

**“I Hear Nothing, I Say Nothing”: Constructions of  
Impotence and Ignorance in the Work of  
Samuel Beckett**

by

Mamo Alo

Supervisors:

Dr Bethan Jones

&

Dr Cliff Forshaw

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the themes of impotence and ignorance across four novels by Samuel Beckett: *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Continuities and discontinuities are discussed, along with the relationship of impotence and ignorance to Beckett's project of indicating a type of existence beyond meaningful language and conventional reality. The thesis suggests that Beckett's work is unusually open to multiple interpretations due to its lack of tellability, which is a result of the epistemological collapse of its protagonists. Impotence and ignorance figure as elements in a critique of the three orders of Cartesian rationalism, empirical knowledge, and religious belief, all of which find their limits in the doubts and failures of Beckett's characters. Impotence and ignorance are sometimes chosen states, and sometimes the result of an unchosen process of becoming-other, or a situation in which the protagonist finds himself. Impotence is often figured in terms of physical incapacity, old age, and an asymptotic decay towards death, while ignorance is associated with the gap between real objects and beings, and their representation in language. Beckett's characters undergo a collapse of representational categorisation which is the source of their impotence and ignorance, and which is often connected to a desire to retreat to the inner life. This process also causes the collapse of subjectivity and the ability to narrate, yet it coexists with an inexplicable compulsion to "go on" (speaking, writing, or living) which keeps Beckett's characters always on the edge of death, silence, or disappearance. This process of near-disappearance is of a variety which creates a type of textual production which frustrates any possible interpretation, pointing as it does to a domain beyond language, which is variously figured as chaos, becoming, darkness, and death.

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**Foreword: *You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.***

Writing on Samuel Beckett, in 2014, is a daunting task. So much has already been written, and the field of Beckett studies is well-served by two dedicated journals, seven interpretive schools (or groups of interpreters with similar interpretations), and a large number of distinguished scholars. What more is there to say? I embarked on this PhD with a vague sense of thematic interest, though I was well aware that all of these themes had been covered already. I hoped, once the research was under way, to find a distinct aspect of these themes which had so far been overlooked. As the research progressed, I increasingly realised that Beckett interpretation is almost necessarily incomplete. Beckett's works are written in such a way that a definitive interpretation seems unachievable, continually deferred by the frustrating effects of anomalies which seem to have been placed by the author in the way of any such conclusive reading. My feeling, then, shifted from a sense of inadequacy – what more can be said? – to a feeling of futility – how can a sufficient reading ever be reached? In this context, of course, Beckett himself provides the appropriate zone of affect to motivate continuing interpretation: the compulsion to continue, even when it seems one cannot go on.

Initially I intended to write on two major thematic groups. One section would focus on impotence, ignorance, chaos, and the collapse or overcoming of the self in Beckett's work. Another would focus on voice and voices. The texts to be studied would include those which remain, and also *How It Is*. Ultimately, this initial plan proved too ambitious, as Beckett's works are simply too rich in content to be reduced to the original plan without overshooting the intended length. Reluctantly, therefore, I trimmed out one of the texts, and reduced the thematic topics to “impotence and ignorance”. I also quickly realised that impotence and ignorance could not be addressed without engaging with the affinal topics of negation and affirmation, and the position of author and

protagonist in Beckett's fiction. Hence, the work evolved in a direction which took me further into discussions of the writing process, the different kinds of narrative standpoints and characters in the various novels, and the different stages of Beckett's writing. I have thus worked to locate impotence and ignorance within a wider authorial project, as meaningful parts of a progression towards an opening to a zone beyond language, the meaning of which for Beckett is constantly deferred or ambiguous.

When I first began reading the secondary literature on Beckett, I quickly noticed that many scholars are forced to add additional hypotheses to arrive at particular readings. Comparing these readings to the primary texts, I often felt a rupture between the two, in which secondary readings convey far more definite meaning than is present in Beckett's texts. My first reaction was that other scholars were simply misreading Beckett, and I set about trying to construct alternative accounts which were closer to my own intuitive understandings of Beckett's work. After a while, however, I realised that I was doing exactly what I criticised in other authors: adding my own perspective to Beckett's, so as to produce a firmer meaning, at the expense of crucial aspects of Beckett's texts. This realisation led to the particular approach I adopted here: a multiple reading, looking at the ambiguities of Beckett's texts, and paying attention to the lack of tellability (Labov and Weletzky, 1967) which is such a crucial feature of these texts. Sometimes I have retained my initial readings, such as the hypothesis that the reader of *Watt* is being inducted as a servant at Knott's house, and the cross-readings of Beckett with Bergson, Agamben, and Lacan. But I have tried to recognise whenever possible the validity of multiple meanings, and the deliberate indeterminateness of Beckett's texts. This also led me to reappraise the validity and usefulness of previous readings, including those which have been long eclipsed in Beckett studies. I came to see Beckett's work as the locus of an ongoing intertextual field, which circles around his text much as Watt orbits Knott, or the narrator of *The Unnamable* orbits who-knows-what. I feel privileged to have been part of

this field, and I now feel a strange sense of complicity, rather than competition, with the many scholars who compose it.

Yet while inside this zone of becoming, I could never sufficiently withdraw from the horrors of the outer world to keep my mind entirely on Beckett. During the writing process, a tragic eruption of negativity rendered its topic disturbingly timely. As I completed this work, my homeland, Syria, was racked by a terrible civil war, with entire cities laid waste and thousands killed in a struggle between contending systems of meaning. It feels strangely inappropriate to be engaged in such a rarefied pursuit as writing literary analysis, while my homeland burns and those around me suffer. But at the same time, it highlights the outer importance of the issues on which I write. On the one hand, Beckett's negativity takes on a stark degree of reality against the scenes of devastated cities and ruined lives. Many whom I knew are now trapped in the traumatic zone of which Beckett speaks, unable to go on or to refuse to go on, or caught in a past which refuses to give peace.

On the other hand, as a reader of Beckett, I am tempted to see this localised “endgame” as an effect of an overemphasis on outer over inner concerns. Because people continue to place faith in essentialised external meanings which are epistemologically untenable, they continue to be drawn into the mutual sadism and empty ritual which Beckett denounces in the case of what I've termed his non-Beckettian characters. I am also reminded that some of Beckett's works were written in similar conditions, on the run in France during World War 2, so that they reflect the cries of an author caught up in such turmoil and tragedy. I am sharply reminded of Slavoj Žižek's comment when challenged on why he was writing about Hitchcock while his native Yugoslavia underwent a similar collapse: 'We are dying in flames because we don't have enough Hitchcock' (Žižek, 1996: 44). I wonder, similarly, if Syria perhaps needs a bit more Beckett: a bit more

scepticism about total claims to truth and knowledge, a bit more reflection on the limits of the self and the social, and a bit more fidelity to the conditions of existential welfare, which are ultimately a matter of inner peace, not outer power.

Writing a piece of work of this length is an immense endeavour, and, while Beckett's characters may do well enough from the inner life alone, the rest of us require an entire social network to take on a task of such magnitude. Thanks are thus due to the many people without whose support, feedback, and reassurance, this project could not have taken shape. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Bethan Jones, for constant helpful feedback on the direction of the project, and in particular, for helping me to negotiate the proper balance between primary and secondary materials in my reading and discussion. I would also like to thank my previous supervisor, Dr David Wheatley for commenting on earlier drafts of certain chapters, and providing input on particular issues. I would also like to thank my brothers (Ibrahim and Issa) without whom I doubt I could have summoned the willpower to "go on" in the face of setbacks. Finally, I would like to thank Samuel Beckett himself, without whom this entire field of scholarship could not exist, and without whom, the world of contemporary literature would be so much the poorer.

## Abbreviations

- M Beckett, S. (2009) [1951], *Molloy*, London: Faber and Faber.
- MD Beckett, S. (2010) [1951/1956], *Malone Dies*, London: Faber and Faber.
- U Beckett, S. (2010) [1953], *The Unnamable*, London: Faber and Faber.
- W Beckett, S. (2009) [1956], *Watt*, London: Faber and Faber.

## Chapter 1: Introduction - “*I work with impotence, ignorance*”

In an interview in 1966, the novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett contrasted his work with that of his famous forerunner, James Joyce. Observing that Joyce works with 'omniscience and omnipotence', he contrasts his own approach, in which 'I'm not master of my material': 'I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past' (cited in Shainberg, 1987: 4; Trieloff, 1984: 1). Beckett similarly wrote to Barbara Bray that he was seeking to create a 'syntax of extreme weakness' (cited in Cordingley, 2010: 141). These are not an isolated comments, but reflects the motivating spirit of most of Beckett's work, across multiple media. Impotence and ignorance are common themes in Beckett's work. In part, Beckett's position reflects a particular authorial standpoint with autobiographical connotations. In part, it reflects a vision of modernity, as Beckett himself states that experience today is that of ignorance and impotence (cited in Trieloff, 1984: 1). Overall, it provides a difficult task for interpreters of Beckett's work. How is it possible to find meaning in texts which so strongly resist it?

The answer to this question is ambiguous. Beckett's work is marked by a recurring structure of ambiguity which problematises interpretation. Most of the characters in the works studied here – and indeed, across Beckett's *oeuvre* – undergo processes of becoming impotent and/or ignorant, or else remain this way from the start. As part of their impotence and ignorance, they often lack knowledge of their own condition, or the ability to convey it to the reader. As this thesis shall later suggest, Beckett's works are written without marks of tellability. Their production is connected to a compulsion to “go on”, but with minimal connection to any social world. As a result, their interpretation is difficult.

As if this is not enough of a problem for the interpreter, the meanings of impotence and ignorance in Beckett's work are ambiguous and shifting. For instance, the narrator of *The Unnamable* sometimes seems to desire life, and at other times to resist it. Watt and his interlocutor write as if the account is a true narrative, but also question its veracity. Moran at once seeks out Molloy as an outer being (a real human in the fictional world), and undergoes a process of becoming Molloy. Impotence simultaneously cuts off some senses and sharpens others. Beckett's characters are at once self-professedly ignorant of empirical and rational realities, and somehow more in touch with the nature of being than the true believers with whom they are contrasted. Impotence is at once joyful and saddening. Ignorant characters deny their ability to speak meaningfully, but compulsively continue to speak or write. There is more happening here than simple confusion. Similar thematic presentations of impotence and ignorance recur throughout Beckett's *oeuvre* with sufficient frequency to suggest that they are deliberate and (in a sense) meaningful.

This thesis will seek to do the impossible: to explicate the meaning of impotence and ignorance in Beckett's fiction. To do this, a selection process is necessary, and this thesis focuses on the novel *Watt* and the three works of the Trilogy: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. These works have been chosen for several reasons. First, I feel that novels provide a clearer test of Beckett's project than his theatre plays, radio dramas, or televisual works, mainly because the linguistic analysis of a text composed entirely of words is more straightforward than the analysis of a text in which verbal, acoustic, and/or visual elements complicate and contradict each other. Secondly, these texts are located in sequence, but at the same time, reflect different stages of Beckett's writing: the more-or-less traditional novelistic structure of *Watt* and *Molloy* (which would also characterise the remaining early works), the impotent but living narrator of *Malone Dies* (who is similar to other middle-stage characters such as Hamm and Krapp), and the abstract construction

of *The Unnamable* (which is broadly echoed throughout Beckett's later works). This selection of novels thus provides telling examples of different stages of Beckett's work, at the same time as offering a series constructed so as to allow comparison.

This thesis traces the themes of impotence and ignorance, and their various connotations (including deliberate negation, bodily decline, social disconnection, and the three intertwined critiques of rationalism, empiricism and religion), through the series of texts under consideration. By following through the same themes in a number of texts, it is possible to trace the development of these themes, in a way which suggests the underlying structure or intentionality behind them. The four texts studied here are similar in their treatment of impotence and ignorance, but present these phenomena in varying intensities, conveying similar concerns in different ways. It is hard to resist the conclusion that Beckett's work undergoes either a purification or a teleological progression, with the later works presenting more basic forms of the impotence and ignorance conveyed indirectly in the earlier texts. On the other hand, the earlier texts are simpler to follow, deviating less drastically from the norms of literary production. In this sense, the early texts can provide an interpretive bridge to the later works, and the later works can clarify the underlying project of the earlier works.

### *Interpreting Beckett*

In spite of their theoretical astuteness, there is a great difficulty in theoretically interpreting Beckett's texts. As Critchley argues, Beckett's texts 'pull the rug from under the feet of the philosophy by showing themselves to be conscious of the possibility of [theoretical] interpretations' (2004: 165). Beckett's texts are unusually hermeneutically open, encouraging readers to interact with the text and produce multiple potential meanings. As Trieloff observes, '[w]hen confronted

with Beckett's asyntactical language, the reader tends to follow the path of least resistance: he looks for significant structures – or creates them – and thus, opens u[p] the hermeneutic potential of the text, "dis-closing" many possible meanings (where perhaps none may exist)' (Trieloff, 1984: 34). This is possible because the reader faces a range of 'syntactical gaps' in which a range of words can be placed (1984: 61), and any reading of Beckett must unpack a number of paradoxes and double-binds (Nojoumian, 2004: 390). Beckett's texts seem 'archetypal examples of [the] defiance of determinate reading' (1984: 59). Some interpreters such as Esslin (1962: 141) and Boxall (2000: 7) qualify their readings with observations that Beckett is beyond the powers of interpretation and theory. Yet there is an irony here, in interpreting Beckett while declaring him uninterpretable. In attempting to write a thesis on Beckett, one necessarily engages in the production of a determinate meaning, though the texts resist any such reading, thus rendering the interpreter complicit in Beckett's project of "going on" producing a meaning which is ultimately impossible.

I believe the reason that Beckett's works resist interpretation is that they lack writer-constructed tellability in their inner structures and claims. The concept of tellability, originally advanced by Labov and Weletzky (1967), refers to 'what makes a story worth telling' (Abbott, 2011), attaching stories to particular 'configurations of facts' (Herman, 2002: 100). It is sometimes taken to be a characteristic of narrativity, but Beckett's work shows that a type of narrative production (albeit one that some theories might not recognise as truly narrative) is possible without tellability. Beckett's characters situate themselves in ambiguous and self-negating ways, attribute their writing to a meaningless compulsion, undermine and question the veracity of their own accounts, and explicitly declare the pointlessness of their own activity. This denies any claim to a positive answer to the question of 'what's the point' (Abbott, 2011) in relation to their stories, the crucial aspect of tellability. The construction of tellability is left entirely to the reader.

As a result, these texts are a bit like a Rorschach test (Mercier, 1990: vii). Deliberately incomplete, they are 'completed' by the reader's perceptions and schemata, thereby saying more about the reader than the author. Feldman (2002: 214, 219) lists contending readings of *Murphy* and *Ping*, and concludes that 'Beckett's texts appear as a fun house mirror, the perception of which shifts as a result of the placement and frame of the viewer' (2002: 215). Readings of Beckett vary on such questions as whether the truth is inscrutable, whether 'asocial eccentricity is a legitimate response' to modernity, whether art can imitate life, and whether the world is reasonable or absurd (2002: 215). Feldman believes that Beckett intentionally produced this dissonance, staging conflicts between such options in his texts so as to reveal the conflicting views of readers (2002: 214). Similarly, Abbott (2010: 75-6) suggests that Beckett has left a 'recombinant' legacy which produces a 'mimetic explosion' of interpretations, and Fish suggests that it transports the text into 'the active and activating consciousness' of the reader (1972: 401). Any reading necessarily *adds to* Beckett's text, as well as selecting within it. Each theoretical reading says as much about the reader as it says about Beckett. Given the quantity and diversity of work on Beckett, I feel it unhelpful to simply produce another theoretical reading. Rather, I aim to reconstruct the points at which Beckett's texts, on the question of impotence and ignorance, intersect with different theoretical possibilities, remaining alert at all times to the *multiple* readings which are built into the text (whether intentionally or through structural openness).

The existing Beckett scholarship is, on the whole, divided into seven broad groups or "schools", each marked by similarities. Early approaches are divided into those who see Beckett as a nihilist mirroring the fragmentation and alienation of modernity, and those who see him as an existentialist celebrating freedom in the face of meaninglessness (Begam, 1997: 8). I have termed these the modernist approach and the existentialist approach. While these approaches have become less fashionable today than in their heyday, new works continue to appear which embody these

perspectives. According to the modernist approach, Beckett's works are deliberately meaningless, and attempt to show the meaninglessness and absurdity of contemporary social life (e.g. Adorno, 2001: 120; Sullivan and Lysaker, 1992: 117), thereby using art as a means to resist the barbarism of the present (Rabate, 2010: 104). For instance, Lawley (1979) suggests that *Endgame* 'is a play about the alienation and end of the mind rather than the end of the world', while Fahrenbach and Fletcher (1976) suggest that *Texts for Nothing* is symptomatic of the status of creative individuals in a modern world which denies feeling and questioning. Readings of this kind focus on the form of Beckett's novels and the world he presents, particularly its relationship to realism and the use of aporetics and solipsism to resist realism. Criticising such readings, Abbott (1997: 147) suggests that Beckett's social protest is always overshadowed by metaphysical bafflement: he is not simply protesting modernity, but 'the entire arrangement' of human life... from birth to death'. Similarly, Critchley suggests that this type of reading fails to account for Beckett's humour (2004: 184).

Before the mid-1980s, the dominant tradition of interpretation of Beckett was existential humanism (Trezise, 1992: 5). Examples of this approach are Kaelin (1981), Dearlove (1982) and Feldman (2002). Existentialists believe that existence precedes essence, and that, at root, each of us is an autonomous subject choosing a path or creating a meaning in an otherwise meaningless outer world. These scholars see Beckett's work as showing the absurdity of the outer world so as to point to the freedom of an inner self able to construct meaning. For instance, Cousineau (1979) suggests that Beckett's most basic concern is with the idea that a false self has overridden the authentic subject. For Christenson, Beckett is exploring 'the existential consequences for man in the modern world' (1981: 152). For Ruby Cohn (2001), the importance of Beckett's characters is their persistence in the face of absurdity. Michael Robinson suggests that Beckett depicts characters who, like the author himself, 'continue to create... having once believed in [their] near impotence', who recognise their near-total impotence, but insist on a 'right to fail', to persist in the futile

endeavour of creativity and hence to 'have sustained [their] consciousness in the face of the universe and its absurdity' (1969: 301). Similarly, Rabinowitz (1977) sees Beckett as trying to 'represent the world as accurately as he can'. Beckett's heroes such as Watt and Murphy seek to penetrate the 'veil of maya' and reach the reality beyond. However, this effort leads to awareness that external perception is limited and the inner world is chaotic and despairing. The main limit to this approach is that Beckett seems to pursue a narrative of self-decomposition far more radical than this approach allows. It is unclear what the existential self would consist of, after undergoing a reduction as thorough as Beckett's. Hence, Davis (2001) suggests that Beckett's work pursues a relentless critique of humanism which echoes postmodernism and which defies existentialist readings. Similarly, Dowd (2007: 23) suggests that Beckett's texts display the collapse of phenomenological intentionality.

The earlier hegemony of modernist and existentialist approaches has largely been broken, though texts in these schools continue to appear (e.g. Feldman, 2002; Dursun, 2007; Huebert, 2008). Since the late 1980s, a series of works informed by poststructuralist theory have appeared (Gibson, 2007: 118). These readings generally focus on the characters (rather than the authorial voice) in the text. The target of Beckett's critique is conceived differently in this literature. Whereas existentialists see Beckett's work in terms of the hollowing-out of value, poststructuralists conceive it in terms of the hollowing-out of meaning (Gibson, 2007: 120). Poststructuralists are generally more interested in what a reader can do with Beckett's texts than with what Beckett intended.

Poststructuralist readings can be broadly divided into three variants: Derridean, Deleuzian and Badiouian. Derridean or deconstructionist readers emphasise the location of Beckett's characters in a liminal, in-between space. Indeed, Derrida was heavily influenced by Beckett,

though he did not engage directly with his work (Critchley, 2004: 170). Deconstructionists reject the view of authors such as Nussbaum and Deleuze that Beckett aims for silence. Rather, they see both the pursuit of silence and its impossibility as necessary (Critchley, 2004: 178, 180). It is the liminal space of the *tympan* which is crucial to the Derridean reading, in which the aporias of Beckett's work are emphasised and celebrated. It is precisely the fact that we *cannot* simply sit still or be silent that is decisive (Cavell, 1969: 161; Critchley, 2004: 210). For example, Kermany (2008) sees Beckett as criticising logocentrism. Binns (1980) argued early on that Beckett is a postmodern author, creating an 'anti-novel' as theorised by Josepovici, which shows the reader that what s/he is reading is a fiction and not reality. More recently, Moorjani (2015) argues that Beckett reshapes the novel as form. Begam (1997: 3) terms Beckett's work 'the earliest and most influential literary expression we have of the "end of modernity"'. He portrays Beckett as anticipating poststructuralist thought. Migernier (2006: 35) suggests that Beckett's narrative is a 'transgressive recognition' of an encounter with the outside. Others using poststructuralist approaches include Connor (1988), Hill (1990) and Tresize (1992).

But does Beckett really suggest that meaning and language are inescapable? Deconstruction has been criticised for denying Beckett a 'rigorously negative power' (Gibson, 2007: 121). The characters of *The Unnamable* and *How It Is* come close to avoiding language as representational communication, and maybe succeed in escaping it. They are stuck using language only because they are creations of literature, not because of the human condition. Then there are the televised productions emphasised by Deleuze, which stress becoming. I would suggest that Beckett *does* posit the possibility of a position which is no longer within language and the requirement to speak (hence why it, rather than I, speaks); however, this position is anxiously constructed in opposition to a sound-envelope and skin-envelope which are threatening, in a pre-Oedipal way (see below).

Two related but distinct approaches also connect Beckett to poststructuralism. The Deleuzian approach is based on Deleuze's remarks on Beckett (Deleuze, 1997), which consider Beckett to be seeking to demonstrate an affirmative, extra-linguistic outside. Scholars using this approach include Dowd (2007) and Uhlmann (1996, 1999, 2000, 2015). The main difficulty with the Deleuzian approach is in accounting for the unrelenting negativity of Beckett's outlook. The Badiouian approach stems from Badiou's work on Beckett (Badiou, 2003), and includes Gibson's (2006) work. This approach suggests that Beckett is showing the conditions for an Event, in particular by pursuing the labour of critique of *doxa* or conventional meaning, reducing the subject to an abstract point within a structural field. This approach is open to criticism because Beckettian characters always fall short of achieving an Event – or even death. Both of these approaches are notable in reading impotence and ignorance as surface manifestations of a deeper process of affirmation, in relation to which they are the preparatory measures or retrospective effects.

With a more empirically based emphasis, a range of authors, particularly Van Hulle (2009), explore the influences of Beckett's sources and influences on his work, while others, such as McNaughton (2005) and Hornung (2005), use autobiographical details and life-experiences to interpret Beckett's work. These genetic and autobiographical approaches should be considered a further school. Also of note here is Abbott (1997), who uses a Barthesian approach and does not fit well into any of the schools. Due to his reading of Beckett's work as an 'autograph' or self-writing, he falls somewhere between the genetic and poststructuralist approaches. What these approaches have in common is that their references to Beckett the historical person fill in some of the gaps of tellability which other authors fill by means of theory. However, Beckett's work reflect a certain excess which seems irreducible to his experiences, personality, and readings. Others writing in Beckett's position would not have produced similar works, and, if Beckett's work is a form of self-expression (whether directly as autobiography or in a more indirect, autographic form), the self he

is expressing is not that of a standard social subject.

This perhaps explains the persistence of a further line of interpretation. On the margins of Beckett studies, and always producing a substantial input to the secondary literature, are psychoanalytic approaches. Some of these apply a Freudian approach (Shapiro, 1969; Riva, 1970). O'Hara's (1982) Jungian reading of *Molloy* interprets it like a dream, suggesting that its subject is 'what the psyche has to say to the conscious ego', while Ackerley (2004: 42) suggests that *Molloy*'s two halves are respectively Jungian and Freudian. Others use a Lacanian approach (Cousineau, 1979), or in a few cases, an innovative psychoanalysis which engages specifically with Beckett's subjectivity (Anzieu, 1992; Tajiri, 2007). Some scholars suggest that Beckett's characters are schizophrenic (Barnard, 1970; Beer, 1983), while Hayman (2002: 212; 2000) suggests that Beckett's work is paranoid. Beckett's work performs and invites failure by frustrating expectations, which paradoxically appealed to masochistic audiences.

However, this approach is also limited. Rabinowitz (1983) has provided an extended critique of psychoanalytic approaches for seeking subjective meaning in Beckett. Beckett's scepticism of any possibility of adequate representation distances him from psychoanalysis. He uses psychoanalytic insights but distrusts any use of psychoanalysis to terminate discussion. Hence, his texts are never entirely comfortable in a psychoanalytic frame. It is noticeable, for instance, that Jungian analysis posits an eventual ascension to a healed or transformed self, but that this state is never directly expressed in Beckett's prose. Nevertheless, certain aspects of psychoanalysis seem to resonate. In particular, Anzieu's (1992) ideas of the skin-ego and sound-envelope seem to express important insights, and Beckett's work also often seems post-traumatic, with characters reacting like half-crushed flies mutilated by circumstances (Adorno, 2001: 128-9). In addition, Beckett's work does not seem to be entirely subjective. While scholars may debate whether Beckett was personally

affected by some of the problems of his characters (such as depression and schizophrenia), it is also clear that he incorporates forms of disability – from aphasia and senility to deafness and walking problems – which did not affect him personally. Barry et al. show that Beckett draws on visits to mental asylums and psychiatric discourse in constructing his novels.

This range of interpretations, and their strengths and limits, points to the difficulties in interpretation which beset Beckett's work. If Beckett wrote to be uninterpretable, then systems of meaning nevertheless have their revenge. First, if existing theories cannot interpret Beckett, new ones will emerge which he could not have foreseen, bringing his work within the purview of representation. Secondly, interpretation flourishes on the undecidability of Beckett's texts, fuelling apparently endless exchanges between scholars anxious to decide the undecidable (is Beckett affirmative or negative, nihilistic or utopian, modernist or postmodernist, existentialist or deconstructive...). Each theoretical reader of Beckett seems to project their own conclusion into Beckett's final spaces or silences, concluding variously that there is nothing beyond language, that the gap between language and silence is unavoidable, that a utopian beyond is possible, that Beckett's characters arrive at an authentic self, that the conclusion is an Event, that it is a deterritorialising flux and so on. This may be an effect of the empty space provided by Beckett, into which readers can project their own views of what the other, or oppositional binary term, of language entails.

If Beckett bores away at language so what is behind it shines through, perhaps it is unsurprising that what others see behind it varies. Beckett's works sometimes point towards a death or silence which is also a kind of second birth, opening onto a Zen-like state of existence in an extra-subjective, extra-linguistic field of becoming. One could also suggest, however, that such a rebirth is somehow impossible – either for Beckett (because his method is purely negative), or in

general (because the condition of submersion in modernity makes 'birth', or autonomy, impossible). It is also possible that rebirth continues to be blocked because of the inability to escape trauma: because Beckett's characters are unable to leave a traumatic context, they are unable to undergo post-traumatic growth. Hence, Beckett is not simply indicating a space beyond language, but also maintaining an ambiguous, contradictory relationship to this space.

In approaching the complexity of Beckett's texts, I shall deploy a particular strategy of interpretation. Instead of settling on a single reading from among the schools, or formulating a new reading of my own, I shall explore different possible readings of each text, situating Beckett within an intertextual space which does not exhaust possible meanings. In fidelity to the texts' openness, I shall juxtapose different readings and possibilities in order to indicate how they open onto different paths of possible interpretation. I shall look for lines of similarity and recurring themes, and explore the function of these elements in the novels, but I shall not attempt to settle on a final meaning. Instead, I shall gather together different passages connected to impotence and ignorance, and different possible meanings these passages may convey. I shall explore their different permutations and resonances, rather than trying to capture their meaning in a single interpretation. This will not quite be a Beckettian exhaustion, for other readings may yet be added to those provided, and I make no claim to terminal meaninglessness. Nonetheless, this seems an approach which is more in line with Beckett's project and style than the more common strategy of attempting to fix Beckett's meaning to a particular perspective.

The originality of this piece consists in two main aspects of its approach. First, whereas previous studies have largely interpreted Beckett from within one or another perspective, this thesis deploys the different perspectives as ciphers for the unreadability or the readerly openness of Beckett's texts, deploying them alongside one another to understand a contradictory whole.

Secondly, while many existing works deal with impotence, ignorance and negation (e.g. Shaw, 2010; Levy, 2003), this thesis focuses more explicitly on these themes, exploring them comprehensively in relation to the texts discussed. The thesis promises an extensive coverage of the themes across four literary works, showing an array of multiple meanings and conceptualisations operative in Beckett's canon.

The thesis focuses on impotence and ignorance, which are here considered broadly in relation to Beckett's project. Impotence can be broadly defined as a lack of power, or of an ability to act. In Beckett's work, it carries a wide range of connotations, from physical incapacity to act due to bodily disintegration and disease, to a vaguer, more existential inability to act in the world, as well as a lingering connotation of erectile dysfunction, and a general association with death and decay. Impotence is the opposite or underside of potency or power, and in Beckett, it reflects ambiguities of what it means to have power, to be able to act or create, to be alive, socially active, physically capable, and so on. Ignorance can be defined as a lack of knowledge, understanding, or information. In Beckett's work, it is necessarily relative to the indeterminate concept of knowledge, in its various senses: as empirical knowledge of the outer world, as rational (self-)understanding, and as religious truth. Ignorance stands relative to these types of knowledge as a breakdown of the three regimes of truth. However, it is not only a contingent personal lack of these types of knowledge, but also a kind of incompleteness or inadequacy of knowledge itself. Impotence and ignorance will sometimes also be related to a range of similar concepts, such as chaos, death, decay, negativity, and their opposites, such as power and creativity. In Beckett, however, the concepts are not simply binaries, as impotence conditions power, and ignorance conditions knowledge (for example, sensory loss leads to intensified experiences of the remaining senses). As will be suggested intermittently, Beckett's negative concepts are sometimes preconditions for their positive opposites, sometimes negations of them, and sometimes paradoxically desirable attributes to be

affirmed.

In addition to this introduction and a concluding chapter, the thesis will consist of five chapters, one theoretical and four substantive. The importance of the range of interpretations of Beckett to the proliferation of possible meanings necessitates a literature review chapter. In order to provide a range of interpretations against which to compare the primary texts, Chapter 2 will summarise the secondary literature on Beckett, with an emphasis on texts dealing with impotence and ignorance. In relation to ignorance, the three reference-points of Cartesian rationalism, empirical knowledge, and religious truth are considered. These chapters will show how ignorance has been interpreted both as incapacity and as a deliberate refusal of meaning. Impotence is then discussed, including an explanation of the skin-ego theory, and the techniques by which Beckett represents impotence. Sections explore the relationship between impotence, social life and literary creation. Another section explores the hypothesis that Beckett pursues negation rather than impotence, enacting a deliberate becoming-impotent. The Badiouian reading is then explored in detail, as it provides a particularly clear account of Beckettian negation. The chapter then examines whether Beckettian characters have a power of affirmation, in accord with a Deleuzian reading, or as a form of anti-representational practice. Beckett's treatment of subjectivity is then examined, including debates over whether Beckett believes in an authentic self. Finally, the relations of impotence and ignorance to the problems of authorship and creation are raised.

