, neither *Murphy* nor *Eleutheria* sufficiently transfigure or reconstellate the content that they lift from empirical reality. They are tied to the traditional even as they mock it. In these terms alone both texts can be considered failures, mirroring the failures of Murphy and Victor to 'be free' (*Eleutheria*, p. 147). Nonetheless, it is from the vantage-point of these failures that we are able to penetrate the remainder of Beckett's work and its relation to the complex question of freedom. The development in Beckett's prose after *Murphy* and theatre after *Eleutheria* shifts the always precarious dialectic—precarious because an abstract formalism runs the risk of neutralisation—away from content and towards form, in the hope, I argue, that the freedom that could only be conceptualised as a nebulous and unreachable goal might be approached more successfully in a radical transformation of form. The negativity already present in *Murphy's* and *Eleutheria's* thematics of failure, registering Beckett's awareness that it is impossible to present freedom as a positive given, is intensified in the mid to late works, as freedom can only be read negatively from the formal contraction and minimal representation synonymous with Beckett's name.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM AND THE FREEDOM OF ILLUSION<sup>1</sup>

Irony is something one simply cannot play games with.

— Friedrich Schlegel<sup>1</sup>

In a footnote on Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein suggests that the American philosopher ‘is frequently condemned for what some take to be the ultimate philosophic sin: failing to be “serious”’.<sup>2</sup> This may not appear to be a problem for Adorno, whose work can be accused of quite the opposite ‘sin’: seriousness to the point of joylessness. This reputation has its roots in Adorno’s condemnation of the Culture Industry and its ‘prescribed fun’ (*CI*, p. 89); his dense and elliptical prose style that ties translator and reader alike in knots; and his unwavering critique of modern capitalist society and all its seemingly innocuous trappings. Nonetheless, and perhaps surprisingly, Adorno demonstrates an acute awareness of what he describes as the ‘essential element of *play* in philosophy’ (*LND*, p. 90). This playful component is a necessary response to philosophy’s ‘fallibility’ (*LND*, p. 90):

Philosophy goes beyond whatever secure knowledge that it possesses, and because it knows this, and because it is fallible, it also possesses this playful element without which it could not be philosophy in the first place. It does not just flirt with playfulness in its motives or methods; rather playfulness is deeply embedded in it and candidly so. I would go so far as to say that without playfulness there can be no truth.

(*LND*, p. 90)

Playfulness, then, manifests philosophy’s acknowledgement of its own epistemological limits, the thinker’s awareness of ‘how far he remains from the object

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<sup>1</sup> ‘On Incomprehensibility’, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 297–307 (p. 304).

<sup>2</sup> *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 255. Rorty’s own work on irony is beyond the scope of this chapter; for an engaging account of Rorty’s debt to Schlegel, see Adam Carter, “‘Self-Creation and Self-Destruction’: Irony, Ideology, and Politics in Richard Rorty and Friedrich Schlegel”, *Parallax*, 4 (1998), 21–40.

of his thinking' (*ND*, p. 14). At the same time, however, it is the very thing that propels the thinker *beyond* such limits, by 'remind[ing] us of the unthinkable' (*LND*, p. 90). This element of play remains external to 'the total rule of method' (*ND*, p. 14), which cannot acknowledge its fallibility at any price. Playfulness, then, is a form of freedom, permitting philosophy to transcend, at least to a degree, the constraints of the given world: namely, what Adorno would describe as the logic of identity that pervades thought within the repressive structures of modern capitalism. It is this peculiar playfulness inherent within philosophy—for Adorno is adamant that it can by no means be a mere appendage—that allows him to declare, with uncharacteristic irony, that '[p]hilosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious' (*ND*, p. 14).

This relationship between seriousness and play is as much a dilemma when it comes to art. Art is predominantly taken seriously by artists, critics and the general public—even those whose uninterest nonetheless betrays a kind of wariness in its vicinity. Adorno himself repeatedly refers to 'serious' (*ernst*) works (see, for example, *CI*, p. 27, p. 28, p. 33; *DE*, p. 107), usually in contradistinction to 'light' (*leicht*) works (see, for example, *CI*, p. 29, p. 33, p. 48; *DE*, p. 107) or Culture Industry products. Nonetheless, the concept of 'serious art' is profoundly paradoxical. For art is, by its very nature, unreal; its semblance-character, or *Schein*,<sup>3</sup> might conceivably seem to neutralise any seriousness it professes to hold. Art's tragedy, in this sense, is that it will never be anything more than art. Beckett's texts are particularly conducive to an exploration of this problem. On the one hand, they are dense, complex and intricate, providing the basis for serious academic study; on the other, they are extraordinarily witty and funny, developing their distinctive humour despite changes in style and medium. Laura Salisbury's recent book on laughter and comedy in Beckett's work offers compelling readings of a number of texts, exploring the difficulty of reconciling their often uncomfortable and unredemptive humour—their refusal to fit into a theory of laughter as catharsis or to sublimate the inherent violence of humour—with their ethical dimension.<sup>4</sup> This chapter departs from this stance to consider in more detail Adorno's dialectic of seriousness and

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the untranslatable nature of the German *Schein*, I have chosen not to gloss it with the necessarily insufficient English translations of appearance, semblance or illusion, unless it is helpful to stress one aspect of these renditions.

<sup>4</sup> *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).



lightheartedness, concisely outlined by Salisbury,<sup>5</sup> and how it may be thought of as informing Beckett's post-war *Novellas*. These four texts are the first instances of Beckett's development in prose style from the intrusive third-person narration of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy*, with their depth of allusion and strongly satirical tone, to the more recognisable first-person narrators of *The Trilogy* and *Texts for Nothing*, where the humour, though very much still palpable, works in an altogether different way.

Adorno's dialectic of seriousness and lightheartedness, I will argue, is utterly indispensable in fathoming the nature of the freedom of art. Without such a tension—and indeed, without the often frustrating questions it raises—art as Adorno understands it simply would not exist. This dialectic is entirely predicated on the artwork's uneven relation to reality: it is 'something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it' (*NL2*, p. 249). Without this element of escape, there would be no freedom; without the work's saturation in the world, the concept of freedom would make no sense. To adapt Kant's famous expression: on the one hand, the artwork would be blind, unable to see beyond the given world; on the other, it would be empty, disconnected from human experience. In a wonderful formulation, J. M. Bernstein claims that, for Adorno, artworks 'are the illusory appearing of freedom'.<sup>6</sup> This encapsulates the dialectic of seriousness and playfulness; any manifestation of freedom in art—its serious relation to the world—is only ever illusory, but such freedom is only possible *because* of this playful retreat into illusion.

Where Adorno's otherwise intricate and fascinating theory loses precision is in its concrete discussion of literary texts. Although he invokes Beckett's name in practically every discussion of play and lightheartedness,<sup>7</sup> he offers very little in the way of analysis of the particular modalities of such play and, moreover, has a distinct tendency to emphasise the other end of the dialectic: seriousness—a tendency that has helped to lead to his austere reputation.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, I will supplement Adorno's

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

<sup>6</sup> *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 237.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *AT*, p. 108, p. 400, p. 402; *NL2*, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> This can perhaps be traced to Adorno's abiding loathing of the Culture Industry and what he describes as the 'failure of culture' (*MCP*, p. 139) to prevent the Holocaust. His cultural austerity can be interpreted as an attempt to redress the balance; it is for this reason that he takes products of the Culture Industry eminently seriously, even as he submits them to intensive criticism.

aesthetic theory with the work of Friedrich Schlegel,<sup>9</sup> whose fragmentary and literary style has prompted even more accusations of ‘failing to be “serious”’ than Rorty—indeed, as Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert emphasises, early German Romanticism is traditionally interpreted ‘as *at best* a literary movement with excessive emphasis on the irrational forces of human life’.<sup>10</sup> Not least, perhaps, because it is so deeply refracted through Hegel, Adorno’s debt to the early Romantics remains predominantly ignored. However, a number of critics have at the very least gestured towards affinities in thought between the early Romantics and the Frankfurt School. Andrew Bowie is instrumental in this field, his work repeatedly situating Adorno and the *Frühromantik* within the same philosophical tradition.<sup>11</sup> Millán-Zaibert notes the congruous attempts by Adorno and Schlegel to ‘make the Enlightenment reflexive’,<sup>12</sup> while Brady Bowman suggests, as an aside, that ‘Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics can itself be construed as a radicalization of the romantic dialectics we find in F. Schlegel and the early Schleiermacher’.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the intended epigraph for *Aesthetic Theory* was taken from Schlegel: ‘What is called the philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or

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<sup>9</sup> There has been relatively little critical attention directed at affinities between Beckett’s work and Early German Romanticism. A 2007 special edition of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* is dedicated to the topic of ‘Beckett and Romanticism’, but only a few articles dwell on the German connection. See, for example, Dirk van Hulle, “‘Accursed Creator’: Beckett, Romanticism, and “the Modern Prometheus””, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 18 (2007), 15–29; Mark Nixon, ‘Beckett and Romanticism in the 1930s’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 18 (2007), 61–76; and Andrew Eastham, ‘Beckett’s Sublime Ironies: *The Trilogy*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and the Remains of Romanticism’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 18 (2007), 117–29. Tine Koch offers a more recent article on the Romantic problematic of finitude and infinitude in ‘Searching for the Blue Flower: Friedrich Schlegel’s and Samuel Beckett’s “Unending Pursuits” of “Infinite Fulfilment”’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 19 (2010), 228–44.

<sup>10</sup> *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> See *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 42; p. 195 n. 7; the complementary texts *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) and *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990; repr. 2003), which trace a tradition including Early German Romanticism and Adorno; ‘Romantic Aesthetics and the Ends of Contemporary Philosophy’, in *Das neue Licht der Frühromantik*, ed. by Bärbel Frischmann and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008), p. 223; ‘The Romantic Connection: Neurath, The Frankfurt School, and Heidegger’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8 (2000), 275–98; ‘The Romantic Connection: Neurath, The Frankfurt School, and Heidegger, Part Two’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8 (2000), 459–83; and “‘Non-Identity’: The German Romantics, Schelling, and Adorno”, in *Intersections: Nineteenth-Century Philosophy and Contemporary Society*, ed. by Tilottama Rajan and David L. Clark (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 243–60.

<sup>12</sup> Millán-Zaibert, p. 161. References to Schlegel allude to Friedrich rather than August Wilhelm.

<sup>13</sup> ‘On the Defense of Literary Value: From Early German Romanticism to Analytic Philosophy of Literature’, in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. by Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 147–62.

the art' (*AT*, pp. 464–5). While a number of compelling parallels can be drawn between Adorno and early German Romanticism, this chapter will focus on how the concept of romantic irony can offer an alternative, though sympathetic, perspective on Adorno's dialectic of seriousness and lightheartedness in art and its relation to Beckett's perplexing *Novellas*.

This dialectic first requires further explication. I will then consider the extent to which the *Frühromantik* concept of irony can be mapped onto it, arguing that the dialectic as Adorno conceives it is radicalised by the structural and linguistic irony of the *Novellas*. Accentuating their containment within the limits of *Schein*, they flaunt their hermeticism in a play of allusions that inevitably lead to a hermeneutic *impasse*. Moreover, they manifest a restlessly ironic tone that floats free of any secure signification: rather than situating irony as a deviation from stable, communicative discourse, they obstruct any attempt to distinguish between sincerity and sarcasm. Far from a mere retreat into trivial game-playing, however, the playful ambivalence of the *Novellas* raises the possibility of an alternative to the reductive principle of exchange endemic to capitalism. In positing an absolute equivalence between disparate things, such exchange attests to an underlying logic of identity: a form of 'domination' (*ND*, p. 178), given the necessarily disparate nature of each. In rejecting, through a persistently radical irony, the terms by which the supposedly serious world is governed, the *Novellas* acquire a seriousness based not on what they can empirically accomplish, but what they can promise is possible.

Adorno's dialectic of seriousness and lightheartedness in art is formulated most explicitly in his 1967 essay, 'Is Art Lighthearted?',<sup>14</sup> although it is also explored in more oblique form in *Aesthetic Theory*. His discussion takes as its basis Schiller's claim: "'*Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist die Kunst*"—life is serious, art is lighthearted' (Quoted in *NL2*, p. 247). Adorno's central aim is to debunk the very binary evidenced in this formulation: that they should be characterised in opposition to each other. In an argument later expanded upon in his 1977 essay, 'Free Time', he suggests that Schiller's assertion 'affirms the established and popular distinction between work and leisure' (*NL2*, p. 247). The bourgeois separation of the spheres of work and free time masks the extent to which free time is merely 'a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life', functioning for 'the recreation of expended labour power' (*CI*, p. 164) in the provision of gratuitous amusement for the sake of greater productivity. The division formulated by Schiller not only neutralises art by confining it to a sphere of vacuous enjoyment but also enlists it in capitalism's all-consuming task of improving productivity: 'art is prescribed to tired businesspeople as a shot in the arm' (*NL2*, p. 248). Against Schiller's binary division, then, Adorno argues that art is neither wholly serious nor lighthearted. The former not only 'terminates in sterility', but 'would be pitilessly ideological': 'To act dignified [art] would have to put on airs, strike a pose, claim to be other than what it can be' (*AT*, p. 49). The latter, on the other hand, 'degrades art to *fun*' (*AT*, p. 49), as consumable as any other product of the Culture Industry, and risks 'irrelevance' as 'the kind of repetitive formulaic play that has been debunked in other species of art, decorative patterns' (*NL2*, p. 90). Instead, 'art vibrates between this seriousness [*Ernst*] and lightheartedness [*Heiterkeit*]. It is this tension that constitutes art' (*NL2*, p. 249).

As always, Adorno's terminology requires close attention; his use of everyday language should not mislead us into assuming its everyday meaning is all that is intended. We have already seen that seriousness is not to be confused with what he terms 'the Wagnerian art religion' (*AT*, p. 49), which attributes an empty dignity to the artwork. Nor is lightheartedness to be equated with the kind of hollow fun he associates with the Culture Industry (as Ross Wilson wryly suggests, fun for Adorno

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<sup>14</sup> This essay was first published under the title 'Ist die Kunst heiter?' in 1967, then as 'Zur Dialektik von Heiterkeit' in 1968. *Heiter* can alternately be translated as 'cheerful', but I have chosen to retain Shierry Weber Nicholson's original translation for the sake of continuity.

is ‘stupid, but it turns out not even to be all that much fun’).<sup>15</sup> In fact, Adorno is (perhaps uncharacteristically) unequivocal, if not conventional, in his understanding of these terms. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he argues:

What can [...] justly be called *serious* in art is the pathos of an objectivity that confronts the individual with what is more and other than he is in his historically imperative insufficiency. The risk taken by artworks participates in their seriousness.

(AT, p. 49)

The seriousness of art inheres in its sense of ‘responsibility’ (AT, p. 49) for the world, the ‘objectivity that confronts the individual’. Art’s responsibility derives from its ability to reconstellate—a term I borrow from Lambert Zuidervaart—the existing world, to offer ‘a determinate negation of contemporary society’ that gestures towards the possibility of a free society.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, however, art is not only unable to live up to its responsibility to achieve the changes it imagines, but it actively ‘*diminishes* [suffering]; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering’ (AT, p. 49; my italics). Art’s constraint by *Schein*—variously translated as appearance, semblance and illusion—instigates a crisis neatly explicated by Frederic Jameson:

Genuine art, which cannot abolish *Schein* altogether without destroying itself and turning to silence, must none the less live its illusory appearance and its unreal luxury status as play in a vivid guilt that permeates its very forms, and is sometimes oddly called reflexivity or self-consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

Art’s consciousness of the guilt of *Schein* provokes a twofold response, which can at once be understood as a historical progression and as a constitutive tension within the artwork itself. The first response—the acceptance, even celebration, of *Schein* and the abdication of responsibility—Adorno situates roughly in the nineteenth century, in which ‘aesthetic semblance was heightened to the point of phantasmagoria’ (AT, p. 135). In retaliation, he continues, modernism attempted a disavowal of *Schein* in a drive to, in Jameson’s words, ‘transcend the aesthetic’:<sup>18</sup> Dadaism is perhaps the most obvious example of this. However, Adorno’s extremely generalised and possibly

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<sup>15</sup> *Theodor Adorno* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991; repr. 1994), p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

misleading chronology is best circumvented in favour of his much more compelling claim that all artworks embody, in varying degrees, this tension between, on the one hand, a playful admission of irresponsibility and, on the other, an attempt to entirely overcome *Schein*. It is the former of these tendencies that, for Adorno, articulates art's lightheartedness, to which we shall now turn.

Art, Adorno acknowledges, is a 'source of pleasure' (*NL2*, p. 248), and this pleasurable aspect 'is not something external to it [...] but part of its very definition' (*NL2*, p. 248). However, such pleasure is extraordinarily difficult to locate, given that it is qualitatively different from the pseudo-pleasure inspired by products of the Culture Industry. It can best be captured in an image that Adorno uses more than once: that of the excitement and anticipation of the raising of a curtain at the beginning of a play (*NL2*, p. 248; *AT*, p. 108). The raised curtain invokes *Schein*: the illusory nature of the artwork; its status as semblance. Adorno notes that this moment is 'the expectation of the *apparition*' (*AT*, p. 108), and it is through his detailed scrutiny of this concept that we can penetrate the significance of art's lightheartedness. Adorno identifies fireworks as 'prototypical' (*AT*, p. 107) apparitions:

They appear empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign from heaven yet artifactual, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes and indeed cannot be read for its meaning.

(*AT*, p. 107)

What is particularly significant here is the capacity of the apparition to gesture towards something entirely new: 'possibility made historical', as Zuidervaart describes it.<sup>19</sup> This possibility, Adorno emphasises, 'is not dreamt up out of disparate elements of the existing. Out of these elements artworks arrange constellations that become ciphers, without, however, like fantasies, setting up the enciphered before the eyes as something immediately existing' (*AT*, p. 109). What is 'enciphered' is the purposelessness of art in contradistinction to the 'prevailing principle of reality: that of exchangeability' (*AT*, p. 109). Art is neither 'a dull particular for which other particulars could be substituted, nor is it an empty universal that equates everything specific that it comprehends by abstracting the common characteristics' (*AT*, p. 109).

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<sup>19</sup> Zuidervaart, p. 189.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno suggests that '[a]rt is magic delivered from the lie of being truth' (*MM*, p. 222): the 'magic' of art is its release from the fungibility of the given world. Truth, in this case, would merely reflect what is—a lie.

Adorno's terminology is suggestive: the apparition is a 'script that flashes up, vanishes and indeed cannot be read for its meaning' and a 'cipher, without [...] setting up the enciphered before the eyes as something immediately existing'. In both descriptions the emphasis is on *language*, albeit a form of signification that cannot be deciphered. This is the enigma-character of artworks: 'Through form, artworks gain their resemblance to language, seeming at every point to say just this and only this, and at the same time whatever it is slips away' (*AT*, pp. 159–60). By saying 'just this and only this', artworks announce themselves as particulars liberated from the exchange-principle.<sup>20</sup> This is the enigma of artworks: that, as J. M. Bernstein notes, 'they attain to purposefulness, to meaning, despite (and because of) their evident lack of meaning'.<sup>21</sup> The enigma returns us to the vexed question of art's seriousness, or the guilt of *Schein*; Adorno suggests that 'art becomes an enigma because it appears to have solved what is enigmatical in existence' (*AT*, p. 167): 'as the image of what is beyond exchange, it suggests that not everything in the world is exchangeable' (*AT*, p. 110), a claim that can easily slip into an ideological affirmation of the world as it is. Art's apparent unity or, in musical terms, harmony, fashions a realm in which the disunity of the objective world can be temporarily ignored; it appears to offer a solution to the problems of reality, one that it is nevertheless powerless to effect. Adorno continues:

the enigma in the merely existing is forgotten as a result of its own overwhelming ossification. The more densely people have spun a categorical web around what is other than subjective spirit, the more fundamentally have they disaccustomed themselves to the wonder of that other and deceived themselves with a growing familiarity with what is foreign. [...] A priori, art causes people to wonder.

(*AT*, p. 167)

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<sup>20</sup> This liberation, as Adorno makes clear, is illusory, in the sense that it exists only within the realm of *Schein*.

<sup>21</sup> J. M. Bernstein, p. 210.

Art may not be able to solve the enigma of society; however, it reveals the forgotten—or reified, for ‘all reification is a forgetting’<sup>22</sup>—that lies beneath the ‘categorical web[s]’ of subjectivity. In so doing, it offers a new way of viewing the world that is based on *wonder*—the basis of philosophy for Plato and Aristotle, although, in typical Adornian fashion, wonder is reformed to articulate man’s mediated response to social conditions rather than an immediate response to the authentically real. The ‘wonder of that other’ is a wonder at the unexchangeable, the unsubsumable, the non-identical. It induces ‘a change in the existing mode of consciousness’ (NL2, p. 248) and therefore embodies, through art’s lighthearted play within the purposeless world of *Schein*, a critique of the serious world: a critique ‘that is also, to be sure, its seriousness’ (NL2, p. 248). In a paradoxical move, the very quality that prevents art from fulfilling its serious responsibility—*Schein*—is redeemed.

On the one hand, then, the lighthearted element of the artwork allows it to inhabit a realm that is free from society and its repressive seriousness—a seriousness predicated on the inescapable exchange-relation and its logic of identity-thinking. On the other hand, this very critical distance from the supposedly serious world, the limited freedom from social, religious or political purpose that characterises the artwork, directly contributes to art’s sense of responsibility to change the given world. Unlike the pseudo-seriousness of an exchange-dominated society, art’s seriousness derives from its ‘*promesse du bonheur*’ (AT, p. 109). Never able to live up to this sense of responsibility, to guarantee that its promise will be kept, it oscillates uneasily and yet productively between a hermetic playful space and a longing to overcome *Schein* entirely. Most importantly, it is this very tension that constitutes art; without it, art would be either superficial decoration, utterly dependent on the model of exchange and subordinate to the existing world, or purely instrumental, once again constrained by that which is. It is perhaps only in these terms that we can appreciate the significance of freedom to Adorno’s aesthetics: it only emerges in the constitutive tension between lightheartedness and seriousness in the artwork; without it, art degenerates into merely an object of exchange in one form or another.

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<sup>22</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940* (London: Polity Press, 1999), p. 321.



Consistent with his claim that ‘it is scarcely possible to speak of the aesthetic unaesthetically’ (*NLI*, p. 154), Adorno argues that the essay form, like the artwork, holds seriousness and lightheartedness in a critical tension. Its play derives, at least in part, from its relation to its object, which is emphatically not the subservient, detached relation one might expect from an essay. The essay, Adorno argues, ‘overinterprets’ (*NLI*, p. 152), refusing to be ‘terrorized by the prohibition of going beyond the intended meaning of a certain text’ (*NLI*, p. 152). It situates itself in a playful relation to its object, though always taking its cue from the object itself: ‘the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done’ (*NLI*, p. 152). Once again, an element of ‘irresponsibility’ (*NLI*, p. 154) is emphasised—something utterly alien to the systematizing impulse that cannot understand the essay’s ‘groping intention’ (*NLI*, p. 164). Moreover, the playful nature of the essay turns out to predicate its seriousness. Adorno quotes Lukács:

The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty.

(Quoted in *NLI*, pp. 257–8)

In an echo of Socrates’ humble acknowledgement of his own foolishness, which paradoxically makes him wise, Lukács suggests that the essayist’s self-effacing recognition of his own small accomplishments—necessarily deriving from the achievements of others—must be understood as ironic, belying the real seriousness and weight of the essay form. Such irony permits us neither to assert with any confidence that the essayist is wholly modest or arrogant, small or great, playful or serious—a subversive gesture, given that, according to Adorno, ‘[i]rony, intellectual flexibility, and scepticism about the existing order have never been highly regarded in Germany’ (*NL2*, p. 306).

Nonetheless, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno presents a somewhat reductive and, indeed, dismissive view of irony:

Irony convicts its object by presenting it as what it purports to be; and without passing judgement, as if leaving a blank for the observing subject, measures it

against its being-in-itself. It shows up the negative by confronting the positive with its own claim to positivity. [...] Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. [...] Irony used to say: such it claims to be, but such it is; today, however, the world, even in its own radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good. There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail.

(*MM*, pp. 210–11)

In this account, I argue, Adorno fails to recognise not only the subversive potential of irony but also its affinity with his own aesthetics. His concerns are twofold. First, he offers a simplistic account of irony, which he rightly condemns for being conservative. That is, he interprets irony as 'the determinate negation of what is asserted in a proposition: "That was good", said ironically, means it wasn't'.<sup>23</sup> He relies, uncharacteristically, on the logic of non-contradiction: irony 'shows up the negative' by revealing that 'such [something] claims to be, but such it is' (*MM*, p. 211). Second, he argues that such irony—even in its limited capacity—has no chance of survival in a world obsessed with the objective goodness of the given.

For Schlegel, however, irony cannot be construed as the rejection of a sentence's meaning in favour of its opposite. Rather, it involves 'assertion which [...] negates itself without leading to a final opposed positive position'.<sup>24</sup> The similarity to Adorno's negative dialectics should be immediately apparent: as 'a dialectics not of identity, but of *non-identity*' (*LND*, p. 6), it rejects the Hegelian principle that the 'negation of negation is the positive' (*LND*, p. 14). Likewise, romantic irony oscillates indeterminately between multiple possible meanings. For this reason, it occupies an ambivalent space between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility, in that it can be pinned down to neither its overt meaning nor a simple negation of that meaning, but, at least to a certain extent, still operates within the rules of language. It is perhaps for this reason that Schlegel's essay 'On Incomprehensibility' not only takes as its focus the concept of irony, but is itself riddled with irony. The essay begins with Schlegel lamenting the prevailing state of incomprehension among his readers: 'not only the incomprehension of the uncomprehending but even more the incomprehension of the comprehending'.<sup>25</sup> The irony of an essay on the topic of

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<sup>23</sup> *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> 'On Incomprehensibility', pp. 297–8.

incomprehension beginning with such a paradoxical and, possibly, at least, incomprehensible statement will hardly escape the attentive reader. In an overhauling of the logic of non-contradiction, Schlegel bemoans incomprehension *and* comprehension and, more confusingly still, defines both as uncomprehending. Ultimately, Schlegel is preparing the reader for the paradoxical status of irony, which, he suggests, will craftily elude those who are arrogantly certain of their comprehension. The sciences and the arts may well ‘aim at comprehension and at making comprehensible’,<sup>26</sup> but, Schlegel suggests, no such simplicity can be expected in his own work. Indeed, ‘On Comprehension’ could quite aptly be described as immersed in irony. From barbs coated with an air of innocence—‘artists can already begin to cherish the just hope that humanity will at last rise up in a mass and learn to read’<sup>27</sup>—to philosophical word-play—the infinite progression back to an illusory ‘prime shoulder’<sup>28</sup>—the essay is comprehensively saturated in irony, right down to the tongue-twisting taxonomy of its various sub-categories.<sup>29</sup>

The playful nature of romantic irony should be apparent to even those ‘harmonious bores’ who ‘are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody’.<sup>30</sup> However, its significance as a supplement to Adorno’s aesthetics lies in its accompanying seriousness. Indeed, Schlegel insists, in a remark that would no doubt receive Adorno’s approval, that ‘[t]he world is much too serious, but seriousness is nevertheless a rather rare phenomenon’.<sup>31</sup> Under capitalism, as J. M. Bernstein suggests, ‘purpose has itself become purposeless, production for exchange without end’:<sup>32</sup> an interminable game of Monopoly from which meaning has been all but eliminated. The seriousness of irony lies, for Schlegel, in its ability to approximate the Absolute, which he understands, in the tradition of German Idealism, as the ‘unity of thought and Being’,<sup>33</sup> or ‘mind and nature’.<sup>34</sup> Schlegel argues that

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303–4.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> J. M. Bernstein, p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> Millán-Zaibert, p. 32

philosophy is inherently incapable of knowing the Absolute because, as Frederick C. Beiser explains, ‘any attempt to know the unconditioned would falsify it by making it conditioned’.<sup>35</sup> Another way of conceiving this dilemma is through the paradox of humans as ‘finite knowers with a longing to know what is without limits’.<sup>36</sup> The significance of irony for Schlegel lies in its ability to combine in new ways ‘the finite elements of language itself, [...] which constantly point beyond themselves, thereby employing the finite means to a non-finite purpose’.<sup>37</sup> Irony is able, and, indeed, obligated, to ‘go beyond what it represents, by alluding to that which it does not succeed in saying’.<sup>38</sup> The very slipperiness of irony, its oscillation between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility, permits it to gesture towards the Absolute without representing it and thereby conditioning that which cannot be conditioned. This is necessarily an infinite task, and it is for this reason that Schlegel emphasises the essentially incomplete nature of knowledge, basing this humble assessment of man’s capabilities on Socrates’ famous (and ironic) discovery that the wisest man is one who knows that he knows nothing.

Within an Adornian framework, then, irony’s seriousness lies in its responsibility for the world. In Schlegel this is seen in mainly epistemological terms: irony offers us a qualitatively different kind of knowledge to the concept-driven knowledge of philosophy. However, this bears more than a passing resemblance to Adorno’s claim that the lightheartedness of art lies in its retreat into a purposeless realm of *Schein* that resists the world’s logic of exchange. Both philosophers emphasise the insufficiency of the dominant ways of perceiving the world. And, crucially, irony’s ability to approximate the Absolute without limiting it is achieved through play. Within Schlegel’s concept of irony, then, we can see, albeit roughly sketched out, the dialectic between seriousness and lightheartedness overtly theorised by Adorno. While the proximity between these two thinkers is interesting in and of itself, it is primarily significant here insofar as it can further develop Adorno’s

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Bowie, ‘German Philosophy Today: Between Idealism, Romanticism, and Pragmatism’, in *German Philosophy Since Kant*, ed. by Anthony O’Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 357–98 (p. 366).

<sup>35</sup> *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Millán-Zaibert, p. 140.

<sup>37</sup> *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, p. 69.

<sup>38</sup> Millán-Zaibert, p. 168.

dialectic, teasing out its latent content. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl notes, the ‘potential danger’ of Adorno’s aesthetics lies in ‘the repetition of the theory itself, reformulated as a disclosure of aesthetic meaning’.<sup>39</sup> that is, the possibility that Adorno’s broader claims about art could be applied to a number of literary texts fails to account for their singularity. Hohendahl acknowledges that ‘[t]his problem cannot be completely avoided because the theoretical level functions as the mediating link between the literary text and the outside world’.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, the bent towards theoretical abstraction in Adorno’s work can be compensated for by a careful consideration of the specificities of the text at hand and the use of an alternate lens—in this case romantic irony—with which to view it.

Schlegel is attracted to what he considers to be ironic forms: that is, forms that emphasise their own provisionality and partiality and therefore indirectly attest to the incomplete nature of all knowledge claims. For Schlegel, ‘[i]t is equally fatal for the spirit to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two’.<sup>41</sup> The traditional philosophical system is fundamentally impossible. It purports to possess a transparent view of the Absolute, but this is, as we have seen, structurally paradoxical: to know the Absolute would be to limit it. Nonetheless, he insists that we cannot abandon the urge to strive towards a system. The fragment, as the ironic form *par excellence*, combines, for Schlegel, the having and not having of a system. For, as Rodolphe Gasché emphasises, ‘fragmentation does not exclude systematic intention and exposition’.<sup>42</sup> The fragment strives for—and necessarily fails to attain—system’s promise of wholeness; in Peter Szondi’s words, ‘the fragment is perceived as anticipation, promise’<sup>43</sup>—a thought similarly captured in Jacques Rancière’s insight that ‘[a] fragment is not a ruin; it is much more a seed’.<sup>44</sup> This is its openness, its desire to exceed its limitations and its refusal to ‘sacrifice living, changing reality to fixed, teleological categories’.<sup>45</sup> However, simultaneously the fragment, ‘like a

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<sup>39</sup> *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 114.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Foreword: Ideality in Fragmentation’, in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. vii–xxxii (p. xi).

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>44</sup> *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. by James Swenson (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> Millán-Zaibert, p. 147.

miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, art itself manifests the paradoxical logic of the fragment, as is evident in Adorno's use of Leibniz's model of the windowless monad to describe the way in which artworks relate to the world around them. On the one hand, '[a]rtworks are closed to one another, blind' (*AT*, p. 237), and this autotelic hermeticism is what generates their playfulness; on the other hand, as Jameson notes, 'the monadic work of art must somehow "include" its outside, its referent, under pain of lapsing into decorative frivolity'.<sup>47</sup> Adorno claims, then, that 'what is external to the monad, and that whereby it is constituted, is sedimented in it' (*AT*, p. 454); that is, the artwork manifests or expresses the bourgeois whole from which it ultimately derives—through the labour process that ensures its production and the objective social conditions that are filtered through the subjective consciousness of the artist. He insists that '[t]here is no content, no formal category of the literary work that does not, however transformed and however unwaresly, derive from the empirical reality from which it has escaped' (*NL2*, p. 89).

In this way, the romantic fragment and the artwork of Adorno's aesthetics can be seen to be governed by the same internal logic. In both, as Gasché explains, 'the universal can be achieved only as a manner that is each time singular'.<sup>48</sup> For Schlegel, the universal for which the fragment yearns is the Absolute, while for Adorno, art expresses and critiques the socially constructed totality. Neither fragment nor artwork can be co-opted into any traditional philosophical system because their moment of what we might call revelation, or at least expression, is fleeting and, to use Adorno's term, *apparitional*. As Millán-Zaibert notes, '[p]hilosophers, interested in the serious construction of lasting systems, do not welcome such fiery presentation'.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, the playful and unsubsumable nature of the romantic fragment and its counterpart, the hermetic artwork, is precisely what enables its seriousness: its always impeded sense of responsibility for the world.

Beckett's *Novellas* are not only governed by this paradoxical logic of the fragment, but accentuate it. Written in quick succession over the course of 1946, they

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<sup>46</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, p. 32.

<sup>48</sup> Gasché, p. xi.

<sup>49</sup> Millán-Zaibert, p. 169.

occupy an ambivalent position in relation to one another: they neither add up to a cohesive whole nor can be read entirely separately. Their history only serves to accentuate their fragmentary nature: the first half of *The End* was published in *Les Temps modernes* in July 1946, while the second half was later rejected by Simone de Beauvoir, much to Beckett's anger; in an outraged letter he insisted that 'the fragment which appeared in your last number' is 'no more than a major premise'.<sup>50</sup> *The Expelled* was also published separately, this time in the December 1946–January 1947 edition of *Fontaine*. Not until November 1955 were these novellas joined by *The Calmative* in *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*. This still leaves *First Love*, which, in a significant anomaly, was not published until 1970, when it appeared in isolation. Since that time, it has been variously included in collections with the other three novellas, excluded entirely and, interestingly, accommodated within the volume but segregated in some way. The publication history of these texts—a retroactive imposition of an illusory coherence—then, attests to a fundamental indeterminacy inherent in the *Novellas*: are they to be considered together or separately, and, if the former, which are to be included?

These questions, I suggest, are not merely incidental to an understanding of the *Novellas*. Rather, they expose a fundamental awareness that the texts do not obey a neat logic of either/or—a logic to which, as Steven Connor suggests, critics rigidly conform: '[t]ime and again, the distinctions between narrative levels and narrators are collapsed, to yield the image of a single, primal, underlying voice'.<sup>51</sup> This voice, he suggests, is typically considered to be a generic 'universal human subject'.<sup>52</sup> Even Marjorie Perloff's otherwise persuasive reading of the *Novellas* as a 'searing examination of wartime conditions in Vichy France' falls into the trap of describing them as a 'three-story cycle'—omitting the awkwardly divergent *First Love* without question—with a consistent first-person narrator, 'whom we might, for brevity's sake, call Sam'.<sup>53</sup> Leaving aside the problematic attribution of the author's first name to his deliberately unnamed narrator, Perloff ascribes an episodic and thematic unity to the *Novellas* that, I argue, simply cannot be assumed. Ultimately, any reading of the

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<sup>50</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*, ed. by George Craig and others, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) II, p. 42 (25 September 1946).

<sup>51</sup> *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> "'In Love with Hiding?': Samuel Beckett's War", *Iowa Review*, 35 (2005), 76–103 (p. 88).

*Novellas* as a ‘self-contained volume’ undermines both the manifest differentiation between them and the subtle interweaving of similarities that pervades them; ‘a chain of repetitions and resemblances’, as Connor describes it.<sup>54</sup> ‘Living souls, you will see how alike they are’ (*The Expelled*, p. 46), the narrator of *The Expelled* declares, and it is this singular and uncanny *likeness* between the *Novellas* that prevents any sweeping assertion of their identity, on the one hand, and their disconnection, on the other.

Not only, then, does each novella formally manifest the dialectic of seriousness and lightheartedness by which art’s sense of responsibility for the world derives precisely from the very quality—*Schein*—that renders it impossible to fulfil, but the complex interlinking chain of all four novellas raises the dialectic to the level of self-reflexivity. The *Novellas* self-consciously play with their hermeticism, constantly threatening to overflow their textual bounds, but only ever into another space of purposeless *Schein*. In accentuating the element of play, however; in ‘straining toward synthesis’ (*AT*, p. 306) and promising but never attaining wholeness, they strengthen the dialectic between such play and the serious content of art: ‘[w]ithout the synthesis, which confronts reality as the autonomous artwork, there would be nothing external to reality’s spell’ (*AT*, pp. 306–7). The Absolute, then, offers for Adorno as much as for the Early Romantics a framework within which the only legitimate combination is a ‘utopian’ striving for ‘the whole truth’ alongside ‘the unfathomable and melancholic knowledge of [its] vanity’.<sup>55</sup> The freedom of art may be illusory, existing as it does in the sphere of *Schein*, but its very attempt to attain a hermetic wholeness, false as it is, is what underlines art’s seriousness and the freedom of *Schein*.

The fracturing movement of the *Novellas* is most apparent in the anomalous *First Love*. As Perloff notes of the other three novellas:

each tale is a hallucinatory dream narrative that begins with an expulsion from ‘home’ down a flight of steps, from a ‘den littered with empty tins,’ or from an institution that may be asylum, hospital, or prison. In each case, the journey takes the protagonist through a town that is at once familiar and yet wholly

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<sup>54</sup> Connor, p. 87; p. 83.

<sup>55</sup> Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv, Akademie der Künste, ‘Einleitung in die Philosophie’ (1959–60), quoted in *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*, p. 42 (author’s translation).



alien; the passage through that town takes the form of a series of tests that try Sam's patience and put his sanity into question.<sup>56</sup>

*First Love* significantly deviates from this generic pattern: while the narrator is indeed ousted from his father's house, repeating the opening scenario of *The Expelled*, he takes no significant journey. Instead, the narrative is structured around his relationship with Lulu (later re-named Anna), in a notable divergence from the other novellas, which lack what we might for simplicity's sake call a love-interest. Nonetheless, despite its thematic difference from the other novellas, *First Love* maintains a linguistic connection to them. To offer a pertinent example, the narrator ponders:

Kepis [...] exist beyond a doubt, indeed there is little hope of their ever disappearing, but personally I never wore a kepi. I wrote somewhere, They gave me... a hat. Now the truth is they never gave me a hat, I have always had my own hat, the one my father gave me, and I have never had any other hat than that hat. I may add it has followed me to the grave.

(*First Love*, p. 35)

This short passage relates to each of the other novellas. The narrator of *The End* also refers to a kepi, claiming to wear one, before retracting his statement: 'no, that must be wrong' (*The End*, p. 83). The narrator of *First Love* claims to have written 'somewhere, They gave me... a hat', which seems to allude to the hat presented to the narrator of *The End* when he leaves the charitable institution, but the precise words never repeat except in a varied form: 'They gave me a tie' (*The End*, p. 79). The narrator of *First Love* immediately goes on to retract his words—'Now the truth is they never gave me a hat'—as if to deny any relationship to the other novellas. The narrator of *The Expelled* suggests dryly that his own hat seems to have 'pre-existed from time immemorial in a pre-established place' (*The Expelled*, p. 48), a recapitulation of the kepis' abstract 'exist[ence] beyond a doubt'; moreover, it was also given to him by his father. While *The Calmative* also contains a hat, its defining characteristic is the string that keeps it close; this string also emerges more tentatively in *The End*, where the narrator notices it as if for the first time.

The repeated resurfacing of the hat—not just in passing but often with a comment—is just one of the many instances of repetition and difference in the *Novellas*. What is striking about such passages as the one from *First Love* quoted

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<sup>56</sup> Perloff, p. 88.

above is the way they seem to operate in dialogue with the other novellas—by, for example, suggesting that the narrator has written elsewhere about receiving a hat and insisting, with odd vehemence, that he has only ever owned one hat, and certainly not a kepi—without ever definitively establishing the relationship between them. A sense of indeterminacy emerges in which the narrators at once drift closer together, their words becoming almost interchangeable, and further apart, as the differences between them remain irreducible. It is certainly not the case, as the hat instance perhaps implies, that the *Novellas* each contain a number of objects and scenarios that are merged in different combinations in a kind of parody of the systematising impulse that leads to, say, Propp's theory of folktales, with its identification of a finite number of narrative elements. Some facets of the *Novellas* are particular to one text alone alone, while some repetitions are confined to two or three, the other/s remaining stubbornly resistant. The narrator of *The Expelled* confides his unusual antipathy to any furniture in his room 'except the bed' (*The Expelled*, p. 56), a sentiment echoed by the narrator of *First Love* when he moves in with Lulu: 'I surveyed the room with horror. Such density of furniture defeats imagination. Not a doubt, I must have seen that room somewhere' (*First Love*, p. 39). The ambiguity of the final two sentences is evident. They might seem to imply that the narrator is attempting to keep a hold on reality; if imagination alone could not come up with the 'density of furniture', the room must be real. This is in keeping with other narrators' uncertainty about whether they are dreaming or awake (*The End*, p. 98), alive or dead (*The Calmative*, p. 61). Alternately, however, the final sentence could also suggest that the narrator has seen the room somewhere before, a possible allusion to the lodging-places that the narrator of *The Expelled* visits with the cabman, who 'had taken it into his head, whence nothing could ever dislodge it, that I was looking for a furnished room' (*The Expelled*, p. 56)

Another notable recurring image is that of the dying flower. The passages in the relevant novellas are worth quoting in full:

One day I asked her to bring me a hyacinth, live, in a pot. She brought it and put it on the mantelpiece. [...] At first all went well, it even put forth a bloom or two, then it gave up and was soon no more than a limp stem hung with limp leaves. The bulb, half clear of the clay as though in search of oxygen, smelt foul. She wanted to remove it, but I told her to leave it. She wanted to get me another, but I told her I didn't want another.

