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**'Stirrings Still' and the Solicitation of Value
in Samuel Beckett's Work**

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Abstract**'Stirrings Still' and the Solicitation
of Value in Samuel Beckett's Work****Michael Davidge**

In Samuel Beckett's *Stirrings Still*, typical of his late work, there is a deliberate poverty of expression. Seen on a continuum, the late work perpetuates while simultaneously condensing the rhetorical excess of the early work, such as the trilogy, which took language almost to the threshold of exhaustion. The economic perspective of the late work thus demands a reevaluation of the previous work and its reception. The deliberate inadequacy of the late work constitutes an aesthetic that works to undermine the tenets of traditional criticism and render them inapplicable. Beckett's late work has often been perceived as the distillation of a vision, despite the fact that it gestures to its position as a residue or remainder of questionable aesthetic -- and ethical -- value. The absence of an unequivocal relation between the subject and the object produces an art obliged to pursue its own worthlessness. The unstable and unequal relationship between the subject and object is never resolved by Beckett's work, and its value is always shadowed by uncertainty. The challenge of Beckett's late work lies in what value, if any, can be drawn from it.

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Introduction

The miserable splendour of Samuel Beckett's late prose work lies in its obstinant indigence, in the defiant poverty of its expression. The work corresponds quite closely to the phrase Beckett has claimed as a point of departure: Arnold Geulincx's "Where you are worth nothing, you want nothing" (Kennedy 24). But, instead of offering a satisfyingly Erasmian *copia dicendi*, or right diction, Beckett's late texts tend towards its negative counterpart, *inopia*, or a poverty of diction. In Beckett's late work there is an allotment or allowance of marginal space, a paucity of material. The form matches the destitution it depicts. His late prose style is repetitive and hermetic, parsimoniously recycling characteristic Beckettian themes, phrases, and situations. In spite or because of its simple means, the work is difficult to read. Like the plays that cruelly proceed with little regard for their audience, the fragmented late prose revels in its obsessive-compulsive nature, its lack of concession for both the human figure (if it is certain there is one) depicted by the work, and the reader. After Joyce staked out the mastery of language, Beckett's persistence in scouring out a hollow of impotence for himself is remarkable. Decades after "Three Dialogues," in which he said there was nothing to express and yet an obligation to express, he kept on saying next to nothing, and a little less each time. Though a storm of activity saw the outpouring of the major works in French in the '50s, towards the end of his career, the writing sparingly describes a bare existence. As this is a deliberate manœuvre, it puts the literary critic in a difficult position. The

intensely winnowed texts of the late period make any commentary seem prolix. Any profit to be had from them is rendered suspect, as if beside the point. The challenge of Beckett's late work lies in what value, if any, can be obtained or retained by an investigation into it.

Frank Kermode found himself in the unenviable position of having to review, for the Manchester *Guardian*, Beckett's last work of prose fiction, *Stirrings Still*. As challenging in its terseness and intractability as any of Beckett's late work, the full text of *Stirrings Still* ran beside Kermode's review of the deluxe, gold-embossed, limited edition that had appeared earlier at the precious cost of 1,000 pounds sterling. Commenting ironically on the contrast between the impoverished content of the text and its conspicuously expensive wrapping, Kermode, in his review titled "Miserable Splendour," wrote: "It's a bit like buying a Porsche to mitigate angst"(29). By pointing out the irony that "prose rich only in its unmatched parsimony"(29) should be so expensive, Kermode revealed his indignation at Beckett's meanness. Faced with the difficulty of evaluating the marginal event of *Stirrings Still*, Kermode became suspicious of the profit that could be had from it.

Sooner or later, an investigation into the marginal work of Samuel Beckett will prove profitable, because the late work places an economic restraint on the perspective gained by the earlier, more critically successful works. There is a wealth of writing about Beckett, and for a man who felt there was nothing to express, he too produced a lot of work, ever experimenting and testing the possibilities of various art forms. Granted, much of Beckett's work is on a small scale, but, seen on a continuum, the late work perpetuates

while simultaneously condensing the rhetorical excess of the early work, such as the trilogy, which took language almost to the threshold of exhaustion. For example, the three sections of *Stirrings Still* (that continue to approach the threshold of the exhaustion of language as impossibly as Zeno's arrow) constitute a final, contracted trilogy that fits on the same page as its review in the press. The economic perspective of the late work thus demands a reevaluation of the previous work and its reception. The trajectory of Beckett's career has often been read as the pursuit of ever purer forms of expression. However, instead of accomplishing "pure expression" (a frequent critical conclusion about his work), it actually thematizes the failure of the artist of language to achieve any such expression. If the work were not a failure, there would be no need to continue. Likewise, if the trilogy were expression purified, there would be no need for critics to look any further. The late work's very marginality, however, demands that it not be excluded from careful consideration. The more Beckett is lauded, the more his late work seems to be ignored. Instead of achieving the pure expression that should follow a seemingly interminable process of distillation and revision, Beckett's late work gestures to its position as a residue or remainder that is of questionable aesthetic value.

It is difficult to discern where value lies in Beckett's texts. Kermode's review of *Stirrings Still* explicitly questions the text's value as a work of art within a system of exchange, and consequently cheapens it by suggesting that never has so much been asked for so little. Beyond the margins of Kermode's review of the deluxe edition lies the irony of the text's appearance in the rattiness of cheap

newsprint, perfectly illustrating the ambivalence harboured and engendered by *Stirrings Still*. The value of Beckett's work, and *Stirrings Still* is as good an example as any, lies not in its mystical ability to transmute "the destitution of modern man into his exaltation," for which Beckett won a Nobel Prize (Kermode 29), but in its investigation into the value of destitution, or the destitution of value; the work calls its own worth implicitly into question. In "Absolute Rubbish: Cultural Economies of Loss in Freud, Bataille and Beckett," Steven Connor argues that Beckett shares with the other two writers the "strategic and compromised refusal of positive or negative values as such" and "the initiation of a principled and probably interminable probation of the value of these values"(80).

In the end, Kermode senses that, no matter how much *Stirrings Still* may try to annul many "normal assumptions about human existence -- that a person has identity, the power to perceive in a world where there is much to perceive, the power to move about that world" -- the text, no matter how reluctantly, pays tribute to that "specifically human power, not extinguished so long as one can speak of such things"(Kermode 29). Essentially, Kermode safeguards human dignity and salvages some kind of return. He salvages an irreducible standard of value, the very ground of meaning and being, in fact, but if there is a payment effected by the text it is less the payment of a tribute than that of a debt. The power Kermode mentions is beyond the control of the character in the text, who, longing for death, finds its persistence a torment, like the convulsions (or even the death throes that prolong life just a few spasms longer) evoked by the title of the French translation, *Soubresauts*. The

suffering or grief the character wishes will end is translated in the French text as "peine" (15), which, with its signification of atonement, reinforces the idea that the text is written at life's expense. It is not, however, without mixed feelings ("hope" and "fear") that the character views the expenditure which may bring about his end (29). The protagonist's uncertainty as to what he may purchase only underscores the risk involved in any exchange, which is always an asymmetrical relationship that exploits the anxieties of free-floating value.

Stirrings Still, a text representative of the endless solicitation of value in Beckett's work, is aptly titled. Here, "solicitation" is operating as close to its etymological root as possible, from the Latin *sollicitare*, meaning to agitate, to set the whole in motion. This anxious agitation is exactly the kind of skirmishing emotions that Geulincx's worthlessness would supposedly bring to an end. These last stirrings still register their power, their valence, no matter how slight, frustrating any sense of an ending. The narrative voice of Beckett's *Company* tries to imagine such an end: "Till...the mind...closes as it were. ...Then nothing more. No. Unhappily no. Pangs of faint light and stirrings still. ...Unstillable"(18). As a tiny citation from *Company*, *Stirrings Still* keeps the process in trial, continues the flow of text, if only a little bit longer. In this context, Beckett's last prose work appears as if with regret, characteristically signalling its own disparagement. The anxious agitation of ambivalence or irresolution becomes the occasion of a work of art in his hands. In spite of its end or its author, the work is implacable, it must be written. For various reasons it must appear. To rewrite his

phrase from Proust, it is solicitude, not "solitude," that seems to be the apotheosis of Beckett's art.

The absence of solitude is, finally, the great irony. As Connor quips: "if Beckett really counted as close friends all those who hint deliciously at close and continuous intimacy with him, then the most celebrated literary recluse of the twentieth century would have a social diary to rival Nancy Mitford's"(195). While Beckett certainly had a penchant for solipsism, he also committed himself to paper in the interest of various extraneous causes: the publication of *Stirrings Still* is one such case. In response to Kermode, critics have pointed out that the publication of the expensive *Stirrings Still* was meant to aid Barney Rosset, a longtime friend and associate of Beckett's. Rosset had built and run Grove Press, the first American publisher of Beckett's works, but after he sold the press in 1995 he was fired a year later by the new owners. Although Beckett had considered his writing career over with the publication of *Worstword Ho*, a terminus if there ever was one, he agreed to offer Rosset another text with which to start up again. In 1986, Beckett started to translate *Eleuthéria*, a play he had written in French about forty years earlier that had yet to be published. Finding the project too taxing, he offered up instead some new short pieces, or "Fragments," which became *Stirrings Still* (Gontarski "I" xv). He was unable not to respond to the demand. Regardless of its aesthetic, whether or not it is destitute enough in form or content (or disparaged enough by its author) to be considered as "worthless," Beckett was canny enough to know (as was Rosset) what any of his output, due to his cultural position, would fetch in the marketplace.

Most critics would find that a successfully worthless aesthetic shouldn't be worth their consideration; it would be nonsense to recommend a work of art considered to be rubbish. Beckett, like many artists, disparaged most of his work as so much rubbish. Indeed, collections of Beckett's work bear titles that belittle them as disjecta, fizzles, and residua, often at his own suggestion. However, he writes in the highly cited "Three Dialogues" that "to be an artist is to fail"(21). Therefore, his disappointment in his work may actually lie in his failure to fail, in the fact that his work is not, following Geulincx, worthless enough. Beckett's disparagement of his own work from this perspective would then run counter to the critics, both those who would praise him and those who would evidently agree with him. Moreover, from the perspective of a worthless aesthetic, perhaps the residua that are considered by both critics and Beckett to be failed experiments are the ones to be valued most highly, if they can be valued at all, as they have defied or fallen short of everyone's expectations. One must remember that the phrase by Geulincx that Beckett takes as a point of departure for his work is, for Geulincx, the foundation of all ethics (Geulincx 117). Paying careful attention to Beckett's texts takes the French phrase, *se fâcher pour une misère*, seriously; their demands are enough to make someone bothered by the least significant thing.

Chapter 1: The Farce of Giving and Receiving

Not only does the title of Beckett's *Stirrings Still*, with its citation of *Company*, continue the work that predates it by almost a decade, but the publication of the full text of *Company* was also preceded the year before by two fragments, entitled *Heard in the Dark 1 and 2*. The connections between these texts contribute to an impression that Beckett's work is engaged in a continual process, obsessively reconfiguring similar material. Among others', S.E. Gontarski's accounts of Beckett's approach to composition reinforce such an idea, for Gontarski argues that Beckett's work and its many revisions are a continual process wherein "novels were often reduced to stories, stories pared to fragments, first abandoned then unabandoned and 'completed' through the act of publication" ("FUW" xi). Accordingly, Gontarski was exasperated by Beckett's exclusion from the *Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* (1989), believing that Beckett's short fiction corresponds perfectly with the editor's characterization of the genre as "the distillation of an essence"(xi). The editor, William Trevor, on the other hand, believed that Beckett was a better playwright. While Beckett may confound readers' expectations by making permeable the strict boundaries between genres and placing his all too repetitive work in highly heterogeneous forms, Gontarski claims that distillation is what Beckett is all about: "Beckett distilled essences for some sixty years" (xi). Gontarski's claims participate in a standard reading of the trajectory of Beckett's career, which is seen as progressing towards ever purer and sparer forms of expression. However, Beckett has

explicitly allied his work, not with essences, or pure extractions/expressions, but with the left-overs of the process, the residue. The problem confronting Beckett's audience is that of the works' resistance to their assimilation into a system, or their unrelenting focus on that which the system expels in order to maintain its desired properties. Instead of privileging the ideal, Beckett leaves the tension between the polarity of ideal form and debased matter unresolved, wherein the gravity of matter gradually disintegrates and collapses that which has propped it up. Israel Shenker quotes Beckett: "At the end of my work there's nothing but dust -- the nameable"(148).

Beckett's alliance with failure, with the worthless remains that cannot be spirited away, constituted an artistic handicap. In the interview collage culled together by Shenker in the *New York Times* in 1956, Beckett complains that *The Unnameable* landed him in a situation from which he could not extricate himself (149). Having reached an impasse in the complete disintegration of syntax and subjectivity that is *The Unnameable*, he couldn't foresee a way to continue. Claiming that he was not a master of his material the way Joyce was, he instead chose to explore impotence and ignorance in art. Accordingly, the area of possibilities for him got "smaller and smaller"(148). He said that the subsequent work, *Textes pour rien*, "was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration but it failed"(148). From this perspective, Beckett's work for the stage, television, radio and film, and his continued experiments in prose fiction, are all tentative avenues out of the impasse of *The Unnameable*, an impasse that has been unquestionably productive.

However, following *The Unnameable's* mode of proceeding by way of aporia, the subsequent work, like *Texts for Nothing*, inevitably fails to avoid disintegration, and cancels itself out -- inevitably repeating what has come before.

By exploring "that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable -- as something by definition incompatible with art"(Shenker 148), Beckett was bound to confound traditional approaches to art criticism. Many critics have felt, like John Fletcher, that Beckett's later texts "add little or nothing that is new to his vision" (quoted in Breuer, 39). Others have called them examples of "self-plagiarism"(Finney "SS" 130). Seemingly instigated as much by the obligations to publish as the celebrated obligation to express, Beckett's work cultivates the impression that it is never finished or that it has been abandoned, as a failure. Beckett told Brian Finney that these "fizzles," or "faux départs" are residual, "(1) Severally, even when that does not appear of which each is all that remains and (2) In relation to [the] whole body of the previous work"("SB" 858). In an earlier statement, Beckett claimed that he wrote his entire oeuvre very quickly, "between 1946 and 1950"(Shenker 148), contributing to the impression that all of Beckett's work, after the "major" texts of the '50s, is merely a distension of that which was broached by *The Unnameable*. Few critics recognize that the limitations of the later work constitute a valid aesthetic, its deliberate redundancy and inadequacy working to undermine the tenets of traditional criticism and render them inapplicable.