Each substantive chapter is divided into sections dealing with different aspects of impotence, ignorance, and negation. The chapter on *Watt* (Chapter 3) has three main sections. The introductory section examines the construction of authorship and characters in the novel, including the ways in which Beckett subverts realism, and an introduction to the idea of Beckettian and non-Beckettian characters which I deploy throughout the thesis. The second section explores the

impotence of characters such as Watt, Hackett and the Galls, demonstrating continuities between impotence and ignorance. The third section focuses on ignorance, and explores in detail Watt's attempts to produce meaning within Knott's house, including the famous “fall from the ladder” and “pot” incidents.

After Watt, the thesis will explore the trilogy – *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. In relation to *Molloy* (Chapter 4), it will discuss changes in authorial style, before exploring once more the themes of impotence and ignorance. Impotence, in the form of becoming-impotent, is developed more fully in *Molloy* than in *Watt*, whereas ignorance recedes as a theme, while retaining a similar structure. An additional section is included on the questions of affirmation and negation, as *Molloy* gives a number of indications that becoming-impotent is a deliberate project. Chapter 5, on *Malone Dies*, begins by exploring the relationship between Malone and his creations. It then examines his and his characters' impotence, with a particular emphasis on his two “deaths” and his reflections on approaching death. Ignorance – mostly focused on self-ignorance, and ambiguity between life and death – and the affirmative pursuit of both impotence and ignorance are also explored.

Chapter 6, on *The Unnamable*, adopts a different structure to deal with the complexity of relations between ignorance and impotence in this text. It will begin once more by examining the relationship between narrators and characters, followed by a section on the impotence of the narrator. It will then examine the compulsion to speak, which seems to be the only power remaining to the narrator, and the struggle for and against life, which will examine whether an escape from impotence is desirable to the narrator. It will look at the bodily impotence and impersonality of the narrator, and the dwindling of Worm and Mahood. The impossibility of reasoning and knowledge will then be considered, with subsections on rational, empirical and

religious knowledge. The relationship to the delegates is then considered. Themes of negation and selfhood are also explored.

The thesis as a whole will explore impotence and ignorance throughout the various works. Despite the differences, there are certain similarities across the texts. The lack of tellability, the correlation of impotence and ignorance with social disconnection, the ambiguous suggestion of incapacity and deliberate negation, the use of bodily impotence to symbolise epistemological or social incapacities, the peculiar zone in which Beckett's major characters reside (and their resultant differences from other, "non-Beckettian" characters), the three-way battle against reason, empirical knowledge and religious truth, and the use of paradoxes and logical problems to frustrate interpretation are all common features. However, other aspects of authorship, characterisation and narrative differ greatly across the four novels. While Beckett seems to be aiming to say or produce something quite similar throughout the texts, the means by which he does so also varies greatly. By the end of this project, I hope to have unpacked some of the recurring themes, and shown why these texts attract so many diverse readings.

## Chapter 2: Impotence and Ignorance in Beckett's Work

It was suggested above, in Chapter 1, that Beckett's work has produced a wide range of different readings, arising partly from the efforts of authors to fill the gaps of tellability. This chapter will examine the central themes of impotence and ignorance in the secondary literature on Beckett, showing how different scholars have spun off different interpretations from Beckett's aporias. Primary work will not be discussed here, but will provide the basis for the following substantive chapters, 4-6. The theme of ignorance will be examined in relation to three main areas: Cartesian rationalism, empirical reality and religious transcendence. Impotence will then be discussed, both in terms of incapacity and negation. This chapter will then explore the implications of accounts of affirmation and power for Beckett's view of impotence. Finally, it will examine the subject and authorial creativity, which impinge strongly on impotence, suggesting that Beckett's characters may be impotent as decomposed selves or as literary creations. In each section, different traditions of scholarship will be discussed and compared, showing the diversity of intertextual connections in which Beckett has been deployed.

### *Ignorance*

The meaning of ignorance in Beckett is widely debated in the literature. Beckett's approach is variously called 'poetics of ignorance' (Van Hulle, 2006: 291), 'poetics of residua' (Caselli, 2006: 249) and 'poetics of unknowing' (Nixon, 2010: 190). While the emphasis on ignorance is widely recognised, its significance is debated. According to Rabinovitz (1977), Beckett's approach emphasises not so much ignorance as the primacy of the inner or imaginative world over external reality. However, other authors suggest that he is representing a molecular, flux-based level of

reality, showing the inadequacy of any thought about, or representation of, this reality. Still others suggest that Beckett's characters deliberately create ignorance by rejecting mental schemas, so as to arrive at a pure form of commotion (Begam, 1997: 45). This is simultaneously a kind of participation in absolute freedom (1997: 46), as expressed in Murphy in the passage: 'Here there was nothing but commotion and the pure forms of commotion. Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom' (Beckett, 1938: 83).

Beckettian ignorance is sometimes said to correspond to an underlying level of reality, which is composed of a flux of becoming, and is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-subjective. Beckett often uses terms such as 'buzzing' to refer to this underlying level, which as we shall see in the next chapter, is related to his experience of a porous skin and sound-envelope as the others of linguistic or rational space. In *Not I*, for instance, 'she could still hear the buzzing... so-called... in the ears'; 'what? The buzzing? Yes... all the time buzzing'; 'all silent but for the buzzing'; 'all dead still but for the buzzing', and so on (Beckett, 1972). A particular reference is embedded in this metaphor of buzzing. The term 'blooming buzzing confusion', used periodically by Beckett (e.g. 1938: 7), is derived from the psychologist William James, who uses it as a description of what sensory input is like before being ordered by consciousness (Rabinovitz, 1989; Gibson, 2007: 149).

Ignorance in Beckett is depicted by many authors as both an attribute and an act of his protagonists. Beckett's characters are 'painfully aware of the impossibility of attaining the kind of knowledge they wish to acquire' (Bureau Ramos, 2006: 32). Yet they may also deliberately seek ignorance. According to Gibson, the narrator of *The Unnamable* resists any terms of knowledge and truth and adopts an 'intransigent stupidity', in resistance to the voices of its masters. This is an effect of the narrator's rejection of particular localisations of Being (2007: 190). At the same time, like impotence, it is an incomplete condition. Migernier (2006: 7-8) suggests that not knowing is

not enough, since it leaves one within a project of knowledge, unable to realise what 'not knowing' really means. Similarly, for Abbott (2010: 80), Beckett suggests that wisdom is incomplete without awareness of ignorance. Hence, ignorance has at least three dimensions in Beckett: as lack of knowledge, as refusal of knowledge, and as inability to fully appreciate one's lack of knowledge. This section will explore three particular types of ignorance in the literature on Beckett, suggesting that ignorance is played-out in opposition to empirical reality/realism, to Cartesian rationalism and to religious transcendence.

### *Ignorance, Rationality and the Cogito*

One of the major views against which Beckett is frequently cast is Cartesian rationalism. In Cartesian rationalism and similar approaches, certain knowledge is taken to be possible through deduction and reason, such as the famous *Cogito ergo sum* of Descartes' theory. Ackerley argues that Beckett was 'immersed in the writings of Arnold Geulincx', a Cartesian theorist, from whom he derives the view that one has no value until dead (2004: 35). In the Cartesian tradition, while empirical reality may be doubtful because of perceptual errors, the existence of the subject and of reason is certain. Beckett is critical of this view as insufficiently aporetic. Takahashi suggests that Beckett is seeking 'the void that exists before, within, and beyond the rational mind' (Takahashi, 2002: 40), a space inaccessible to Cartesians. Similarly, Trieloff (1984: 10) suggests that Beckett reveals an 'incapacity to determine the world's ontological status'. There is a suggestion in Beckett that one thinks with one's voice (Trieloff, 1984: 11), and the dependence of thought on physical sensory input or output undermines Cartesian binaries.

According to some scholars, the main dispute between Beckett and Descartes is over the certain existence of the self. Beckett questions whether the self exists. If an authentic self exists,

only its most superficial aspects can be perceived (Rabinovitz, 1989). Beckett reportedly told Lawrence Harvey that the authentic or deep self is distinct from the visible self, being both 'somehow stunted, undeveloped' but also 'more real, more authentic'. The visible or public self is 'closer to the second or third person than to the first', i.e. the true self (Harvey, 1965: 556). This suggests an existentialist view of an inner, creative self which is frustrated in language, although Beckett's exact conception of the 'true self' is unclear from this statement. One problem is that Cartesian man is too insubstantial to be certain. In Beckett's works, Cartesian man without bodily prostheses such as a bicycle is simply an intelligence fastened to a dying animal (Kenner, 1973: 124). For Beckett, *contra* Descartes, even one's own existence is open to doubt (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). This is because of the awkward relationship of the subject to language. Descartes "I" thinks itself in a language which exists in excess over it, rather than as an outgrowth of its self-identity, and this excessive field potentially excludes the I both before and after (Migernier, 2006: 25). Beckett's 'larger' version of meaning 'includes non-sense at the very core of its formation and thus eludes the simple grasp of rational understanding' (2006: 28).

Another aspect of the critique is that a literary "I" is never really self-present, but rather, is a representational creation of the author. Beckett is also said to reject the subordination of thought to knowledge (Cousineau, 1979). Further, the cogito may be haunted by the unconscious. Katz (1999: 123) suggests that Beckett saw Descartes as a neurotic, and interpreted him using Freudian concepts. However, the rejection of rationalism is partial and incomplete. According to some authors, rationalism seems both necessary and impossible in Beckett. The poet seeks to escape himself, but this is futile; the rational self can only watch and become alienated from his 'other half', the poet (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). Taking a different position, Ackerley (2010: 148) suggests that Beckett breaks up the unified Cartesian self to reveal multiple particles inside it, without any final understanding of these particles. This is reminiscent of the Irish author Flann

O'Brien's character De Selby, in the novel *The Third Policeman*. De Selby does not appear in the novel, but his unorthodox theories are frequently referenced, usually in voluminous and doubtfully relevant footnotes – a strategy of parody of academia and literary critique reminiscent of Beckett (Gonzalez, 1997: 292-4).

There are several strategies by means of which Beckett is said to undermine Cartesian rationalism. Beckett figures Cartesian dualisms in terms of symbolisms of lighter-than-air versus gravity-bound conditions (Begam, 1997: 135). According to Cordingley (2010: 129), Beckett incorporates allusions to Pascal, Proust and others, but deliberately disguises them in a poetic language, altering them in the course of rewriting his texts. 'He neutralizes the content of his inevitably learned language by employing references in a private way, such that they no longer affirm their source meaning but are rather the raw material for his own creation (poetics)' (2010: 130). A number of authors refer to specific parodies of Descartes - for instance, the Cartesian idea of walking in any one direction to escape a forest is rendered in Molloy as inevitably leading to a circular path, whereas walking in circles might lead to a straight line (Mooney, 1978; Ackerley, 2004: 38-9). Beckett is also argued by one author to undermine Descartes by taking his metaphors literally, leading to absurdity (Mooney, 1978). Other strategies involve the use of logical contradictions in the text of a novel to undermine the view of a certain self or reason. For instance, *Watt* is described as showing the limits to rationalistic philosophy because of the internal errors and contradictions in the account (Mood, 1971). Beckett presents situations which are 'slightly awry, out of joint' (Posnock, 1980). He parodies logic and philosophy and questions the elements underpinning it: 'clarity, intelligibility, rationality, causality' (Velissariou, 1982). Through contradictions, Beckett approaches the unnameable of language and thought (Abbott, 2010: 81).

Beckett's work is also taken to play on the idea of madness as the limit to the cogito. As

Begam argues, Beckett 'discovers at the heart of the cogito not the rationalism of the Enlightenment but the derangement of the lunatic asylum' (Begam, 1997: 38), 'the dark netherworld of insanity, where all the carefully articulated structures of the *ratio* collapse into chaos and unmeaning' (1997: 40). Watt, Murphy and Macmann are in asylums, Malone and Molloy in institutions of some kind, and Worm is under a clinical gaze (Begam, 1997: 40-1). Murphy attempts to doubt his way to madness, or the 'will-less indeterminacy of the "third zone"', by withdrawing from reality-checks in the 'big world' (1997: 41). For Begam, this is a direct allusion to Descartes. In *Murphy*, the cell is analogous to Descartes' writing closet (1997: 42). In turn, Murphy's experience critiques Descartes'. The subject can say 'cogito ergo sum' even if mad, but cannot say 'I am mad' (1997: 42). In a different way, Worm, against Descartes, exists without knowing or feeling (Begam, 1997: 163). At the same time, this anti-rationalism is not necessarily unreasonable. Watt might be confined in an asylum, but he also has a stronger grip on reality than those on the outside (Rabinovitz, 1989). Discussing the quasi-insanity of certain Beckettian characters, Dowd (2007: 166) suggests that Beckett is interested in the Leibnizian idea of a threshold beyond which a monad can exercise reason. This idea of lingering at the threshold is particularly noticeable in *The Unnamable* (2007: 167), and also occurs in *How It Is*, where a pedagogical demand is made from above to learn how to reason (2007: 171). Characters in these novels are haunted by lacks which keep them the wrong side of the threshold. For instance, Worm somehow lacks the capacity to store information (2007: 171).

Anti-rationalism is also taken to exhibit itself in critiques of systems of meaning and power. O'Hara (1982) suggests that Beckett usually deploys general reasoning and verbal abstractions when attacking the absurdity and inhumanity of law or officialdom. Molloy, for instance, is arrested for 'acting humanly' on his bicycle, and he responds by acting as irrationally and vaguely as possible. Similarly in the sheep-slaughter scene, 'the unconscious has presented a strong case

against the rational, masculine world'. He also interprets Molloy's killing of a 'pathetic, lonely version of [himself]' as an attack by reason on emotion. After this incident, Molloy abandons his trust in reason. Material from the unconscious pours into and unbalances the conscious. Gigante (2001) suggests that Molloy turns his back on systems of taste because of their incomprehensibility. She suggests that Molloy's perpetual hunger is used to create paradoxes in his status as connoisseur, because in classical theories of taste, the exercise of taste requires the absence of hunger. The sucking-stones in particular deflect Molloy from a hunger which would defeat taste. Molloy exercises 'fine distinctions' between the stones, though they have no taste. He 'returns this iconic existentialist taste-object back to the unconscious realm of enjoyment' (Gigante, 2001).

The theme of rationalism is particularly prominent in discussions of *Watt*. The title character is often seen as a rationalistic subject struggling, and succumbing, to a world which does not fit into rationalistic categories. According to Posnock (1980), Watt 'constructs intricate schemes and systems of relations and possibilities in an effort to cope with the world'. For Ramsay, he offers 'contorted pataphysical solutions' to logical problems (Ramsay, 1983). The novel *Watt* is concerned both with the blurring of truth and falsity, and with the virtual impossibility of communicating meaning (Ramsay, 1983). Watt shows to Sam the 'grotesque end-point of his own rationalist tendencies' (Ramsay, 1983). According to Begam, Watt remains in particular ignorance of who or what Knott is. In this novel, Cartesian inquiry leads to the negation of self-presence (Begam, 1997: 78). Knott and his house are 'protean', taking on different attributes (1997: 79). Begam also provides a diagram suggesting that *Watt* deconstructs Descartes on two grounds. First, the knowing subject (Watt) is himself a creation of writing (Sam/Hackett), and secondly, the cogito leads to the negation rather than the realisation of primordial presence (1997: 94). He further suggests that Nixon is Beckett's self-negation in the novel (1997: 95). In addition to his doubts about external objects, Watt can no longer be sure of his own existence. However, Watt also fails to speak

arbitrarily and destroy the possibility of meaning. His distorted statements can still be brought back to sense by Sam. Ackerley (2004: 39) suggests that *Watt* parodies Descartes' claim that God can be deduced from the cogito, for instance because Knott needs a string of servants, and because he is incomprehensible. *Watt* fails because he seeks to apprehend Knott's essence from his contingent traits.

*Molloy* is also seen by some as an anti-Cartesian critique in which Beckett 'turns philosophy into myth'. Mooney suggests that Molloy is a 'suffering Cartesian, paralysed by the inability of Cartesian rationalism to order his life' and drawn towards scepticism. The doubts which for Descartes are philosophical considerations, for Molloy are directly true. This undermines Cartesianism from within, using its own method of aporia or doubt (Mooney, 1978). Whereas Descartes believed in a decipherable world, *Molloy* 'is a cipher' (Mooney, 1978). This is also a critique of authorship, since the literary form of the novel is closely connected to the Cartesian standpoint of the solitary man (Kenner, 1961: 17; Robinson, 1969: 142; Mooney, 1978). Several scholars suggest that Beckett reads Descartes' *Discourse on Method* as if it were a novel in which a mind progresses through layers of ignorance (Mooney, 1978; Kenner, 1961: 81-2; Robinson, 1969: 312). Hence, *Molloy* is interpreted as a reconstruction of Cartesian processes in a critical form. *Molloy* reduces the Cartesian self to the level of 'Lear's unaccommodated man' (Ackerley, 2004: 42). In relation to *Malone Dies*, it has been suggested that Malone experiences the mind-body dualism, but his self is in neither (Toyama, 1983). Hence, Beckett's strategies seem to have the effect of undermining the distinction between philosophy and fiction, both of which are forms of storytelling about the self. The usual perception of a difference between them, based on the rational or reality-oriented nature of philosophy, is problematised through Beckett's making-strange of philosophical figures and themes, thereby revealing the fictive character of philosophical concerns.

There are various ways in which Beckett's critique of rationalism have been interpreted. Genetic scholarship suggests that Beckett turns against rationalism as part of a reaction against totalitarianism. According to McNaughton (2005: 101), Beckett's initial faith in the ability of modernism to counter totalitarian irrationality was shaken after a trip to Nazi Germany. The experience of Nazism turns Beckett against cause-effect rationality (2005: 102) and against his earlier view of reason as an antidote to fascism (2005: 104). The use of facts and documentaries to counter irrational Nazi myths was seen to be ineffective (2005: 110). He became increasingly critical of the ways in which historical experiences and traumas are turned into an 'empty cognitive form' through language. This conversion of content into cliché gives fascist mythologies space to emerge, and 'turn[s] a disturbance into a pillow of old words' (2005: 114), providing a basis for Beckett's hostility to cliché and the lifeworld of non-Beckettian characters.

The critique of rationalism is particularly important to readers who see Beckett as nihilistic. In a modernist reading of Beckett, the critique of Descartes is actually a critique of the possibility of sufficient reason in a thoroughly absurd world. Adorno (2001: 139) suggests that the disappearance of the 'principle of sufficient reason' in everyday language is demonstrated by Beckett's absurd view of communication. In *Endgame*, it sounds as if the dialogues are not continuous reasoning or reply, but 'rather a test of listening', similar to musical appreciation (2001: 140). Disintegrated language is polarised into basic English, French or German words and an 'aggregate of empty forms' (2001: 140-1). Beckett presents an image of 'reason terminating in senselessness' (Adorno, 2001: 148). In poststructuralist and existentialist readings, in contrast, the critique of rationalism simply shows its insufficiency to a deeper level of reality. For instance, Badiou's reading of Beckett suggests that he levels humanity to its foundations to base an ethics there (Rabate, 2010: 109). His 'torture of the cogito' (2010: 110) thus has a deeper purpose than negation.

The relative importance of the critique of reason and the trope of voice is debated. Some authors read issues of voice in relation to the critique of rationalism. For instance, Fahrenbach and Fletcher see 'silence' and 'words' in *Texts for Nothing* as stand-ins for rationality and poetry. The poet's creativity must prevail over his rationality, since otherwise creativity is doomed. Rationality, or the inability to cease thinking, condemns the poet to muteness (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). In contrast, Cousineau (1979) suggests that the issue of rationalism is a place-holder for the issue of false consciousness or the false self.

### *Ignorance of the Empirical World*

In addition to Cartesian rationalism, Beckett questions empiricist approaches to knowledge. Beckett is said to question 'scientific methodology generally', on the basis of a preference for expressive, poetic language over categorisation and a belief that the mental world does not obey the rules of observed physical interactions (Rabinovitz, 1989). For instance, he signed the 'Verticalist Manifesto' which championed the 'hegemony of the inner life over the outer life' and the 'autonomy of the poetic vision', against the 'hypnosis of positivism' (Rabinovitz, 1989). On Joyce, Beckett argues that his work does not represent something, it *is* the something it refers to: '[w]hen the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep' (Beckett, cited in Begam, 1997: 34). This suggests that Beckett saw Joyce in expressionist terms. Beckett is particularly critical of the realism of authors such as Balzac, whom he considers to have reduced characters to automata, mannequins or 'clockwork cabbages' (Bair, 1978: 151). His rejection of nineteenth century realism is commonly noted (e.g. Adorno, 2001: 127). Hence, in his work there is a 'gradual destabilization of the model governing traditional fiction', which is solidly located in time and space and with the time of the narrator dominating the time of narration. Rather, the narrator is figured as 'that which cannot name or know himself' (Migernier, 2006: 24). Beckett comments favourably on the loss of relationships between

previously connected areas of experience, and on indifference towards such loss. He does not seek to recompose the elements which have been separated (Beckett, 1949; Cousineau, 1979).

While Beckett challenges empiricism, this challenge does not necessarily involve denying the existence of an external reality. For Trieloff (1984: 3), the impression of meaninglessness comes from the fact that Beckett's fictional world challenges the 'formal ordering impulse'. Beckett presents a 'formless world devoid of shape and intelligible meanings' (1984: 45). Referring to a common human tendency to impose form on experience so as to comprehend, Trieloff suggests that this occurs in literature through characterisation and plot sequence. Beckett defies these formalising features, instead seeking to show a void or nothingness behind them, and opening the novel to new possibilities (1984: 22). This also suggests that the formal ordering of the world through language does not in fact culminate in sound knowledge, since the order imputed to the world is an effect of perceptual and linguistic construction, rather than being attributes of the empirical world. Instead of arriving at sound knowledge, reason gets stuck between different levels of reality, such as the mental, physical and mathematical (Ackerley, 2010).

The nature of Beckett's challenge to empiricism is debated. According to Robbe-Grillet (1965), Beckett's literary worlds are radically subjective, focused on the protagonist's egocentric worldview, pursuing an absent self with no significant presence outside itself (1965: 115). According to Trieloff, the 'contours of the phenomenal world' seem to be 'removed' from Beckett's works (Trieloff, 1984: 2). Similarly, Rabinovitz claims that Beckett 'systematically makes the world of time and space subservient to the world of his imagination' (Rabinovitz, 1977). Thobo-Carlson (2002: 247), in contrast, suggests that Beckett's works are polyvocal, with reality and language conventions speaking past each other while remaining mutually dependent and double-voiced. Other authors suggest that an outer world exists in Beckett, but is incomprehensible. For

instance, Hamilton and Hamilton suggest that the cosmos seems to Beckett 'to be simply a mess' (1976: 9-10). Principally, there is a breakdown in the relationship between words and reality. Words no longer 'match reality' but 'both exceed and miss it' (Migernier, 2006: 29). Analysing *All That Fall*, Stewart (2009: 170) observes that, in Beckett's world, the mechanisms of life go on without regard for suffering. This suggests that Beckett sees reality as brutally unconcerned about human life. Other authors suggest that Beckett is mainly concerned to debunk the association of literary fiction with a function of representing an external reality. According to Posnock (1980), the creation of logical necessity through permutations and private language in Beckett's work punctures the 'mimetic illusion' of life-like, free literary characters. Hence, Beckett is not saying that external reality does not exist for real people, but that literature can never mirror life.

The means by which empirical ignorance is demonstrated are multiple. Often, Beckett portrays reality as unrepresentable. Since Beckett's process of production rebels against representation, it is said to cause the collapse of the inner world of the novels, and of the selves within them (Migernier, 2006: 1). Whenever the reader thinks s/he knows something, s/he turns out to be self-deluded (2006: 2). Some of the strategies involve the imitation of realist methods to represent irrational or contradictory situations. Hence, Bersani suggests that Beckett 'helps to kill the realistic novel by the very profundity of [his] commitment to realism' (1970: 21). Similarly, according to Pilling (2010: 63), *Murphy* contains a style of empirical reportage which contrasts with imaginative adventure. This strategy seems particularly common in the early novels, including *Watt*.

Another strategy noted by critics is reflexivity. According to Byron, *Watt* is an 'ecstatic' novel in that it is 'beside itself and never simply just there' (2004: 495). This undermines the representative basis of fiction. Yet another strategy involves the representation of narrators or

voices outside space and time. In *Texts for Nothing*, the voice exists in a 'ghostly dimension of space/time' in which nothing can be affirmed or clearly named, and being and nothingness cannot be distinguished (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). Kelly (1980) suggests that the mouth in *Not I* resembles Orpheus, but with Orpheus's close relationship to nature replaced by 'utter isolation from nature and society'. In *Lessness*, Solomon (1980) suggests that Beckett uses nominalisation (presentation through simple naming, rather than description) so as to present 'brute facts' without analysis, judgement or subjectivity. This is similar to the method of *chosisme* which Roland Barthes attributes to the work of Robbe-Grillet, in which objects serve as a 'pure anonymous presence' (Kuuskoski, 2009: 103). This situation of disembodied voice particularly characterises *The Unnamable*, and is discussed in Chapter 6.

*Watt* is a particular focus for discussions of empirical ignorance. According to Gibson, Watt encounters in Knott's house a world of 'actual infinity or pure multiplicity' (Gibson, 2007: 155). It includes literary equivalents for non-empirical phenomena such as irrational numbers (Gibson, 2007: 156). Mostly, however, the objects of the house consist of exhaustible finite sets (2007: 157). For Begam, what is crucial is that the world of Knott's house is not 'given', as in a realist novel. It presents 'a series of phenomena' which the protagonist needs to place in a 'telling order' (1997: 86). This is taken to the extreme, 'mocking the attempt to marshal intransigent material into coherent orders, to compel disparate experience into causal sequences' (1997: 88). For instance, the effort to explain phenomena creates conjectures which then become realities, as in the case of the Lynch family (Begam, 1997: 88). The story about Mr Ash is taken to use a story to impart information, which is actually about the uselessness of information (1997: 90). According to Migernier, Beckett does not simply remove materiality from representational language, but takes it up within a post-representational language (Migernier, 2006: 14). His works resist any attempt at self-elucidation (2006: 20) and move from the affirmative to the self-interrogative (2006: 21). What is crucial is

that Watt has to labour to produce meaning, rather than its arising unproblematically from representation (2006: 41). The difficulty of this labour draws Watt to contest the nature of reality (2006: 42).

Similar observations have been made of other texts. *Murphy* 'at once appears to establish a coherent and objective reality and to dismantle it' (Begam, 1997: 63). In *Molloy*, Moran exists in a world in which definite statements can still be made, whereas Molloy seems to be without knowledge (Begam, 1997: 102). Ackerley (2010: 147) suggests that *Murphy* and *Watt* eliminate the rationalist foundations for interpreting the visible universe. The third zone Murphy seeks is a tumult of non-Newtonian motion (2010: 148). Against 'anthropomorphic' knowledge, Beckett posits three challenges: an atomist rejection of a transcendental order, a suspicion of perception and an aesthetic which sees nature as incommensurable with humanity (Ackerley, 2010: 148-9). This is figured in the text through means such as Watt's error in interpreting Knott through his accidents, and the failure of the parrot in *Malone Dies* to complete the scholastic maxim 'there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses' (2010: 149-50).

Beckett is also said by interpreters to criticise empiricist views through the parody of science. In *Acts Without Words*, Beckett parodies a psychological experiment by Köhler. While the original experiment showed that apes can use tools to obtain an item which is out of reach, Beckett's protagonist pulls the item out of reach, measuring 'the degree of frustration the subject will endure before refusing the temptations' and showing 'how easily the godlike experimenter's whimsical exercise of power can demoralise the subject' (Rabinovitz, 1989). Similarly, in *Molloy*, Beckett refers to the wave-particle controversy, or the scientific discovery that light has both wave-like and particle-like qualities (M 41). According to Rabinovitz (1977), this suggests the inadequacy of human names and categories in describing the world, and the decay of empiricism and positivism in

the face of scientific discoveries. This critique also extends to a critique of methodology.

According to Ramsay, Sam is distracted by the form or 'how' of Watt's speech, when the real point is the substance, the 'why'. According to Ramsay, this suggests the shortcomings of methodology and objectivism. It suggests that logical positivism and similar approaches neglect the meaning of phenomena which cannot be explained, particularly in psychological life (Ramsay, 1983).

Similarly, in *Murphy*, Beckett retells a story of a Greek thinker drowned in a puddle for betraying the incommensurability of side and diagonal, and hence the irrationality of being (Ackerley, 2010: 159).

Various interpretations have been placed on Beckett's anti-empiricism. Early approaches focused on the loss of faith in progress. Adorno (2001: 122-3) suggests that the portrayal in *Endgame* is not of the end of existence, but of a 'completed reification of the world', in which there is no more nature. He also suggests that it is a portrayal of a kind of brute reality stripped of psychological and purposeful content (2001: 130). Similarly, Beer (1983) suggests that the critique of science stems from the exposure of the superiority of the 'civilised world' as a sham in World War 2, though she also notes that Beckett rejects the 'noble savage' in the figure of Thomas Nackybal. Poststructuralist and modernist readings suggest that Beckett counterpoises rationalism and empiricism to a layer of flux which underlies them. For instance, it is alleged that *Texts for Nothing* suggests that chaos is the norm and life has no meaning (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). Connor suggests that Beckett dissolves the difference between difference and repetition, treating the two as equivalent, with sameness returning in novelty (Connor, 1988: 2). Dowd (2007: 185) suggests that *How It Is* delineates possible worlds, all of which "are", so that "how it is" is a matter of stringing them together. There is no way to choose among possible worlds (2007: 186). Life in the mud is composed of waiting and coupling, whereas transcendence instead sees them as hierarchical positions and filiations (2007: 188). To say "yes" to the mud is to recognise impossible worlds

(2007: 191), not reducible to logical coherence. Hence, there is a dispute as to whether Beckett rejects the existence of a structured external reality as such, or simply the view that such a reality is reducible to a rational system of interpretation.

### *Ignorance, Religion and Mysticism*

Beckett also rejects the idea of transcendental religious knowledge, but in this case, his rejection is more ambiguous. For instance, Beckett reportedly told Charles Juliet that he appreciated the mystical spirit for 'burn[ing] away filthy logic' (Juliet, 1995: 167). According to Ackerley, Beckett seems drawn to mystical approaches for their deflating effects on empiricism and rationalism, but remains sceptical of their own claims to religious transcendence. Ackerley (2004: 30) suggests that some of Beckett's pieces try to render the mind 'entirely passive and receptive, with thought and reflection turning on itself, as in quietism. He suggests that this reflects the influence of Thomas a Kempis on Beckett. However, Beckett rejects the idea that disinterestedness and altruism can calm psychological pain (2004: 34). The idea that renunciation of the human will permits God's will was maintained by Kempis and Geulincx, but was 'problematic' for Beckett (Ackerley, 2004: 36).