(*First Love*, p. 42)

Once I sent for a crocus bulb and planted it in the dark area, in an old pot. [...] It sprouted, but never any flowers, just a wilting stem and a few chlorotic leaves. I would have liked to have a yellow corcus, or a hyacinth, but there, it was not to be. She wanted to take it away, but I told her to leave it. She wanted to buy me another, but I told her I didn't want another.

(*The End*, pp. 84–5)

These passages are strikingly similar. Both flowers languish and both narrators reject attempts to remove or replace them. The latter two sentences of each passage are practically identical, and although they of course refer to entirely different women, both Lulu and the Greek woman provide the same function for the narrators: a place to live where one's basic needs can be fulfilled. The fact that both narrators send for a flower is striking as it fulfils an aesthetic desire that is distinct from the otherwise functional needs of food, shelter and a chamber pot. While the desire for a 'yellow corcus, or a hyacinth' on the part of the narrator of *The End* is fulfilled in *First Love*, both plants ultimately wither. They do not, however, actually die. In this way, they express the logic of the *Novellas*, which, like the narrator of *The End*, crucially lack 'the courage to end or the strength to go on' (*The End*, p. 99).

Adorno argues that 'the unrelenting seriousness of the artwork declares itself as frivolous, as play. Art can only be reconciled with its existence by exposing its own semblance' (*AT*, p. 325). The *Novellas* do more than expose their containment within *Schein*: they flaunt it with a structural irony worthy of Schlegel's admiration. This play offers an intoxicating image of purposelessness that is only possible through the texts' critical distance from the world. The web of allusions, folding back into each other like origami, parody the serious world's demand for meaning. Nonetheless, and in a darker way than is envisioned in Schlegel's concept of irony, the hermetic play of *Schein* in the *Novellas* manifests art's 'vivid guilt that permeates its very forms':<sup>57</sup> guilt at its harmlessness and hollow failure even to get a purchase on a world that might be changed. For this reason, Adorno sees in play's 'compulsion toward the ever-same' a 'remainder of horror' (*AT*, p. 400). A decidedly minimal freedom is salvaged in art 'when play becomes aware of its own terror' (*AT*, p. 400) and, rather than attempting to whitewash over it, accentuates it like the open sore it is.

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<sup>57</sup> Jameson, p. 166.

## II

The ‘syntax of weakness’ that is so often said to characterise Beckett’s work—its ‘endlessly proliferating series of *non sequiturs*, of planned inconsistencies and contradictory sayings and unsayings’<sup>58</sup>—gains depth when it is seen through the lens of romantic irony. ‘All I say cancels out’, the narrator of *The Calmative* complains of his self-editing, ‘I’ll have said nothing’ (*The Calmative*, p. 62). This is simultaneously true and false: true because the *Novellas* say ‘nothing’ that is certain or objective; false because they nonetheless say *something*. They manifest the self-cancelling impulse of irony, holding contradictions in a critical tension. The ‘incomprehensibility’, in Schlegel’s words, of the irony of the *Novellas* derives from our inability to secure what Catherine Bates, in her work on puns, describes as a ‘differentiated, supposedly non-punning field of “seriousness”’ against which such irony can be measured.<sup>59</sup> That is, there is no reliable foundation on the basis of which we can determine irrevocably what is ironic and what is not.<sup>60</sup> ‘In this sort of irony’, Schlegel argues, ‘everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden’.<sup>61</sup> The *Novellas* play relentlessly with meaning, letting it collapse under its own weight: they offer knowledge claims only to undermine them; they open an uncomfortable space where humour and cruelty collide; they delight in the accidental, surplus and indecent qualities of language. However, their irony always holds back from the brink of nihilism: from an affirmation of pure and empty play. By

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<sup>58</sup> Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> *Play in a Godless World: The Theory and Practice of Play in Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Freud* (London: Open Gate Press, 1999), p. 136.

<sup>60</sup> My reading of the mode of irony that characterises the *Novellas* considerably departs from Jennifer Jeffers’ rejection of Romantic irony as a way of exploring *The Unnamable*. She argues that such irony ‘relies upon a traditional interpretation of Socratic irony that is characterized by “saying the opposite of what you mean” and relies on a stable and overt reading of a text’ (p. 49), an interpretation that, as this chapter demonstrates, entirely misunderstands the subversive and paradoxical play of what Schlegel terms ‘transcendental Buffoonery’ (*Philosophical Fragments*, p. 6). ‘Beyond Irony: The Unnamable’s Appropriation of its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text’, *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 25 (1995), 47–66. Eastham is far more sympathetic to a consideration of Beckett’s work in the light of Romantic irony.

<sup>61</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 13.

turning its back on the world in the name of a purposeless *Schein*, such irony subjects the world of ‘*quid pro quo!*’ (Murphy, p. 3) to a withering critique.

*The End* situates the ambivalent narrator between two competing discourses—on the one hand, capitalism, with its bourgeois work-ethic; on the other, a dogmatic Marxism—and thus plays with the question of art’s responsibility for the world, parodying the concerns of committed literature. The former is approached through what David Weisberg describes as the narrator’s ‘reception theory of begging’:<sup>62</sup>

But people who give alms don’t much care to toss them, there’s something contemptuous about this gesture which is repugnant to sensitive natures. To say nothing of their having to aim. They are prepared to give, but not for their gift to go rolling under the passing feet or under the passing wheels, to be picked up perhaps by some undeserving person. So they don’t give. There are those, to be sure, who stoop, but generally speaking people who give alms don’t much care to stoop. What they like above all is to sight the wretch from afar, give ready their penny, drop it in their stride and hear the God bless you dying away in the distance. Personally I never said that, nor anything like it.  
(*The End*, p. 92)

The narrator’s dead-pan commentary on the various inhibitions of ‘sensitive’ would-be philanthropists offers an ironic spin on the seemingly straightforward task of begging. Far from being a passive and mindless activity, the narrator suggests, it requires an intimate understanding of human psychology—an understanding that does not reflect well upon those bourgeois philanthropists who prefer to donate their pennies from behind the safety of a *cordon sanitaire*. One way of thinking about the workings of irony in this passage is through the musical concept of ‘overtones’, which Beckett himself employs in an oft-quoted assertion usually seen to exemplify the writer’s distrust of critics: ‘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’.<sup>63</sup> As Catherine Laws argues, the musical significance of ‘overtoneal frequencies’—that is, surplus notes usually referred to as harmonics, which are created by the vibrations of the played note—would not have escaped Beckett: ‘they

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<sup>62</sup> *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 59.

<sup>63</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1957–1965*, ed. by George Craig and others, 4 vols (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), III, p. 82 (29 December 1957).

determine the quality of a musical sound', attesting to precise tuning.<sup>64</sup> Unlike the more frequently used figurative meaning of 'overtone' as '[a] subtle or elusive implication or association' (*OED*), the musical use of the term posits a significant yet paradoxical relationship between the overtone and the fundamental note from which it necessarily derives. Beckett's statement overtly discounts the need for any deeper reading of his texts beyond what they *say*: they are a 'matter of fundamental sounds'. However, this apparently unequivocal claim undoes itself: Beckett acknowledges the supposedly unintended 'joke' deriving from the scatological pun on 'fundamental', but, as we have seen, an additional meaning of 'fundamental sounds' is 'the tone produced by the vibration of the whole of a sonorous body, as distinguished from the higher tones or *harmonics*' (*OED*). The overtones of this particular claim paradoxically belie its surface meaning: that overtones are insignificant. Any engaged and critical reading of Beckett is obligated to accept the concomitant 'headaches', with or without the recommended aspirin. *The End* articulates this very same tension between what we can call, following Beckett's lead, 'fundamental sounds' and 'overtones'. Overtones of castigation and contempt for these self-important do-gooders, with their Victorian distinction between the deserving and 'undeserving' poor, resonate within the narrator's words without being rooted firmly in them. The irony of the passage lies in its Janus-faced refusal to affirm any single opinion or ideology.

The Marxist discourse of *The End* is embodied in what the narrator describes as an 'orator', 'perched on the roof of a car and haranguing the passers-by' (*The End*, p. 94). The orator is presented derisively by the narrator, who is baffled at the speaker's garbled soundbites: 'Union... brothers... Marx... capital... bread and butter... love. It was all Greek to me' (p. 94), he confesses, emphasising the emptiness of such concepts in the absence of any real physical change. The orator then gesticulates to the narrator 'as at an exhibit' (p. 94)—the significance of this word lying in its reduction of the narrator to an example of a solid, pre-determined category: a mere 'specimen' (*ND*, p. 408). This reification neutralises the supposedly ideologically distinct systems of capitalism and Marxism in order to illuminate the underlying problem of identity-thinking. The narrator, unsurprisingly, given the

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<sup>64</sup> *Headaches Among the Overtones: Music in Beckett / Beckett in Music* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 9.

dominant mode of irony throughout the *Novellas*, does not engage in rational debate, instead suggesting, with an indulgent tone: '[h]e must have been a religious fanatic, I could find no other explanation. Perhaps he was an escaped lunatic. He had a nice face, a little on the red side' (p. 95). This final somewhat patronising comment on the episode deflates the orator's charade by attributing to him the very irrational dogmatism he seeks to undermine.

What is striking about this passage, moreover, is that the capitalist system is by no means allowed to stand triumphant. The narrator's life offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of the bourgeois work ethic. By describing his begging as 'work' (*The End*, p. 95), carried out in order to allay his small 'expenses' (p. 95), and directing a substantial amount of energy and cunning into establishing an intricate begging system by which he can generate small sums, the narrator embodies, and simultaneously ridicules, the figure of the self-made man. In an exemplary instance of bourgeois thrift, he 'even managed to put a little aside' (p. 95) for his old age. The irony is directed not only at the capitalist system, but also at the narrator himself, who is baffled by the concepts of 'brothers' and 'love', and cannot see the element of truth in the orator's words. The latter's description of charity as 'a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organized murder' (p. 94) returns us to the novella's opening, in which the philanthropy of the 'charitable institution' (p. 80) from which the narrator is evicted is undermined in the simple and apparently deadpan exchange between himself and the featureless Mr Weir: 'I am greatly obliged to you, I said, is there a law which prevents you from throwing me out naked and penniless? That would damage our reputation in the long run, he replied' (p. 80). The irony of *The End*, then, serves to critique bourgeois institutions on the one hand and the Marxist alternative on the other, revealing the inconsistencies and inadequacies of each system. Nonetheless, in the words of Montaigne, 'every example limps':<sup>65</sup> Beckett's Marxist orator and bourgeois philanthropists are by no means realistic instances of the ideologies they purport to embody. Instead, they are fragmented and even unlikely caricatures. *The End* is neither a political pamphlet, nor high realism. Its thematic engagement with the concerns of the serious world is filtered through a discourse of irony that prevents any simplistic commitment of the kind satirised, as we have seen, in *Eleutheria*. This irony engages with the vexed question of the relation of art to the

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<sup>65</sup> *The Complete Essays*, trans. by M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1987; repr. 2003), p. 1213.

world, not by merely satirising two political perspectives, but by critically reframing them within the realm of *Schein*. The freedom thereby attained is necessarily illusory—and this is what prompts the compulsive repetition of guilt-ridden art—but without its withdrawal into ironic and playful ambiguity, *The End* would not be able to pose an alternative to a society governed by identity-thinking.

One of the most disturbing elements of the *Novellas* is the malice that often characterises their irony, a ‘cruelty [...] that smiles’ (*The Calmative*, p. 63), as the narrator of *The Calmative* aptly describes it. Humour, of course, tends to walk hand in hand with cruelty; the act of laughing at, say, a man slipping on a banana skin and falling over—replicated, of course, in *Krapp’s Last Tape*—is fundamentally cruel. Hobbes suggested in 1640 that ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly’,<sup>66</sup> attributing to laughter a kind of gleeful acknowledgement of one’s mastery over another, however fleeting it may be. Salisbury suggests that in the ‘existential humanist’ readings of Beckett predominant before the 1980s, ‘comedy and laughter were seen to function as the means by which the human condition could be wearily acknowledged and endured’.<sup>67</sup> But this serves to redeem the often problematic cruelty of laughter; it is not directed at the falling man *per se*, but at the human condition. Critchley suggests that ‘[t]his is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness’.<sup>68</sup> Salisbury convincingly argues, however, that this understanding of the relation between humour and cruelty tends to be insufficient for a reading of Beckett’s texts, in which we struggle to locate what Paul Sheehan characterises as an ‘ethic of redemption’.<sup>69</sup>

*The Expelled* offers the most obvious instance of the uneasy tension between humour and cruelty:

I had to fling myself to the ground to avoid crushing a child. [...] I would have crushed him gladly, I loathe children, and it would have been doing him a

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<sup>66</sup> *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; repr. 2008), pp. 54–5.

<sup>67</sup> Salisbury, p. 5

<sup>68</sup> *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 111.

<sup>69</sup> *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 153. See Salisbury, pp. 3–8.



service, but I was afraid of reprisals. Everyone is a parent, that is what keeps you from hoping. One should reserve, on busy streets, special tracks for those nasty little creatures, their prams, hoops, sweets, scooters, skates, grandpas, grandmas, nannies, balloons and balls, all their foul little happiness in a word.  
(*The Expelled*, pp. 51–2)

The narrator's diatribe is directed against a proportion of the population that customarily elicits unconditional love or disinterested tenderness—or, at least, is hardly deemed to merit anathema. His words can neither be taken wholly seriously nor dismissed as a joke: they exude an uneasy irony. There seems to be two reasons why the narrator dislikes children. First, they embody potential: they secure the continuation of humanity, which, for the narrator, 'keeps you from hoping'—a thought that is further developed in *Endgame*, where the presence of a flea prompts Hamm's fear that 'humanity might start from there all over again!' (*Endgame*, p. 108). This misanthropy is what allows him to rationally infer that crushing the child 'would have been doing him a service'. Second, they manifest an assertive 'happiness' that is extended to the varied paraphernalia that so annoys the narrator. These reasons, however, do not quite harmonise: the irrationality of the latter, with its humorous list detailing the trappings of childhood, undercuts the misanthropic rationality of the former. The narrator continues:

I fell then, and brought down with me an old lady. [...] I had high hopes she had broken her femur, old ladies break their femur easily, but not enough, not enough. I took advantage of the confusion to make off, muttering unintelligible oaths, as if I were the victim, and I was, but I couldn't have proved it. They never lynch children, babies, no matter what they do they are whitewashed in advance. I personally would lynch them with the utmost

pleasure, I don't say I'd lend a hand, no, I am not a violent man, but I'd encourage the others and stand them drinks when it was all done.  
(*The Expelled*, p. 52)

Once again, the narrator's tirade is directed at the essentially harmless: this time, an old lady, whom he hurts accidentally but, unaccountably, hopes 'had broken her femur'. His retraction of his claim that he would actually lynch children 'with the utmost pleasure' in favour of cheering on other perpetrators is at once truly horrific, bringing to mind the complicity of ordinary people to heinous crimes in wartime Europe, and extraordinarily funny, as the narrator carefully assesses exactly what his role would be in this unlikely baby-lynching scenario. His assertion that he is 'not a

violent man' is particularly difficult to place. What is intriguing about the cruelty of the *Novellas* is that it tends to occur within the realm of possibility rather than actuality: in contradistinction to the *Trilogy*, in which, for example, Molloy savagely beats a charcoal-burner for no apparent reason, the narrator of *The Expelled* hurts the old lady by accident and, indeed, actively throws himself to the ground to avoid crushing the child. Similarly, in *First Love*, the narrator deliberates violence towards Lulu, but does not enact it: 'She began stroking my ankles. I considered kicking her in the cunt' (*First Love*, p. 31). The tender, albeit bizarre, moment of physical intimacy is broken by the narrator's strangely specific desire to attack the defining element of her femininity (and, of course, the site of her reproductive organs). In *The Calmative*, the narrator reaches an *impasse* halfway up the cathedral's spiral staircase and describes it in a peculiarly archaic register that distances us from a full appreciation of his murderous intentions:

I met a man revolving in the other direction, with the utmost circumspection. How I'd love to push him, or him to push me, over the edge. He gazed at me wild-eyed for a moment and then, not daring to pass me on the parapet side and surmising correctly that I would not relinquish the wall just to oblige him, abruptly turned his back on me.

(*The Calmative*, p. 69)

It is the very extremity of the narrators' responses to their situations that is so striking—the disproportionate reactions to mundane events. For this reason, we are unable to take their words at face value. On the other hand, the use of irony does not allow us simply to discount the narrators' words as a joke, meaning the opposite of what it says. Instead, we are acutely aware that there is a tension between the sentiments the narrators are expressing and the language in which such sentiments are expressed, which undermines them without wholly neutralising their sadistic intent.

In a playful displacement of Bergson's famous claim that laughter requires 'something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart',<sup>70</sup> Salisbury argues that the anaesthetised heart paraded by the narrator of *First Love*—when he callously implores Lulu/Anna to abort their baby and speedily retreats after the birth, which 'finished' (*First Love*, p. 44) him in an ironic subversion of birth's usual frame of reference—is

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<sup>70</sup> *Laughter* (Baltimore, ML: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 64.

a ‘grotesquely humorous object’ that can be added to the list of his other ailments.<sup>71</sup>

However, there is another way in which the text forces together matters of the heart and the narrator’s infinite pains: they are also both presented in systematic form:

I’ll tell them to you some day none the less, if I think of it, if I can, my strange pains, in detail, distinguishing between the different kinds, for the sake of clarity, those of the mind, those of the heart or emotional conative, those of the soul (none prettier than these) and finally those of the frame proper, first the inner or latent, then those affecting the surface, beginning with the hair and scalp and moving methodically down, without haste, all the way down to the feet beloved of the corn, the cramp, the kibe, the bunion, the hammer toe, the nail ingrown, the fallen arch, the common blain, the club foot, duck foot, goose foot, pigeon foot, flat foot, trench foot and other curiosities.

(*First Love*, pp. 32–3)

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

And with my devil’s finger into the bargain, which I then sucked. Come now!

(*First Love*, p. 34)

Indeed, the narrator’s taxonomy of love could quite easily be understood as a smaller system within the ‘heart or emotional conative’ subsection of his pains. This is unsurprising given that Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*—a book Beckett read and noted, and whose qualities, ‘encyclopaedic in range, learned yet flippant about scholarly accuracy, and utterly eccentric’,<sup>72</sup> are self-evidently channelled in the pseudo-systems of *First Love*—contains an entire section on love within his broader classification of melancholy. Indeed, Burton’s intention to ‘examine all the kinds of love, his nature, beginning, difference, objects, how it is honest or dishonest, a virtue or vice, a natural passion or a disease, his power and effects, how far it extends’,<sup>73</sup> is not unlike the, admittedly less grandiose, ambition of the narrator of *First Love*. Here, the systematic compulsion—the desire to *know* and to *contain*—is set against and undermined by frequent resigned expressions of ignorance. Indeed, there is a particular tension between the narrator’s apparent ignorance and the terminology with

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<sup>71</sup> Salisbury, p. 50.

<sup>72</sup> Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 119.

<sup>73</sup> *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicholas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989–1994), III, p. 10.

which he expresses it, from the obscure and overdetermined ‘priapic’ to the allusion to *Hamlet*: ‘the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe’.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, what we actually receive in the first excerpt is only a précis of the system proper: the narrator describes how he would—‘someday [...] if I think of it, if I can’—relate his ‘strange pains’ in a suitably methodological way. What is offered is a system in the Romantic sense: self-consciously partial and eternally incomplete. It is not even wholly correct: neither ‘goose foot’ nor ‘duck foot’ exist, while ‘pigeon foot’ is a misnomer for ‘pigeon toe’. The dissection of the concept of love into its various subcategories is a clear *reductio ad absurdum* of schematism: the narrator is trying to diagnose his particular brand of love, the obscure symptom of which is tracing the beloved’s name ‘in old cowshit’. The narrator acknowledges his hitherto lack of success in gaining intellectual control over his unruly existence, but confides his hopes for the future: ‘Yes, I’ve changed my system, it’s the winning one at last, for the ninth or tenth time’ (p. 32)—the particular lexis recalling the gambler’s frenzied belief that this time the jackpot is his. In simultaneously raising and demolishing system after system, the narrator emphasises the playful nature of language and the spuriousness of its claims to totality.

Such claims of ignorance are characteristic of *The Calmative*, which is structured around a fundamental indeterminacy regarding the narrator’s very existence:

I don’t know when I died. It always seemed to me I died old, about ninety years old, and what years, and that my body bore it out, from head to foot. But this evening, alone in my icy bed, I have the feeling I’ll be older than the day, the night, when the sky with all its lights fell upon me. [...] I’ll try and tell myself another story, to try and calm myself, and it’s there I feel I’ll be old, even older than the day I fell, calling for help, and it came. Or is it possible that in this story I have come back to life, after my death? No, it’s not like me to come back to life, after my death.

(*The Calmative* p. 61)

Speaking in the past tense, the narrator assures the reader that he has, indeed, died, but, only a few lines later, insists that ‘it’s not like me to come back to life, after my death’. This is paradoxical; he is basing his assessment of the likelihood of returning

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<sup>74</sup> *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), p. 419 [V. 1. 129–131].

from death on his mortal personality that would perish with him. Or, to put it another way, he is positing a post-mortal agency that could not possibly exist. His words raise the question of who, exactly, would be likely to come back to life after death—the logical answer being Jesus, whose crucifixion is referenced a number of times in the *Novellas*.<sup>75</sup> In a bathetic image, the narrator of *The Calmative* imagines himself in Jesus' position, 'stretched out in the rigor of death, the genuine bodily article, under the blue eyes fount of so much hope' (p. 70)—the tragic potential of which is immediately dissolved by the glib remark that 'they would [...] put me in the evening papers' (p. 70). Schlegel describes irony as 'the freest of all licences, for by its means one transcends oneself';<sup>76</sup> irony requires a critical detachment from the immediate. However, the narrator ironises this liberatory transcendence by observing himself as a dead object, acknowledging the tendency towards reification that is always part of art as it detaches itself from reality. Irony is the 'freest of all licences' not because it entirely transcends the empirical world—an impossibility—but because its playful refusal of the terms of that world simultaneously critiques it. Even as it does so, it attests to the suffering 'of which the work is an image' (*AT*, p. 49). More so than the other novellas, the narrator of *The Calmative* is alienated from his own discourse. His assertion, for example, that 'I had merely to bow my head and look down at my feet', continues with a trailing and increasingly insecure subordinate clause: 'for it is in this attitude I always drew the strength to, how shall I say, I don't know' (p. 66). Irony in *The Calmative* is produced by the narrator's distrust of language's ability to approximate experience.

Such distrust takes on a celebratory aspect in the punning opening of *First Love*. Puns are a particularly ironic literary device.<sup>77</sup> If irony expresses 'both sides or viewpoints at once in the form of contradiction or paradox',<sup>78</sup> then the polysemy of a pun contains a tiny, ironic explosion of play. In the pun, language eschews its prescribed task of communication and ceases to be entirely referential. It celebrates

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<sup>75</sup> 'Personally if I were reduced to making the sign of the cross I would set my heart on doing it right, nose, navel, left nipple, right nipple. But the way they did it, slovenly and wild, he seemed crucified all of a heap, no dignity, his knees under his chin and his hands anyhow' (*The Expelled*, p. 52); 'Do you hear me, you crucified bastard!' cried the orator' (*The End*, p. 95).

<sup>76</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> David G. Wright suggests that 'Irony, ambiguity and the pun may be usefully regarded as a continuum, rather than as three distinct entities'. *Ironies of Ulysses* (Savage, MD: Barnes & Noble, 1991), p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> Clare Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 52.

*Schein* by refusing to refer to anything concrete beyond the infinite play of language. It distends time by preventing the resolution of meaning and stages the purposelessness of art in its own aimlessness, for puns, as Bates emphasises, ‘have no point or purpose’.<sup>79</sup> This pun on the German *Pointe* or ‘punch-line’ demonstrates the extent to which connections in language ‘pop up when you least expect it’.<sup>80</sup> The ideas of purpose, punch-line and even the figurative concept of the sharpness of wit are elided in the ambiguous and multivalent ‘point’. As Bates argues, the danger lies in the critic’s impulse to defuse the subversive moment of the pun: ‘its tendency to distort or to extend meaning is dealt with by the interpretative process which, however playfully, ultimately restores priority to the serious business of making sense, to showing what a pun finally means’.<sup>81</sup> However, this hermeneutic recuperation relies on two things. First, the puns must be visible deviations from a stable, serious discourse. Second, they must elicit interpretative pleasure: the rational pleasure of making sense of chaos that Bates associates with play. Both of these are undermined in Beckett’s use of the pun in *First Love*, where the narrator claims that the date of his birth ‘remains graven in my memory’, and continues, ‘I have no bone to pick with graveyards’ (*First Love*, p. 25). The novella’s saturation with irony means that we have no stable communicative discourse in which to place and resolve the puns. The meaning of the narrator’s words is perfectly transparent, but the connotative excesses destabilise their relation to an already muddled discourse. Moreover, these puns belong to what Bates describes as ‘those troublesome half-way houses—the subsumed pun, the stupid pun, the unmotivated, meaningless, gratuitous pun, puns that are dubious, accidental, or unintended’.<sup>82</sup> They are cringingly bad puns, perfectly in line with Beckett’s corpus as a whole, which Salisbury describes as ‘replete with jokes or comic moments that couldn’t properly be called witty—jokes which hold back from the instant of the comic payoff but are bound to the quivering temporality of the almost’<sup>83</sup>—and it is not insignificant here that Schlegel berated Kant for ignoring ‘the category “almost” [*Beinahe*], a category that has surely accomplished, and spoiled, as much in the world and in literature as any other’.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Bates, p. 140.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>83</sup> Salisbury, p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 10.

There is no neat containment of their meaning: by structurally exceeding the restraints of a single sense, they become distinctly gratuitous and *meaningless*. This permits a reflective critique of the supposedly serious world's wholly instrumental use of language and thus its blinkered identity-thinking. In art, J. M. Bernstein argues, '[f]reedom appears only as the revealing of the unfreedom of what lies outside art; but since every appearance must yield to its comprehension, our grasping at our freedom through works immediately ruins it'.<sup>85</sup> The puns of *First Love* elude the critic's grasp by playfully oscillating between meaning and its negation.

The setting providing sustenance for the narrator's puns alludes to the famous Graveyard scene in *Hamlet*,<sup>86</sup> in which the play's punning, equivocating and digressing reaches its zenith. This ironic intertextuality is directed at a tragedy whose excessive linguistic play has traditionally been sidelined in favour of accounts of its intense philosophical preoccupations.<sup>87</sup> *First Love*, then, is ironising a canonical text: it is hard to read the narrator's claim that 'with a little luck you hit on a genuine internment, with real live mourners and the odd relict trying to throw himself into the pit' (*First Love*, pp. 26–7) without remembering (and perhaps cringing a little at the memory) Hamlet flinging himself into Ophelia's grave and brawling with her brother. More importantly, however, it is ironising a play that is itself saturated with irony. Such intertextuality estranges *Hamlet* from its own fame, revealing what is important to it and, indeed, serious in it: not the supposed birth of subjectivity, but irony's 'infinite jest'.<sup>88</sup>

The irony that permeates Beckett's *Novellas* resists any final resolution or critical mastery. It straddles the realms of lightheartedness and seriousness, attesting to their dialectic. Irony is intrinsically playful and is the mode by which these texts retreat into what Bates describes as 'another world, one which, bounded and complete, stands at one remove from the world of reality'—a world of *Schein*.<sup>89</sup> The ironic phrase cannot be taken at face value but neither can it be rejected as a lie; it hovers between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility, refusing epistemological

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<sup>85</sup> J. M. Bernstein, pp. 262–3.

<sup>86</sup> I am indebted to Sam Hall for bringing this parallel to my attention.

<sup>87</sup> For a detailed account of this, see Sam Hall, 'Shakespeare's Folly' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Royal Holloway College, 2014), pp. 190–207.

<sup>88</sup> Shakespeare, V. 1. 160.

<sup>89</sup> Bates, p. i.

stability; and it delights in its interminable play. The *Novellas* do not simply manifest an ironic tone, but push irony to its very limits, challenging the possibility of a stable, serious discourse. Such play, in its very refusal to adhere to the identity-compulsion of the serious world—a compulsion necessarily undermined by irony, which is predicated on a denial of the logic of non-contradiction—resists the world ‘of everything-for-something-else’ by revealing ‘what it itself would be if it were emancipated from the schemata of imposed identification’ (*AT*, p. 110). This triumph of possibility, however, is inevitably undermined by the *Novellas*’ self-confinement within the sphere of *Schein*, in which they are unable to effect any empirical changes. For this reason, Adorno argues that ‘the blemish of mendacity obviously cannot be rubbed off art; nothing guarantees that it will keep its objective promise. [...] Every radical art is a lie insofar as it fails to create the possible to which it gives rise as semblance [*Schein*]’ (*AT*, p. 110). This is ultimately a promise of freedom: freedom from the rigid exchange-relation of capitalist society and its concomitant identity-thinking that reduces everyone and everything to a mere specimen. If the *Novellas* articulate the illusion of freedom, the structural illusion of anything qualitatively different to the ‘real world of work, meaning, exchange’,<sup>90</sup> then they simultaneously attest to the freedom of illusion: ‘the claim that because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible’ (*AT*, p. 109).

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SCARS OF EVIL

— History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. [...]  
— The ways of the Creator are not our ways, Mr Deasy said. All history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God.

— James Joyce, *Ulysses*<sup>1</sup>

Freedom and evil have been bedfellows since Augustine used the narrative of the Fall to justify God's benevolence, arguing that 'from the evil use of free will, there arose the whole series of calamities by which the human race is led by a succession of miseries from its depraved origin'.<sup>2</sup> This provided the established answer to the problem of evil: it had the merit of exculpating God from any wrongdoing while retaining human freedom, in light of which, of course, individuals could be held morally accountable for their actions and condemned accordingly. Some 1500 years later, in the work of Adorno, the relationship between freedom and evil is as close as ever, though the events that desecrated the twentieth century made it philosophically and, indeed, morally necessary to reconsider their connection. The question of evil was no longer 'how can we justify the goodness of God in the face of evil?', but the far simpler and yet more radically uncertain: 'how can we understand the presence of evil *per se*?' The wrongful execution of free will simply didn't seem an appropriate rationale for such events as the Holocaust, in which evil was not a consequence of the actions of a few, but a systematic network of horror that marked everyone as complicit. 'Evil, therefore', Adorno argues, 'is the world's own unfreedom' (*ND*, p. 219). It is to society, rather than the individual will, that we should turn in order to interrogate the concept of evil.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ulysses*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; repr. 2008), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; repr. 2002), p. 556.

The concept of society itself is, however, not unequivocally transparent, an issue Adorno addresses in his 1968 lecture series, *Introduction to Sociology*. Against those sociologists who ‘consider that this term is no longer usable’ (*IS*, p. 28), Adorno insists on its enduring utility, although, as an abstract term in constant dialectical relation with lived reality, it cannot be seen as a ‘legal term definable once and for all’ (*IS*, p. 28). What Adorno has in mind when he speaks of society is something beyond a ‘descriptive concept’ (*IS*, p. 33) of ‘basic types of arrangement by which people gain their livelihood and which define the forms of their coexistence’ (*IS*, p. 29). Instead, he argues that society ‘in the strong sense’ (*IS*, p. 29) is the existence of a ‘functional connection’ (*IS*, p. 29) between people that ‘leaves no-one out, a connectedness in which all the members of the society are entwined and which takes on a certain kind of autonomy in relation to them’ (*IS*, p. 30). Fundamentally, this interrelationship is rooted in exchange, the structural equivalence of which corresponds to the presentation of society’s ‘individual elements [...] as relatively equal, endowed with the same faculty of reason. They appear as atoms stripped of qualities, defined only by their self-preserving reason’ (*IS*, p. 30). Adorno’s concept of society is, then, essentially *modern*, in that it is predicated on capital and the specific inter-personal relations it fosters.

Adorno is not renowned for his theorisation of evil. For this reason, only a few articles and book chapters dwell on his contribution to the topic,<sup>3</sup> while larger works on the subject of evil tend to contain, at best, a brief note on his famous, and often misunderstood, remark that ‘[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (*P*, p. 34).<sup>4</sup> It is nonetheless my contention not only that Adorno’s work is immensely valuable for a consideration of evil, but also that such insights can fundamentally affect our understanding of freedom. Beckett’s works, too, are rarely associated with evil, perhaps unsurprisingly given the solitary use of the term in *Ill Seen Ill Said*: ‘And from it [the cabin] as from an evil core that the what is the wrong word the evil spread’ (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, p. 50). Far from being contained to a cabin in a late work,

<sup>3</sup> See Espen Hammer, ‘Adorno and extreme evil’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 26 (2000), 75–93; Gordon Finlayson, ‘Adorno: Modern Art, Metaphysics and Radical Evil’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 10 (2003), 71–95; and Anders Johansson, ‘Adorno and the Guilt of Thinking’, in *Territories of Evil*, ed. by Nancy Billias (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 171–88.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Martin Beck Matušík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope: Postsecular Meditations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

however, evil exerts a pervasive influence over a number of Beckett's works—a point noted by Paul Sheehan, in an unusual consideration of Beckett in relation to evil:

The world according to Samuel Beckett, before it is anything else, is a place of extreme hardship and suffering. More disturbing, however, is the fact that when torment is the outcome of human action, the results are nearly always nasty, brutish and long-winded. Routine acts of atrocity are performed without caveats, and in the absence of the standard reassurances of dramatic logic or ethical norms. [...] Suffering is both *necessary*, in that no alternative is offered, nor any mitigating circumstances; and it is *gratuitous*, with a piling-on of woes that surpasses any reasonable expectation of human forbearance.<sup>5</sup>

It is nonetheless true that binaries such as 'good' and 'evil' risk articulating what Richard Bernstein describes as a 'vulgar Manichaeism' that is not only hopelessly out of date in today's secular world,<sup>6</sup> but is also, as Peter Dews notes, dangerous in its reduction of 'the complexities of politics and history to the opposition of "us" and "them"'.<sup>7</sup> Dews cites George Bush's State of the Union Address in the wake of the 11<sup>th</sup> September terrorist attacks as a 'notorious example of this abuse';<sup>8</sup> the President provocatively declared: 'I know we can overcome evil with greater good'.<sup>9</sup> More pertinently, the invocation of the concept of evil is commonly seen to appeal to a static idea of the human condition—an area from which Beckett studies has, in the main, rightly shifted away. Nonetheless, I argue that Adorno's materialist reconception of evil and its root in modern capitalist society resonates acutely with a number of Beckett's more disturbing texts from the 1950s and 1960s. As I will demonstrate, evil for Adorno is by no means an unchanging category; rather, he emphasises that the twentieth century witnessed a qualitative shift in the very nature of evil. Eschewing chronology, this chapter turns first to *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is*, considering Adorno's transposition of evil from the individual will into society. I argue that the oppressive social worlds depicted in these two texts offer an insight into the ways in which manmade structures solidify and circumscribe the lives of those who created them. Second, I explore *Endgame* in relation to Adorno's critique of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. *Endgame*, I argue, subverts

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<sup>5</sup> 'A World Without Monsters: Beckett and the Ethics of Cruelty', in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. by Russell Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 86–101 (p. 86).

<sup>6</sup> *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Investigation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002; repr. 2007), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *The Idea of Evil* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

Hegel's affirmative universal history and its redemptive narrative of progress by acknowledging those ruptures that problematise the fundamental claims of theodicy. Nonetheless, it simultaneously exposes the truth of universal history that lies in the real unfreedom of an oppressive history that has become second nature—a socially constructed state that gives the illusion of being natural.

It is often taken as a given that evil is something that exceeds reason. Jean Nabert, for example, characterises evil as 'the unjustifiable':<sup>10</sup> as Dews elaborates, '[n]o matter how historically inevitable the acts that bring suffering and destruction may appear to have been, we respond to them as that which *absolutely should not have occurred*'.<sup>11</sup> Susan Neiman, practically verbatim, argues:

Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil. Note that it is as little a moral problem, strictly speaking, as it is a theological one. One can call it the point at which ethics and metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics meet, collide, and throw up their hands.<sup>12</sup>

Accepting that there is something in evil that lies beyond rational comprehension, how can we respond to it? Adorno's concept of the 'moral addendum [*Hinzutretenden am Sittlichen*]' is suggestive:

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection.

(*ND*, p. 365)

As I explained in this thesis' Introduction, the addendum refers to an extra-rational 'additional factor' (*HF*, p. 183) that supplements the rational will. Even the simplest of decisions, Adorno argues, require 'a sort of jolt' (*HF*, p. 228) to be actually executed. Essentially, the addendum works as a mediator between the self and the world, or the mental and somatic. In this and other passages, Adorno extends the

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Neiman, p. 5.

addendum into the realm of morality, arguing that moral decisions cannot be made wholly with the dispassionate rationality advocated by Kant. This is what ultimately distinguishes Adorno's 'new categorical imperative' from Kant's famous original: '[s]o act that the maxim of your action could become a universal *law*'.<sup>13</sup> Adorno's imperative is historically contingent, more rudimentary—Gunzelin Schmid Noerr argues that it is not a principle 'which could ground morality altogether', but rather grounds only a '*minimal morality* of respect for unafflicted life'<sup>14</sup>—and more nebulous, lacking even Kant's admittedly abstract guideline. However, beyond these differences, Adorno's imperative is grounded in a moral response to Auschwitz that is simultaneously rational and somatic: a visceral, but by no means uncritical, experience of horror at modern evil.

In his 1963 lecture series, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno describes the moral addendum as an 'other factor [*andere Moment*]': 'something alien [to] moral philosophy, something that does not quite fit, precisely because as a theory moral philosophy tends to overlook such matters' (*PMP*, p. 8). Significantly, this 'other factor' is necessarily extra-rational or extra-logical; Adorno emphasises that rationality alone is not necessarily an adequate response to a situation:

If we were to attempt to set up an absolute law and to ask the laws of pure reason to explain why on earth it would be wrong to torture people, we would encounter all sorts of difficulties. [...] In all such moral questions, the moment you confront them with reason you find yourself plunged into a terrible dialectic. And when faced by this dialectic the ability to say, 'Stop!' and 'You *ought* not even to contemplate these things!' has its advantages. [...] If reason makes its entrance at this point then reason itself becomes irrational.  
(*PMP*, p. 97)

For Adorno, true reason must allow for that which is ostensibly irrational by existing standards—not least because the rationality upon which our moral compass relies is itself responsible for the very catastrophes we are responding to. A few years previously, in a discussion following his 1959 paper, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', Adorno had similarly insisted that 'breaking off rationality at such places better serves reason than a kind of pseudo-rationality that erects systems where

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<sup>13</sup> *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 353–604 (p. 520; 6:389).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, 'Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. by Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 328–53 (p. 347).

it is first and foremost a question of immediate reaction' (*CM*, p. 304). He prioritises spontaneous reactions in the face of evil: 'the immediate [*unmittelbar*], active reaction to particular situations' (*PMP*, p. 7). This should not, however, be interpreted as a straightforward rejection of rationality, as if a wholly unmediated response to a situation were possible, but rather as a deliberate deviation from Kant, who intractably relies on reason alone in questions of the will. Kant, for whom 'the principle of freedom should itself be nothing but reason, pure reason' (*PMP*, p. 71), insists that every moral decision is necessarily rational: 'the kernel of the Kantian idea here is that everything that I do not recognize as a purely rational being, and every rule that is not derived from my own reason actually restricts the principle of freedom' (*PMP*, p. 71). Kant could not accept the possibility of what Adorno describes as an 'impulse, intramental and somatic in one' (*ND*, pp. 228–9) that adds an irrational quality to one's seemingly rational decisions. As Andrew Bowie argues, 'motivation' for Adorno 'is not just something initiated by consciousness in the form of a norm-governed reflective choice of a course of action. It is also something which depends on our primal connection to the natural reality we are that is evident in our reflexes and impulses'.<sup>15</sup> This is elucidated by an example Adorno offers to his students. He cites one of the architects of the plot to kill Hitler in 20<sup>th</sup> July 1944: 'there are situations that are so intolerable that one just cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen and no matter what may happen to oneself in the course of the attempt to change them' and comments:

I believe that this act of resistance—the fact that things may be so intolerable that you feel compelled to make the attempt to change them, regardless of the consequences for yourself, and in circumstances in which you may also predict the possible consequences for other people—is the precise point at which the irrationality, or better, the irrational aspect of moral action is to be sought, the point at which it may be located. But at the same time, you can see that this irrationality is only one aspect, because on the level of theory the officer concerned knew perfectly well how evil, how horrifying this Third Reich was, and it was because of his critical and theoretical insight into the lies and the crimes that he had to deal with that he was brought to the point of action. If he had not had this insight, if he had had no knowledge of the vile evil that prevailed in Germany at the time, he would quite certainly never have been moved to that act of resistance.