It is not surprising that Beckett criticism should have come to an impasse similar to the one that Beckett confronted. Darren Tofts notes that only recently have critics come to the realization that most critical methodologies are unable to account for Beckett's work. According to Tofts: "Written text and performance were events of structure and space, and the interpretive problems which they gave rise to were analogous to those which confronted critics of abstract painting and atonal music"(85). The problems that Tofts sees as confronting Beckett's audience (and anthologizers, as Gontarski would have it) are those of categorization, arising from a subversion of traditional conventions and expectations. Claiming that Beckett's work renders traditional criticism invalid, Tofts argues that only an unconventional approach such as Peter Gidal's anarchic collage, *Understanding Beckett*, may be satisfactory (87). Others, like Thomas Trezise, believe that Beckett's work prefigures and participates in the later development of post-structuralist theory and read it from that perspective. Trezise's *Into the Breach* is a polemical intervention that calls attention to the shortcomings of reading Beckett from the perspective of existential humanism, a common response that fails to recognize that Beckett's work questions and renders suspect the very grounds upon which such a position is made. Unfortunately, Trezise's book tacitly undermines its own usefulness when it allies itself with Beckett's project, viewed as participating in a general economy that produces and exceeds the world, opposing any notion of instrumentality. Explicitly critical of Sartre's "What is Literature?", Trezise can only allow himself affirmations scarcely discernible from apolitical metaphysics. A

useful overview of the morass of Beckett criticism is, however, given by Rolf Breuer, Werner Huber, P. J. Murphy, and Konrad Schoell in their *Critique of Beckett Criticism*. They essentially provide an aetiology of the impasse. Equally critical of the ideology of existentialist humanism dominant in the field, they place its "locus classicus" in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Martin Esslin, whose introduction is "undoubtedly the most influential fifteen pages in the history of Beckett criticism in English"(17). The main reason they give for this early collection's prominence is that it made widely available for the first time Beckett's essay on art criticism, "Three Dialogues." The essay immediately follows the introduction, "thereby ostensibly lending Beckett's own authority to Esslin's speculations about the artist trying to shape an existential nothingness" (17). By following Esslin's lead, riddled as it is with contradictions, critics have, in study after study, come to the same inevitable conclusion: Beckett's work is essentially poetry that comically recognizes the pointlessness of human strivings and provides a cathartic release for the reader. The *Critique* claims that this "bourgeoisification" of Beckett renders his work innocuous (18). The editors feel that a more careful examination of some of the more radical elements in Beckett's work may explode the assumptions made about it early on in his career and wrench the criticism out of its impasse.

An examination of Beckett's *Three Dialogues*, its position within his critical writings, and its relationship to his creative writing, reveals the elaboration of an aesthetic entirely other than the one understood by most of Beckett's critics. It is an aesthetic that

fundamentally contradicts, for example, the one described in Esslin's seminal "Introduction." As an introductory gesture, Esslin quotes a phrase from *Three Dialogues* which turns up again and again in critical introductions: "there is nothing to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express"(quoted in Esslin, 2). Esslin finds that this is the inevitable dilemma and paradox of the artist who lives "in a world that lacks a generally accepted -- and to the artist acceptable -- metaphysical explanation that could give his efforts purpose"(2). However, confronted by the absence of a transcendental absolute value, Esslin finds some kind of affirmation of value in the artist, who, having lost all religious and secular faith, continues to create. It is a position that Esslin sees as not only tragic and absurd but brave and heroic, "challenging as it does the ultimate nothingness"(2). Not only does Esslin's interpretation undermine, in particular, the position that Beckett tries to maintain in *Three Dialogues*, but it also obscures, ultimately, the main implications of Beckett's work, which annul the usual assumptions about human existence, as Kermode points out in his review of *Stirrings Still*: "that a person has identity, the power to perceive in a world where there is much to perceive, the power to move about that world"(29). Yet Kermode, in the face of a withering skepticism about human agency, also finds that an affirmation is made, that the character in *Stirrings Still*, no matter how stripped of the usual human attributes, "cannot be represented without the payment of tribute, however reluctant, to a specifically human power"(29). Notice, however, the curious negative construction of his statement: Beckett cannot not pay tribute. Again, agency is

undermined. Beckettian agency can only be approached through failure. While failure has a variety of definitions, in Beckett's case the most significant are those that give the sense of falling short, being insufficient, being absent, and coming to nothing. Many of Beckett's characters can trace their failure right back to the beginning, when they failed to be really born (*CSP* 36). But in *Three Dialogues*, Beckett embraces failure as the vocation of the artist. When he claims that "to be an artist is to fail," that claim definitely rings with the sense of doing bad business: for Beckett, art is not "good housekeeping," it is about expenditure without return and the declaration of bankruptcy (21). Esslin's interpretation of Beckett's work tries to maintain the self against all odds. He places the artist's self as the only source of certainty in the confrontation with the void, but in doing so he erases the self's intimate relation to the void. Esslin's void, as a poetic metaphor that spatializes the absence of a transcendental value, works to stabilize what is rather a dynamic and free-floating anxiety about the possibility of communication. Esslin never doubts its possibility, but in *Three Dialogues*, Beckett has art, indigent because of its lack of expressive capability, turn its back on communication, on the "farce of giving and receiving"(18). The collapse of any certain relation between the subject and the object produces an art that is obliged to declare its own worthlessness.

The inadequacy of Esslin's "Introduction" is revealed upon consideration of the context from which his substantiating quotes are taken. An examination of only the second citation from *Three Dialogues* confirms Esslin's misrepresentation of the original text and the subsequent and unfortunate shift in meaning that results. Esslin

quotes Beckett as saying that the artist must make "of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion...and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, [the artist] makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation"(2). However, in *Three Dialogues* as it is printed, Beckett introduces this notion ironically: he is aware that, in order to bring the "horrible" discussion of the paintings by Bram Van Velde that he is trying to describe to an acceptable conclusion, he must make conclusions about them that would admit them into the conventional history of art, thereby "enlarging its repertory"(20). But, according to Beckett, the paintings of Van Velde are an art of a different order, an art "turning from [the plane of the feasible] in disgust, weary of...pretending to be able, of being able, of going a little further along a dreary road"(17). For Beckett, "the history of painting...is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure"(21). Esslin's understanding of this concept of the failure of representation is revealed to be inadequate when he writes: "To attempt the impossible and to emerge having failed, but not completely, may be a greater triumph than total success in easier tasks"(15). Beckett hopes to resist such recuperation of an art that is critical of the history of art's series of triumphs, as it would betray "this fidelity to failure" by making of it "a new occasion"(21). While anything and everything is doomed to become an occasion "for the artist obsessed with his expressive vocation," Beckett is trying to describe an inexpressive art "unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving"(21, 18). In the sentence that immediately follows the one cited by Esslin, Beckett

refuses to accept such a mercenary end for an art uninterested in the expansion of the field of expression, thus displacing the heroic position Esslin would have him take. He writes, "I know that my inability to do so [make conclusions] places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists"(21). Beckett is obviously self-conscious of the idealism of his position. He tempers his idealism somewhat (that is, he has his cake and eats it) by placing his essay in the form of a dramatic dialogue, presenting himself as a bit of a naïf -- at one point he even "exits weeping"(19). Esslin does Beckett a disservice by not allowing him to give full expression to his inability to come to an acceptable conclusion about the failure of expression. By removing the citation from its context in the interest of supporting his own conclusions, Esslin stabilizes the precarious position that Beckett tries to maintain, and indeed thematize as above all unstable.

Indeed, a fuller account of the text that Esslin is so pleased with reveals an altogether different *Three Dialogues*, one at pains to avoid the affirmations Esslin makes. Esslin himself takes pains to make them, demonstrating that in the art of supportive citation, text flies as freely as a purloined letter. Esslin elides the brief phrase "a new term of relation" from the passage wherein Esslin reads Beckett's artist as making of "this fidelity of failure, a new occasion..."(21). If his excision is in the service of any economy, it is one which places him akin to the creature of habit described by Beckett in *Proust*, who turns aside "from the object that cannot be made to correspond with one or other of his intellectual prejudices, that resists the propositions of his team of syntheses, organized by

Habit on labour-saving principles"(12). Of course, as the excision implies, it is not any single object but a certain "relation" that Esslin seems to have a problem with, a relation which undermines his own premises. It is a relation that breaches the integrity of the position he tries to maintain -- individualism -- as a sanctuary and laboratory of meaning in the face of Beckett's work.

In order to illuminate what is at stake in the excised relation, as well as the relationship between what Beckett has to say about the indigent art of Bram Van Velde and his own work, I want to address the broader context in which *Three Dialogues* appears. One of the major problems of Beckett criticism is its portrayal of him as one of the characters in his texts, a lone figure whose concrete relation to the world seems to be completely severed. Esslin's introduction to Beckett espouses the values of a liberal humanism that is seemingly unaware of any challenges to that position. Not only excising the unstable relation between subject and object in Beckett's text, Esslin also excises Beckett's relation to his avant-garde contemporaries, placing him, in effect, into a sort of artistic vacuum. Though Esslin sidesteps the issue, a concern with the instability of the relation between subject and object is a constant, not only in Beckett's work, but in his criticism of others': not only in *Three Dialogues* of 1949, but also in his earlier writings, at least since *Proust* in 1931. In "Recent Irish Poetry," a review published in 1934, Beckett divided Irish poets into two camps: the antiquarians and those few younger poets who "evinced awareness of the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again, namely the breakdown of the object"(D 70). The historical event that Beckett

vaguely evokes might refer to the recent developments in physics, such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle of 1927, which appears in *Proust* reformulated as the "observer infects the observed with his own mobility"(6). One need not locate the specific cause of the new breakdown of the object. Such events have occurred before, and the originary cannot be located beyond the mythic Fall. One needs only to note the new awareness of the problems of objectivity, that there is an asymmetry or lack of direct correspondence between the subject and the object, and that a grounding principle that would enable such a correspondence is unavailable. To ignore or deny the new breakdown is to persist in bad faith. Though Beckett notes in his review that the antiquarians "adoring the stuff of song as incorruptible, uninjurable and unchangeable" would probably prefer it "amended to the breakdown of the subject," he also says that both views amount to the same thing -- a "rupture of the lines of communication"(70). For Beckett, the rupture between subject and object radically questions the possibility of any certainty when one is observing and describing phenomena. Such uncertainty leads to a skepticism about the expressive capabilities of art, or indeed, of any kind of discourse.

Instead of leading Beckett to the abandonment of art altogether, however, such skepticism draws him to an immanent critique of art. In fact, the breakdown of any such notion of objectivity leads to the recognition or establishment of an autonomous realm for art: art's unmooring is its freedom to exist on its own terms. Such at least are the views propounded by Beckett in an article published in 1938, ostensibly reviewing a book of poems

by Denis Devlin. Beckett's views are symptomatic, however, of a much larger historical trend. The historian Carl Schorske sees the disillusionment brought about by the events of the early twentieth century as leading liberals and radicals to adapt "their world-views to a revolution of falling expectations" (xxxiv, xxiii). In his review of Devlin's poetry, Beckett finds it a relief that poetry is now "free to be derided (or not) on its own terms and not in those of the politicians, antiquaries...and zealots"(D 91). That which is implicit in the immanent critique of art is explicitly used by Beckett to fashion a critical stance against programmatic art, socialist realism in particular: "Art has always been pure interrogation...whatever else it may have been obliged by the 'social reality' to appear, but never more freely so than now, when social reality...has severed the connection"(91).

Beckett's views can be profitably compared with those held, fairly contemporaneously, by Clement Greenberg, who without doubt, comes from a different milieu but indicates nonetheless the general and increasing disaffection with leftist art practices at the time. In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," which appeared in the Fall 1939 issue of the *Partisan Review* (a pivotal moment in the depoliticization or "de-Marxization" of the intelligentsia in the United States, according to Serge Guilbaut [36]), Greenberg lays down the theoretical foundations for an 'elitist' modernist position (which has certainly informed many readings of Beckett's work). According to Guilbaut, the revolutionary politics of Trotsky's defense of an art that remained "faithful to itself," which appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1938, is neutralized by Greenberg when he takes it "one step further, maintaining that

while the avant-garde did indeed do critical work, it was criticism directed within, toward the work of art itself, toward the very medium of art, and intended solely to guarantee the quality of the production"(35). Though Beckett's views may initially seem quite similar to Greenberg's, there is a crucial difference that cannot be overlooked. In the definitive revision of his essay on modernist painting in 1966, where Greenberg writes that the "essence of Modernism lies...in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself -- not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its areas of competence"(101), his position is the complete anathema of the Beckett of "Three Dialogues." For Greenberg, the task of the immanent criticism of the arts is the distillation of each particular medium until each contained only the effects proper to each. The end result would be, ideally, the purification of the arts, in which each form would "in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence"(102). Greenberg writes, "By doing this, each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure"(102). Beckett proposes and champions an art that is insuperably indigent, an art that eschews three-dimensional perspective as merely an expansive trap for the acquisition of property. For Beckett, Van Velde, whose paintings are "bereft" of an object, is the first painter to admit that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living"(20,21). Perhaps failure should be read in the double sense of the German word

Durchfall (it also means "diarrhoea"). As the area within which Beckett chooses to work is one of incompetence, it leaves him with material that is improper for the work of art, "that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something usable -- as something by definition incompatible with art"(Shenker 148). For Beckett, there can be no "pure" expression in an art that is irredeemable, nor for that matter in any post-lapsarian language. For him, the only valid expression becomes that which invalidates itself, recognizing its own destitution. When Beckett objects to the transposition of his works from one medium to another, it is because each is written in a Brechtian manner to expose the mechanism by which it is produced.

But Beckett's artist, whom he describes as a distasteful *pharmakos*, an untouchable who relishes and cultivates his own destitution by turning away from the fiasco of the world and its everyday banalities to pursue a deeper investigation of the poverty of existence, does not find himself cast out of the gates of the city, but all too comfortably accommodated. The values of individualism and the willingness to take risks, inherent in the anti-authoritarianism of avant-garde art and its critique of the status quo, are championed by liberal democracy. In his study of the rise to prominence of American Abstract Expressionism after the Second World War, which saw New York supplant Paris as the vanguard centre of the arts, Serge Guilbaut shows how easily the "new liberalism" of Cold-War political life appropriates avant-garde dissidence. Avant-garde artists like Jackson Pollack, as politically 'neutral' individualists, found that their "combative stance could

easily combine with...[an] old fashioned bourgeois individualism that did not trouble itself with avant-garde subtleties"(Guilbaut 200). Through commentary like Greenberg's "Avant-garde and Kitsch," the critical work of the avant-garde ultimately "came to represent the values of the majority, but in a way (continuing the modernist tradition) that only a minority was capable of understanding"(Guilbaut 3). Greenberg's essay disproves one of his own points: that it was "too difficult to inject effective propaganda" into avant-garde art (Greenberg 47). For Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism is the exemplary product of the individualism of liberal democracy. It is individual above all else, as individual freedom, or the freedom of expression, guarantees the standards of quality of art against which all mass-produced kitsch fails to measure up. Greenberg changes the aim of avant-garde art from the self-conscious shocking of the bourgeoisie to the preservation of what they hold dear. Avant-garde art becomes the last bastion of quality in a society seemingly unable to resist the easy satisfaction of mass-produced kitsch, the debased goods of capitalism. Critics can therefore congratulate themselves on being among the rare individuals who can appreciate the more difficult pleasures of the avant-garde. And critics who insist on the purity or quality of Beckett's vision risk doing the same.