There are various examples of mystical imagery in Beckett. In *Watt*, Arsene undergoes something like a mystical experience through falling off a ladder, but Beckett denies this experience any transcendental significance (Ackerley, 2004: 37-8). According to Begam (1997: 74), Arsene discovers that gravity cannot be defied in general, only 'in leaps and bounds'. However, Arsene's leap also provides an 'ecstatic' escape from subject-object dialectics (Begam, 1997: 82). Elsewhere, the ladder incident is taken to be a reference to the work of the linguist Fritz Mauthner, whose work influenced Beckett (Skerl, 1974; Ben-Zvi, 1980). Takahashi (2002: 38) suggests that Beckett makes

use of a Zen image of a circle as a way to signify mindlessness. Zen circles are free, natural and imperfect, in contrast to rationalism. He also suggests that *Ohio Impromptu* comes close to a zen vision of mindlessness (2002: 39). It is only after a quasi-religious disciplinary repetition that the protagonist enters mindlessness (2002: 40). Yet Beckett continues to reject nirvana, instead bearing the cross of the western mind (2002: 41).

Ackerley (2010) suggests that Beckett's religious sensibility is combined with scepticism. Beckett often referred to a 'gulf' between the finite and the infinite, which his characters sought to cross (Ackerley, 2004: 39). Characters such as Malone are seeking a zone of peace or 'great calm' behind the 'tumult' of life (Ackerley, 2004: 38). Molloy is seeking a 'return to an idealized pre-Cartesian condition' outside subject-object dialectics, identified with union with his mother (Begam, 1997: 106). Beckett's work is thus similar to the *via negativa* of mysticism (Ackerley, 2004: 41). Similarly, Tønning (2009: 111) suggests that Malone and other characters 'adher[e] to some version of Schopenhauerian mysticism'. According to Alfred Simon, Beckett was a gnostic who believed in an evil God who had committed suicide. Thought thus honours itself in nihilism (cited in Weller, 2010: 120-11).

However, the mystical resolution of Beckett's works seems thwarted. According to Rabinovitz, Beckett's heroes follow Schopenhauer in seeking to penetrate beyond the illusory phenomenal world to the authentic inner world. They give up and succumb to despair when their 'hoped-for nirvana' turns out to be itself 'gloomy, labyrinthine, and perilous' (Rabinovitz, 1977). For Begam, the apparently paradisiacal garden becomes the site for Moran's loss of his last moment of peace to Gaber's fatal knowledge. The cultivated, artificial nature of the garden lapses away as Moran's self disintegrates (Begam, 1997: 107). Kelly (1980) suggests that Mouth in *Not I* clings to a 'deluded hope that self-expression can expiate guilt'. She sees it as deluded because Mouth never

passes into Paradise, but instead, is trapped constantly in her own 'babble' and must keep it going. According to Ackerley, Murphy's mystical journey is impossible because it would lead to madness (Ackerley, 2004: 37). In this text, Beckett rejects transcendence in favour of apperception, but this stance entails embracing failure (2004: 37). Crucially, Beckett does not *show* a return to Paradise or the emergence of utopia in any of his works. He has actualised the negative conditions for such a situation, but does not seem to theorise or perform it.

This refusal to follow through on the mystical theme has sometimes been given an affirmative spin. Beckett's characters seem to pray for a release from ignorance, waiting, and even life (Bureau Ramos, 2006: 34). Bureau Ramos interprets various aspects of Beckett's texts as enactments of such prayers, before concluding that 'most of Beckett's characters are suspended in an endless moment of intense anticipation, what Borges beautifully describes as the imminence of a revelation that never takes place' (2006: 36). However, this failure is not taken as giving the work a negative dimension. Rather, it demonstrates the end of the post-lapsarian journey, and the dissolution of the pride which prevents readmission to Paradise (2006: 38). They inhabit a space of expectation because there is nothing more to be done, creating a liminal space which is 'the *primum mobile* of all aspirations to utopia' (2006: 39). A more negative interpretation could, however, be offered. It might be suggested that a silent, reflexive self can be achieved via techniques such as meditation, but that this process is blocked for an over-anxious or traumatised person. This process of interference in meditation is modelled as the voices which interrupt and disrupt Beckett's characters.

Beckett's later work is often seen as dismantling transcendental illusions. Begam (1997: 126) suggests that, as the Trilogy progresses, Beckett dismantles the remaining subject-object paradigms, including his earlier lapsarian epistemology. Uhlmann describes *Malone Dies* as 'a book

of reckoning that demolishes the idea of judgement' (1996: 117). It performs functions similar to a religious text, but without moral judgement, instead creating an immanent assemblage of desires. This is portrayed, however, as an escape, rather than a limit. Malone, Sapo and Macmann *escape* judgement because they 'have no faith in the order of time, the order of progress through accumulation' (1996: 124). Macmann finds in the St John of God's asylum a 'little paradise' which seems to be a caricature of Eden (Begam, 1997: 138). The effort to overcome Cartesian dualism is figured both as salvation and as fall (1997: 138). Cavell (1969: 149) suggests that, for Beckett, only the rejection of hope, meaning and justification free us from the 'curse of God'. Religion, like science, provides a universal which turns the person into a puppet.

Shaw (2010: 10) suggests that Beckett questions the source of creativity once God is no longer seen as the origin. The author is the obvious answer, but authorship is itself in question. In *The Unnamable*, divine light and word are referred to, but reduced from command to contingency (2010: 67). Hammond (1979) suggests that the loss of Christian eschatology leads to the loss of linear time, and hence to an experience of time as unstructured. The absence of God or meaning also makes suffering meaningless (Stewart, 2009: 169). Beckett's characters refuse to praise God from the depths of misery, insisting that suffering negates divine imperatives. While religious authors have objections to such refusals, they cannot answer the 'irreducible mystery of suffering' which Beckett posits (Tonning, 2009: 120-1). O'Hara (1982) suggests that Moran is disillusioned with religion after learning that the Gaber-Youdi-Obidil organisation is indifferent to him. Hence, the indifference of empirical reality is repeated by God.

One aspect of religious knowledge which Beckett decisively rejects is doctrinal belief. Cordingley (2010: 131) suggests that Beckett's 'burlesque treatment' of Pascal's belief in miracles and asceticism interacts with his concerns regarding voice and originality, and his readings of

Proust's mysticism. Beckett sometimes shows a 'Romantic agony' of wishing for his words to 'transcend their limited capacity for representation', but never endorses miracles or transcendence (2010: 140). He seems to see such mystical short cuts as stupid (2010: 142). Similarly, Cordingley argues that Beckett down-values the possibility of transcendence by including catechists with other mental programmers (Cordingley, 2010: 145).

The critiques of ignorance in the cases discussed above are also repeated in other fields. Hamilton (2005) suggests that Beckett subverts the pastoral idyll so as to eliminate yet another path to completeness. The pastoral 'is exposed for its contemporary impotence', but also used in a 'self-effacing rhetoric' (2005: 325). Images of animal slaughter, and violence by Moran and Molloy, undermine ideas of self-liberation in nature and of natural idylls (2005: 325). For Hamilton, this suggests that Beckett thinks that attempts to escape one's present situation always end in frustration (2005: 326). Similarly, Gigante (2001) suggests that Molloy 'experiences an existential sickness which hinges on an anxious relation to taste'. The order of taste undergoes a similar deconstruction as the orders of reason, empirical knowledge and transcendental knowledge.

### *Impotence*

There is little debate that Beckett's characters are often impotent. The ambiguity reflected in the secondary literature is about the extent to which these conditions are involuntary. Impotence might also be deliberate subjective disintegration, just as ignorance might also be post-representational. For instance, Toyama (1983) suggests that Beckett's characters *deliberately* undergo bodily decomposition so as to avoid substance. Malone becomes liquid to imagine escape from substantiality, Lemuel maims himself, and Macmann sheds his skin (Toyama, 1983). There is also a paradox that the 'desire for ignorance or indifference derives from anything but ignorance or

indifference' (Cordingley, 2010: 149). Beckett's use of impotence can be summarised in two crucial quotes he uses in his work, one from Democritus, that 'naught is more real than the nothing', the other from Geulincx, that 'where you are worth nothing, you should want nothing' (Weller, 2006: 70). The latter phrase, used in *Murphy*, suggests that the body has 'little value and is only a source of suffering' (Shaw, 2010: 11). Impotence is thus closely connected to the lack of value and the collapse of relationships to the world.

One of the most common representations of impotence is the use of physical disability and incapacity. In *Lessness*, the protagonist is immobile, his arms and legs unable to move, his context a wasteland (Solomon, 1980). In *The Unnamable*, the character in an urn is without arms, legs or speech (Begam, 1997: 161). Beckett's use of disability to symbolise impotence, downplays the ways in which different experiences of embodiment nevertheless produce forms of ability and agency. However, it can also be seen as a way of critiquing the ableist assumption of a 'normal' body in Cartesian world-views. Authors in disability studies have suggested that Beckett's work offers 'a parable about the work – the practice – of disability in making normal life strange' (Davidson, 2008: xxiii). Similarly, Swanson (2015) argues that Beckett uses ageing as a way to discuss inner experience in response to physical impairment.

One detailed account of bodily impotence in Beckett's work is provided from a psychoanalytic perspective. Drawing on Schilder (1935) and Anzieu (1989, 1992), Tajiri (2006) argues that Beckett's work suggests a fixation on a pre-Oedipal bodily image, namely 'the undeveloped, amorphous body image of the intrauterine period and early infancy' (2006: 41). This body lacks a 'skin ego' separating the self from the world by a definite boundary (2006: 55-6). It involves a regression to a conception in which, in the absence of an integrated bodily ego, body parts are alien and detachable, and the skin can seem constrictive (2006: 41, 47). In some of Beckett's works, the body deteriorates until all that remains is a voice or a series of fragments

(2006: 43). Body parts become interchangeable with one another, particularly the orifices, which are the point of demarcation between self and world (2006: 54), but also the organs, which feel like alien objects (2006: 63). The body is also, for Molloy and Malone, expansive (2006: 55). Various aspects of normal bodily experience break down due to the absence of a skin ego. The inside-outside boundary is particularly porous (2006: 57). The 'supporting function', the ability to stand upright, is also lost by Malone, Moran, Molloy and the narrator of *How It Is*, who 'crawl or lie with no ability to stand upright' (2006: 58). Furthermore, the anxiety arising from the absence of a body-as-envelope causes thoughts and memories to slip away, and flows to be experienced as uncontrollable and anxiety-inducing (2006: 58). Limbs in Beckett's works frequently go wrong, are 'casually lost', or are supplemented by prostheses such as crutches (2006: 42). Molloy, for instance, has both crutches and a bicycle (2006: 43). Beckett tends to produce a 'prosthetic grotesque' in which human and machine are combined (2006: 73).

Other techniques are also used to suggest impotence. Dearlove suggests that Beckett's is a world without passing time, in an eternal present. Without memories, sentences become badly formed. The 'major concern is to pass the time while waiting for an end that will not come' (Dearlove, 1978). Ackerley suggests that, in Beckett's worlds, the mind and body are incapable of stillness (Ackerley, 2004: 48). In *Endgame*, it is constantly suggested that the supply of artificial objects is exhausted or almost exhausted, and cannot be replenished. This abyssal sense is achieved grammatically, by stating that there are no more of each item (Hammond, 1979). Impotence can also be seen in terms of the impossibility of the tasks Beckett assigns to his characters. According to Badiou (cited in Gibson, 2007: 186), Beckett sets his narrators an impossible task: to reach the silence which is the origin of their voice. The task is 'impossible from the outset' and leads to an endless repetition of a Sisyphean task.

Beckett has sometimes been read as portraying impotence through automatic determinism. In *Murphy*, the claim that '[t]he sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new' (Beckett, 1938: 1) suggests the sun has a kind of mechanical causality. Automatism is here associated with impotence. Hill (1990: 91-2) suggests that Molloy fends off the image of his mother by means of 'anal reversal'. As a result, he ends up in a state of breakdown, and the work is a record of this breakdown (1990: 120). Mahood undergoes an 'absolute reduction to silent isolation' (Quigley, 2005: 95). The narrator of *How it Is* is revealed as impotent in terms of the necessity of replacing the sacks and his apparent loss of his own sack and of Pim (Dearlove, 1978). O'Hara (1982) suggests that Moran's leg breaks down as part of a dream-like call to silence, against his perpetual mobility. Malone's power is portrayed as dwindling in a phallic metaphor of a shrinking pencil (Shaw, 2010: 57). Molloy does not reach his mother, but as Begam argues, 'offers a kind of fallen version of what he sought to achieve' (1997: 106). Watt is often interpreted as melancholic (e.g. Gibson, 2007: 170; Harvey, 1970: 390). Lawley (1979) suggests that, while bodily impotence in *Endgame* is meant to increase the sense of the 'body as a wrecked machine', they also contribute to a stylised arrangement of mutually reversed characters. According to Toyama (1983), Malone ultimately fails to bring his creations to life. They are not 'real' people who can serve as Others. He also fails to control them as an author should. When they slip out of his control, he scrutinises the present (Toyama, 1983). In *Endgame* it is suggested that things should be done *because* they are not worth doing: '[t]he nonsense of an act becomes a reason to accomplish it' (Adorno, 2001: 141). Watt, meanwhile, is implicitly suggested to be yearning for the silence of the womb (Beer, 1983). In many of these cases, it is unclear whether the gesture in question is a true incapacity or a refusal. Is Beckett *refusing* (for example) union with the mother, or does he see it as impossible or inadequate (in distinction from Jung)?

### *Impotence and Social Life*

Impotence also affects social relationships in Beckett's work. According to Thobo-Carlsen (2002: 249), Beckett suggests that togetherness is an illusion, derived from creating or fantasising a companion in one's solitude. According to Weller (2009), Beckett attempts various combinations as ways to produce a social relationship. His romantic couples tend to be grotesque parodies, as with Macmann and Moll (2009: 37). Krapp longs for the 'girl in the punt', but Beckett has suggested that, were she present, she would simply be 'nagging away behind him, in which case his failure and solitude would be exactly the same' (cited in Weller, 2009: 38). Romantic love is thus doomed to fail (2009: 38). Similarly, Tønning (2009: 112) suggests that love as union is seen by Beckett as a fantasy which further ties people to the flesh, impeding the quest for nothingness. The second type of relationship is Beckett's construction of mutually dependent, antagonistic pseudocouples (Weller, 2006: 78), such as Hamm and Clov, Mercier and Camier, and Vladimir and Estragon (Weller, 2009: 39). According to Weller, '[t]he individuals who constitute these pseudo-couples can bear neither to separate nor to remain together' (2009: 39). Weller interprets this as an 'anethical dispatching of the other', which seeks to reduce alterity to nothingness (2006: 79). The pseudo-couples seem to need each other since (for instance) outside Hamm's abode 'it's death'; the self needs the Other. Yet they also find each other unbearable.

Hence, neither romantic couples nor pseudo-couples provide satisfaction. The third combination, which arguably escapes impotence, is familial. Kristeva suggests that Beckett's sons cannot introject, annex or incorporate the father, but remain haunted by a fascination and terror which ground meaning (Kristeva, 1980: 155). However, Weller (2009: 44-5) suggests that Beckett presents an image of father-son love, premised on the exclusion of, or violence against, the mother. Such father-son combinations hold out the possibility of a genuine social combination (2009: 44). Other authors suggest that successful social relations occur in Beckett's work. Badiou suggests that

Beckett depicts love in texts such as *Enough*, but not as romantic love. Instead, this is a kind of 'encounter whose strength radically exceeds both sentimentality and sexuality' (Badiou, 2003: 28). Similarly, Begam (1997: 84) suggests that Watt and Knott arrive at a joint consciousness of nothing, a kind of face-to-face encounter beyond subjectivity.

Impotence can also play a role as a source of power in interpersonal relations. Cavell suggests that *Endgame* is focused on a kind of dialogic contest: 'victory or salvation consists... in coming up with the right answer – or rather the *next* answer... whose point is to win a contest of wits by capping a gag or getting the last word' (1969: 127). Noguchi (1983) analyses *Endgame* as a competitive speech situation or 'interactional struggle' in which, while Hamm is the authority figure, Clov constantly seeks to gain an authoritative 'soliciting' position by subverting Hamm's questions. Clov accommodates Hamm but makes him struggle constantly. The material limits to the possible and to what is known limit Hamm's power over Clov; Clov effectively uses impotence as power. As Noguchi suggests, 'the counters... challenge a presupposition that a particular ability or a particular referent exists' (Noguchi, 1983). Hamm cannot know if Clov is lying about such material limits. Clov's replies challenge Hamm's ability to make appropriate demands or requests. Perhaps Clov symbolises the limits which the body's incapacities place on the (otherwise blind and immobile) mind's ability to exert its will.

### *Interpretations of Impotence*

Various interpretations have been placed upon the role of impotence in Beckett's work. Some authors see Beckettian impotence as a parody of the power of other kinds of literary characters. Beckett's invalids and vagrants are seen by Begam (1997: 6) as parodic versions of modernist heroes. Wilcher (1979) suggests that Hamm is a bored, impotent version of Hamlet,

reduced from his former glory and now providing an 'abstract action' which mirrors tragic action without its usual narrative content. Like Hamlet, he sees only pestilence and sterility when he looks upon the world. Unlike Hamlet, Hamm is aware all the time that he is an actor. Unlike tragic characters, he does not continue to hope that his destiny can be averted. This suggests that his impotence is an effect of his awareness that he is actually a product of the author – rather than an effect of 'real' impotence. Nevertheless, he hesitates in discarding his stage props and ending the play.

Impotence can also be a means to empty the space of possibilities within a novel. For Deleuze, the body has to remain immobile for the mechanics of mental exhaustion to take place (1997: 169). This reaches its limit in *Nacht und Traume*, in which the protagonist has no voice, hears no voices, and is also unable to move (1997: 171). Powerlessness can be an effect of alienation, particularly of an absence of any direct connection between the self and nature. Protagonists become powerless because they are cut off from any such contact. Hence, bodily impotence is sometimes taken to symbolise the frustrated attempts to find a meaningful *topos* (Bureau Ramos, 2006: 33). Psychoanalytic accounts interpret impotence in terms of inner transformations. For instance, Critchley (1998: 116) suggests that, in Beckett's texts, authoritarian Oedipal subjects become abject pre-Oedipal selves, and as a result, become both weaker and more content. Impotence can also be seen as a variety of affirmation of diversity. From an affirmative point of view, Musgrave (2004: 372) classifies Beckett's work as a new variety of the grotesque. For instance, he constantly employs grotesque bodies (2004: 375). After earlier phases of grotesque realism (Bakhtin's classical grotesque, referring to authors such as Rabelais) and subjective grotesque, Beckett operates with the 'abstract grotesque' (2004: 373). Instead of collectives or individuals, the abstract grotesque works with silence (2004: 378-9). Similarly, Tajiri suggests that Beckett's bodies subvert the rational, integrated self through the material lower bodily stratum in a

recognisably Bakhtinian fashion (Tajiri, 2006: 48). They also express a tendency in modernity towards experiences of bodily fragmentation (2006: Chapter 3).

### *Impotence or Negation?*

An alternative to the idea of impotence as a characteristic of Beckett's characters is the view that these characters, or Beckett himself, perform a positive task of negation. Beckett might be seen as performing an exhaustion, subtraction or negation. As Beckett remarks: 'I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding' (in Knowlson, 1997: 352). What is noticeable here is that the *process* of subtraction or negation is crucial. Beckett does not simply work with a prior lack, but with means of creating absences and impossibilities. He also states that '[t]he only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn into the core of the eddy' (Beckett, 1987: 65-6). He describes himself as having an active desire to make himself poorer (cited in Gibson, 2007: 122). 'To bore one hole after another in [language], until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today' (Beckett, 1984: 171-2). In Beckett's words, it is a method which might make it 'possible to feel a whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All' (1984: 172). Beckett wrote that '[t]here is at least this to be said for mind, that it can dispel mind' (cited in Begam, 1997: 39). All of these statements suggest a process of negation behind the representations of impotence in Beckett's work.

Negation is sometimes counterpoised to nothingness by readers of Beckett. As Bureu Ramos argues, 'Beckett is the poet of negation – not to be confused with nothingness, an idea one cannot sustain for too long without feeling chilled to the bone' (Bureu Ramos, 2006: 31). She

suggests that the effect of Beckett's works is not to produce fear of an existential void in the reader, but rather, a feeling derived from dense, intense physical and mental images. Hence, '[n]egation in Beckett has a more positive connotation than the atmosphere pervading his work might suggest' (2006: 31). Authors emphasising Beckett's poetic dispositions suggest that negation is a means to replace the rational self with the expressive self. Creativity negates the rational self, and hence the unitary self; the world becomes chaotic, in a 'total negation of everything' which can be lived only in insanity or death (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). Dearlove (1978) suggests that Beckett's earlier emphasis on the external world led him to a position of disintegration, which he transcended in *How It Is* and later works by switching to the inner world. His later works are said to emphasise imaginative creation rather than the mind's limitations. However, throughout his works he emphasises active processes of negation by his characters. Murphy *chooses* a stance of indifference to the contingent world (Gibson, 2007: 151). He seeks a 'third zone' where he could love himself, but he was able to reach it only through the destruction of the bodily self (Dearlove, 1978). Malone, similarly, seeks darkness and the void (Critchley, 1998: 121). Critchley refers to a 'massive and unrelenting critique of the illusoriness of what passes for life' in Beckett's work (1997: 171). The Unnamable, in particular, rejects any exchange with what passes for life (Gibson, 2007: 192).

Despite this valorisation of negation, Beckett also reportedly said to Juliet that '[n]egation is no more possible than affirmation... It is impossible to protest, and equally impossible to assent' (Juliet, 1995: 165). This aporia is interpreted as central to Beckett's work. The paradox is the wish to come to an end while still writing (Thobo-Carlsen, 2002: 250). The task is itself marked with the absurdity of being unable (Gibson, 2007: 194). For Critchley, the double inability to go on or not to go on is a source of a 'kind of *rapture*' in Beckett's work (2004: 199). It results from the rejection of various false salvations and a recognition of the limits to the human condition (2004: 211). Similarly, for Mooney, negative reasoning leads to a calm indifference or scepticism which leads to

inner peace from a state of being beyond knowing anything (Mooney, 1978). To 'fail better', suggests Thobo-Carlsen (2002: 250), is to be increasingly effective in avoiding the pitfall of representation, of creating signs, or of meaning. For Weller, Beckett articulates a *wish* to be 'abstracted to death' (Weller, 2006: 67). Negation can also be seen as a means to reach a level beneath usual appearances of power and knowledge. For Trieloff, experience is rooted in the flux beneath the form, in aporia, impotence and ignorance (Trieloff, 1984: 2).

The textual strategies producing negation are multiple and complex. Beckett's processes of 'erasure and erosion' (Ackerley, 2004: 40) create what Locatelli (1990) terms an 'impotence potential'. Various strategies are used in his works. One of the most common tactics is the aporetic statement. Others include permutations, lost threads and irrational statements. *The Unnamable* in particular is full of 'an endlessly proliferating and self-undoing series of sayings and unsayings' (Critchley, 1998: 124). For Ricks, Beckett's syntax is a syntax of weakness because it is unable to arrive at severance (Ricks, 1993: 83). Musgrave (2004: 374) suggests that the most central device in Beckett's work is the enthymeme or incomplete syllogism. Trieloff (1984: 9) discusses three types of undermining of structure in Beckett: 'the antiphonal or catechetical strategy of *Texts for Nothing*, the mnemonic formula of *How It Is*, and the canonic structural principle of *Six Residua*' and other works. Begam refers to 'entropic transformations' in *Murphy* (Begam, 1997: 44). According to Gibson, restricted action is a process of discernment which selects against present realities (Gibson, 2007: 150). Beckett also uses images of massacre, torture and persecution to undermine the 'smug will to live' (Gibson, 2007: 193). Dowd (2007: 170) suggests that Beckett's disjunctive syntheses work with discord which is resistant to synthesis. Deterministic views also have a role here by assuming the big world is fixed in place and unrelated to choice, providing a 'Geulinxian absolution' from engagement with it (Begam, 1997: 50). This is 'a makeshift device for holding the world at arm's length' (1997: 51).

Negation can, however, have different meanings or types. If one can gain peace (as Murphy briefly does) through an activity of negation, one can also *fail* to negate, and thereby suffer, as Beckett's protagonists often do (Weller, 2006: 73; Toyama, 1983). A reader of Beckett is thus dealing with two different senses of negation, failure, or impotence: the deliberate, *affirmative* act of negating or failing, and also the entirely *negative* act of 'failing to fail' or to negate. According to Connor, the 'magic' of Beckett's work is an effect of the manner in which he converts 'extreme delapidation' into 'a positive reflex of value' and 'a whole unforgettable world' (1992: 82). To these may be added a third aspect of perceiving the *inadequacy* of the situation. Impotence and ignorance thus have at least three senses: a descriptive sense, in which the present situation is generally meaningless and renders people impotent and ignorant; a subjective sense, in which the subject uses the tools of refusing power and knowledge to resist the situation; and a fatal sense, in which the subject's refusal is insufficient to escape the situation: the subject is too impotent to refuse successfully.

The interplay of negation and its failure varies between different texts. Begam (1997) interprets the impotence and negation of different texts in different ways. First, Murphy is unable to enter the third zone because he cannot cease to be conscious of himself. He enters the 'excellent gas, the superfine chaos' of the third zone accidentally, after failing to do so by choice, then decides to return to the outer world (Begam, 1997: 55). Murphy thus finds it difficult to move from *ratio* to chaos without bringing *ratio* with him. Anyway, his mission was conditioned on eliding the suffering of madness (1997: 56). Begam suggests that *Murphy* is an 'experiment' in which 'the cogito... attempts to doubt its way into madness' (1997: 64). This attempt 'disintegrates in mid-flight and then slowly drifts back to an earth now scorched and uninhabitable' (1997: 64-5). Hence, Murphy is seeking one kind of negation – the radical otherness of madness – but is unable to

achieve it. In the process, he achieves enough negation to doubt, and libidinally disinvest, the present, but not to escape it. Both Murphy and Watt 'can rig up temporary ascensions out of subject-object dialectics', but never reach paradise (Begam, 1997: 71). Murphy proves unable to will himself into will-lessness, resulting in a mental overheating and explosion (1997: 179). However, Beckett's later works go beyond his early aesthetic of failure, inventing ways of naming the unnamable (Begam, 1997: 148). Begam suggests that, with *The Unnamable*, we finally gain access to the 'blooming buzzing confusion' Beckett seeks (1997: 175). This text is a successful negation. Worm arrives at the third zone Murphy sought (1997: 179). He does this by making of Murphy's 'impasse' a 'resource' in which one can dwell (1997: 182).

Various readers have interpreted the functions of negation differently. Trieloff suggests that the purpose of Beckett's negations is to cause the reader to reflect on her/his assumptions, such as grammatical expectations (1984: 58). Weller suggests that Beckett seeks a work which is constituted simply by meaningless, expressionless and productive language, but repeatedly enacts the failure of such a subjectless language to come into being (2006: 77). Pilling (2010: 70) suggests that there is a revolt of means against ends in Beckett, because ends lack purpose. For Adorno, Beckett goes further than simply the 'abstract negation of meaning', positing absurdity by debating meaning (1984: 230). Adorno sees Beckett's plays as an immanent logic of sequences, rather than meanings (Rabate, 2010: 103). Rabate (2010: 101) suggests that Adorno's reading of Beckett involves a subtraction which opposes existentialist abstraction, instead leaving absurdity. Pouillon suggests from an existentialist viewpoint that Molloy is a resisting subject who refuses to collaborate with an absurd world, offering passive resistance (cited in Weller, 2010: 119). Hence, negation can variously be figured as the collapse of the subject, as resistance to power, as a way of provoking reflexivity in the reader, and/or as a critique of the possibility of meaningful life-projects. To add a further possibility, it might be argued that Beckett is seeking a kind of being without

attributes. Attributeless being tends to become whatever-singularity (Agamben, 1993), which is counterpoised to the process of being ordered by particular binaries and exclusions. The achievement of whatever-singularity, and its recognition by the other, ends interpellation by the other, and hence ends the 'self' as relational construct. Knott is a whatever-singularity through his mutating characteristics.

### *Negation and the Event in Badiou and Beckett*

One approach emphasising negation in Beckett's work is the Badiouian approach. Badiou's work is seen as especially appropriate because of his project of subtracting *doxa* or conventional belief, in a manner similar to Beckett (Gibson, 2007: 121). According to Gibson, '[s]elf-impoverishment is an austere and necessary clearing of the ground for thought, as distinct from the incorrigible, muddy complicities of daily life' (2007: 122). Badiou argues that Beckett's work gradually opens itself up to the Event and to chance, to what he terms 'brusque modifications of the given' (2003: 39). A similar sense of Beckett opening to 'leaps' of chance events is suggested by Bersani and Dutoit (1993: 19). Gibson also extends the Badiouian reading. For Gibson, the name of the Event is disruptive of language, a kind of disorder or scandal (Gibson, 2007: 127). The obligation to keep going is advanced as evidence for a Badiouian interpretation (Gibson, 2007: 130). Badiou interprets *Watt* as involving an addition to the situation in the form of Knott's house, which saves thought from collapse (cited in Gibson, 2007: 158). *Watt's* experience can thus be seen as an Event. He is subjectified (turned into a different person) through a slow separation of this incommensurable experience from the everyday knowledge to which he initially reduces it (Gibson, 2007: 159-60). For Gibson, the two aspects of the self-founding of thought and openness to the Event – which Badiou sees as phases of Beckett's thought – are instead intertwined in tension (2007: 132). Rabate suggests that Badiou sees the later Beckett in affirmative terms, with *How It Is*

providing a new openness to the Other. This contrasts with earlier works such as *The Unnamable*, which present mainly despair (2010: 105). From this point of view, the destruction of the superstructure of humanity down to its foundation is necessary to create the conditions for an Event (Rabate, 2010: 109).

Gibson also criticises Badiou's view in certain ways, emphasising Beckett's negative rather than affirmative character. Badiou misunderstands Beckett because he sees aesthetic trajectories in logical terms, and underplays the extent to which art can create an experience of *evenimentalite*, or the 'eventness of the event' (Gibson, 2007: 132, 140-1). Beckett thinks more in terms of remainders than events (Gibson, 2007: 137). He does not show fidelity to a prior Event, but works towards a limited sense that an Event (and resultant subjectification) is possible (2007: 141). Gibson's view of Beckett is that he waits patiently before the inert for the conditions of an Event to appear (2007: 141), although some characters also engage in a kind of forcing (2007: 151).