(*PMP*, p. 8)

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<sup>15</sup> *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 127.

Adorno is careful to emphasise through this commentary that moral judgement is not merely irrational, but that the addendum mediates between mind and natural being. Through it, ‘freedom extends to the realm of experience’ (*ND*, p. 229) in a ‘union of reason and nature’ (*HF*, p. 237). Adorno is affirming the necessity for a response to evil that, precisely by including this extra-rational, somatic impulse, is *free*. The significance of the addendum to aesthetic experience allows us to consider art as the locus of such freedom. What Adorno describes in *Aesthetic Theory* as the ‘shudder’ (*AT*, p. 437) is a spontaneous response to the artwork through which the individual is able ‘to experience the true horror of the world for what it is’.<sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that Adorno is able to declare that ‘[c]onsciousness without shudder is reified consciousness’ (*AT*, p. 437); without it, there is no access to the truth: the disclosure of the world’s evil.

## I

The term ‘radical evil’ has an established place in common philosophical parlance, due in no small part to Hannah Arendt’s vivid and powerful definition of it as ‘a phenomenon that [...] confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know’.<sup>17</sup> However, as Arendt acknowledges, the term derives from Kant, who utilised it in a very different sense, namely, to describe the ‘natural propensity [*Hang*]’ of mankind to evil—a propensity that is ‘not any the less brought upon us by ourselves’ (*R*, 6:32). This apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, an insistence on human freedom to choose between good and evil, and, on the other, an acknowledgement that there is ‘a *radical* innate *evil* in human nature’ (*R*, 6:32), forms the basis of both Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and Adorno’s critique in *Negative Dialectics* and the *History and Freedom* lecture course of 1964–65. To understand the latter—and therefore to establish Adorno’s own theory of evil—it is important to delineate Kant’s own position.

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<sup>16</sup> Finlayson, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Bernstein, p. 11.

For Kant, as for Augustine, evil is located in free will (*Willkür*) alone,<sup>18</sup> rather than in ‘natural impulses’ (*R*, 6:21). He emphasises that however persuasive natural inclinations may be, they exert no power over a human being unless he wilfully incorporates them into his maxim. This is fundamental to Kant, for if such impulses could be held responsible for one’s actions, ‘the entire exercise of freedom could be traced back to a determination through natural causes—and this would contradict freedom’ (*R*, 6:21). The preservation of freedom, then, lies at the heart of Kant’s consideration of evil, resulting in the attribution of complete responsibility to human agents. This responsibility, however, is not for one’s actions, but for the maxims chosen—or, more precisely, for one’s particular hierarchy of maxims. For, as Kant makes clear, external circumstances force one’s maxims to compete for ascendancy:

Hence the difference, whether the human being is good or evil, must not lie in the difference between the incentives that he incorporates into his maxim (not in the material of the maxim) but in their *subordination* (in the form of the maxim): *which of the two he makes the condition of the other.*

(*R*, 6:36)

To be evil, human beings must merely freely choose to elevate a maxim of self-love above the maxim of duty to the moral law. However, this implies that a person is neither wholly evil nor wholly good—that sometimes they subordinate the moral law to their maxim of self-love and sometimes do the opposite: an interpretation that Kant definitively rules out. Rather, one’s hierarchy of maxims attests to one’s disposition (*Gesinnung*), or moral character. While this was freely chosen, no inquiry can be made into its ground without warranting an infinite regress, and, for this reason, Kant describes it as an ‘innate characteristic’ (*R*, 6:25). This disposition, moreover, is further circumscribed by human beings’ propensity to evil—the radical evil that inheres within the human—a propensity that Kant declines to prove in light of ‘the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us’ (*R*, 6:33). Using the empirically somewhat dubious analogy of ‘savages’, who ‘have a propensity for intoxicants’ (whether or not they are originally inclined towards it),

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<sup>18</sup> ‘The human *Willkür* [...] is the faculty of free spontaneous choice. Or, more accurately, it is that aspect of the faculty of volition that involves unconstrained free choice. [...] The *Willkür*, the name we give to the capacity to choose between alternatives is neither *intrinsically* good nor *intrinsically* evil; rather, it is the capacity by which we freely choose good or evil maxims. In the *Religion* it is clear that *Wille* (in its more technical, narrow sense) does not act at all; it does not make decisions. *Wille* refers to the purely rational aspect of the faculty of volition’. Bernstein, p. 13.



Kant insists that ‘*Propensity* is actually only the *predisposition* to desire an enjoyment which, when the subject has experienced it, arouses *inclination* to it’ (*R*, 6:29). Radical evil, then, in no way exonerates the human being from responsibility for their disposition, despite the fact that it ‘corrupts the ground of all maxims’ (*R*, 6:37).

This brief summary attests to Kant’s oscillation between his commitment to freedom as the basis of morality and his belief that humans are radically evil. As I will explore, Adorno’s response to this paradox is twofold: first, he translates the Kantian picture from its place in the individual will to society; second, within this social context he insists upon the very real unfreedom faced by the individual. The specific relation between the individual and the world is addressed in Adorno’s 1969 essay ‘Subject and Object’, in which he argues for the mutual mediation of subject and object. In this, he is affirming the Idealist claim that reality is necessarily mediated by human consciousness and, beyond this, insisting that we as humans are equally mediated by the objective world. This world is not conceived, as in naïve Realism, as that which neutrally always already merely exists. Rather, it should be seen as the sum of the social structures that have sedimented into second nature, those structures that are constituted by humans but at the same time stand in opposition to them. In light of this, Adorno’s argument for the ‘primacy of the object’ (*CM*, p. 249) in lived experience emphasises the oppressive weight these social structures take on. In *Negative Dialectics*, he insists that ‘to a subject that acts naively and opposes itself to its environment, its own conditioning is nontransparent’ (*ND*, p. 220). The subject, that is, conceives of the social world as merely existing—as natural—and this very blindness prevents his insight into his predicament and neuters the capacity to change it.

This dialectic between subject and object is the basis of Adorno’s critique of Kant’s concept of evil. He insists that Kant’s attempt to subtract the world from the question of free will is fatally flawed: ‘countless moments of external—notably social—reality invade the decisions designated by the words “will” and “freedom”’ (*ND*, p. 213). If subject and object are continually mediated, it is impossible to untangle the knots that bind our decisions to the outside world. This, Adorno concludes, ‘is why the attempt to localize the question of free will in the empirical

subject must fail' (*ND*, p. 213). For this reason, he rephrases the problem that so preoccupied Kant:

The trouble is not that free men do radical evil, as evil is being done beyond all measure conceivable to Kant; the trouble is that as yet there is no world in which—there are flashes of this in Brecht's work—men would no longer need to be evil. Evil, therefore, is the world's own unfreedom. Whatever evil is done comes from the world.

(*ND*, pp. 218–9)

While Kant situates the problem of evil in the human will, Adorno relocates it to society. In so doing, he avoids Kant's paradox, in which Kant attempted to reconcile human freedom with radical evil—one's innate propensity to evil that 'corrupts the ground of all maxims'. For Adorno, freedom is not primarily a question of the will; rather, it is a socio-political issue. Moreover, within a social context, freedom is rare, fleeting and by no means inevitable. Collapsing one end of Kant's paradox, Adorno firmly roots evil in society—society, which, of course, is not only an abstract and impersonal menace but which 'consists also of men themselves' (*ND*, p. 219). For Kant, there is no possibility of moral responsibility without freedom: humans are held accountable not only for their evil maxims, but also for their propensity towards evil. For Adorno, the choice is not a simple one between freedom and moral responsibility, on the one hand, and unfreedom and no accountability, on the other. The complexity and non-transparency of the social realm, which is nonetheless a manmade structure, obscures the neat dichotomy Kant erects. Ultimately, Adorno rejects both sides of Kant's paradox: he refuses to acknowledge the universality of freedom and he denies the existence of radical evil, in which he perceives 'the echo of that revolting adaptation of the theological doctrine of original sin, the idea that the corruption of human nature legitimates domination, and that radical evil legitimates evil' (*HF*, p. 159).

It is significant that Adorno retains the term 'evil'. After all, evil seems to be inextricably entwined with the idea of intention. Given Adorno's insistence on the dominance of society and the real unfreedom of the individual, it would be tempting to give up on the concept of evil altogether, viewing it as a Romantic anachronism that has no room in an administered society. And, indeed, Adorno muses on this very question:

we must ask whether the entire moral sphere [...] in which it is meaningful to speak of good and evil, has not approached a threshold at which it is no longer meaningful to apply these terms. If that were the case, it would undoubtedly help to explain some of the antinomies and aporias that we constantly encounter in discussions of Auschwitz. One such is that here we necessarily apply yardsticks of good and evil to behaviour that, as if in fulfilment of a dreadful prophecy, already belongs to a state of mankind in which, negatively, the entire sphere of morality has been abolished, instead of being elevated, positively, into a higher sphere that is equally free of both repression and morality.

(*HF*, p. 207)

Nonetheless, Adorno continues to employ moral terminology, though he insists that '[a]fter Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it underwent a transformation' (*ND*, p. 367). If the concept of evil is retained, it must be transposed from its original context and reconsidered in relation to existing circumstances. Evil, then, is qualitatively different in a post-Auschwitz world.

It is of this revised conception of evil that we should be mindful when considering two of Beckett's more disquieting texts of the 1960s: *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is*. These two prose works are conspicuous in the Beckett corpus for offering the broad outlines of a social world. *The Lost Ones* lacks realism, defined characters and any discernible plot. Nonetheless, it does, if obscurely, present the abstract mechanisms of a society: a community of 'lost bodies' (*The Lost Ones*, p. 202) who, at least primitively, interact within a systematic framework. Moreover, it does so within the constraints of a third-person narrative, the narrator ambiguously located at once inside and outside the cylinder, in which the inner world privileged in other prose works of this period—the *Novellas*, the *Trilogy*, the *Texts for Nothing*—is eschewed in favour of surfaces and objectivity. *How It Is* is somewhat more ambiguous. As Russell Smith argues, interpretations of the text fall broadly into two main camps, based upon different understandings of its final few pages. Some critics 'take the narrator at his word here' and accept that 'the entire text—Krim, Kram, Bim, Bom and the others—has been nothing more than figments created and discarded by a solitary imagination'.<sup>19</sup> Others 'take this final negation as no more determining than any of the others that precede it',<sup>20</sup> allowing the possibility of the narrator's

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<sup>19</sup> 'Bearing Witness in *How It Is*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 19 (2008), 351–60 (p. 352).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

description of events throughout the text to be ‘how it was how it is how most certainly it will be’ (*How It Is*, p. 147). While Smith focuses on the text as ‘bearing witness to alterity’ through the narrator’s encounter with the other,<sup>21</sup> I am more interested in the narrator’s depiction of a systematic framework of tormentors and victims (later significantly condensed in *What Where*) and its similarities to the more definitive social world of *The Lost Ones*.

For all their manifold differences, then, *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is* are alike in their stress on the mechanisms of social life, however abstracted, rather than the individual. While, admittedly, this is not evident in *How It Is* until Part III, it is possible to read this final section as offering an entirely new and thus estranging perspective on the more personal narrative that has preceded it.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, both texts exhibit a mismatch between their aesthetic mode of non-representation and the world(s) to which this alludes. This is all the more significant when we consider how the texts resonate with Nazi concentration camps (*The Lost Ones*) and Irish history (*How It Is*).<sup>23</sup> In his brief account of *Endgame* in his (even briefer) biography of Beckett, Andrew Gibson suggests that the play is defined by a ‘split between historical markers and ahistorical claims’.<sup>24</sup> References to the Cold War ‘disappear, then reappear’<sup>25</sup>—a point also made by Adorno, who insists that ‘*Endgame* is neither a play about the atom bomb nor is it contentless’ (*AT*, p. 325). This oscillation between universalising and particularising is equally manifest in *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is*, and is accentuated by their abstraction of form, which opens up a gap with the historical worlds indicated but never concretised. Such abstraction permits a radically unsettling dialectic between universal and particular: both texts make a certain claim for the comprehensive nature of the experience they articulate, most obvious in the title of *How It Is*, but this is always counterposed by their acute sense of affinity with a concrete, historical world. Such a dialectic corroborates Adorno’s

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Gibson similarly argues that ‘*How It Is* [...] is not obviously best read in linear fashion, like a novel’, though he suggests that ‘we should [...] read it from the second part, “with Pim”, outwards, because the second part is quite distinct from the first and third’. ‘The Irish Misanthropic Tradition’, *Misanthropy* [Forthcoming].

<sup>23</sup> I will return to the texts’ post-Holocaust significance later in this chapter. For a detailed analysis of the ‘non-confrontations’ between *How It Is* and Irish colonial history, see ‘The Irish Misanthropic Tradition’.

<sup>24</sup> *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

claim, within a discussion of Beckett, that '[a]rt emigrates to a standpoint that is no longer a standpoint at all because there are no longer standpoints from which the catastrophe could be named or formed' (*AT*, p. 325). Neither a localised, historical perspective nor a universal and totalising one is able to name what Adorno here calls the catastrophe, but elsewhere describes as evil.

The 'obscured form' (*AT*, p. 296) in which society appears in *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is* manifests Adorno's conception of the primacy of the object: that manmade structures oppress and circumscribe the lives of individuals. The bleak social structure of the cylinder and the 'thousand thousand nameless solitaries' (*How It Is*, p. 125) that constitute 'life in the mud' (p. 151) offer a depiction of evil horrifyingly apposite to its modern context. The allusion to *Paradise Lost* in *The Lost Ones* renders only too clear the extent to which modern evil deviates from its classical conception:<sup>26</sup> evil in this short prose work is as far removed from the Miltonic Satan's 'unconquerable will' as is conceivably possible.<sup>27</sup> Iago's careful cultivation of his will so as to direct it with greater accuracy toward evil is equally not comparable:

IAGO [...] Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills are gardeners. [...] If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions; but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts.<sup>28</sup>

Such instrumental use of reason for one's own evil ends is strikingly absent in a Beckettian universe, where such an exertion of will is barely comprehensible. Even the torture of *How It Is* is listless and impersonal, carried out in line with an abstract and reified 'justice' (*How It Is*, p. 121).

Kant disavows the possibility of diabolical evil, insisting that '[t]he human being (even the worst) does not repudiate the moral law, whatever his maxims, in rebellious attitude (by revoking obedience to it)' (*R*, 6:36). He goes on to clarify that human evil cannot involve 'a disposition (a subjective *principle* of maxims) to incorporate evil *qua evil* for incentive into one's maxim (since this is *diabolical*)' (*R*,

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<sup>26</sup> The narrator suggests that 'violation' of 'the fundamental principle forbidding ascent more than one at a time' would 'soon transform the abode into a pandemonium'. *The Lost Ones*, p. 209.

<sup>27</sup> *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2000; repr. 2003), p. 5 [Book I, 106].

<sup>28</sup> *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 235–6 [I. 3. 316–26].

6:37). Evil is not undertaken for the sake of evil; rather, its roots lie in a broad conception of self-love, which is wrongly prioritised above the infinite claims of the moral law. This preserves the innate freedom of every person (to choose to obey the moral law) and therefore their very humanity itself. For Kant, there are no monsters *per se*: no figures who *will* evil. As we have seen, however, Adorno has no need to insist upon the unconditional freedom of every human being; on the contrary, he argues compellingly that freedom is contingent and rare. This would allow him, logically, to accept the possibility of diabolical evil where Kant cannot—and, indeed, in the wake of Auschwitz, this would be a tempting proposition. ‘A world without monsters, just imagine!’ (*Rough for Radio II*, p. 280), the Animator of *Rough for Radio II* laughs, and it is easy to share his incredulity. However, this does not form the basis of Adorno’s conception of evil. He instead observes:

wicked people of the kind you meet in literature no longer exist, Iago, say, or Richard III, to name only the most famous literary prototypes. Such radically evil people are no longer to be found, for the radical evil of the kind postulated [and denied] by Kant presupposes a strength of character, energy, and a substantiality of the self that is made impossible by a world that calls for more or less dissociated achievements that are separated from the self.

(*HF*, p. 206)

This otherwise clear passage is complicated by what I take to be Adorno’s confused terminology. It should be self-evident that by ‘radical evil’ he means, in Kant’s terms, diabolical evil: evil for the sake of evil. Radical evil, as we have discussed, means (for Kant) merely mankind’s propensity to evil and is in no way confined to such literary figures as Iago and Richard III. This confusion of terms is unsurprising given Arendt’s well-known concept of radical evil that, in reality, has far more to do with Kant’s (logically impossible) diabolical evil. That Adorno was aware of Arendt’s work is clear: he cites her later work on the banality of evil in his 1965 *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* lecture series. Adorno can be seen to be claiming that while diabolical evil is not impossible, it has all but disappeared in modern capitalist society. Kant and Adorno, then, reach similar conclusions through wholly different means. If, for Adorno, evil is no longer diabolical, but still exists, it must be sought in an entirely different guise. Figures of diabolical evil such as Iago are no longer useful models with which to conceive of modern day evil. Moreover, Adorno is anxious to resist locating evil in the will as Kant does; the absolute moral responsibility that radical evil entails is, for Adorno, an abhorrent and inappropriate response to a world

in which freedom is by no means assured. In light of this, *The Lost Ones* stages an imaginatively pared back image of communal suffering without an agent instigating such pain, while in *How It Is* every mud-dweller is perpetrator and victim: ‘what the fuck I quote does it matter who suffers’ (*How It Is*, p. 144). This, for Adorno, is the evil that characterises modern society: the systematic propagation of suffering and unfreedom that ultimately cannot be traced back to one guilty human agent. This is the primacy of the object that demolishes all naïve attempts to posit the power of the subject.

The specific form of the subject-object dialectic described by Adorno is particularly evident in the image of the constraining cylinder that incarcerates the ‘two hundred bodies’ (*The Lost Ones*, p. 204) of *The Lost Ones*. In 1983, Enoch Brater painstakingly established the various mathematical flaws in the text: the narrator’s figures, he claimed, ‘are approximate at best, misleading or even erroneous at worst’.<sup>29</sup> For Brater, this confirms the unreliable nature of the narrator, of whom we should be suspicious. I suggest, however, that the cylinder’s enigmatic measurements can also attest to its continually shifting dimensions, which render it unfathomable. In this I am following Ulrika Maude’s insight that ‘despite the machine connotations of its shape, the cylinder has a distinctly natural constitution’.<sup>30</sup> While Maude dwells on the cylinder’s tactile resemblances to the body—its ‘heat and light fluctuations reminiscent of the rhythm of heartbeat or of respiration’ and the rubbery surface similar to that of skin<sup>31</sup>—I suggest that the organic elements of the cylinder attest to its status as a manmade institution that nonetheless represses and imprisons the bodies it contains. This is even more crudely painted in *How It Is*, where the narrator suggests in a moment of brilliance: ‘quick a supposition if this so-called mud were nothing more than all our shit’ (*How It Is*, p. 58). If the mud that constitutes the world of *How It Is* is indeed the shit of its inhabitants, then, in a particularly disgusting way, the dwellers have physically created the world that oppresses them and from which they draw their meaning.

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Mis-takes, Mathematical and Otherwise’, in *The Lost Ones*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 29 (1983), 93–109 (p. 97).

<sup>30</sup> ‘Mingled Flesh’, *European Joyce Studies*, 16 (2005), 91–107 (p. 101).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

The environments of the two texts are particularly hostile, though the mud of *How It Is* is expansive and apparently endless, while the cylinder of *The Lost Ones* is finite and restrictive. Life in *How It Is* is reduced to ‘the sack the tins the mud the dark the silence the solitude’ (*How It Is*, p. 9). In the cylinder, meanwhile, the continually oscillating temperature, as the narrator dispassionately notes, prevents any sustained rest:

Out of the eight seconds therefore required for a single rise and fall it is only during a bare six and a half that the bodies suffer the maximum increment of heat or cold which with the help of a little addition or better still division works out nevertheless at some twenty years respite per century in this domain.

(*The Lost Ones*, p. 215)

The source of such fluctuating temperatures—or, indeed, of the ‘omnipresen[t]’ (p. 202) yellow light—is undisclosed. The rubbery texture of the cylinder—almost like a padded cell—prevents any indent or impression. The cylinder is wholly unresponsive to the needs or desires of its inhabitants, imposing its predetermined structures indiscriminately. As an inanimate object that nonetheless takes on an oppressive role, it demonstrates the dual nature of society.

Such oppression is, however, not merely limited to the physical environments of the two texts. In *The Lost Ones*, rules and regulations dominate the lives of the bodies. They may constitute the mere vestiges of a society, but they do possess a broad moral code, elaborately detailed by the narrator. The use of the ladders, for example, ‘is regulated by conventions of obscure origin which in their precision and the submission they exact from the climbers resemble laws’ (*The Lost Ones*, p. 207). More specifically, a general precept ‘not to do unto others what coming from them might give offence’ is ‘largely observed’ (p. 222), paraphrasing the commonly cited Biblical decree: ‘[a]nd as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise’.<sup>32</sup> Given the scarcity of communication in the cylinder, this system of ethics appears to conform to Kant’s claim that knowledge of the moral law is innate. We should, however, be cautious of attributing such knowledge to Beckett’s characters. When discussing what he knows ‘about men and the ways they have of putting up with it’ (*The Unnamable*, p. 7)—‘it’ being pointedly unspecified—the Unnamable

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<sup>32</sup> Luke 6. 31.



considers the foundation of his insights: ‘Can it be innate knowledge? Like that of good and evil. This seems improbable to me’ (*The Unnamable*, p. 8). The improbability of ‘innate knowledge’ could semantically refer just as much to the awareness of ‘good and evil’ as to the understanding of men. The Unnamable’s scepticism about the possibility of inherent cognition is particularly germane when considering the extent to which man engenders the very laws and strictures to which he then submits himself with resentful or oblivious humility. In *How It Is*, too, the narrator’s methods of torture mimic the strategies of behaviourists, most famously evident in the experiment of Pavlov’s dog: ‘it’s not yet second nature but it will be’ (*How It Is*, p. 76), he celebrates. This, beyond all else, marks the behaviour of the narrator and the ‘millions’ (p. 123) of others as learned, not innate. The communication system first encountered in *Molloy*—‘One knock meant yes, two, no, three I don’t know, four money, five goodbye’ (*Molloy*, p. 14)—is here intensified in its sadism and stripped of its purpose: an unlikely aesthete, the narrator plays upon Pim like an instrument:<sup>33</sup>

table of basic stimuli one sing nails in armpit two speak blade in arse three  
stop thump on skull four louder pestle on kidney

five softer index in anus six bravo clap athwart arse seven lousy same as three  
eight encore same as one or two as may be.

(*How It Is*, p. 76)

The narrator insists that all he says is quoted from a voice inside his head and muses ‘that’s the speech I’ve been given part one before Pim question do I use it freely it’s not said or I don’t hear’ (p. 19). In a world of social unfreedom, the narrator’s evil actions can neither be excused as an inevitable part of a bad totality nor condemned as the actions as an individual agent. He explains: ‘at the instant I reach Pim another reaches Bem we are regulated thus our justice wills it thus fifty thousand couples again at the same instant the same everywhere with the same space between them it’s mathematical it’s our justice in this muck’ (p. 121). Within this network of suffering, evil is pervasive but indeterminable. It is, moreover, inescapable. The narrator notes dispassionately that ‘the wish for something else no that doesn’t seem to have been

<sup>33</sup> ‘In *How It Is* the notion of phonic control exuberates far beyond a mere on/off switch: the human body simulates a whole electronic console or mixing-board. Each mud-crawler with his can opener treats the man in front of him as if he were a radio, making him speak or sing or cry out through a system of learned responses—there is even a protocol for volume control’. Daniel Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 120.

given to me' (p. 12). In a Sadean twist he associates 'the birth of hope' with 'Pim the lost tins the groping hand the arse the two cries' (p. 25): hope is reduced to the possibility of inflicting pain on another and thereby maintaining one's preordained role within the social totality.

In contrast, the possible existence of a 'way out' (*The Lost Ones*, p. 206) of the cylinder is one of the more provocative elements of *The Lost Ones*, offering as it does the prospect of freedom from the infernal dwelling described in such detail. Such a belief seems at first glance to represent a moment of defiant liberation in the midst of the otherwise oppressive and totalitarian nature of the cylinder, which circumscribes the inhabitants' very movements with its unwritten laws and conventions. It is such an alluring possibility that even those who have given up hope 'are not immune from believing so again' (p. 206). However, the chance of freedom is instantly curtailed by the bodies themselves. The narrator explains that of the two opinions regarding the whereabouts of the way out—a 'secret passage branching from one of the tunnels' and 'a trapdoor hidden in the hub of the ceiling' (p. 206)—the latter is gaining in popularity, precisely due to the impossibility of testing it. The elusive way out is revealed to be a false hope, a chimera preventing any real change from taking place. We cannot, however, agree with the narrator's odious description of such a belief as a 'fatuous little light' (p. 207), as the desire itself—to discover a paradisiacal realm in which 'the sun and other stars would still be shining' (p. 206)—is the only indication we are given that the bodies are not resigned to their lives. Their mistake, however, is in believing that freedom lies beyond the confines of the cylinder, when the cylinder itself is only a manmade institution. Dwelling on the pseudo-problem of how to escape only serves to reconcile them to their existing social conditions.

A number of critics have noted the parallels between the cylindrical world of *The Lost Ones* and the concentration camps—Gary Adelman, for instance:

No cattle cars, crematoria, factories, no lethal gas, or I. G. Farben, no SS, or thirty-eight camps attached to the main Auschwitz camp, no *Arbeit Macht* [sic] *Frei*, no death begins with the shoes, or parades, or striped rags, or tattoos, or ersatz coffee, or cutaneous endemas, no boils, leg ulcers, abscesses,

suppurating sores, no dysentery, no roll calls. Yet that world is called into being by the cylinder.<sup>34</sup>

Similar parallels could be made of *How It Is*: Liesel Olson argues that ‘the master and servant suffering of *How It Is* resonates against the historical reality of concentration camps’,<sup>35</sup> while Russell Smith’s reading of the text invokes Agamben’s Holocaust-inspired paradox of ‘how can the true witness be the one who by definition cannot bear witness?’<sup>36</sup> Adelman’s parallel, however, goes at once too far and not far enough. As Adorno claims, ‘Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps—a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban. What is, he says, is like a concentration camp’ (*ND*, p. 380). The cylinder and the endless mud are not allegories of Auschwitz; rather, they testify to the insidious similarities between the camps and society. This may seem to be a contentious claim that minimises the horrific suffering of the Holocaust, and must therefore be understood in the context of Adorno’s argument that Auschwitz was not an aberration from but rather the culminating moment of a society dominated by instrumental reason and identity-thinking. In light of this, correspondences between the concentration camps and the world surrounding it, while horrific, are nonetheless evident. *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is* are all the more effective because they strip away the paraphernalia described above by Adelman—those horrifying details we, in a post-Holocaust society, are only too intimately aware of—leaving only the stark imprint of evil.

Science and mathematics—the tools of an instrumental reason that cannot envisage their use for any other purpose than domination—are utilized by the narrator of *The Lost Ones* as a means of objectively fathoming the cylinder and its inhabitants; we are presented with an array of figures that attempt to pin down the life that dwells therein.

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Fearful Symmetry: Beckett’s *The Lost Ones*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 26 (2003), 164–9 (p. 167). See also David Houston-Jones, ‘From Contumacy to Shame: Reading Beckett’s Testimonies with Agamben’, in *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 54–67; and Mary F. Catanzaro, ‘No Way Out: The Effect of Surveillance in *The Lost Ones*’, in *Beckett in the Cultural Field / Beckett dans le champ culturel*, ed. by Jürgen Siess, Matthij Engelberts and Angela Moorjani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 183–196 (pp. 192–3).

<sup>35</sup> *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 110. Jackie Blackman similarly comments that ‘*How It Is* (begun in 1958), an abstract work notoriously difficult for Beckett to write, evokes the mud, abject violence, and numbering system of the camps’. ‘Beckett’s Theatre “After Auschwitz”’, in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Seán Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 71–88.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Smith, p. 355.

From measurements—the environment is a ‘flattened cylinder fifty metres round and sixteen high’ (*The Lost Ones*, p. 202)—to timings—the temperature ‘falls rapidly from a maximum of twenty-five degrees approximately to a minimum of approximately five whence a regular variation of five degrees per second’ (p. 206)—the text is saturated with references to mathematical certainty and analysis. In a sickening reminder of the concentration camps, the bodies are categorised into types according to their mobility: ‘[f]irstly those perpetually in motion. Secondly those who sometimes pause. Thirdly those who short of being driven off never stir from the coign they have won and when driven off pounce on the first free one that offers and freeze again’ (p. 204). Analysed in such a disinterested manner, the bodies lose their humanity; the description could be of different types of particles. Along these lines, the narrator of *How It Is* dispassionately and tentatively identifies physical elements of Pim—‘the cries tell me which end the head but I may be mistaken’ (*How It Is*, p. 60)—and demonstrates pleasant surprise at the similarities between their forms: ‘having rummaged in the mud between his legs I bring up finally what seems to me a testicle or two the anatomy I had’ (p. 60). *The Lost Ones* further divides the bodies according to how much space they occupy, with no regard for discrepancies: ‘[o]ne body per square metre or two hundred bodies in all round numbers’ (*The Lost Ones*, p. 204). The ‘dearth of floor space’ (p. 223) is returned to later in the text when the narrator explains that, for reasons of space, ‘Lying down is unheard of in the cylinder’ (p. 222): that luxury is denied to the bodies. The objective conditions of the cylinder block the fundamental human needs it should be alleviating. While such an appraisal of humans, who throughout the text are reduced to the status of ‘bodies’, is acutely consistent with the treatment of Jews and other ‘undesirable’ groups of people, *The Lost Ones* resists being pinned down to a mere imaginative representation of a concentration camp. Its scope is broader: it reveals the very weight of social coercion that allows people to be reduced to specimens.

Despite the seeming precision of the scientific register, confident that ‘in the cylinder alone are certitudes to be found and without nothing but mystery’ (*The Lost Ones*, p. 216), it is ‘littered with modifiers [...] that undermine the assertive tone. [...] Doubt, therefore, is always already built into the register that at first appears so firm

in its convictions'.<sup>37</sup> One particularly pertinent example of this is the vanquished woman who 'is the north [...] because of her greater fixity' (p. 221). The ironic possibility, implied by the use of the comparative 'greater', that 'north' may, at any time, move around the cylinder and destabilise the system based on her immobility, suggests the absence of security at the heart of the scientific discourse of the text. *The Lost Ones* therefore testifies to the impossibility of reducing the bodies, even in their most degraded and non-human state, to figures in a mathematical equation or objects of scientific analysis, without a remainder. This remainder is suffering, the suffering of the searchers and the vanquished alike, which 'remains foreign to knowledge' (*AT*, p. 18). The possible allusion to the title of Primo Levi's 1947 book *If This is a Man*—'there he stirs this last of all *if a man* and slowly draws himself up and some time later opens his burnt eyes' (p. 223; my italics)—extends the inhumanity of the concentration camps, well-documented in Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of the *Muselmänner*,<sup>38</sup> to the broader social world. The man's 'burnt eyes' attests to the bodies' inability to adapt to their continually fluctuating environment:

It might safely be maintained that the eye grows used to these conditions and in the end adapts to them were it not that just the contrary is to be observed in the slow deterioration of vision ruined by this fiery flickering murk and by the incessant straining for ever vain with concomitant moral distress and its repercussion on the organ.

(*The Lost Ones*, p. 214)

Submitting to the conditions of the cylinder as though they are natural and inescapable, the bodies passively accept the hellish nature of their dwelling, barely subsisting in an environment that destroys them. The 'fiery flickering murk' echoes a classic conception of hell. Once again, however, despite the myriad of Dantean allusions in both *The Lost Ones* and *How It Is*—explored in detail in Daniela Caselli's *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*<sup>39</sup>—neither text presents hell or purgatory. Rather, they depict in stark form the social world: as Adorno insists, 'socially produced evil has engendered something like a real hell' (*M*, p. 105). Mephistopheles' resigned acknowledgement in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* that 'this

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<sup>37</sup> Maude, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 183–200; pp. 148–82.

is hell, nor am I out of it' captures the essence of Adorno's claim.<sup>40</sup> Hell is not a specific location from which it is possible to escape. In *Doctor Faustus*, hell is the absence of God's grace and the 'eternal joys of Heaven';<sup>41</sup> for Adorno, however, it is the sum total of the man-made structures that take on an autonomous life of their own, preventing humans from alleviating their needs and compelling them to take on cold and instrumental relations with one another.

Is, then, 'all [...] for the best' (*The Lost Ones*, p. 216) in the cylinder, as the narrator of *The Lost Ones* insists? Is this the Leibnizian 'best of all possible worlds'?<sup>42</sup> Leibniz's *Theodicy* aimed to justify God's goodness in the face of manifest evil by claiming that 'all the Creator's actions in fact happen for the best'.<sup>43</sup> Time alone—and with it the development of human capability—will reveal the inherent reason of the world. However, echoing and tacitly undermining the end of the *Gloria Patri*—'As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen'<sup>44</sup>—the narrator admits that '[a]ll has not been told *and never shall be*' (p. 219; my italics). The Christian narrative posits a continuity of past, present and future that is perceptibly lacking in *The Lost Ones*, where 'the beginning' is as 'unthinkable as the end' (pp. 212–3). The cylinder may exist 'for the sake of harmony' (p. 202), but such harmony is at odds with the individuals who are oppressed by its indiscriminate domination. It is here that the perspective of the narrator—and thus the reader—becomes of vital importance. The narrator claims to possess knowledge of the system that is denied to the bodies themselves because of their immersion within it. This gives us a privileged perspective from which we can construct 'a perfect mental image of the entire system' (p. 204), witnessing the crushing objectivity that weighs down upon the inhabitants. At the same time, however, as Caselli argues, the hermetic nature of the environment means that 'the observer has no openings from which to peruse the closed cylinder'.<sup>45</sup> Our god's eye view compromised, we are forced to confront our more limited perspective within both the cylinder of the text

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<sup>40</sup> *Doctor Faustus*, in *The Complete Plays*, ed. by Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 341–95 (p. 356 [III. 78]).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* [III. 80].

<sup>42</sup> Neiman, p. 68.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. by Brian Cummings (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 242.

<sup>45</sup> Caselli, p. 185.

and our own dominating structures, structures that must be rendered transparent if the possibility of a way out is to remain anything but a false hope.

This disjunction is equally apparent in *How It Is*. We are given the pervasive sense of a condition that has not significantly changed since the dawn of time. In Part I, particularly, the narrator muses on this: ‘fleeting joys and of sorrows of empires that are born and die as though nothing had happened’ (*How It Is*, p. 13). He emphasises the transitory nature of ‘empires’ with their ‘joys and sorrows’ and their insignificance from a broader perspective: ‘centuries I can see me quite tiny the same as now more or less only tinier quite tiny’ (p. 19). This sense of perspective is what enables the narrator to contextualise his suffering and to rationalise the evil he perpetrates: ‘the fuck who suffers who makes to suffer who cries who to be left in peace in the dark [...] it’s someone each in his turn as our justice wills’ (p. 144). Such justice, in the face of which there is ‘nothing to be done’ (p. 135)—an echo of the refrain of *Waiting for Godot*—is, the narrator hesitantly posits, presided over by ‘one not one of us an intelligence somewhere a love who all along the track at the right places according as we need them deposits our sacks’ (p. 150). The attributes of God are here listed: intelligence, love, ‘exceptional powers’ (p. 150). Nonetheless, the narrator claims that this is ‘the place without knowledge’ (p. 134) and notes that ‘of the four three quarters of our total life only three lend themselves to communication’ (p. 143): he is unable to speak in his ‘quality of victim’ (p. 143). These narrative holes prohibit us from comprehending the entire system; like the narrator, we are floundering in the mud. Moreover, the cyclical nature of the text prevents us from accepting it as complete; even the narrator’s acknowledgement of this ends mid-sentence: ‘assuming one prefers the order here proposed namely one the journey two the couple three the abandon to that to those to be obtained by starting with the abandon and ending with the journey by way of the couple or starting with the couple and ending with the’ (p. 126). Thrust *in media res*, our reading is just as partial and limited as the narrator’s. Perhaps the most revealing statement of the text comes early on: ‘we follow I quote the natural order more or less’ (p. 7). This very equivocation attests to the intense difficulties of penetrating the façade of naturalness that shrouds society and its destructive circularity.

II

Theodicies offer the means by which the existence of evil is justified in the face of a benevolent divinity. As Peter Dews argues, we are therefore confronted with a paradoxical situation in which the ‘problem of theodicy [...] should have disappeared for us, who live after Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God’, and yet ‘the problem of theodicy seems in some sense to have outlived the explicit belief in a divine creator that first gave rise to it’.<sup>46</sup> The human compulsion towards theodicy should therefore be seen as part of a wider project of rendering evil comprehensible and tending to nullify it by getting it in some kind of supposed ‘proportion’. Such a project is no less applicable in a rational, secular age than an explicitly religious one. The drive to understand evil is one with which we can sympathise—as Neiman puts it, it demonstrates an urge ‘to face evil in the world without giving in to despair’;<sup>47</sup> nonetheless, there is a fine line between evil’s comprehension and its rationalisation. The latter has a number of worrying implications: not least among them the risk of accepting evil as an inevitable and ultimately trivial if regrettable moment in the wider scheme of things and thereby neutralising real human suffering. Theodicy, then, has not died with God, but continues to inform not only contemporary debates about evil but also, as I will demonstrate, Beckett’s *Endgame*. This play’s very title conjures up the Cold War stalemate that lurked ominously over the 1950s, as well as evoking the possibility of the end of history—an utterly serious proposition in light of potential nuclear annihilation. Hamm and Clov wait in the ‘old refuge’ (*Endgame*, p. 126) for everything to come to an end, their predicament constructing an alternative history to that of theodicy, in which all evil is redeemed. Specifically, *Endgame* can be situated in opposition to Hegel’s theodicy as depicted in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, which, as Adorno claims, offers an essentially affirmative view of history in which all evils are sublated by triumphant Spirit [*Geist*].<sup>48</sup> While acknowledging the truth content in the concept of universal history,

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<sup>46</sup> ““Radical Finitude” and the Problem of Evil: Critical Comments on Wellmer’s Reading of Jonas’, in *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by María Pía Lara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 46–53 (p. 47).

<sup>47</sup> Neiman, p. 291.

<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that this reading of Hegel, while textually rooted, is one that is contested by recent Hegel scholarship intent on constructing what Bowie terms ‘a “non-metaphysical” Hegel’ (p. 54). While, as Bowie explains, Adorno is at times close to such non-metaphysical interpretations, his reading of Hegel’s philosophy of history is primarily ‘a response to the metaphysical Hegel, who is seen as embodying the “hubris of philosophy” by seeking to dissolve



Adorno emphasises its inherent discontinuity and non-identity that are ignored only in the course of writing history from the perspective of the victors. *Endgame* explores this twofold nature of history. By accentuating the ruptures that subvert Hegel's account of Spirit's progression towards freedom, it offers an alternative history from the perspective of its victims, freeing humans from preordained roles in a constrictive narrative of progress. At the same time, it manifests the real unfreedom faced by individuals in light of the tangible oppression of history.

Hegel's *Lectures* set out, as he himself acknowledges, a theodicy in the tradition of Leibniz, which '*should enable us to comprehend all the ills of the world, including the existence of evil, so that the thinking spirit may be reconciled with the negative aspects of existence*'.<sup>49</sup> This theodicy is traditional in its justification of evil as a necessary moment in a providentially ordained design: according to such logic, God is good, and 'no force can surpass the power of goodness or of God or prevent God's purposes from being realised'.<sup>50</sup> Hence, in a reiteration of Leibniz, this is, or will at least prove to be, the best of all possible worlds. Moreover, for Hegel, the plan of providence is revealed in world history, to which humans have unique access through their faculty of reason. So far, this is perfectly in accord with other theodicies. However, Hegel's employment of such theological terms as 'providence' and 'God' should not blind us to the more secular—specifically Enlightenment-informed—thrust of his theodicy.

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the real into what can be articulated in concepts' (p. 55). Adorno's identification of a grand narrative of progressing rationality in Hegel is heavily influenced by his own historical context. Moreover, as Robert B. Pippin argues, '[c]haracterizing Hegel's complex assessment of modernity has always depended on which texts one looks at'. 'Hegel, Modernity, and Habermas', *The Monist*, 74 (1991), 329–57 (p. 329). Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* are particularly damning from a new Hegelian perspective, containing as they do some of his more inflammatory remarks. It is outside the scope of this thesis to offer a more nuanced reading of Hegel; Pippin admits that '[i]t is also obvious that, whatever Hegel's actual position, what he was taken to mean by some descendants influenced world history like almost no other philosophy'. *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 97. It is Adorno's interpretation that is of interest here. For recent Hegel reinterpretations along a non-metaphysical line, see also Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Martin Schuster, *Autonomy After Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 134–67; and Robert B. Pippin, 'Finite and Absolute Idealism: The Transcendental and the Metaphysical Hegel', in *The Transcendental Turn*, ed. by Sebastian Gardner and Matthew Grist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 159–72.