By the end of Esslin's introduction, Beckett represents the heroic affirmation of liberal humanism. His example provides consolation for those without the conviction to confront the terrifying emptiness of freedom:

to see a lone figure, without hope of comfort, facing the great emptiness of space and time without the possibility of miraculous rescue or salvation, in dignity, resolved to fulfill its obligation to express its own predicament -- to partake of such courage and noble stoicism, however remotely, cannot but evoke a feeling of emotional excitement, exhilaration. (Esslin 14)

In this passage, Esslin provides one of the best examples of how little Beckett's admirers, as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have noted, are troubled by "his demonstrations of cosmic meaninglessness and the demise of Western philosophy"(16). Divested of secular and religious illusion, the lone figure of Beckett's texts, who is, by Esslin's account, Beckett himself, is all that is left to set the standard of value, exhibiting a pure self free of all worldly attachments. According to Esslin, as Beckett refuses to deal in abstract concepts and generalities, totally rejecting all ideology, the only thing that he communicates, being the best of the existentialist writers, is the quality of his experience, which directly affects his audience (10). Esslin advocates, then, through Beckett, via Kierkegaard, an apolitical existentialism, which, instead of saying that people define themselves through action in the world, proposes that the existentialist self is that which has no truck with the social. It is therefore not surprising that Kierkegaard figures largely in Esslin's reading of Beckett. As Schorske notes, his figure becomes prominent in the Cold-War turn to neo-orthodox Protestantism (xxiii). For American critics, like Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Kierkegaardian existentialism provided a justification for alienation in democratic

society -- "anxiety," writes Kierkegaard, "is the dizziness of freedom"(quoted in Guilbaut 202). For Esslin, Kierkegaard establishes the superiority of subjective over objective thought (6). Through the framework of a Kierkegaardian existentialism, Esslin reads Beckett's works as documents of the immediate experience of the self in the process of becoming. He writes:

That is why in the last resort there is nothing to express together with the obligation to express; the only certain evidence of being is the individual's experience of his own consciousness, which in turn is constantly in flux and ever changing and therefore negative rather than positive, the empty space through which the fleeting images pass. (Esslin 9)

However, Esslin locates the source of negativity not in the individual but in the revelation of the contradiction between the eternal and the temporal. When Esslin writes that the "existential experience is thus felt as a succession of attempts to give shape to the void"(9), he centres the self as a pure deontological subject with the agency to choose the forms it will pursue in the anxious freedom of democratic modernity. Separating thought (infinite mind) and being (finite existence), while privileging the former over the latter, Esslin concludes that negativity resides only in material existence, in the perception of change in this world, and not in the perceptive mind. The lesson of Beckett's texts, then, is no different from the task of all true philosophy, at least since Socrates' exhortation of a turning away from the sensuous world in preparation for death and the soul's release. According to Esslin, Beckett faces the stark reality of the human situation alone. Others, less capable, come to find consolation

in the transformation of the world through Beckett's courageous talent, his ability to describe his "quality" experience of an ugly reality. Esslin writes, "The uglier the reality that is confronted, the more exhilarating will be its sublimation into symmetry, rhythm, movement and laughter"(15). With the recognition that all hope for change is an illusion, the only ground for change -- that of the arts -- is illusory. The aestheticization of despair is the result. For Kant, little could destroy all aesthetic satisfaction, except that which excited disgust. When Esslin finds the very act of confronting the void an affirmation of the existential experience of the individual, his externalization of the void indicates that which he finds repellent.

While Esslin preserves the integrity of the individual in confrontation with the void and the flux of perception, for Beckett, individualism is a dilemma, and the subject is as unstable as its object. The instability of the relation between the subject and its object troubles the two possibilities for the maintenance of meaning, refusing to allow that (1) there is a transcendental source of intelligibility, or that (2) the solitary consciousness is originary. As Ewa Ziarek notes, both positions "attempt to invent a being absolved or removed from the unstable relations to others"(191). These positions cannot be maintained in Beckett's work. The latter position, having to take the place of the absentee first, breaks down because the unfortunate subject becomes divided against himself.

If the dilemma is not apparent in any of Beckett's work, it certainly is in "Three Dialogues," where Beckett describes the relation between artist and subject matter, or as he calls it, the "occasion": "But if the occasion appears as an unstable term of relation, the

artist, who is the other term, is hardly less so..."(21). If, as Esslin argues, any artist's description of perception must interminably recount the change and flux, the account would therefore be necessarily inadequate and incomplete, and so too would the artist be in relation. Beckett continues:

All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to. (21)

Beckett denigrates the metaphorical rationality of vision by referring to it as a blinkered "tropism towards the light" (21) and to the history of Western thought, optics, art, as the development of more and more efficient means of acquiring objects in plain sight, which would confirm the suspicion that there is something more that remains unseen. For Beckett, this heliocentrism is motivated by "a kind of Pythagorean terror, as though the irrationality of pi were an offense against the deity, not to mention his creature" (Beckett 21). To acknowledge the existence of irrational numbers is a slander against the unity of the One, cherished by theologians and individual theorists since Parmenides up to and including Esslin and beyond. As Burkert notes, the revelation of the irrational is fabled to have elicited divine punishment for the "lawlessness and impiety" of the act: Hippasus was drowned at sea for such mathematical treason (457). With the then current rallying cry of a good liberal, Beckett proclaims that Hippasus, a martyr of his own revelation, was "neither fascist nor communist" ("Deux Besoins" *D* 56, my translation). Unable to be partisan to anything, nor gerrymander, the artist puts all into

question through the (very Greenbergian) "pure interrogation" of art: "rhetorical question less the rhetoric" ("Intercessions" *D* 91) or "questions rhetoriques sans fonction oratoire" (*D* 56). No answers will satisfy the artist or make the artist's quest complete. To posit the fullness of Being is to deny non-Being; it is to maintain that being is fully present to itself, lacking nothing.

The only thing the artist lacks, Esslin argues, is a transcendental principle that would guarantee meaning. The artist who feels an obligation to express himself in the face of, if not stemming from, the lack of a transcendental guarantee of meaning, confronts a formidable dilemma. But, Esslin continues, despite the dilemma, and despite Beckett's disregard for communication (one might say Beckett renders it completely doubtful) the obligation to express opens up the possibility for communication. Yet Esslin never explicitly accounts for the sense of obligation felt by the artist, be it some kind of superior moral obligation to the truth, or some kind of duty to his fellow men, those unable to discern the truth as accurately as he. For Esslin, the artist is never at fault, and therefore avoids having to deal with any troublesome pangs of conscience. The dilemma of the obligation in Beckett's writing is that the subject, as it is fundamentally faulty, far from being absolved from the unstable relations to others, experiences an acute desire for absolution that only another can give.

Beckett's notion of the artist's obligation, as it is articulated in the critical and theoretical essays of his early career, is congruent with a larger cultural trend, described by Schorske as the turn from Marx to Freud, wherein the premises for the understanding of

humanity and society shift "from the public sociological domain to the private and psychological one"(xxxiv). Though Beckett would have art give up the charade of expression and therefore its ostensible connection to social reality, he does not conclude that it no longer has any obligations. In the review of Denis Devlin's "Intercessions," Beckett claims that, if art is to be derided, it should be derided on its own terms: not according to the prevailing opinions about what is valuable in art, but rather according to the "terms of need," established by the identification of the kind of need that has produced the work (91). Beckett proposes, in short, that the only valid perspective on art is one that is of a psychoanalytic bent, which sees an artist's creation as the result of some kind of compulsion.

During the thirties, Beckett was very much involved in the discourse of psychoanalysis. He was himself a patient of the Kleinian therapist, Wilfred Bion, at the Tavistock Clinic in London. According to Dierdre Bair, their "discussions as often as not touched upon the abstract creative process as upon Beckett's personal problems"(177). A lecture given by Jung at that time, the Third Tavistock lecture, would be a reference point for Beckett several times in his later career: it is mentioned by the character Maddy in Beckett's radio play *All That Fall*, first broadcast in 1957 (*CSP* 35-36), and though it pertains to all of the works in which a character is "not really there," it also provided a textual supplement for the perplexed actress who played May in the German premier of *Footfalls* in 1976 (Asmus 83). But it is Jung's essay "Psychology and Poetry" that is of primary interest in any discussion of the abstract creative process involving Beckett. Beckett would have undoubtedly been familiar with it, as it

was published in 1930 by *transition*, a Parisian journal with which Beckett was associated. Jung's portrait of the poet as a conflicted man, which may now, if not then, sound overly familiar, corresponds in a striking way with Beckett's formulation of "his terms of need."

Jung writes:

his life is, of necessity, full of conflicts, since two forces fight in him: the ordinary man with his justified claim for happiness, contentment and guarantees for living on the one hand, and the ruthless creative passion on the other which under certain conditions crushes all personal desires into the dust. (42)

For Jung, art is an impersonal force, innate in the artist, like an instinct that "makes a tool out of a human being" (41). The artist's revelations suit not his own ends but the aim of art, which is the re-establishment of a psychic balance and the fulfillment of the "psychic need of the people" (44). With access to the rich maternal depths of the unconscious, the artist "is in a higher sense 'man'" above the common squabble of the everyday; he is "the collective man, the carrier and former of the unconsciously active soul of mankind"(41). The suprahuman qualities of the artist that Jung delineates will be ironically deflated later when Beckett claims, in "Three Dialogues," that nobody fails better than the artist. While the brand of mysticism purported by Jung found a willing audience at *transition*, whose Verticalist manifesto, of which Beckett was a signatory, proposed to champion the depths, Beckett was somewhat at odds with his comrades. Dougald McMillan points to a line from the novel Beckett was working on at the time, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*: "Behold Mr. Beckett, a dud mystic"(152). McMillan finds

that the metaphysical consummation of the "I and Thou" proclaimed by the manifesto is nowhere evident in Beckett's work. As indicated by the line from *Dream*, the posthumously published novel, access to a transcendent realm is always denied in Beckett's work. In Jung's essay, the greater of the two needs, the demands of art, offers fulfillment on a different plane. When Beckett writes, in the Devlin review, about the "two needs" of the subject, the greater need, "an inverted spiral of need," hollows out Jung's ascension (*D* 91). Painfully aware of the absence of transcendence, the subject strives for what may give satisfaction, but it is always tantalizingly out of reach. The Devlin review offers an example of an "I and Thou" relationship that can never be consummated -- the relationship between Lazarus and the rich man (Luke: 19-31) who are separated by a chasm in this world and after. But while their respective positions cannot broach any kind of fulfillment or rapprochement, they nevertheless maintain a precarious balance, in what Beckett calls the Dives-Lazarus symbiosis: "The absurdity, here or there, of either without the other, the inaccessible other. In death they do not cease to be divided"(92). In Beckett's work, the "I and Thou" relationship is asymmetrical. Not one that erases the difference between the two, the relationship in fact heightens it. One demands from the indifferent other the relief of his suffering. In this world, the rich man lorded it over Lazarus. Their life in the afterworld merely effects a reversal of their roles. The two are unequal, except in the imaginary reflection of their own torment.

In Beckett's work, the asymmetry of the "two needs" creates a restless propulsion, the fundamental lack, or inverted spiral of need,

demanding activity that will never stem the sense of anxiety or loss at its root. As Beckett writes, "Deux besoins, dont le produit fait l'art" (*D* 55). In *Mercier and Camier*, Beckett repeats the motif: "There are two needs: the need you have and the need to have it"(72). Beckett's first novel written in French, seen as a proto-Godot in its account of two vagrants on a dead-end journey, it remained unpublished until the '70s. Didier Anzieu suggests that *Mercier and Camier* is a parodic account of, if not Beckett's analysis with Bion specifically, then the analytical session in general: "Camier, for example, is humorously presented as a 'private detective' whose specialty is finding 'lost objects'"(25). While the novel catalogues the on-again off-again relationship of the title characters, it equally details the fate of the objects that they possess or of which they are dispossessed. One such object, a sack that contained several of their articles, is particularly mourned. Camier opines, "Whence then our disquiet? ...From the intuition...that the said sack contains something essential to our salvation"(59). Camier thinks that the sack, as that which contains, might have contained the thing they think they need, and if they discarded it, deeming the contents superfluous, perhaps it was a fault of their judgment, which they cannot remember clearly. However, he is not sure if the thing they think they need was in the sack, as it may have been amongst their other past possessions. He can only speculate that they once had it but have it no longer, and even of that he is uncertain: "It boils down then to some unknown...which not only is not necessarily in the sack, but which perhaps no sack of this type could possibly accommodate"(60). The various quests that Mercier and Camier embark upon procure a

series of objects, one replacing the other, but none can satisfy an unknowable source of disquiet.

In a move that is significant for Beckett's entire oeuvre, Camier links the sack to the exhortations of an interiorized voice, which, other than the subject, takes him outside of himself with a demand he may not be able to meet:

You know the faint imploring voice, said Camier, that drivels to us on and off of former lives?

I confuse it more and more, said Mercier, with the one that tries to cod me I'm not yet dead...

It would seem to be some such organ, said Camier, that for the past twenty-four hours has not ceased to murmur, The sack!

Your sack! (59-60)

They search "longingly, patiently, carefully, unsuccessfully" (89). The faint imploring voice which bids them to do so will become more prominent in Beckett's work when he switches to the monologue. The status of the voice, however, in the polyphonic paranoia of the later first person narratives, cannot really be said to have the unqualified stability of a monologue. Dispossessed of all other material objects, the voice becomes the last object to be possessed by the Beckettian character, who is equally possessed by it.