I would suggest that this reading is limited in failing to appreciate the depth of the collapse of meaning in Beckett. A Badiouian Event can be demonstrated by means of the emergence of a new language which redefines the situation. Beckett noticeably refrains from such conceptions of a new perspective or paradigm. A Badiouian Event might be said to occur when Harry Potter comes to see his former life in terms of the difference between wizards and muggles – a nonsensical distinction pre-Event, but one with its own coherence. But this is precisely *not* what Watt undergoes in the house of Knott; he does not come out with new names, but enters into linguistically transgressive practices in which existing names such as 'pot' break down without being replaced. To be sure, Beckett's characters wait. But does Beckett believe an Event is possible? Godot, for example, never comes. And how can one reconcile the naming of an event with the unnamable in Beckett? The Badiouian view has also faced some criticism. Dowd (2007:

193) criticises Badiouian interpretations for implying that Beckett endorsed Platonism, while Rabate (2010) accuses Badiou of foisting affirmative conclusions onto Beckett from outside his oeuvre.

Gibson is perhaps closer to Beckett's work when he suggests that it involves a *failed or negated* Event. Characters undergo a 'break with *doxa*' without its being guaranteed by an Event. Such a break has 'no means of decisive rupture with the situation at hand' and 'no guarantee of its value' (Gibson, 2007: 144). Instead, a character such as Murphy suffers 'defeat and disaster' (2007: 147), induced by the realisation that solipsism is the outcome of release (2007: 152). The Unnamable radically refuses the demands of the masters, the order of knowledge and the localisation of Being, but in doing so, is caught in an untenable position and is constantly agitated, since it resists within the terms of the situation (2007: 190). Beckettian characters are also caught between economic relevance and authenticity. In the absence of an Event, relevance tends to triumph (2007: 149). Murphy's negations are 'pleasant' but lead nowhere (2007: 150, 165). The scission from the dominant system of meaning is experienced by Murphy simply as a conflict (2007: 153). In Watt, it turns into a 'declaration of fundamental absurdity' which eventually produces a return to the established reality (Gibson, 2007: 161). For Gibson, this is because Watt cannot recognise the force of the Event, and holds it at a distance, refusing to be 'gripped' (2007: 161-2). Beckett's characters are marked by a 'receptivity with nothing to receive' (2007: 169). Beckett shows the 'vigilance of the waiting subject' seeking an Event (Gibson, 2007: 170). Gibson terms this the 'inertia of the remainder', resisting submersion in the situation in the absence of an Event (Gibson, 2007: 191). The world of the Unnamable is *evenemental*, it is characterised by instability and the possibility of an Event, but no Event takes place. It is like Beckett's image of a stone a fraction of a second before it comes apart (Gibson, 2007: 196; Beckett, 1984: 128). The Unnamable engages in a 'manic but futile explosion of mock throws of the dice' (Gibson, 2007:

195). He leaves the reader on the threshold of an Event, but continues no further (2007: 196).

Gibson seems to suggest that this absence of an Event is due to an emphasis on the conditions for patience. It might instead be that for Beckett, the naming and forcing of the Event would itself be a betrayal of the fundamental insufficiency of language which the Event reveals: to feel commitment and fidelity is to succumb to the illusion of meaning, or to put the external world before inner subjectivity. The Event, perhaps, is itself part of the doxastic function of world-ordering for Beckett. Alternatively, it may be that, for Beckett, full Events are not possible in modernity because *doxa* is too entrenched – only a negative Event like Watt's remains possible. Indeed, the Unnamable seems to suggest that any Event would simply lead back to the general problems with *doxa* (Gibson, 2007: 191). This seems to suggest that Events are impossible for Beckett. A more hopeful possibility would be that Beckett sees it as the reader's work to construct their own Event, and hence does not prescribe or model one. This would be consistent with existentialist approaches, in which each subject finds their own unique truth.

### *Impotence or Power?*

While Beckett frequently portrays impotence, his characters also seem to many commentators to have certain kinds of power. According to Gibson, Beckett seeks to free himself from an impasse arising from the oscillation between being and the cogito (Gibson, 2007: 126). To be sovereign, one has to escape the big world for the little world of the mind (Begam, 1997: 50). While Beckett's characters do not always succeed in doing this, they often have the power to at least partially access the little world. Such power is paradoxically obtained from nothingness, and inspires the practice of negation. In *Murphy*, Beckett refers to a 'positive peace' which arises when 'the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing' (1938: 246). Such negation can

disempower external sources of control. For instance, the tyrants of *Texts for Nothing* are seen as having little power within the world of the voice; they 'cease to matter much' after the first text (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976).

Various forms of power recur in Beckett's work. Travel or movement – cycling, using trains or trams, walking on crutches, crawling - is a recurring theme, suggesting the metaphor of the journey. This metaphor may represent 'mental progress, the act of writing, or the process of moving through the moments of a life' (Rabinovitz, 1977). Beckett's characters undergo journeys, but these are neither the mystical journey to inner enlightenment nor Descartes' journey through thought (Ackerley, 2004: 36). Dowd (2008) discusses the role of spatiality in *Watt*, and concludes that Watt's trajectory is 'toward the breach' (2008: 84). There are also acts of violence throughout the Trilogy and elsewhere – the murder of Lemuel, Moran's fight, Mercier and Camier's murder of a policeman, and so on. These actions are often interpreted as inexplicable (e.g. O'Brien, 1986: 89-93). However, Uhlmann suggests they are best interpreted as attempts to 'escape capture' by subjectification and power. 'No attempt is made to justify these actions which are, more often than not, committed with relish' (Uhlmann, 1996: 128). They are thus part of the challenge to the individuated, responsible self and its subordination to a symbolic order. Beer (1983) suggests that Beckett's characters are 'tramp-heroes', at once clown-like and Christ-like, radically unassimilable except for the effects of language. At the limit, they lose even this similarity to others, as words no longer provide comfort. Hence, in addition to their power to write, speak or create, Beckett's characters sometimes have three kinds of power: movement, violence and unassimilability. This places limits on their impotence, suggesting that the loss of knowledge and of ordering power is not a condition of complete powerlessness.

If Beckett's characters have power rather than being impotent, then what appears as

impotence may be a particular effect of their location within a Beckettian reality. Discussing *Malone Dies*, Uhlmann argues that Malone is a 'haecceity'. He undergoes a process of individual subjectivation which is also a differentiation and a unity of being, running together separate elements and breaking out of the 'sealed jar' which symbolises the subject (1996: 119). Malone is defined by his affects rather than by representation or value-judgements – though his affects are mainly those of impotence (1996: 120). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari argue that Malone recognises himself as a set of 'unformed particles' and 'nonsubjectified affects' (1987: 262). This explains the types of power Beckett's characters retain. Theirs is the power of nonsubjectified molecular assemblages, rather than the power of subjectified agents.

Another form of power or affirmation in Beckett is the permutation. This has been interpreted in various ways. Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the inclusive use of disjunctive syntheses, or 'inclusive disjunction', which as Tajiri argues, 'pertains to many different aspects of Beckett's work', from the permutations of texts such as *Watt* to the transgression of binary oppositions and the paradoxical use of language (2007: 69). They place an emphasis on the use of permutations in Beckett, 'the system of possible permutations between differences that always amount to the same as they shift and slide about' (1987:12). Mooney similarly refers to a 'principle of permutative form' in Beckett, 'which depends on repetition and reduction' (1978). Begam (1997: 48-9) suggests that the permutations involve removing objects from their material references, constructing them simply as sets of formal possibilities. This is only possible if one can leave behind physical references – for instance, appetite and preference in the case of Murphy's biscuits. In the case of *Watt*, he suggests that Knott's varying characteristics are also permutations, and that permutations open up closed systems (Begam, 1997: 80). Cavell sees the statements, inferences and negations in Beckett's texts as a kind of spiritual logical exercise of permuting statements (1969: 126).

Permutation is also a central principle of Beckett's writing style. Solomon suggests that *Lessness* uses a 'combinatory machine' which could generate almost endless variations on the text. The random rearrangements of the text show a glimpse of the near-infinite realm of combinatory possibilities (1980). In *Lessness*, words 770-1538 are simply words 1-769 in a new order (Coetzee, 1973: 195). Begam suggests that the text of *Malone Dies* performs permutations of narrative elements (1997: 143). *The Unnamable* goes even further. 'The idea is to play out variations on a series of largely binary formulas', applying to the text itself what is represented in *Molloy* and *Watt* (1997: 180). Critchley suggests that '*The Unnamable* is made up of an endlessly proliferating and self-undoing series of sayings and unsayings' (2004: 198). Interpreting *Watt*, Posnock (1980) suggests that the permutations are similar to a remark of Valéry's, that trying out substitutions exposes the arbitrariness of literary construction and undermines realism. By using permutations, Beckett undermines narrative progress and challenges realistic representation. He gives free rein to language by refusing to select details, showing what is possible at each moment. In the permutations, what matters is that Watt verbalises every possibility in a situation, not that he actually understands the forces at play.

In Deleuze's reading, Beckett creates a machine to produce impotence through particular combinations. Beckett aims for a state of exhaustion of possibilities, not to be confused with tiredness (Begam, 1997: 163). He is seeking to become imperceptible in this way (1997: 23). In this reading, '[b]ecoming imperceptible is Life, "without cessation or condition"... attaining to a cosmic and spiritual lapping', in a Beckettian universe in which 'nothing ever dies' (1997: 26). Deleuze argues that 'Beckett's characters play with the possible without realizing it' (1997: 153). Beckett's work involves acts of exhausting the possible by running through all possible permutations. Only a person who has renounced 'need, preference, goal or signification' can do this

(1997: 154). There are for Deleuze four ways Beckett exhausts the possible: via exhaustive series, voices which dry up, extenuated potentialities of spaces, and dissipating powers of images (1997: 161). They are all means of reducing the possible to a minimum so as to exhaust it (1997: 171). The goal is a particular 'mental image' made possible by the 'any-space-whatever' devoid of inherent meaning (1997: 169). Deleuze suggests that Beckett fails in earlier works because of the limit of words in accessing the undetermined (1997: 173). However, he reaches his goal in his televisual works.

Other authors dispute this affirmative reading, suggesting that permutation is an effect of limits, often related to autobiographical episodes. In *Watt*, Dearlove suggests that Knott cannot be known; the rational mind can only 'permute its own limitations' (Dearlove, 1978). McNaughton suggests that Beckett responded to fascist anthropomorphism and false causality, such as scapegoating and historical teleology, with a counterpoint of lists of facts (2005: 107-8). In his *German Diaries*, he admits such lists to be ways of warding off a threat of meaninglessness by switching off the incipient thought in terror (2005: 109). This is used as a model to read Beckett's literature. In *Endgame*, Hammond suggests that routine and games are ways of structuring a world which is felt to be 'a yawning vacuum, a black hole without structure' (Hammond, 1979). O'Hara (1982) suggests that Molloy's permutations are a way of stalling or escaping from his journey. In various genetic studies, Van Hulle suggests that Beckett seems to manoeuvre himself into dead-ends through permutations of his own texts (e.g. Van Hulle, 2009: 121). Kennedy (1998: 116) and Knowlson (1996: 307-8) also suggest that the permutations were influenced by Beckett's code-work for the French Resistance. It is thus debatable whether the permutations can be seen as exercises of power or impotence.

*Limits to Impotence: Affirmation in Beckett*

Various authors have suggested that Beckett's work is not entirely negative, suggesting that it reveals a particular kind of affirmative force. These readings suggest that impotence and ignorance are ways to point to a particular affirmative possibility or reality. One major aspect of empowerment in Beckett is the process of 'going on'. Beckett's ethic of keeping going is a major reason Badiou rejects the claim that Beckett is a nihilist (Weller, 2010: 112). Abbott similarly refers to the 'trope of onwardness' as central for Beckett. The work of creation or negation is always incomplete, with Beckett fracturing emerging patterns in his work to produce 'renewed surprise' (1996: 32). Similarly, for Migernier, the positive aspect of Beckett's work arises from the fact that, despite awareness of their limits, his characters avoid despair and keep going (Migernier, 2006: 32). They continue in the hope that the fragments of their experience will become meaningful (2006: 34). Similarly, Gibson suggests that the non-capitulation of Beckett's characters arises from their determination to continue (Gibson, 2007: 137). They face a question of how to live once all options are exhausted (Bureau Ramos, 2006: 32), or exhaust options the better to become unnamable and unrepresentable (Dowd, 2007: 168). Nixon (2009: 22) suggests that the problem of 'going on' for Beckett is a 'continual struggle with the ever-present threat (or salvation) of silence'. Weller (2010) suggests that Beckett has both negative and affirmative ethics. His negative ethic comes from Schopenhauer and the cosmological nihilist Gorgias of Leontini (Weller, 2010: 126). The affirmative ethic is contained in the exhortion to 'go on' (2010: 127). Weller cites Beckett's claim that the artist can find a way to go on by giving form to the formless, and concludes that he adheres to two antithetical imperatives (2010: 127-8). Both negation and affirmation fail because of their coexistence as imperatives (2010: 128).

Various authors conceive affirmation in Beckett in terms of a sphere beyond representation. Thobo-Carlsen (2002: 251) suggests that Beckett hopes through 'missaying' to 'express a quality of

being – out of reach of denotational referentiality'. Dearlove suggests that Beckett's humanistic horizon is the redemptive power of art (1982: 3). Migernier (2006: 4) suggests that Beckett's 'problematization of the possibilities of successful expression goes beyond the question of failure and negativity'. Instead, he tries to uncover the existence of a 'basic economy of divergence' which contradicts dualistic thinking and which problematises identity (2006: 4). Beckett first 'repeats the collapse of representation and self-representation' then ushers in a new way of thinking otherness (2006: 16). He shows the disorder, dispersion and molecular distribution underlying the illusion of representational order (2006: 41).

Poststructuralist approaches emphasise Beckett's post-representational aspects. Begam suggests that Beckett was trying to create an 'aesthetic of antirepresentation' (1997: 151). Critchley suggests that Beckett engages in a 'relentless pursuit... of that which narration cannot capture, namely the radical unrepresentability of death' (1998: 114). In a typical deconstructive reading, he sees Beckett as creating a productive tension between the necessity and impossibility of representation (1998: 115), suggesting an 'uneasy and solitary inhabitation of the aporia between the inability to speak and the inability to be silent' (1998: 122). Dowd (2007: 21) suggests that Beckett is committed to a principle of becoming, at the threshold of atopia or non-space. He shows the becoming of being on a virtual level (2007: 176). A case against such a reading is the impact of self-transformation on Beckett's characters. The loss of definite linguistic meanings seems to have depressed Watt, as in the pot and hat episodes (Beer, 1983).

For some readers, the emphasis on death is not pessimistic. Death, as un-experienced, cannot be included in the 'ledger of weal and woe' (Beckett, cited in Critchley, 1998: 117). The inconceivability of death is a major theme of *Malone Dies* (Critchley, 1998: 118). Ricks (1993) suggests that Beckett's view of death is fortifying and comedic rather than pessimistic. Since death

is associated with transformation and escape from suffering, it can be given an affirmative side in literature.

There are also intermittent utopian moments in Beckett. Caws suggests that the aura of despair is offset by occasional 'allusions to gestures calling for a certain strength or signalling a confidence', which 'provide a basis for hope' (1973: 18-19). Kaelin (1981: 137) suggests that Beckett offers transcendence in three temporal ekstases, past, present and future. These are articulated in *How It Is*, which 'embodies the epistemological ideal of the hermeneutical expansion of human experience' (1981: 138). In contrast, according to Dowd, in *How It Is*, the narrator is optimistic only when privileging the life above (Dowd, 2007: 172). The concluding sentences in *Lessness* appear to invoke a return to Paradise, 'a diverse world in which man can act and speak again "as in the blessed days"'. *The Unnamable* includes a story of a galley-man escaping by crawling between the seats (Gibson, 2007: 193). The closing remark, that the Unnamable still does not know and will never know, is according to Gibson a victorious ending, a continual refusal of the masters (Gibson, 2007: 195). Musgrave's reading of Beckett's work as grotesque leads to a conclusion that it is 'concerned with being a mode of discovery, a means of uncovering, a possibly of escape' (2004: 382). It leads to an anarchic politics, tending to enhance the world's heterogeneity and to allow a particular form of grace through permutations and marionette-like determinism (2004: 382).

Dearlove resists reading this as a utopian moment because it would also be a return to a false linguistic refuge, and is accessible only through the imagination (Dearlove, 1978). In *Fizzles*, '[r]ather than exposing his impotence, the narrator creates images of "stillness" or of "ending yet again"' (Dearlove, 1978). Both *Fizzles* and *Enough* suggest a self-sufficient narrator who 'hesitantly and tentatively proffers the reconciliation, calm acceptance, and perhaps even the affirmation' that

'it is enough to have spoken at all' (Dearlove, 1978). *Endgame* 'lights up' with a 'mythopoeic glow' from words referring to a 'mythic past' or 'exotic elsewhere', such as 'Turkish Delight', 'Pomeranian', and 'Kov'. However, these terms are shown to be 'intellectual efforts to mythologize, to gain control of and therefore to survive in a world of meaningless flux' (Lawley, 1979). This utopia reading has also been contested. Trieloff (1984: 43) suggests that utopian readings are misleading, because hopeful statements are always followed by negations. According to Begam (1997: 75), Beckett's characters can find 'intimations of paradise' only by 'seeking without the hope of finding'. The 'third zone' of subjectless being seems to fall randomly from heaven (1997: 182).

Another affirmative reading is provided by the Jungian O'Hara (1982), who suggests that Molloy's is the 'more nearly successful' of the Trilogy quests, on the basis that Molloy journeys towards self-transformation. His old Self is wasting away, which for O'Hara suggests a pressing 'need to construct a new Self'. He suggests that Molloy's unconscious is telling him to 'seek the *anima*'. Figures of the *anima* in the novel include Molloy's mother, Sophie Loy/Lousse and Ruth/Edith. The *anima* shows mercy in spite of how Molloy behaves. Molloy refuses to accept Sophie, distorts her into an 'enclosing but sexless Calypso', and distorts her 'wisdom' into 'cliché-ridden glibness'. Similarly, he keeps Ruth/Edith at a distance. He moves towards a world divested of human others. Molloy thus flees both masculine justice and the feminine 'earth-mother'. 'In place of a thorough-going change of Self Molloy accepts only an endless decay' (O'Hara, 1982). Perhaps Beckett thinks that finding the *anima*, or any similar reconciliation with otherness, is impossible.

Another affirmative position interprets Beckett's work in terms of postcolonial strategies of resistance. Ricks (1993) suggests that Beckett's syntax is derived from Irish 'bull', the resource of a subordinate people to pretend foolishness so as to get away with provocations and sabotage and

Graham (2015) argues that Beckett was influenced by Gaelic. Quigley (2005) takes this postcolonial reading further. He suggests that Beckett is interested in disciplinary power and its reconfigurations (2005: 87-8). He further argues that Beckett's critique of representation links allegorical writing with the state's quest for stability (2005: 89). Beckett suggests that the idea of a real external object is an effect of imperial discourses of power in which language is implicated (2005: 90), and that modernity is linked to nationalism and imperialism (2005: 92). Mahood is a postcolonial subject, analogous to a coloniser who 'has ceased to plague me' but is 'woven into mine', impotent in appearing to be 'immediately accessible' but actually 'trapped behind a transparent wall', lacking external relations and unable to meet its own needs (2005: 94-5). Worm, in contrast, is a nationalist withdrawal, escaping the reified structure of subjectivity only by establishing a more consolidated personal authority (2005: 96-7). Quigley suggests that Beckett posits the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture as a third alternative to Worm and Mahood (2005: 97). There are, however, limits to this reading. In this kind of Scottian postcolonial rhetoric, one expects a split between the (subjectively) real subject who resists, and the feigned subjective performance whose attributes are strictly relative to power. Beckett's characters seem rather to actually identify with their own decomposition within what James Scott (1990) would term the public transcript.

### *Ignorance, Impotence and the Subject*

The question of the subject is relevant to impotence and ignorance in Beckett, because the effects of impotence and ignorance are largely results of subjective transformations undergone by Beckett's characters. Subjects become unable to act or know because of their lack of coherence as subjects. Ackerley describes inner consciousness as a 'lifelong theme' of Beckett's work (Ackerley, 2004: 31). However, the coherence of the subjectivities of Beckett's characters is doubtful.

According to Weller, Beckett attempts the 'disintegration of identity in the name of identity' (Weller, 2006: 79). Beckett's characters often undergo fragmentation along with impotence, but the significance of this process of becoming-impotent is debated by scholars.

Beckett's views on subjectivity are interpreted very differently by different authors. One common observation is that Beckett emphasises subjective over objective realities. Impotence is thus due to the fact that the external world is irrelevant to, inaccessible to, or subordinate to the inner world of the protagonist. For instance, Lukacs (1963: 19-20) famously argued that Beckett viewed people as asocial, in contrast to realism. Similarly, Abbott (2010: 80) suggests that Beckett's 'revelatory' legacy is to enable an experiential knowledge of subjective ignorance or news from one's interior. Theorists of the New Novel suggest that it tends towards 'total subjectivity', leading to 'distorted vision and delirious imaginings' (Trieloff, 1984: 39; c.f. Migernier, 2006: 3). According to Murphy (1994: 15), Beckett's characters are endowed with a drive towards life or being, which the author must accommodate.

Existentialist readings extend this idea of a subjective Beckett by interpreting his work as the discovery of an authentic self. According to Kaelin (1981: 97), all Beckett's narrators are deeply involved in quests for self-identity. The quest of a character such as Moran also 'symbolizes the predicament of the reader' (1981: 87). Molloy and Moran go on journeys to seek their truths (1981: 94-5). Molloy's authentic self, here conceived in Jungian terms as a self which incorporates the unconscious, appears in the gaps between his reflective self and his past, remembered, non-reflective self (1981: 90). The characters are integrated by the role of conscience in defining an authentic world out of an otherwise meaningless chaos (1981: 93). The keys lost during a murder signify the loss of the old self (1981: 96). Subsequently, Molloy discovers a conscience which clashes with his assigned task, whereas Malone is caught between real and authentic deaths (1981:

107). Malone dies in order to experience the holism of life which cannot be reached within life (1981: 88). However, *The Unnamable* is extra-subjective in a sense. Kaelin suggests that the intent of this text is that the tale 'continue to reverberate until we ourselves lose consciousness' (1981: 108). The Unnamable's true essential nature is schizoid, which is agonising because he cannot be understood (1981: 108). He is no longer two worlds but one, held together by a tympanum (1981: 114). Further, *How It Is* 'is the sparsest, densest, most intense expression of the solipsistic predicament... Beckett has devised' (1981: 147). The artist must create, speaking only to himself (1981: 148), as the narrator of this work moves from solitude to solitude via communication (1981: 139). Since the Other determines what one is, the writer and reader must be reunited as one (1981: 107-8).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, O'Hara interprets *Molloy* as a Jungian exploration of the inner self. 'The goal of the psyche in both dreams is a change of personality based on the admission into the conscious ego of previously repressed or unavailable psychic elements' (O'Hara, 1982). O'Hara (1982) suggests that Molloy and Moran are impelled by their unconscious towards self-transformation. Moran's killing of a stranger actually kills his past self, after which he regains some power. The 'ashes' of a dead self are juxtaposed to the 'breath and flight of a self to come'. Moran's outwitting of a farmer shows him to be self-sufficient, after his loss of the Organisation and of religion. According to O'Hara, Moran's abandonment of his social role and family, though socially unconventional, is actually a self-transformation which rejects dominant social standards. Both Moran and Molloy switch to using the third person after their transformations. Molloy, however, fails to self-transform effectively because of his evasions of the *anima*. He is either submerged in her or completely represses her. The narrative of Molloy 'may be read as an attack on the Jungian ideal of an accommodation between the ego and... the *anima*'. It results in an incomplete or inadequate self-transformation.

Other authors have taken similar positions. Cousineau (1979) suggests that Beckett is concerned that the 'true subjectivity', with a 'capacity for authentic action', has been submerged beneath 'false consciousness' and a 'surrogate self' arising from 'alienating culture'. Using Lacan and Ricoeur, he suggests that Beckett's subjects are unable to move from objectification in language to a position of subjectivity. Texts such as *Watt* re-enact the subject's loss of its primordial self in language (Cousineau, 1979). The 1950s critic Bonnefoi suggests that Beckett's subject exhibits an 'extreme exigency of truth' in seeking to grasp itself even when this is impossible (cited in Weller, 2010: 119).

Agreeing with the subjectivist interpretation, but disagreeing with the existentialist conclusion, Adorno (2001: 119) suggests that Beckett rejects the idea of conforming to one's essence along with the ease of representation. *Endgame* is the image of the 'last human', devouring the human condition (2001: 123). This loss of humanity is figured as abstractness taken to the extreme, and a 'shell-like, self-enclosed existence' which 'exhausts itself in self-positing' and cannot obtain universality (2001: 124). Beckett's characters react in an almost mechanical way, reflecting their post-catastrophic trauma (Adorno, 2001: 128). They exhibit a 'bad particularity' of alienated antagonistic self-interest, showing their pre-formation by the situation (2001: 133). This offers little possibility of redemption, since the 'succession of situations' ends with 'obstinate bodies' to which people have 'regressed' (2001: 134).

These readings are contentious in suggesting a continuation of subjectivity. Many other readers suggest that subjectivity breaks down in Beckett's work. For these scholars, impotence is a figuration or effect of the dissolution of subjects. For instance, Bataille (1991) suggests that Beckett advances a vision of the end of subjectivity as such. Abbott (1988: 604) also suggests that

there is a 'doomed effort of self-rendering' in Beckett's work. Byron (2004: 501) suggests that Beckett engages in a 'challenge to the possibility of self-sameness'. Each text questions its own status by incorporating traces of unpublished notes and earlier published works, encoding its own archival and ancestral origins (2004: 501-3). Acklery (2010) suggests that the idea of character became increasingly problematic for Beckett because of the incoherence of the self. For Gibson, 'Beckett's work pervasively dramatises or effects a dissolution of the subject' (Gibson, 2007: 128). *Watt* offers a vision of 'subjectivity as an irrationality or surd, a perverse commitment' (Gibson, 2007: 153). Similarly, Quigley (2005: 89) refers to 'Beckett's unrelenting attack on the conceptual bases of identity of any sort'.

Along the same lines, according to Dearlove (1978), selves in Beckett's work are effects of voices. According to Katz (1999: 95), most of the Trilogy focuses on the absence of the subject, as testified by the subject itself. *Malone Dies* was originally to be titled *L'Absent*. Beckett's aporetic statements can thus be seen as expressions of the difficulty in saying one is absent (1999: 96). For Katz, *The Unnamable* marks a shift, from a focus on absence to a supplemental approach in which presence and absence coexist (1999: 96). Dearlove notes that '[t]he dispersion of identity yields ambiguous pronouns' (Dearlove, 1978). According to Begam, in *Watt*, 'subjectivity has grown so enfeebled, so attenuated, that it has finally collapsed into itself, become its own negation' (1997: 66). Begam (1997: 74) suggests that Beckett saw desire as self-frustrating – one cannot possess an object without knowing it, and knowing it entails its loss. Similarly, self-presence is possible only by negating subject-object dialectics, but this leads to a 'self-negating logic' which cannot found knowledge (Begam, 1997: 80). This impasse, however, leads not to the end of the story but to the creation of characters (Begam, 1997: 80) in a zone of 'radical liminality' (1997: 83). According to Velissariou (1982), Beckett treats the self as a 'tendency away from any particular spatial and temporal context'. Levy suggests that mimesis reflects non-existence as much as reality (Levy,

2003).

Poststructuralist authors have criticised the idea of an authentic self in Beckett. For instance, Nojournian denies the idea of a true self beyond language in Beckett, suggesting that the limits to language are also limits to existence (2004: 392-3). However, she also suggests that self-recognition in Beckett is a move towards silence (2004: 397-8). Silence or death, which resemble immanence, ineffability and a world without language, are the target with which Beckett's narrators seek reunification (2004: 398). However, this outcome is unachievable; silence is the 'promise' the novels make but cannot fulfil (2004: 387). Silence and death motivate language and the search to define and name oneself, but also point to an outside (2004: 387). In relation to Moran and Molloy, Begam suggests that they are defined by *différance*, as others and also as substitutes (1997: 103). *Différance* haunts Beckett's characters before they begin to narrate (1997: 110). There are a 'whole series of Molloy's' occurring via supplementation (1997: 112), a 'doubling of self' (1997: 119). Begam (1997: 97) suggests that novels such as *Watt* are prolonged attempts to name the self, which founder on the self's unnamability. For Derridean scholars, Beckett demonstrates the gap between representation and the subject. 'The self is ever receding beyond the verbal expression of the discrete experiences with which man attempts to establish a secure identity' (Jewinski, 1990: 142).

Deconstructionists frequently suggest that Beckett's subjects are actually intersubjective, and their apparent impotence comes from their constructedness from other selves and voices. For instance, the idea of solitude is criticised by Tresize, who suggests that Beckett's voices are always-already intersubjective, and the internal life of the author is itself multi-voiced (1992: 24). From a deconstructive point of view, as Gibson summarises Tresize, 'The personages in the *Trilogy* are powerless because they cannot escape an ironical knowledge that, as speaking subjects, they articulate themselves only on the basis of a more fundamental intersubjectivity that they cannot

articulate' (Gibson, 2007: 123). Similarly, Katz suggests that the "I" in Beckett is always responding to an implied addressee (Katz, 1999: 107). It is questionable whether subjects need others in Beckett. It is ambiguous whether a voice speaking in an eternal present needs a hearer. However, the Unnamable seems to require an other simply for its otherness (Dearlove, 1978). The narrator of *How It Is* also needs the other to establish an identity or name, but with Pim, 'finds life in the couple yields only false identity' (Dearlove, 1978). Elsewhere, Watt treats the Other, Knott, as real whereas the novel treats the Other as an empty space. This leaves Watt constantly trying to deduce true meanings which are not there (Cousineau, 1979).

On this reading, Beckett's view of the subject is of a type of being which cannot be sure of its existence, senses or abilities. His subject is a 'cracked nomadic substance exiled and dispossessed within its own language' (Migernier, 2006: 1). This 'problematic self' is unable to distinguish itself from the otherness which 'resonates at its very heart' (2006: 19). The subject cannot be returned to identity because of its location within the thought of the outside or without (2006: 18). Hence, a 'different I' starts speaking (2006: 20). The encounter with self is always missed, so the gesture of repetition never reproduces the same (2006: 22). Recollection of origins – the source of an essential self – 'turns into an unending process of self-multiplication and self-estrangement', suggesting the absence of origin (2006: 21). The search for origin simply leads back to non-origin (2006: 26). Characters such as Molloy and Watt are not 'recognizable identities' and cannot be captured in external representations (2006: 31). Watt even has difficulty recalling his name (2006: 32). This is part of a critique of representation which attacks both its objective and subjective poles (2006: 40). Watt embodies the difference he sees in his own becoming-other (2006: 43).