<sup>49</sup> *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1975; repr. 1984), p. 42.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Hegel takes as an *a priori* truth the idea that world history is governed by reason—this, he claims, is manifestly evident ‘in the study of world history itself’—and thus progresses rationally in line with its internal *telos*.<sup>51</sup> He uses the image of a seed as a paradigm for such a development: ‘just as the seed bears within it the whole nature of the tree and the taste and form of its fruits, so also do the first glimmerings of spirit contain virtually the whole of history’.<sup>52</sup> However, the movement of history is not linear—a steady progression towards perfection—but dialectical. Hegel demonstrates this through the concrete image of nations rising and falling as the national Spirit ‘has been absorbed into another and higher principle’ and, rather more poetically, through the metaphor of the Phoenix, which ‘for ever constructs its own funeral pyre and is for ever consumed upon it, only to rise again from the ashes as fresh and rejuvenated life’.<sup>53</sup> In this way, a ‘rejuvenation of the spirit’ takes place.<sup>54</sup> Thus Hegel conceives of history as a continual negation and sublation, embodying Spirit’s ‘conquering march’ towards freedom.<sup>55</sup> Within this progression of Spirit, evil occupies a problematic position. According to its own premises, Hegel’s theodicy is equipped to deal with any number of evil deeds: such particular events can only be seen within the context of an affirmative narrative of progress:

*From this beginning, we proceeded to define those same events which afford so sad a spectacle for gloomy sentiment and brooding reflections as no more than the means whereby what we have specified as the substantial destiny, the absolute and final end, or in other words, the true result of world history, is realised.*<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, as Hegel emphasises, it is not that individual suffering is an unfortunate by-product of Spirit’s progression; rather, ‘it is from this very conflict and destruction of individual things that the universal emerges, and it remains unscathed itself’.<sup>57</sup> As Bernstein neatly puts it, ‘evil is a *necessary* stage in the realization of Spirit’—a stage

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69. Author’s italics.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

that it will, equally necessarily, sublimate.<sup>58</sup> This is the crux of what Adorno would later appropriately describe as Hegel's 'theodicy of conflict' (*HF*, p. 52).

I have noted in passing Hegel's central claim that 'the aim of the world spirit in world history is to realise its essence and to obtain the prerogative of freedom'.<sup>59</sup> Hegelian theodicy, then, is intimately caught up with the concept of freedom, which, indeed, provides its *terminus ad quem*. The question is, however, what this freedom actually amounts to. Hegel follows Kant in arguing that human freedom can only be understood as the freedom to act in accordance with the law. The law, however, is no longer the Kantian moral law that is innately known by all mankind,<sup>60</sup> rather, it is the rational course of the world Spirit: 'we are free in so far as we recognise it as law and follow it as the substance of our own being; the objective and the subjective will are then reconciled, forming a single, undivided whole'.<sup>61</sup> This reconciliation of the objective and the subjective is paramount for Hegel; if Spirit progresses towards freedom, then human freedom only makes sense insofar as it is *in tune* with this development.

Adorno's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of World History* must be situated in its specific historical context: that is, in the twentieth century, for the horrors of which Adorno repeatedly uses Auschwitz as a metonym. For Adorno, then, Hegel's affirmative view of history is not only impossible after Auschwitz, but actively complicit in the mechanisms of evil:

Confronted with the fact that Auschwitz was possible, that politics could merge directly with mass murder, the affirmative mentality becomes the mere

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<sup>58</sup> Bernstein, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 63.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno notes that 'Kant is forced into all sorts of contortions to demonstrate the presence of moral consciousness everywhere, even in radical evil, just as he had argued for its presence in the minds of evil-doers and scoundrels' (*HF*, p. 242). He has in mind Kant's 'card-sharp' (*HF*, p. 225) in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: 'He who has *lost* at play can indeed be *chagrined* with himself and his imprudence; but if he is conscious of having *cheated* at play (although he has gained by it), he must *despise* himself as soon as he compares himself with the moral law. This must, therefore, be something other than the principle of one's own happiness. For, to have to say to himself "I am a *worthless* man although I have filled my purse" he must have a different criterion of judgment from that by which he commends himself and says "I am a *prudent* man, for I have enriched my cash box"' (5:37). Adorno continues: 'Had he not done so he would have been compelled to admit that these periods and stages of human development that lacked a so-called sense of morality did not deserve to be called human. For an adherent of Rousseau [...] this would have been intolerable' (*HF*, pp. 242–3).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

assertion of a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face and thereby perpetuates it.

(*HF*, p. 7)

Adorno's critique is similar to the objections commonly levelled at Kant's refusal to countenance the possibility of diabolical evil: Hegel simply did not conceive of an evil so pervasive that it could not be overcome by Spirit—that, indeed, it was not part of Spirit's necessary movement of progress towards freedom. Hegel insists that '[t]he wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind',<sup>62</sup> but, for Adorno, Auschwitz attests to the truth that some wounds are simply too deep to be alleviated by any amount of development. Ultimately, for Adorno, Hegel ends up 'glorifying history' (*HF*, p. 113), tracing its apparent progress as though it were some 'kind of infernal machine' (*HF*, p. 113).

As this image of indiscriminate destruction would suggest, the crux of Adorno's critique of Hegel is that, in the latter's admittedly compelling account of the vast sweep of history, he prioritises the universal over the particular. Adorno terms this a 'philosophical history from the standpoint of the victor', emphasising that Hegel 'justifies or vindicates the universal as it asserts itself' (*HF*, p. 41). Adorno acknowledges that Hegel attempts to do justice to the individual by emphasising that Spirit does not operate over the heads of mankind, but operates *through* them, but claims that at every step the individual is sacrificed for the sake of the universal. Marxism inherits this prioritisation of the universal in its belief that 'when ultimately the universal takes over and the concept is victorious, individuals will indeed come into their own—and this factor will ensure that all the suffering and the wasted individuality of history will somehow be made good' (*HF*, p. 44). The pertinent question for Adorno is whether 'the sufferings of a single human being can be compensated for by the triumphal march of progress' (*HF*, p. 8); whether it is possible to erase the past in such a totalising way. Moreover, Adorno argues that Hegel opposes the individual and the universal, the subjective and the objective, in an overly simplistic way. He fails to note the element of objectivity within the individual that allows him to critique existing conditions in a way that is more than merely subjective: 'the figure of the universal in which the particular possesses the universal to a substantial degree is in actual fact the process of thought in which the particular is

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<sup>62</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 407.

raised to the level of the universal' (*HF*, p. 64). Characteristically, Hegel's synthesis claims to reconcile the particular and the universal, but at the expense of the non-identical, which is incorporated into the all-encompassing identity of Spirit with no remainder. This prioritisation of the universal, Adorno claims, attests to how the world actually is: time and time again, individuals are subordinated to the 'blind, heteronomous and potentially destructive' (*HF*, p. 28) universal. However, Hegel simply accepts such a reality as a given, refusing to submit it to scrutiny, and insisting that the universal that always takes precedence is synonymous with reason.

Indeed, Hegel's concept of reason—the guiding force of his Enlightenment-inspired theodicy—is equally problematic for Adorno, who argues that 'history can be called rational only if we know *for whom* it is rational' (*HF*, p. 41); rationality cannot exist without a subject employing it. A similar abstraction is evident in Hegel's understanding of freedom, which, Adorno insists, must be seen as 'tied to the *individual*' (*HF*, p. 84), a point neglected in Hegel's depiction of Spirit's necessary 'progress in the consciousness of freedom'. Adorno therefore identifies a clash between the supposedly absolutely rational 'tangle of historical events and processes' and the 'legitimate rationality of individual human beings' (*HF*, p. 113). In Hegel's theodicy, reason becomes synonymous with fate. It has its own independent *telos*, proceeding with disregard for humans and treating them 'only as instruments to further its own progress'.<sup>63</sup> The course of such apparent progress is, however, not smooth, but decidedly conflict-ridden. For Adorno, Hegel extrapolates from the fact that 'mankind has survived not just in spite of but because of conflict' (*HF*, p. 51) to the erroneous and morally suspect conclusion that 'life can be reproduced *only* by virtue of conflict' (*HF*, pp. 51–2). Far from being peripheral, this belief is deeply rooted in Hegelian dialectics, in which 'the positive is the quintessence of all negativities' (*HF*, p. 52). Spirit relies on conflict in order to sublimate it and reach a higher principle. Such conflict is therefore necessary rather than incidental; Hegel, rightly observing that the history of the human race is one of conflict, hypostatizes this state of the world, insisting that things simply could not have been otherwise. The implications of such a claim extend not only to a valorisation of the present but further to an incapacitation of both the ability and drive to change existing conditions. The belief that conflict is an inevitable and actually necessary part of human existence

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<sup>63</sup> *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 65.

renders any attempt to live another way pointless; moreover, it leads directly to a political quietism. This conservative identification with the world as it is, Adorno argues, is equally evident in Hegel's insistence that the world Spirit *is* the reality of human existence. In so doing, he 'conflate[s] possibility and reality' (*HF*, p. 68), impeding the chance of change or improvement.

Given Adorno's at times caustic critique of Hegel's philosophy of history, it would seem inevitable that he should reject the concept of a universal history altogether. However, his position is rather more nuanced. Despite the manifest flaws in the concept of universal history, he argues, 'there is a lot that can be said in its favour' (*HF*, p. 81). It is certainly the case that the historical processes that human beings as a whole shape and develop nevertheless seem to coalesce into a rigid force inflicting its unbending will upon the supposedly free lives of individuals. With this in mind, Adorno suggests that 'we can only properly experience the objective nature of history, as opposed to its supposed subjective "shaping", once we realize that we are its potential victims' (*HF*, p. 23). It is for this reason that Adorno rejects the claim made by positivists that 'there is no such thing as a unified, continuous process of history' (*HF*, p. 81). He insists that attending to the 'facts' alone is insufficient; such facts are not as transparent as they may at first seem. They are intimately caught up with their wider context, which cannot be neglected if any insight is to be gleaned. Another response to the predicament is that of Schopenhauer, whose 'denial of history' (*HF*, p. 81) was fiercely directed against Hegel's system of thought. For Adorno, however, this belief that 'throughout all endless change and turmoil, [one] confronts the same unalterable being, who acts in the same way today as he did yesterday and always',<sup>64</sup> only serves to justify the status quo, or 'leap to the assistance of individual evil in the world' (*HF*, p. 8), by impeding the possibility of change.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, quoted in Paul Gottfried, 'Arthur Schopenhauer as a Critic of History', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36 (1975), 331–8 (pp. 336–7).

<sup>65</sup> 'Schopenhauer [...] was a pessimist in the usual sense and vehemently opposed the affirmative character of metaphysics [...], especially in its Hegelian form. Nevertheless, in his work he turned even this negativity into a metaphysical principle, the principle of the blind Will which, because it is a metaphysical principle and therefore a category of reflection, contains the possibility of its own negation by human beings. Thus, he also posits the idea of the denial of the Will to Live, a denial which, in view of what has been and continues to be perpetrated on the living and can increase to an unimaginable degree, is an almost comforting idea. I meant that in a world which knows of things far worse than death and denies people the shot in the neck in order to torture them slowly to death, the doctrine of the denial of the Will to Live itself has something of the innocence for which Schopenhauer criticized the theodicies of philosophers'. *MCP*, p. 105.

Adorno's own position, then, is characteristically dialectical and also paradoxical: 'the task is both to construct *and* deny universal history' (*HF*, p. 93). Or, to consider it in a different light, the element of discontinuity or non-identity in history should be emphasised, without, that is, incorporating it wholly into the universal as in Hegel. Such a history emphatically rejects the perspective of the victors, with its concomitant idolization of the way the world happens to be. Universal history is evident, but it cannot be unproblematically assimilated with concepts of reason, progress or freedom. Adorno clarifies this with the concrete example of 'progress from the slingshot to the atom bomb' (*HF*, p. 12). The technological development in such an instance is painfully apparent—'the age of the bomb is the first in which we can envisage a condition from which violence has disappeared' (*HF*, p. 159)—even as we revolt from acknowledging the greater capacity for destruction as progress.

It is tempting to view *Endgame* as an expression of Schopenhauerian pessimism.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Paul Gottfried's claim that Schopenhauer 'denied the feasibility of social improvement and the rationality of man'<sup>67</sup> is all too frequently said of Beckett, whose texts were originally seen—and still are, at times—to demonstrate some universal condition of suffering humanity in an ahistorical and amoral world. Even more recent and nuanced criticism is apt to underplay the radicalism of Beckett's work: Matthew Feldman, for instance, argues that 'Schopenhauer's unique and profound legacy in Beckett's art is, above all, an acceptance of suffering'.<sup>68</sup> I suggest, however, that a rejection of Hegel's triumphant Spirit does not necessitate an acceptance of Schopenhauerian 'resignation':<sup>69</sup> *Endgame* is far more complex than a mere rejection of universal history would suggest. It interrogates the concept of history by at once emphasising the element of discontinuity or, as Adorno would put it, non-identity, in history and, at the same time, revealing the dialectic between

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<sup>66</sup> For recent readings of Beckett and Schopenhauer see Eric Tønning, "I am not Reading Philosophy": Beckett and Schopenhauer', in *Beckett / Philosophy*, ed. by Matthew Feldman and Karim Mamdani (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2015), pp. 75–102; Matthew Feldman, "Agnostic Quietism" and Samuel Beckett's Early Development', in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Seán Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 183–200; and Ulrich Pothast, *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of It* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> Gottfried, p. 331.

<sup>68</sup> Feldman, pp. 190–1.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193

nature and history: exposing history as a second nature that acts, to an extraordinary degree, over the heads of human beings. In this double movement it plays out the Adornian paradox that '[u]niversal history must be construed and denied' (*ND*, p. 320). This compressed dialectic has considerable repercussions for the possibility of freedom. The identification of universal history in the manner of Hegel makes a mockery of human freedom, while its absolute rejection causes an impotent blindness to the real unfreedom caused by a dominant totality.

*Endgame* gives us reason to return to Hegel's contentious claim that '[t]he wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind'. The scars of the play are as patently visible as they are incurable. The darkly symbiotic relationship between Hamm and Clov is premised upon the base instinct of self-preservation. Hamm alone has access to the food supply, concealing the combination to the larder, but is in turn blind and lame, thus utterly dependent on Clov to subsist. This cold, functional relationship underlies the lightness and ironies of the dialogue, emerging only at times when the frustrations of such dependence surface:

HAMM: I'll give you nothing more to eat.

CLOV: Then we'll die.

HAMM: I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.

CLOV: Then we shan't die.

(*Endgame*, pp. 94–5)

Tethered to Clov by an instinct for self-preservation that belies his insistence that everything ought to end, Hamm resorts to cruelty—the only kind of torture that is in his power. His threat is to maintain Clov in a continual state of near-starvation, to which the weary Clov is only able to acknowledge the truth that, in that case, despite it all, 'we shan't die'. Clov is not the only character to bear the brunt of Hamm's cruelty; his parents are notably kept in dustbins, placed in sawdust or sand like animals, and Hamm coldly instructs Clov to 'Screw down the lids' (p. 103). Mother Pegg is another, though absent, victim:

CLOV: (*Harshly*) When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no?  
(*Pause*) You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness.

(*Endgame*, p. 129)



The cryptic horror of dying of darkness—engulfed, perhaps, by heavy blackness in a manner similar to drowning—is rendered all the more abhorrent given that Hamm had it within his power to save Mother Pegg, but instead callously refused that most basic of needs. Clov’s tirade, however, is inconsistent with his earlier coldness when discussing the subject:

HAMM: Is Mother Pegg’s light on?  
CLOV: Light! How could anyone’s light be on?  
HAMM: Extinguished!  
CLOV: Naturally it’s extinguished. If it’s not on it’s extinguished.  
HAMM: No, I meant Mother Pegg.  
CLOV: But naturally she’s extinguished! [*Pause.*] What’s the matter with you today?  
HAMM: I’m taking my course. (*Pause*) Is she buried?  
CLOV: Buried! Who would have buried her?  
HAMM: You.  
CLOV: Me! Haven’t I enough to do without burying people?  
HAMM: But you’ll bury me.  
CLOV: No I shan’t bury you.

(*Endgame*, p. 112)

Kindness has wholly given way to self-preservation. Clov is neither surprised nor distressed that Mother Pegg has been ‘extinguished’ as simply and quietly as her lamp. He denies responsibility for her burial—on the dubious grounds that he has ‘enough to do’ in this wasteland of indolence—as easily as he does for Hamm’s.

Hamm himself would be easy to paint as a classic diabolical villain, committing evil for the sake of evil, were it not for his abjectly impoverished state. To an extent he fits Arendt’s characterisation of banal evil—evil that ‘possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world because it spreads like a fungus on the surface’.<sup>70</sup> Arendt’s famous identification of the banality of evil was first formulated in her 1963 report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She was struck by her uneasy awareness that despite the degree of the crimes committed, ‘the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect on his part [...] was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think’.<sup>71</sup> While

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Bernstein, p. 218.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

Adorno and Arendt cannot be unproblematically allied,<sup>72</sup> there are striking similarities in their thought on evil—not least their mutual recourse to the same literary figures to emphasise the qualitative change in the nature of evil:

wicked people of the kind you meet in literature no longer exist, Iago, say, or Richard III, to name only the most famous literary prototypes. (HF, p. 206)

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain’.<sup>73</sup>

Both Arendt and Adorno are responding to their own personal confrontations with evil, to a ‘phenomenon which stared one in the face’:<sup>74</sup> the fact that it is no longer possible to locate evil in the will; that a bureaucratic or ‘administered’ society dulls the very capacity for evil; and that evil is nonetheless shockingly apparent. Arendt’s report on Eichmann demonstrates with alarming detail the nature of twentieth-century evil, though, as Craig Reeves notes, it ‘sees the banality of evil as a specific problem of totalitarianism’.<sup>75</sup> In tracing the bureaucratic web of National Socialism, it at once convicts the defendant of participation in heinous crimes and acknowledges the impossibility of utilising traditional concepts of evil to account for them—a problem with which Adorno too was wrestling. In *Endgame*, Hamm’s specific form of evil—far from exhibiting any ‘diabolical or demonic profundity’—is seen to be peculiarly systematic. His evil deeds are fostered by a cold and cruel social milieu propagated by his father; as Paul Sheehan notes, ‘the most monstrous act of cruelty in the play is actually perpetrated *against* Hamm’:<sup>76</sup>

NAGG: Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace. (Pause) I was asleep, as happy as a king, and you woke me up to have me listen to you. It wasn’t indispensable, you didn’t really need to have me listen to you. Besides I

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<sup>72</sup> For a thorough comparison of the differences in Adorno’s and Arendt’s theories of evil, see Dana Villa, ‘Genealogies of Total Domination: Arendt, Adorno, and Auschwitz’, *New German Critique*, 34 (2007), 1–45.

<sup>73</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1977; repr. 2006), p. 287.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> “‘Exploding the Limits of Law’: Judgment and Freedom in Arendt and Adorno’, *Res Publica*, 15 (1009), 137–64 (p. 142).

<sup>76</sup> Sheehan, p. 94.

didn't listen to you. (*Pause*) I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice. (*Pause*) Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope.

(*Endgame*, pp. 119–20)

This understated yet impassioned moment of utter cruelty situates Hamm within a network of evil, unable to shake off the influence that has made him heartless. Such a system, however, testifies less to Kant's belief in an innate radical evil in all humanity, and more to Adorno's concern that evil exists not in the human will but in society—a society that is loosely sketched out in the master–servant relationship between Hamm and Clov and the familial connections between Hamm and his parents. Moreover, the wounds or scars that Hegel insists Spirit will heal are here all too apparent in Hamm's almost traumatised repetition of Nagg's cruelty to Mother Pegg. The image of Mother Pegg running out of oil for her lamp has its precedent in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which emphasises the need for readiness in light of Jesus' coming: 'keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour' (Matthew 25:13). The lit lamp is a symbol of hope, which Hamm denies to Mother Pegg as easily as his father withholds it from him. If evil consists here of shutting out hope, and we remember Adorno's claim that evil 'is the world's own unfreedom', then any flicker of hope involves a call for freedom. For Adorno, the awareness of discontinuity in history provides 'something hopeful that stands in precise opposition to what the totality appears to show' (*HF*, p. 91). This element of non-identity offers a glimpse of freedom in its resistance to the prevailing totality—a totality that is acknowledged and even revered in Hegel's philosophy of history.

For Adorno, the element of truth in the concept of universal history can be established by teasing out the dialectic between history and nature. This dialectic, Bowie explains, is 'based on the idea that in modernity the opposition between the terms, where nature is history-less, and history, which is sometimes seen as the realm of freedom, is opposed to the static world of natural laws, breaks down'.<sup>77</sup> The supposed distinction between causality (nature) and freedom (history) is therefore rendered suspect. For Adorno, nature must be seen as historical—whatever is understood as 'natural' has come to be so in time—while history is recognised as

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<sup>77</sup> Bowie, p. 82.

solidified second nature. Hegel's mistake was in accepting such second nature as first nature—as an immutable given. Only by rendering transparent the extent to which history becomes a dominant and overpowering 'natural' force is it possible to resist it. For all its stress on discontinuity, then, *Endgame* repeatedly returns to the idea of universal history: specifically, to the concept of a heteronomous force of petrified ideological categories pressing down upon the characters. Most pertinently, however, the play weaves the concepts of history and nature together, emphasising their inextricability. The very first lines attest to the experience of the relentless progression of history:

CLOV: (*Fixed gaze, tonelessly*) Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. (*Pause*) Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. (*Pause*) I can't be punished any more.

(*Endgame*, p. 93)

This image of a growing 'heap' of some unidentified substance is a traditional metaphor for the passing of time: it recalls the hourglass, in which slowly but surely the sand amasses. Clov's sense of the 'impossible heap' emphasises the disjunction between universal history and its perception by individuals: each grain added to the pile seems to make no difference; it is only by time's perseverance that the pile surreptitiously grows. Somewhat enigmatically, Clov describes this process thus: 'Something is taking its course' (p. 98). The cryptic 'Something' could easily refer to either history or nature, and it is this slippage throughout *Endgame* that makes transparent the dialectic between the two concepts. Whatever is taking its course, Clov suggests, is obscure, its meaning impenetrable and its origins unidentifiable.

Hamm and Clov consistently allude to their belief and hope that both nature and history are coming to an end: 'Will this never finish?' Hamm cries '[w]ith sudden fury' (*Endgame*, p. 103). This takes for granted Adorno's project 'to behold all nature, and whatever regards itself, as history' (*HF*, p. 124): if Clov can declare that 'There's no more nature' (p. 97), then nature must take place *in time* and change accordingly. Beyond this, as Deborah Cook notes, 'philosophy also shows that nature is historical [...] because it has been profoundly—often negatively—affected by human history. Adorno's idea of natural history reveals the dynamic, and potentially catastrophic,

interaction between nature and history'.<sup>78</sup> Clov's identification of the liquidation of nature offers a pointed reminder of its manipulation by mankind: far from nature having 'forgotten' (p. 97) them, as Hamm bemoans, it has been actively destroyed. Despite everything, however, nature and history limp on—adding, grain by grain, to the 'impossible heap'. To his horror, Clov identifies a flea on his person and a 'rat in the kitchen' (p. 118)—not to mention the elusive 'small boy' outside the refuge (p. 130)—prompting Hamm's fear that 'humanity might start from there all over again. Catch him, for the love of God' (p. 108). In eagerly awaiting, and, indeed, actively encouraging, the end of history, Hamm and Clov interrogate the eschatological claims of universal history. The alarm clock that Clov sets to inform Hamm whether he is gone or dead is said to be '[f]it to wake the dead!' (p. 115)—presaging the end of history according to the Christian narrative. While Clov insists that 'The end is terrific!', Hamm 'prefer[s] the middle' (p. 115). They are, of course, speaking of the sound of the alarm, but their words could equally ironically refer to history itself, a history whose end is, like the unreliable alarm clock, at once terror-inducing and unlikely.

Shortly afterwards, Clov, perhaps inspired by his own reference to judgment day, returns to the question of the end of history:

CLOV: Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM: Mine was always that.

(*Endgame*, p. 116)

Within Hamm's humorous retort—based on a wilful rejection of the redemptive possibility of Clov's words—lies the serious point that 'life does not live' (quoted in *MM*, p. 19): Hamm's life, like his death, is always postponed. Another explicit reference to the end of history comes in Hamm's story of the madman, who, as Thomas Dilworth and Christopher Langlois have noted, strikingly 'resembles the madman in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*'.<sup>79</sup>

HAMM: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter—and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The

<sup>78</sup> *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> 'The Nietzschean Madman in Beckett's *Endgame*', *The Explicator*, 65 (2007), 167–71 (p. 168).

sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (*Pause*) He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (*Pause*) He alone had been spared.

(*Endgame*, p. 113)

Dilworth and Langlois dwell on what they perceive to be the contrast between the affirmative perspective of Nietzsche's madman—he declares: 'There has never been a greater deed [than the death of God]; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto'<sup>80</sup>—and Beckett's repudiation of such a 'farcical delusion': 'Absence of God is the absence of meaning and precludes real or lasting happiness. In Beckett, all that is left to Godless humanity is absurdity and despair'.<sup>81</sup> However, this conclusion not only runs the risk of attributing to Beckett's works some illusory conception of a universal human condition, but also glosses over the significant references to history and nature in the short section. In the post-Holocaust world he inhabits, the madman is blind to the physical rejuvenation that has taken place in nature and society—'that rising corn!' and '[t]he sails of the herring fleet!'. With the privileged perspective of the artist, he is aware only of the metaphysical implications of the events that have torn open the belly of the world, and sees such implications in physical form: as 'ashes'. Therein lies his affinity to Nietzsche's madman, who hysterically recounts the ramifications of the death of God: 'Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions?'<sup>82</sup> Susan Neiman perceptively notes that the philosophical significance of the Holocaust lies in the way it rendered obsolete our conceptual tools for understanding the world. While the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 'revealed how remote the world is from the human; Auschwitz revealed the remoteness of humans from themselves'.<sup>83</sup> Despite their manifest differences, Lisbon and Auschwitz are analogous in the scale of the tremors they sent through contemporary assumptions about the world. Beckett's madman sees the effects of such tremors as scars wrought upon the surface of the world. For him, the course of history has come to an end, but there is no 'life to come', no triumphant sublation of past evils. The unity of universal history has collapsed into a gray sameness that continues beyond its end-date. Hamm's elusive statement that 'He

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<sup>80</sup> *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 181.

<sup>81</sup> Dilworth and Langlois, pp. 169–70.

<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche, p. 181.

<sup>83</sup> Neiman, p. 240.

alone had been spared' at once refers to the madman's conviction that he alone was destined to live in a world after the destruction of nature and history—not unlike the situation Clov and Hamm consider themselves to be in—and, more interestingly, Hamm's own belief that the madman had been 'spared' the suffering of continuing with existence within an oppressive history that takes on all the weight of a natural phenomenon. While Hamm can only envisage insanity as an escape from second nature, *Endgame*'s very disclosure of the weight of the world allows us to hope, with Adorno, for 'a situation in which the blind compulsion of material conditions over human beings is broken, and the question of freedom will at last be truly meaningful'.<sup>84</sup>

*Endgame*, I suggest, raises the admittedly minimal possibility of freedom that results from the paradoxical rejection and acknowledgement of universal history. While the rejection of the very real presence of universal history marks a naivety that refuses to countenance the extent of actual unfreedom, its ingenuous acceptance risks establishing a narrative of progress that nullifies human suffering. *Endgame*'s response to the dilemma of history—one brought in terrifying proximity by the Cold War—is singular and complex, positioning Hamm and Clov as non-identical remnants unsubsumable by the march of progress, yet also acknowledging the bleak horror of a continuity leading from 'the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (*ND*, p. 320). Its hope lies in its insight into the petrified categories that, when identified as the second nature they are, can be impeded.

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<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Cook, p. 16. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie zur Einleitung*, 2 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), II, p. 198.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### VIRTUAL FREEDOM

Beckett and Adorno seem to approach technology from utterly opposing perspectives. Beckett's media plays—utilising radio, film and television—represent a substantial if under-considered part of his literary output. Between 1956 and 1982 he wrote six radio plays, one film and five television plays—not including the various authorized adaptations of theatre plays to television or his adaptation of Robert Pinget's radio play, *La Manivelle*. Adorno, on the other hand, is renowned for his resistance to what he considered to be the various media of the Culture Industry. His substantial output on the subject of the mass media and his consistent suspicion of its supposedly liberating and democratising ideals have led to accusations of elitism. For the most part, this chapter circumvents the endless indictments and rebuttals that make up a substantial part of any discussion of Adorno and the mass media. Adorno's diatribes against so-called popular culture are not necessarily very helpful when considering Beckett, whose work in no way fits the mould of the Culture Industry. For this reason, I have generally sidestepped Adorno's more straightforward readings of radio, film and television to consider more interesting connections. In so doing, I have avoided a wholly pessimistic attitude towards the technologies I have discussed, while retaining Adorno's suspicion of their supposedly emancipatory status.

Rather than being a fault, I take Adorno's scepticism regarding radio, film and television to be a useful point of departure for considering Beckett's media plays. Adorno's critiques may seem exaggerated or petty, but they at least shock a modern-day reader out of the complacency that necessarily sets in when such media gain an anaesthetising familiarity. In the same way, Beckett's media plays explode our understanding of what constitutes normal radio, film and television—perhaps even more so now than when they were first broadcast. Beckett may not share Adorno's suspicion of mass media's complicity in maintaining the status quo, but he certainly



does not take his medium for granted. Indeed, his plays are inextricably tied to their medium, appropriated for another only at great loss.

Beyond his localised critiques of the Culture Industry, Adorno considers technology as primarily a mode of domination: the means by which the subject can more efficiently control nature. It is, then, not technology *per se* that is problematic, but its role within humanity's compulsive habit of mastery: mastery over both the natural world beyond the subject and its inner nature. As Heinz Paetzold argues, however, 'technology may have a totally different meaning from the socially established, one-dimensional role of control or domination'.<sup>1</sup> It is this very possibility, I suggest, that Beckett explores in his media plays. The prospect of 'liberating nature through technological means'<sup>2</sup> takes on a significance beyond its immediate environmental application—though this can hardly be understated given current global trends<sup>3</sup>—when we consider Adorno's insistence that our context of domination over nature is as detrimental to the subject as it is to the object.

This chapter begins by considering Beckett's radio plays in light of Adorno's intriguing correlation between the aesthetic domination of material in music and the technological domination of nature in the social world. In contrast to the inevitable repression of nature in the latter, Adorno suggests that control over aesthetic material is, paradoxically, a precondition for aesthetic freedom. Such freedom, moreover, offers a model of subject-object relations that is not premised on mutual destruction, and therefore points to a radically different use of technology. In his radio plays, Beckett experiments with methods of control and constraint, bringing his work ever closer to the sphere of music. These plays, insistently self-reflexive, stage an interrogation into existent and possible relations between subject and material, whether aesthetic or natural.

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<sup>1</sup> Heinz Paetzold, 'Adorno's Notion of Natural Beauty: A Reconsideration', in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 213–35 (p. 227).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Cook's book-length study on Adorno and nature includes a large discussion on Adorno's relevance to major trends in radical ecology. *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), pp. 121–54. Paetzold also compares Adorno's understanding of natural beauty to two recent thinkers, Gernot Böhme and Martin Seel, who approach the acute modern problem of 'the crisis in humanity's relationship with the environment' (p. 222).

Moving onto Beckett's cinematic collaboration with Alan Schneider, I suggest that *Film* engages with the mechanisms of idolatry that permeate the nature of film itself as a visual medium, as well as the film industry as a whole. Advancing beyond the prevailing and perfunctory view of Adorno as exhibiting a mandarin disdain for Hollywood, I argue that he consciously engaged with film as an art form that—for him—habitually fell short of its potential. *Film*'s very failures and technical flaws preserve it from conforming to the exacting standards of an industry that seeks to whitewash all cracks and blemishes, while its self-reflexivity and lack of realism distort rather than reflect reality. In this way, it is able to offer an alternative cinematic gaze that subverts film's prevailing mode of idolatry.

Beckett's television plays, finally, take an inward turn, rooting themselves in the domestic world where television has its home. In his rarely-considered *Habilitation*, Adorno reads Søren Kierkegaard's imaginative recourse to the *bourgeois intérieur* as representative of his inward-facing philosophy: the subject's isolation in his fortress of mind, as embodied in the domestic sphere, means that 'the world only appears to him reflected by pure inwardness' (*K*, p. 41). This is a more subtle and insidious form of domination: the reduction of everything external to the mind's ultimate sway. Through *Ghost Trio*'s alienated and etiolated version of a domestic interior, Beckett exposes the skewed subject-object relations within a modernity characterised by the domination of nature: as Adorno describes it, '[t]he abstract self, which alone confers the legal right to record and systematize, is confronted by nothing but abstract material' (*DE*, p. 20). By depicting the situation in its extremity, the play demonstrates the extent to which subjectivity is dependent on the very objectivity it attempts to bring under its own control. *Nacht und Träume*, the last of Beckett's plays explicitly conceived for television, has a wholly different tone, resonating strongly with the mute gaze of iconography, in which the human beholder is overwhelmed and disoriented by the icon's revelation of divinity. In this play, Beckett accentuates the two-dimensionality of television and brings the moving images to a point of near-stasis in order to approach the depthlessness of the icon. Through a productive yet evanescent correspondence between Adorno and Jean-Luc Marion, I argue that *Nacht und Träume*, in reversing the conventional gaze of the controlling subject, can be understood as the wordless, overwhelming expression of the non-subjective that reminds the subject of their own natural being. Beckett's

radical use of television here disrupts the dominative norms of technology, reminding the viewer of nature within and without.

I

Unsurprisingly, given that music consistently occupied a dominant place in his thought, Adorno wrote significantly more about radio than other technological media. The late 1930s and early 1940s saw him in a frenzy of writing on the subject of radio music. The proliferation of texts that resulted must be seen in relation to the spectacularly increased popularity of radio in the United States,<sup>4</sup> as well as more specifically to Adorno's participation in the Princeton Radio Research Project between 1938 and 1941.<sup>5</sup> However, these texts generally met with disfavour from critics and publishers alike—perhaps justifiably—and few were published until the 2005 collection of Adorno's radio works, entitled *Current of Music*. Indeed, the texts are often disappointing in their repetitive critique of popular culture twinned with a stubborn refusal to envisage any way out of the *impasse* of generic and reactionary American radio programming. From these rarely read essays there are, unfortunately, very few insights to be gleaned.

It is for this reason that I turn to a less obvious text to begin my discussion of radio: namely Adorno's *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, a collection of notes written sporadically through the 1940s and 1950s. Adorno's brief discussion of coloratura, the 'ballet of the voice' (*TMR*, p. 132), or the 'elaborate ornamentation of

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor notes that 'where only ten thousand families owned [radio] sets in 1922, 27 million families—out of 32 million in the United States—owned sets by 1939'. 'Second Salvage: Prolegomenon to a Reconstruction of "Current of Music"', *Cultural Critique*, 60 (2005), 134–69 (p. 138).

<sup>5</sup> While this project is seldom mentioned in Adorno studies, it actually provided the necessary rationalisation for Adorno's relocation from Oxford to New York. For a detailed account of Adorno's affiliation with the Rockefeller Foundation-funded project, see Hullot-Kentor; and Thomas Y. Levin and Michael von der Linn, 'Elements of a Radio Theory: Adorno and the Princeton Radio Research Project', *Musical Quarterly*, 78 (1994), 316–24.

melody',<sup>6</sup> as the more prosaic *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* has it, can be extended beyond its local referent to apply to the wider problem of technology:

[Coloratura] is not simply control over nature as dominion over the material and the playing mechanism; rather, it loses its power and its severity by playing with that control—through its perfection—becomes imagination and is thus reconciled: dominion over nature appears 'natural', and becomes aware of itself as nature.

(*TMR*, p. 133)

Coloratura, as a musical technique, involves the domination of nature that Adorno and Horkheimer associate with the progress of a repressive and destructive rationalization that attempts to set up the subject as the locus of absolute meaning and power; '[w]hat human beings seek to learn from nature', they argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings' (*DE*, p. 2). Adorno emphasizes the naivety of the belief that art somehow transcends this context and remains unaffected by it; on the contrary, '[w]hat art in the broadest sense works with, it oppresses: This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play' (*AT*, p. 65). While the coloratura singer, however, acts, in line with this domination, as 'a sort of harnesser, a tamer' (*TMP*, p. 117) of the material, she simultaneously moves beyond mere control: '[t]he most difficult thing must sound "easy", effortless, never merely realized. It belongs to the feeling of controlling nature that the ability should not be equal to the task, but rather exceed it' (*TMR*, p. 132). This excess is significant because it is disproportionate to the control that is strictly necessary to manage the aesthetic material. In his discussion of this passage, Andrew Bowie argues that freedom emerges in the space between the apparent domination of nature and its very excess:

[F]reedom has to do with the realisation that in certain cases our subjective command of something initially appears as an overcoming of nature, but can be the opposite. Freedom in this sense is nature itself in us [...] but in a form which transcends self-preservation.<sup>7</sup>

Adorno continually emphasises that the subject's control of outer nature results in a repressive domination over one's inner nature. However, in the reproduction of music, the subject's control over the material does not necessitate a denial or

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<sup>6</sup> John Warrack and Ewan West, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> *Music, Philosophy and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 313.

repression of his own nature: quite the opposite, in fact. This is primarily because Adorno does not see nature as exclusively the realm of necessity, set against and mastered by the autonomous subject. We have already seen in Chapter 3 that nature is inherently historical rather than static and lifeless, but, beyond this, to be human is to be a piece of nature, for all that human beings recoil uncomfortably from this truism. Ironically, as Bowie points out, ‘if, as evolutionary epistemology and other scientistically oriented theories want to insist, human beings are to be seen purely naturalistically, they ought to conclude, as Schelling did, that nature, far from being reducible to determinism, must *inherently* involve what can move beyond determinism and develop reflexive self-determination’.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, then, for Adorno, ‘we are no longer simply a piece of nature from the moment we recognize that we are a piece of nature’ (*PMP*, p. 103); or, less elusively: ‘what transcends nature is nature that has become conscious of itself’ (*PMP*, p. 104). In a radical deconstruction of the binary of freedom and nature, Adorno suggests that freedom—the transcendence of nature’s determinism—is only possible through an acknowledgement of our own natural state, one that emphatically does not entail a regression to the condition of primitive man. Bowie argues that this dialectic offers a ‘glimpse of a way of being both beyond mere technical domination and beyond a failure to live up to human creative possibilities—possibilities which necessarily involve technical command’.<sup>9</sup> If radio is an instance of the domination of nature through technology, the implications of which are, for Adorno, decidedly detrimental to both subject and object, then it is at least provisionally possible to use radio in such a way that the excess of control, in Adorno’s words, ‘appears “natural”, and becomes aware of itself as nature’.

For Adorno, the paradox by which the excessive control of nature leads to aesthetic freedom can be envisioned in musical notation. Against the ‘seemingly natural, reasonable attitude that musical notation arose as an aid to memory’ (*TMR*, p. 52), Adorno argues that notation represents ‘not so much the preservation of something already present in tradition as the disciplinary function of the traditional exercise’ (*TMR*, p. 171). That is, in what he describes as ‘primitive music’ (*TMR*, p.

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<sup>8</sup> *Between Idealism, Romanticism, and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 389.

<sup>9</sup> *Music, Philosophy and Modernity*, p. 314.

172), no notation is required because the music is in a constant state of flux, not a finished product that is fixed and repeated. The ‘rational element’ of notation is the objectification and concomitant reification of such music, ‘the spatialization of experience for the purpose of controlling it’ (*TMR*, p. 53). The paradox is, as Bowie neatly encapsulates it, that ‘this form of repression of memory is also what makes possible modern Western music culture’.<sup>10</sup> Musical notation, which on the one hand ‘regulates, inhibits, and suppresses whatever it notates and develops’ (*TMR*, p. 53), is on the other a precondition for the very development of music itself: ‘[a]utonomy and fetishism are two sides of the *same* truth’ (*TMR*, p. 53). ‘Through the domination of the dominating’, Adorno argues, ‘art revises the domination of nature to the core’ (*AT*, p. 182): precisely the control of nature that exceeds its own bounds leads to an ‘aesthetic freedom’ (*TMR*, p. 53) that is not attained at the expense of lifeless material, but through a dialectical relationship between subject and object. This paradox is certainly not confined to music; Adorno emphasises in *Aesthetic Theory* that ‘[i]n the most authentic works the authority that cultic objects were once meant to exercise over the *gentes* became the immanent law of form. The idea of freedom, akin to aesthetic autonomy, was shaped by domination, which it universalised’ (*AT*, p. 23). Freedom here emerges from the formal domination of aesthetic material. Notation provides a provocative concrete model through which Beckett’s radio plays can be considered.

The pathos of musical notation for Adorno is that “[a]ll reification is a forgetting”—making available what has passed at once makes it irretrievable’ (*TMP*, p. 53). Notation preserves that which has temporally passed, but in so doing loses something crucial. Adorno’s consequent claim that ‘[a]ll music-making is a *recherche du temps perdu*’ (*TMP*, p. 53)—a desperate yet impossible endeavour to salvage that which has been constrained by notation—resonates with Beckett’s penultimate radio play, *Words and Music*, which follows Croak, an old feudal Lord, in his attempt to summon the memory of the elusive ‘Lily’ (*Words and Music*, p. 292) with the aid of his two servants, Joe and Bob, or ‘Words’ and ‘Music’ respectively. I contend that Croak’s instructions to his servants can be seen as rudimentary forms of notation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>11</sup> This is in contradistinction to Elissa S. Guralnick’s claim that radio, ‘[c]onceived as a species of electronic music, in which phonemes take the place of notes, [...] can neither be written nor scored: it exists, by definition, solely in performance’ (p. xi). While Guralnick is attentive to

He offers them themes, indicates dynamics and controls their relation to each other, directing them to come '[t]ogether' (p. 289). He uses his servants instrumentally, undermining his original address of 'My comforts!' (p. 287) with his '*Violent thump of club*' (p. 288) and exhortation: 'Together, dogs!' (p. 289). Music-making in *Words and Music* is quite literally a '*recherche du temps perdu*'—one which cannot unequivocally succeed. Like Orpheus, the archetypal musician, Croak is unable to gaze upon his beloved, to 'retrieve the irretrievable' (*TMP*, p. 53). Adorno's Proustian allusion is of particular relevance given Beckett's own enduring interest in the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory, overtly considered in his monograph *Proust*. While Kevin Branigan claims that Croak 'remains open to the impact of painful involuntary memory', which is freed in the collaboration of Words and Music,<sup>12</sup> I would claim that Croak's efforts cannot be seen through a simple opposition between voluntary and involuntary memory. He indeed hopes to unleash his involuntary memory through a particular combination of words and music, but he attempts to do so by an act of will, namely in his instrumental control of his servants. He therefore only succeeds in objectifying the music by means of his primitive notation. Nonetheless, as we have seen, it is possible for such domination of musical material to have a surprising effect. In *Words and Music*, Croak's unbending will eventually leads to a moment of revelation, painful though it may be, as he glimpses the lost Lily.