It is not clear which possesses the other, the subject or the voice, as there is no stable identity and no full-possession in Beckett's oeuvre, only the partial annexation of objects. In the Devlin review, Beckett notes that identity is "made up of cathexes not only multivalent but interchangeable"(93). Likewise, in his study of Proust, Beckett claims that identity comprises the pursuit of objects

of desire with which the subject identifies. He notes that we can only be "disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment" because the subject "has died -- and perhaps many times -- on the way"(3). The subject's parameters oscillate between boredom and suffering -- the prime condition of the artistic experience -- which opens onto the real (16). In Lacanian terms, the Real is the inaccessible domain of the lost object, a domain resembling the true paradise that Beckett finds in *Proust*, indicating that it is absurd to "dream of a Paradise with retention of personality, since our life is a succession of Paradises denied, that the only true Paradise is the Paradise that has been lost, and that death will cure many of the desire for immortality"(P, 14). *Proust's* subject is condemned to be always unfulfilled, inhabiting the space between the two butting heads of the monster of time: the infinite and the finite. Beckett writes, "all that is realized in Time...can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations -- and never integrally and at once"(7). This conception of time runs counter to those who would insist on the unity of the One, in particular the Eleatic school and its paradoxes. Zeno, disciple of Parmenides, argued that motion and change did not exist because everything was present at once in the unity of the One. An arrow in flight is not in motion because its trajectory can be cut into an infinite series of positions, at each of which it is at rest. For Joan Copjec, Beckett's work is the best illustration of Zeno's paradox from its "proper, psychoanalytic perspective," that is, from the Lacanian perspective that "shows that, on the contrary, it is the non-presence of the subject to its whole self that determines the formulation of the

Eleatic paradoxes"(52). She explains that the "cutting up of the subject's movements and the *reductio ad absurdum*, that is the reduction to infinite series of its replaceable objects" is accounted for by the fact that the subject is cut off from that essential thing that would complete it"(61). Beckett's characters, no matter how compulsively they speak or feverishly fill pages, no matter how closely they follow the imploring voice they hear, will never come to terms with their existence, they will never complete the "impossible heap" of their desire.

A reading of Beckett's texts from a psychoanalytic perspective certainly goes a long way towards explaining the hitherto inadequately addressed notion of obligation in his work, even if doing so reiterates the rusty myth of original sin, in which language suffers from being always already post-lapsarian. As Beckett writes in *Proust*, "the tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin...the sin of having been born"(49). Unable to fulfill a fundamental lack, the subject is certain to languish, and Being takes on the cast of punishment. Lacan names, as *Jouissance*, the absence that makes the subject feel incomplete. Furthermore, Lacan makes the subject responsible for his *Jouissance*, or lack of it: since there is no successful communication with an inaccessible other that would make the "I" complete, "all that remains to me is to assume the fault upon 'I'"(E, 317). The fault remains with and within the subject. The subject's sense of his own guilt stems from the fact that his integrity is betrayed by an insatiable desire. As the narrator of *The Unnameable* (like many of Beckett's characters) describes his existence: "I was given a penum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment

for being born perhaps...Yes, I have a penum to discharge before I can be free"(BT 312). Lacan, who sets the example for taking desire literally, writes: "it is only through a speech that lifted the prohibition that the subject has brought to bear upon himself by his own words that he might obtain the absolution that would give him back his desire"(E 269). In Beckett's texts, maybe more so than in any others, desire is literally a transgression, an obligatory movement outside. Desire is always desire for the other. Beckett's characters often wish to sacrifice this enjoyment so that they will not be indebted to another. The existence of Beckett's characters certainly indicates that life has the characteristics of being far more of a debt than a gift. His protagonists can only hope that the payments they suffer have some kind of currency. To have full possession of their own desire would entail the absolution, or abolition, of a guilty conscience.

Having contracted a debt, and unable not to take responsibility for it because desire wants full possession, the Beckettian character's only recourse is to imagine a way to break the indenture. Over and over again, Beckett's characters express their longing for redemption from various scenarios of persecution or prosecution. For example, in *Play*, the merciless glare of a spotlight prompts the characters, as if at an interrogation, to relate their version of the story. But, though the light compels them to speak, they have no idea about what it may be searching for, what may placate it. One character says: "Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that someday somehow I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?"(CSP 53). Another says: "Am I hiding something? Have I

lost...the thing you want? ...I might start to rave and... bring it up for you"(155-6). The characters can only imagine they are at fault, that their language is at fault, but hold on to the slim chance that their language harbours the possibility of their redemption. The repetitive, discontinuous structure of the play, however, (of which the audience is witness only to part of what could go on forever) tacitly asserts that what the characters manage to bring up, over and over again, will be worthless in relation to their goal. Commenting on the relationships of power in Beckett's *Play*, Connor notes that, "the effect of the repetition is to reveal that the light is no freer than they are, but is itself forced to repeat the inquisition, having learned nothing, or with no more knowledge than its victims of what has already passed"(180). The situation will not be dialectically overcome. The characters will not experience the satisfactions of complete self-knowledge. As Connor's investigation implies, there is a paradoxical powerlessness when the subject inhabits structures of power. As Lacan would say, the subject is carved by a structure. Cut out by a structure, the subject's frustrations leave little course of action, and often take the form of acts of aggression, of aggressive corporeal dislocations enacted on the self or on others. The central image of Beckett's *Not I* is a disembodied mouth suspended in space, but the agent of enucleation is unknown, save for the sharply pinpointed spotlight that cuts the mouth out of the darkness of the stage area. Like those in *Play*, the main character of *Not I* is subjected to the cruel inquisition of a spotlight that compels her to give some kind of confession, illuminating the notion that morality is inextricably linked with aggression, as the farce of giving and

receiving is a two-fold operation. Now unable to stop talking, before she had been virtually speechless all her days: "now this... something she had to tell...could that be it?...wouldn't know if she heard...then forgiven"(CSP 221). There are moments in her past, however, that are comparable to her present:

...speechless all her days...practically speechless ...even to herself...but not completely...some-times sudden urge [...] sudden urge to...tell...then rush out stop the first she saw...nearest lavatory...start pouring it out...steady stream...mad stuff. (222)

Through her confession she hopes to purchase some kind of indulgence, but if the language is indicative of anything it is that she is suspicious of the value of what she gives. Beckett's tenth *Text for Nothing* is even more caustic in its evaluation. Noting that "somewhere someone is uttering" the narrator writes, "I see what it is, the head has fallen behind, all the rest has gone on, the head and its anus the mouth, or else it has gone on alone, all alone on its old prowls, slobbering its shit and lapping it back off the lips like in the days when it fancied itself"(SB 141). In light of Lacan, it is hard not to read the moral of such a fable. Lacan writes:

The anal level is the locus of metaphor -- one object for another, give the faeces in place of the phallus. This shows you why the anal drive is the domain of oblativity, of the gift. Where one is caught short, where one cannot, as a result of the lack, give what is to be given, one can always give something else. That is why in his morality, man is inscribed at the anal level. (FFC 104).

Beckett's texts depict the search for a speech that would liberate the speaker, who wishes to be finished telling stories, but will only be able to do so by telling the "right one" ("Cascando" *CSP* 137). As Lacan notes, "desire is simply the impossibility of such speech" (*E* 269).

Lacan contrasts two relations of the subject to knowledge, the Hegelian and the Freudian, in order to distinguish the dialectic from desire. In the dialectic of desire, Freud's not Hegel's, there can be no sublimation. Though Esslin may find the ugly reality of Beckett's texts sublime, their rhythm and laughter stem from a conflict that cannot be resolved, or absolved.

Beckett's characters seem doomed to forever entreat another who is entirely indifferent to whether or not the demands will be met, but within this relationship, like the subject's subjection to the punishment of a cruel super-egoic conscience, lies the ethical relationship to the Other. In the Lacanian formulation, love is the gift of what one does not have, and as desire is always desire of the Other, one can never know what is really wanted. Moreover, the subject, as Lacan notes, lacks "Hegel's 'cunning of reason'" which is that "from beginning to end, the subject knows what it wants" (*E* 301). Aware of the charade, Beckett, at least in *Three Dialogues*, would have art turn its back on the farce of giving and receiving in a Kantian line of reasoning that would make of the moral act one in which no one benefits. But Copjec, critiquing Kant from a psychoanalytic perspective, argues that "someone -- the Other -- always benefits from the sacrifice of enjoyment -- and always at the subject's expense" (96). In addition, Copjec perceives in Kant the erasure of the division of the subject and the materiality of language.

The categorical imperative is a statement that appears to come to the addressee from nowhere, as it takes place in a realm cut off from the phenomenal world subject to historical change, like the pure subject in Esslin's reading of Beckett's narratives. As such, "the addressee takes itself as the source of the statement"(96-98). Copjec notes that, in Kant, "the ethical subject hears the voice of conscience as its own"(98). However, in Beckett's work, the subject is always split by the voice of conscience, and the voice is always of questionable provenance. One need not recount the history of aggression perpetuated by the universal subject under the guise of altruism and benevolence. If Beckett's texts illustrate anything, it is that one's duty to the other cannot be shrugged off.

If only vaguely, the outline of an ethics of aesthetics is taking shape. Charting a treacherous topology filled with gaps, Lacan is led to write, "The unconscious is ethical not ontic"(*FFC* 34). Significantly, the phrase Beckett should take as one of the starting points for his work, "Where you are worth nothing you want nothing," is for Geulincx the foundation of all ethics. But as Murphy discovers, pursuing solipsism in an asylum, it is not enough to want nothing where you are worth nothing, because, instead of being provided for in such a state, demands continue to be made on the subject. No matter how isolated Beckett's characters may be, they always exist in relation to others. For example, though highly abstract, *Not I* tells the story of a very real woman who is made to stand trial for her actions, her deviance: "that time in court...what had she to say for herself ...guilty or not guilty...stand up woman...speak up woman...stood there staring into space...mouth half open as

usual"(221). Abstraction is really only an artificially isolated aspect of the Real, and in *Not I*, this abstraction is underscored by the derealizing effect of pinpointing a spotlight on a mouth in the darkness of a stage. As many have argued, the Real (as it is in Lacan's terminology) is always mediated by the symbolic relations of difference, and abstraction in the arts, as Guilbaut points out, has too often been a mute accomplice to the obfuscation of the relations of political economy and power. Though he dismissed them as "*foutaise alimentaire*" (Pilling 99), one of the Surrealist texts Beckett translated in the '30s lends a political dimension to his choice of characters for his work: Breton's "Surrealism and the Treatment of Mental Illness," described as "one of the earliest denunciations of the use of psychiatry as an aid in enforcing standards of conformity, by which a branch of medicine is made into an arm of the police"(Rosemont 62). Breton protests against "the increasingly abusive condemnation of what has been called autism" which allows "the bourgeoisie...to regard as pathological everything in man which is not his pure and simple adaptation to the external conditions of life"(164). Beckett's texts give their full attention to characters who are consistently marginalized fixtures in society. The texts come to focus on little else. What is troubling, however, is their absolute refusal to cooperate with any clear system of value. Beckett's texts demand that we pay attention to their every detail, to their singularity, all the while acknowledging that such details and singularities may well be worthless.

Chapter 2: Two Points of Departure

It is more than fortuitous that Kermode's review of *Stirrings Still* raises the issue of value in connection with Beckett's texts. Indeed, if one takes *Beckett* at his word, value can be seen as a central concern in his work. Though Esslin insists that a work should be valued for the direct existential experience that can be gleaned from it, "distinct from its purely descriptive, ideological, and polemical content," he admits that a "legitimate auxiliary function for the critic" would be to uncover the structuring principles that must be present "in an oeuvre in which the concept of the games that the consciousness must play to fill the void is of such importance"(11, 13). Esslin argues that, just as knowing the rules of a game allows the spectators to "fully enter into and share the excitement of the players," knowing the underlying patterns of design in an artist's work enhances "the onlooker's ability to see it with the [artist's] own eyes"(11-12). But Beckett's texts deny the possibility of any such communication. The unstable and unequal relationship between the subject and the object is never absolved by Beckett's work, and value is always shadowed by uncertainty, like the shadow of the inaccessible object that falls across the subject. If value is a central concern in Beckett's work, ambivalence is ultimately that concern's structuring principle. The dynamic oscillation of ambivalence is all that is left to the subject cut off from the confirmation of another that would anchor value and put a stop to its solicitation.

In 1967, when solicited by Sighle Kennedy, then a graduate student, to corroborate her approach to his first novel, *Murphy*

(1938), Beckett responded that if he were in the unenviable position of studying his work he would take a phrase attributed to Geulincx, "Where you are worth 'nothing,' you 'want nothing,'" as one of his points of departure (Kennedy 24). Geulincx, the 17th-century Cartesian philosopher, espouses an idealism that denigrates the finite material world in favour of the infinite spiritual realm. By recognizing and respecting the Christian God as the supreme Being, Geulincx advises, one gains access to the infinite. Recognizing his own inadequacy, the believer desires to become one with the Almighty, renouncing his own finite, bounded identity. Will-lessness is the desired end of one's making of God's will one's own; powerlessness accedes to the supreme strength of the almighty God; worthlessness brings an end to the desire for anything other than the highest value, God, whose greatness and generosity satisfies any want. God accounts for everything because He is the primal cause of all Being. However, Geulincx's phrase and its distillation of his philosophy, in itself does not decisively account for Beckett's work. As Beckett remarks, it only offers one point of departure.

A second such point is a phrase Beckett attributes to Democritus: "Naught is more real than nothing"(Kennedy 17). Developing an explicitly materialist and mechanistic view of the universe, Democritus claimed that "material bodies are not the only things that exist, since space [or void] exists as well"(Allen 15). The two together are the material causes of existing things. Perception of the world is derived from the interaction of atoms, the smallest particles of being, moving through space. In Democritus's theory there is no primal cause that accounts for the motion of the atoms.

Causality becomes implicitly mechanical, not moral, and seems to be generated by accident or chance under the rubric of "Necessity"(Allen 54). As Reginald Allen notes, Democritus's "treatment of motion closely anticipate[s] the modern account of inertia"(15). To account for his work, Beckett's letter to Kennedy recommends, the phrase by Democritus must be considered together with the one by Geulincx. Both appear in *Murphy*, but the two together provide the impetus for his later work as well. Taken together, they pose a problem that cannot be resolved.

The disjunction posed by Beckett's letter to Kennedy is not, however, new; it dates back to the first philosophical demonstration in history, Parmenides' *Way of Truth*, which was supposed to have resolved it. Simply stated as "It is, or It is not", the disjunction was erased by Parmenides' reasoning. That which is not must be rejected, as nothing can be known except that it exists. For Parmenides there is only one Being, ungenerated, unchanging, and indestructible (Allen 11). The school of Eleatics, founded by Parmenides, denied motion and change. Parmenides' reasoning is at the root of later idealism such as Geulincx's and others' that places God as the absolute and benevolent self-creating cause of everything. Democritus was of an entirely different opinion, of course, placing limits on the infinite. But Democritus's account should be more properly considered as part of a third way, pointed out by Parmenides, that is a combination of the two, a way that claims both "It is and It is not" (Allen 11). Parmenides wryly notes that those who follow this third way are deceived, as it is attributed to the false perception of the destruction and change in the worthless material

world, and is reducible to the second way that is untenable. Those who follow this third way are condemned to wander helplessly, deaf and blind, altogether dazed, with "hordes devoid of judgment"(Parmenides, in Allen, 44). Parmenides' condemnation aptly describes the characters in Beckett's texts, who wander in a space that constantly questions their agency.