As we have seen above, Beckett's work critiques bases for certainty such as empiricism and

Cartesian reason. This results in a self unsure of its relation to the world. Creativity must prevail over rationality, but the result of this relation is that the self becomes self-alienated and no longer 'one'. As a result, the outer world also becomes subjectively chaotic and doubtful (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976). When the subject is no longer doubtlessly self-identical, its boundaries with the exterior become blurred (Adorno, 2001: 129). Beckett's work is thus taken to critique existentialism, with its assumption of a fixed subject (2001: 130). Daniel Katz (1999) provides a detailed and influential account of this dissolution. There are two ways of effacing the subject in Beckett: by not using the pronoun "I", or by denying that the being who says "I" is really an I (Katz, 1999: 98-9). Aporias also disrupt the possibility of self-recognition (1999: 101). It has been observed that the mind is unique in being subject and object simultaneously (Rabinovitz, 1977). This leads to a situation in which both subjectivity and objectivity can be deconstructed.

One aspect of Beckett's treatment of the subject is resistance to representation. Wolosky suggests that Beckett's characters 'resist, even while inevitably producing, fictional representations of self' (1991: 221). She suggests that his characters show nostalgia for a 'true, originary selfhood' before representation (1991: 221). This claim is contested by other scholars, on the grounds that no pre-linguistic self exists in Beckett's writing (Shaw, 2010: 15). Beckett's characters do not know who they are or were (Tonning, 2009: 118). According to Iser (1974a: 174), it is Beckett's narrators' inability to discover their identity which leads them instead to discover aspects of their reality.

The subjective significance of events in Beckett's work is hotly debated. For instance, Murphy's turn away from social convention has variously been interpreted as a 'turn away from the social world at large to find the sanctuary of the All' (Amiran 1993: 97), a revolt against rationalism (Farrow, 1991: 14), 'a reality which cannot be penetrated by human knowledge' (Kenner 1973: 55) or the interaction of 'an unassimilable hero with characters who are caught up in a standard fiction'

(Iser 1974a: 262). Beginning a new quest or retelling a story requires 'unlocking' the body, 'co-extensive with a return to movement' (Solomon, 1980). Yet the progress of movement in Beckett seems to cause the loss of mobility and especially uprightness.

Although the significance of events is debated, their direction is similar in many works. Murphy, Watt and Molloy all begin as standard subjects, but progress towards subjective dissolution, impotence and ignorance as their subjectivity breaks down. In *Watt*, mirroring is used to undermine assurance of the self (Ramsay, 1983). These novels enact the passage (or regression) *from a Cartesian self to a freed or borderless self*. Ramsay suggests that Watt is a surrogate for Sam, whom he can both disown and appropriate, sharing his knowledge without sharing his traumas. The image, Watt, fools the original, Sam (Ramsay, 1983). Yet it may also be significant that Watt cannot narrate directly. In *Molloy*, the process of self-transformation is interpreted in a similar way by Begam. The garden Molloy enters is a 'nurturing' site where he can shed his alienated subjectivity and reintegrate with the object-world (Begam, 1997: 105). Molloy reports a self-disintegration of what protected him from what he was condemned to be (Begam, 1997: 116). He attempts to survey the inner self from a standpoint in which sight is impossible, figured as hills and hidden valleys (Begam, 1997: 118). The resultant narrator doubles and quadruples into different characters, before admitting its narrative as false (1997: 119).

Other Beckettian characters have different subjective stances. For Dowd (2007: 166-7), Krapp is a kind of Leibnizian God, programming past and present, whereas the narrator of *How It Is* is a post-archival subject. The Unnamable is a 'hypothetical juridical location' (2007: 169). The narrator of *How It Is* faces choices between remaining in the mud or permitting transcendence (2007: 184). According to Begam, Malone tries to 'play in the past', but fails, falling back into self-introspection (Begam, 1997: 127). Fearing a fall into darkness with no other, he writes of playing

with himself (1997: 128). He is torn between a self who is alone and a self who is impelled to create (1997: 130). Both versions are, furthermore, patently unreal (1997: 131). Similarly, Toyama (1983) suggests that Malone seeks, but fails, to lose his given personality so as to find a personality unable to exist in the present world. Instead, he suffers from 'a deterioration similar to Molloy's', being reduced to scattered pieces. This also leads to a process of authorship: Malone creates characters because direct representation must be false (Toyama, 1983). Critchley also suggests that Malone wishes to finish dying, but the others – the powers that be – do not want that (2004: 191). As in Foucault's idea of 'making live or letting die', power in Beckett seeks to hold life in place, to prevent any death which is out-of-place. The narrator of *Texts for Nothing* refers to himself as 'X', a paradigm of humanity defined mainly by his capacity for movement (Fahrenbach and Fletcher, 1976).

Subjective disintegration is particularly widely noted by readers of *The Unnamable*. According to Begam, the narrator, as subject, carries the sphere or circle of meaning on his back (Begam, 1997: 173). Worm seems to be already beyond the pale of humanity, and his story, insofar as there is one, is an attempt by the delegates to reclaim him for humanity, to resubjectivise him (Begam, 1997: 164). He rejects being moulded by figures such as Basil (1997: 168), who attempt to extract him from his nonexistence (1997: 169). Worm sometimes seems able to be resubjectivised by means of Cartesian reason (1997: 165), but all such moves are rapidly superseded (1997: 166). The delegates cannot succeed in subjectivising Worm, but he cannot stop their attempts to do so. At one point it is suggested that, although they can't subjectivise Worm, they can coerce him to limited compliance through punishment (Begam, 1997: 169). Worm might thus be a residue of the modernist or disciplinary society, or perhaps of the welfare state, living in a world which is all settled except for his own exclusion. Gibson suggests that the narrator's standpoint is not a death of the subject but a refusal to be a subject (2007: 188). *The Unnamable*

resists all specific 'logics of appearance', or social perspectives, and is powered by a 'sheer rage against *doxa*' (2007: 188). Its narrator resists having the 'gift of life' imposed on it by the delegates, radically subtracting itself and refusing capture by the ephemeral (2007: 189). For Gibson, the Unnamable seeks to identify with the multiplicity of Being, and resist any particular localisation (2007: 190). The Unnamable is unconsenting man, refusing to be identified with what is taken as man even while using the name (Gibson, 2007: 193; Bersani and Dutoit, 1993: 54).

There is also an implication that, as authorial creations, characters lack freedom. In *Endgame*, according to Adorno, Hamm suggests that Clov only stops acting when he is unable to (Adorno, 2001: 139). Hamm acts as if playing a role he no longer is, suggesting that 'this self is not a self but rather the aping imitation of something non-existent' (2001: 143). He touches the world only indirectly, via Clov (2001: 144). Presence and absence have particular meanings in literature: they can be fictional or fictive, instead of literal (Trieloff, 1984: 41). Tønning (2009: 111) suggests that the essential Self Malone wishes to dissolve into is modelled on the author-figure. In addition, for Byron, Watt 'seems aware of his constructive role in propelling the novel to its uncertain finish' (Byron, 2004: 501), though he is unable to see beyond his position in the text-system (2004: 504). This leads to the conclusion that the notion of 'self-aware composition is at the heart of Beckett's enterprise' (2004: 501). Hence, the limits to Beckett's characters' integrity and power can be interpreted as effects of their status as literary creations.

The view of the subject contained in Beckett's work is thus complex, and has been interpreted in many different ways. Beckett's texts enact either a passage from Cartesian subject to fragmented subject, or else a refusal of incorporation into the world of reason. This echoes closely both the modernist emphasis on the refusal of alienation, and the poststructuralist emphasis on the achievement of a liminal space or a molecular, virtual plane of immanence. However, it seems that

the pre- and post-Fall (non-)subject-position in Beckett would be that intimated by Klein, Lacan and Anzieu, an anxious state ridden with terrifying voices, object-splits, uncertainty and greyness. As a result, when Beckett enacts such a passage, it occurs as a passage into impotence, rather than an ecstatic passage to freedom.

### *Creativity and Authorship*

The impotence of some of Beckett's characters may also be a function of their construction as reflexive literary characters aware of their own fictional status. Dearlove (1982: 3) raises the possibility that Beckett is suggesting the absence of relationships between the artist, his art and external reality. In addition, many of Beckett's characters exercise power (to create) and impotence (to control one's creations) in relation to their own fictional characters.

Beckett's characters also sometimes have the power to create, but are paradoxically unable to tell their creations from reality. For instance, Moran suggests he may have invented Molloy, and Molloy suggests that he has invented A and C (Begam, 1997: 117). Inventions within Beckett's texts sometimes become realities within the text. In *Molloy*, a speculated wife imputed by Moran to observers becomes a remembered wife; in *Watt*, the Lynch family are first deduced and then actually encountered. Bersani and Dutoit (1993: 42) and Gibson (2007: 191) suggest that the Unnamable has the impersonal initiating power of the artist, and exists in the field of *evenimentalite*. In Beckett, self-making and story-making go together (Uhlmann, 1999: 93). Words 'impregnat[e]' and 'fertilize' Beckett's narrators, producing their offspring (2010: 15). In *The Lost Ones*, 'the narrator-as-Creator... only needs to name it as such for it to be' (Guest, 1994). The loss of Malone's pencil and notebook leads to a sequence in which he is threatened with erasure, as literary creation is conflated with life (Nixon, 2009: 23). According to Lawley (1979), *Endgame*

has the author's creative obligation at its heart. It is full of imperfect or unfinished creations.

Beckett's creatures neither affirm nor deny creativity; Hamm, for instance, would like to deny it, but cannot (Lawley, 1979). Lawley suggests that the conclusion of *Endgame* is Hamm's disclaiming of creativity. This expresses a broader situation in which, in Beckett's work, the creative voice constantly breaks down against an unnarratable possibility (Critchley, 1998: 119).

The nature of Beckett's characters as creations renders their freedom and power problematic, contributing to their impotence. Sapo in *Malone Dies* is characterised as a doll or mannequin, in a manner suggestive of Beckett's iconography of authorship (Begam, 1997: 132). Sapo is thus 'not a kindred soul' to Malone but 'a technical convenience', enabling him to tell a story (1997: 132). Begam suggests that Lemuel's mass homicide is a symbol of authorial intervention (1997: 146). A character does not die, but is killed by the author (1997: 147). On the other hand, some characters seem to rebel against authorship, recognising their lack of freedom (Critchley, 2004: 204).

The emphasis on creation seems to increase through Beckett's career. Pilling (2010: 63) suggests that Beckett disliked the architectonics of prose. He feels *Murphy* to be 'dishonest' because of its teleological movement (2010: 68). His later works moved increasingly away from this type of standard narrative structure. Toyama (1983) suggests that *Malone Dies* is creating, whereas *Molloy* was reporting. Creativity is also figured in the intertextual references which dot Beckett's texts. For Fletcher, 'Beckett is unique in his conception of fiction as something which collapses in upon itself from book to book' (1972: 238). On the other hand, Adorno suggests that Beckett shows poetry and philosophy as worn-out, 'dreamlike dross' (2001: 121). Beckett's own creative process may be somewhat tragic. Hayman (2002: 210) suggests that Beckett wrote by 'taking himself back to [his] moment of deepest uncertainty and indecision', marking the trauma of a move during World War 2 with his trope of 'going on' or 'continuing'. Beckett also portrays the completion of texts as a

kind of death, the implication being that textual completion/death threatens the process of going-on (Nixon, 2009: 24). According to Migernier (2006: 18), Beckett replaces the strategy of writing well with the strategy of writing transgressively. For Beckett, 'story-making is a discursive operation that questions its own foundations' (2006: 23). For JanMohamed (2014), Beckett's works are themselves alive, which is why they resist interpretation. They are not literary expositions, but works of art without expository function.

Shaw has proposed an intriguing theory of non-sexual reproduction as the contact-point between impotence and creation in Beckett. For Beckett, 'making can never be isolated from not-making or not being able to make' (Shaw, 2010: 7); the two are in a 'dialectical relationship' (2010: 8). Both creativity and impotence are associated with excremental imagery (2010: 60). The writer usurps the father, or God, as creator of language (2010: 61) – sometimes literally, by actually *being* the father (2010: 62). The author 'is, at once, an unseparated father, mother and child', rendering his authors 'hermaphrodite' (2010: 63). What is unusual in Beckett's view is that thought or language produces an actual bodily self (2010: 11). Physical generation is linked to writing and language, with the narrators of the Trilogy and *How It Is* generating their bodily selves (2010: 13). For instance, Malone gives birth to Macmann, even though his words provide a 'putrid' womb (2010: 62), and the Unnamable is the mother of children conceived by words (2010: 64). Describing the birth of Worm, Beckett suggests that words are all one needs to sprout a head (2010: 65).

This suggests a second, initiatory level of "birth" which Beckett prefers to natural birth. According to Stewart, in Beckett's world, ordinary conception and birth is ethically dubious because life is essentially suffering: hence 'the undesirability of the continuation of suffering through the continuation of human life' (2009: 182). For this reason, Beckett's work is full of sterile creatures and people, which express the hope that suffering can end in the death of the species (2009: 172).

The failure to provide new life is a kind of victory over death (2009: 173). This view is derived from Schopenhauer (2009: 176) and is reflected in an aversion to sexual reproduction in Beckett's work (2009: 180). Once sexual reproduction has been rejected, artistic creation (metaphorised as masturbation) and adoption serve as desirable means of 'going on' (2009: 179). Hence, Malone actually generates new characters, and Hamm speaks of doing so (2009: 179). Such sterile reproduction is favoured in that the suffering it causes is only imagined (2009: 182). According to Begam, *Malone Dies* constantly combined images of death and birth, such as the world parting its labia to let Malone leave (Begam, 1997: 139). Kristeva (1980), interprets *Not I* as a female unable to be a wife, who instead gives birth to an abortion of words. Takahashi (2002: 38) similarly suggests that Beckett operates with a 'womb-tomb fantasy'. Such creative births are also a kind of self-creation. Stories, argues Critchley, are a way to conceal the failure of narrative identity, creating an integrated self (1998: 120).

This process is, however, characteristically unpleasant. Words are *forced* into the characters in a violent process leading to an equally violent conception (Shaw, 2010: 54). Hill suggests that Beckett is left cynical and frustrated by publishers' rejections, and comes too see writing as self-inflicted injury and aggression (1990: 107). Similarly, Kaelin suggests that Beckett's relationship to his characters is sadomasochistic (1981: 145). His creations are marked by impotence as a result.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, therefore, the existing literature suggests the centrality of ignorance and impotence in Beckett's work, but different traditions of scholarship attach importance to different aspects of these phenomena. Both impotence and ignorance function on multiple levels – as the inability to obtain knowledge or power in the conventional sense, as the limitation of particular

conceptions such as realism and Cartesian rationalism, as a proactive attempt to negate present attachments or assumptions, as the failure or impossibility of this attempt, as textual residues of something which cannot be expressed, and as paradoxical forms of power and affirmation. When examining Beckett's texts, it will be necessary to remain alert to all these possible implications of impotence and ignorance, and to draw distinctions between those gestures which succeed in negation or in alternative affirmation, achieving a proactive impotence and ignorance, and those which are impotent in a more direct sense.

In my view, Beckett's text has been deliberately constructed to allow multiple readings, and/or frustrate any possible reading. The lack of 'tellability' renders Beckett's texts radically undecidable. The process of negation, and the corresponding asymptotic increase in impotence and ignorance, are presented relatively directly, rendering these aspects of the work unproblematic. However, Beckett seems to frustrate attempts to determine whether the resultant collapse is simply negative or also empowering or euphoric, whether it is pure loss or a deliberate process, and whether it has one or more metaphorical meanings. However, these are clear groupings of tropes and themes which go together in Beckett. For example, impotence is at once bodily and mental, personal and social; impotence and ignorance go hand-in-hand; and they both entail the collapse of Cartesian, empiricist/scientific, and religious points of knowledge or belief. I believe that Beckett deliberately frustrates interpretation as a performative continuation of the process of producing ignorance within the text: the reader is not able to know from outside of the state of ignorance afflicting the character, but rather, is caught up in the authorial construction of ignorance. The multiplication of readings is at once a (probably intended) consequent of Beckett's indeterminacy, and insufficient to the lack of tellability Beckett is seeking (for whatever reason) to convey.

### Chapter 3: Impotence and Ignorance in *Watt*

This chapter, and those which follow, will examine several of Beckett's novels in terms of their multiple constructions of impotence and ignorance. The first novel selected for this purpose is *Watt*, in which the protagonist suffers a collapse of logical reasoning in the face of an incomprehensible experience. The novel *Watt* is Samuel Beckett's second published novel, and is indicative of his emerging approach, retaining important aspects of realist prose and rationalistic logical construction. In terms of style and genre, *Watt* subverts genre norms to achieve a ruptural effect. The novel plays with characteristics of realism, generally by emphasising the question of whether a realistic account depicts the subjective experience of a character or an objective world. It has also been read as undermining representation because it is 'never simply just there' (Byron, 2004: 495), as the writing process is made apparent, though never to the same degree as Beckett's later works.

*"What does it matter, who he is?" Characters in Watt*

In *Watt*, Beckett suggests that realism depends on the protagonist being able to discern an objective world, and portrays this assumption as problematic given the perceptual difficulties highlighted by philosophy. As a result, he frequently draws attention to the reliance of the novel's account on Watt's and the author's perceptions, and the gap between these perceptions and any possible objective reality (or perhaps between perception and the meaning-systems which can interpret perceptions at any given moment). Examples include:

The compartment was not so empty as Watt had at first supposed. (W 20).

Now the fields flew by, the hedges and the ditches, ghastly in the train's light, or appeared to do so (W 21).

And is it not strange most strange that one says of a thing that it is full, when it is not full at all [i.e. not full to the brim], but not of a thing that it is empty, if it is not empty? (W 80).

The leaves quivered, or gave the impression of doing so (W 213).

This line of deconstruction of realism reaches its peak in the logical deduction that Erskine's room could not literally be described as *always locked*:

Now, Erskine's room was always locked, and the key in Erskine's pocket. Or rather, Erskine's room was never unlocked, nor the key out of Erskine's pocket, longer than two or three seconds at a stretch... For if Erskine's room had been *always* locked, and the key *always* in Erskine's pocket, then Erskine himself, for all his agility, would have been hard set to glide in and out of his room (W 105).

All of these passages undermine the obviousness of realist representation, generally by demonstrating barriers between perceptual experience and objective reality, or between common, 'realistic' language and literal description. This suggests that realistic depiction is actually conventional rather than realistic, reinforcing the Mauthnerian nature of Beckett's treatment of language (see below). Small gaps between 'realistic' experience and objectivism – between the fields flying by and the fact that it is really the train that is moving, for instance (W 21) – throw doubt on whether realism actually portrays a reality, rather than a subjective experience. It is shown that normal experience, not only Watt's, is actually 'unrealistic'. Indeed, Watt is sometimes more literally 'realistic' than the normal realist subject.

Similarly, the nature of Beckettian characters undermines the realistic presentation. Realism seems absurd when applied to the experiences of a subject whose experience of reality is unusual. This is because the rhetorical tricks of realism give to the character's experiences the appearance of objectivity. Yet this is not simply a matter of recognising that 'unrealistic' experiences exist, for once the constructed nature of realism is exposed, it becomes unclear whether normal, 'realistic'

characters can be trusted any more than can Watt. The effect is akin to a Brechtian *verfremdung*, alienating the reader from conventional terminology and assumptions. It is also suggested that Watt seems somehow faintly aware of his textual role (Byron, 2004: 501).

The novel also deploys language-play as a way to denaturalise language. Beckett is said to tear up the 'veil of language' in *Watt*, through irregular syntax (Stewart, 2006: 95; c.f. Beer, 1983). Further, the bilingual play in *Watt* is, according to Beer, the model for the 'acute self-awareness' which marks Beckett's later work (Beer, 1983). The use of French syntax or phrases in English is paralleled by a use of colloquial and standard dialects in Beckett's French works (Beer, 1983). Beer (1983) suggests that Beckett incorporates bilingual references in *Watt*, such as variants on the obscenities *caca* and *putain*, and Anglicisations of French terms ('not having the force', 'in block'). The 'bilingual space' is the source of the 'strange un-English English' in which *Watt* is written. In the manuscript for *Watt*, Beckett plays with the strange phrases emerging from over-literal translations. Beckett writes from a position of being 'poised between languages', at once frightening and liberating.

*Watt* is generally narrated in the third person. Beer (1983) suggests that Beckett's experimentation with different narrative modes in the manuscripts for *Watt* suggest an attempt to escape the 'mannered third-person narrator' he uses in *Murphy*, but also that he had not yet reached the position of the narrators of the trilogy. She suggests, however, that the narrator of *Watt* – sometimes using the plural pronoun "we" – is a composite of the voices in the text. In addition, certain passages pass from a colloquial, realistic style to an extremely formal style, mimicking academic writing. For instance, the passage dealing with the academics is written in a highly formal style, parodying the self-importance of academia. On one occasion, Beckett provides a list of travelling expenses (including 'coloured beads' and 'gratifications') which parodies documentary-

style novels (W 147). According to Hassan, the serious language of characters such as the academics and Arsene 'enhances the farcical and futile qualities of words' (Hassan, 1967: 148). To take an example of formal style, the addenda include a footnote reading as follows:

The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation. (W 215).

This is notable for treating a novel as if it were an academic work, and also for its explicit reference to the writing process. The theme of exhaustion exhibited here is also central to the whole of Beckett's *oeuvre*.

Another ambiguity deployed in *Watt*, which is to recur in all the novels discussed here, and which creates their specific resistance and attractiveness for interpretation, is the lack of tellability. *Watt* is noticeable for the absence of marks of what is known in conversation analysis as 'tellability' – indications of the pragmatic or contextual importance of the story, or why it is worth telling (c.f. Bowles, 2009: 302 on *Endgame*). *Watt* and Sam have a compulsion to speak, but the reason for speaking or listening is unclear. Incampo suggests that Beckett's characters 'simply "are", left to fill their endless existence with habitual actions and memories of past moments' so as to ward off fear of the void (Incampo, 2012: 7). In *Watt*, characters use stories to ignore reality, while the novel uses them to reveal that reality is imaginary (Cousineau, 1979). The following passage is an example of the subversion of tellability:

What does it matter who he is? said Mrs Nixon [...]

Or what he does... Or how he lives. Or where he comes from. Or where he is going to. Or what he looks like. What can it possibly matter, to us?

I ask myself the same question, said Mr Hackett. (W 17).

This passage explicitly questions whether the story has tellability, much as the later experiences in Knott's house question whether there is a reality to which they refer. The absence of tellability can

be interpreted in a number of ways. It may suggest that there is no ultimate meaning, that the circular drive or impulse to narrate is ultimately autonomous, that Watt's story in particular is absurd, or serve to expose the presence and role of tellability in narrative more broadly. Perhaps the absence of tellability is part of the purpose of the story: it suggests that life is ultimately meaningless, and/or that narratives are simply expressions of forms of life which are non-transferable. Watt as whatever-singularity does not matter as a particularity. Alternatively, perhaps the story has an existential or mystical meaning which is *shown*, rather than a value of tellability, so that its relevance to the reader only becomes apparent through what is beyond it, but cannot be said. It is in the cases where tellability is weakest that the proliferation of interpretations becomes most fruitful, and the imposition of a particular decisive reading becomes unhelpful.

The status of the narrative is further problematised by the account of its origins. We are told that the entire novel is told as remembered by Sam, from an account by Watt. (It has been suggested that Watt is actually an alter ego or mirror image of Sam [Ramsay, 1983]). As a result, a number of Watt's experiences 'will be recorded in this place, without addition, or subtraction' (W 59). The difficulty of such recording is great, because the construction of meaning always entails additions and subtractions from sense-experience. Beckett further adds that Watt's account is problematised by the passage of time, by state-dependent memory, Watt's aphasia and other problems (W 62), by Watt's difficulty in making sense of what happened to him, by the possibility that he may have added or omitted details (W 107), by the loss of details to 'imperfect hearing' or 'the rushing wind' (W 133), or by the difficulties the author has in accurately reporting what is told (W 108). The suggestion that Watt hallucinates throws further doubt on his account, as does the speculation that Watt, Knott and Erskine are all insane (W 104). It is also suggested that, even when Sam understands well, he only understands 'fully one half of what won its way past my tympan' (W 144), in other words, that normal thought processes themselves edit out part of the

content. This series of imperfections is perhaps intended to distance the work from the omnipotent narrator of realist fiction, and also parodies Cartesian discussions of grounds for doubt.

Hence, the entire account is of dubious empirical accuracy within the fictive reality it recounts. On one occasion, Beckett even informs the reader in a footnote that the figures given are 'incorrect', and the calculations therefore 'doubly erroneous' (W 87), a subversion of the standard use of footnotes to further corroborate claims. On another occasion, Beckett suggests that Watt's interpretation of Erskine's picture as temporary was the only one of his suppositions to be confirmed, or for that matter 'informed' (presumably meaning falsified) (W 112). This is paradoxical, since his belief in the Lynches and the dog, the presence of the bell, and so on, also seem to be confirmed. Furthermore, Watt necessarily engages in a constant process of interpretation so as to turn a 'nothing' into a 'something' (W 64), leading the narrator to speculate that several incidents may really be the same incident interpreted differently (W 65). Incidents in Watt's house may begin as unintelligible changes in sensory experience, or begin as meanings and change over time. For this reason, Watt's account is unreliable:

Watt spoke of [the piano incident] as involving, in the original, the Galls and the piano, but he was obliged to do this, even if the original had nothing to do with the Galls and the piano. (W 65).

The narrator suggests that the accounts Watt provides are probably a mixture of original and later meanings (W 66).

Furthermore, the entire novel draws attention to the process of construction of meaning. Because Knott's house is not a 'given', Watt needs to construct it into a communicable order (Begam, 1997: 86; Migernier, 2006: 42). This creates a paradox in the novel. By definition, Watt cannot recount the original sense-experience unless it has a meaning attached (though the fact that

such an experience might exist is communicated repeatedly). He can only recount the post-interpretation meaning that he eventually arrives at, and only in those cases where such a meaning has been constructed (mostly on the ground floor). Yet this leaves Watt unable to convey the most important aspects of the process he underwent in Knott's house, which involve the sense-impressions themselves, the shifting and reflexive formation of retrospective meanings, and the subset of experiences which remain aloof from interpretation. The reader can receive only a pale intimation of the novel's referent, through the distortion-effects of the absent Real on those incidents which *can* be recuperated for the system of meaning.

Despite ambiguities, Beckett insists that the entire account comes from Watt:

And if Watt had not known this... then I should never have known it either, nor the world.

For all that I know on the subject of Mr Knott, and of all that touched Mr Knott, and on the subject of Watt, and of all that touched Watt, came from Watt, and from Watt alone. (W 107).

This, in turn, renders the narrator unreliable:

And so always, when the impossibility of my knowing, of Watt's having known, what I know, what Watt knew, seems absolute, and insurmountable, and undeniable, and uncoercible, it could be shown that I know, because Watt told me, and that Watt knew, because someone told him, or because he found out for himself. (W 109).

This assertion seems to be a way of playing a certain game with the reader, in which the possibility of Watt's knowing what is recounted is used as a kind of bait. Immediately before this statement, it is shown to be true in the case of Watt's having knowledge of the location of Erskine's key (W 108). Yet immediately after, it is shown to be untrue in the case of Watt's entry to the room, which is described as occurring simply by a '[r]use' (W109). There are also a number of recurring instances in which the reader is told things Watt could not have known, for example:

Mr Spiro now replied to these questions... quoting from Saint Bonaventura, Peter Lombard,

Alexander of Hales [etc.]... But Watt heard nothing of this (W 22).

And as Watt's face wore its habitual expression... Mr Graves's hopes ran high, of hearing something to his advantage. Unfortunately Watt was thinking of birds at the time (W 124).

In another place, he said, from another place, he might have... told the true identity of Mr Nackybal (his real name was Tisler and he lived in a room on the canal)... But on Mr Knott's premises, from Mr Knott's premises, this was not possible, for Arthur. (W 171-2)

Other instances include the entire conversation between Mr Hackett and the Nixons, the opinion of Lady McCann (W 24), the 'inferior' quality of Micks' cigar (W 187), the ass or goat that Watt did not see (W 193), and Case's reasoning before allowing Watt to stay, which 'Mr Case had the delicacy to keep to himself' (W 200). On the other hand, we are reminded of the point-of-view aspect of the story when what Case is reading is elided (W 197). In general, Beckett seems to play a kind of *fort-da* game with the point-of-view aspect of the narrative. This is perhaps a way of undermining the figure of the omnipotent author, or of exposing the realist norm of oscillating between characters' experiences and objective facts they could not have known. Since it is established that Watt hallucinates, and that these hallucinations sometimes provide information relevant to the story, such as the capacity of the waiting-room (W 202), it is also possible that all this knowledge comes to Watt from hallucinations. This might even be a way of suggesting that a point-of-view narrative *can only* make sense if the character "hallucinates" a certain amount of extraneous detail, an observation which has epistemological implications, suggesting that schemas or perspectives are akin to hallucinations. Such queries also seem to throw further doubt upon the reliability and tellability of the entire account, which exists in a limbo between approximate estimated truth, arbitrarily constructed meaning, and falsehood.

The narrator's standpoint is also ambiguous. He switches between first and third person when talking about himself, referring to himself as 'Sam' as well as 'I' (W 130-1). It has been

widely suggested that both Sam and Watt were in a mental asylum (e.g. Begam, 1997: 40-1; Rabinowitz, 1989). This is presumably based on the reference to the others in the halls (W 130). However, I would suggest an alternative interpretation, based on the following passage:

It was about this time that Watt was transferred to another pavilion, leaving me behind in the old pavilion. (W 129).

This suggests that Sam is the next servant following Watt, moving onto the ground floor as Watt moves up to the first. This is paradoxical, because the narrator claims to know nothing of Knott's house, besides what Watt told him. The paradox can potentially be resolved, because the house and Knott are established in the novel to be unknowable. Perhaps Sam is unable to convey his own experience of the house to a rational reader, because he realised from the start that they are unknowable. Perhaps, therefore, he succeeded where Watt failed, or rather, he 'failed better': he came to accept, in peace, the meaninglessness of the experience of the house (and of the human condition), whereas Watt could not. For this very reason, he is unable to narrate, except as a secondary conveyer of Watt's increasingly incomprehensible, yet nevertheless persistent, attempts to represent his experience. The outcome of this situation is that all that he *knows* (paying careful attention to the terminology) does, indeed, come from Watt, even though he has spent time in the house. He has encountered Knott, Watt, and the house, but he does not attempt to know them. This also raises the possibility that the entire novel is Sam's rendition, to an incoming 'servant', of the nature of the house, akin to Arsene's speech to Watt, and that the reader, by implication, is being induced to take the standpoint of the incoming servant, taking in relation to the world the stance which the servants take towards Knott. Sam is a narrator akin to Arsene speaking to Watt, inducting the reader into the mysteries of Knott's house, or the zone of becoming it symbolises. However, as with other readings, this interpretation requires the reader to add marks of tellability which are not immediately present; it is thus not necessarily "better" than the asylum interpretation, or other possible interpretations.