The script for *Words and Music*, along with two other radio plays, *Rough for Radio I* and *Cascando*, is inherently incomplete; that is, it lacks precisely that which is so central to its thematic concern: music. Beckett, like Croak, offers a form of basic musical notation, particularly indicating variances in tone, as, for example: '*Soft music worthy of foregoing, great expression*' (*Words and Music*, p. 288) and '*warmly sentimental*' (p. 291). These rudimentary indications are, in themselves, insufficient; as Morton Feldman, the composer for the 1987 American radio production of *Words and Music*, explained: 'I know what it [a particular emotional characterisation] is in terms of Puccini. If Beckett says he wants something sentimental, I have no idea what

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radio's affinity with music, she fails to recognise the corollary of this: that is, the tension between script/score and performance. *Sight Unseen: Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, and Other Contemporary Dramatists on Radio* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> *Radio Beckett: Musicality in the Radio Plays of Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 145.

that means'.<sup>13</sup> The music is therefore notated for a second time by the composer, based on Beckett's own version but crucially new. Musical notation, then, can be seen as synonymous with Beckett's own exacting stage directions and notoriously precise written and verbal performance instructions.<sup>14</sup> Although these are conspicuous in all Beckett's plays, radio offers the most appropriate medium for an absolute control of material that exceeds domination; Thomas Mansell suggests that Beckett's dissatisfaction with performances of his theatre plays could be attributed to the 'messy aspects of theatrical work'—to those human elements that cannot be strictly controlled, since the very nature of theatre is its repetition under different conditions.<sup>15</sup> This messiness is, if not eliminated, significantly reduced in radio work: the performance can be edited before it is broadcast; there are considerably fewer competing performances; and, with visual distractions stripped away, radio operates in a world of pure sound—a world that, arguably, Beckett was intent upon perfecting throughout his career. As Ruby Cohn elucidates:

Midway during the rehearsal period [of *Endgame*] [...] Beckett held a rehearsal for tone, pitch, rhythm. Especially in the last two weeks, he tended to comment in musical terms—legato, andante, piano, scherzo, and a rare fortissimo. Often he spoke of 'reine Spiel', pure play.<sup>16</sup>

Mansell argues that Beckett's envy of 'what he considered the greater subtlety and precision of musical notation' in comparison to stage directions was due to an unconscious desire for authenticity that would render all subsequent performances of his plays inadequate.<sup>17</sup> He suggests that 'Beckett's envy of the alleged accuracy of musical notation bespeaks a desire to fix performances of his plays to the specifications of their texts'.<sup>18</sup> *Contra* Mansell, I would suggest that Beckett's extreme attentiveness to sound and his attraction to musical vocabulary is due to his appreciation of the complex relation between a text (or score) and its reproduction,

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Catherine Laws, 'Music in *Words and Music: Feldman's Response to Beckett's Play*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 11 (2000), 279–90 (p. 282).

<sup>14</sup> James Knowlson notes Beckett's reputation as a 'tyrannical figure, an arch-controller of his work, ready to unleash fiery thunderbolts onto the head of any bold, innovative director, [sic] unwilling to follow his text and stage directions to the last counted dot and precisely timed pause', and although he insists that 'the truth of his position was more complex', it is certainly the case that Beckett insisted on metronomical precision from his actors. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 691.

<sup>15</sup> 'Beckett's Theatrical Conduct', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 15 (2005), 225–239 (p. 229).

<sup>16</sup> *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 241.

<sup>17</sup> Mansell, p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.



itself dependent on an understanding of the score as inherently and necessarily liberating through its restrictions. Bowie, following Adorno, notes that ‘in the writing down of music, the difference of what is written from what is performed is “*constitutively* established at the same time”’.<sup>19</sup> There is necessarily a gap between score and performance (a gap that did not exist before notation), and this gap cannot be overcome either by viewing the score as a rigid set of instructions to be adhered to, or the performance as the true and liberated expression of the work. The non-identity between score and reproduction must be acknowledged and accentuated so as to preserve the work’s objectivity from subjective expression, on the one hand, and subjective freedom from the score’s rigidity, on the other. When Adorno suggests that successful artworks ‘rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence’ (*AT*, p. 65), he is referring to this non-identical element. Its salvage is significant because it attests to the possibility of a non-subsumptive relationship between subject and object—one that was gestured to earlier by the subject’s acknowledgement of his own natural being.

A number of critics have noted that Beckett’s six radio plays get progressively shorter and more oblique. Elissa S. Guralnick argues that ‘the more conspicuously [Beckett’s] radio plays aspired to the condition of music, the shorter they grew’; narrative is gradually (but never completely) ousted from the texts in an attempt to suppress the referential quality of language.<sup>20</sup> This is certainly an interesting reading, in keeping with Beckett’s widely acknowledged preoccupation with stories and their ends; however, it glosses over the particularly musical nature of this drive towards constraint. Both Beckett’s first two radio plays, *All that Fall* and *Embers* incorporate music into the dramatic action through the use of a gramophone as an invisible stage prop. The music emanating from the gramophone is commented upon by Mrs Rooney at the beginning of *All That Fall* and finally identified by Mr Rooney near the end of the play as Schubert’s ‘Death and the Maiden’ (*All That Fall*, p. 197).<sup>21</sup> In *Embers*, the gramophone never appears, but Henry draws attention to his habit of carrying it around in order to drown out the sound of the sea: ‘I forgot it today’ (*Embers*, p. 261).

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<sup>19</sup> *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, p. 320.

<sup>20</sup> Guralnick, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Branigan argues that in *All That Fall*, ‘Beckett assimilates musical models from the composer Franz Schubert’s *Leider* for thematic, structural and autobiographical reference’ (p. 83), though he acknowledges that ‘The framework of Schubert’s sonata cannot be drawn too rigidly’ (p. 98).

These tentative movements towards incorporating music into the radio plays are soon superseded by more striking and experimental efforts. *Rough for Radio I* and *Rough for Radio II* (written early 1960s; first broadcast 1976) are self-reflexively concerned with the nature of radio. In both texts, the increasingly desperate—and in *Rough for Radio I*, addictive—attempts to control nature in the form of sound ultimately lead to an *impasse* of dependence and anguish. Governed purely by the impulse of self-preservation, the protagonists of these plays exert a tortuous control over their material that radically backfires as their own subjective freedom dissolves. In *Cascando*, on the other hand, the use of repetition acts as a principle of constraint by which the play can rigorously control and curtail its material in a way that does not result in the repression of subject or object. This alternative to a purely instrumental domination of nature opens up possibilities for freer subject-object relations that have implications far beyond the realm of aesthetics.

*Rough for Radio I* and *Rough for Radio II* occupy an ambiguous position within Beckett's radio canon; they are treated variously by critics as works in and of themselves and as 'preliminary sketches', as Martin Esslin puts it, for *Words and Music* and *Cascando*.<sup>22</sup> Their equivocal status is only heightened by the incomplete nature of *Rough for Radio I*, which is not only lacking a musical score but also, more crucially, the text of one of the four characters, Voice. These short texts share themes of power and control, which, though more overt in *Rough for Radio II*, are explicitly tied to the nature of radio technology in *Rough for Radio I*. The plot of the latter is, characteristically for Beckett, at once simple and oblique. A woman, known only as She, visits a man, He, who reluctantly demonstrates a contraption consisting of 'two knobs' (*Rough I*, p. 268) that, when twisted, emanate music and words respectively. These, to the woman's great shock, emerge from different sources. Having witnessed the phenomenon, She departs, leaving He to phone the doctor's surgery with the anxious claim that 'they're ending' (p. 270). The doctor is unable to attend until the following day. The play ends with He alone with his contraption. This machine, described so sparingly, bears a striking resemblance to a radio set, with its transmission of sound that 'goes on all the time' (p. 267), only to be rudimentarily controlled by twisting the knobs. Marle Tönnies suggests that Beckett's radio plays

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<sup>22</sup> 'Beckett's *Rough for Radio*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 6 (1977), 95–103 (p. 100).

establish a ‘hierarchical instability’ in depicting an “‘elicitor”, whose apparent control over others turns out to be a sham’:

The listeners to the radio plays, who are structurally made to share the thoughts of the ‘elicitor’, then become implicated in the slipping away of control, as it becomes obvious that the master is as dependent on his servants as they are on him.<sup>23</sup>

In *Rough for Radio I*, He certainly possesses the power to turn the knobs and thus control the transmission of sound. However, this power is presented as purely nominal; He is a self-confessed addict, who is crucially unable to control his ‘need’ to listen. In a remarkably similar vein, Adorno ascribes a subversive quality to the fiddling with radio knobs—whether compulsively changing station or attempting to get ‘good reception’, insisting, however, that ‘no matter how far the activity of a regulating listener may go, he has no real power over the phenomenon. It always remains within the framework and within certain proportions of the given material’ (*CM*, pp. 99–100).

*Rough for Radio II* is far more overtly concerned with questions of control and domination, presenting as it does the torture of a prisoner, Fox, at the hands of Animator, Dick and Stenographer. Animator is nominally in charge and directs the torture that is carried out by the mute Dick, while Stenographer transcribes Fox’s every word. Despite its apparent contrast to *Rough for Radio I*, the radio play, as Esslin’s early reading suggests, is intimately related to its medium:

the Animator with his ruler and stenographer and additional acolyte reproduces the team of producer, secretary, and technician which Beckett must have encountered in his contacts with production teams at the BBC or the French radio. (In French *animateur* is a term used for a radio or television producer).<sup>24</sup>

Within this structure, Fox, with his incoherent babbling, can be seen to play the part of the radio sound itself. Refining Fox’s corporeal being into pure sound, Stenographer, at the request of her mysterious superiors, omits the transcription of ‘mere animal cries’ (*Rough II*, p. 276) and the ‘play of feature’ (p. 275). Beckett’s listeners, however, eavesdrop on this editorial process, witnessing the sound of the

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Players, Playthings and Patterns: Three Stages of Heteronomy in Beckett’s Drama’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 11 (2001), 194–201 (pp. 198–9).

<sup>24</sup> Esslin, p. 99.

‘Swish and thud of pizzle on flesh’ (p. 277) and Fox’s cries of pain. Animator and Stenographer relentlessly analyse every syllable of Fox’s output, but they are blind to anything beyond their own purposes. The torturers exhibit a dispassionate and coldly rational attitude throughout: Animator enquires if ‘Dick functioned?’ (p. 277) as a euphemism for his lashing; the mysterious employers ‘note yet again with pain that these dicta [...] are totally unacceptable’ (p. 276), the Latin serving to distance them from the embodied screams and cries issuing from Fox; and both Animator and Stenographer register confusion at how to record Fox’s ‘weeping’ (p. 279). Moreover, the division of labour, most evident in the inclusion of Dick who, as mute, is utterly redundant as a radio character, serves to abstract the torturers from the corporeal reality of their actions; they are like workers on a production line, detached from the complete picture. The supposed control of the torturers, however, is strongly undermined by the end of the play. Their desperation to uncover the right word from Fox’s stream of consciousness reveals their own unfreedom as helpless listeners. Like He in *Rough for Radio I*, they are compelled to listen, this time by an external agency that provides scathing reports and inspires such fear that the Animator himself amends the record of Fox’s words, angrily demanding: ‘What the devil are you deriding, miss? My hearing? My memory? My good faith? [*Thunderous*] Amend!’ (p. 284).

In these drafts, then, the extreme control exerted first by He over the knobs that nonetheless dominate his life, and second by Animator, Stenographer and Dick over Fox, who supposedly holds the key to their freedom, only serves to bind those who are supposedly in command. Crucially, excessive constraint cannot lead to freedom within these texts, because in neither is the control exerted aesthetic: it is purely technological. This is apparent in the miserable futility of the knob turning in *Rough for Radio I* and the inhuman torture in *Rough for Radio II*. This control is exerted for the sake of self-preservation alone, whether due to the addict’s insistence that the control is necessary, or the employees’ fear of the repercussions of failure. And, just as Adorno recognizes, ‘self-preservation forfeits itself’ (*MM*, p. 230). The very self these characters attempt to preserve disintegrates: He is a husk confined to his own home, while Animator, Stenographer and Dick remain in the Dantean Purgatory Animator alludes to, in which ‘all sigh, I was, I was’ (*Rough II*, p. 278). These two preliminary works certainly thematically demonstrate the perils of non-

aesthetic control of nature, but they are formally less advanced than the later works, which is perhaps unsurprising given their draft status.

Beckett's final radio play, *Cascando*, represents the culmination of his drive towards control and constraint. It can be seen in many ways as a rewrite of *Rough for Radio I*, and also contains deep affinities with *Words and Music*. However, as will become evident, Beckett's interest in control is so developed in *Cascando* as to wholly structure the text in a way that he did not attempt in either previous play. The plot, such as it is, follows Opener, who 'open[s]' and 'close[s]' (*Cascando*, p. 197) Voice and Music in a manner reminiscent of the knob-twisting in *Rough for Radio I*. A number of critics, including Clas Zilliacus in his seminal 1976 text, *Beckett and Broadcasting*, have noted the musical quality of the text spoken by Voice. This is usually attributed to the disintegration of an already perfunctory narrative, or, as Zilliacus describes it, the ascendancy of the 'élément soi'—Voice's metatextual musings about the need to finish the 'right' (p. 297) story—over the 'élément histoire'—the narrative that follows Woburn.<sup>25</sup> Zilliacus also notes Beckett's indications that Voice should speak extremely quickly, supporting the primacy of sound over content.<sup>26</sup> What, however, is neglected in such arguments is the prevailing feature of Voice's text: repetition. Voice's text is clearly divided into short phrases, which are separated by ellipses. Over 30% of these phrases are repeated at least once, some up to seventeen times. Repetition therefore accounts for an overwhelming proportion of the text; indeed, so much so that when Opener opens Voice for the final time, the passage is comprised almost entirely of recycled phrases, the only original material being the slightly revised 'a few more' (p. 304) and 'it was him' (p. 304), even these seen previously in slightly varied form: 'just a few more' (p. 304) and 'it's him' (p. 300; p. 301). The incessant repetition within *Cascando* is, I suggest, what renders it truly musical. Music, unlike the more expansive quality of language,<sup>27</sup> is necessarily limited to a finite quantity of notes that can be combined in various ways. Though unable to imitate harmony, Voice's text has an affinity to a musical score in its combinations of a limited number of phrases.

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<sup>25</sup> *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett For and In Radio and Television* (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1976), p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> It is certainly the case that a remarkably small number of distinct words are actually utilised in any given text; nonetheless, the deliberate patterning and unusual amount of repetition is distinct enough in *Cascando* for my claim to be valid.

This sense is encapsulated in Adorno's concrete image of 'a child at the piano searching for a chord never previously heard': 'This chord, however, was always there; the possible combinations are limited and actually everything that can be played on it is implicitly given in the keyboard. The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself' (*AT*, p. 41). Adorno specifically utilises this image to explore his claim that utopia must be a determinate negation of the already existing. However, the musical nature of the image has a resonance beyond its explicit purpose: it indicates the broader dialectic of constraint and freedom that characterises music. The child has to learn that freedom must necessarily be accessed through the constraint of musical form—here evident in the very concrete restriction of a finite number of notes on a piano.<sup>28</sup> In *Cascando*, the musical quality of repetition acts as a mechanism by which Beckett controls his text, forcing it to restrict itself to progressively fewer new phrases. Beckett's very choice of title attests to the increasing constraint of the text. Zilliacus notes the musical associations of the Italian term—'calando, diminuendo, decrescendo'—and remarks that all 'concern volume as well as tempo'.<sup>29</sup> The word *Cascando* therefore signifies not only the necessary control involved in a gradual reduction of sound, but also more broadly the inherent constraint derived by diminishing.

In this final radio play, Beckett is experimenting with constraint in a way that brings his work closer to the sphere of music. A number of critics have noted Voice's typically Beckettian quest to reach the end of all storytelling by completing the 'right one' (*Cascando*, p. 299)—the story that will set him free. Zilliacus, for example, suggests that:

*Cascando* is paradigmatic insofar as the play, in model form, expresses a desire which pervades the entire Beckettian oeuvre: the desire not merely to finish a story but to find that story which, when finished, and being the right one, would absolve its teller of the need to go on, and thus make peace possible.<sup>30</sup>

This is hardly a controversial claim: Voice admits that '...if you could finish it...you could rest...sleep...not before' (p. 297). However, what is more interesting is

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno suggests as an aside that piano-playing 'in a certain sense is also a "writing" of music, its imitation through the accents of the keys' (*TMP*, p. 175), and therefore a form of the spatialization of time that, as seen in notation, 'is by its nature controllability'. *TMP*, p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> Zilliacus, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Beckett's parallel attempt to achieve, in this case, *aesthetic* freedom, through the very same mechanisms of constraint that Voice uses in order continuously to refine his narrative into the correct one.

Within the text, the control exerted by Opener is qualitatively different to that of *Rough for Radio I*, *Rough for Radio II* and even *Words and Music*. He 'open[s]' and 'close[s]' Voice and Music in a far less authoritative way than the other texts, and seems to have a more nuanced relationship with his material:

What do I open?

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

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

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

There is nothing in my head.

I don't answer any more.

I open and close.

(*Cascando*, p. 300)

The opener here takes on the role of the modernist musician, whose compositions are incomprehensible to others: 'they don't see what I do'. More significantly, his being is utterly caught up with his role as 'Opener': 'They say, That is not his life, he does not live on that. They don't see me, they don't see what my life is, they don't see what I live on' (p. 300). Opener does not understand his nature as qualitatively distinct from the material he manipulates, though he is careful to separate subject and object by insisting that '[t]here is nothing in my head'. He is not intent upon achieving a specific, instrumental goal—unlike any of Beckett's previous radio plays—but upon bringing Voice and Music to fruition: 'As though they had linked their arms' (p. 303). While the question of Voice's success or failure in reaching the right narrative is ultimately suspended in the silence, or dead air-time, that finishes the play, Beckett's achievement is evident in *Cascando* itself. Just as the development of Western music exceeds the rational control inaugurated by notation, the freedom gestured to by *Cascando* emerges from the gradual curtailment of possibilities within its very form. Most significantly, as Paetzold suggests, 'integrating technology into the work of art

may still be seen as a means to a new kind of experience of technology'.<sup>31</sup> Works such as *Cascando* and *Words and Music*—and, indeed, their more ambivalent draft forms *Rough for Radio I* and *Rough for Radio II*—inaugurate a way of thinking about technology from an aesthetic perspective—one that, crucially, does not obliterate external or internal nature.

## II

While Beckett's 1963 foray into cinema with the aptly named *Film* represents a logical shift into a technological medium that had captured his imagination early in his career,<sup>32</sup> Adorno's residence in the heart of the Hollywood community from 1941 to 1949 seems bizarrely incongruous with his deep-seated distaste for American culture. Ehrhard Bahr has captured this sense of disconnect in his study of the emerging German exile culture in 1940s Los Angeles: he notes, somewhat wryly, that 'the German exile writers were living in bungalows or flats, surrounded by lush gardens that some of them resented with a vengeance'.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, as David Jenemann has demonstrated, it would be a mistake to assume that Adorno distanced himself from the 'dream factory'; on the contrary, he had an 'intimate knowledge of the practice and personnel of the U.S. film industry'<sup>34</sup>—one that actually extended to the aborted development of an experimental film that aimed to research patterns of anti-Semitism.<sup>35</sup> Given this, it is unsurprising that Adorno's 1966 essay, 'Transparencies on Film', seems, as Miriam B. Hansen suggests, to 'suspend some of

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<sup>31</sup> Paetzold, p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> As has been noted by a number of critics, Beckett read a great deal on cinema in 1936 and even wrote a letter to Eisenstein asking 'to be considered for admission to the Moscow State School of Cinematography'. See *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), I, p. 317 (2 March 1936). J. M. B. Antoine-Dunne argues that in 1937 'Beckett was immersed in Soviet film aesthetics' and traces Eisenstein's influence throughout Beckett's career. J. M. B. Antoine-Dunne, 'Beckett and Eisenstein on Light and Contrapuntal Montage', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 11 (2001), 315–23 (p. 315).

<sup>33</sup> *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Adorno in America* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 108.

<sup>35</sup> For more information see Jenemann, pp. 128–46; and Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 208–9.



the major fixations of Adorno's theory on [the] Culture Industry',<sup>36</sup> instead permitting a more nuanced—and, indeed, *aesthetic* rather than sociological—account of film.

This section will discuss Beckett's *Film* in relation to what Miriam Hansen quite justifiably characterises as a 'regulative idea' of Adorno's aesthetic theory:<sup>37</sup> *das Bilderverbot*—a German compound noun combining 'die Bilder' (pictures) and 'das Verbot' (ban)—or 'theological ban on images' (*ND*, p. 207), as Adorno defines the term. The *Bilderverbot* derives its scriptural authority from Exodus 20:4–5, the second of the Ten Commandments: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them'. The Commandment not only proscribes positive representations of God—of 'any thing that is in heaven above'—but images more generally. Such images are idolatrous because they hypostatize that which has been made by human hands into something eternal and immutable. I will argue that Adorno's secularisation of the *Bilderverbot* is instrumental in penetrating the complexities of Beckett's enigmatic *Film*, which both engages with and subverts mechanisms of idolatry that Adorno associates with cinema. For Adorno, film's repudiation of the *Bilderverbot* not only limits its emancipatory potential but also renders it complicit in maintaining an unfree and alienating status quo. In contrast, what Beckett describes as the 'strangeness and beauty of pure image' in *Film* can be read as a negative image of reality that, in respecting the demands of the *Bilderverbot*, frees it from the delusions of idolatry.<sup>38</sup> This is the possibility of technology that, far from confirming the status quo and fixing it in place, radically subverts our vision of uninterrupted domination.

Adorno's concept of the *Bilderverbot* is firmly rooted in the Old Testament proscription of idolatry. However, his secularisation of the term also owes a debt to Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism. Marx defines fetishism as the process by which 'the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with life of their own'—the same reversion of the subjective into the objective that is

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<sup>36</sup> 'Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966)', *New German Critique*, 24/25 (1982), 186–98 (p. 186).

<sup>37</sup> 'Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer', *New German Critique*, 56 (1992), 43–73 (p. 45).

<sup>38</sup> *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. by Maurice Harmon (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 188.

evident in idolatry.<sup>39</sup> Despite their almost identical definitions, idolatry and fetishism are drawn from completely different contexts. ‘Fetish’ is now overdetermined with Marxist connotations, while the biblical origins of ‘idol’ are fast being superseded by the pop- and film-idols of the Culture Industry. Since these disparate contexts are relevant to Adorno’s understanding of the modern significance of the *Bilderverbot*, it is important to retain both terms.

As David Hawkes claims in his groundbreaking study of idolatry in early modern England, ‘for the Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole, idolatry is not merely a theological problem but rather an all-encompassing view of the world’.<sup>40</sup> This is certainly true for Adorno, who secularises the *Bilderverbot* to refer to the idols of contemporary society.<sup>41</sup> He makes a number of direct references to the ban throughout his philosophy; however, it acts more broadly as a regulative idea, particularly of his aesthetics, which can be encapsulated in his enigmatic claim that ‘artworks are imageless images’ (*AT*, p. 364): as ‘images that do not contain replicas of anything’, they ‘are imageless’ (*AT*, p. 368). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno explains that materialism ‘comes to agree with theology’ in its ‘longing to grasp the thing’: ‘it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived’ (*ND*, p. 207). In Exodus, God prohibits the construction of images because they fetishize that which is made by human hands into something eternal and given, qualities that belong only to God himself. Such idols attempt to objectify God, fixing him into one form. Similarly, materialism forbids ‘Utopia to be positively pictured’ (*ND*, p. 207). This correspondence between theology and materialism provides the basis for Adorno’s understanding of the *Bilderverbot* and its implications for modernity. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he argues:

The right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition. Such observance, ‘determinate negation’, is not exempted from the enticements of intuition by the sovereignty of the abstract concept, as is scepticism, for which falsehood and truth are equally void. Unlike rigorism, determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the

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<sup>39</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), I, p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> *Idols of the Marketplace: Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature, 1580–1680* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> As James Gordon Finlayson argues, ‘Adorno shows a rather cavalier lack of interest in the religious significance of these prohibitions, and freely and radically reinterprets them’. ‘On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno’s Singular Apophaticism’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 105 (2012), 1–32 (p. 8).

absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth.

(DE, p. 18)

This extremely dense passage offers an explanation for the continuing relevance of the *Bilderverbot* beyond its Judeo-Christian usage. This explanation relies on a familiarity with Adorno's oft-used terms: 'abstract negation' and 'determinate negation'. Abstract negation is here associated with scepticism, following Hegel, who argued that in neither does *Aufhebung* take place, as they both 'halt at the merely negative result of dialectics' (quoted in *ND*, p. 16). In this case, abstract negation 'entails an indiscriminate negation of any and all images of the divine', and is therefore uncritical and empty.<sup>42</sup> Determinate negation, on the other hand, can be defined as the process of 'confronting concepts with their objects and, conversely, objects with their concepts' (*LND*, p. 25). It differs from abstract negation in that it, first, measures the image or idol up to what it purports to be, rather than some absolute, and, second, critically negates those images that, in their falseness, perpetuate the bad totality by presenting it as immutable. The determinate negation of the image crucially retains a critical power, which allows us to read from the image the damaged world's 'admission of falseness'. Thus, as Elizabeth A. Pritchard claims, 'instead of veiling the divinity, the *Bilderverbot* must unveil fallen reality'.<sup>43</sup> Adorno's adherence to the *Bilderverbot* can thus be seen to assume an ethical and political resonance. Hawkes claims that 'the condition of mind that these people [in Reformation England] called "idolatry" has, in our time, achieved a triumph so complete as to render itself imperceptible'.<sup>44</sup> In light of this, Adorno's 'prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth' (*DE*, p. 17) can be seen as an emancipatory act of unveiling the falsity that dominates the world.

Adorno's concept of determinate negation, then, ensures that a materialist translation of the *Bilderverbot* does not necessitate the indiscriminate rejection of all images. And, indeed, in critiquing film's idolatrous representation of the world, he is merely holding cinema up to the same exacting standards that he insists upon in all

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth A. Pritchard, 'Bilderverbot Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno's Inverse Theology', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 95 (2002), 291–318 (p. 302).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Hawkes, p. 6.

art:<sup>45</sup> ‘Aesthetic images stand under the prohibition on graven images. To this extent aesthetic semblance [...] is truth’ (*AT*, p. 137). Art’s refusal either to directly represent the world as it is—idolizing it as the only possible world—or to offer ‘images of a reconciled social reality’<sup>46</sup>—betraying the very possibility of reconciliation—is what constitutes its status as art. Indeed, for Adorno, film’s tendency towards idolatry can be seen as the defining characteristic distinguishing it from art. While art, ‘rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as something “socially useful”, [...] criticizes society by merely existing’ (*AT*, p. 296), film (generically) fetishises the world as it is and ‘ensures an affirmative stance towards the whole system’,<sup>47</sup> thus actively preventing emancipatory change. The possibility of creating a non-idolatrous film—film as ‘imageless image’—is, therefore, the very possibility of film as art. It is with this in mind that we turn to Beckett’s *Film*, which, I suggest, not only engages with the question of idolatry but actively attempts to overcome it. When discussing *Film*, it is important to note that there are two texts to take into consideration: the written script and its execution. Although for the most part, the film follows the directions of the script, there are a few notable exceptions. The film itself begins with a close-up shot of a reptilian eye, which opens and closes, eventually fading into the similar texture of a wall. This does not appear in the written script, which instead begins with a street scene (compressed in the film itself). Moreover, Beckett appends a number of explanations to the beginning of his script, an indulgence necessarily absent in the film itself:

*Esse est percipi.*

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

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

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

In order to be figured in this situation the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit.

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<sup>45</sup> Here I agree with Jenemann, who argues that ‘Adorno—in very nuanced ways—conceives of cinema as part of a continuum of aesthetic productions’ (p. 123).

<sup>46</sup> Brian O’Connor, *Adorno* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 157.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Introduction to Adorno, “Transparencies on Film” (1966)’, p. 188.

It will not be clear until end of film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self.

Until end of film O is perceived by E from behind and at an angle not exceeding 45°. Convention: O enters *percipi* = experiences anguish of perceivedness, only when this angle is exceeded.

(*Film*, p. 323)

This unusually detailed explication provides a structural framework for *Film*, based on Berkeley's concept that being is being perceived.<sup>48</sup> According to this framework, the film follows the protagonist, O, in his attempt to escape his perceiving self, E, whose point of view is the camera's. O runs through the street, always careful to keep his face hidden. At moments, the point of view changes to that of O, recognisable by the use of a lens gauze. After the short street sequence, O runs into a set of flats, avoiding the gaze of an old woman with flowers walking down the stairs. At the sight of E, the old woman collapses with a look of horror on her face. O enters a flat and, after locking the door, walks around it, again hiding his face. Seeking to limit extraneous perception, he closes the curtain, covers the mirror and the goldfish bowl, takes down an image of God—in reality an image of the Sumerian God Abu—and shuts out the dog and the cat. Sitting down on a rocking chair, he takes seven photographs from his briefcase and, after perusing them carefully, tears them up. While he falls asleep in his chair, E takes the opportunity to infiltrate the angle of perceivedness. As we see O's face for the first time, he awakens and stands up with a horrified expression. The camera angle switches to O's point of view and reveals E as the same man, this time expressionless. This 'Investment proper' (*Film*, p. 328), as Beckett defines it, lasts a few minutes as the perspective continues to switch between O and E. The script ends here, while the film itself returns to the opening image of an eye opening and closing.

I contend that Beckett's *Film* exceeds its own clearly delineated structural framework—as Simon Critchley suggests, 'to interpret an artwork in terms of a pre-existing philosophical or conceptual grid is not to encounter an artwork, it is simply to confirm that pre-existing grid. It is to see through the artwork and not to see

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<sup>48</sup> This framework is discussed in detail by a number of critics, including Katherine Weiss, 'James Joyce and Sergei Eisenstein: Haunting Samuel Beckett's *Film*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 21 (2012), 181–92; Graley Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 38–42; Daniel Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 121–4; and Sylvie Debevec Henning, 'Film: A Dialogue between Beckett and Berkeley', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 7 (1982), 89–100.

it'<sup>49</sup>—and can be usefully understood in relation to Adorno's conception of the *Bilderverbot*. Before discussing this further, it is imperative to understand Adorno's association between film and idolatry. A useful point of departure here is the question of what Hansen describes as 'film's photographically based claim to immediacy and verisimilitude, its inherent pull toward iconic representation'.<sup>50</sup> Adorno's distrust of film lies precisely in its idolization of reality, its method of embalming or mummifying that which is and presenting it as second nature—as unchangeable. Moreover, Adorno contends that, in a broader sense, film participates in and contributes to a culture of idolatry. His 1938 essay 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' provides an interesting analysis of the role idolatry plays in so-called popular culture. For Adorno, in an extension of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism to the realm of culture, the 'world of [...] musical life [...] is one of fetishes' (*CI*, p. 31). He includes among these fetishes people—such as conductors and composers—works, melodies, voices and instruments. To take but one of these examples, in the 'cult of the master violins' (*CI*, p. 33), Adorno notes the rapturous response of the public at the 'well-announced sound of a Stradivarius or Amati, which only the ear of a specialist can tell from that of a good modern violin, forgetting in the process to listen to the composition and the execution' (*CI*, p. 33). A violin—whatever its brand—is created by humans for the purpose of producing music. In the culture of idolatry of contemporary society, however, '[m]eans and ends are inverted' (*MM*, p. 15) and the violin becomes hypostatized as an end in itself, to the detriment of the music it produces.

In his rather specialized exploration of the fetish character of music, Adorno gestures towards the wider culture of idolatry that, of course, makes the Culture Industry possible in the first place:

The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert. He has literally "made" the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognizing himself in it. But he has not "made" it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket.  
(*CI*, p. 34)

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<sup>49</sup> 'To Be or Not to Be is Not the Question: On Beckett's *Film*', *Film-Philosophy*, 11 (2007), 108–21 (p. 112).

<sup>50</sup> *Cinema and Experience*, p. 210.

Money is the ultimate object of fetishistic consciousness and is treated accordingly by Marx in *Capital*: '[t]his physical object, gold or silver in its crude state, becomes, immediately on its emergence from the bowels of the earth, the direct incarnation of all human labour. Hence the magic of money'.<sup>51</sup> As Hawkes claims, '[f]inancial value is an alien meaning imposed upon nature'.<sup>52</sup> gold and silver, as mere objects, have no intrinsic financial value. Value is ascribed to them by humans, who then fetishize the apparently inherent value of money. Marx explicates this in his *Comments on James Mill*:

It is clear that this *mediator* thus becomes a *real God*, for the mediator is the *real power* over what it mediates to me. Its cult becomes an end in itself. Objects separated from this mediator have lost their value. Hence the objects only have value insofar as they *represent* the mediator, whereas originally it seemed that the mediator only had value insofar as it represented *them*.<sup>53</sup>

Money, supposedly a mediator between commodities, becomes an end in itself. Originally, it represented the value contained in those commodities and was valuable only insofar as it mediated between them. A reversal takes place, however, in which the supposed carriers of values, the commodities, obtain their value from money itself. In the same way, in Adorno's example, the money that should represent the ticket to the Toscanini concert becomes the carrier of value.

Beckett's *Film* engages with the *Bilderverbot* through its anti-realism, its subversion of the status of the idol, and its foregrounding of the image. First, then, Beckett's *Film* refuses realism: O's movements are stylized, as are the reactions of the couple he bumps into, particularly their hyperbolic expressions of horror at the sight of E. The fast camera pan as E catches up with O has a cartoon feel to it. The setting of the street scene itself seems to be imbued with realism; however, as Sidney Feshback notes:

[Beckett's] derelicts are based not on the poor or the *clochards*, despite resemblances, or having lived that life out of necessity, but on representations in paintings, movies, and philosophical models. His derelicts are constructs that are 'comic and unreal'. Economics may be there, but the characters'

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<sup>51</sup> Marx and Engels, p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> Hawkes, p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Hawkes, p. 50.

background, their environment, their clothing and their few roots for food are formal, artistic, and aesthetic.<sup>54</sup>

The unreal quality of the film reaches a peak as O enters the flat. Beckett himself described the room as a ‘trap prepared for him, with nothing in it that wasn’t trapped. There is nothing in this place, this room, that isn’t prepared to trap him’,<sup>55</sup> and, indeed, the layout of the objects in this stark room seems deliberate and poised. The image of God stares dramatically with enormous black pupils. The comic superfluity of animals in the room—a ‘large cat and small dog’ (*Film*, 326), a parrot and a goldfish—succeeds in establishing the ‘extremely unreal’ quality Beckett intended.<sup>56</sup>

Eric Tønning argues that despite Beckett’s intentions, *Film* does not escape realism. First, the nature of film ensures its rootedness in reality. As Stanley Cavell explains, ‘We might say: A painting *is* a world; a photograph *is of* the world. [...] You can always ask, pointing to an object in a photograph [...] what lies behind it, totally obscured by it. [...] This generally makes no sense asked of a painting’.<sup>57</sup> Film, unlike painting, necessarily captures a slice of the empirical world. Second, the lack of such techniques as montage prevents *Film* from resisting this realism. On the first of these grounds, Adorno would be in complete agreement. He insists that film’s ‘elements, however abstract, always retain something representational; they are never purely aesthetic values’ (*CI*, p. 182) and concludes that ‘[b]y virtue of this relationship to the object, the aesthetics of film is thus inherently concerned with society’ (*CI*, p. 182). Hansen notes Adorno’s wariness of abstract film, which ‘ends up disavowing the (photographic) character of its material and the immanent aesthetic principles that might be derived from it’: its ‘experimental play with purely geometric figures thus merely sidesteps the crisis of semblance that modern art must confront; in Adorno’s view, it risks regressing into harmlessness’.<sup>58</sup> By its nature, film cannot avoid representing the world; however, it *can* avoid *idolising* the world: presenting the world as a fixed given that cannot be changed. Tønning’s second claim is a response to Beckett’s perhaps surprising decision—given his ‘early interest in

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Unswamping a Backwater: On Samuel Beckett’s *Film*’, in *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts and Non-Print Media*, ed. by Lois Oppenheim (New York: Garland, 1999), pp. 333–63 (p. 348).

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Feshback, p. 349.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Tønning, p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Tønning, p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> *Cinema and Experience*, p. 217.



Eisenstein'<sup>59</sup>—to prioritise his point-of-view shots of E and O, rendering montage impossible and, for Tønning, limiting the potential of the film.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Adorno suggests in 'Transparencies on Film' that montage can be utilised to 'negate [...] the affirmative appeal of the image';<sup>61</sup> montage, as Hansen explains, 'would fracture the illusionist self-identity of the moving image and make it an object of immanent construction, figuration and deciphering',<sup>62</sup> allowing film to fulfil the demands of the *Bilderverbot*. Despite this guarded positive appraisal of the technique, however, Adorno manifests an awareness of the possible capitulation of montage.<sup>63</sup> As David Bordwell argues, while 'Soviet montage cinema constituted a challenge to classical narrative and decoupage on almost every front', Hollywood's assimilation of the technique castrates it by prioritising continuity over disjunction.<sup>64</sup> *Film's* absence of montage, moreover, is perhaps less surprising when the technique's dynamism is contrasted to Beckett's aesthetic tendency towards stasis; in the film, the long shots and relatively few cuts give an overwhelming sense of unescapable surveillance—one that would be further developed in the television play *Eh Joe*.

*Film* engages with idolatry quite literally in its depiction of two idols. The first is the image of God, which O tears down, depicting in microcosmic form what the film accomplishes more broadly. The second is both internal and external to the film: the figure of Buster Keaton, a spectacular example of a film idol—a star venerated by millions of fans. As Adorno notes of this idolisation within the sphere of music, '[t]he star principle has become totalitarian. The reactions of the listeners have no relation to the playing of the music' (*CI*, p. 31). The music or, in our case, the film, is subsumed under the all-important question of who is performing. The film star is not a means to an end—the production of a film—but an end in himself. Moreover, the film idol *does not really exist*. As David Hawkes points out, when St. Paul states: 'We know that an idol is nothing in the world', he uses the Greek word 'eidolon', the 'Homeric word for

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Kalb, 'The Radio and Television Plays, and *Film*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. by John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; repr. 1996), pp. 124–44 (pp. 134–5).

<sup>60</sup> Tønning, p. 92.

<sup>61</sup> 'Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966)', pp. 194–5.

<sup>62</sup> 'Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing', p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, *AT*, p. 73 and p. 176.

<sup>64</sup> 'The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917–60', in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1995; repr. 2005), pp. 1–87 (p. 76).

“ghost”, “phantom”, or “hallucination””.<sup>65</sup> An idol is quite literally nothing because its seemingly objective nature has actually been wrought by human hands; this is just as true of a film star as it is of a statue of the Virgin Mary. All the qualities held by the film star have in reality been projected upon them by their adoring fans. For this reason, Adorno situates film stars firmly within the Culture Industry’s mechanisms of control. Like all idols, they are manufactured. As Adorno perceptively notes, ‘[b]ecause of his ubiquity, the film star with whom one is supposed to fall in love is, from the start, a copy of himself’ (*DE*, p. 112). He is a copy of *what he is supposed to be*. Feshback suggests that Beckett and Schneider were in a problematic position in their casting of Keaton:

a worry about such a plan and about the film itself was that it would become a “Keaton”, which meant, to spell out the obvious, at least three things—the movie would express Keaton’s interests as a director and performer, it would be saturated with Keaton’s celebrity personage, and it would trigger associations with Hollywood and silent movies, exceeding and obscuring what Beckett saw as his innovation, all of which did come into play when the movie was first shown.<sup>66</sup>

However, I argue that these elements, rather than being difficulties to be negotiated and ultimately eliminated, form integral tensions within the film itself. The very fear that the film ‘would become a “Keaton”’ testifies to the culture of idolatry I have discussed: the privileging of the film star over the film. Indeed, Schneider’s very reflection that ‘I feel the film is more Beckett than Buster, but both work’,<sup>67</sup> is very much rooted in this culture of idolatry in its reduction of the film to one person. Beckett self-consciously plays with Keaton’s star status; as Keaton himself claimed at the press conference after the preview of *Film* at the Venice Film Festival, ‘The camera was *behind* me all the time. I ain’t used to that’.<sup>68</sup> Having their back to the camera and, by extension, the viewers, could be interpreted by any star as derisive, even blasphemous, but it is particularly so for Keaton, who earned his fame from his deadpan expression. For this reason, he ‘felt it a waste, perhaps insulting, their not

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<sup>65</sup> Hawkes, p. 58.

<sup>66</sup> Feshback, p. 341.