"To be or not to be" really is the question, and devoid of judgment, Beckett's characters wonder helplessly in texts that are unable to answer decisively. The absolute value which would clinch all decisions is inaccessible because each character has an acute awareness of limitations; but without limitations, there would be no desire for the absolute. A reading of Beckett's work through Geulincx and Democritus accentuates the tension within the texts created by the statement of an ideal (Geulincx's access to the infinite) and the failure to measure up to it (the limitations marked out by Democritus). The conflict produces perpetual strife in a process without end. As Beckett was concerned with form as much if not more than with content, the unresolved conflict between the two points of departure in Beckett's letter must affect that aspect of his work as well. The result is a restless propulsion, even if it may be repetitive. Such work, as that which *Beckett* began to describe in "Three Dialogues," confounds traditional approaches to the evaluation of art by questioning their application or applicability. Without an absolute value as a stable referent there is no way to anchor the judgement of a work's value, which would be anchored within the work itself, and plainly in view. Rather, each work becomes a solicitation of value that underscores the disequilibrium behind the

maintenance of value. Beckett reveals the maintenance of value to be a continual process that positions itself strategically on contested rather than secure grounds. As Beckett writes in an early essay collected in *Disjecta*, it is the conclusion and not the premise that the enthymeme of art lacks ("Deux Besoins" D 57). The irresolution of ambivalence is dynamic. It refuses closure by pursuing a third way that, even if punished by it, does not follow the law of a binary structure which opposes two fixed values to generate meaning. Eluding the value-system that it finds inadequate, ambivalence finally resists evaluation. Beckett's texts position themselves as being indifferent to the completion of a transaction in a fixed system based on exchange-value. This indifference to exchange underscores the uncertainties that always accompany any act of giving and receiving, or buying and selling. Such indifference is eventually what qualifies the interpretation of the phrase by Geulincx as offered and delineated by *Murphy*.

In the context of *Murphy*, Beckett's translation of Geulincx's, "Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil veles" emphasizes worth, and, in doing so, enlists it in a general investigation of value by which it too will come into question. He translates the phrase, from the Belgo-Latin, as "Where you are 'worth nothing', you 'want nothing'" (Kennedy 24). *Vales*, however, encompasses a range of meanings that may be offered by its translation as "valence." Comparing Alain de Lattre's translation of Geulincx's phrase into French, "Tu n'as rien à vouloir, là où tu es sans pouvoir," (Geulincx 117) with Beckett's rendering, one notes the inflection towards worth, or perhaps away from it. The translation in Beckett's text evaluates the impotence rendered in de

Lattre's translation of Geulincx, which does have its benefits. Turned towards God and away from the material riches of the world that are worthless in comparison, one becomes a conduit for the eternal bounty and grace of God. Turned away from God, one has only spiritual poverty and impotence: "la misère qui m'attend si j'en suis détourné"(Geulincx 116).

La misère economically expresses a constellation of meaning, as it encompasses the extreme poverty, weakness, and impotence at issue in both the *Beckett* and de Lattre translations of the phrase. In both, *la misère* is the predicate for a state without lack, want, or need. In Geulincx, of course, it is not recognized as such because of the provision of the overflowing gift of God's grace: the opposite, material wealth and power, is *la misère*. There is still another context in which the word is used, a context that may distinguish more clearly the differentiation between the *Beckett* and de Lattre translations: in cards, *la misère* is a declaration to win no tricks. Though the Christian asceticism of a Geulincx has a similar resolve to gain nothing, it is obviously related to the acquisition of spiritual benefits. While the strategy of *la misère* may be to ensure future benefits, at the time it is played, the principle seems to be one of homeostasis, which is perhaps what is more at stake in the context of *Murphy*.

In the context of *Murphy*, Geulincx's phrase is made to be the expression of a secular idealism, of autonomous individualism, where even the Christian ascetic's refusal of material wealth would be seen as a calculated exchange or a dependency. Murphy's admiration for the Belgo-Latin phrase of Geulincx is connected to his admiration for

the inmates of the asylum where he works, and to his naive identification with them (*M* 176-79). The doctors at the asylum treat their patients in order to bridge the gulf that is perceived to separate them from reality and its system of benefits. Murphy perceives the patients as being completely autonomous, as beings in themselves who have no interest in an exchange with the outer world. He imagines the patients' dissociation as a form of sanctuary, where the workings of the inner mind are allowed to proceed undisturbed by impinging external contingencies and the disequilibrium they cause. Murphy observes that contact with reality is envisaged as the index of mental well-being only from the physicians' point of view of scientific or instrumental rationality, which he critically connects with commerce. He finds that the doctors' conception of the well-regulated mind is one that functions like a cash register, indefatigably adding up the petty cash of current facts (178). The quality of the patients' dissociation in a society dominated by exchange value is then reduced to its quantitative equivalence, as in Beckett's translation of Geulincx's phrase. The refusal or inability to participate in the regulations of society or the outer world makes one of little use to that system; hence the establishment of safe houses like the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat for the useless and the undesirable, and the efforts at their reintegration. Rather than seeing the suppression of the exchange of current facts about the world as a deprivation, Murphy welcomes it, desiring absolutely no commerce with the exterior; he defiantly covets the patients' mental and physical isolation, yearning for the space of a padded cell. In Murphy's citation of Geulincx's phrase, the perfection of the

providential circle is relinquished in the pursuit of the more personal pleasures to be found in individual self-sufficiency or the encapsulation of degree zero.

While the association of Geulincx's phrase with the misfits in the asylum can be related to their social uselessness, it equally gestures to a more fundamental assumption about their ontological status. Murphy, not unlike the doctors, seems to equate non-reason with non-being, but he perceives non-being in a positive light that is not unlike, according to the coinage of Barbara Low, a quasi-Freudian Nirvana principle. Murphy's condemnation of the circulation and cashing-in of the facts of the exterior world expresses a principle very similar to one, as Freud (using economic metaphors) maintains, that governs the operation of the mental apparatus: the reduction or the keeping to a minimum of "the sums of excitation which flow in upon it" (159). Murphy's recourse to solitary confinement and immobilization is an exaggeration of the need to screen out the mass of external stimuli, a function of the setup of the mental apparatus as it is described in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In his essay on masochism, and elsewhere, Freud notes that the Nirvana principle is in the service of the death drive, the aim of which is to conduct the restlessness of life to return to the stability (or homeostasis) of an inorganic state (160). The state towards which Murphy aspires, the true vocation of a philosopher according to Socrates, is expiration, or its semblance until it comes.

Murphy's point of view -- that the patients occupy this idealized vanishing point of existence and that he can somehow achieve it by being in proximity to them -- is, finally, naive. Such a

view Beckett distances from the narrator, suggesting that Murphy pays no heed to signs that may indicate otherwise (*M* 179). Any indication of the dissatisfaction of the patients Murphy attributes to the investments of the doctors. He believes that if it were not for the doctors, the patients would be as happy as Lazarus before his resurrection, the one occasion, Murphy felt, on which the Messiah had overstepped the mark (180). But despite his championing of the mental world over and against the outer world, which aligns him with Geulincx if not the inmates upon which he projects his desire, Murphy is never successful in his bid to experience the succour of self-sovereignty. He discovers it is not enough to want nothing where he is worth nothing, and he continues to be divided by desire for the inner and outer world -- his susceptibility to his girlfriend, Celia, and to the taste of ginger, and so on -- even though his vote has been cast for the former (Beckett 179). Murphy's existence is ruled by a vague desire or *velléité* (from the Latin *velles*, supposedly annihilated by Geulincx's impotence); he is irresolute despite his convictions. He had hoped that the environment of the asylum and its company would help him clinch the sought after negative plenitude of the Geulincx quote. Unfortunately for Murphy, he cannot escape the sway of velleity even within the asylum. While we can only speculate about the end of Murphy's oscillating desire, Murphy's accidental death at least brings his conflict and the novel to an end.

It is Murphy's own realization of the futility of his identification with the asylum inmates that is the climax of the novel. His realization only exacerbates the fissure within him that he sought

to redress in the asylum, a fissure that perhaps only his accidental death could clinch. His final encounter with one of the patients, Mr. Endon, effects a radical turnabout in Murphy's attitude. After playing a game of chess with Mr. Endon, who never once acknowledges that he is facing an opponent, Murphy gazes for a long time into Endon's eyes (245-50). He realizes that the gaze is non-reciprocal, and he sums up the relation between them as "the former's sorrow at seeing himself in the latter's immunity from seeing anything but himself"(250). That the discovery that "Mr. Murphy is a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen"(250) should have a negative effect on Murphy is quite surprising, as an earlier description of the pleasures Murphy took in the self-containment of his own mind was similarly phrased: "Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom" (112). Formerly, the fact that Murphy does not exist for Mr. Endon challenges the sense of his own being, opens the possibility of his own absence in the heart of his being. Murphy cannot exclude nothing from his mind; he is forced to include it, that is, to include as part of his being a part that is non-existent, or inaccessible to him. He will always be wanting something. In part, the realization is that one cannot exist except in relation to others, and that some form of absolute, hermetic narcissism is imaginary. Mr. Endon represents an ideal for Murphy; he is valued most highly because of his seemingly transcendent position, apart from the despised system of exchange in and with the world from which Murphy is unable to extricate himself. Moreover, Mr. Endon's complete dissociation ultimately renders any system of evaluation worthless.

In the context of *Murphy*, then, the allusion to Geulincx effects an idealization of the ontological worthlessness associated with the patients. However, Murphy's desire for and inability to achieve that goal creates a tension within the text, a tension heightened by the gap between the narrator and the main character. The conflict, within and without Murphy, maintains an ambivalence within *Murphy* about the value of the inmates who remain incommunicado at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. Given that Beckett's texts are populated by misfits destined for one form of asylum or other, it may not be too hard to argue that the phrase could be applied as successfully to them as to the inmates of Mercyseat -- that is, if one can call a final ambivalence or uncertainty about the value of the supposedly worthless a success. The idealization of dissociation has the uncanny effect, however, of successfully opening a question or gap in the relation between the absolute value and the scales on which such value is judged.

Mr. Endon's blank stare is unresponsive to Murphy's solicitation, thereby casting doubt upon absolute value as an anchoring principle. Murphy seeks the confirmation of his beliefs in the asylum, and in the face of Mr. Endon he gets no reply. Murphy, unseen finally by Mr. Endon but reflected in Endon's blank stare, is "the last Murphy saw of Murphy"(250). Joan Copjec, referring not to *Murphy*, but to Lacan, argues that the "horrible truth, revealed to Lacan...is that the gaze does not see you"(36). The Lacanian concept of the gaze is only too applicable to Murphy and Mr. Endon, as it points out that, beyond the visual field, beyond the signifying network, nothing grounds meaning. As Copjec writes, "if you are

looking for the confirmation of the truth of your being...you are on your own; the gaze of the Other is not confirming"(36). Mr. Endon's peculiar gaze opens up a space of nothingness within Murphy that does not provide succor. With this insight Murphy goes back to his garret, intending to eventually return to Celia and the outside world, accompanied by, as Sylvie Debevec Henning points out, the derisive laughter of Democritus (15), whose lesson Murphy dimly perceives when, during the chess game with Mr. Endon, he is given a vision of "the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite, naught is more real"(M 246).

In Beckett's work, "'Naught' is faced with 'nihil'" (Kennedy 25). With his suggestion of phrases from both Democritus and Geulincx as starting points for the evaluation of his work, Beckett's position is already closer to that of Democritus, and to the third way, outlined by Parmenides, that recognizes both being and non-being. The maintenance of these two positions -- one infinite, the other finite -- causes a divisive conflict within Murphy. Throughout his oeuvre, Beckett often casts the forces of the divisive conflict in the form of two needs -- one infinite, the other finite. In the review of Devlin's "Intercessions," Beckett describes them as "the need that in its haste to be abolished cannot pause to be stated and the need that is the absolute predicament of particular human identity"(D 91). The former is the need that one has, one's appetite for the finite everyday. Then there is the latter, the need to need, "an inverted spiral of need" which inhibits any satisfaction the former might offer. In "Les Deux Besoins," written shortly after the Devlin review, Beckett provides a geometrical figure to illustrate his theory. Two

triangles, one the inversion of the other -- the "Besoin d'avoir besoin (DEF)" and the "besoin dont on a besoin (ABC)" -- intersect to form a dodecahedron, a twelve point star that is a common mystical figure in world religions (*D* 56). The construction of the divine figure depends upon an irrational number, a number that is not whole. It was for revealing this figure and the irrational, remember, that Hippasus perished. Beckett's "Deux Besoins," the essay and the concept, and particularly the "grand besoin," the "need to have a need," ruthlessly undermines the consolatory platitudes of both Science and Religion, as well as politics and self-help psychology. A fundamental lack, the need to have a need, the greatest need, one might even say the most desperate need, is unsatisfied with the sublimations of dialectics. In his translation of the phrase by Geulincx, at least in the context of *Murphy*, Beckett shifts its meaning towards Democritus by contesting the boundlessness of God. Considered together, the two phrases represent an asymmetrical relationship, but Beckett inverts the former so that it has more of the character of an infinite debt, or demand, than that of an infinite gift. The inversion places the burden of boundless generosity in the finite realm, making demands that an individual cannot possibly meet. Any response would inevitably fall short. While Kennedy argues that the absolute evaluation of man as a non-entity in the world views of Democritus and Geulincx may paradoxically allow the reconciliation of the extreme ends of philosophy, the only reconciliation is imaginary.

Certainly, in Beckett's work, the positions represented by the two quotes seem to be placed entirely at the service of the same

drive: the death drive, which points towards the extreme end Kennedy raises. Both positions represent an instinct described by Freud as an expression of the inertia inherent in organic life (*BPP* 36). As Freud points out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the aim of all life is death (38). Even the so-called conservative instincts of self-preservation really only guarantee that the organism shall follow its own path to death, the death that is immanent in the organism itself (39). It is hard to overlook the implications of the fact that Beckett's characters, exceeding or left out of the Hegelian dialectic, cannot be saved, that nothing can be done for them. But through this loss, Beckett's texts also register mourning and the desire for redemption. For example, the narrator of the eighth *Text for Nothing* wonders if he will ever escape from the endless flow of words: "...if I'm guilty let me be forgiven and graciously authorized to expiate, coming and going in passing time, every day a little purer, a little deader" (*SB* 133). While the expressed hope for a possible atonement through a "pensum" or the repayment of a debt certainly has Christian overtones, it can also be linked to the Anaximander fragment, the oldest of the fragments of philosophy: "The source of coming to be for existent things is that into which destruction, too, happens, 'according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time'" (quoted in Allen, 3). If not explicitly at the heart of Freud's concept of the death drive, the Anaximander fragment occupies a central place in his theories; he refers to the fragment specifically in *Totem and Taboo*: "A fragment of Anaximander says that the unity of the world was destroyed by a primordial crime and everything that

issued from it must carry on the punishment for this crime"(924). Beckett's characters confess their sins, hoping their expiation will allow their suffering to expire.