The characters in *Watt* can be broadly divided into two types. Most of the characters who appear in *Watt* are in the 'not-quite-there' zone associated with Beckett's work. This seems to include not only Watt and Knott, but Hackett, I/Sam, Graves, Arsene and Erskine. I would suggest that this zone, previously termed the 'third zone' in *Murphy*, is equivalent to Agamben's concept of 'whatever-singularity', and I would characterise these characters as Beckettian, in that they express a self-writing process peculiar to Beckett. On the other hand, certain characters seem to stand for a different kind of automaton-like person, who appears here as a stereotype of the bourgeois or of polite society. These characters can be termed non-Beckettian. Examples include the Nixons, Nackybal's colleagues, Mr Spiro, Lady McCann, Mr Case, Mr Gorman and the others at the station. These characters in some ways contradict the Beckettian characters, attacking, frustrating or refusing to comprehend them; Begam terms Nixon Watt's self-negation (1997: 95). The inner thought-processes and perspectives of these characters are rarely explained in much detail, though their outer 'behaviour', so to speak, is periodically displayed and ridiculed.

Non-Beckettian characters are shown in two main situations. Mainly, they are shown in interaction with Beckettian characters. Their reactions to Beckettian characters are overwhelmingly negative, expressing hostility or pity. Nixon's unwillingness to 'let the sun go down on the least hint of an estrangement' (W 17) suggests that non-Beckettian subjects are concerned above all with social accord and convention, the avoidance of strangeness and strife. Their main narrative function seems to be to express an outsider's view on Beckettian characters. Lady McCann throws a rock at Watt, apparently because he seems strange (W25). Similarly, Watt seems to drive Mr Gorman into an uncharacteristic anger (W 207-8), so that, for instance, Gorman spat uncharacteristically into a bucket (W 208). It seems that non-Beckettian characters cannot bear the presence of Beckettian characters, and the rupture they announce in the symbolic order. Gorman is prepared to tip dirty

water from the muck bucket over Watt, exhibiting considerable cruelty, yet wants to avoid 'soiling the floor unnecessarily' (W 209), a commentary on non-Beckettian characters' obsession with order at the expense of humanity. Similarly, he later tells Case not to help Watt up as he may 'spoil' his 'nice book' (W 210). Other examples include the passing lady and gentlemen who pity 'Hunchy' Hackett, while labelling him in this way (W 2009: 5), and the judgemental commentary on Grehan's sentence (W 6). The characters' hostility seems to be returned by Sam and Watt:

No truck with the other scum, cluttering up the passageways, the hallways, grossly loud, blatantly morose, and playing at ball (W 130).

These, perhaps, are the people who don't know, who are left behind by the break which Sam and Watt have accomplished, and who are still within the empty world of producing meaning through social rituals. The other way they appear is in situations of absurdity, in which they are arranged in series much like Beckett's objects, as in the series of Lynches, the academics, and the different station visitors.

*"I would pursue him, if I were sure it was he": Impotence in Watt*

In distinction from the non-Beckettian characters, most of the Beckettian characters are afflicted by clear instances of impotence and incapacity. Hackett is a hunchback, pitied by others:

You must have often heard me speak of Hackett. Hunchy Hackett. On the seat.

[...]

Poor fellow, she said. (W 5).

The 'poor fellow' aimed at Hackett's disability is echoed by the 'poor little Larry' directed at a newborn child (W 10), suggesting that birth is itself a kind of disablement. Hackett's hump also raises interesting possibilities of inter-character continuities, as a porter addresses Watt:

The devil raise a hump on you, said the porter. (W 18).

This raises the intriguing possibility that Mr Hackett is a future version of Watt. (Their simultaneous existence is not necessarily a barrier to this on a Bergsonian or cyclical view of time, if selves are viewed as interchangeable, or if Hackett is equivalent at an earlier point in the series of servants.)

Some of the clearest cases of impotence arise in Watt himself. Watt has been variously interpreted as melancholic/depressive (Gibson, 2007: 170; Harvey, 1970: 390), as a 'schizoid' character unable to adapt to the representation of reality through language (Keatinge, 2008: 93), as subjectivity collapsing into its own negation (Begam, 1997: 66), and as denying anything outside his mind (Hoffman, 1962: 117). Watt, when he first appears, is utterly abject:

they heard the voice of the conductor, raised in anger. Then [the tram] moved on, disclosing, on the pavement, motionless, a solitary figure (W 11).

Like a sewer-pipe, said Mrs Nixon. Where are his arms? (W 13)

In addition to such physical abjection, Watt also lacks a clear identity. He consistently evades being seen, remembered, or attributed specific details. This is noticeable, for instance, in the remarks of Nixon:

I never heard you mention him, said Mrs Nixon.

Strange, said Mr Nixon. (W 12-13)

I seem to have known him all my life, but there must have been a period when I did not.

How is that, said Mr Hackett.

He is considerably younger than I, said Mr Nixon.

And you never mention him, said Mr Hackett. (W 13).

This renders Watt as a kind of paradox:

Here is a man you seem to have known all your life, said Mr Hackett, who owes you five shillings for the past seven years, and all you can tell me is that he has a huge red nose and

no fixed address. (W 16)

Hence, Watt is anomalous, in that he seems intimately familiar to Nixon, yet elided in normal conversation and lacking in attributes Nixon can specify. This may reflect the zone of existence which Watt occupies. He is communicable to Nixon, but not on the levels of ordinary conversation or empirical knowledge. Watt represents a zone of affect which is strangely familiar to Nixon, and which has no known beginning, rather as if Watt is in the same situation relative to Nixon as the narrator of *The Unnamable* is to the delegates or creations (see below, Chapter 6). This may suggest an association of Watt with repressed aspects of the self, with early childhood or pre-birth experience, or the continuity of the various characters as different aspects of a single field of becoming and/or a single authorial project. The last of these suggestions is further reinforced by the following excerpt:

The curious thing is... that when I see him, or think of him, I think of you, and that when I see you, or think of you, I think of him. I have no idea why this is so. (W 13)

This suggests that Watt is identical to Hackett, that the two are different manifestations of the same zone of affect, or perhaps that Hackett is the creator of Watt. Further instances can be advanced of Watt's indeterminability:

Personally, I would pursue him, said Mr Spiro, if I were sure it was he (W 23).

the moon pouring its now whitening rays upon him, as though he were not there (W 26).

Tetty was not sure whether it [i.e. Watt] was a man or a woman. Mr Hackett was not sure that it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin (W 11)

Hence, Watt's very presence in the world is problematic. Since he does not exist in the symbolic order, the order of things, he lacks identity and attributes. This suggests that impotence in Beckett's works is a way of figuring absence from the normal world of symbolic order.

This absence from symbolic order is further signified in terms of Watt's affinities with birth

and death:

... feeling weak, he left the crown of the road and sat down on the path... He knew, as he did so, that it would not be easy to get up again, as he must (W 26).

Watt adopts a foetal position, a position which makes the parts of the body 'very friendly... towards one another' (2009: 26), and which may signify pre-birth subjectivity. In this position, he is torn between his 'feeling of weakness' and an imperative belief that he 'must' go on (W 26). This duality of impotence and compulsion is characteristic of many of Beckett's characters. The birth theme is followed elsewhere, including addenda about having 'never been properly born' (W 217), dirtiness associated with the possibility of seeds germinating (W 200), the unborn Lynches 'spared' life (W 88), and Tetty's pregnancy (W 10). Impotence is thus associated with an absence of full mature life, associated with the occupation of the zone of impersonal becoming which exists before infantile self-formation and after death (with birth and death figured as equivalent).

Another mark of Watt's impotence is his inability to heal:

why then a wound had perhaps been opened, never again to close, never, never again to close, for Watt had a poor healing skin, and perhaps his blood was deficient in ? .

And he still carried, after five or six years... a running sore of traumatic origin. (W 25).

Here as elsewhere, Watt's physical impotence seems to be an allegory for psychological trauma, which is consistently slower to heal. In this instance, Watt narrowly avoids being wounded by Lady McCann, because her rock (and implied abjection) misses – perhaps because he would need to be inside the symbolic order to be successfully interpellated by her. Watt, in turn, ignores her:

Watt, faithful to his rule, took no more notice of this aggression than if it had been an accident. (W 25).

This is a rational response from someone who does not believe in free will, or in the separability of human subjects. It is only if the other is seen as a hostile agent, on the far side of an interpersonal

boundary, that aggression is distinct from accident. This attitude apparently does not protect Watt from persistent wounds 'of traumatic origin' (and further marked as incommunicable by an elision), but may explain why McCann's stone misses.

Watt is also unable to smile expressively. He is able to imitate smiling, and his smile is 'closer to a smile than a sneer', but leaves 'something wanting' for the observer, including doubt about the expressed emotion (W 19). Perhaps Watt's smile is always like the infamous pot (see below, p. 103), with a split between its singularity and its conceptualisation (a doubly disturbing trait for an *expressive* act, suggesting that the self can only express itself in conventional terms). It also raises the question of whether Watt is unable to experience the emotion of happiness, and hence has to 'fake' his smile. Elsewhere, it is suggested that bodily weakness is the reason for Watt's expressive problems:

[Watt] would have smiled, if he had not been too weak to smile, or laughed outright, if he had been strong enough to laugh outright. (W 192).

The two passages, read together, again suggest a textual affinity between physical impotence (the inability to laugh or smile) and absence from the symbolic order (inability to smile in a conventional way). Watt's smile is further anomalous in that it is only usually seen once (W 19) and yet usually comes in pairs (W 21). A further complication arises around an association of smiling with upset:

And it will be a long time before Watt smiles again, unless something very unexpected turns up, to upset him. (W 21).

This is a strange statement, perhaps introduced to disrupt conventional expectations (that smiles signify happiness). It raises a number of questions. Does Watt smile when he is upset, instead of when he is happy? Is he unable to distinguish one intense emotion from another? Or does he receive a paradoxical *jouissance* from melancholic sadness?

If Watt's smile is mystifying, his walk is even stranger. Beckett discusses it at length:

Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south (W 23).

Lady McCann... thought she had never, on the public road, seen motions so extraordinary (W 24).

Watt's walk is again discussed later (W 195). These passages form the basis for Naumann's 'Beckett Walk' (Chiong, 1998), a related artwork. This style of walking seems to lead Watt into further pain:

Ann often he struck against the trunks of trees, and in the tangles of underwood caught his foot, and fell to the ground, on his back, on his face, on his side, or into a great clump of brambles, or of briars, or of thistles, or of nettles. (W 185).

Despite already being impotent, Watt is portrayed as becoming increasingly impotent through his experience at Watt's house: 'Thing quiet, dim. Ears, eyes, failing now also' (W 140); and 'nilb, mun, mud' (W 144) – dumb, numb, blind. The claim of worsening is rather anomalous here. The porter had already described Watt before his trip to Knott's house as '[m]ute on top of blind' (W 18), apparently because he was unresponsive. Perhaps Watt is only able to embrace his pre-existing impotence (allegorically perhaps, the impotence of human existence) after the experience with Knott, but the fact of this condition precedes this experience, so that what changes in Knott's house is growing awareness of impotence, rather than increasing impotence. On the other hand, increased impotence may here again be figurative, suggesting a growing gap between Watt and social normality.

Impotence is also associated with the absence of regularity in *Watt*. Passing water regularly is described as '[t]he last regular link with the screen' (W 201). The loss of regularity might be associated with death here, since it amounts to a loss of specifiable, repeated identity into a field of

pure difference. On the other hand, maintaining balance is 'the conformism of youth confirmed' (W 202), as if the absence of impotence is a failure to escape from social habit. This makes sense if regularity is associated with habit, and hence with social conformity.

The condition of impotence is not, however, limited to Watt and Hackett. It is spread across many of the characters of the novel. The station newsagent suffers 'unremitting mental, moral and perhaps even physical pain' (W19). He limps, and moves in 'aborted genuflexions' (W 19). Gall senior is blind (W 57). The Lynches have a list of disabilities and illnesses, one with no legs, another a 'hunchbacked inebriate', another apparently bipolar (affected by elation and depression), one with a 'painful congenital disorder of an unmentionable kind', another with haemophilia – which affects women 'in this work' (though not in reality), and another with a condition marked only as “?” (W 85-6). After speaking to Watt, Sam's hearing also begins to fail, though unspecified mental faculties marked by question-marks remain vigorous (W 145). Watt sees paintings of a horse which 'seemed hardly able to stand', and 'flies, of skeleton thinness' (W 205). Case's signals somehow manage to be against two trains arriving from opposite directions (W 211). The arriving train discharges a bicycle for a Miss Walker (W 213), probably a pun (a walker does not need a bicycle, but a “mis-walker” might – Molloy for example). The committee of academics is unable to look at itself 'for all its twisting and turning' (W 153), because of the improbability of the same members looking at each other simultaneously. This arguably refers to the idea in Mauthner that one cannot depict oneself in language, because the looker and looked cannot coincide. The problem is ultimately solved, however, by coordinated sequential looking (W 154). The generalisation of impotence across virtually the entire cast of characters can be read several ways. It may reflect a general human reality as seen by Watt, a basic continuity between different characters as textual creations, or a subversion of the usual convention of focusing on 'unmarked', physically and mentally able characters.

The case of Arsene should also be noted, because it adds further subtleties to Beckett's account of impotence. Arsene is bothered by boils, buttons, but above all his head:

I am in no fit state for the time being to trouble my head, which begins to feel as though it were falling off, than which... for the intellectual chap, Haw! Like me few sensations can be more painful (W 41).

This is important for several reasons. First, Arsene here conflates the physical head with the metaphorical, thinking head. The passage is thus a grotesque reduction of the intellectual to the bodily. Secondly, the head's 'falling off' may refer to the separation of rational thought (as meaning-production) from the reality of becoming (as immediate sense-experience), or conversely, the negation of the outer world in the pursuit of the third zone. Thirdly, the head's 'falling off' may refer to the loss of meaning which Arsene, and Watt, undergo. This passage reinforces the wider implication that in *Watt*, physical impotence stands for mental incapacity, which in turn stands for the rejection or inadequacy of reason in a chaotic world.

*“But what do I know? Nothing” : Ignorance in Watt*

Ignorance is central to the narrative of *Watt*, in part because Watt is something of a rationalist subject (in spite of his visible abnormality). Another character says of Watt:

he is a most truthful man, really incapable, I believe, of telling an untruth. (W 12).

Whether this claim is reliable or not, it says much about Watt's epistemological stance. Watt is committed to knowledge, and is unconcerned about social artifice. (Given what we later learn of Watt's reality, it seems implausible that he always tells the truth, as he arrives only at contingent interpretations of events; perhaps 'unable to tell an untruth' amounts to 'unable to arrive at a fixed interpretation', since every interpretation is fictive). Watt is sometimes able to become content with

his ignorance, as in the following instance:

Indeed it is a wonder to him, and will remain so, how having found the neighbourhood he found the gate, and how having found the gate he found the door, and how having found the door he passed beyond it. No matter, he was content. (W 33).

There is no rational process whereby one finds Knott's house, nor is it possible to remember the process in empirical terms. That Watt is nonetheless 'content' is significant, given the lengths to which he elsewhere goes to explain anomalies. In Arsene's observations:

And he knows he is the right man, at last. In another place he would be the wrong man still, and for another man, yes, for another man it would be the wrong place again. (W 33).

Watt knows *intuitively* that he is the right man, just as he later knows intuitively that he must leave. Knott's house provides intimations of a type of knowledge which, ungrounded in reason and empirical facts, is more psychologically reassuring and more certain. A little further on, it is suggested that he acts in comfort – taking off his hat and coat – 'all pure and open to the long joys of being himself' (W 33). This suggests that Watt has perhaps entered a zone of pure expressive being, similar to Murphy's third zone. Each of the servants, according to Arsene, enters this zone:

he comes to understand that he is working not merely for Mr Knott... but also, and indeed chiefly, for himself, that he may abide, as he is, where he is, and that where he is may abide about him, as it is. (W 34).

Beckett here suggests that Arsene resides in a zone of pure being or becoming, both in himself and in his surroundings. What does Watt need to subtract to achieve such a situation of pure becoming? The main subtraction seems to be of the outer world, and of a socialised conception of meaning. More deeply, perhaps, Watt needs to abandon the pursuit of meaning as such.

Knott's house, as a zone of immanence, is also a zone outside representational knowledge, associated in Beckett's text with ignorance. For instance, Arsene suggests that someone leaving

Knott's house has 'learnt nothing' (W 34). This is open to two possible readings. On the one hand, it could be a simple negation: the process of being in Knott's house does not actually deliver the extra-empirical knowledge it promises. On the other, it may have a paradoxical meaning: that what is obtained in Knott's house is not knowledge *stricto sensu* at all, but a kind of awareness of what was already the case, which perhaps one already knew, and which does not entail learning since it cannot be known consciously, but only recognised existentially:

But what do I know of Mr Knott? Nothing. And what to me may seem most unlike him, and what to me may seem most like him, may in reality be most like him, most unlike him, for all I can tell. (W 101).

Over the course of the novel, Watt gradually becomes more content with the insufficiency of all systems of knowledge in relation to Knott and Knott's house, though on leaving, he falls back into his rationalistic habits. This process is founded on an epistemological change, a becoming-ignorant, which is central to Beckett's treatment of ignorance in this work.

The process of becoming-ignorant, or of recognising one's ignorance, is a process of becoming increasingly distant from representational language. This is discussed at several points. To begin with, in a much-discussed example, Arsene recounts a changed perception:

It was a slip like that I felt, that Tuesday afternoon, millions of little things moving all together out of their old place, into a new one nearby, and furtively, as though it were forbidden. (W 35).

This transformation also happens to Watt, stretching his 'personal system' of meaning:

For my... personal system was so distended at the period of which I speak that... [e]verything that happened happened inside it, and at the same time everything that happened happened outside it' (W 35).

This change altered the apparent significance of everyday objects and events:

The sun on the wall, since I was looking at the sun on the wall at the time, underwent an instantaneous and I venture to say radical change of appearance. (W 35).

At the same time my tobacco-pipe... ceased so completely from the solace to which I was inured, that I took it out of my mouth to make sure it was not a thermometer, or an epileptic's dental wedge (W 36).

How the things are experienced or perceived is changed by awareness of the constructedness of meaning. Objects, as experienced, are experienced as at once outside (as zone of becoming) and inside (as meaningful only through a subjective conceptual system). This leads to an experience of estrangement between senses and words. Arsene then suggests that what happened to him happens to everyone 'in our situation' (servants of Knott, or perhaps humans); that most will not admit that it has happened; and that Watt might not repeat Arsene's revelation, or perhaps leave it 'undecided' (W 37). Arsene also suggests:

I think I have said enough to light that fire in your mind that shall never be snuffed, or only with the utmost difficulty, just as Vincent did for me, and Walter for Erskine, and as you perhaps will do for another, though that is not certain, to judge by the look of you. (W 52).

This passage has meanings on a number of levels. On the most literal level, Watt does, indeed, fail to prepare his successor Micks when he leaves. On a second level, he lights the fire for another by passing on his story to Sam (the narrator). On a more allegorical level, Arsene is perhaps speaking of what Beckett is seeking to do for the reader: to open their eyes to the contingency of meaning, the underlying reality of becoming, and the primacy of drive over desire. If Arsene helps Watt to think 'off the ladder', so Beckett uses Watt as an instrument to encourage such thinking by the reader, with the entire work functioning like a sideways *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist's experience provides a course of learning for the reader. Beckett later reinforces this impression when he suggests that what Watt and the narrator ('his mouthpiece') cannot understand may nevertheless shed light for the reader (W 57).

The relationship between knowledge and reality is also deconstructed in Arsene's story about Mr Ash. Mr Ash, whom Arsene met on Westminster Bridge, when asked the time, strips off successive layers of clothing only to give the wrong time (W 37). The implication here is that there is no truth underneath the levels of artifice, but only another falsehood. Arsene adds:

This in my opinion is the type of all information whatsoever (W 37).

Hence, for Arsene, all information is simply an underlying falsity revealed beneath other layers of falsity.

Arsene's discussion also includes the much-discussed 'ladder' incident:

What has changed was existence off the ladder. Do not come down the ladder, Ifor, I haf taken it away. This... is the reversed metamorphosis. The Laurel into Daphne. (W 36).

In the secondary literature, the reference to falling off a ladder is taken to be a reference to the work of Fritz Mauthner (Skerl, 1974; Ben-Zvi, 1980). Mauthner's view of language as conventional rather than realistic appears to have had considerable influence on *Watt*, as has been argued by Skerl (1974: 474). Among the explicitly Mauthnerian views found in *Watt* are the view that the word is not the thing (1974: 478), that 'the reality-problem is a language-problem' (1974: 479), that statements lack information about external reality (1974: 479), and that language cannot be applied to an inner world (1974: 481). In the secondary literature, the ladder is seen as an escape from various aspects of conventional thought, sometimes with mystical significance (e.g. Begam, 1997: 82), sometimes without (e.g. Ackerley, 2004: 37-8). It also coexists with another, similar incident (displaced among the characters) which associates impotence and ignorance particularly clearly:

It was there I fell off the ladder, said Mr Hackett.

What age were you then? said Tetty.

One, said Mr Hackett.

[...]

You were all alone, said Tetty.

There was the goat, I am told, said Mr Hackett. (W 10-11).

Assuming the 'fall from the ladder' retains its wider meaning, this passage suggests that Hackett's physical disability is a metaphor for existential dislocation. He is observed by a goat. Goats recur later in the novel, with one observing, but unseen by, Watt (W 193). Ackerley notes that the goat has biblical implications, suggesting the beings abandoned by the Good Shepherd (Ackerley, 2005: 36); this is reinforced by Satanic goat-imagery and the 'scapegoat'. The goat perhaps stands here for bare life, as the zone to which whatever-singularity is assigned by the operation of sovereignty. On the one hand, Hackett is alone because the fall from the ladder is a rupture with social meaning. On the other hand, he enters through the fall into a zone of continuity between different subject-positions, shared by all whatever-singularities, such as the goat. It is here suggested that Hackett (Beckett?) does not undergo a prolonged unlearning of normal reality, as Watt must; rather, he is thrust into the 'inner world' early in life, before he can escape the pre-Oedipal condition. Goff blames Hackett's mother for leaving him unattended, which might indicate that Beckett blamed his mother for his psychological problems, or alternatively, that non-Beckettian subjects like Goff are unable to understand the fall from the ladder except as a violation of the order of place. Hackett's response that she was either at the pub or the chapel implicitly rebuts this implication of abnormal neglect, placing blame squarely on the established order, while also associating the most profane and sacred locations within it.

Arsene's ignorance is repeated by Watt. The plasticity of interpretation is a cause or effect of ignorance for characters such as Watt. Events in Knott's house do not end as they unfold, but continue to unfold within Watt's head (W 59). This is because they are not habitual occurrences, reducible to existing categories of meaning, and require ongoing mental processing so as to be rendered intelligible. Events thus have a 'purely plastic content' (W 60), and gradually lose their

relationship to meaning, 'even the most literal', in the process of lights, sounds, impacts and rhythm (W 60).

This fragility of the outer meaning had a bad effect on Watt, for it caused him to seek for another, for some meaning of what had passed, in the image of how it had passed. (W 60). Watt considered that he was successful, in this enterprise, when he could evolve, from the meticulous phantoms that beset him, a hypothesis proper to disperse them... For to explain had always been to exorcise, for Watt (W 64).

Throughout his stay on the bottom floor, Watt is caught up in this process of constructing meanings from experiences resistant to meaning. (He seems to become reconciled to ignorance once on the first floor). Watt is able to speak of his experiences on the ground floor only because they came to mean 'something' instead of 'nothing' (W 64). Most often, they come to mean something only via exhaustive logical deductions, often passing by way of long lists of permutations. This is discussed by Beckett in terms of a subjective need for a stable symbolic order or meaning, which is not to be confused with a quest for ultimate, ontological truth:

So Watt did not know what had happened. He did not care, to do him justice, what had happened. But he felt the need to think that such and such a thing had happened then (W 61).

This is not so much a matter of accessing a 'real' reality which objectively exists, as a matter of reconstructing personal meaning so as to be able to process incoming events:

[Watt] was obliged, because of his peculiar character, to enquire into what [the incidents] meant, oh not into what they really meant, his character was not so peculiar as all that, but into what they might be induced to mean, with the help of a little patience, a little ingenuity. (W 61).

Watt's concern... was not after all with what the figure was, in reality, but with what the figure appeared to be, in reality. (W 196).

Watt encounters problems because this process of personal meaning-making was frustrated by events and things which effectively refused to be named:

Not that Watt desired information, for he did not. But he desired words to be applied to his situation... to the conditions of being in which he found himself. For Watt now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance (W 67).

But to elicit something from nothing requires a certain skill and Watt was not always successful, in his efforts to do so (W 63).

The difficulty is that the events neither resolve themselves into something, nor into a nothingness either. In spite of their unrepresentability, they remain, fundamentally, events and things:

Yes, Watt could not accept, as no doubt Erskine [and the others] could not accept... that nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something, and that it revisited him in such a way that he was forced to submit to it all over again, to hear the same sounds, see the same lights, touch the same surfaces (W 63).

Hence, Watt is seeking to create meaning, and to resist accepting that what had happened was a “nothing”, whatever this means for Beckett. Watt can find peace only when he can reduce outer appearances to the order of meaning. This theme is repeated in relation to the Lynches, the dog and the disposal of leftovers:

But once Watt had grasped, in its complexity, the mechanism of this arrangement... then it interested him no more, and he enjoyed a comparative peace of mind, in this connexion. (Beckett, W 99).

he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for a head. (W 99).

It is also repeated regarding the bell:

Watt decided in the end that an examination of Erskine's room was essential, if his mind was

to be pacified, in this connexion. Then he would be able to put the matter from him, and forget it, as one puts from one and forgets the peel of an orange, or a banana. (W 105).

In all these passages, the construction of meaning is portrayed less as a means of relating to reality (which is itself a field of incomprehensible becomings), and more an effect of a subjectively felt drive towards symbolic order, a drive which Knott's house pushes Watt to reject. Watt is not, it is suggested, concerned to reach the thing-in-itself, to obtain objective knowledge. He simply seeks, like everyone else it is implied, to construct a meaningful world. This is particular to him (peculiar in the first sense), but not particularly strange (peculiar in the second sense). It is implied that this particularity renders Watt unable to accept the real nature of his experiences, which the narrator implicitly knows (see below); nevertheless, this peculiarity places him squarely within the spectrum of normality, alongside Cartesian rationalists, empiricists, realist writers, and theologians. Its insufficiency, then, is not mainly an effect of Watt's eccentricity or schizophrenia; it is a limit to the power of normal, rational thought when dealing with a particular zone of experience (the field of becoming, the domain of drive, or the zones of anomalies and limit-situations). Watt makes a 'pillow', a source of relief and relaxation, by domesticating the Real into the Symbolic Order, thereby managing its traumatic effects.

However, Watt's strategy of managing unpredictability through logic is frustrated by the nature of Knott's house. Watt has previously always been able to create meaning, even from hallucinations (W 60-1). In an incident like that with the Galls, however, the incident loses its mundane significance and seems to 'belong to some story heard long before... ill told, ill heard, and more than half forgotten' (W 61). Watt's ignorance is particularly discussed in relation to the famous pot example:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot... it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot.

Well, perhaps not in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the

more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted... And it was just this hairbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot that excruciated Watt. (W 67).

Ackerley (2005: 95) sees this as a gap between the thing and its Platonic Form. One could also, however, see it as an excess in the individual pot (as zone in the field of becoming) over the reductive representational concept, as a gap between the mental image of a pot and the pot-in-itself, and/or as a gap between a literary pot, seen by a character, and a real pot. It may stand for the separation of the real object from its conventional field of uses and references, as an object available for montage, as a unique, singular entity in its own right, or as a molecular form in a process of constant change. It may be an experience of the pot as *unheimlich* or uncanny, due to the loss of certainty in meaning – a change in the Symbolic Order, rather than in the pot. Anyway, Beckett makes clear that the change is subjective, not objective or social:

For the pot remained a pot, Watt felt sure of that, for everyone but Watt. For Watt alone it was not a pot, any more. (W 68).

The 'pot' incident is central to many secondary interpretations of ignorance in *Watt*. This incident, and similar, are sometimes seen as showing the limits of rationalism (Mood, 1971; Rose, 1971: 225). Migernier refers to it as an 'implosion of the space of representation' (Migernier, 2006: 13). He argues that, in the pot incident, '[t]here is a sense that language suffers from a fundamental flaw, a kind of internal irritant that perturbs the very task it seeks to perform: to represent the world' (2006: 14). The re-emergence of this 'disruptive internal economy' is what causes Beckett's representations to deliberately fail (2006: 15). Watt tries to escape 'the trap of language' by creating a personal language, but this is not an adequate solution because the personal language also has no relationship to reality (Skerl, 1974: 480). For Posnock (1980), Watt's 'self-defence' against a reality incomprehensible to language is to construct a private language as a closed system. This language

no longer seeks communication or public usefulness, instead 'exist[ing] only by the rules of its internal coherence'. This is likened to Valéry's view that language becomes a private system when it becomes aware of itself as an object. According to Keatinge (2008: 94), Beckett portrays language as a 'closed system without external referents', at least in relation to Watt's perceptions. Watt is searching for a new language to express the inexpressible, in a context in which accepted names no longer seem right (Beer, 1983).

As we have seen, *Watt* is often interpreted in terms of the attempt to provide rational explanations for an irrational world, to which Watt ultimately succumbs (Ramsay, 1983; Posnock, 1980; Begam, 1997: 94; Gibson, 2008: 156-7). This is sometimes interpreted as depressing Watt (Beer, 1983), though it can also be seen as opening onto a field of mystical experiences, such as communion with Knott (Begam, 1997: 84). It has also been theorised as enacting a loss of the self in language (Cousineau, 1979). All of these interpretations are founded on the initial construction of a kind of affirmative ignorance arising from awareness of the gap between a thing and its representation. The pot provides a paradigm for the rest of Watt's interpretations. Hence, Watt's experiences went from a 'knock that was not a knock' to a 'door closing that was not a door closing' (W 63). The incidents which became the story of the Lynches and the dog were 'shapes, that were not rooted to the ground... but melted away, into the dark, after a while' (W 99). Throughout Beckett's works, readers will find 'pot-like' incidents in which Beckett alludes to things which are not quite what they are called.