<sup>67</sup> *The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, p. 160.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Kevin W. Sweeney, ed., *Buster Keaton: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 219.

using his face'.<sup>69</sup> Not only, then, does Beckett devise a film which almost wholly avoids the protagonist's face, but he casts 'the Great Stone Face' to play him.<sup>70</sup>

By its very title, *Film* draws attention to its status as film: to its status as a mediation of the external world. It does not set up its image as the truth, as an idol. It occupies an elusive middle ground between the silent film and the talkie—not only because of the verbalisation of 'sssh!' (*Film*, p. 325) in the otherwise complete silence, but also because, in this very silence, it eliminates the attendant music of silent cinema. Most importantly, on the level of content it depicts a fragmented self, which resonates well with the abstraction in other areas of film. Beckett's schema, as I have already discussed, indicates clearly what the fragmentation of E and O is supposed to represent. However, as Adorno notes, 'the potential gap between [the intentions of a film] and their actual effect [...] is inherent in the medium' (*CI*, p. 181). Beckett himself recognized that the film's execution was markedly different from his original intentions:

It does I suppose in a sense fail with reference to a purely intellectual schema, that is in a sense which only you and I and a few others can discern, but in so doing it has acquired a dimension and a validity of its own that are worth far more than any merely efficient translation of intention.<sup>71</sup>

I am on the whole pleased with the film, having accepted its imperfections, for the most part only perceptible to insiders, and discern how in some strange way it gains by its deviations from the strict intention and develops something better. The last time [I watched *Film*] I found myself submitting, far from the big crazy idea, to a strangeness and beauty of pure image.<sup>72</sup>

Beckett acknowledges that while the 'intellectual schema' provided by Berkeley offered a useful 'overall direction and motivation',<sup>73</sup> it does not account for the 'strangeness and beauty of pure image' that the film presents. For Gertrud Koch, 'fragmentation, the image as "unsensuous likeness", successfully generates such mimesis as would be compatible with the *Bilderverbot*'.<sup>74</sup> *Film*'s central image of fragmentation amidst a setting of abstraction successfully attests to the fragmented

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<sup>69</sup> Feshback, p. 341.

<sup>70</sup> Sweeney, p. 220.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, p. 166.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>73</sup> Tanning, p. 99.

<sup>74</sup> 'Mimesis and *Bilderverbot*', trans. by Jeremy Gaines, *Screen*, 34 (1993), 211–22 (p. 219).

world that it cannot help but represent, but can resist idolizing. The horror of the final ‘investment’ lingers long enough for an audience to question the world that, as Cavell insists, is implied in the very limits of the film screen.<sup>75</sup> Rather than idolizing society, Beckett’s ‘shabby, damaged world of images is the negative imprint of the administered world. To this extent Beckett is realistic’ (*AT*, pp. 39–40).

With particular reference to the Obenhausen Group, established in the 1960s by young German filmmakers, Adorno suggests that, as contrasted with autonomous art,

vis-à-vis the culture industry—whose standard excludes everything but the pre-digested and the already integrated, just as the cosmetic trade eliminates facial wrinkles—works which have not completely mastered their technique, conveying as a result something consolingly uncontrolled and accidental, have a liberating quality.

(*CI*, p. 179)

Adorno emphasises that, unlike autonomous art, which must be relentlessly modern in its use of technique, film can gain a measure of freedom by refusing to keep up with the latest technical innovation. He praises the ‘uncontrolled and accidental’ in film, which is capable of resisting idolatry in its provisionality and lack of mastery because it is a reminder of the imperfections intrinsic to sublunary existence. Read in this light, *Film* can be seen to embody this ‘liberating quality’. A number of critics have noted its lack of technical finesse: due to what Jonathan Bignell diplomatically describes as ‘[p]roblems of lighting, performance quality and continuity’,<sup>76</sup> and William Martin more forcefully puts down to Alan Schneider’s ‘failure as a director’ and general inexperience,<sup>77</sup> a proportion of the initial street scene was unusable and had to be cut. I have already noted Beckett’s own acknowledgement that *Film* ‘fail[s] with reference to a purely intellectual schema’ and his concomitant insight that the film gained ‘a strangeness and beauty of pure image’ in the process. In this connection, Beckett’s understanding of *Film* as a ‘pure image’ corresponds with Adorno’s ideas about the powers of negative images to escape the *Bilderverbot*. For Adorno the ‘pure’ image is a negative or ‘imageless’ image, freed from representing

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<sup>75</sup> Tanning, p. 93.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Questions of Authorship: Samuel Beckett and *Film*’, in *Writing and Cinema*, ed. by Jonathan Bignell (Essex: Pearson, 1999), pp. 29–42 (pp. 39–40).

<sup>77</sup> ‘*Esse and Percipi in Film: A “Note” upon the Beckett-Schneider “Correspondence”*’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 14 (2004), 533–46 (p. 536).

what positively is; it is, therefore, 'strange' because it throws into relief the poverties of reality, a reality distorted by an objectifying or idolatrous mindset. Indeed, this admission is startlingly similar to Adorno's acknowledgement that, in Hansen's words, 'a poverty of means, a self-conscious abstinence from perfection, may be more likely to achieve artistic standards of its own'.<sup>78</sup> This poverty of means, with its overall effect of abstraction and fragmentation, unveils the damaged world it refuses to idolize and thus acknowledges the potential of technology to liberate, rather than oppress.

### III

Domestic spaces persistently resurface throughout Beckett's corpus, from the Krapps' respectable salon in *Eleutheria* to Mr Knott's strange and alienating residence in *Watt*, Murphy's condemned mew to Krapp's 'den' (*Krapp's Last Tape*, p. 215). Molloy's narrative opens with his claim that 'I am in my mother's room' (*Molloy*, p. 3), a conceit echoed in *Film*, where the '[s]mall barely furnished room' (*Film*, p. 326), somewhat obliquely, given that it 'need not be elucidated', 'obviously cannot be O's room. It may be supposed it is his mother's room, which he has not visited for many years and is now to occupy momentarily, to look after the pets, until she comes out of hospital' (p. 332). The unnamed men in *Rough for Theatre II* infiltrate the domestic space of the man whose right to live they are judging, insisting all the while that 'This is not his home and he knows it full well' (*Rough for Theatre II*, p. 240). Homes and dwelling-places provide a persistent source of fascination for the narrators of the *Novellas*. Even the more abstract locations of *Footfalls* and *Ohio Impromptu* seem to be domestic. However, despite the centrality of the interior to a number of texts, it is not until the television plays that this space is interrogated and explored in all its implications. Television is the domestic medium *par excellence*. While films offer public spectacles—and *Film* is no exception, with its obsession with the logic of surveillance—watching television is an essentially private activity, taking place within the comfort and safety of our own domestic sphere; it is unsurprising, then,

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<sup>78</sup> 'Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966)', p. 190.

that television's actual content centres on the home, with soap operas as the most obvious example. Beckett's studio-filmed television plays, firmly rooted within the domestic, demonstrate a significant shift from the approach of the radio plays, which, perhaps inspired by the popularity of the portable transistor radio from the mid-1950s onwards, take advantage of radio's capacity to dissolve '[c]orporeal boundaries',<sup>79</sup> as Anna McMullan puts it: to encompass any space, or, indeed, none at all.

Of Beckett's five television plays, then (discounting those later adapted for the medium), four are clearly situated within a domestic setting.<sup>80</sup> It is in view of this stress on the domestic interior that, rather than considering Adorno's specific writings on television—'Prologue to Television' and 'Television as Ideology'—I turn to his 1931 *Habilitation: Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. This text is notable for its isolation of the nineteenth century bourgeois *intérieur* as 'a metaphor for the nexus of [Kierkegaard's] fundamental concepts' (*K*, p. 41). Adorno associates Kierkegaard's repeated recourse to the *intérieur* with his philosophy of inwardness. He therefore scrutinises the minute details of Kierkegaard's various depictions of the *intérieur*, establishing that the supposedly free and safe space into which Kierkegaard retreats from the exterior world is not all it appears. Beckett first explores the unforeseen threat of domestic space in *Eh Joe*, in which the scantily furnished bedroom soon takes on a menacing ambience when it is infiltrated by a disembodied female voice, which taunts Joe with its presence in his sanctum: 'Thought of everything? ... Forgotten nothing? ... You're all right now, eh? ... No one can see you now. ... No one can get at you now' (*Eh Joe*, p. 362). Ten years later, in *Ghost Trio*, Beckett considerably reworks and complicates this basic premise. *Ghost Trio* also takes place in a domestic space, though less recognisable as such in its sparse greyness. Unlike Joe, who has a name, personality and past, the protagonist of *Ghost Trio* is nameless, known only as F[igure], and blends in with his surroundings, becoming object-like. In light of Adorno's *Kierkegaard*, I suggest that this play exposes the flawed subject-object relations lurking under the security of the bourgeois *intérieur*.

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<sup>79</sup> *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 68.

<sup>80</sup> The exception is, of course, *Quad* (and its derivation, *Quad II*) which represents a considerable anomaly in any reading of the television plays as a whole. More than any other of Beckett's works, perhaps, *Quad* deflects any interpretive structure; as Graley Herren suggests, 'Beckett's warning at the end of *Watt* seems especially fitting here: "no symbols where none intended"'. 'Samuel Beckett's *Quad*: Pacing to Byzantium', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 43 (2000), 43–60 (p. 48).

For Adorno, the analogous relationships between subject and object, individual and society, are integral to the question of freedom, and he considers these relationships in his analysis of the bourgeois *intérieur*. Adorno insists that the ‘rift’ between subject and object is necessary for the very possibility of freedom: ‘we must conclude that this allegedly happy time before the divorce between freedom and unfreedom had taken place can only have been an unfree condition for the individuals who were born into it’ (*HF*, p. 208). Nonetheless, the relation between subject and object in modernity is fundamentally damaged because of the subject’s claims to sovereignty—a sovereignty manifested philosophically in German Idealism and its intellectual aftermath, and materially in the subject’s instrumental control over nature. The theoretical and material here support and legitimate each other. As Martin Schuster explains, ‘the more of the world that subjectivity seeks to identify and bring under its domain’—whether theoretically, by stripping meaning from the objective world, or physically, by exercising technological domination over nature—‘the more it destroys *its own* conditions of possibility and thereby *itself*. Since all objectivity merely becomes the mirror of subjectivity, the distinction between the subjective and the objective disappears’.<sup>81</sup> The subject becomes hardened and impervious to the external world—growing, in fact, objectlike. The object, reduced to its exchange-value in that it represents no other source of meaning for humans, loses its very corporeality: it is a mere reflection of the subject. As Adorno insists, ‘it is only as something definite that the object becomes anything at all. In the attributes that seem to be attached to it by the subject alone, the subject’s own objectivity comes to the fore’ (*AR*, p. 143). For Adorno, the subject’s ‘mental imprisonment’ (*AR*, p. 145) that seeks to seclude itself from the outside world finds its concrete manifestation in the bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century, a space whose ideological structure is still traceable in aspects of the domestic today.

Beckett’s *Ghost Trio* presents the spectre-like remains of the bourgeois *intérieur*. These vestiges estrange the viewer from the very domestic space in which he sits. The sparse grey room—first envisioned in Beckett’s stage notes and diagram and then described by V[oice]—is a far cry from the comforts and luxuries of bourgeois interior design. Nonetheless, it is, we are assured by V, a ‘familiar

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<sup>81</sup> *Autonomy After Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 22.

chamber' (*Ghost Trio*, p. 408). We have seen it before, in Murphy's condemned mew; in Molloy's mother's room; in Malone's enigmatic dwelling; in the 'trap' that is O's room in *Film*—but also in Kierkegaard, Proust, Flaubert and other masterful navigators of the *intérieur*. The furniture in *Ghost Trio* is stripped back to a minimum, consisting of merely a door, window, mirror, pallet, stool and cassette player. More importantly, however, none of these objects are recognisable as such. As barely distinguishable grey rectangles of similar sizes, they must all be individually identified by V. The 'chamber' of *Ghost Trio* may well seem like the 'cell' that *The Times* defined it as in its 1977 review of the play.<sup>82</sup> However, there is no evidence of any external force compelling F to stay, nor is there anything to suggest that he could not leave through the door that he himself opens, if he so wished. The chamber's affinity with a prison cell, however, is by no means unimportant, and can in fact be entirely reconciled with my claim that the room is an etiolated domestic space. As I will go on to discuss, the bourgeois *intérieur* that Beckett has stripped bare is a 'fortress' (*K*, p. 43) in which the individual imprisons himself.

There is in fact one more barely distinguishable object that must be identified by V: the '[s]ole sign of life' (*Ghost Trio*, p. 409) in the room: F. The very vocabulary choice here is indicative of F's objectlike status: he is only a 'sign of life'. A reversal has taken place, then, in which subject has become objectlike, just as Adorno observes. The objects in this chamber, moreover, have become insubstantial and ghostly: they have lost their solidity and referentiality, reduced to exchangeable grey rectangles. Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's inward-facing philosophy is 'objectless' (*K*, p. 49). He considers in detail the 'window mirror' (*K*, p. 42) described in *Diary of a Seducer*—a common nineteenth century artefact that 'spies' (*K*, p. 42) on the outside world by reflecting its objects back into the bourgeois *intérieur*—and claims that it 'testifies to objectlessness—it casts into the apartment only the semblance of things' (*K*, p. 42). The domestic space accentuates the ghostliness of objects in the eyes of an all-dominating subject. In *Ghost Trio*, the generic grey rectangles are reminiscent of a television screen—one of Beckett's moments of self-reflexivity. This

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, quoted in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by L. Graver and R. Federman (London: Routledge, 1997; repr. 1999), p. 398. Sidney Homan, similarly retreating from the domestic, argues that 'on camera the set looked patently artificial, like a studio set, or a place painfully impermanent'. *Filming Beckett's Television Plays: A Director's Experience* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), p. 87.



twentieth-century object is another vestige of the bourgeois *intérieur*; Benjamin, whose work heavily influenced Adorno's *Kierkegaard*, saw the *intérieur* as a space of semblance.<sup>83</sup> Adorno draws attention to the domestic *flâneur* who 'promenades in his room; the world only appears to him reflected by pure inwardness' (*K*, p. 41). Here imagination is the device by which the individual, as Benjamin puts it, 'brings together remote locales and memories of the past'.<sup>84</sup> However, as Tom Gunning notes, the *intérieur* also quite literally contained 'optical devices and philosophical toys of all sorts—the stereoscope, the kaleidoscope, the magic lantern—that seem to open the viewer's gaze onto a different world, but only under the dominion of the image and semblance'.<sup>85</sup> Prefiguring Beckett's very description of television as 'peephole art',<sup>86</sup> Adorno notes that here the world 'can appear only as an optical illusion, *as through a peephole*' (*K*, p. 44; my italics). Television is the domestic optical device of the twentieth century. Just like the nineteenth-century window mirror, it produces only the semblance of objectivity. The grey screen-like objects in *Ghost Trio*, then, attest to their ghostly incorporeality.

While a number of critics assume that V instructs F's movements,<sup>87</sup> I suggest that, on the contrary, she *predicts* them. The key to this conundrum lies in Beckett's earlier work on Proust, namely in his lengthy discussion of habit. Proust himself situates habit within the domestic sphere:

this mere change of lighting was enough to destroy the familiar impression I had of my room, thanks to which, save for the torture of going to bed, it had become quite endurable. Now I no longer recognized it, and felt uneasy in it, as in a room in some hotel or chalet, in a place where I had just arrived by

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<sup>83</sup> 'The private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. [...] His living room is a box in the theater of the world'. *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> 'The Exterior as Interior: Benjamin's Optical Detective', *Boundary 2* (2003), 105–30 (p. 107).

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Toby Zinman, 'Eh Joe and the Peephole Aesthetic', in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: The Savage Eye / L'Oeil Fauvre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 53–64 (p. 53).

<sup>87</sup> Herren argues that 'V controls F, and the false alarms she induces in him are deliberate demonstrations of her power'. 'Unfamiliar chambers: power and pattern in Samuel Beckett's *Ghost Trio*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 9 (1998), 73–100 (p. 81). Weiss agrees that 'Initially, one perceives V as the author of the teleplay, controlling the camera, the spectator and the "sole sign of life", F'. 'Animating Ghosts in Samuel Beckett's *Ghost Trio* and ...but the clouds...', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 18 (2009), 105–22 (p. 106).

train for the first time. [...] The anaesthetic effect of habit being destroyed, I would begin to think—and to feel—such melancholy things.<sup>88</sup>

The bourgeois *intérieur* is the physical location within which Marcel exercises those habitual actions that, when removed or destroyed, cause such trauma; this association of habit and habitation—already etymologically linked—is inherited by Beckett, whose discussion of habit contains a number of references to rooms and domestic spaces:

our current habit of living is as incapable of dealing with the mystery of a strange sky or a *strange room*, with any circumstance unforeseen in her curriculum, as Françoise of conceiving or realizing the full horror of a Duval omelette.<sup>89</sup>

The habit of friendship for the low ceiling is ineffectual, must die in order that a habit of friendship for the high ceiling may be born.<sup>90</sup>

As Gunning neatly summarises, ‘[t]he encasing forms of the bourgeois interior, its protective shell, are literally shaped by habit’.<sup>91</sup>

In light of this, the supposed shift in power from V to F identified by a number of critics at the moment when F apparently defies V should rather be seen as a spontaneous moment in which F breaks his habitual routine—enforced only by himself—prompting a surprised ‘Ah!’ (*Ghost Trio*, p. 411) from V.<sup>92</sup> It would perhaps be more accurate to say that F *exceeds* V’s prediction: he conforms perfectly to her statement: ‘Now to pallet’ (p. 410), only moving unbidden or unpredicted after a

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<sup>88</sup> *Swann’s Way*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, in *Remembrance of Things Past, vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), pp. 10–11.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Proust’, in Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999), pp. 11–93 (pp. 20–1; my italics).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>91</sup> Gunning, p. 108.

<sup>92</sup> Herren argues, for example, that ‘V establishes order and control at the beginning, F contradicts her patterns and challenges her authority in the middle, then he orchestrates his own counter-pattern from a new perspective in the end’. ‘Ghost Duet, or Krapp’s First Videotape’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 11 (2001), 159–66 (p. 161). Bignell agrees that ‘Voice seeks to author the play, but Figure undermines her authority. Figure rebels against the system of repetitions established by Voice in Part Two, when Voice orders Figure “Now to door” and he instead goes to the stool, sits down and resumes his pose as in the opening of the play’. *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 95. Weiss emphasises the fact that V’s ‘authority is faltering. Neither F nor the camera obeys her commands’. ‘Animating Ghosts’, p. 106. Chris Ackerley also assumes that F’s deviation from his habitual routine is a deliberate rebellion: ‘instead of obeying V’s ‘Now to door’ he returns to his stool and cassette. The sequence is revisited, but at the critical point F ignores V’. “‘Ever Know What Happened?’: Shades and Echoes in Beckett’s Television Plays’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 18 (2009), 136–64 (p. 146).

pause of five seconds. It is at this moment that he turns towards the wall and ‘*looks at his face in mirror hanging on wall, invisible from A [the camera angle]*’ (p. 410). I have already gestured towards the window mirror that plays such an important part in Adorno’s analysis of the bourgeois *intérieur* in Kierkegaard’s works. However, the mirror does not simply project ghostly traces of objects into the domestic space. It also attests to the very ‘objectification and reification of [the subject’s] own mirrored self as a dead or estranged object’.<sup>93</sup> When F looks into the mirror, he is confronted with his reality as ‘an eviscerated state of second nature’.<sup>94</sup> This realisation can be seen to prompt another, more deliberated, departure from habit, as he first considers his position, standing ‘*before mirror with bowed head*’, then ‘*goes to stool*’ (p. 411) rather than, as predicted by V, ‘to door’ (p. 411). However, this rupture of habit does not last, as the eerie music of his cassette player lulls him back into his routine, the ‘patter driven’ basis of *Ghost Trio*.<sup>95</sup>

If the bourgeois *intérieur* is characterized by habit, it is the habit of the self-exiled individual who isolates himself from the outside world in the hope of cordoning off ‘a private sphere free from the power of reification’ (*K*, p. 47). As Gunning argues, the *intérieur* is conceived as ‘a radical separation from the exterior, as a home in which the bourgeois can dwell and dream undisturbed by the noise, activity, and threats of the street, the space of the masses and of production, a private individual divorced from the community’.<sup>96</sup> However, Adorno pointedly notes that ‘as a private sphere it itself belongs, if only polemically, to the social structure’ (*K*, p. 47). Kierkegaard’s turn to the interior, for example, ‘falls to the mercy of his own historical situation, that of a *rentier* in the first half of the nineteenth century’ (*K*, pp. 47–8). The *rentier*, Adorno goes on to explain, is a pre-capitalist vestige, ‘excluded from economic production’ (*K*, p. 48) by virtue of his inheritance. However, Kierkegaard is necessarily unable to free himself from the historical circumstances that define his very independence from the accumulation of capital. The ‘fortress’ of the bourgeois *intérieur*—already containing the semblances of objects reflected from the outside world through optical devices—proves to be insufficiently hermetic. This

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<sup>93</sup> Joseph D. Lewandowski, *Interpreting Culture: Rethinking Method and Truth in Social Theory* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 75.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> ‘Ghost Duet, or Krapp’s First Videotape’, p. 160.

<sup>96</sup> Gunning, p. 106.

inevitable permeability is a recurrent theme in Beckett's texts: supposedly closed systems leak. In this case, the room is infiltrated by a boy, who clearly belongs to the outside world, wearing as he does a '*black oilskin with hood glistening with rain*' (*Ghost Trio*, p. 413). His only action is to enigmatically '*shake [...] head faintly*' (p. 413), prompting a critical consensus that his role is a reprisal of the boy in *Waiting for Godot*,<sup>97</sup> who conveys the message that Godot 'won't come this evening but surely tomorrow' (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 49). According to this reading, the boy is a messenger from 'her' (*Ghost Trio*, p. 410): the mysterious woman that, according to V, F 'think[s] he hears' (p. 410). However, the whole incident is deliberately ambiguous and impossible to pin down into such concrete terms. The space of the *intérieur* in *Ghost Trio* is an insubstantial, spectral arena in which the skewed subject-object relations of the domestic sphere are revealed in all their starkness.

For Adorno, Kierkegaard's value lies in his ability to present the real situation of the world, albeit unwittingly. As Brian O'Connor puts it, 'idealism is true in that it reflects the abstraction of subjectivity from a world in which it might be constitutively immersed, but false in that its very hypostatization masks its real lack of freedom'.<sup>98</sup> Kierkegaard's numerous portraits of the bourgeois subject retreating from the world into the apparent safety of the *intérieur* bear witness to the actual state of affairs—the false life—but equally permit its determinate negation. The images by which Kierkegaard betrays himself—the window mirror, for instance—demonstrate the impossibility of maintaining a neat subject-object polarity that results in an 'objectless dialectic'.<sup>99</sup> In their very insubstantiality, the grey rectangles in *Ghost Trio* haunt the play, their very presence implying that the subject-object relation could be otherwise.

Adorno's reading of the *intérieur* in Kierkegaard's work is remarkable in its very literariness; he deciphers it as a text, drawing attention to those supposedly meaningless details that in reality explode the innocence and cohesion of the domestic sphere. Adorno explains his particular procedure thus:

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Ackerley, p. 146; Bignell, p. 96; and 'Animating Ghosts', p. 112.

<sup>98</sup> 'Introduction to "Subject and Object"', in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O'Connor (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 137–8 (p. 137).

<sup>99</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977), p. 115.

The objective images, whose interpretation is the aim of his writing, are volatilized into such metaphors under the pressure of his subjectivism. They are to be called back out of the imagery to their authentic reality.

(K, p. 13)

In this sense, he takes Kierkegaard's words *literally*. His precedent for this is Kierkegaard's own reliance on 'theological Christian exegesis': 'the pseudonymous *Training in Christianity* is exegetical; and all the pseudonymous writings are interwoven with exegetical sections. No meaningful exegesis can be conceived, however, that is not obligatorily bound to the vocabulary of the text' (K, p. 12). Adorno binds Kierkegaard to his own terms, and in the same way we can 'crack [...] the surface' of Beckett's *Ghost Trio* by observing the minutiae of his chosen theatrical space,<sup>100</sup> as well as the medium through which it is exhibited. In the television play, Beckett strips bare the bourgeois *intérieur*, leaving it almost unrecognisable. In so doing, he exposes the hardened subject and insubstantial object that Adorno argues have developed in modernity. He puts on display a space of unfreedom: not a cell in which F is physically imprisoned, but rather an alienated and alienating domestic *intérieur* intimately associated with the voyeurism of television. As with Adorno, Beckett's *Ghost Trio* offers only the stark image of unfreedom, from which we can read freedom only negatively.

The sparse and alienating space of *Ghost Trio* could not be further away from the tone of Beckett's final television play, *Nacht und Träume*. This is, in many ways, an anomaly within the Beckett corpus. While it accords with the curtailment of language and priority of the image—visual or musical—characteristic of this period of writing, it does so in a way that has left many critics uncomfortable. It is characterised by a mute—the only words being the sung line drawn from Schubert's *Nacht und Träume*—and deep expressiveness that has been characterised as 'sacramental' and even 'sentimental'.<sup>101</sup> It is singularly spiritual, with explicitly Christian symbols and allusions to which I will return. Its overwhelming stasis and careful positioning of images render it seemingly incongruous with the medium of

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, 'Foreword: Critique of the Organic', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. by and ed. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. xxii.

<sup>101</sup> Graley Herren, 'Splitting Images: Samuel Beckett's *Nacht und Träume*', *Modern Drama*, 43 (2000), 182–91 (p. 184); Martin Esslin, 'Towards the Zero of Language', in *Beckett's Later Fiction and Drama: Texts for Company*, ed. by James Acheson and Kateryna Arthur (London: MacMillan, 1986), pp. 35–49 (p. 46).

television: more at home in an art gallery. Even the remnants of plot in the other television plays have been discarded in this calm scenario that depicts nothing more overt than a dreamer and his dream.

For Adorno, the expression that all artworks contain, but which is intensified in *Nacht und Träume*, is their ‘gaze’ (AT, p. 148). In an inversion of the commonsensical view in which a subject gazes at the work, Adorno insists that the work does not merely resist this gaze, but actively gazes back, expressing itself in a way that defuses our subjective appropriation of it. *Catastrophe*, written the same year as *Nacht und Träume*, offers a simple elucidation of this link between expression and the gaze. At the end of the play, after being manipulated and exploited for theatrical purposes, Protagonist, or P, ‘raises his head, fixes the audience’ (*Catastrophe*, p. 461), the audience being both within and without the play itself. ‘The applause falters, dies’ (p. 461), the stage notes continue. In this moment, as Sandra Wynands summarises, ‘Beckett points toward everyone’s complicity with such exploitative structures more effectively and memorably than the evanescent nature of wordly eloquence would have been able to’.<sup>102</sup> The gaze of P is saturated—a term I shall return to—with expression: expression that is enough to stop a voyeuristic and indifferent audience in its tracks. Without dwelling further on *Catastrophe* itself, I would just like to draw attention to this instance in which a literal gaze offers what we might call aesthetic expression. In *Nacht und Träume*, it is the work itself that is offering such expression, that gazes so deeply at a (quite probably) disengaged audience.

Adorno argues that ‘[a]rt is expressive when what is objective, subjectively mediated, speaks. [...] Expression is the suffering countenance of artworks’ (AT, p. 146). Two moments are intertwined here. First, expression should not be construed as the outpourings of the artist as subject. On the contrary, ‘the model of expression is that of extra-artistic things and situations’ (AT, p. 146); expression is the way in which the world becomes incorporated into the artwork. Second, the mode of expression is suffering. This may seem to contradict Adorno’s insistence that art’s ‘expression is the antithesis of expressing something’ (AT, p. 147), but this is not the case; the natural history that is sedimented within the artwork necessarily expresses

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<sup>102</sup> *Iconic Spaces: The Dark Theology of Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2007), p. 19.

suffering because that is its mode of being within a radically dominated and dominating world. Hence these two moments are inextricable: the suffering that constitutes artworks' expression is 'the nonsubjective in the subject' (*AT*, p. 148)—and, indeed, outside the subject: internal and external nature alike are damaged by an instrumental rationality. This does not mean that art offers immediate access to nature, because the aesthetic and the natural are inevitably subjectively mediated: '[y]ou cannot bring non-mutilated nature to speak', Adorno insists, 'because this non-mutilated nature, pure nature, that is a nature that has not gone through society's mediation process, does not exist'.<sup>103</sup> However, it does mean that art expresses the domination of nature and its concomitant suffering through its 'mimetic language' (*AT*, p. 147) that is inherently distinct from meaning-making discursive language. 'The true language of art is mute' (*AT*, p. 147), even in literature, but 'art seeks to make this muteness eloquent' (*AT*, p. 101). It does so through an excess of expression: 'Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from that more's contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art' (*AT*, p. 104).

Adorno explicitly associates the neglect of natural beauty in post-Kantian aesthetics with the 'burgeoning domination of the concept of freedom and human dignity': 'in accord with this concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank' (*AT*, pp. 81–2). What we see here is a paradox whereby 'freedom for the subject [...] is at the same time unfreedom: unfreedom for the other' (*AT*, p. 82), and in his *Lectures on History and Freedom*, Adorno quite rightly 'leave[s] open the question of what that freedom amounts to' (*HF*, pp. 178–9). Moreover, it would be a mistake to conclude that this 'other' is categorically distinct from the subject: as we have seen, denial of nature within the subject carries with it the gradual destruction of the subject itself. With this in mind, Adorno argues that 'the feeling of natural beauty is intensified with the suffering of the subject thrown back on himself in a mangled and administered world' (*AT*, p. 83). Art is able to expose the façade of subjective autonomy and express the

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<sup>103</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, 17 vols, ed. by Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), III, p. 125. 'Die unverstümmelte Natur kann man nicht zum Sprechen bringen, denn diese unverstümmelte Natur, eine reine Natur, also eine Natur, die nicht durch die Vermittlungsprozesse der Gesellschaft hindurchgegangen wäre, gibt es nicht'. Quoted in and translated by Camilla Flodin, 'The Wor(l)d of the animal. Adorno on Art's Expression of Suffering', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 3 (2011), 1–12 (p. 7).

anguish of the always dominated non-subjective, without whose liberation no true freedom is possible. More than this, indeed, expression, ‘by which nature seeps most deeply into art, is at the same time what is not literally nature’ (*AT*, p. 149), in that it anticipates a non-dominated nature that has never yet existed.

I would argue that *Nacht und Träume* is a play preoccupied by the expressive gaze that takes on a similarly significant role in the contemporaneous *Catastrophe*. This gaze, moreover, is literally figured within the play through the inclusion of an icon: Veronica’s cloth. This object appears within A’s dream, in which R ‘wipes gently B’s brow’ (*Nacht und Träume*, p. 465). According to a cameraman working on the Süddeutscher Rundfunk production of the play, Beckett explained that ‘the cloth made an allusion to the veil that Veronica used to wipe the brow of Jesus on the Way of the Cross. The imprint of Christ’s face remains on the cloth’.<sup>104</sup> This cloth, as Graley Herren notes, ‘was venerated in the early centuries of the common era as an icon of divine origin’.<sup>105</sup> While the cloth cannot be indisputably identified as such within the television play itself, this allegorical reading is in accord with the other major symbol within the dream: a ‘cup’ (p. 465) or chalice, which is held to B’s lips by R, and is strikingly reminiscent of the Last Supper and the Eucharistic ceremony in which Jesus’ gesture is repeated, with the priest holding a chalice of wine to the lips of the communicants.<sup>106</sup> The significance of Veronica’s cloth—or the *vera icon*, as it came to be known—lies, of course, in its iconic status, with the icon defined by its ability to ‘exert its own gaze’,<sup>107</sup> or, as Jean-Luc Marion describes it, to ‘open [...] in a face that gazes at our gazes in order to summon them to its depth’.<sup>108</sup> I would suggest that this allusion to the historical Veronica encourages us to see the expression of *Nacht und Träume* in iconic terms.

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, p. 682.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Splitting Images: Samuel Beckett’s *Nacht und Träume*’, p. 184. Ackerley also notes the cloth’s ‘intimations of the veronica’ (p. 156).

<sup>106</sup> While the image could equally allude to the ‘vinegar [...] mingled with gall’ (Matthew 27:34) forced upon Jesus by the soldiers before his crucifixion, or even the ‘cup’ that he begs God to ‘pass from me’ (Matthew 26:39) in the Garden of Gethsemane, this does not undermine the religious force of the dream sequence, and in fact only serves to emphasise the suffering sedimented within the Christian symbols.

<sup>107</sup> Wynands, p. 7.

<sup>108</sup> *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 19.



For Marion, the ‘phenomenological conflict’ between the idol and the icon is based on their ‘variations in the mode of visibility’.<sup>109</sup> The idol is defined as such by the gaze of the human: it ‘consists only in the fact that it can be seen, that one cannot but see it’.<sup>110</sup> It is absolutely visible: it ‘fills the gaze, it saturates it with visibility, hence dazzles it’.<sup>111</sup> Even while rescuing the idol as an apprehension of the divine by arguing that ‘the idolater never dupes, nor finds himself duped: he only remains—ravished’, Marion admits that the idol ‘represents nothing, but presents a certain low-water mark of the divine; it resembles what the human gaze has experienced of the divine’.<sup>112</sup> He insists that criticising the idol on the grounds that it has been wrought by ‘hands that pray’ misses ‘the essential’: that is, the fact that the human gaze is what constructs the idol as idol.<sup>113</sup> The question that Adorno muses of art—‘how something spiritual that is made, in philosophical terms something “merely posited,” can be true’ (*AT*, p. 173)—is pertinent here, and the icon offers an answer. In the icon, the gaze of the human is supplanted by the gaze of the icon itself, which ‘unbalances human sight in order to engulf it in infinite depth’.<sup>114</sup> Unlike the idol, which only exists through its visibility, the icon ‘needs only itself. This is why it indeed can demand, patiently, that one receive its abandon’.<sup>115</sup> In the face of the icon, the human gaze is unsettled and undermined; for this reason, Marion insists that the icon ‘is not seen, but appears’.<sup>116</sup> Sandra Wynands explains how iconography works in practice:

The image resists being seen, as it were, by persistently coming at the viewer instead of presenting itself complacently for consumption. Or else, multiple perspectives or viewpoints clash in the same image, producing a similarly confusing effect for the viewer by giving her no stable position from which to survey the scene in its entirety.<sup>117</sup>

While Marion insists that ‘the icon is not the concern [...] of the artistic domain’, and Adorno himself would not be hugely sympathetic to Marion’s religiosity, I would suggest that Adorno’s aesthetics and Beckett’s texts are compatible with a conception

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12; p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> Wynands, p. 34.

of iconography, even while it would be foolish to suggest simplistically that *Nacht und Träume* is an icon. Interestingly, Marion's claim that the icon 'never reduces the invisible to the slackened wave of the visible',<sup>118</sup> is remarkably similar to Adorno's formulation that art's 'darkness [...] must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning' (*AT*, p. 35), and Beckett's profession that true art 'stirs in the murky waters of the inexplicable'.<sup>119</sup> Certainly, iconography offers an illuminating and textually rooted lens through which to view this late television play.

Indeed, the medium of *Nacht und Träume* and its particular use cannot be overlooked. Icons are images and as such bear a closer resemblance to visual art than literature. Wynands suggests that 'Beckett's late stage images [...] literally become paintings strangely disturbed by minimal motion: action is reduced to a minimum'.<sup>120</sup> While television necessarily 'moves along a temporal axis', *Nacht und Träume*, like the 'theatrical image[s]' Wynands discusses, is minimal in its movement and is thus 'able to give itself all at once'.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, the play has prompted comparisons with paintings, primarily religious. While Esslin suggests broadly that 'this is a kind of painting, the creation of an "emblem" to be deciphered by the viewer, except that the image moves and has sound',<sup>122</sup> and Enoch Brater characterises the play as almost 'a modernist version of some medieval religious painting',<sup>123</sup> more specific connections have been made to Caravaggio, Rembrandt and 'a schematised, seventeenth-century Dutch painting'.<sup>124</sup> Beyond these visual art resonances, however, television as a medium resembles the depthlessness of icons, in which 'there is no simulated third dimension':<sup>125</sup>

on a television screen, darkness (and in Beckett's dramas, absolute blackness) is flat. If a director wishes to create a sense of recession in a dark television image, he or she will provide visual clues as to the image's depth. [...] In the

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<sup>118</sup> *God Without Being*, p. 17.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Andrea Oppo, *Philosophical Aesthetics and Samuel Beckett* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>120</sup> Wynands, p. 36.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Esslin, p. 47.

<sup>123</sup> 'Toward a Poetics of Television Technology: Beckett's *Nacht und Träume* and *Quad*', *Modern Drama*, 28 (1985), 48–54 (p. 49)

<sup>124</sup> See, respectively, Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 98–100; Herren, p. 183; Knowlson, p. 682. See also Hans H. Hiebel, 'Beckett's Television Plays and Kafka's Late Stories', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 6 (1997), 313–28 (p. 313).

<sup>125</sup> Wynands, p. 33.

TV plays, darkness is a two dimensional surface, forming an impenetrable backdrop to the action; but it is a background that carries none of the connotations of darkness on stage—of depth, of limitlessness, and of infinitude.<sup>126</sup>

In reference to the televised version of *What Where*, with its two-dimensional disembodied faces, David Pattie notes that ‘the window through which I watched the play had itself begun, uncannily, to shift position’.<sup>127</sup> The darkness from which the images emerge in *Nacht und Träume* similarly gives the viewer ‘no stable position from which to survey the scene’, instead confronting us with an enigmatic gaze. Beckett’s use of television rather than film for his allusion to the veronica is striking. The public sphere of film stars and worshipping fans; the penetrative gaze of the camera and the eye; the street and the external world: these elements of film locate it within the sphere of idolatry, in which ‘the visible dazzles the gaze’.<sup>128</sup> The icon, on the other hand, is manifested through the domestic and personal medium of television.

The iconographic logic of *Nacht und Träume* is unable to reveal divinity in the traditional sense because Beckett’s world is overwhelmingly godless. However, its depthless gaze returns us to Adorno’s claim that art’s expression is the non-subjective suffering that overflows the work. This ‘more’ is characterised by Marion as ‘saturation’:

They are saturated phenomena in that constitution encounters there an intuitive givenness that cannot be granted a univocal sense in return. It must be allowed, then, to overflow with many meanings, or an infinity of meanings, each equally legitimate and rigorous, without managing either to unify them or to organize them.<sup>129</sup>

Wynands argues that ‘[t]he saturated phenomenon need not be the divine. It can be anything that resists being taken in its entirety from a single vantage point because it gives itself superabundantly’.<sup>130</sup> Adorno’s conception of the ‘primacy of the object’ (*AT*, p. 191) converges with Marion’s saturated phenomenon insofar as it registers an excess beyond subjectivity that is nonetheless mediated by the subject. While for

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<sup>126</sup> David Pattie, ‘Coming Out of the Dark: Beckett’s TV Plays’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 18 (2009), 123–35 (p. 126).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>128</sup> *God Without Being*, p. 12.

<sup>129</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. by Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 112.

<sup>130</sup> Wynands, p. 15

Adorno all objects can be characterised in this way, art, through its expression, brings the appearance of ‘more than what is literally there’ (*AT*, p. 92) to the level of consciousness. The experience of being flooded with expression, powerless in the face of its iconic gaze, resonates with Adorno’s re-interpretation of the sublime: ‘[r]ather than that, as Kant thought, spirit in the face of nature becomes aware of its own superiority, it becomes aware of its own natural essence. [...] Freedom awakens in the consciousness of its affinity with nature’ (*AT*, p. 356). Just as in *Catastrophe* P overtly and defiantly fixes his gaze upon the audience in a non-discursive expression of the domination inflicted upon him, so *Nacht und Träume* more subtly and less dramatically sets its mute and enigmatic gaze upon the viewer in a radically novel use of television. What Camilla Flodin describes as ‘the flash-like awareness of what freedom would be like’<sup>131</sup> is as transitory and indeterminable as A’s longing for the dreams in which he is physically transported—dreams that he is aware, from his use of the subjunctive, may not return: ‘*Holde Träume, kehret wieder!*’ (‘Fair dreams, may you return again’; *my translation*).

This chapter has sought to sidestep the uninteresting *impasse* of Adorno’s Culture Industry writings in pursuit of a more provocative avenue of inquiry: the role of technology as a troubling mediator between humanity and the natural world. Far from merely an aesthetic concern, the use of technology in art can offer a model for a different relation between subject and nature. This, as Adorno continually emphasises, would be the precondition for freedom, as the subject’s instrumental domination of nature inevitably rebounds upon its author, damaging both in the process. What Adorno has in mind is far greater than localised attempts to deal with the world in a less aggressive way; he is calling for a complete overhaul of our dominant ways of conceiving the relationship between ourselves and the world beyond the subject. This, indeed, is what he has in mind in the *Preface* to the otherwise bleak *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: ‘The critique of enlightenment given [...] is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination’ (*DE*, p. xviii). It is in this sense that Beckett’s media plays are

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<sup>131</sup> Flodin, p. 6.

invaluable: in radically reenvisioning the scope of technology and its role beyond the instrumental control of nature.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### METAPHYSICS

The worst is not  
So long as we can say ‘This is the worst’.

— *King Lear*<sup>1</sup>

It seems somewhat anachronistic to speak of metaphysics in the twenty-first century, not least in connection with Adorno, who insists on the impossibility of holding that, on the one hand, ‘the immutable is truth’ and, on the other, that ‘the mobile, transitory is appearance’ (*ND*, p. 361), and Beckett, whose work has been frequently placed in a post-structuralist context as marking ‘a transition that manifests itself by the increasing capacity to delimit, criticize and undermine metaphysical conceptions’.<sup>2</sup> Adorno himself was acutely aware of the charge of anachronism when he delivered a lecture series on metaphysics in 1965:<sup>3</sup> he notes almost immediately that ‘[t]oday metaphysics is used in almost the entire non-German speaking world as a term of abuse, a synonym for idle speculation, mere nonsense and heaven knows what other intellectual vices’ (*MCP*, p. 1). While a good proportion of these lectures is dedicated to an exploration of Aristotle’s metaphysics, it would be a mistake to attribute Adorno’s interest in the subject to a kind of historical curiosity. ‘Athens and Auschwitz’ (*MCP*, p. 96) form a provocative constellation as Adorno considers with

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997; repr. 2005), p. 306 [IV. 1. 31–2].