Echoing the confessions of his characters, Beckett characterized the activity of the artist as an obligation. Invoking a gift-economy with reference to artistic production, Beckett often phrased his activity as a writer in terms of Paulinian grace; for example, responding to Alan Schneider's queries about *Endgame*, he wrote: "[It's] All I could manage, more than I could"(D 106). The position Beckett occupies smacks of the Kantian genius, whose ethics of aesthetics were unsullied by the exchange of coin. Though in a manner quite different from *The Critique of Judgement*, in "Three Dialogues," Beckett formulates artistic production along similar lines: the new art, called "indigent," has turned its back forever on "the farce of giving and receiving"(21). Self-sovereignty, more homeostatic than *la misère* in cards, needs nothing, wins nothing, no thanks, no regrets, like the sun that daily spills forth its radiance, stimulating the natural production of genius and genius. Beckett figures the production of art as an expenditure without return, like alms-giving. In conversations with Lawrence Harvey in 1961 and '62, Beckett described his activity as a writer with an explicit reference to the Sermon on the Mount: "I can't let my left hand know what my right hand is doing"(249). But the sleight of hand Beckett attempts, generated by a secret fissure or paradox within, makes him appear eager to be seen as empty-handed, or eager to cut off the offensive hand. Artistic production is characterized by Beckett as far more of a debt than a gift, and the gift as debt is more of a curse.

The artist's obligations prevent the severance of the self from the other, and prohibit the purchase of an indulgence, the self-satisfactions of solipsism.

The obligations that take the faulty subject outside of himself are most clearly and eloquently expressed in Beckett's *Film*. (A single "sssh!" is its only disturbance of the silence). *Film*, like *Murphy*, represents the plight of a character in pursuit of the static calm of non-being, where the severance of the self from the other would put an end to the farce of giving and receiving. In the film, "the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit," the latter being the camera (*CSP* 163). Far from purchasing a consolatory position, the subject in *Film* finds himself experiencing the "anguish of perceivedness"(163). The camera, if not Hugo's "Conscience," certainly has a cruel and persecuting gaze. Although Beckett stresses in the script that the principles of his film have no truth value and are only used for "structural and dramatic convenience," he nonetheless lists them as: "All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being" and "Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception"(163). In Beckett's film, the attempt to suppress everything extraneous leads the self outside again and again. It is obligatory for the subject to see to it that he is put in his place. In Beckett's work, the attempt to absolve or remove oneself from the unstable relations to others always fails because one's self consciousness, or conscience, will not allow it. In *Film*, the unfortunate subject becomes divided against himself, torn by a

conflict that cannot be resolved, or absolved. The grim countenance of E, as inscrutable as Mr. Endon's, confronts O at the end of the film, and offers neither consolation nor confirmation.

The only hope held out to the hopeless in Beckett's work is death's deliverance. Understood in the terms of an Anaximandrian debt, the expiation of Beckett's characters will, in the end, only purchase the end that Freud notes is inherent in all organic life. But Freud does not stop himself from suggesting, however, that submission to the belief in the necessity of this bleak scenario may merely be another palliative, created to bear the burden of existence (*BPP* 45). The end in Beckett's texts, death's deliverance, is never allowed anything other than the status of a fiction. Ambivalence, especially ambivalence about death, can only be finally resolved by the death that can only occur beyond the margins of the text. By pointing the extreme ends of philosophy ultimately towards the extreme end, or death, Beckett unhinges any guarantee of the acquisition of meaning. There can be no guarantee of a meaningful relation to death, if that is the end point, because of its inaccessibility. The event that absolutely brackets and grounds life is precisely that which is beyond its limits. Tyrus Miller observes that death loses its status as the ontological axiom favoured by existentialists after the Second World War, because the war proved that death requires no relation whatsoever with the life of the individual (50). He argues that Beckett's *Endgame* is of great importance to Theodor Adorno in his polemic against existentialism because of its break with meaningful death (Miller 50). As Clov's pained evocation of the "little heap" of life in *Endgame* suggests,

while the millet grains of life keep pattering down, nothing of significance may ever be realized; the end may only be brought about arbitrarily, and as Sextus Empiricus points out, even a little word like "heap" is devoid of meaning (Kenner 123). As the narrator of the eighth section of *Texts for Nothing* says, "it's forever the same murmur, flowing unbroken, like a single endless word and therefore meaningless, for it's the end gives the meaning of words" (B 131). Such a statement hollows out the logos, whether Heraclitean or Christian.

The specifically human power that Kermode discovers in the remains of *Stirrings Still*, "not extinguished so long as one can speak of such things"(29), ultimately frustrates any sense of an ending. Whereas Kermode participates in a phenomenological reduction that attempts to anchor the very basis of meaning, Beckett's texts seem to participate not in the reduction to meaning but in the reduction of meaning, an operation that Derrida noted in the texts of George Bataille ("From a Restricted to a General Economy" *WD* 268). That reason and meaning may be ultimately disconnected from any source of stability is the crisis that drives all phenomenological projects. But, Derrida adds:

crisis is also a decision...in the sense of *krinein*, the choice and division between the two ways separated by Parmenides in his poem, the way of logos and the non-way, the labyrinth, the *palintrope* in which logos is lost; the way of meaning and the way of non-meaning; of Being and non-Being. ("Cogito and the History of Madness" *WD* 62)

Those who choose the non-way have their difficulties cut out for them, as Parmenides has already shown. The difficulties of the non-way are certainly evident in Beckett's texts, peopled with hordes devoid of judgement. The ambivalence Freud places at the root of all cultural formations is, in Beckett, the conflict from whence art arises; and the renunciation of the very medium that marks the Beckettian character's existence, language, is an attempt to make amends for the persistent illegal possession of it and to break the indenture. Schopenhauer, whose influence on Beckett has often been noted, states the theme of atonement along similar lines when he says, "human existence, far from bearing the character of a gift, has entirely the character of a debt that has been contracted"(207). In the Beckettian context, there is no voluntary headlong rush towards death because payment of the debt will be exacted in its own due time. Henning, in a note about Schopenhauer's relevance for *Murphy*, observes that suicide, as a possible response to the question of existence is, for Schopenhauer, unsatisfactory, as it is "an act of the will that affirms one's Being-as-will at the moment when paradoxically it is being negated, precisely through the very act of negation. Schopenhauer's solution is a kind of wasting away in which one refuses to choose between life and death"(Henning 14-15, n25). As Henning points out, in *Murphy*, the solution is similar: Murphy makes no choice. There is no decision, only indecision. For the Beckettian character, from *Murphy* to *Stirrings Still*, everything is riding on entropy. Unfortunately, the concept of entropy, an irreversible non-differentiation and irrecoverable waste, bears within itself the subversion of the unequivocal morality of the

fragment of Anaximander it so closely resembles: it becomes impossible to recuperate value or a system of exchange when every principle of selection (decision) becomes increasingly inoperative.

Chapter 3: The Reduction of an Oeuvre

In *Stirrings Still*, one finds the entropic residue of an oeuvre that calls its worth into question. If the familiar narrative of Beckett's compositional technique has him paring down each text to the integrity of its final form, then the text of *Stirrings Still* itself works to counter such notions of self-sufficiency. It appears at once supplementary and insufficient. Meditation on the supplement destabilizes its traditional subordination as an unnecessary addition because it brings into the open the lack that determined its existence in the first place. Suffering from such instability, *Stirrings Still* pursues a course towards the degradation and non-differentiation of entropy established in the oeuvre at least since *Murphy*.

Instead of characterizing the trajectory of Beckett's work as a progression towards some purity of vision, it would be more apt to view it as dedicated to pushing language towards its inevitable end, dead language or cliché, and cultivating redundancy through repetition. The drive towards "worthlessness" -- a translation of *vales*, or valence -- attempts to drain the energy or *élan vital* from the work, that which, understood along thermodynamic lines, was responsible for its production: an original inequity, such as the difference of level between a hot and a cold source. In a state of worthlessness, all energy would be used up, and there would be nothing to distinguish the living from the dead. Beckett criticism is beset with problems because the very nature of criticism, which is to confer distinction, is at odds with the movement towards entropy in Beckett's work. In the "Deux Besoins," Beckett pointed out the

asymmetrical relationship between the two needs "*dont le produit fait l'art*," but he notes that to prefer one over the other would be to take the unsustainable position of Maxwell's demon (D 55-56), who, able to distinguish the difference between hot and cold molecules is able, through a process of selection, to contravene the Second Law of Thermodynamics and extract energy from a state of maximum entropy. The conservation of energy or value is impossible in the Beckettian universe not only because there is no transcendent principle that would anchor meaning, but also because there is no agent of preservation. However, shorn of the imaginary identification with a transcendent principle that enables the recognition of value, the subject position in Beckett's work remains fixed by the oscillation of ambivalence, stuck like the subject who -- suffering the symptoms of *pyschasthenia* described by Pierre Janet -- "invents spaces of which he is 'the convulsive possession'"(quoted in Roger Caillois 30). The convulsions registered by *Stirrings Still*, literally rendered by the French title *Soubresauts*, indifferently extend the repetition of automatism. As long as there is energy left, the possibility for repetition remains. The deliberate renunciation of the demand for recognition, illustrated by the flight from perception in Beckett's texts, can, at best, hope to narrow its field of possibility, or the sums of excitation that flow upon it.

Stirrings Still certainly attempts to diminish the field of possibilities. The text itself is extraordinarily slight, in form and content, staging the barest of events -- events barely described in sentences that are simply repetitive: "So again and again disappeared again only to reappear again at another place again. Another place in

the place where he sat at his table head in hands"(29). Repetition is so far removed from its distant source it appears as the citation of a citation. Each successive section of the three sections of *Stirrings Still* seems to continue what preceded it, but little connects them other than repetitious echoes, and echoes, as Andrew Renton notes, from other texts in Beckett's oeuvre (172). Its very title places *Stirrings Still* in a supplemental position to *Company*. Renton feels that *Stirrings Still* is Beckett's most self-reading, self-consciously Beckettian text ever published, what Finney calls an instance of "self-plagiarism," and Bruno Clément refers to as a mode of "auto-citation"(25). Indeed, Clément claims that, by abandoning self-reflexivity for an auto-citation that runs the course of the oeuvre, the text capitulates to myth, to the extent that the discourse of the work and the discourse on it become virtually indistinguishable (26). Instead of achieving some kind of textual integrity, however, the result seems to be little more than the evidence of a failure, a lack of control typified by convulsions. Titling his essay on Beckett's late prose "Disabled Figures," Renton claims that Beckett progressively "renders...[his writing] unreadable"(170). However, especially in comparison to *Worstword Ho*, Beckett's most unreadable work (the title says it all), *Stirrings Still* is probably one of the most accessible of Beckett's late texts. Yet it still appears as if strange to the reader, denying, as Kermode points out in his review, many of the expectations one has when approaching literature. The impression given is that the text, in the absence of an author, will continue to automatically recycle clichés in the oscillation between presence and absence, the barest of binaries.

Since the flow of information in Beckett's work on both a large and small scale comes with either an apparently minimal concern for structure or an apparent concern for the most minimal structure, it is a great temptation to at least place the play of citation in a context that will lend it signification. Such an approach was one of the earliest to be given official sanction, when Esslin described as "entirely justifiable" the "approach which seeks to elucidate the numerous allusions -- literary, philosophical, geographical -- in the text"(10). But, likening the existential experience of Beckett's texts to the automatic writing of the Surrealists, Esslin warns that one should not assume that the author has "intentionally constructed his work as an intellectual puzzle"(11). Without a clearly defined principle of selection, the act of hunting for allusions in Beckett's work takes on the cast of "the comedy of exhaustive enumeration," Beckett's characterization of vaudeville (*P* 71). Nonetheless, vaudeville was, for Beckett, the most complete and satisfying response to music, which is at once "perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable"(71). Gilles Deleuze argues that Beckett's texts are about exhaustion in general: their protagonists attempt to exhaust the possible to the point of exhaustion (3). But as Copjec would add, Beckett's characters "approach asymptotically their own oblivion, without ever being able to reach it"(52). Having embraced the comedy of exhaustive enumeration, Beckett's texts, no matter how long, offer incomplete perspectives on an interminable process, not extinguished so long as the text continues to appear. Beckett criticism appears to engage itself in the same activity, the narrowing

or the exhaustion of possibilities in the interpretation of the texts, in order to master them.

Stirrings Still reflects the crisis of Beckett criticism in the very scenario it stages. In the second section of *Stirrings Still* the protagonist finds himself in a colourless field without limits in sight, such as "a fence or other manner of bourne from which to return"(29). In the description of the field, Enoch Brater finds "the most banal allusion of all, the 'other manner of bourne from which to return' lifted from the most famous of Hamlet's soliloquies" (154). While it may be banal, it is not insignificant that the allusion is made in the attempt to circumvent the problems posed by the second section. The protagonist finds himself in a field that in no way corresponds to his past experience of fields, and hence finds himself in the position of not knowing what to do: "he sought help in the thought that his memory of outdoors was perhaps at fault and found it of none"(29). Admirably pointing out the overdetermination of almost every line in *Stirrings Still*, Brater also concedes a hermeneutic impotence and instead focuses on the text's formal aspects and its "sound": "Retrofitted from the past, echoes are nostalgic at their fractured best and provide only 'fault' lines in defense of a discredited poesy"(156). Brater sees *Stirrings Still* as a serious and self-conscious "art of confinement" that attempts to sever all connections to the outside: "Though the tension towards closure momentarily relaxes with the intrusion of an 'outdoor' scene...this is quickly undermined by the texts' commitment to abstraction"(154). Nature is not forgotten, but subjected to a chilling stylization that renders differentiation impossible. The protagonist ventures through

a boundless field of grass, "long and light grey in color verging here and there on white," without a marker or bourne in sight (29). The protagonist, like an art critic before the infinite and dehumanizing grid of an abstract work of art, finds himself in a tough spot because the rules he knows for reading the Book of Nature can no longer be applied there where there is so little to be discerned.