The 'pot' phenomenon is a fundamental disruption of linguistic order. Watt's experience of the unnamable pot is differentiated, first, from a situation where a thing has no name – rather, the proven name is no longer the thing's name for Watt (W 67) – and from a situation where the pot is actually something else, such as a shield or a raven (W 69). It is a deeper rupture in the symbolic

order than a simple absence of name or a misnaming. Badiou's interpretation of *Watt* as detailing an Event arises from a belief that Watt adds Knott's house to the situation, preventing his own mental collapse and initiating subjective change (Gibson, 2007: 158-60). I would suggest that the failure to create a different 'naming', either a new name for the pot which restores it to order or a new name in the entire field which gives the pot a new designated place, differentiates Watt's experience sharply from Badiou's approach, suggesting that Watt simply rejects *doxa* and does not achieve a Badiouian Event (which necessarily reconstitutes and reorders names). This rules out Watt as an exemplar for a Badiouian subject (if anything, he is an 'obscurantist' in Badiouian terms), though the response is open to a Badiouian to claim that this is why Watt's experience is labelled a failure. However, this seems to be an inaccurate response. To be sure, Watt tries names 'on things, and on himself, almost as a woman hats' (W 68), but this operation fails, and anyway the analogy with fashion places it squarely within *doxa* from Beckett's point of view: had the operation succeeded, Watt would return to the status of Mr Spiro or the academics, who ward off the flux of becoming through fixed categories. Unlike Badiou, Beckett sees naming as part of *doxa*, and a Badiouian Event would doubtless appear to Beckett as a pointless rearrangement of *doxa* rather than its overcoming.

Watt's ignorance also extends to his inner life. We are told that the uncertainty of objects also applies to the self, so that 'of himself too he could no longer affirm anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone' (W 68), and so that he could not affirm himself as a 'man', or feel comforted by being among other men as members of the same category (W 68). This is later referred to as a 'loss of species' (W 71), and also appears to be a loss of a common language to some extent. This is consistent with Mauthner's critique of subjectivity, and with the poststructuralist view of the self as subject-position, and it distances Beckett from those such as Descartes whose ignorance stops short of the self. Crucially, the separation of Watt from any kind of species-being

suggests a radical claim about the de-socialising impact of the recognition of radical contingency, echoing to some extent the distinction between the human and whatever-singularity in Agamben, and implicitly criticising accounts in which constructivism entails sociality.

For Beckett, ignorance entails anti-humanism. It is suggested that Watt only thinks of himself as a man because of his mother:

So he continued to think of himself as a man, as his mother had taught him, when she said, There's a good little man, or, There's a bonny little man, or, There's a clever little man. (W 69).

Not that the fact of Erskine's naming the pot, or of saying to Watt, My dear fellow, or, My good man, or, God damn you, would have changed the pot into a pot, or Watt into a man, for Watt, it would not... Not that the fact of the pot's being a pot, or Watt's being a man, for Erskine, would have caused the pot to be a pot, or Watt to be a man, for Watt, for it would not. But it would perhaps have lent a little colour to the hope, sometimes entertained by Watt, that he was in poor health... [and that] his health [would be] restored, and things appear, and himself appear, in their ancient guise, and consent to be named, with their time-honoured names, and forgotten (W 69).

This view of the source of the concept of 'man' is distinctly Althusserian: Watt is a man because he has been interpellated as a man, through statements by his mother, or (by implication) by Erskine (had Watt still been open to interpellation). The source of an identity as human and/or male is not innate, nor a product of Reason, nor a result of scientific inquiry, but an arbitrary, socially-constructed identity arising from mundane, colloquial uses of the word 'man'. As a result, it is firmly part of *doxa* and convention, rather than a separate, inner essence. This view starkly opposes the humanism fashionable in Beckett's time. However, Watt has become resistant to interpellation because of his nascent awareness of the field of becoming. The Real is so apparent that the

Symbolic Order becomes shaky. The reference to medicine or psychiatry here suggests that Watt's (self-)classification in these terms would be a potential means to restore the Symbolic Order. Erskine is relevant because he must have passed through similar experiences to Watt. However, Watt has difficulty achieving social effects from his rejection of convention. He continues to call himself a man, but can obtain no relief from it (W 69). The main loss, in other words, is libidinal, not conceptual: he loses any emotional attachment to the deployment of the category 'man', even if it remains, relatively speaking, the most appropriate category. It should also be recognised, however, that Watt *does* retain desires or drives, both in terms of sensory attachment (such as a preferred type of weather), and in terms of the compulsive drive to narrate.

Although 'pot-like' experiences are particularly common in Knott's house, they also arise in earlier and later sections. Particularly noticeable is the following:

Watt looked at the hat. Was it possible that this was his hat. (W 20).

This statement seems to suggest that Watt already experienced the gap between things and words before he entered Knott's house, which suggests that, possibly, he simply became aware of, and accepted, his ignorance rather than becoming-ignorant as such. (Compare the discussion of impotence above). It may prefigure the pot incident, with Watt uncertain that the hat fits its concept. Alternatively, it may suggest that Watt is unable to make unconscious habitual judgements, and must rely on deductive logic even for an act as simple as retrieving his hat. The main change between Knott's house and the earlier period is Watt's apparent abandonment of, or great difficulty with, the reconstruction of meaning through logic.

At times, Watt hopes for a cure so things can once more be 'named... and forgotten' (W 70). This is apparently because Watt experiences uncertainty as traumatic. Recurring memories are typical of experiences of trauma, and especially of the failure to process a traumatic experience. In

this case, trauma seems to be conflated with the incapacity to generate meaning, in a manner similar to the Lacanian Real. One can reconstruct the process as follows. Watt is unable to forget because his unconscious mind is still seeking to process the anomalous experiences. He is unable to habituate to his new state of existence. Therefore, he is permanently outside his comfort zone (except when he ceases to care about the loss of meaning) and haunted by involuntary memories arising from unprocessed traumas.

While it is suggested in passing that incidents such as those with the Galls and Lynches may be retrospective reconstructions, there is one incident in which no such explanation is provided, and which is left at the level of a nascent conceptualisation-in-formation:

One day... the telephone rang and a voice asked how Mr Knott was... The voice said further, a friend...

Watt stated this incident as follows:

A friend, sex uncertain, of Mr Knott telephoned to know how he was.

Cracks soon appeared in this formulation.

But Watt was too tired to repair it. Watt dared not tire himself further. (W 127).

The assumption that a voice saying such things was in fact 'a friend' calling 'to know how [Knott] was' is the obvious interpretation of such a sense-impression, but things in Knott's house are never so obvious, and are always vulnerable to the pot-effect of not quite being what they seem. From the rest of the novel, one can imagine what the cracks might be: there is no sign of Knott having friends, nobody would ask how he was because his state does not change, Knott would doubtless not come down to answer, and the story could be further complicated in terms of whether there is a telephone, whether it could ring, where the wires led and so on. We also know that resolving such issues, if possible at all, would involve a long deductive process, tiring no doubt for the reader as well as for Watt. It indicates the extent to which Beckett can induce the reader to think in a

Beckettian way, that a formulation such as cited that above makes instant sense. This learning process may also induce people to similarly question their immediate judgements in everyday life, and whether their habitual interpretations are always valid. I would suggest that this is the implicit purpose of *Watt* as a novel, and the meaning of the reader's implied apprenticeship to Sam as the successor to Watt.

Successful acceptance of one's necessary ignorance, and thus of the underlying field of becoming, seems to be the implicit *telos* of servitude to Knott. At the end of Watt's stay on the first floor, we are told:

Watt was now tired of the ground floor, the ground floor had tired Watt out.

What had he learnt? Nothing.

What did he know of Mr Knott? Nothing.

Of his anxiety to improve, of his anxiety to understand, of his anxiety to get well, what remained? Nothing.

But was that not something?

He saw himself then, so little, so poor. And now, littler, poorer. Was not that something?

(Beckett, W 127).

There are several notable aspects of this account. First, the stay did not culminate in knowledge, but in *exhaustion*. The first floor tired Watt out before he could unravel the mysteries which taxed him. This is never implied to be a deficiency in Watt; rather, if anything, it comes too late.

Secondly, exhaustion is, in its own way, an improvement in condition. It entails the loss of the anxiety to know, which motivates Watt throughout the second chapter, and which is arguably a form of resistance to acceptance of, or union with, the field of becoming and contingency. Thirdly, Watt's apparent failure is also a proactive change. He has recognised the human condition (as little and poor), and he has accumulated impotence (littler, poorer), possibly by becoming habituated to

exhaustion and to the state of meaninglessness. This is a 'nothing' (in the regime of knowledge) which is also a 'something' (a transformation of personal state). After he leaves Knott's house, Watt seems to revert to form:

He did not desire conversation, he did not desire company, he did not desire consolation, he felt no wish for an erection, no, all he desired was to have his uncertainty removed (W 196).

Though Watt thought it 'greatly to be deplored' that he cared so much, he continued to care, and did not know why (W 196). He falls back into 'the error of the old days', stumbling on 'substance shadowy' (W 196). This suggests that he did, indeed, fail to learn the lesson of Knott's house.

While he was able to lose his obsession with meaning while in Knott's company, he reverted to his old, rationalist ways almost the moment he was outside.

Do non-Beckettian characters have knowledge? The consistent implication is that they believe they do (and thus fail to ask the questions which Beckettian characters ask), but that they patently do not, and thus are both dangerous and contemptible. The idea of reality-checking by reference to conventional views is particularly sharply rejected. The nature of knowledge for Watt is itself rather doubtful:

As there seemed no measure between what Watt could understand, and what he could not, so there seemed none between what he deemed certain, and what he deemed doubtful. (W 112-13).

Watt can, and does, reality-check by testing the material world, but he does not trust others' judgements as a form of reality-check, probably for philosophically valid reasons (i.e. others may be in error, and their opinion may itself may be simply a common illusion or a way of managing anomalies). Nevertheless, Watt seeks this kind of reassurance, particularly from Erskine, and it is not forthcoming (W 70-1). Erskine and Knott are here similar to the analyst in Lacanian theory, who affirms the void in the Symbolic Order rather than patching it up through transference, or the

Zen master, who multiplies rather than papers over anomalies. Yet Watt is not prepared to force such constructions of meaning:

Perhaps if Watt had spoken to Erskine, Erskine would have spoken to Watt, in reply. But Watt was not so far gone as all that. (W 71).

This brief comment says a lot about Beckett's view of social normality. It is possible (and common, for instance, in narcissism and hysteria) for someone to induce or provoke others into producing responses which reinforce the first person's worldview. Beckett here seems to imply that this practice is particularly pathological, and reveals a separation from reality far deeper than Watt's. Beckett's portrayals of pointless social rituals, such as those of Spiro and the academics, which use trivialities, repetition and minutiae to hold together a coherent but arbitrary system of meaning and to suppress the fact of becoming, arguably locate them within the same social pathology, as forms of mutual social puppetry used to reassure people in their stable identities. Since this kind of social puppetry is far more normal than Watt's experience, this is actually a denunciation of the dominant social reality, which is more 'insane' than Watt in its suppression of the truth of becoming.

This still leaves the question of whether Knott shares the ignorance of the other characters. He is sometimes termed Watt's other-supposed-to-know, frustrating Watt's imputations of meaning with his own nothingness or indeterminability (Cousineau, 1979). He seems to share Watt's ignorance, but with an entirely accepting attitude towards it:

When Mr Knott moved about the house he did so as one unfamiliar with the premises, fumbling at doors immemorially locked [etc.]

When Mr Knott moved in the midst of his garden, he did so as one unacquainted with its beauties (W 176).

This makes sense if Knott, existing in whatever-singularity, does not have a continuous memory. Perhaps Knott relates to each situation anew, relating to the flow of becoming in which every

moment is unique, without any sense of the continuity of objects, like Heraclitus' river which is never the same twice. Hence, Knott has accepted and adapted to the recognition that the 'pot' is not identical to its name, and lives in a reality which is continuous, cyclical and sequential, yet different at each moment. Knott arguably shows what a 'successful' Watt might look like, a Watt who does not succumb to the temptation to rationalise contingency and unpredictability. Everything is at once a coming, a going and a being, and 'in this long chain of consistence... the notion of the arbitrary could only survive as the notion of a pre-established arbitrary' (W 114). Knott's world also seems to harmonise coincidences without causal relationships:

That with his need he might witness its absence.

[...] That Mr Knott might never cease, but ever almost cease. (W 175).

That he might witness the absence of what? Of the 'need not to need'? Knott could here be seen as a Buddhist sage who, having rejected desire and reached Nirvana, now affirms his own Nirvana by observing that others do not pursue it. Knott thus keeps himself as a murmur, just short of non-existence, somewhat similar to the Unnamable and Malone. For the servants, Knott's house seems to exemplify a world of drive, without desire in the Lacanian or Buddhist sense:

these two men forever about Mr Knott in tireless assiduity turning... about Mr Knott in tireless love. (W 52).

Moments of harmony, mystical union, or self-sufficient inner peace seem to occur periodically, between Watt and Sam, Watt and the fisherwoman, and on one occasion between Watt and Knott in the garden (W 125). This incident, which contrasts with a misfire between Graves (seeking advantage) and Watt (thinking of birds) on the previous page, occurs in a kind of communion in appreciating nature (in particular, flowers), or perhaps in appreciating death/disappearance (the vanishing worm). At these moments, they are in the same zone of affect to the point of being almost equivalent, and they walk together, breast to breast (W 130), in a homosocial variant on Watt's relationship with the fisherwoman. Furthermore, Watt feels content both in Knott's presence

and in his absence (W 179-80). This suggests that Knott is not an absent, unachievable object of desire, nor a substitute for fusion with the mother, but rather, a zone of affect one might aspire to occupy.

This experience of mystical communion, occurring in the absence of representational communication, seems to be Beckett's ideal in this work. Watt is able to achieve this state, but sadly, only too little and too late:

Watt learned towards the end of his stay in Mr Knott's house to accept that nothing had happened, that a nothing had happened, learned to bear it and even, in a shy way, to like it.

But then it was too late. (W 66).

The context of this quotation clarifies that 'nothing' refers to an experience which is either without meaning or with shifting meaning, hence to the field of becoming. It sounds from this passage as if learning to accept and like the field of becoming is the goal of Watt's stay, but that Beckett sees Watt as failing (in a negative, not a proactive sense) to achieve this goal sufficiently. It is unclear why it is too late, but the implication perhaps is that Watt comes out of the house still attempting to construct and convey meanings (perhaps this is necessary for Watt to serve as the source of the novel, since, in full acceptance of meaninglessness, the desire to narrate might disappear). I would speculate that the goal is an acceptance of meaningless becoming, that Watt reaches this goal temporarily on the first floor, but that the recession of his meaning-producing personality is temporary, so that, when he leaves the house, his concern to establish meanings reawakens. Watt is not in a state of 'not caring' for long enough, and does not habituate to it stably enough, for it to persist in the outside world, and this is why his stay 'fails'. This failure is productive for the novel, because it creates the compulsion to narrate without which the novel could not exist, but it points to the real goal of 'failing better', in which one would enter permanently into a state of 'not caring' similar to that experienced by Watt on the first floor. Hence, Watt 'fails to fail': he does not

permanently exit the domain of meaning or renounce its compulsive drives. His impotence and ignorance not only persist, but actually increase through the progression of the narrative.

#### Chapter 4: Impotence and Ignorance in *Molloy*

The structure of *Molloy* is similar in some respects to *Watt*, particularly in the introduction from an authorial standpoint, the growing impotence of the characters, and the way in which the characters fuse into one another. It differs in that it features two main protagonists, is written in the first person, and appears to be temporally discontinuous. It is also written from within the lifeworld of a Beckettian character, whereas *Watt* was narrated by a third party. Another difference is that non-Beckettian characters get a more extensive treatment.

*“Or am I imagining it, in the interests of the narrative?” Characters in Molloy*

In particular, Moran begins as a non-Beckettian character, who, unlike the similar characters in *Watt*, is seen from the inside (albeit retrospectively), making him the only non-Beckettian character to receive this treatment in the novels studied here. He is in many ways the opposite of Molloy and Watt:

That a man like me, so meticulous and calm in the main, so patiently turned towards the outer world as towards the lesser evil, creature of his house, of his garden, of his few poor possessions, discharging faithfully and ably a revolting function, reining back his thoughts within the limits of the calculable, so great is his horror of fancy, that a man so contrived, for I was a contrivance, should let himself be haunted and possessed by chimeras (M 118)

He later adds that he rather enjoys dotting his i's (M 122), and that he has to have a gas stove to feel easy (M 128). He is able to manipulate and 'call forth' emotions, but this is possible only based on a deeper closure in which 'you cannot feel, nor denigrate, nor laugh', a state of affect which was Moran's 'at will' (M 130). This account of Moran provides an additional element of depth to

Beckett's world, showing how Beckettian characters pass over into non-Beckettian characters, and how the Beckettian field of life underpins the apparently alien zones of the conventional and the everyday.

This account by Moran also rehearses a number of Beckettian concerns. The recognition of the conventional self as a 'contrivance' reveals Beckett's constructivism, at least as regards non-Beckettian subjects (or maybe literary characters). The passage also contains various (presumably deliberately) dualistic references which refer oppositionally to standard Beckettian themes: the outer rather than the inner world, the calculable rather than fancy, the house rather than nomadism, utility rather than social irrelevance, to have possessions rather than to be possessed. There are also clear continuities: the use of calculation to manage uncertainty is common to Moran, Molloy and Watt, and so too is the attachment to a 'few poor possessions', some of which Molloy (and later Malone) has until the end.

One of the most noticeable features of the novel is the interpenetration of different characters. It is a story, says Stewart, projected across fictional time and different Beckettian works (2006: 101). Similarly, Begam suggests that Molloy and Moran are haunted by *différance* (1997: 110). There is a single authorial standpoint, but it shifts between the zones of affect occupied by the different characters: the narrator who observes "A" and "C" (presumably Molloy and Moran), Molloy's narrative, Moran's narrative. Webb suggests that Beckett portrays humanity as a continuous block in which Molloy is interchangeable with others (Webb, 1970: 84). In addition, Molloy is continuous with his mother, as 'a couple of old cronies... with the same memories, the same rancours, the same expectations' (M 13). The "A" and "C" of the opening part of the novel seem to be Molloy and Moran – Molloy heading for the town, Moran for the countryside. Yet they are also seen by a character who appears to be Molloy.

In addition, the relationship between Molloy and Moran is both ruptural and continuous. In readings of *Molloy*, there is a division between the view of Molloy as the authentic self underlying Moran, and those seeing Moran as the origin or writer of Molloy's narrative, though Katz suggests that Beckett actually tries to undermine such hermeneutics (Katz, 1999: 73). Katz suggests that Molloy and Moran contest ownership of the story of *Molloy*, performing a doubling of the first-person pronoun while enacting the elision of their own conditions of possibility (1999: 75). The narrator recedes before a second, 'impossible, supplemental "I"' (1999: 77). The two seem to exist simultaneously, meeting at the ends of their stories, but also to be temporally distinct, since Moran seems to convert into Molloy at the end of his story. Yet Molloy hears 'we are coming', right before Moran receives the message to seek Molloy (M 93, 95), suggesting that Molloy's story precedes Moran's. The two stories can thus be arranged in two quite different temporal ways – as a sequence of Moran followed by Molloy, or as simultaneous processes culminating in the meeting of Moran and Molloy at the end of their stories (or culminating with Moran becoming a second, temporally later Molloy). Either reading is insufficient, as it has to abandon textual markers either of succession or simultaneity, both of which are clearly present. In some respects, it makes more sense to assume that the story operates atemporally, with the characters moving in time as well as space, so that Moran's story can loop back into Molloy's and still culminate in a meeting. The story could also be read cyclically, as the recurrence of the Molloy-effect across different characters, perhaps with the reader set up as the next Molloy, much as s/he is set up as the next resident in the house of Knott.

Indeed, Molloy seems to be as much a zone of affect as he is a character. Moran summons Molloy, creates an image of Molloy (or "Mollose" – the fact that he cannot quite visualise the name is itself revealing) as a zone of affect he knows, 'as of one designed to occupy us', and establishes in

dream and imagination a sense of what it is like to be Molloy:

And though this examination prove unprofitable and of no utility for the execution of my orders, I should nevertheless have established a kind of connection, and one not necessarily false. (M 116)

This is, on an imaginary level, a means of becoming-Molloy for Moran, and perhaps is the reason for his later development. Moran literally takes on Molloy's attributes:

He panted. He had only to rise up within me for me to be filled with panting. (M 117)

Later we are also told that Moran experienced 'uproar, bulk, rage, suffocation, effort unceasing, frenzied and vain' through his experience of an imagined Molloy (M: 118). Moran, like Molloy, fastens his hat by a string (M 132). He has similar leg problems, and the same swollen testicles (M 164). This continuity suggests that Molloy is actually a shadow part of Moran. It gives rise to an experience of familiarity (Moran has met Molloy) and/or of *deja vu* (Moran is Molloy) (M 116). One question which arises here is whether Moran (or whatever he symbolises – for instance, scientific knowledge, rationality, and/or religious communion for the "black sheep") necessarily undergoes a process of becoming-other for each of his assignments, and whether the Molloy assignment is unusual in that this process usually proceeds unproblematically, without subjective destitution for Moran. In order to fulfil its mission of complete knowledge, each regime of knowledge has to expand itself into the domains it does not yet know (the Molloy-zone), to capture the remainder of the unknown, yet in doing so, it risks undergoing a falsification, an exhaustion, or a collapse of its psychosomatic underpinnings which, instead of incorporating the remainder, expands it to cover the entire field of knowledge. Instead of Moran succeeding, in his job of "instantaneity", in bringing Molloy within the domain of meaning, Moran fails and becomes Molloy. This book, *Molloy*, is perhaps the report Moran was required to submit.

Molloy and Moran suffer typically Beckettian degenerations of their selfhood. Involuntary

memory derived from external knowledge occurs in a passage where Molloy says of his mother 'I remembered, I mean, I knew more or less what she was talking about, even if I hadn't always taken part personally' (M 14, 202). This repeats Beckett's concern with memories which stem from external knowledge rather than actual experience. Molloy also seems to channel Beckett's usual desire to work with impotence and ignorance:

Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition. (M 25).

In this novel, the critique of realist structures is less noticeable than in Watt, but nevertheless, authorial self-questioning remains prevalent. One instance of this is the passage on the Pomeranian, in which there is a prolonged authorial self-questioning:

A little dog followed him, a pomeranian I think, but I don't think so. I wasn't sure at the time and I'm still not sure...

Yes, it was an orange pomeranian, the less I think of it the more certain I am. ...

But was not in reality perhaps the cigar a cutty, and were not the sand-shoes boots, hobnailed, dust-whitened, and what prevented the dog from being one of those stray dogs that you pick up and take in your arms, from compassion or because you have long been straying... Until the day when, your endurance gone... you catch up in yours the first mangy cur you meet, carry it the time needed for it to love you and you it, then throw it away. (M 8).

This passage suggests a number of possibilities. It could be a simple uncertainty, as to whether an observed phenomenon is what it seems; an existential uncertainty, as to whether objects are identical to their concepts, as in the "pot" discussion, here overdetermined by an authorial question as to how to write the narrative, and a psychological question as to how to pin down images and memories; and/or an attempt to distinguish the narrative dog from an existential state of abjection,

in effect to give it (and the narrative gaze) a certainty greater than that available to Molloy. Shortly afterwards, there is a similar criticism of the standpoint of the omniscient narrator, based on the fact that C, who is assumed to have gone out of town and not returned, may in fact have returned by means the author could not see, such as hiding in a cart or returning over the horizon (M 11). In yet another case, the author, observing A and C, reflects that he must have been on top of a hill, but cannot explain how a hill could have been there, or why he was there (M 199). In another instance, Molloy says of Lousse:

She had a somewhat hairy face, or am I imagining it, in the interests of the narrative? (M 55)

Literally, of course, Beckett is imagining *all* of it in the interests of the narrative, and it is left ambiguous whether Molloy here identifies himself with the author, or simply returns to the theme of mistaken memory. Beckett also seems to use the more reliable-sounding Moran to decontest Molloy's narrative, for instance giving meaning to his statements about his locality (M 140). Moran here functions like Watt's rational deductions, providing meaning in Molloy's chaos.

There are also some reflections on the creative process of the author. After A and C depart, the narrator is left to contemplate his solitude, which he refuses to call being 'alone', but is prepared to call 'free' in a sense. During this reflection, he connects freedom to knowledge of 'the laws of the mind' (M 9). He then reflects that writing 'looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery' (2009: 10). This suggests that the narrator is in something similar to Murphy's third zone, a kind of existential freedom beyond sociality, but not necessarily beyond causal reality or fatalism, a freedom to exist in the zone of "death" and "decay" which is left when the social world of "life" is removed. This world creates an imperative to think and write:

mostly I stayed in my jar which knew neither seasons nor gardens. And a good thing too.

But in there you have to be careful, ask yourself questions... I called that thinking. I thought

almost without stopping, I did not dare stop. (M 48).

This passage suggests that the incessant logical deductions and combinations are here presented, first as a compulsion arising from anxiety ("I did not dare stop"), and secondly as a side-effect of being within the third zone, or the zone of the ladder. What would happen if Molloy (or Watt) stopped? Perhaps there is a fear of greater subjective collapse or nonexistence. This seems unlikely, however, since subjective collapse seems desirable to Beckettian characters. The compulsion to keep asking questions, and therefore to keep narrating, is not fully explained here, as it is not elsewhere.

The compulsion to go on is as noticeable in *Molloy* as in *Watt*. Molloy is driven forward by an irrational compulsion of unknown origin, rooted apparently in an external (possibly authorial, superegoic, divine or schizophrenic) voice:

then the anguish of return, I won't say where, I can't, to absence perhaps, you must return, that's all I know, it's misery to stay, misery to go. (M 41).

The use of the second person in this passage is anomalous (Molloy mainly uses the first person), and is open to several possible readings: that Molloy is using a generic second person, 'one must return', everyone must return; that he is repeating an external imperative, a command to return received from a Gaber-like figure; or that return connotes becoming-other, that the "I" who returns is a "you" to the person it becomes (as character to author, or narrator to delegate). Furthermore, Molloy portrays himself as a split self:

For within me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. (M 47)

The contradiction here is between an inertia born of generalised apathy and a compulsion to continue. The resultant oscillation between stillness and movement is characteristic, not only of

Molloy, but also of Watt and other characters.

Another interesting aspect of *Molloy* is the appearance of intertextual references. For instance, there is an intertextual reference to people taking to the roads, 'for they had never heard of Watt, just imagine that too' (M 77). Similarly, Moran speaks of Murphy, Watt, Yerk and Mercier as past assignments of his (M 143), lending credibility to readings in which he is either the author, or a symbol for the element which pushes characters into the Beckettian zone (perhaps he is Knott, or sends Watt to Knott's house, for instance). Later, he recounts them as people he may meet in heaven (M 176), prefiguring the orbiting characters of *The Unnamable*.

The relationship between Moran and his 'employer' or God is also constructed in ways which are allegorical of authorship. In one relevant passage, the employer's messenger, Gaber, complains of being pushed around:

Gaber began bitterly to inveigh against our employer, who had made him get up in the middle of the night, just as he was getting into position to make love to his wife. For this kind of nonsense, he added. (M 98)

While the obvious reading has Gaber as the Archangel Gabriel, complaining about his 'employer' God (or Youdi – Deus), is it also possible to read this as a complaint by characters about how they are pushed around by the author, who is equivalent to God in the world of the novel. At another point, Moran alludes to the authorial function when he says: 'I have not enough imagination to imagine it' (M 137). He then goes on to suggest that writing is a compulsion:

And if I submit to this paltry scrivening which is not of my province, it is for reasons very different from those that might be supposed. I am still obeying orders, if you like, but no longer out of fear. No, I am still afraid, but simply from force of habit. And the voice I listen to needs no Gaber to make it heard. For it is within me and exhorts me to continue to

the end the faithful servant I have always been, of a cause that is not mine (M 137)

Moran then adds that he 'follows' this voice, both in the sense of understanding it, and of obeying it (M 137). In another passage, Moran says that he woke 'with a mild erection, to make things more lifelike' (M 145), which is both a suggestion of authorial reflexivity and/or of the embellishment of personal narratives and memories, and also a nod to the omission of such realistic details in literary realism.

*“Faring below the dead”: Impotence in Molloy*

Impotence is an important theme in *Molloy*. Both Molloy and Moran undergo a process of becoming-impotent. The overwhelming impression is that one is born suffering and then cumulatively becomes weaker and weaker. Critchley suggests that Molloy wishes to finish dying, but those in power do not want him to (2004: 191). The phenomenon of impotence is contrasted with death as absolute absence, instead occurring as an asymptotic deadening or a life after death. For instance, Molloy questions whether he lives:

But it is only since I have ceased to live that I think of these things and the other things. [...]

To decompose is to live too, I know, I know, don't torment me, but one sometimes forgets.

(M 22).

This passage suggests that, once in his mother's room, Molloy is in a sense 'dead', perhaps in the third zone, or in an asymptotic decline precluding a return to social activity, or in a ghost-like state akin to Echo or Belacqua. At one point, Molloy can only figure out that he is alive because there is a rational reason his hat stays in place (M 10). He feels dead, but he is still technically alive in that he is in a process of decomposition. A second passage reinforces this impression:

My life, my life, now I speak of it as if of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for

that? (M 34)

The implication here is that Molloy's condition is beyond descriptive appreciation, since two contradictory descriptors are equally true of it. However, there is also a sense of a rupture between two different kinds of life. Life goes on as a repetition, a set of gestures, a process of writing, but it is 'over' in that meaning has been irrecoverably lost. The idea of a 'joke' may here reference Bergson's theory of humour, in which pointless, object-like repetition is one of the characteristics of a comedic world, along with the Bakhtinian connotation of the impossibility of death in comedy.

A few pages later, however, it is suggested that only Beckettian characters are truly alive:

Yes, there is no denying it, any longer, it is not you who are dead, but all the others. So you get up and go to your mother, who thinks she is alive. (M 25).

The others are 'dead', perhaps, in the sense of being unreflexively trapped in social routine, and thus unable to relate to the real, living world of becoming. Life is paradoxically possible only as the living death of asymptotic exhaustion. Or perhaps the others are 'dead' because Molloy is the author-figure, and the others are simply characters. We are also later told by Moran that Molloy's mother 'was much less alive than her son' (M 117), an unusual construction of life/death as a continuum of quantities rather than a binary, which suggests that she is either further along the same path of decay as Molloy, or less liberated from deathly conformity. Molloy is grateful that she tried to abort him, but suggests that he was destined 'for less compassionate sewers' (M 203). His period in early childhood is the only 'just endurable' period of his life (M 15). From this point onwards, presumably, his pain and impotence have cumulatively increased.

In another passage, Martha, having lost her locus of meaning in Moran, seems to become an empty shell, 'lolling in her rocking-chair', seeming 'so old', or worse, 'ageing, so sad and solitary in her everlasting corner' (M 125). There is an irony in seeing ageing as worse than being old, since

everyone is ageing; the contrast echoes Beckett's broader contrast of processes of decay with the fact of being dead. This passage suggests that existence as a Beckettian self is a state worse than death, and that the process of becoming-impotent is worse than the state of being impotent.

From the outside of a Beckettian character, death seems impossible. Moran says of Molloy: I was no better able to conceive how, left to his own resources, he could put an end to it. A natural end seemed unlikely to me, I don't know why. (M 118)

Soon you are faring below the dead. It is there I have my plot in perpetuity... Sometimes I went and looked at my grave. The stone was up already... I wanted to have my name put on it, with the here lies... Then all it would have wanted was the date of my death. They would not let me (M 141).