<sup>2</sup> Steven Miskinis, ‘Enduring Recurrence: Samuel Beckett’s Nihilistic Poetics’, *ELH*, 63 (1996), 1047–67 (1047). See also Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Eric Migernier, *Beckett and French Theory: The Narrative of Transgression* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); and Sarah Gendron, *Repetition, Difference, and Knowledge in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> This was delivered ‘in conjunction with his own writings’: namely, *Negative Dialectics*, published only a year later in 1966. While the *Lectures* and the third model of *Negative Dialectics*, ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’, follow a similar trajectory, they are by no means identical and are, I suggest, best used in conjunction with each other. Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Editor’s Afterword’, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 191–8 (p. 191).

great seriousness the question of the relevance—and, indeed, possibility—of metaphysics today.

Adorno is self-consciously writing about ‘metaphysics at the time of its fall’ (*ND*, p. 408). What he wishes to salvage—adhering to his own claim that metaphysics ‘is always [...] an attempt to *rescue* something which the philosopher’s genius feels to be fading and vanishing’ (*MCP*, p. 19)—is the speculative quality of metaphysics: its drive to transcend the given. This shifts the focus from the immutable metaphysical ideas that Adorno, following Nietzsche, decries as ideological, to the liberating process of thought itself. If Adorno suggests that ‘true thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves’ (*MM*, p. 192), then this is because thought that does not ‘transcend [...] itself’ (*ND*, p. 392) is not really thought at all, but the thoughtless duplication of the existing. Such duplication is inherently unfree:

This speculative surplus that goes beyond whatever is the case, beyond mere existence, is the element of freedom in thought, and because it is, because it alone does stand for freedom, because it represents the tiny quantum of freedom we possess, it also represents the *happiness* of thought. It is the element of freedom because it is the point at which the expressive need of the subject breaks through the conventional and canalized ideas in which he moves and asserts himself.

(*LND*, p. 108)

This thread between speculation, freedom and happiness is paramount to Adorno’s reconception of metaphysics. Speculation, Adorno argues, ‘amounts to the idea that one should keep on thinking [...] in a motivated, consistent way, going beyond the point where one’s thinking is backed up by facts’ (*LND*, p. 95). This does not, however, mean that speculation disappears into the realm of make-believe, or that the freedom it represents is illusory, rather that the positivistic distinction between what can and cannot be objectively and scientifically known is an unhelpful basis for thought.

Nonetheless, the positivist argument here raises a serious dilemma. The metaphysical problem *par excellence* is that ‘thought, which in its conditionality is supposed to be sufficient to have knowledge only of the conditional, presumes to be the mouthpiece, or even the origin, of the unconditional’ (*MCP*, p. 7). This is essentially the problem of how the empirical world and the transcendent concepts or ideas are mediated: ‘metaphysics’, Adorno insists, ‘cannot be a deductive context of

judgments about things in being, and neither can it be conceived after the model of an absolute otherness terribly defying thought' (*ND*, p. 407). The immanent deduction of the metaphysical from the existent would nullify it altogether. However, metaphysics as 'an absolute otherness' leaves us incapable of perceiving it at all. Adorno's solution is to re-think the concept of transcendence: he argues, as Brian O'Connor explains, that 'we can think against the given without reaching for a realm lying outside the historical-material sphere'.<sup>4</sup> He insists that the experience of transcendence 'was never located so far beyond the temporal as the academic use of the word metaphysics suggests' (*ND*, p. 372). The key term here becomes experience: 'Is it still possible to have a metaphysical experience [*metaphysische Erfahrung*]?'<sup>5</sup> (*ND*, p. 372), Adorno asks, or has experience atrophied to the extent that it is unable to register anything beyond the façade? A logically consistent materialism cannot tolerate the speculative possibility of a distinction between appearance and essence: 'No longer trusting the infinity of its animating essence, it goes against that essence to reinforce its own finiteness, to affix itself to the finite' (*ND*, p. 383). Duly affixed to the finite, the subject rejects even the possibility of that which transcends the existent.

It is within this context that we can see the significance of Beckett's late prose, which, no more than the rest of his corpus, certainly cannot be affiliated with metaphysics in the traditional sense. H. Porter Abbott is uncommon in overtly attributing a metaphysical charge to Beckett's works:

From beginning to end, Beckett's art is one long protest. It is written out of a horror of human wretchedness and a yearning that this wretchedness be lessened. But the overriding sense in Beckett is not that there is something wrong with society or with the means of production or with the distribution of goods and privileges or with the hegemony of social control, but that there is

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<sup>4</sup> *Adorno* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay offers a neat distinction between the 'very different notions of experience' designated by the words *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*: '*Erlebnis* contains within it the root for life (*Leben*) and is sometimes translated as "lived experience". Although *erleben* is a transitive verb and implies an experience of something, *Erlebnis* is often taken to imply a primitive unity prior to any differentiation or objectification. [...] *Erlebnis* generally connotes a more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience than *Erfahrung*. The latter [...] activates a link between memory and experience'. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), p. 11. Adorno betrays a characteristic suspicion of the claims of *Erlebnis* to immediacy, designating *Erfahrung* as 'experience proper'. Quoted in Jay, p. 340.



something massively wrong with the entire arrangement, from birth to death. Beckett's social protest is always shadowed by his metaphysical bafflement.<sup>6</sup>

What I would suggest is that the socio-political concerns that Abbott raises are not so very far apart from the 'metaphysical bafflement' he attributes to Beckett. If, following Adorno, we consider that 'actual events'—and by this he means the expansion of identity-thinking that culminated in Auschwitz—'have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience' (*ND*, p. 362), then the 'horror of human wretchedness' is at once political *and* metaphysical. This is not to say, however, that Adorno articulates some kind of politics of metaphysics: as I shall explore, the glimmers of metaphysical experience that do withstand what Adorno describes as 'the inescapably dense web of immanence' (*ND*, p. 369) could never be the basis for a normative politics. Beckett's metaphysics, like Adorno's, is occasional and fragile: it manifests itself in ephemeral moments that transcend his otherwise relentlessly dark portrayal of 'human wretchedness'.

From the 1960s to his death in 1989, Beckett's prose is characterised by an impulse towards the minimal and enclosed. As S. E. Gontarski suggests, '[t]hese "closed space" tales not infrequently resulted in intractable creative difficulties, [...] and that stuttering creative process of experiment and impasse, breakthrough and breakdown, was folded into the narratives themselves'.<sup>7</sup> These are works that, above all perhaps, are in the process of doing or accomplishing something; as such, they are provisional and even fragmentary: not unfinished *per se*, but unfinishable. This is most obviously apparent in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, which are both, I will argue, driven by the paradoxical aim of imagining a world of pure immanence—paradoxical, of course, because the imagination that is necessary for Beckett's literary creations would necessarily be nullified within the worlds they envision.<sup>8</sup> What we witness in these two texts is the gradual curtailment of

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<sup>6</sup> *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> 'Introduction', in *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1980), pp. vii–xxviii (p. ix).

<sup>8</sup> A similar paradox occurs in *Malone Dies* when Malone writes: 'In vain I grope, I cannot find my exercise-book' (p. 34) and then later notes: 'What a misfortune, the pencil must have slipped from my fingers, for I have only just succeeded in recovering it after fortyeight hours (see above) of intermittent efforts' (p. 49).

metaphysics, as understood in this Adornian context as the ‘joy of elevation, the joy of rising beyond what merely is’ (*MCP*, p. 114). This curtailment and the lack of freedom it signifies is figured by the narrator through the physical confinement of a body or bodies within a variously sized and shaped structure. In *Company*, the relentless constancy of these earlier works is punctuated by displaced and sourceless memories or imaginings. Concealed among these attempts to transcend the dark present are glimmers of transcendence: moments of metaphysical experience that offer a fleeting and unverifiable promise of happiness that, as Martin Schuster suggests, is absolutely ‘*necessary* to freedom’.<sup>9</sup>

## I

Andrew Gibson, following the path of Alain Badiou, argues that one moment in *The Lost Ones* ‘crystallizes the paradoxical insistence repeatedly evident in Beckett’s later work’.<sup>10</sup> This moment is described as follows:

Very rarely, it may happen that one of the vanquished, those who appear definitively to have abandoned the search, re-enters the arena. A searcher may retire from the search, may definitively give up on his desire, and yet all the possibilities continue to exist; which means that the abnegation of desire may after all turn out to be miraculously reversible. This encapsulates Beckett’s conception of liberty. [...] Badiou puts the point simply: it is a cardinal Beckettian principle that there is no eternal damnation. The world of *The Lost Ones* is purgatorial rather than infernal.<sup>11</sup>

This passage alludes to two significant and well-known phrases of Beckett’s: first, what Beckett describes as ‘a wonderful sentence in Augustine’—‘Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned’<sup>12</sup>—and,

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<sup>9</sup> *Autonomy After Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; repr. 2008), p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Harold Hobson, ‘Samuel Beckett: Dramatist of the Year’, *International Theatre Annual*, 1 (1956), 153–5 (p. 153). This makes its most well-known appearance in *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir tells ‘the story’ of ‘Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our saviour. [...] One is supposed to have been saved and the other .... [*He searches for the contrary of saved*] ... damned’ (p. 14).

second, Beckett's claim in 'Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce' that, unlike Dante's Purgatory, 'Mr Joyce's is spherical and excludes culmination'.<sup>13</sup> Augustine's maxim, of course, resonates strongly throughout Beckett's corpus in his syntax of weakness that undermines any movement towards absolute affirmation or absolute negation. The spherical condition of Joyce's Purgatory could likewise be attributed to Beckett's own texts. Gibson astutely suggests that this preservation of possibility—'Do not despair'—is a distinct feature of the late works, even as there is nothing in their resolutely spherical—or, indeed, cylindrical—shape to guarantee an escape from their purgatorial conditions.<sup>14</sup>

It is my claim that this tension reaches its zenith in two short works that neither Gibson nor Badiou considers, *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, though in a somewhat different way to that which Gibson identifies in *The Lost Ones*. In these texts, Beckett, I suggest, stages the inherently paradoxical attempt to negate the very possibility of possibility in positing the existence of a sphere of absolute immanence. Adorno understands immanence as the dialectical opposite to transcendence. A perspective that is utterly prescribed by its immediate context would take place in a 'closed complex of immanence' (*P*, p. 265). Such an existence fills Adorno with horror because it sucks all possibility out of life: without transcendence, there is no past, no future, and no other. Immanence is manifested in the eternal sameness that Adorno sees encroaching on modern life—the result of reason's refusal to admit the existence of anything outside of itself as it consumes and neutralises anything remotely different: the 'belly turned mind' (*ND*, p. 23). The self-conscious irony of Beckett's late prose here lies in his attempt to posit absolute immanence within an imaginative act: to imagine the death of imagination. In a multi-layered narrative, Beckett fictionalises (and thus imagines) a narrator who in turn imagines—and instructs the reader to do likewise—the death of imagination. Possibility, then, is preserved in the imaginative origins of the task itself and, indeed, in the text's status as art. Nonetheless, Beckett plumbs the depths of absolute immanence and, in doing so, exposes its horror.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983; repr. 2001), pp. 19–34 (p. 33).

<sup>14</sup> Gibson, p. 214.

Such horror can only be fully understood in relation to its post-metaphysical context, in which transcendence has been systematically eroded. For Adorno, the zealous process of disenchantment propagated by a not-yet enlightened enough enlightenment has come so far that it is practically impossible to posit anything outside of the existent.<sup>15</sup> It is important to emphasise that this claim does not betray a conservative nostalgia for fixed and unchanging metaphysical values. Adorno is adamant that traditional metaphysics cannot be sustained in a post-Auschwitz world: as I discussed in Chapter 3, he dismisses any affirmative conception of the world as a form of betrayal to the victims of history. However, in having ‘lost sight of the moment of transcendence’,<sup>16</sup> we have all but sacrificed the possibility of changing existing conditions or even the freedom to imagine an alternative. In this context, the emphasis on imagination in Beckett’s ‘closed space’ stories takes on a deep significance.

It is primarily to Kant that Adorno turns in his exploration of the philosophical justification of immanence. This is partly, but not principally, because of the radical significance of Kant’s thought for his successors—‘What has gone before and what will come after are both largely to be understood in terms of what occurs here’<sup>17</sup>—but also, as Bernstein notes, because of the contradictions implicit in Kant’s identification of a ‘block’ (*KCP*, p. 65) or barrier limiting knowledge, beyond which we cannot hope to direct our thoughts without being entangled in contradiction: ‘it both legislates radical immanence as the condition for possible knowledge and acknowledges the inevitability and necessity of thinking that transcends the bounds of

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<sup>15</sup> In this, as Bernstein notes, Adorno is following Weber’s conception of ‘rationalization’, according to which ‘there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather [...] one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted’. Quoted in J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 7. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer insist that the ‘critique of enlightenment given [...] is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination’ (p. xviii).

<sup>16</sup> J. M. Bernstein, ‘Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics’, in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 177–212 (p. 187).

<sup>17</sup> A. W. Moore, ‘Kant: The Possibility, Scope, and Limits of Metaphysics’, in *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 107–42 (p. 107).

experience'.<sup>18</sup> This contradiction, indeed, constitutes the very opening of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason.

(*CPR* Avii)

I have repeatedly emphasised Adorno's Hegelian insistence on teasing out the contradictions inherent in philosophical thought, along with his resolutely un-Hegelian refusal to sublimate such contradictions in a higher unity. His work on Kant and metaphysics is no exception. Characteristically, Adorno neither wholly condemns nor celebrates the 'Kantian block' (*KCPR*, p. 75), instead emphasising, on the one hand, its 'terroristic' element in advocating 'a ban on all thinking', and, on the other, its preservation of non-identity in maintaining a sphere that is beyond the ravenous rage of the 'belly turned mind' (*ND*, p. 23). Ultimately, for Adorno, it is this tension in Kant's philosophy that preserves its significance for the question of metaphysics. In contradistinction, post-Kantian Idealism, which 'proclaimed the mind as the absolute' (*ND*, p. 276) and thereby abolished the Kantian block altogether, is ultimately one giant tautology:

knowledge directed at *natura naturata* is no knowledge at all; for such knowledge possesses nothing in its object but the knowing subject itself. In consequence, by resigning itself heroically to this situation, it simultaneously misses out on the very thing that defines the concept of knowledge: that it fails to recognize whatever is not at one with cognition.

(*LND*, p. 82)

Kant may set limits to the possibility of knowledge, may deny reason's right to 'stray into intelligible worlds' (quoted in *KCPR*, p. 6), but he crucially 'leaves open the possibility of reinstating or salvaging metaphysics' (*KCPR*, p. 47).

It is this tension between critique and rescue that Adorno traces back to Aristotle and suggests is definitive of the metaphysical project itself. As something 'fundamentally *modern*—if you do not restrict the concept of modernity to our world but extend it to include Greek history' (*MPC*, p. 19), metaphysics participates in the enlightenment project of demythologisation, but it is equally driven to salvage those

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<sup>18</sup> 'Why Rescue Semblance', p. 187.

very concepts it critiques. The Kantian rescuing urge is manifested in the intelligible sphere, and its motivation, Adorno insists, ‘lies far deeper than just in the pious wish to have [...] some of the traditional ideas in hand’ (*ND*, p. 385). Nonetheless, this ‘Protestant apologetics’ (*ND*, p. 385) is certainly part of the story for Adorno, who reads the Kantian block as an expression of ‘bourgeois resignation’ (*KCPR*, p. 6): an unreflective and bumbling contentment to ‘set up house in the finite world and explore it in every direction’ (*KCPR*, p. 6). The tension in Kant’s thought is between this very resignation, which manifests itself in the block, and its preservation of that which lies beyond the block, even if this is only in indeterminate form, offering only the ultimately unsatisfactory ‘consolation [...] of the kind we generally feel at funerals’ (*KCPR*, p. 49). The thing-in-itself is one such example of Kantian speculation. As O’Connor argues, for Adorno, the thing-in-itself is ‘nonidentical in that it is never directly given, yet it somehow stands behind the things as they appear, an ever present image of what cannot be reduced to the intentions or concepts of the subject’.<sup>19</sup> While Adorno acknowledges that ‘Kantian philosophy is one that enshrines the validity of the *non-identical*’ (*KCPR*, p. 67), he registers frustration at the inaccessibility of non-identity:

since the process of cognition and its content are radically separated from this absolutely unknowable things-in-themselves [sic] by [...] a rupture, in the Platonic sense, the idea of a thing-in-itself adds nothing to my actual knowledge. This means that what I recognize as an object is just that, an object in the sense that we have discussed at length; it is *not* a thing-in-itself, and always remains something constituted by a subject.

(*KCPR*, p. 129)

The Kantian block, by limiting knowledge to the sphere of reason, risks circumscribing thought entirely, rendering it an ‘absolute tautology’ (*MM*, p. 123): the narcissism of thought only ever knowing itself. Nevertheless, Kant’s acute awareness of ‘the heterogeneous, the block, the limit’ (*KCPR*, p. 18) demonstrates ‘a mode of thought that is not satisfied by reducing everything that exists to itself’ (*KCPR*, p. 66)—a mode of thought not shared by his Idealist successors. Adorno describes this awareness as ‘a kind of metaphysical mourning, a kind of memory of what is best, of something that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget’ (*KCPR*, p. 176).

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<sup>19</sup> O’Connor, p. 102.

As Irit Degani-Raz argues, '[i]t is commonly accepted that Beckett explores in his works various kinds of limits, physical as well as mental'.<sup>20</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that the Kantian block takes on a particular significance when considered in relation to Beckett's works. In *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, Beckett explores the very situation that forms the basis of Kant's philosophy: the limitation of thought to what we can objectively know, with its consequent rejection of 'all strange' (p. 173). Moreover, just as Kant's philosophy is haunted by the non-identical that is always beyond bounds, these two 'closed space' works manifest a struggle—necessarily and ironically unsuccessful—to maintain a sphere of total immanence, while growing close enough to the death of imagination to provoke a sense of abhorrence.

In his preliminary injunction—'Imagination Dead Imagine'—the narrator of *All Strange Away* asks the reader to imagine a situation of pure immanence, in which speculation has no place. He directs our thoughts to 'A place, then someone in it, that again' (*All Strange Away*, p. 169). The repetition here works on both the level of semantics, as the statement echoes the preceding 'A place, that again' (p. 169), and thematics, as the narrator self-reflexively registers the derivative nature of his words in relation to Beckett's corpus as a whole. More significantly, however, this repetition reflects the very 'principle of immanence' (*DE*, p. 8) that the narrator is attempting to imagine:

The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation—this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was.

(*DE*, p. 8)

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<sup>20</sup> 'Cartesian Fingerprints in Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 21 (2012), 223–43 (p. 223). Degani-Raz's reading of *Imagination Dead Imagine* works from a very different premise to my own. She posits that the limit this text attempts to cross is the problem of imagining the death of imagination. In this way, she takes as read the Kantian claim that we cannot overstep the bounds of secure knowledge (though Wittgenstein provides her immediate frame of reference: 'in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limits of the unthinkable (i.e. we should have to think what cannot be thought)' (p. 225)). My basis is rather the opposite: the death of imagination, or, at least, its severe dwindling, is already our socio-political predicament, a predicament that Beckett demonstrates an awareness of in these two texts.

Pure immanence presupposes repetition by ruling out the possibility of anything new. With the death of future possibility comes the death of memory. The allusion to the war—‘Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war’ (p. 169)—must be stifled, not, as Daniel Gribben suggests, in an act of self-censorship that encrypts the ‘real story’ that the narrator ‘does not want to [...] re-enact’,<sup>21</sup> but, rather, because memory offers a route out of the immanence that the narrator is attempting to imagine.

What follows is 13 pages (*Imagination Dead Imagine* is considerably more condensed) of a continually self-revising description of a closed space containing a figure. The narrator changes, among other things, the size of the space from ‘Five foot square, six high’ (*All Strange Away*, p. 169) to ‘three foot square, five high’ (p. 170) (‘Tighten it round him’ (p. 170)), to a ‘perfect cube’ of ‘three foot every way’ (p. 173), to a ‘rotunda three foot diameter eighteen inches high supporting a dome semi-circular in section’ (p. 176) and, finally, to a ‘rotunda two foot diameter and two from ground to verge’ (p. 177). These gradually reducing dimensions serve to further restrict the figure, the physical containment a clear metaphor for the subtraction of possibility as the death of imagination draws closer. Another significant revision is the gender of the figure, who starts as an unnamed man and is arbitrarily changed into a woman, Emma, ‘since sex not seen so far’ (p. 172). There is a strong implication that the original man is named Emmo, since at the sex-change the images of Emma on the walls of the structure change to those of Emmo. The similarity between the two names and their closeness to palindromes contribute to the text’s impulse towards repetition as an elimination of all difference.

Graham Fraser suggests that the ‘permutative impulse’ in *All Strange Away* functions as part of the narrator’s ‘pornographic imagination’.<sup>22</sup> Referring to Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy, which subordinates the latter’s use of ‘fixities and definites’ to the former’s poetic recreation of the given,<sup>23</sup> Fraser argues that ‘[t]he play of Fancy in *All Strange Away* is expressed in the

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Samuel Beckett: Number 465. Censorship of the Self and Imagination in Beckett’s Work After World War II’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 13 (2003), 215–27 (p. 216).

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Pornographic Imagination in *All Strange Away*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41 (1995), 515–30 (p. 516; p. 515).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 516.



narrator's obsessive manipulation of his material'.<sup>24</sup> While there are pornographic images of Emma on the wall—'First face alone, lovely beyond words, leave it at that, then deasil breasts alone, then thighs and cunt alone, then arse and hole alone' (*All Strange Away*, p. 171)<sup>25</sup>—as well as 'the presence of naked, sweating bodies', Fraser emphasises that the narrator's 'real interest remains the confining space'.<sup>26</sup> He also notes the fragmented nature of the images on the wall and the voyeurism of both the narrator and Emma. I agree that there is a distinctly pornographic quality to *All Strange Away*. However, I suggest that this is constitutive of the text's broader paradoxical project of imagining absolute immanence.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise the deep affinities between Sade—the 'quintessential example' of pornography according to Fraser<sup>27</sup>—and the instrumental reason that characterises enlightenment philosophy and bourgeois society. More specifically, they suggest that Sade exposes the intellectual proximity between his pornographic depictions of 'perverted sexuality' (*DE*, p. 85) and enlightenment's drive towards systematic unity and disenchantment: he 'pushes the scientific principle to annihilating extremes' (*DE*, p. 74). The 'sexually objectified and abstracted' fragments of bodies that provide the material for pornography can be seen as the logical extension of a social system that 'treats human beings as things' (*DE*, p. 67). Juliette's sexual permutations, similarly, are traceable to the 'repeatable, replaceable process' (*DE*, p. 65) of enlightenment. More pertinently, Juliette demonstrates the same drive towards demythologisation that is definitive of

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<sup>24</sup> Fraser, p. 517.

<sup>25</sup> The unusual word 'deasil', with its Gaelic etymology, refers to the clockwise movement of the narrator's gaze and also appears in *How It Is* (p. 111), in which context Daniela Caselli notes that 'the Purgatorial direction of salvation [...] can be read as one of the overdetermined meanings with which the text plays'. *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 168. This purgatorial motion accords with my claim that *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* are characterised by their provisionality; they quite literally work through a dilemma rather than presenting it as solved. Within this context, damnation and salvation are equally distinct possibilities.

<sup>26</sup> Fraser, p. 515; p. 518. This is an interesting reading that does not rely on the figures themselves as the basis of the pornographic imagination. However, Fraser's insistence that the 'point of the permutation is not to exhaust the possibilities but to repeat them endlessly' (p. 518) fails to acknowledge the very aim of the narrative: to imagine the death of imagination itself. For this reason, the permutations cannot be ends in and of themselves.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 516. Beckett was also profoundly interested in Sade's work and even agreed to translate *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* in March 1938, despite concerns about 'the practical effect on my own future freedom of literary action in England & USA'. He later withdrew from this commitment. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), I, p. 608 (21 February 1938).

the project of enlightenment: ‘She abominates any veneration which cannot be shown to be rational: belief in God and his dead son, obedience to the Ten Commandments, preference of the good to the wicked, salvation to sin’ (*DE*, p. 76). Her systematic sexual permutations are symptomatic of a closing circle of immanence: a circle of her own making, but that attests to a broader rejection of metaphysics. This is most apparent in her wholehearted rejection of love—as something beyond the stagnant zone of apathetic rationalism. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, ‘[i]t is not just romantic sexual love which has been condemned as metaphysics by science and industry but love of any kind, for no love can withstand reason’ (*DE*, p. 91). The possibility of something beyond the pornographic gaze is barely hinted at in *All Strange Away* before it is snatched away: ‘Imagine lifetime, gems, evenings with Emma and the flights by night, no, no that again’ (p. 171).<sup>28</sup> This moment is a significant contrast to the more crude sexual imaginings: ‘Imagine him kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking and bugging all this stuff’ (p. 171). It is hardly coincidental that the glimmer of love in the text is coupled with an allusion to the narrator’s memory of wartime ‘flights by night’. Anything that resonates beyond the sphere of immanence must be cast off.

Adorno emphasises the relationship between pornography and immanence in a less direct and yet perhaps more revealing way in his short 1956 essay, ‘Looking Back on Surrealism’. He notes the pornographic basis of Surrealist montages: in their disjunction of fragmented images they offer ‘mementos of the objects of the partial drives that once aroused the libido’ (*NLI*, p. 89). Such images are ‘*nature morte*’ in its most literal sense: they are ‘[t]hinglike and dead’ (*NLI*, p. 89). Adorno’s concern regarding Surrealism is that it, as Richard Wolin puts it, ‘celebrate[s] a reified immediacy in its montages’.<sup>29</sup> By presenting ‘random assemblages of existing objects in their immediately given, hence reified form’,<sup>30</sup> Surrealism risks duplicating and therefore confirming ‘everyday life in its indigent given state’.<sup>31</sup> Pornography is the

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<sup>28</sup> The eruption of extraordinarily big words—‘Know happiness’ (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, p. 86) and ‘Joy!’ (*Worstward Ho*, p. 104)—in other late prose texts adheres to a similar logic.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism’, in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 93–122 (p. 108).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977), p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Wolin, p. 107.

model for Surrealism because, for Adorno, it is already a mode of representation that is trapped in immanence.

It is notable that *All Strange Away* dispenses with the pornographic images on the walls relatively early on in the text. The imaginings of the narrator adhere to conventional gender stereotypes: we are enjoined to imagine Emmo ‘kissing, caressing, licking [etc.]’ (*All Strange Away*, p. 171) Emma, but to imagine Emma ‘being all kissed, licked, sucked, fucked and so on by all that’ (p. 172): Emma, as a woman, is necessarily the object of sexual attention. As a means of accounting for the sudden disappearance of the pornographic images on the wall—‘no Emmo, no need, never was’ (p. 173)—Fraser suggests that once ‘Emma is the figure within the box, Emmo is no longer needed as a lens through which to observe her. Consequently, Emmo is erased from the scenario entirely’.<sup>32</sup> On this reading, Emma was always the intended object of the pornographic gaze. I would suggest that the narrator’s ultimate rejection of the pornographic image is far more pragmatic. While pornography reflects and affirms the reification of the given, there is an element of it that points beyond the merely existing. Adorno suggests that the truth content of Surrealism lies in its very fidelity to bourgeois society. In its images, ‘what has been forgotten reveals itself to be the true object of love’ (*NLI*, p. 89). While this truth content is extraordinarily fragile and is betrayed at every minute by the more dominant ‘signs of a Sisyphean, hellish, eternal recurrence’,<sup>33</sup> it is still a moment of heterogeneity, a divergence from immanence. The pornographic images in the cuboid—‘*nature morte*’—prompt an unsolicited memory of ‘lifetime, gems, evenings with Emma’. Since the use of pornography in *All Strange Away* is always a means to an end—that of imagining the death of imagination, of envisioning a space of pure immanence—its failure necessitates its removal from the imagined scenario.

The context of Romanticism that offers an explanation for *All Strange Away*’s distinction between imagination and fancy has been well explored by critics.<sup>34</sup> Paul Davies provides a useful summary:

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<sup>32</sup> Fraser, p. 524.

<sup>33</sup> Wolin, p. 112.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Fraser; and Michael Angelo Rodriguez, ‘Romantic Agony: Fancy and Imagination in Samuel Beckett’s *All Strange Away*’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 18 (2007), 131–42;

For Coleridge, the imagination [...] does the transformative metaphorical work of the poet, ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create’. Fancy, on the other hand, ‘has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites’. [...] Fancy is an *aggregative* faculty; it arranges units but does not create them or change them.<sup>35</sup>

As a supplement to this Romantic context, the *OED* can offer some useful information. Fancy is a contraction of ‘fantasy’. Its meanings include: ‘A spectral apparition; an illusion of the senses’ (now obsolete); ‘Delusive imagination; hallucination’; ‘A mental image’; ‘A supposition resting on no solid grounds; an arbitrary notion’; and ‘Caprice, changeful mood’. These various definitions emphasise the inferiority of fancy in relation to imagination. Primarily, this inferiority is manifested in fancy’s inability to precipitate change. It is characterised by impotence. Within *All Strange Away*, the power of imagination is attributed solely to the narrator, who continually exhorts the reader and himself to ‘imagine’. Fancy, on the other hand, belongs to the figure within the narrative itself, whether Emmo or Emma.<sup>36</sup> I suggest that in *All Strange Away*, fancy acts as the last remnant of hope in a context of encircling immanence. For all fancy’s impotence to effect real change in its surroundings, it nonetheless mounts an impoverished resistance to the text’s drive towards absolute identity by offering a reminder of something different: Adorno is adamant that ‘should fantasy be driven out, judgement too, the real act of knowledge, is exorcised’ (*MM*, pp. 122–3). Hope, of course, is by no means a guarantee that that which is hoped for exists, or could exist. As Adorno acknowledges, ‘Nietzsche in the *Antichrist* voiced the strongest argument not merely against theology but against metaphysics, that hope is mistaken for truth’ (*MM*, p. 97). Nonetheless, he continues:

Nietzsche himself taught *amor fati*: ‘thou shalt love thy fate’. [...] We might well ask whether we have more reason to love what happens to us, to affirm what is because it is, than to believe true what we hope. Is it not the same false inference that leads from the existence of stubborn facts to their erection as the highest value, as he criticizes in the leap from hope to truth? [...] [T]he origin of *amor fati* might be sought in a prison. Love of stone walls and barred windows is the last resort of someone who sees and has nothing else to love. (*MM*, p. 98)

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Paul Davies, *The Ideal Real: Beckett’s Fiction and Imagination* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Davies, pp. 142–3.

<sup>36</sup> Davies disagrees with this, arguing that ‘[t]he provisional, speculative, and idly permutative language which generates the bulk of the text is clearly an example of fancy running away with itself, left on its own by the dying imagination to sustain itself solely on “images which it has had no part in producing”’ (p. 144).

Nietzsche identifies a logical fallacy in Christianity based on the ‘false inference’ that what we hope is the case is therefore true. However, as Adorno notes, this fallacy can also be ascribed to Nietzsche’s own thought: facts no more assure that there is nothing beyond them than hope guarantees truth. Moving beyond this impasse, Adorno attempts to salvage the concept of hope by arguing that ‘[i]n the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable’ (*MM*, p. 98). Truth, if it is not to be mere tautology, must be more than ‘the practicable summarizing and arranging of the merely existent’ (*MCP*, p. 115).

There is a distinct similarity between what Adorno suggests truth is *not*—that is, the ‘mere registering, order and summarizing of facts’ (*MCP*, p. 115) valorized by positivism—and what Coleridge claims fancy *is*: ‘the deliberate practice of reducing “the conceivable” to the “bounds of the picturable”’.<sup>37</sup> If this is the case, then the immanence the narrator of *All Strange Away* is striving to imagine is more definitive than it at first appears. The ‘Fancy’ that provides the ‘only hope’ (*All Strange Away*, p. 170) for Emmo and Emma is worse than impotent: it actively contributes to the drive towards immanence within the rotunda. If this is an accurate description of the situation, however, then the reiterated coupling of ‘Fancy’ with ‘hope’ and the threat of ‘Fancy dead’ (p. 171) become inexplicable. If Fancy assists the identity-drive of the text then why would its death or absence be necessary? Even if Beckett does indeed gesture towards Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy in *All Strange Away*, I suggest that he does not in fact simply replicate Coleridge’s valuation of imagination over fancy. Fancy may well be an inferior faculty to imagination, but it still has the capacity to inspire ‘hope’. Its final disintegration is the text’s muted tragedy: ‘henceforth no other sounds than these and never were that is than sop to mind faint sighing sound for tremor of sorrow at faint memory of a lying side by side and fancy murmured dead’ (p. 181).

Of course, *All Strange Away* does not succeed in its project of ‘Imagination dead imagine’. Not only is such a project premised on a paradox, but, as I have shown, the drive towards immanence is also interrupted throughout by moments of resistance. This, however, does not mark the text as a failure, but rather attests to the

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

truth that ‘everything is not just nothing. If it were, whatever is would be pale, colorless, indifferent’ (*ND*, p. 104). Adorno argues that the Kantian block is premised on ‘the unthinkability of despair’: that his salvaging of the intelligible sphere ‘condemns the intolerability of extant things’ (*ND*, p. 385). Kant insists that ‘he who has not conducted himself so as to be unworthy of happiness must be able to hope to partake of it’ (*CPR* A813/B841): that is, there must be a connection between virtue and happiness. Only with such a connection, as Bernstein speculates, would ‘the happiness of the Nazi and the suffering of his or her virtuous victim [...] bespeak a moral deformity in the world order’.<sup>38</sup> Kant is only able to save this connection through his construction of the intelligible sphere:

I say, accordingly, that just as the moral principles are necessary in accordance with reason in its **practical** use, it is equally necessary to assume in accordance with reason in its **theoretical** use that everyone has cause to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct, and that the system of morality is therefore inseparably combined with the system of happiness, though only in the idea of pure reason.  
(*CPR* A809/B837)

Here we see that the reconciliation between virtue and happiness only takes place within ‘the idea of pure reason’. Our judgment that it is unjust for an immoral person to achieve great happiness or for a moral person to suffer is only possible because ‘it is grounded on a **highest reason**’ (*CPR* A810/B838). For all its inadequacies, this move manifests a moment of radical speculation within Kant’s system. Adorno argues that the very feeling of despair attests to our consciousness that there could be something different; it proves, as it were, that the ‘spell’ of immanence is not yet absolute: ‘Grayness could not fill us with despair if our minds did not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole’ (*ND*, pp. 377–8). That Kant constructs the elusive and unreachable intelligible sphere in reaction against the ‘intolerability of extant things’ demonstrates his awareness that ‘[t]he world’s course is not absolutely conclusive’ (*ND*, p. 404). Adorno’s crucial contention is that while ‘there is a “block” preventing access to the non-identical, the metaphysical, [...] this “block” is historical not a priori’.<sup>39</sup> Kant’s block limits reason to its regulative use, which ‘does not allow us to cognize what an object is as a thing in itself’ but ‘stimulates us to search for an ever more complete

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Why Rescue Semblance?’, p. 191.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

understanding of that object’;<sup>40</sup> Adorno’s historicisation of the block, however, allows us to posit something beyond regulative knowledge of the metaphysical—only, however, if we discard Kant’s limited scientific conception of knowledge.

I will return to Adorno’s account of metaphysical experience in the next section of this chapter. It is certainly the case that the ‘hope’ of *All Strange Away* does not move beyond the negative truth that despair is not yet conclusive: that its very possibility ‘guarantees to us that the hopelessly missed things exist’ (*ND*, p. 372) or that, in the words of *King Lear*’s Edgar that appear in Beckett’s ‘Sottisier Notebook’: ‘The worst is not | So long as we can say “This is the worst”’.<sup>41</sup> Such despair is perhaps all the more acute in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, which, in its highly condensed form, evokes a pathos that is rarer in the more scientific register of *All Strange Away*. The text as a whole demonstrates a closer affinity to the world as we know it: the narrator’s observation that ‘imagination not dead yet’ (*Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 182) provides him with the stimulus for the text itself: ‘yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine’ (p. 182). His use of the modifier ‘yet’ works on a personal level, an acknowledgement that his faculties are not quite spent; however, it is also a broader indication of an enclosing context of immanence that neutralises any speculative impulse. At the end of the short text, the narrator withdraws from the rotunda altogether—an unimaginable action in *All Strange Away*: ‘Leave them there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness’ (p. 185). The possibility of ‘better elsewhere’ is ‘invalidated as uttered’ (*The Unnamable*, p. 1), while the rotunda itself is reduced to complete identity: a ‘white speck lost in whiteness’. This is the most extreme instance of absolute immanence within the two texts in that it registers the dying of the narrator’s imagination itself.

But the significance of *Imagination Dead Imagine* is to be found in its attention to the basic condition of *life* of its two inhabitants. That they are alive is proven to the narrator by their breath: ‘Hold a mirror to their lips, it mists’ (p.

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<sup>40</sup> Predrag Cicovacki, ‘Kant’s Debt to Leibniz’, in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. by Graham Bird (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 79–92 (p. 88). See CPR A509/B537.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Steven Matthews, ‘Beckett’s Late Style’, in *Beckett and Death*, ed. by Steven Barfield, Philip Tew, and Matthew Feldman (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 188–205 (p. 189).

184)—an allusion to Lear’s own desperate use of ‘a looking-glass’ to determine if Cordelia’s ‘breath will mist or stain the stone’.<sup>42</sup> If in *King Lear*, the possibility of Cordelia’s recovery is ‘a chance which does redeem all sorrows’, while her death is an ‘image of [...] horror’,<sup>43</sup> in *Imagination Dead Imagine* the distinction between life and death is not so clear. The narrator admits that ‘Sweat and mirror notwithstanding they might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible’ (p. 184). This attentiveness to the corporeal existence of the bodies, who ‘seem to want nothing essential’ (p. 184), emphasises Adorno’s claim that, in Bernstein’s words, ‘life does not of itself carry the promise of possible experience, of possible meaningfulness. Just carrying on is not the same as human possibility’.<sup>44</sup> For Adorno, this is figured in its most extreme form in Auschwitz, which encapsulates the ‘human cost of the violence of system and identity’.<sup>45</sup> Auschwitz, for Adorno, ‘confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death’ (*ND*, p. 362). In projecting ‘the figure of a world reduced to self-identity without remainder, a world without an outside and without possibility’,<sup>46</sup> Auschwitz neutralises the distinction between life and death. While Adorno leaves this claim in abstract terms, we can better appreciate his meaning by turning to Giorgio Agamben’s characterisation of the figure of the *Muselmann*, the term referring to those in the concentration camps who, overcome by extreme malnutrition and both physical and mental exhaustion, had simply given up.<sup>47</sup> Primo Levi describes them as:

an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, always too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call

<sup>42</sup> *King Lear*, p. 385 [V. 3. 275]; p. 386 [V. 3. 276].

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386 [V. 3. 279]; p. 386 [V. 3. 278].

<sup>44</sup> ‘Why Rescue Semblance?’, p. 184.

<sup>45</sup> O’Connor, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Why Rescue Semblance’, p. 183.

<sup>47</sup> For more on Beckett and *Muselmänner*, see Marcin Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett’s Fiction* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), pp. 81–7; David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011); Robert Harvey, *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility* (London: Continuum, 2010); Russell Smith, ‘Bearing Witness in *How It Is*’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujour’hui*, 19 (2008), 351–60; Daniel Katz, ‘What Remains of Beckett: Evasion and History’, in *Beckett and Phenomenology*, ed. by Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 144–57; and Russell Smith, ‘“The acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself”: Beckett, the Author-Function, and the Ethics of Enunciation’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujour’hui*, 18 (2007), 341–54.



their death death in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.<sup>48</sup>

The defining factor of the *Muselmänner* for Agamben is ‘not so much that their life is no longer life (this kind of degradation holds in a certain sense for all camp inhabitants and is not an entirely new experience) but, rather, that their death is not death’.<sup>49</sup> The *Muselmänner* have no experience, no memory: there is nothing left within them to die. When Adorno argues, then, that the ‘pure identity of all people with their concept is nothing other than their death’ (*MCP*, p. 108), he does not necessarily mean their physical demise, because death has become identical with a life without experience or possibility.

It is the horror of this absolute identity, I suggest, that in *Imagination Dead Imagine* prompts ‘for the eye of prey the infinitesimal shudder instantaneously suppressed’ (*Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 185). The use of the word ‘shudder’ to describe the narrator and reader’s response to the figures in the rotunda takes on a particular resonance when considered in light of Adorno’s concept of the ‘shudder [*der Schauer*]’ (*AT*, p. 26). The shudder, for Adorno, discloses a metaphysical experience analogous, as Gordon Finlayson suggests, to the ‘experience of wonder underlying classical metaphysics’.<sup>50</sup> The shudder is a response to ‘the horror of pure identity’,<sup>51</sup> manifested most radically in Auschwitz but increasingly evident in the social world. As an authentic response to such horror that is predicated on experience, the shudder is at risk of liquidation: Adorno registers the fear ‘that the shudder will dissipate’ (*AT*, p. 106). Modern art works, however, preserve and express it. The shudder prompted by Beckett’s late prose works is soberly predicted by *Imagination Dead Imagine* as the appropriate response to the context of immanence it is attempting to imagine: ‘life in the subject’, Adorno argues, ‘is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell’ (*AT*, p. 418). The shudder’s instantaneous suppression in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, therefore, registers a worrying indication that experience is being nullified: that the ‘merited shudder in the face of [...] a monstrosity’ (*AT*, p. 336) is gradually being replaced by

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> Agamben, p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Adorno: Modern Art, Metaphysics and Radical Evil’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 10 (2003), 71–95 (p. 82).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

apathetic indifference: the final sign before the flashes of transcendence darken forever.