But if *Stirrings Still* seems to be ages away from *Hamlet*, the circumstances of their protagonists retain a similarity: they both have to make a decision, one that seems to have been made for them. As Derrida writes, the future, of what remains to be, contains the following appeal: "to do and to decide (which is first of all, no doubt, the sense of the 'to be or not to be' of Hamlet -- and of any inheritor who, let us say, comes to swear before a ghost)" (*SOM* 17). The end of Beckett's text does little more than stage a moment of undecidability. In the third and final section of *Stirrings Still*, the protagonist finally stops wandering in the limitless field: "So on till stayed, when to his ears from deep within oh how and here a word he could not catch it were to end where never till then"(29). The range of possibilities offered by the text are narrowed to an either/or situation. Not knowing what course of action to take, the protagonist heeds the voice within, hoping it will make the decision for him:

Was he then now to press on regardless now in one direction and now in another or on the other hand stir no more as the case might be that is as that missing word might be which if to warn such as sad or bad for example then of course in spite of

all the one and if the reverse then of course the other that is stir no more. (29)

If this voice that comes from deep within is the voice of conscience, then the lines of communication, unlike the direct line from Hamlet to the ghost, have been disabled. The voice remains wholly other, and ever more inaccessible with each repetition, as its message gets fainter and fainter: "Such and much more such the hubbub in his mind so-called till nothing left from deep within but only ever fainter oh to end"(29). In this static scenario, the only movement is the entropic hubbub of the receding voice, accentuating the character's persistent desire for an end to "time and grief and self so-called"(29). While both Hamlet and the protagonist of *Stirrings Still* tend to dilate the dilemma by putting off the decision in an aside, the latter may forever remain in abeyance, asymptotically approaching oblivion, our vision of him occluded by the narrator. Weary of fortune telling, the narrator reiterates the text's refrain, bringing it to a close, "Oh all to end"(SS 29).

Despite indications to the contrary in Beckett's texts, Brater pursues a common line of thought that recognizes self-sufficiency in the work, especially in lyrics of such careful distillation that they are deemed precious. Even if negatively achieved through a syntax of weakness, the form supposedly retains its integrity, and is nonetheless successfully solipsistic. The arbitrary ending of *Stirrings Still*, however, serves to reinforce the inadequacy of the text: it could have gone on, but then it could not, wanting an end to its miserable state. The narrator's ending, "Oh all to end," merely asking for mercy, picks up where the inner voice left off: "only ever fainter oh

to end," which is itself a reduction of "Oh how [place missing word here] it were to end where never till then"(29). Regardless of its brevity, the reduction follows all that has preceded it, a life's work, merely distending an overly long project, and indicating that it is not a satisfying conclusion; after all, the missing word is never found, no decision is made, nor will be made. Though the first two parts of *Stirrings Still* may consign the remains of a literary memory to the dustbin, Brater writes: "The third part is by contrast, far more defiantly *sui generis*" (159). But this voice from deep within curiously points outside, as it underscores the protagonist's separation rather than his enclosure or insulation. The fact is, this "perilous minaturization of the end of the end," as Brater describes it, is as unsatisfactory as everything that has preceded it, and is only consolatory in the relief it gives due to the little space that it takes up. That said, one possible literary reference that Brater overlooks, in his catalogue of references in *Stirrings Still*, is to Ben Jonson's Pindaric ode to Sir Lucius Carey and Sir H. Morison: "What did this Stirrer, but die late?" As Patricia Parker points out, the classical subtext to Jonson's poem is Seneca's moral epistle -- "A person like him has not lived; he has merely tarried awhile in life" -- which has its counterpart in his dictum: "We should strive not to live long, but to live rightly" (quoted in Parker 199). In contrast to the right diction of Jonson, who finds in Sir Henry Morison a model to follow ("His life was of Humanitie the Spheare"), Beckett offers an *inopia* or poverty of diction, in which every bulletin fails to be complete. Even if he may have reduced his "masse of miseries on the stage" like Jonson, Beckett retains a form that reflects its own inadequacy, never

allowing the achievement of the perfection of a "Spheare." Even the briefest span of text depicts, even elicits or inflicts, an inconsolable suffering due to a fundamental imbalance of power that has yet to be defused. The protagonist remains at the mercy of the indifferent voice whose persistence is a torment.

The temptation of solipsism is never fully enjoyed by any of Beckett's characters. None of them achieves the self-satisfaction of full-presence or unity. As noted by Kojin Karatani, the subject who enjoys full-presence, who enjoys the auto-affection of "hearing oneself speak," enjoys a "monologue in which the subject who hears the speech -- the other -- is interiorized within the subject who speaks"(139). Those with access to the full-presence guaranteed by unity with the higher ground of Being can fully enjoy the smug satisfactions of a good conscience. Karatani criticizes universal humanism's imaginary identification of the I with the We as mere solipsism that erases difference and omits the asymmetry between the subject and other (138). As arguments for a transcendent universal self always tend to elide or ignore real relations of difference that are for the most part self-serving, it is interesting to observe the way they stake their territory in a limitless field without boundaries. For example, Esslin claims that Beckett's work, perceived as devoid of ideological and polemical content, expresses only the existential experience of the author and thereby elicits a direct, essential, existential response in its audience. By couching his discussion in naturalized terms (when he describes the body of Beckett criticism as an organic tradition that weeds out the inessential responses, for example), Esslin's position reveals itself to

be nothing but ideological. Though he denies that there is any lesson or meaning to be obtained in Beckett's work, he is nevertheless loathe to vacate his position of critical authority:

It is the critic's experience that serves as an exemplar for the reactions of a wider public; they are the sense organs of the main body of readers: the first to receive the impact of a new writer and trained to experience it; their modes of perception will be followed by the mass of readers, just as in every theatre audience it is the few individuals with a keener than average sense of humor who determine whether the jokes in a play will be laughed at all, and to what extent, by triggering off the chain-reaction of the mass of the audience (12).

When he notices that many critics may have responded to Beckett's work because of the daunting hermeneutic challenge it represents, he comes close to recognizing the element of mastery in their displays of "discernment" and "erudition"(13). But this story of domination, as usual, gets transfigured into one of emancipation, as a natural growth towards the good and higher ideal. Though Esslin channels the drive towards renunciation in Beckett's texts into a conservative capitulation to established authority, Beckett's texts in general stage a crisis aggravated by an incomplete transaction that fails to recognize any authority. In effect, the crisis throws into doubt the self-sufficiency of the system in which the transaction takes place. For Karatani -- perceiving Wittgenstein's choice of children or foreigners as examples of the other as a way to pursue a "secular criticism" -- the other destroys the internal certainty of a system mainly by its indifference to it (139). The desire for

recognition is thereby highlighted in any attempt at mastery, which always contains the critical risk that the confirmation of one's position may never be reflected in the gaze of another. There is always the chance that the attempt might fail. Significantly, the last section of *Stirrings Still* illustrates the disequilibrium relation between the self and the other that discernibly inverts the scenario of the "good conscience." If the voice of conscience is scarcely discernible in the last section, the question of who speaks is unanswerable except that the character who hears it seems so distant from its origin. And if it is another who speaks, that other, seemingly indifferent to its auditor's response, certainly does not attempt to make itself heard or more intelligible. The protagonist will always be subordinate to the caprices of the voice and will never have access to the missing word that might enable him to surpass his double bind. At the end of the text, the protagonist remains an outcast. However, Karatani's "transcendental critique" is one that would be most affected by the abject or the outcast. If any narrative of salvation is essentially conservative, who should trouble its smooth operation more than the irredeemable? Narratives of salvation are always breaking down in Beckett's texts, which stage nothing more than the theatre of the abject, illustrating perfectly the asymmetrical relationship between the subject and the other, even, as in *Stirrings Still*, between "the self and the second self his own"(29).

Indeed, the opening movements of *Stirrings Still* stage a doubling that attests to an uncanny insufficiency: "One night as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go"(29). The first

section establishes the fact that the protagonist, who once occupied himself with walking the back roads, pacing his bare room and looking out the window, does nothing now but wait for nothing, with "[p]atience till the one true end to time and grief and self and second self his own"(29). Now, for some reason, he sees himself get up to go, perhaps to the back roads again, or perhaps in preparation for his earthly departure. The event is what enables the text, gets it underway, and its unexpected nature is what lends it its drama. For Paul Davies -- who sees *Stirrings Still* as Beckett's most explicitly spiritual text, reconciling the mystic and the post-structuralist by re-opening a metaphysical plane foreclosed by the latter -- the imaginary doubling attests to the protagonist's awareness of his higher self, which would, according to Davies, make his life "into a biography instead of a mere aggregation of events"(239). Davies bespeaks an individualism that needs access to a transcendent universalism in order to confer unity upon itself, the higher self supplementing and completing the inadequate worldly self. Davies' understanding of the self in Beckett's texts, however, is limited to a tradition towards which these texts are often explicitly at variance. The vision the protagonist has of himself is, rather, always characterized by fragmentation and disassociation. His awareness of this spectral self that makes its presence felt in its leave-taking, in its gathering of itself up to go, leads to further the fragmentation of his life, rather than the fruition of a biography. Far from conferring unification, the leave-taking progressively places the connection between the two into question. While his spectral leave-taking could be the solicitude for death that rehearses its welcome departure

from care for this world, it also rehearses the times he habitually left his room for the back roads. Having forsaken the back roads, or any goal of movement, the protagonist sees his spectral self, on its own volition, get up and go, and it is uncertain as to whether or not it is welcome: "Now as if strange to him seen to rise and go" (29). The few details that establish a relationship between them, habit ("the same old hat and coat") and habitation ("Another place in the place where he sat at his table head in hands...The same place as when left day after day for the roads"), become more and more uncertain (29). As the spectral self moves away from the table it becomes as one in a strange dark place that it has not marked out, leaving only the vision, from behind, of a hat and coat, moving of their own accord, appearing and disappearing, into a void. Unable to differentiate the few markings of place and person, the narrator states, "Nothing to show not another" (29). Eduard Morot-Sir, discussing the hat as a Cartesian emblem in Beckett's work -- an emblem of human recognition -- quotes Descartes meditating on passersby: "...what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover [spectres] or automatic machines? Yet I judge them to be men" (*translation modified* 66). Descartes leaps quite comfortably to his conclusions, but the leap that is also required to match the protagonist to the appearance of the spectral self, as it seems completely indifferent to him, becomes a gap that is increasingly difficult to bridge. In order to secure a sufficient mastery of the material, such as the ability to discern the relationship between the protagonist and its spectral self, it seems necessary to follow the material, like its own leave-taking, in a movement outside.

For Davies, the barely sufficient description of the events in *Stirrings Still* "fails to convince," so he is prompted to construct, through an outside source, an elaborate theory about reincarnation (231). Not unlike Esslin, Davies finds consolation in an art apparently attuned to an unconditioned higher self beyond the vicissitudes of political, cultural, and intellectual attitudes (14). Not unlike Brater, Davies locates the most satisfyingly solipsistic unity of the text and the self in the third section, where the voice that calls from deep within calls into question everything that has preceded it -- the "so-called reality" of the first two parts of *Stirrings Still* (162) -- and therefore contains the answer that has been contained within all along: "There then all this time" (Beckett 29). The protagonist of *Stirrings Still* is so far past care for the material world that he finds the key for experiencing its transcendence. For Davies, *Stirrings Still* stages an allegory of reincarnation, and expresses the desire for something akin to the Buddhist Nirvana, an escape from the endless cycle of returns. If so, then the moment of indecision at the end of *Stirrings Still* may be a deliberately spiritual teaching. But while the Zen pupil chooses to be in undecidable situations, schizophrenics also inhabit such spaces, trapped in what Gregory Bateson termed a double bind, with no means of escape (Karatani 70). Responding to the double bind of *Stirrings Still*, Davies resolves it by shifting to an allegorical level, and the missing word becomes the mystical unqualified, the gnosis of initiates (151). According to every indication in the text, however, the "saving power" Davies detects in the awareness of a "higher self" will forever remain inaccessible to the protagonist. There will be no deliverance.

The decisive piece of evidence supporting Davies' reincarnation theory is provided by an unpublished manuscript related to *Stirrings Still* held in the Reading Library archives. He gives a brief citation:

Whenever the lame hexameter occurred however mangled and he happened to be heeding at the time it seemed to him he had heard it somewhere before, and most likely in the course of some previous incarnation to judge by his experience of the current now coming to a close. (quoted in Davies, 233)

Though it is undoubtedly related to the voice the protagonist hears at the end of *Stirrings Still*, the voice in the unpublished manuscript, taking the highly sedimented form of the hexameter, does not, if it indicates the awareness of a higher self, bespeak an individualism active from the perspective of an order beyond the vicissitudes of political, cultural and intellectual attitudes. And oddly enough, at an extremely mystical moment, when Davies is considering the qualities of an immaterial voice from another dimension in Beckett's unpublished manuscript, a decidedly modern, if not otherworldly, apparatus appears: the telephone. Davies asserts that a seasoned reader of Beckett would recognize "that the voices coming out of the dark are, as he explained in *Proust* of the narrator's hearing his grandmother's voice in the telephone, the voices of his lost self or past self"(223). But in *Proust*, Beckett characterizes the grandmother's voice, derealized as it is over the telephone, as nothing other than the "measure of its owner's suffering," and "the symbol of her isolation, of their separation, as impalpable as a voice from the dead"(27). Likewise, the protagonist is symbolically cut-off from the voice in *Stirrings Still*. The relationship with the other is

always frustratingly incomplete, reciprocal, yet unreciprocated. The protagonist's awareness of himself in *Stirrings Still*, an awareness of his limitations, or sense of himself as other than what he wishes to be, points to his awareness of himself as subjected to a network of relationships with others and pulls him outside of his solipsism, even while it accentuates his separation and isolation. One can never be fully present because one is always contaminated by the past. What would a narrative of reincarnation be but the story of such contamination? As Derrida notes in his critique of Husserl, the problem of language always remains, weighing down transcendental discourse with a "certain ambiguous worldliness" (*OrG* 69). Davies divides his reading of *Stirrings Still* into two levels, the esoteric and the "exoteric," precisely so that the transcendental discourse of the esoteric (and his own argument), closer to the surface in the unpublished manuscript, is free from the contradictions of the material. It is risible to suggest, like Davies, that Beckett was so secretive about the real meaning of his texts because he feared that his beliefs -- in this case in reincarnation -- were unfashionable. Perhaps more troubling is Davies' simultaneous assertion that Beckett's texts are only for those who have the "eyes to see and ears to hear" the hidden meaning, or for an elite audience of the select (147). Clearly Davies has fallen into the familiar trap, established at least since Esslin, of countering Beckett's threatening undecidability with the idea that there must be a key to the text's hidden meaning -- a key that Davies claims to have. Contrary to Davies' discovery, whatever the nature of the landscape encountered in *Stirrings Still*, the protagonist never transcends the material, due to an

asymmetrical relationship of which he is a part. Moreover, the end of the text renders transcendence doubtful.

Fortunately, there is really no need for restricted access to unpublished manuscripts to supplement a reading of *Stirrings Still*, because, as the critics have pointed out, intertextual references within *Stirrings Still* to other widely available texts abound. Unfortunately, no matter where a connection is made, the path always seems to lead to the same end, an impasse. Not knowing in which direction to continue, the protagonist of *Stirrings Still* soon tires of wandering, and, "For want of a stone on which to sit like Walther and cross his legs, the best he could do was stop dead and stand stock still which after a moment of hesitation he did"(29). The reference is to the medieval troubadour Walther von der Vogelweide. In his preface to a collection of poems by the author, Ian G. Colvin cites "I Sat Upon a Stone" as one of von der Vogelweide's first political poems, in which God provides the only stable foundation from which to judge the skirmishes of vanity and greed in the world (13-28). Unlike Walther, the protagonist of *Stirrings Still* has no rock to sit on as a foundation from which to contemplate the best course of action.

Although the *Stirrings Still* denies the consolation of a transcendent position, the appearance of the proper name Walther signals a return to material written by Beckett about four decades earlier: "The Calmative," one of the first post-war texts written in French that would be published as one of the "Stories" in *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, only after the success of the trilogy and *Waiting for Godot*. Written at a distance and a remove, *Stirrings Still*

nonetheless shares many of the concerns of the "Stories," as well as, by extension, "Three Dialogues," being contemporaneous with their composition. The first person narration of "The Calmative" describes a night of wandering in a city. After failing to get directions from a passerby to the nearest shelter, the narrator comments: "Seeing a stone seat by the kerb I sat down and crossed my legs, like Walther"(SB 71). Soon he is joined by a man who offers him a glittering phial, perhaps the calmative of the title, from a big black bag (like a midwife's) in exchange for a kiss. What has brought the narrator out into the night, out from a "den littered with empty tins,"(61) to meet this man by accident is unclear. He asks, "Was I hungry itself?" but, unable to answer, only writes, "little by little I got myself out" (62). "The Calmative" and the other stories in the collection, "The Expelled" and "The End," plus a fourth, "First Love," that was published separately, share a first person narrator who, exhibiting knowledge of a classical education, has been reduced to poverty. All the stories depict the narrator's eviction from or search for, with varying degrees of success, a comfortable home. As in "First Love," all exhibit the consideration and pursuit of "...what steps to take not to perish off-hand of hunger, cold, or shame"(SB 35). Each character, though not necessarily sympathetic, suffers, and if all of the characters, driven to be homeless, are unsuited for the farce of giving and receiving, each participates in the farce to the degree that she or he can accept. One is, indeed, unable to want nothing where one is worth nothing, and even worse, one is unable to divest oneself of the past and one's inheritance. In "First Love," the narrator is cared for by a woman he ungraciously leaves while she is in the

pains of childbirth. Her cries get fainter as he walks away. But he states: "faint or loud, cry is cry, all that matters is that it should cease. For years I thought they would cease. Now I don't think so anymore"(45). Whether or not he tells his story as a confession, he gains no absolution, but merely a story to tell himself, like the narrator of "The Calmative" who tells a story, perhaps the calmative of the title, to calm himself while he impatiently waits "for the slow killings to finish in [his] skull"(61). To these characters, all narratives of emancipation, redemption, salvation, and purification fall as if on deaf ears. In "The End," for example, the narrator (who once read Guelincx's *Ethics*) is begging for alms in the street when he overhears only snatches of a public orator's discourse:

"Union...brothers...Marx...capital...bread and butter...love. It was all Greek to me"(SB 94). Eventually, there is a confrontation between the two. The orator points to the narrator "as if at an exhibit" and says:

Look at this down and out...this leftover. If he doesn't go down on all fours, it's only for fear of being impounded. Old, lousy, rotten, ripe for the muckheap. And there are thousands like him, worse than him, ten thousand, twenty thousand...Thirty thousand. Everyday you pass them by...and when you have backed a winner you fling them a farthing.... It never enters your head...that your charity is a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organised murder. Take a good look at this living corpse. You may say it's his own fault. Ask him if it's his own fault. (94)

Taken to task, the narrator immediately pockets the coins that he has earned and goes away, leaving the orator crying after him, "Do you hear me you crucified bastard!"(95). In the end, the narrator takes to living in a boat in an abandoned shed. Finally too weak to get out of the boat, he is subject to visions, visions in which he commits suicide, swallowing a calmate to make the operation go smoother (99). Compared to *Stirrings Still*, the stories have a wealth of detail, but the characters, in all, have nothing, and the main characteristic they share is that they are unconsolated.

The end of "The End" paints a terribly bleak picture, but the miniaturization of the end at the end of *Stirrings Still* is no less bleak. A reduction of all that has come before it, it merely distends an overly long project and clarifies nothing. Even if the highly abstracted landscape of the late work points more clearly than the earlier material to a "metaphysical poverty," the comic or cosmic recognition of the pointlessness of human suffering offers little by way of catharsis, as the stories told purchase no absolution or resolution. Only the longed-for end will end the characters' suffering. Such nihilism leaves little room for affirmative action. The only unexhausted possibility lies in the fact that the characters are never quite successful in their act of resignation, and the face or voice of another might call them reluctantly outside of themselves once again.

Scenario after scenario in Beckett's work stages an asymmetrical relationship between two characters, and, though the impasse cannot be breached, the breach remains open. If the opening imagery and wording of *Stirrings Still* recalls several of

Beckett's late works, like *Nacht and Träume, ...but the clouds...*, and *Ohio Impromptu*, in which the appearance of another is at times positively yearned for, the eventual description of the vision's appearance, what there is of it, and its implications of self-consciousness, what there is of it, is comparable with *Film*: "Seen from behind withersoever he went. Same hat and coat as of old when he walked the roads"(29). The automatic projection of the spectral self is like a private interiorized screening of *Film* that has been slowed down to such a speed an indeterminately lengthy period of time occurs between each frame, the separation of which is, as Mary Doane remarks, "the site of loss, discontinuity in film"(332). The movement of the protagonist is so slow that it is barely perceptible, and the halting and repetitive language, beginning to describe the action, soon lapses into the alternation of appearance and disappearance:

One night or day then as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. First rise and stand clinging to the table. Then sit again. Then rise again and stand clinging to the table again. Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went. As when he disappeared only to reappear later at another place. Then disappeared again only to reappear again later at another place again. So again and again. (29)

The text itself, barely filling in the gaps, points to moments of unconsciousness or inattentiveness within perception. *Film* itself pointed to this space through its use of still images, a photo album tour that condenses the protagonist's life into seven frames, each

stage of his life a *nature morte* (173-74). *Stirrings Still* revisits the scene of *Film* to view the impossibility of film, of continuous representation without loss, the impossible film. But if the text points to the periodic functioning of consciousness, it is a reminder of its functioning to the protagonist, who would rather be done with it. The appearance and disappearance of his spectral self in its leave-taking is an intrusion on his privacy, like the distant clock that strikes the hours and half-hours: "Leave him or not alone again waiting for nothing again" (29). Trapped in a convulsive space of his own invention, he regards the appearance and disappearance of the vision with both "hope and fear," as if it is completely autonomous from him (29). Without full possession of his self and surroundings, the subject cannot know where to place himself. Shadowed by a shameful sense of inadequacy, both scenarios express the desire to relinquish the project, yet they continue to function intermittently, as they can. Both scenarios represent a frustrated flight from perception in pursuit of non-being, but in each, the roles are reversed. In *Film*, E, the eye/camera, grimly bears down on O (the object), who, longing to escape from perception, feels the "anguish of perceivedness" whenever too fully confronted by E, who must therefore, generally remain behind O (163). The character in *Stirrings Still* could be said to occupy the "active" role of E, but Beckett questions the agency of his position, suggesting that the character would rather be done with perceiving the flight of another. In both cases the characters' own self-awareness prevents self-satisfaction. If the operations of conscience are represented here, then the self as persecuting other is never successfully fully

interiorized. It is a part that is not contained as originary. The self as interiorized other automatically takes the characters outside themselves into an ambiguous worldliness.

Disrupting his solitude, the appearance and disappearance of the vision of his leave-taking reminds the protagonist of *Stirrings Still* that others he knew have left him: "...as when among others Darly once died and left him"(29). The haunting persistence of Darly beyond the grave, incorporated in memory, commemorated in literature, heightens the sense of time and grief and self and second self that the protagonist would like to relinquish. Uncommonly candid for Beckett, the proper name Darly, so striking in so abstract a work, recalls the poem "Mort de A. D.," which was written after the death of Beckett's friend Arthur Darly. One of the first post-war texts in French, written before the impasse of the trilogy, the poem describes the disruption of the writer's solitude by the news of his friend's death. An extended metaphor in the poem has the writer hearing the confession of a personified Time in its dying moments: "courbé vers l'aveu du temps mourant" (in Harvey, 231). This activity has paradoxically had the effect of making the writer less aware of the passage of time ("des jours et nuits broyés aveuglement"), which makes the news of the friend's death all the more shocking: "mort hier pendant que je vivais" (231). The death of his friend is one more piece of evidence that establishes "la coulpe du temps irrémissible," the inexorable and fatal advance of the ticking hands of a clock and, without reasonable doubt, the responsibility of an unpardonable Time. But, as Lawrence Harvey notes, the "imagery carries with it a built in ambiguity"(232). The poem is not only the

confession of Time, but, as all are inextricably implicated in the passage of time, it also serves as the confession of the writer's friend, and above all, the writer himself. The line "d'avoir été ce qu'il fut fait ce qu'il fit" is given in the confession, pertaining to "du temps mourant" but also "de moi de mon ami." While the poem establishes the saintly appearance of the dying friend, it also tells of how each night he must relive the agony of past sins ("revivant dans la nuit ses noirs péchés"). The friend, like Time, is condemned to death, and the writer, "who has been and done what his friend was and did," as Harvey observes, must ask himself an anguished question such as, "Why should he die and not I too?" (233). In effect, the poem takes up the responsibility for the friend's death, making, at the end of the poem, the writer's worktable "témoin des départs témoin des retours" (231). While the lines suggest the difficulty in remaining committed to it, the act of writing, when it is done, becomes a testimony, closing the poem, as Harvey notes, on the theme of art as "a witness to living and dying, to love and suffering, a witness that testifies against time" (233). But whether the writer testifies or not, he too is condemned to death, even if merely for the sin of living, for having been born. Moreover, his actions ("a être là a ne pas fuir et fuir") prove to be as inescapable as his sentence. To take such a position against time is an irremissably tragic situation, one that, though compulsory, offers little hope for escape.

Stirrings Still recalls "Mort de A. D." and continues a general testimony against time in Beckett's work; its continuation may only serve, however, as a prolongation of suffering, as the painful dilation of the death throes invoked by *Soubresauts*. In *Stirrings Still*, time is

a brutal force, and the strokes of the distant clock become so closely linked with the distant cries on the air that they come to function literally as lashes upon its victims: "the strokes and cries as before and he as before" (29). The discontinuity of the appearance of his vision, the receding voice, and the sound of the strokes and the cries only serve to heighten the protagonist's anguish. The protagonist's suffering, compounded by the accentuation of his "second self," recalls Hamlet's anguished cry, "The time is out of joint, O cursèd spite,/that ever I was born to set it right!" While the protagonist of *Stirrings Still* wishes to relinquish care for the world, he is simultaneously compelled to take action, both wishes manifested when he sees himself "rise and go." As long as a specifically human power is not extinguished, the character is indebted to stand some kind of a tribute, no matter how reluctant. As long as power is left, a fundamental imbalance remains and the conflict will not be dissipated.

Within the moment of hesitation required by every decision resides the awareness of the risk being taken, of the questionable nature of choosing rightly. As Derrida observes, the irreparable tragedy Hamlet inherits is the indefinite malediction that marks history as law; the person of right and law inherits the redressing of wrongs "inscribed in the law itself: in its murderous, bruising origin" (*SoM* 21). Within the dynamism of the closed circuit of violence, propagated by a law that exacts vengeance, lies the evidence of a disequilibrium: an asymmetry between the subject and the other, in which an eye is never equal to an eye, even in the act of self-scrutiny. Because of the asymmetrical nature of every act of

power, whether it is reciprocated or not, it seems to make little difference as to who is in control when power is exercised. Nowhere is this more clear than in the paradoxical relationship between Beckett the author of impotence and Beckett the strict taskmaster seeking control over the "original vision" of his plays by directing them (Connor 186). Beckett was, of course, sensitive to his actors' discomfort in the tortuous tableaux he asked them to people. As Kermode notes, the most "scarifyingly destitute" of Beckett's "dramaticules," *Not I*, relatively extensive at about fourteen minutes long, was "about as much as Billie Whitelaw, Beckett's perfect actress, could stand"(29). The short play *Catastrophe*, a scathing self-portrait of the artist as dictator, depicts the literally painstaking process by which a punctilious director achieves the stylized and formal image, consistent with Beckett's late work, of a human face, abstracted in the darkness of the stage. In the end, the question implicitly asked by the diminished capacity of *Catastrophe*, as much as similar Beckettian scenarios, is like the question asked by the narrator of "First Love" when he attempts to describe the face of the lover he mistreats:

As to whether it was beautiful, the face, or had once been beautiful, or could conceivably become beautiful, I confess I could form no opinion. I had seen faces in photographs I might have found beautiful had I known even vaguely in what beauty was supposed to consist. And my father's face, on his death bolster, had seemed to hint at some form of aesthetics relevant to man. But the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects? (38)

The development of an aesthetics of worthlessness is directly linked to the relinquishment of power, an attempt to abandon the subject position, if maintaining it means to maintain the relation to the real in terms of its objectification. It fails to the extent that it cannot resign.

The interminable investigation into value set by an agenda that pursues an ultimate worthlessness leaves little that will not wither under its scrutiny. In an aesthetic of worthlessness, even the suffering it depicts is irredeemable. The end of *Stirrings Still* refuses transcendence. But no matter how stringent the vision, the depiction of distress in Beckett's work is always both the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. In this way, the call to give up illusions is also the call "to give up a condition which requires illusions," that vale of tears which has seen a history of violence and oppression crowned by the halo of religion, or art (Marx 244). The testimony of *Stirrings Still*, no more successful than the oeuvre it minimizes, questions whether the righting of the fundamental imbalance between the subject and the object can ever be represented.

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