## II

If *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* are Beckett's inherently paradoxical attempts to imagine a context of complete immanence, a context in which life becomes indistinguishable from death and experience is numbed, *Company*, fifteen years later, can be read as Beckett's effort to escape the imprisoning rotunda of immanence through what Bernstein describes as 'fugitive' metaphysical experiences.<sup>52</sup> The majority of the text—'forty-four of the fifty-nine paragraphs',<sup>53</sup> Davies assures us with a degree of exasperation—is given over to the repetitive description (by a third person narrator) of 'one on his back in the dark' (*Company*, p. 3) and the disembodied voices he hears. This basic premise is reminiscent of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*—the 'place where he lies' is suggested to be 'a hemispherical chamber of generous diameter' (p. 23)—though the narrative treatment of the situation is markedly different. Moreover, this permutative description is interrupted by sustained passages devoted to (true or false) memories, narrated in the second person to the body in the dark. These memories or imaginings offer more or less successful speculations that transcend the sphere of otherwise dominant immanence. Moments of the text can be read in light of Adorno's concept of metaphysical experience.

First, however, it is worth considering what it means to describe something as a metaphysical experience. The Kantian block effectively debarred knowledge of the transcendent; nothing mediates between the empirical and the intelligible except the elusive 'as if' of regulative knowledge. After Auschwitz, Adorno argues, an affirmative or traditional metaphysics is no longer possible: 'our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate' (*ND*,

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<sup>52</sup> Adorno: *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 419.

<sup>53</sup> Davies, p. 185.

p. 361). However, a post-metaphysical complacency that rejects transcendence altogether or is indifferent to it conceals, Adorno argues, ‘a horror that would take men’s breath away if they did not repress it’ (*ND*, p. 395). This horror, as I have explored, pervades the contexts of (near) total immanence in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of an obsolete and morally culpable metaphysics, on the one hand, and a thought-dulling immanence on the other, Adorno proposes what O’Connor aptly describes as ‘a post-metaphysical version of the metaphysical project’ that relies on ‘reframing the core metaphysical notion of transcendence—of going beyond what is immediately given—within a materialist philosophy’.<sup>54</sup> This involves shattering the Kantian block—Kant’s ‘*ignoramus*’ is replaced by the fallible hope that ‘we do not know yet, but that some day, perhaps, the mystery will be solved after all’ (*ND*, p. 386)—but not in the name of the conceptual knowledge of the absolute that Kant ruled out. Rather, Adorno sees metaphysical experiences as elusive promises of something else: promises that, crucially, are ‘not aimed at a realm beyond the historical world, but rather at an altered state of the world itself’.<sup>55</sup> Herein lies the materialist element of Adorno’s metaphysics: ‘transcendence’, he argues, ‘feeds on nothing but the experiences we have in immanence’ (*ND*, p. 398). The traditional diremption between the intramundane and the transcendent is no longer possible—if it ever was.

One significant instance of this is in the corporeal elements of death that are so neatly shaved off from the supercilious metaphysical understanding of the same concept:

The integration of physical death into culture should be rescinded in theory—not, however, for the sake of an ontologically pure being named Death, but for the sake of that which the stench of cadavers expresses and we are fooled about by their transfiguration into ‘remains’.

(*ND*, p. 366)

This ‘integration’ of death into theory that Adorno criticises is a reference to what he terms Heidegger’s ‘death metaphysics’ (*ND*, p. 369): that is, his affirmation of the possibility of an authentic being-towards-death. For Adorno, as Giuseppe Tassone

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<sup>54</sup> O’Connor, p. 101.

<sup>55</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, ‘Metaphysics at the Moment of Its Fall’, in *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity: Essays and Lectures*, trans. by David Midgley (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 183–202 (p. 188).

explains, Heidegger's 'transformation [...] of the negativity of human death into something positive neutralises the sheer suffering of the body'.<sup>56</sup> 'Even *in extremis*', Adorno asserts *contra* Hegel, 'a negated negative is not a positive' (*ND*, p. 393): Heidegger commits the fallacy of elevating 'negativity, the critique of what merely is, into positivity' (*ND*, p. 393). Death cannot be abstracted from the messy, corporeal process of dying. Indeed, Adorno attributes a subconscious awareness of this to children, who, in the 'fascination that issues from the flayer's zone, from carcasses, from the repulsively sweet odor of putrefaction, and from the opprobrious terms used for that zone' intuit that 'this is what matters' (*ND*, p. 366).

In *Company*, Beckett demonstrates an awareness of the uncanny significance the 'zone of the carcass and the knacker' (*MCP*, p. 117) holds for children. A long passage is dedicated to the memory of a hedgehog the child rescued from the 'cold' (*Company*, p. 20). The 'glow at your good deed' (p. 20) is gradually replaced by 'a great uneasiness. [...] A suspicion that all was perhaps not as it should be' (p. 21). Time passes before the child can bring himself to inspect the homemade hutch: 'You have never forgotten what you found then. You are on your back in the dark and have never forgotten what you found then. The mush. The stench' (p. 22). I would suggest that the significance of this moment for the child grown up is due not primarily to a sense of guilt or sadness, natural though these emotions would be. Rather, it is the 'place of carrion, stench and putrefaction' (*MCP*, p. 117) that haunts the memory. The significance of this for Adorno is its indication that death is fundamentally incommensurable with life—a claim that contains 'a perverse, dislocated bit of hope: that death does not constitute the entirety of existence' (*ND*, p. 369). This may suggest the post-theological resurrection of immortality, but if, as Adorno insists, '[a]fter Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it underwent a transformation' (*ND*, p. 367), it must necessarily be a transfigured immortality. More specifically, it is a *materialist* immortality. Adorno insists on the truth content of 'Christian dogmatics, in which the souls were conceived as awakening simultaneously with the resurrection of the flesh': 'hope means a physical resurrection' (*ND*, p. 401). Mortality and immortality, rather than being antithetical or separated by a Kantian-style block, are dialectical: 'the

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<sup>56</sup> 'The Politics of Metaphysics: Adorno and Bloch on Utopia and Immortality', *The European Legacy*, 9 (2004), 357–67 (p. 360).

concept of mortality implies its opposite, not as an eternal abode after life on earth, but as resistance to mortality and refusal of dying in our daily practice'.<sup>57</sup> It is, crucially, to the corporeal world that we must turn in our hopes of experiencing transcendence.

For Adorno, children have a privileged access to these glimmers of transcendence. They therefore play a significant role in his concept of metaphysical experience. Beckett's work, too, which, as Daniela Caselli argues, is 'generally discussed as populated with geriatric characters, is surprisingly prolific in children'.<sup>58</sup> *Company*, however—as the hedgehog incident would indicate—offers Beckett's most sustained exploration of childhood and its experiences. It is important to note that neither Adorno nor Beckett subscribe to a romantic idealisation of childhood. Rather, they demonstrate an interest in the 'capacity of children for wonder and their insistence on the particular'.<sup>59</sup> Adorno describes one particular example of this:

What is a metaphysical experience? If we disdain projecting it upon allegedly primal religious experiences, we are most likely to visualize it as Proust did, in the happiness, for instance, that is promised by village names like Applebachsville, Wind Gap, or Lords Valley. One thinks that going there would bring the fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed; the feeling now is one of being too close, rather, and not seeing it for that reason.  
(*ND*, p. 373)

This passage knits together a number of elements that Adorno identifies in metaphysical experiences. Such experiences bespeak an attentiveness to the particular, an awareness of 'the preponderance of the object' (*ND*, p. 183). This concept—one that holds a significant place in Adorno's philosophy as a whole—is in part a return to the Kantian thing-in-itself. In his 1969 essay, 'Subject and Object', Adorno observes that 'objectivity can be conceived without a subject; not so subjectivity without an object' (*AR*, pp. 142–3). The dialectical relationship between subject and object that forms the basis of Adorno's thought maintains, therefore, a slight bias towards the object, without which we cannot conceive of the subject's existence. While cognitive knowledge of the object in-itself is not possible, non-

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>58</sup> 'Tiny Little Things in Beckett's *Company*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 15 (2005), 271–80 (p. 271).

<sup>59</sup> Christian Skirke, 'Metaphysical Experience and Constitutive Error in Adorno's "Meditations on Metaphysics"', *Inquiry*, 55 (2012), 307–28 (p. 317).

cognitive experience of it *is*. However—and this brings us back to the metaphysical experience itself—such knowledge is by no means guaranteed. Its fallibility is part of the structure of a true experience. Adorno continues: ‘To the child it is self-evident that what delights him in his favorite village is found only there, there alone and nowhere else. He is mistaken; but his mistake creates the model of experience’ (*ND*, p. 373). The concept of delight leads us to another characteristic of metaphysical experience: its promise of happiness, which, in giving ‘us the inside of objects as something removed from the objects’ (*ND*, p. 374), allows us to experience the world outside our subjective categories. These three elements are inextricably woven together. Happiness is implied in the very act of acknowledging ‘the surplus over the subject’ (*ND*, p. 374) because, as Andrew Bowie explains, ‘it is what is manifest when the world promises something beyond the given’.<sup>60</sup> This promise cannot be fulfilled in the context of a damaged world, but its rainbow-like retreat, far from undermining its significance as an experience, actually constitutes it: ‘all experiences which have to be lived, which are not mere copies or reconstructions of that which is in any case, contain the possibility of error, the possibility that they can completely miss the mark’ (*MCP*, p. 141).

Adorno suggests that metaphysical experiences are often ‘the weakest and most fragile’ (*MCP*, p. 141). They do not advertise themselves; they require an openness to the particular that can be associated with children—children who, as Shirke suggests, ‘experience specifically and perhaps also literally, what is strictly speaking inconceivable’.<sup>61</sup> The very first memory of *Company* demonstrates this childlike openness to fresh experience and the response it gets from jaded adulthood:

A small boy you come out of Connolly’s Stores holding your mother by the hand. [...] It is late afternoon and after some hundred paces the sun appears above the crest of the rise. Looking up at the blue sky and then at your mother’s face you break the silence asking her if it is not in reality much more distant than it appears. The sky that is. The blue sky. Receiving no answer you mentally reframe your question and some hundred paces later look up at her face gain and ask her if it does not appear much less distant than in reality it is. For some reason you could never fathom this question must have angered her exceedingly. For she shook off your little hand and made you a cutting retort you have never forgotten.

(*Company*, p. 6)

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<sup>60</sup> Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 186.

<sup>61</sup> Shirke, p. 317

Justin Beplate suggests that this passage preserves ‘the memory of a first, small sin: guileless speculation’.<sup>62</sup> The question is *not* a scientific one: the child is not asking for a factual explanation of the sky’s distance or nearness. Rather, he is displaying wonder at a natural phenomenon: truly *experiencing* it as something fundamentally uncognizable. What is particularly interesting about this passage is its intertextual allusion to other moments in Beckett’s work: namely *Malone Dies* and *The End*:

I said, The sky is further away than you think, is it not, mama? It was without malice, I was simply thinking of all the leagues that separated me from it. She replied, to me her son, It is precisely as far away as it appears to be. She was right. But at the same time I was aghast. I can still see the spot, opposite Tyler's gate.

(*Malone Dies*, p. 98)

A small boy, stretching out his hands and looking up at the blue sky, asked his mother how such a thing was possible. Fuck off, she said.

(*The End*, p. 81)

This intertextuality undermines the authority of the memory *qua* memory. Gontarski perceptively suggests that ‘[c]hildhood memories, like literary allusions, are “figments”, “traces”, “fables”, or “shades”, a mix of memory, experience, desire, and imagination’.<sup>63</sup> The significance of such memories lies not in their reliability or correctness, as though their correspondence to the ‘actual experience’ were something to be ticked off a checklist. The experience to which they allude is itself something provisional and uncertain, marked by innocent expectation and an essential fallibility. It is for this reason that Adorno argues that thought possesses ‘an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it’ (*MM*, pp. 126–7). Memory and imagination are not so distinct as they may at times seem, and *Company* exploits this slippage throughout by refusing to root the supposed memories unambiguously in any singular consciousness: ‘the first person singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary’ (p. 45).

In both *Malone Dies* and *Company*, the episode takes place in a specific location: ‘opposite Tyler's gate’ and by ‘Connolly’s Store’, respectively. The very

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Who speaks? Grammar, Memory, and Identity in Beckett’s *Company*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29 (2005), 153–65 (p. 163).

<sup>63</sup> Gontarski, p. xxi.

rarity of such references, at least in ‘Beckett’s prose after *Murphy*’,<sup>64</sup> as Davies notes, manifests an attentiveness to particularity above and beyond the mindless regurgitation of place and company names encouraged by an ever self-advertising capitalist market economy. However, the experience is eclipsed by the mother’s ‘cutting retort’: this, fundamentally, is what is preserved by memory. Another memory discloses the child’s dawning awareness that his experiences are incommunicable: ‘The first time you told them and were derided. All you had seen was cloud. So now you hoard it in your heart with the rest’ (*Company*, p. 17). This sketch of the child’s excursion to a hillside, which Davies aptly describes as ‘one of the best evocations of paradisiacal experience in all Beckett’s work’,<sup>65</sup> depicts the memory of a metaphysical experience, the possibility of which had previously been pre-emptively arrested by the mother’s ‘cutting retort’. One of the most distinctive elements of this passage lies in its fusion between what Davies describes as the ‘analytic present’ of the body in the dark and the ‘lyric past’.<sup>66</sup>

The light there was then. On your back in the dark the light there was then.  
[...] Back home at nightfall supperless to bed. You lie in the dark and are back  
in that light. Straining out from your nest in the gorse with your eyes across  
the water till they ache. You close them while you count a hundred. Then open  
and strain again. Again and again. Till in the end it is there. Palest blue against  
the pale sky. You lie in the dark and are back in that light.

(p. 17)

What Davies fails to note is the fusion of a third temporal possibility *within* the ‘lyric past’ itself: the child is banished to bed ‘supperless’, where, the text implies, he conjures up the memory of the ‘light’. The levels of temporality are, then, first, the original experience; second, the memory of that experience and the possible attempt to recreate it from the child’s home; third, the present-day memory—from within the all-encompassing darkness—of the event. All these layers are filtered through the second-person narration that dominates the recollections or imaginings, so it becomes impossible to locate a secure basis or consciousness from which the memories emanate. The fusion of these temporal possibilities arises from the doubling of ‘On your back in the dark’, a phrase that characterises the narrative of the ‘analytic present’ as well as a description of the child’s bedroom; the ambiguity of the

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<sup>64</sup> Davies, p. 183.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.



temporality to which the repeated phrase ‘You lie in the dark’ refers; and the doubt as to whether being ‘back in that light’ is a memory or an attempt to replicate the original experience. The multifaceted ambiguity further obscures the object of experience itself, which remains obstinately undefined: ‘in the end it is there. Palest blue against the pale sky’.

One of the few elements of the experience that is actually recounted is the significance of light. Davies observes that the presence of natural light in a number of the memories in the text plays a very different role to, on the one hand, the artificial and sourceless whiteness that dominates the earlier closed-space works and, on the other, the darkness that otherwise characterises *Company* itself.<sup>67</sup> He suggests in reference to another, very similar passage, that light ‘is introduced here to modify the terms upon which, in the cold light of day, we see [everyday objects] related’.<sup>68</sup> When this is considered alongside Adorno’s insistence on the primacy of the object as fundamental for metaphysical experience, we can see that light in this passage takes on the role of inducing speculative thought that goes beyond ‘mere statement’ (*MM*, p. 127). That the child is not seeing what is simply there—that he is, in fact, ‘overshooting the object’—is evident from his perseverance: ‘Straining out from your nest in the gorse with your eyes across the water till they ache’. In this way, the child adheres to Adorno’s insistence that ‘thought must aim beyond its target just because it never quite reaches it’ (*MM*, p. 127), invoking the need for a speculative moment in thought. This is echoed in the ‘strand’ passage, where the assertion that ‘Light dying. Soon none left to die’ (*Company*, p. 39) is swiftly undercut: ‘No. No such thing then as no light. Died on to dawn and never died’ (p. 39). The light may indeed dwindle in the evening, but the vision with which it is associated maintains its existence. ‘Were your eyes to open’, the narration continues, ‘they would first see far below in the last rays the skirt of your greatcoat and the uppers of your boots emerging from the sand. [...] Were your eyes to open dark would lighten’ (p. 40). There is a suggestive ambiguity regarding whether the eyes are closed within the memory itself or in the narrative present. If the latter, the words seem to offer a yearning for vision to return, a promise that it is possible for the dark to lighten. Within the memory itself, the attentiveness to the sound of the ‘wash’ (p. 39) and the insistence that light never

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187–8.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

entirely fades suggest that the closed eyes accommodate another way of seeing that is unconditioned by the ‘cold light of day’.<sup>69</sup>

However, these moments of metaphysical experience in *Company* are no more than glimmers; they are ‘fugitives’, Bernstein explains, because they at once ‘flee from ordinary empirical experience and are intrinsically ephemeral and transient’.<sup>70</sup> *Company* dramatises the process by which such glimmers are gradually co-opted by a transcendence-resistant totality of the kind dramatised in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. A number of the passages of memory allude to wandering in the countryside. While in no particular order—the memories as a whole are by no means chronological—these passages chart the slow demise of experience whose end point is the lonely darkness of the narrative present. The passage describing ‘[t]he last time you went out’ (*Company*, p. 25) registers how far the capacity for experience has deteriorated. The narrator notes the ‘expanse of light’ (p. 25) that has, in other memories, been associated with metaphysical experience; however, this time there is no speculative vision: ‘you advance if not with closed eyes though this as often as not at least with them fixed on the momentary ground before your feet. This is all of nature you have seen. Since finally you bowed your head’ (p. 26). The man has closed his eyes to the potentially liberating light that has represented the possibility of transcendence since his inception, or when he ‘first saw the light’ (p. 7). This passage contains other key differences from the other descriptions of ‘plodding along’ (p. 9). Most notably, his ‘father’s shade is not with [him] any more. It fell out long ago’ (p. 26). The word ‘shade’—unelucidated in the text—seems to refer to a spectral presence that has now left him. This presence—dark and insubstantial though it may be—offers the ‘company’ (p. 5) so ardently pursued. The deterioration of vision, then, is not just of ‘nature’, but also of the supernatural—or, at least, the imagined company of his father’s ghost. This indifference to visual spectacles is twinned with a disregard for his ‘footfalls’ (p. 26), whether their noise or number:

You do not count your steps any more. For the simple reason they number each day the same. Average day in day out the same. The way being always the same. You keep count of the days and every tenth day multiply. And add. [...] You do not hear your footfalls any more. Unhearing unseeing you go

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Adorno: *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 419.

your way. Day after day. The same way. As if there were no other any more.  
For you there is no other any more.

(pp. 26–7)

This assertion that the steps ‘number each day the same’ is contradicted not only by other, similar episodes—when, in a fit of exuberance, ‘suddenly you cut through the hedge and vanish hobbling east across the gallops’ (p. 16)—but the passage itself: ‘Thither from your entering the pasture you need normally from eighteen hundred to two thousand paces depending on your humour and the state of the ground. But on this last morning many more will be required. Many many more’ (p. 26). The innocuous step-counting ritual has been transformed into a self-governing mechanism designed to render each day the same as the last. It is for this reason that the narrator is able to say with assurance: ‘You are no older now than you always were’ (p. 27). Time has begun to contract into an eternal present.

*Company*’s complexity *vis-à-vis* the earlier closed space works lies in its juxtaposition of these very different elements. Unlike the paradoxical but definitive narrative impetus of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, this text ‘tells of a past. With occasional allusion to a present and more rarely to a future’ (*Company*, p. 4). The folding and unfolding of narrative time in origami-like fashion places us ambivalently between hope and despair, rather like the predicament expounded in Augustine’s maxim that Beckett so admired. Peter Uwe Hohendahl argues that such ambivalence is also manifested in *Aesthetic Theory*, in which the ‘glimpses of hope’ Adorno attributes to artworks is always undermined by their ‘extreme vulnerability’.<sup>71</sup> For Adorno, it is in art that something approaching a metaphysical experience is possible. In Chapter Two, I argued that art is simultaneously the illusion (*Schein*) of freedom and the freedom of illusion. It is this paradox that underlies the metaphysical possibility of artworks: ‘Semblance’, Adorno argues, ‘is a promise of nonsemblance’ (*ND*, p. 405), but, as Bernstein explains, it is impossible ‘to categorically separate the objectivity of art’s promise from the lapse of such promising into mere illusion, its telling lies’.<sup>72</sup> Adorno uses exactly the same metaphor of the rainbow in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* to articulate the promissory nature of metaphysical experience: ‘If one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears’ (*AT*, p. 162).

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<sup>71</sup> *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 71; p. 62.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Why Rescue Semblance?’, p. 200.

Nonetheless, just as the child ‘does not find in Monbrunn any of the fulfilment which is stored up in its name’ (*MCP*, p. 140) and yet is not disappointed, the structural fallibility of art’s promise does not lead to despair:

Part of the majestic beauty of promises, vows, and pledges is that they pose human determination and hopefulness in the teeth of intransigent reality. Artworks on Adorno’s accounting partake in that kind of emphatic claiming and impotence. In experiencing works of art we are experiencing a material event that *is* incompatible with the present social order of the living, and in so being *promises* another social order of the living.<sup>73</sup>

Adorno famously reassigns Stendhal’s description of beauty as a ‘*promesse du bonheur*’ (*AT*, p. 109) to art itself, a claim that can be illuminated by his insight that ‘[t]he happiness gained from artworks is that of having suddenly escaped’ (*AT*, p. 18). Art prompts this experience of happiness through its transcending impulse: ‘it epitomizes the unsubsumable and as such challenges the prevailing principle of reality: that of exchangeability’ (*AT*, p. 109). Nonetheless, art is simultaneously the ‘absolute commodity’ (*AT*, p. 28): it is ‘a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling’ (*AT*, pp. 308–9). This is the price art must pay for its metaphysical quality: without an authentic relation to the given world, it would not be able to arouse the experience—however fleeting and fallible—of another.

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the closed space texts discussed can be characterised by their provisionality and even incompleteness. These late works, I argue, nourish what Finlayson describes as ‘the weak flame of metaphysical experience’.<sup>74</sup> For Adorno, ‘[w]hat art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgments is that everything is not just nothing. [...] No light falls on men and things without reflecting transcendence’ (*ND*, p. 404). This, I suggest, is what he means when he claims, in relation to Beckett’s work, that ‘[t]he slightest difference between nothingness and coming to rest would be the haven of hope, the no man’s land between the border posts of being and nothingness’ (*ND*, p. 381). Even the pursuit of the ‘Unworsenable worst’ (*Worstward Ho*, p. 107) is destined for failure, because the utterance of despair means that ultimate despair has not yet been reached: this is Beckett’s negative ‘haven of hope’ and its promise of

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<sup>73</sup> Adorno: *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 436.

<sup>74</sup> Finlayson, p. 81.

happiness. And we, as readers, are in the position of the unnamed protagonist of *Company*, destined to ‘work [our] way through the darkness without a lamp’, always tempted to ‘mistake [life’s] remnants for the absolute, for flashes of meaning’ (*MCP*, p. 144)—just as the narrator gropes for meaning and, indeed, happiness, in the memories he is unable to acknowledge as his own. The fallibility of the Beckettian narrative—as Adorno’s archetypal instance of metaphysical art—leaves us with the paradox that the ‘promise of something transcending life [...] *is*, and at the same time *is not*’ (*MCP*, p. 145). This is perhaps most beautifully articulated in the final, inconclusive words of *Minima Moralia*:

Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.

(*MM*, p. 247)

CODA: *ENOUGH?*

Beckett’s characters often claim to have had ‘enough’—enough of ‘[t]his gag’ (*Rough for Theatre II*, p. 244); of love (*First Love*, p. 32) and embraces (*The Calmative*, p. 74); of company (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 31), games (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 68) and ‘family chat’ (*Molloy*, p. 150); of ‘questions’ and ‘reasoning’ (*The Unnamable*, p. 19) and ‘this cursed first person’ (p. 56); of ‘shingle’, ‘sand’, ‘earth’, ‘sea’ (p. 20) and ‘holes’ (p. 81); of ‘procrastination’ (p. 63); and, most fundamentally, of ‘this... this... thing’ (*Endgame*, p. 94) that is typically called existence. Simultaneously, however,

‘enough’ is never quite good enough, always somewhat unsatisfactory: Mr Rooney earns ‘barely enough to keep [him] alive and twitching’ (*All That Fall*, p. 193), while the narrator of *The End* is assured that he is ‘well enough’ (p. 79) to be turfed out of his bed. Most poignant, perhaps, is a conversation between Vladimir and Estragon:

ESTRAGON: I had a dream  
VLADIMIR: Don’t tell me!  
ESTRAGON: I dreamt that –  
VLADIMIR: DON’T TELL ME!  
ESTRAGON: [*Gesture towards the universe.*] This one is enough for you?  
(*Waiting for Godot*, p. 17)

If Beckett’s characters have had enough of the world, then, concomitantly, the world—‘how it is’—is never quite enough for them. The word itself is slippery: it implies the bare fulfilment of a state of necessity—to have *enough* to eat—but also its surfeit: ‘*to have had enough (of anything): to have become tired of (it), desire no more*’ (*OED*). What never seems to be achieved by ‘enough’ is equilibrium: satisfaction, happiness. It is for this reason that the ‘eternally mild’ (*Enough*, p. 191) life depicted in the rarely considered *Enough* is so remarkable in Beckett’s corpus as a whole, but particularly in relation to the late prose—from which it manifestly differs in its expansive, natural setting. ‘All that goes before forget’, the narrator opens by instructing us. This encourages a reading of *Enough* as manifesting a shift in emphasis or style, but this chronological account does not do justice to the text’s strangeness: in significant ways, it annuls or forgets what comes before and after. It is for this reason that I consider this enigmatic text in a coda: a supplement to the chapter that is, as Sarah Jane Reichardt suggests, at once ‘extraneous’ and ‘of utmost importance on an aesthetic and symbolic level’.<sup>75</sup>

*Enough* distils decades of a life of happiness and companionship into a beautiful, condensed prose form. It even utilises that most un-Beckettian of things, euphemism—the narrator repeats that his/her companion was ‘on his last legs’ (p. 186; p. 191), and, soon after their separation, ‘stop[s] counting’ (p. 189) on his return. Far from the ‘disgrace’ (p. 190) that the narrator interprets his/her banishment to be, I would suggest that it is in effect a deliverance from witnessing the death of a loved

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<sup>75</sup> *Composing the Modern Subject: Four String Quartets by Dmitri Shostakovich* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 67.

one.<sup>76</sup> This is significant to the text as a whole because it reframes the couple's separation as a biological necessity and leaves the narrator contemplating, from the perspective of old age, a life lived well: what Badiou describes as 'a strange and powerful form of happiness'.<sup>77</sup> 'Enough' in this context is, as Peter Murphy puts it, 'as good as a feast'.<sup>78</sup>

In his recent book, *Autonomy After Auschwitz*, Martin Schuster considers Stanley Cavell's claim that '[i]n Kant freedom depends upon freedom from desire, in [J. S.] Mill upon the freedom for desire',<sup>79</sup> and enlists Adorno in the latter camp, insisting that '[t]he desire for something better is an impulse that expresses a speculative surplus, and for Adorno it is both essential to our freedom and *expressive* of that freedom'.<sup>80</sup> This is a significant and unusual move that, unfortunately, Schuster does not develop further: it corresponds with Adorno's insistence on the need for humanity's reconciliation with its natural being (in Chapter Four I considered Adorno's enigmatic claim that 'we are no longer simply a piece of nature from the moment we recognize that we are a piece of nature' (*PMP*, p. 103)). While Adorno is relentlessly critical of the unnecessary needs and desires promulgated by the Culture Industry—the idea that 'in addition to food and lodging the cinema is necessary for the reproduction of labour power is "true" only in a world which prepares men for the reproduction of their labour power and constrains their needs in harmony with the interests of supply and social control' (*P*, pp. 108–9)—he is equally sceptical of what he considers to be 'Kant's ambivalence about happiness': his exclusion of happiness or desire as a basis for morality, but his concomitant acknowledgement that, as Fabian Freyenhagen puts it, 'we could reasonably reject morality, if we had not even the hope for happiness'.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, as Raymond Guess argues, Adorno's philosophy 'make[s] room, centrally and systematically, for a concept of "happiness"'<sup>82</sup>—and such happiness, Adorno insists, 'aims at sensual

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<sup>76</sup> Badiou, in one of the few extended explorations of *Enough*, offers a different reading, but notes similarly that the separation 'is not at all a longing to return to solipsism'. *On Beckett*, ed. by Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), p. 34.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>78</sup> 'The Nature and Art of Love in *Enough*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 4 (1979), 14–34 (p. 30).

<sup>79</sup> *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 182.

<sup>80</sup> Schuster, p. 110.

<sup>81</sup> *Adorno's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 61.

fulfillment and obtains its objectivity in that fulfillment' (*ND*, p. 202). Finlayson even goes so far as to suggest that Adorno 'endorses[es] a hedonistic conception of happiness'.<sup>83</sup>

This is all illuminating when considering the significance of desire in *Enough*. It is certainly not the case that—as Enoch Brater implies by comparing the text to *Mercier and Camier*, in which Mercier is 'curiously without desires'<sup>84</sup>—the narrator lacks desire:

I did all he desired. I desired it too. For him. Whenever he desired something so did I. He only had to say what thing. When he didn't desire anything neither did I. in this way I didn't live without desires. If he had desired something for me I would have desired it too. Happiness for example or fame. I only had the desires he manifested. But he must have manifested them all. All his desires and needs. When he was silent he must have been like me. When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so. I drew satisfaction from it. We must have had the same satisfactions. The same needs and the same satisfactions.

(*Enough*, p. 186)

This is not an uncomplicated passage and it contains some troubling elements that cannot simply be brushed over. The sexual act is worryingly one-sided and the hint of coercion is impossible to dismiss. However, we would be looking in the wrong place if we expected Beckett to depict socially acceptable bourgeois love or even a simple negation of it. What I take to be significant in this passage is not the narrator's lack of desire, but desire's curious equilibrium—*enough*, we might say—and the couple's synchronicity with regard to it. Couples in Beckett are hardly unusual, but this pairing is characterised by an insistent tenderness: a togetherness that endures beyond their physical separation. The explicitly sexual nature of the relationship in *Enough*, for example, is treated with a frank sensitivity that we could not imagine accompanying, say, the 'spectacle' of 'Macmann trying to bundle his sex into his partner's like a pillow into a pillow-slip, folding it in two and stuffing it in with his fingers' (*Malone Dies*, p. 89) in *Malone Dies*.<sup>85</sup> In *Enough*, desire is distanced from the constraints of the social world, without disintegrating into the consolation of an illusory pastoral

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<sup>83</sup> 'The Work of Art and the Promise of Happiness in Adorno', *World Picture*, 3 (2009), 1–22 (p. 15).

<sup>84</sup> 'Why Beckett's *Enough* is More or Less Enough', *Contemporary Literature*, 21 (1980), 252–66 (p. 261).

<sup>85</sup> Gibson makes a similar point, arguing that 'the anti-romantic deflation' of *Enough* 'is not like that of the *Trilogy*' (p. 207).



idyll. This is in part due to the text's combination of the almost sentimental—'We lived on flowers. So much for sustenance' (p. 192)—with the candidly practical: 'What do I know of man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes. For them he had a fondness' (p. 192)

It is in a well-known aphorism from *Minima Moralia* that Adorno best articulates the relationship between freedom and happiness:

Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars. A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a larger scale. Enjoyment itself would be affected, just as its present framework is inseparable from operating, planning, having one's way, subjugating. *Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, "being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment", might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace.

(*MM*, pp. 156–7)

Something of this—the freedom to be happy in a world where '[h]appiness is obsolete: uneconomic' (*MM*, p. 217)—is captured in *Enough*, in which, as the narrator muses, it is as though 'the earth had come to rest in spring' (*Enough*, p. 191). In this text there is no such thing as progress: the couple spend their time walking 'in a half sleep' (p. 191) and refuse to 'keep tally of the days' (p. 191); they take pleasure in ascending the same mountain twice instead of 'moving on' (p. 190). There is, however, knowledge—but this is abstract knowledge that is neither quantifiable nor instrumental and that, remarkably enough, enters into a kind of accord with nature instead of dominating it: 'We took flight in arithmetic. What mental calculations bent double hand in hand! Whole ternary numbers we raised in this way to the third power sometimes in downpours of rain' (p. 188). This singular image combines intellectual 'flight' with sensuous happiness and the natural world. Gibson notes that '[i]n its Beckettian manifestation, love is certainly quite mundane',<sup>86</sup> a point the narrator of *Enough* makes when s/he suggests that 'our last decade [...] veils those that went before and must have resembled it like blades of grass' (p. 190)—despite insisting

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

that '[i]t is then I shall have lived then or never' (p. 189). True experience, the narrator seems to explain, is not discernibly different from what Adorno would call the 'wrong life' (*ND*, p. 35): it is a frustrating paradox that '[i]n the right condition, [...] all things would differ only a little from the way they are; but not even the least can be conceived now as it would be then' (*ND*, p. 299). For this reason, the ending of *Enough*, in which the narrator seeks to bracket out the memory of the 'rain' and the 'mounds' (p. 192), leaving only 'the two of us dragging through the flowers' (p. 192), is a distinctly utopian one, closing with an image of sensuous unity: 'Enough my old breasts feel his old hand' (p. 192). The promise of happiness that Adorno identifies in ephemeral metaphysical experiences is here captured in that reiterated word: enough.

## EPILOGUE

This thesis has followed the twists and turns of the elusive concept of freedom as it is manifested, in minimal form, in Beckett's work. Adorno's insistence on the impossibility of a positive representation of freedom that is not ultimately self-betraying has provided me with a lens through which to view Beckett's radically negative images of freedom. Whether through minimal vestiges of freedom or determinate negations of a decidedly unfree reality, Beckett's works refuse to offer the consolation of affirmation while tenaciously holding open the slightest of gaps between the world as it is and a possible other.

I have hitherto progressed roughly chronologically through Beckett's corpus, though always with a greater concern for my perception of intuitive textual groupings.<sup>1</sup> I would like to depart from this logic in my closing words to consider the narrative of modern freedom from an Adornian standpoint. This slight shift in perspective should, I hope, bring into final focus my synthesis of these two writers, which, of course, is strictly non-identical. Adorno's understanding of freedom starts with the damaged nature of 'subjective experience' (*MM*, p. 18), even if it departs from the traditional attribution of freedom to the individual will. By positing itself as an autonomous being, the subject irrevocably splits itself from the world. Far from generating the freedom it promises, this inaugurates a new era of repression, as the subject's domination of everything external to it (whether physically or through the subsumptive power of conceptual thought) involves self-repression: nothing natural can resist the sway of reason. The subject is, moreover, already caught up in a dialectic of history and nature, in which, as he dominates nature in the name of autonomy and reason, bringing it to a historical end, he is concomitantly subjugated himself by the force of history that takes on the weight of a natural phenomenon. Within this process, the more the subject dissociates himself from the world by

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<sup>1</sup> My most conspicuous departure from chronology lies in my placement of *The Lost Ones* in Chapter 3 with the earlier *Endgame* and *How It Is* rather than with the other closed texts in Chapter 5, a decision I justify in terms of the texts' shared concerns.

refusing to place himself within it as a natural being, the less of a subject he becomes and the more he is shackled to a system of unfreedom.

In distinctly Adornian terms, Stanley Cavell posits the question of whether our civilization is being replaced by another:

In particular, is it being replaced by one in which nothing that happens any longer strikes us as the objectification of subjectivity as the act of an answerable agent, as the expression and satisfaction of human freedom, of human intention and desire? What has a beginning can have an end. If this future (civilization?) were effected its members would not be dissatisfied. They would have lost the concept of satisfaction. Then nothing would (any longer) give them the idea that living being, human things, could feel. So they would not (any longer) be human. They would not, for example, be frightened upon meeting others—except in the sense, or under circumstances, in which they would be frightened upon encountering bears or storms, circumstances under which bears would be frightened. And of course particular forms of laughter and amazement would also no longer be possible, ones which depend upon clear breaks between, say, machines and creatures.<sup>2</sup>

This is a possibility clearly delineated in Beckett's texts, particularly his late prose: the picture Cavell paints is all too familiar from *The Lost Ones*, *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. The power of Adorno's thought here lies not in his horror at what we might become, for, as Martin Schuster acknowledges, 'perhaps to be truly modern is to no longer be a subject'<sup>3</sup>—but his dual awareness that 'the autonomous subject is *both* the product of rationalization (the process of civilization, the long history of the formation of the self up to its distortion by irrational reason) *and* a refuge from utter domination'.<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that he is able to make the unexpected claim that '[i]n the period of his decay, the individual's experience of himself and what he encounters contributes once more to knowledge, which he had merely obscured as long as he continued unshaken to construe himself positively as the dominant category' (*MM*, p. 17). Paradoxically, the period of the dissolution of the individual and its desperate assertion of freedom opens the opportunity for a community of truly free subjects.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 468.

<sup>3</sup> *Autonomy After Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Duncan McColl Chesney, *Silence Nowhen: Late Modernism, Minimalism, and Silence in the Work of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 158–9.

Within this bleak context, then, Adorno allows for glimmers of hope. One such glimmer is what he describes as the ‘addendum’, which testifies to the presence of nature in the subject. By acknowledging this natural basis, the subject can forestall the process that leads to its disintegration and concomitant unfreedom. This would not entail the subject’s identity with the object, but a mediated non-identity that peacefully preserves their differences. In his late essay, ‘Subject and Object’, written shortly before his death, Adorno addresses the concrete consequences of this abstract question:

In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in the realization of peace among men as well as between men and their Other. Peace is the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other.

(AR, p. 140)

Beyond this, Adorno enlists thought, art and metaphysical experience as allies. Thought, which ‘points beyond itself’ (CI, p. 175) is defined by its ability to negate the world as it is. And as a realm of purposelessness in a society defined by exchange, art too offers a transitory escape from lived reality. Finally, metaphysical experience, which ultimately encompasses both thought and art, but also includes brief moments of absolute and inexplicable happiness, offers the hope that the context of immanence is not yet absolute and something beyond the given can still be imagined.

In this thesis, I have attempted to elucidate Beckett’s minimal conception of freedom within this Adornian narrative. Beckett does not, of course, explicitly register this narrative, which he certainly would not have experienced in the same terms as Adorno, but I suggest that his works attest to a strikingly comparable consciousness of the predicament of freedom in modernity. To recapitulate some of the major claims of the thesis, in Chapter 1, I emphasised the perils of uninhibited subjectivity as demonstrated in *Murphy* and *Eleutheria*. Both texts, with their singularly explicit exploration of freedom, are ultimately concerned with the limits of freedom as conceived according to the predominant philosophical model of the autonomous subject. Simultaneously, I registered Beckett’s shift from the explicitly thematic presentation of freedom in these texts to a subterranean scrutiny of its complexities. In Chapter 4, I focused on Beckett’s experiments with the role of technology in his media plays, arguing that these texts offer an imaginative reconception of how

technology can mediate between the subject and the world. Fundamentally, this serves to interrupt the subject's habitual domination of nature. In Chapter 3, I considered the bleak social worlds presented by Beckett in the 1950s and '60s and how they manifest the abstract tyranny of second nature. Beckett's astute penetration of such nebulous social systems provides the foundation for their dispersal, while his re-writing of history from the perspective of its victims offers an alternative narrative to the dominant one of progress. In Chapter 2, I explored more broadly art's relation to the world and its peculiar mode of resistance. Through Beckett's post-war *Novellas*, I traced the winding route of romantic irony and its simultaneous seriousness and lightheartedness, demonstrating art's tenuous yet significant critical detachment from the society to it nonetheless belongs. Finally, in Chapter 5, I probed the threat of absolute immanence already gestured to in Murphy's final encounter with Mr Endon. In their paradoxical endeavour to imagine the death of imagination, Beckett's late prose texts plunge us into the horror of absolute identity, which is ultimately deflected by the imaginative act itself. Only ephemeral metaphysical experiences, which are inevitably inscribed by failure, offer the means to transcend the given world. Without metaphysics in this specific sense, we are powerless to inaugurate any real freedom.

In context, the Animator's words in *Rough for Radio II* that 'Tomorrow, who knows, we may be free' (*Rough for Radio II*, p. 284) can only seem deluded. However, when considered in the light of Beckett's corpus as a whole, there is an almost lambent quality to their stubborn hope. Beckett made his name with the 'fruitless waiting' (*MCP*, p. 143) of Gogo and Didi in *Waiting for Godot*. Noting that 'Berg gave the highest rank to bars that express idle waiting as music alone can express it', Adorno suggests elliptically that '[i]dle waiting does not guarantee what we expect; it reflects the condition measured by its denial. The less of life remains, the greater the temptation for our consciousness to take the sparse and abrupt living remnants for the phenomenal absolute' (*ND*, p. 375). It is perhaps in this condition of 'idle waiting' that Beckett's works most profoundly denunciate these 'sparse and abrupt living remnants' and express the deeply negative hope that, as the Animator plaintively muses, freedom may be, at the very least, a future possibility.

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