Perhaps "they" knew presciently that Moran was not destined to die, but to be trapped in a limbo in which he remains "below the dead". On the other hand, it is as if they are waiting for death:

my situation... was rather that of the turd waiting for the flush (M 170).

I like to think of [flies] that hatch out at the beginning of winter, within doors, and die shortly after. You see them crawling and fluttering in the warm corners, puny, sluggish, torpid, mute... They must die very young. (M 174).

He later says of himself that he counts among his 'familiar' a tree which lived five thousand years (M 156). Moran's acts – prefiguring Molloy's – become those of 'prepar[ing] my soul to make an end', or waiting for death (M 174). He asks what he can do until his death, and whether he can hasten it without sinning (M176). This is a long distance from an Evental Beckett, or a Beckett of affirmative becoming. The state of being trapped in abjection, waiting for an end within an exhausted reality, suggests a finality which does not allow for a future opening. On the one hand, Molloy and Moran are too "dead" to accomplish living events or affirmations; on the other, they remain incapable of realising the Event of death.

Another revealing passage refers to experimentation in sleeping patterns:

in my life without end I have dabbled with every kind of sleep (M 11).

That people do not in general experiment with different sleep-patterns, as they do for instance with different foods or working patterns, is here drawn to the reader's attention. Molloy, in the third zone, and possibly beyond death, is able to experiment with experiential combinations denied to the ordinary (non-Beckettian) subject. Perhaps more important here, however, is the reference to a 'life without end'. This may simply be hyperbole – his life *feels* endless, because of meaninglessness, impotence, repetition, depression – but it might suggest that Molloy occupies the same zone as Belacqua, beyond the possibility of a final death, trapped in a mid-zone between life and death. Created characters are, perhaps, in such a zone, since they are repeated each time a book is read; so are humans, if the process of death is taken to be asymptotic rather than ruptural.

Molloy's becoming-impotent is expressed as a perceptual fading, at once impotence, ignorance and decomposition of self, in an early passage:

All grows dim. A little more and you'll go blind. It's in the head. It doesn't work any more, it says, I don't work any more. You go dumb as well and sounds fade. The threshold scarcely crossed that's how it is. (M 4).

The shifting pronouns and modalities of this passage are noticeable, perhaps indicating that the experience described here is self-decompositional. The passage is distributed among first, second and third persons. The switch from *it* doesn't work, to *it* says, to *I* don't work indicates difficulties in attributing failings of mental and existential faculties as external body-parts (*it*) or as self (*I*), and suggests the dependence of the "I" on organic bodily matter, an "it", continuing to work. The reference to a threshold suggests that becoming-impotent is an existential change, not simply a biological process, though it also makes implicit reference to cumulative biological processes which only become noticeable after a point (it suggests, for instance, the Weber constant).

Becoming-impotent is also associated with occupation of the place of the other, and resultant loss of self. The opening passage of the novel reads:

I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone. (M 3).

It is later suggested that he has taken his mother's place, down to the most intimate particulars: 'I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot' (M 3). Has Molloy become equivalent to his mother, by occupying her space, and her impotence? That he was helped to get there, and does not know how (an instance of ignorance within his subjective narrative), makes sense in terms of the later novel: he collapses before reaching his goal, at the point when he hears a voice, and quite possibly encounters Moran. This is sometimes read as a pursuit of the standard goal of union with the mother (e.g. O'Hara, 1982), but this seems to misread Beckett's maternal symbolism. Molloy's mother does not get a positive treatment in the novel; for instance, 'the old bitch' is blamed for giving Molloy 'her lousy unconquerable genes' (M 82). I would suggest that the mother's room here symbolises a fusion into abjection, rather than an Edenic state.

Bodily impotence is also a major theme of the novel. Molloy constantly complains of impotence, and of an accumulation of incapacities and pains, in his legs and lower regions, including his genitals:

Now my sick leg, I forget which, it's immaterial here, was in a condition neither to dig, because it was rigid, nor alone to support me, because it would have collapsed. I had so to speak only one leg at my disposal, I was virtually one-legged, and I would have been happier, livelier, amputated at the groin. And if they had removed a few testicles into the bargain I wouldn't have objected. For from such testicles as mine... there was nothing more

to be squeezed, not a drop. (M 33)

This impotence is sometimes figured as irreducible, with the decayed parts deemed irremovable:

I would have seen to it myself, with a knife or secateurs, but for my terror of physical pain and festered wounds, so that I shook. (M 34)

Furthermore, impotence is thematised as cumulative:

And now my progress, slow and painful at all times, was more so than ever, because of my short stiff leg, the same which I thought had long been as stiff as a leg could be, but damn the bit of it, for it was growing stiffer than ever, a thing I would not have thought possible, and at the same time shorter every day (M 77)

Molloy's existential impotence is symbolised, and given occasion (in the form of difficulties with simple tasks), by his physical disability. Due to a conveniently constructed supplementary impotence, Molloy is unable to dispose of his useless parts, which continue to operate as marks of impotence and sources of discomfort. Furthermore, no sooner does Molloy become accustomed to impotence than it worsens, beyond what he can conceive or imagine. Newly gained worsenings in health are experienced particularly badly as Molloy had not yet got used to them (M 78). His health turns his movement from a 'slow and painful progress' into a 'veritable calvary, with no limit to its stations and no hope of crucifixion' (M 79), giving it religious and metaphysical significance. It also created a situation where 'my progress reduced me to stopping more and more often, it was the only way to progress, to stop' (M 79). Molloy states that he likes to lie down 'in defiance of the rules' with his legs above his head – 'no easy matter' with stiff legs (M 84). Molloy, like Watt, seems to enjoy, or feel compelled to adopt, supine positions, for instance lying 'with outspread arms' in a ditch (M 24).

As if such bodily incapacity was not enough, Molloy also undergoes sudden collapses:

And it happened too, less surprisingly, when I was walking, or even propped up against

something, that I suddenly collapsed, like a puppet when its strings are dropped, and lay long where I fell, literally boneless. (M 53)

The puppet analogy is suggestive of deterministic views of humanity, and especially of the view that convention makes people puppet-like. In this context, to be rendered impotent is also to be rendered free from the control of the puppet-master. However, a person passing from control to freedom would not be rendered 'literally boneless'. This claim makes more sense if Molloy is here experiencing a withdrawal of authorial attention, in a situation where he is in fact a puppet. It could also make *metaphorical* sense, if the word 'literal' is seen as ironic or hyperbolic, as a withdrawal of the skeleton of meaning, subjectivity or belief.

From the outside, Moran describes Molloy (or his inner image of Molloy, which he admits may deviate from the real Molloy) as follows:

Even in open country he seemed to be crashing through jungle. He did not so much walk as charge. In spite of this he advanced but slowly. He swayed, to and fro, like a bear.

He rolled his head, uttering incomprehensible words.

He was massive and hulking, to the point of misshapeness. And, without being black, of a dark colour.

He was forever on the move. I had never seen him rest. Occasionally he stopped and glared furiously about him.

This was how he came to me, at long intervals. Then I was nothing but uproar, bulk, rage, suffocation, effort unceasing, frenzied and vain. Just the opposite of myself, in fact. (M

118)

This dream-figure indicates that Moran experienced Molloy as his shadow, or a representation of his repressed Real. It is in many ways consistent with the "real", self-reported Molloy above – we know for instance of Molloy's effort, his 'misshapeness' (bodily impotence) and his 'swaying'

(owing presumably to his decaying legs) – but it also deviates from Molloy's self-account, notably on the points of 'never resting' (the self-reported Molloy is frequently forced to stop) and 'rage' (anger is not a dominant affect in the first half of the novel, which is, rather, quite resigned in tone). This might reflect a gap in external and internal appearances. The reader knows Molloy has difficulty experiencing and expressing emotions, so it is possible that he seems angry to others, without feeling anger; and since Molloy's sense of time is also nonstandard, it is possible that what he experiences as long stops are actually so momentary as to be invisible (but given the feeling of length by the rush of thoughts they involve). However, it seems more likely that Beckett introduces the differences to indicate how Moran misperceived Molloy, perhaps in a reflexive nod to Jung or Freud – Moran is projecting his own repressed anger onto Molloy. It was established above that Beckettian characters provoke anger in non-Beckettian characters, so the encounter with Molloy, rather than Molloy's own affective state, probably brings on the anger.

On two occasions, Molloy's impotence bring him into conflict with the social mainstream. When Molloy runs over Lousse's dog, it is noted that his 'ineptness' is 'unpardonable', but also that Lousse must have thought she had warded off danger 'whereas in reality she was setting the whole system of nature at naught' (M 30), suggesting a fatalistic worldview. It then emerges that the dog was 'old, blind, deaf, crippled with rheumatism and perpetually incontinent', and was being taken to be euthanised, so the accident turns out to be a boon (M 30). Or rather, this is how Lousse presents the situation to a mob pursuing Molloy; its accuracy is later questioned. Things are turned upside-down: a killing (accidental in this case) is not necessarily a bad thing, as death is a release from suffering, in line with Beckett's worldview.

On another occasion, Molloy is pushed by his impotence into an inadvertent, technical violation of law and/or propriety, which is the occasion for the incident with the policeman (M 17).

The ableism of the law, which makes no exception for the sick, seems part of the backdrop here, suggesting reasons why impotence, and by extension seeing otherwise, or living in the third zone, entails a withdrawal from sociality. However, Molloy later tells us that 'I never rested in that way again', and deduced the reason for his apprehension as being that his 'abandoned' posture was 'a deplorable example, for the people', who need to be encouraged by images of strength, not impotence (M 22). This gesture of conformity, and others which have preceded it, is ambiguous for Molloy: 'I have never ceased to improve', by learning good behaviour, 'within the limits of my physical possibilities', 'for I used to be intelligent and quick' (M 22). Molloy has 'goodwill' to conform, an anxiety to conform, yet is impotent to do so, both because of his physical limits, and because he lacks what he terms the 'guiding principles' of manners (M 22), which are perhaps part of the Symbolic Order. Yet this anxiety to conform is itself corrosive, leading to the loss of intelligence and quickness. It is quite possible that social norms are so arbitrary that no 'guiding principles' exist, and that Molloy's impotence in relation to deducing norms is actually an effect of a constitutive gap between Beckettian and non-Beckettian subjects, such that only those inside the world of opinion (and outside the third zone) can possibly conform with any degree of reliability.

Molloy's impotence has drastic effects on his experience of his own social position. He feels unable to relate to others:

It seems to me that I even knew my son, that I helped him. Then I tell myself it's impossible. It's impossible I could ever have helped anyone. I've forgotten how to spell too, and half the words. (M 3).

This suggests that Molloy is Moran, he has memories of Moran's son, but he is also a different person, in the sense of occupying a different zone of affect in which Moran's acts, or self-justifications, seem impossible. It is questionable if Moran really "helped" his son, but clear that he believed he was doing so. Molloy is here, perhaps, more reflexive than Moran in recognising the

nature of Moran's relationship to his son.

Molloy's impotence seems to contaminate the objects around him:

I soon received a very fine vegetable knife, so-called stainless, but it didn't take me long to stain it (M 44).

The reference may be to self-harm, or simply the wear and tear of objects through use (which further separates them from their 'name' or ideal), but also has clear existential implications: the contact between the tainted Molloy, who has no place in the order of things, and the knife is such as to destroy the knife's untainted quality. The implication of self-harm is made clearer in a later passage:

I took the vegetable knife from my pocket and set about opening my wrist. But pain soon got the better of me. First I cried out, then I gave up, closed the knife and put it back in my pocket. I wasn't particularly disappointed, in my heart of hearts I had not hoped for anything better. (M 61)

This passage suggests that Molloy would like to die, but is unable to carry out the act of suicide because of the pain involved. Molloy is impotent to negate himself, and thus remains in his asymptotic, partial impotence. Beckett later clarifies Molloy's refusal of suicide:

For death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which therefore cannot go down in the ledger of weal and woe... I sometimes wondered, believe me or not, if it wasn't a state of being even worse than life. So I found it natural not to rush into it and, when I forgot myself to the point of trying, to stop in time. (M 68)

Here, it is suggested that death is both attractive, in that it cannot be conceived and therefore known to be bad, and unattractive, because it might be worse than life. Later it is further suggested that 'the thought of suicide had little hold on me, I don't know why, I thought I did, but I see I don't' (M 79). Hence, Molloy is not attracted to the Event of death, instead existing in a state of continual dying-as-process, marked by an accumulation of impotence.

Similar implications are conveyed, indirectly, in relation to the disappearance from sight of one of the figures seen by the narrator at the start:

He is dwindling, dwindling. I knew what I meant. I knew I could catch him, lame as I was.

I only had to want to. And yet no, for I did want to. (M 9).

"Dwindling", of course, has a double sense of perceptual disappearance (following from the previous sentences about disappearance from sight), and physical or mental diminution; and to "catch up" has the dual implications of physically pursuit, the literal sense here, and becoming-other, or occupation of the other's zone of affect. Perhaps the passing character (A or C) has entered a zone into which Beckett wishes to follow, but cannot – the zone of indeterminacy, in which becoming is affirmative. The Event of disappearance is specifically precluded:

From things about to disappear I turn away in time. To watch them out of sight, no, I can't do it. (M 8-9).

This is a strange inability which reflects a failing similar to Watt's: an inability to pass outside the field of appearance into the domain of imperceptible becoming. It reflects Beckett's concern with characters who remain just the right side of death, who seem unable to die, and whose becoming-impotent is asymptotic without reaching a point of disappearance.

Molloy's state of impotence, or at least the accumulation of new impotences, seems to be reduced by the relatively comfortable periods at the beach and at Lousse's house. The beach is reassuring partly because one direction of movement is blocked by the risk of drowning (M 69), limiting Molloy's choices and therefore his anxiety. The advantage of life in Lousse's house is that his decline in health is frozen:

But I must say that with Lousse my health got no worse, or scarcely. By which I mean that what was already wrong with me got worse and worse, little by little, as was only to be

expected. But there was kindled no new fear of suffering or infection (M 55).

Molloy says the same of his time at the beach. However, Beckett suggests that this amounts to a different kind of death-through-entrapment. For instance, Molloy states, discussing Lousse's parrot:

Him too one day she would bury. In his cage probably. Me too, if I had stayed, she would have buried. (M 36)

Beckett here analogises Molloy's welfarist confinement by Lousse with the status of the parrot, which even in death, cannot escape its cage. Molloy accuses Lousse of drugging his food and drink, but makes this accusation 'without ill-feeling' (M 52-3), presumably because the drugged state is not necessarily less desirable than a conscious state to him (though to the reader, it suggests once more an attempt to entrap Molloy).

In contrast, when in movement, Molloy's illness increases:

For the truth is I had other weak points, here and there, and they too were growing weaker and weaker, as was only to be expected. But what was not to be expected was the speed at which their weakness had increased, since my departure from the seaside. (M 80)

But I had hardly left the shore, harried by the dread of waking one fine day, far from my mother, with my two legs as stiff as my crutches, when they suddenly began to gallop, my weak points did, and their weakness became literally the weakness of death (M 81)

This cumulative increase leads to a fear that the asymptotic decay will culminate in total impotence and failure:

Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, and I won't be able to move, but will have to stay, where I happen to be, unless some kind person comes and carries me. For my marches got shorter and shorter and my halts in consequence more and more frequent and I may add prolonged. (M 90)

In the forest, Molloy is once more struck by the preference for where he is, since it is no worse than elsewhere, and spares the need to move (M 87). It is not clear why movement compounds

impotence. It is possible that greater movement is associated with greater openness to flows of becoming, or that life-preserving activity is taken to delay the process.

While Molloy is impotent from the beginning of his narrative, Moran becomes cumulatively more impotent, from a starting position of bodily functioning. He thus presents a clearer account of becoming-impotent than Molloy. Revealingly, his first knee-pain (the precursor of his/Molloy's stiffened legs) occurs when giving his son an enema to speed his departure, and the second in a shelter while searching for Molloy (M 144-5). He says, rather intriguingly, that his knee 'felt like a clitoris' (M 146), perhaps a reference to castration. Later he suggests that his sick knee 'was becoming a habit', so a slow worsening would be unnoticeable (M 154). He undergoes a process which seems to be a disintegration:

And on myself too I pored... And I seemed to see myself ageing as swiftly as a day-fly. But the idea of ageing was not exactly the one which offered itself to me. And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be. (M 155)

Moran undergoes a 'growing resignation to being dispossessed of self', marked by a decline in his attention to meaning (M 156), which he refers to as 'disintegrations' (M 165), as 'privations' and as 'great inward metamorphoses' (M 171). He becomes 'rapidly unrecognizable', feeling his hands and face are not his own (M 178), akin perhaps to Watt's pot, or else suggestive of a collapsing skin-ego. Despite this, 'I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before' (M 178). However, he suffers a brief reversal (his knee bends 'normally') after killing a figure who seems to be a shadow of himself, and who only after the event 'no longer resembled me' (M 158). He seems, however, to resemble Moran and Molloy in having stiff legs (M 159). His testicles swell, like Molloy's (M 164). He becomes unable to be heard unless he shouts (M 171). He remains, however, determined and able to resist being dominated by 'things', though he no longer feels cleverer than

men, which are the only two categories he now recognises – 'to hell with animals. And with God' (M 173).

Such episodes have been interpreted in diverse ways. For instance, Tajiri (2006: 55) suggests that Molloy and Moran's experiences of the body are caused by the absence of a skin-ego, which renders body-parts alien and the body expansive. This is partly why they lose the 'supporting function', and the ability to stand (2006: 58), and rely on prostheses such as crutches and bicycles (2006: 43). In contrast, O'Hara (1982) suggests that becoming-impotent is an unconscious resistance to a constant movement which runs away from a call to silence.

Moran narrates his experience of becoming-impotence partly as a kind of fatalistic loss. Moran observes at the start of his narrative that he and his son are 'done for', but 'unsuspecting' of this (M 95). He later writes of his time at his home as Edenic. 'In such surroundings slipped away my last moments of peace and happiness' (M 96). Hence, Moran associates his ordinary, non-Beckettian life with peace and happiness, prior to his decay into impotence:

Lost and be banished from the absurd comforts of my home where all is snug and neat and all those things at hand without which I could not bear being a man, where my enemies cannot reach me, which it was my life's work to build, to adorn, to perfect, to keep? (M 158)

Moran is not so much discussing the loss of a physical space as of a state of mind: safe space or homeplace and an integrated, teleological life-narrative. Despite his fatalism, however, Moran also feels a kind of existentialist responsibility for his situation:

I wondered... what compelled me to accept this commission. But I had already accepted it, I had given my word. Too late. Honour. It did not take me long to gild my impotence. (M 109).

Moran, in retrospect, is sufficiently reflexive to realise that his account of a choice he cannot

reverse is a kind of bad faith, and that in fact he was impotent to choose otherwise. Moran feels compelled to continue forwards, not by self-interest or by concern for Molloy, but by an anonymous 'cause', which he suggests 'would subsist, haunting the minds of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more' (M 119). This could be the authorial drive, or the pursuit of knowledge, or the compulsion to keep going, or the underlying flow of becoming.

*"No things but nameless things, no names but thingless names": Ignorance in Molloy*

If impotence is foregrounded in *Molloy*, ignorance is perhaps less visibly played-up than in *Watt*. Nevertheless, similar issues are raised regarding the character of rationality, with the recurrence of problems similar to Watt's "pot" problem. According to Iser, the narration of *Molloy* is '[e]mbedded in a process which Molloy would like to narrate but which he has to falsify' because of a language-reality gap. 'Narration sets out to convey something which cannot possibly be conveyed by it, and so any narrative representation must inevitably be a lie' (1974a: 166). Referring to Moran and the Unnamable, Barry suggests that Beckett sees speaking and erasing speech as analogous to sinning and redemption, suggesting that 'human language is, from a theological point of view, fallen' (M 150).

A contrast is established between a normal social experience, associated with the pre-decline Moran, in which meanings exist but are based on illusion, and a clearer perception deriving from the abject status of Molloy and the later Moran, in which illusions and meaning collapse:

And I knew this swamp a little, having risked my life in it, cautiously, on several occasions, at a period of my life richer in illusions than the one I am trying to patch together here, I mean richer in certain illusions, in others poorer. (M 77)

The 'swamp' here is similar to the 'mud' of *How It Is*, and suggests a zone of indistinction.

Presumably the illusions Molloy felt before, but had now lost, were those pertaining to the solidity and meaningfulness of reality; those in which he was poorer are more ambiguous, but perhaps refer to his voices and self-constructed deductions. Molloy becomes increasingly untrusting of his mental capacities. When relying on his mind, Molloy feels like 'one dying of cancer obliged to consult his dentist', since he did not know the way (M 28). It is not that he does not feel like a specialist, but that his specialism is irrelevant to the situation. At one point, Molloy wonders if he ever came back from a journey to sea, since he can remember setting out but not coming back (M 69).

A similar uncertainty, based on the possibility of unlikely contingencies, prevents Molloy from being sure of Lousse's sex (M 58). Yet another puzzle arises because the moon-phase suggests more time had passed than Molloy recalled, suggesting amnesia and unleashing another string of alternate explanations (M 40). It is perhaps revealing that these deductions, reminiscent of Watt's deductions in Knott's house, occur mainly in Lousse's house, when Molloy is in a state of relative release from his impotence, and which he ultimately abandons as insufficiently negative. One might speculate that Lousse's house is equivalent to Knott's house, and that it is a similar subsumption (in a total reality without remainder) which leads to the collapse of referentiality and the string of logical deductions. Whereas Watt embraces the experience of Knott's house, however, Molloy rejects the experience of Lousse's house as a delay on his road to his mother.

Further examples of Watt-like deductions appear, particularly in Lousse's house, in which Molloy engages in self-questioning, being unable to derive knowledge from mundane experience. For instance, he states:

But such as it was they had docked my beard. Perhaps they had dyed it too, I have no proof they had not. (M 36-7).

Most people would assume in this situation that the beard had not been dyed, since there was no evidence it had. They would then experience a radical discovery should they look in a mirror and find it dyed. Molloy rejects such assumptions of an 'unmarked' status, assuming all unknown facts to be equally possible. This is an example of a rational deduction in a context without evidence, implying that to assume they had not dyed it is as arbitrary as assuming they had. Later he adds:

For the moon was moving from left to right, or the room was moving from right to left, or both together perhaps, or both were moving from left to right, but the room not so fast as the moon, or from right to left, but the moon not so fast as the room. Can one speak of right and left in such circumstances? (M 37).

Two reference points are clear here, the literary convention whereby a realist author would (subjectively accurately, but scientifically inaccurately) say that the moon has moved from left to right, and the scientific view that both the earth and the moon are in motion. Beckett thus succeeds in pitting literary and scientific realism against one another. Unsatisfied with such deductions, he further multiplies unlikely but possible alternatives which involve the room moving.

In the other location where Molloy is relatively happy, the beach, similar deductions take over his thinking, in this case the well-known problem of the sucking-stones (M 69-72). The problem was how to ensure he sucked all the stones equally, a problem motivated by a desire for order, the absence of which causes anxiety: 'if in the cycles taken together utter confusion was bound to reign, at least within each cycle taken separately I could be easy in my mind' (M 73). This process leads to 'endless martingales all equally defective' (M 216). He eventually solves it by 'sacrificing the principle of trim' (M 71), a term for a realisation that he is failing to see additional options, the meaning of which only becomes clear later. The word 'trim' arises as an explanation for his failure before it is given a definitive meaning, providing an instance of an Evental term in a Badiouian sense, naming the place of the anomaly which will later alter the problem. A solution to

the problem provides 'peace of mind', whereas its absence provokes 'anxiety', with both the need for an equal distribution and the need for an order of sucking described as 'bodily need[s]' (M 74). In the end, Molloy was unable to find a sufficiently elegant solution, except to discard all the stones but one (M 75). A few pages afterwards, Molloy pursues similar deductions regarding how to move despite his stiffening and shortening legs (M 78).

The meaning of such permutations is similar to their role in *Watt*: they represent the attempts of a rationalist subject to reconstruct a meaningful world. O'Hara (1982) interprets the permutations and deductions as ways of stalling Molloy's journey. This is likely the case, since they are concentrated in the periods of rest, rather than the periods of becoming-impotent. It is as if the suspension of becoming-impotent requires instead an attempt to uphold the regime of meaning so as to ward it off. Moran is also portrayed as filling his life with activity in order to postpone his duty or compulsion (M 127), in a manner similar to Molloy. The role of meaning is here explicit:

Let me tell you something, my sight was better at the seaside!... And not only did I see more clearly, but I had less difficulty in saddling with a name the rare things I saw. (M 220)

In Molloy's world, the relative comfort of the less impotence-inducing spaces seems also to produce a situation where meaning becomes possible.

The inadequate nature of meaning renders ignorance paradoxically desirable. The implication that meaning is a product of falsity is further suggested by the statement: 'I think that all that is false may more readily be reduced, to notions clear and distinct, distinct from all other notions' (M 83). In another passage, he says: 'I began to think, that is to say to listen harder' (M 61). This somewhat perplexing statement perhaps suggests that Molloy experiences thoughts as if they were voices to which he must listen. This position is a criticism of the self-knowing self of rationalist theory. In another episode, after realising that going in a straight line in a forest leads to

going in a circle, Molloy instead tries to go in a circle (M 86). This is at once perverse and impeccably logical. Several scholars have interpreted this as a critique of Descartes' idea of walking in a straight line to escape a forest (Mooney, 1978; Ackerley, 2004: 38-9). More broadly, Mooney (1978) portrays Molloy as a 'suffering Cartesian', who is drawn into scepticism because Cartesian rationalism is unable to provide order. Similarly, Ackerley (2004: 42) suggests that *Molloy* takes the Cartesian self down to an abject level.

The relationship between knowledge and ignorance takes unusual twists and turns in *Molloy*. Discussing Lousse's dog, Molloy observes:

Funny she should have chosen, to bury her dog beneath, the only tree I can identify, with certainty. (M 35)

It is unusual that Molloy can identify *anything* decisively, still less 'with certainty', but this reference is quite easily interpreted as a symbol: the past is buried beneath meaning, and Molloy, as Lousse's new pet, would similarly be subsumed within meaning. Moran, meanwhile, admits that he would earlier have engaged in logical deductions of the exact content of his meals, but was now content to recognise his shortage (M 156). This is part of a broader process of rejection of rationalism which Moran undergoes. O'Hara (1982) suggests that Moran kills a 'pathetic, lonely version' of himself in an attack on emotion by rationality, and subsequently abandons his faith in reason. Begam (1997: 102) suggests that Moran is still within rationalism, able to make clear statements, whereas Molloy is not. He suggests that Molloy is seeking a 'pre-Cartesian' condition of union with the mother (Begam, 1997: 106). However, Moran performs typically Beckettian deductions towards the end of his story, focusing on whether to use his umbrella, despite its uselessness, or continue walking, a question focused, as Moran admits, on his habit or routine, not on functionality (M 179-80). Further, Moran admits that he uses rationality as an escape from dilemmas:

I did as when I could not sleep. I wandered in my mind, slowly, noting every detail of the

labyrinth, its paths as familiar as those of my garden and yet ever new (M 110).

This process seems to lead to a decay of meaning, arriving ultimately at an existentialist position of responsibility:

And if I had not hastily sunk back into my darkness I might have gone to the extreme of conjuring away the chief too and regarding myself as solely responsible for my wretched existence. (M 112)

Molloy manages to survive despite his ignorance through intuition. Riding a bicycle is possible for Molloy only when he does not 'try to think riding' – if he does so, he loses his balance and falls (M 23). This suggests that rational thought interferes with intuitive knowledge. However, while there are many things Molloy can do without thinking, 'going to my mother was not one of them. My feet, you see, never took me to my mother unless they received a definite order to do so' (M 27). Intuitive knowledge is insufficient to accomplish Molloy's quest.

The slippage between rational and empirical bases for knowledge-claims occurs in *Molloy* as well as in *Watt*. For instance, Moran seems to confuse empirical knowledge and rational deduction:

I sought in my mind, where all I need is to be found, what treasured possession he was likely to have about him (M 136).

If I had heard of other birds that cry and sing at night, I should have listened to them too. (M 159)

On another occasion, however, he discovers 'something of which my mind had been powerless to inform me, namely that my keys were no longer there' (M 159), and on another, that 'my straw hat which I thought was on my head' was on the ground (M 160). Meanwhile, the pressure from a reality uncompliant with his will is such as to generate mental collapse:

I stood up and the leg of my trousers fell down over my ankle. The inertia of things is

enough to drive one literally insane. I let out a bellow (M 324).

Furthermore, Moran attributes decay to an outer, empirical source:

[My son] had no suspicion of what life could do to you. I too was innocent. But I knew it.  
(M 146)

Yet the regime of meaning has unstable foundations. For instance, Gaber (the Archangel Gabriel?) carries messages without understanding their content, and if he reflects on them, his conclusions are 'extravagantly wrong' (M 110). Since Moran's worldview depends on Gaber's master, this throws serious doubt on its foundations.

The presentation of ignorance in relation to rationality in *Molloy* is also conveyed in ways which echo the 'pot' incident in *Watt*. Stewart refers to these passages in *Molloy* as 'slow-to-signify moments' and likens them to Derrida's theory of deferral (2006: 102), while Hassan suggests that Moran and Molloy discover that 'language subsumes the futility of human existence' (1967: 157). One example uses the wave-particle controversy to show the gap between reality and knowledge:

Yes, even then, when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. I say that now, but after all what do I know about then, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. (M 29)

This largely repeats the 'pot' analysis: things can no longer be adequately named, names no longer have adequate references, and the effect is a disintegration of meaning, which for Beckett is analogous to death.

Similar passages abound. Another pot-like incident occurs in Lousse's house:

And my eye too, the seeing one, must have been ill-connected with the spider, for I found it hard to name what was mirrored there, often quite distinctly. (M 49)

While this may refer simply to amnesia with regard to nouns, the reference to disconnection is

strongly reminiscent of the small gap between the object and its concept which is also found in the pot incident. Still another such gap occurs regarding a space Molloy encounters:

At the end there were two recesses, no, that's not the word, opposite each other

I entered one of the alcoves, wrong again (M 60)

The things, whatever they are, are not recesses or alcoves, though these are perhaps the most approximately accurate words for them. Language seems to be haunted by a necessary lack or excess:

For I always say either too much or too little, which is a terrible thing for a man with a passion for truth like me. (M 32).

Molloy, like Watt, has a passion for truth, but this passion is frustrated by the impossibility of accurately depicting reality. In other cases, speaking is taken to be necessarily lying:

I am merely complying with the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace.

For what really happened was quite different. (M 89)

Or which I express without sinking to the level of oratio recta, but by means of other figures quite as deceitful, as for example, It seemed to me that, etc., or, I had the impression that, etc., for it seemed to me nothing at all, and I had no impression of any kind, but simply somewhere something had changed (M 89).

In another case, which also demonstrates Beckett's grotesque fascination with the excremental, the gap between the impotent or ill body and the normal body is taken to undermine the possibility of using conventional names:

I give you my word, I cannot piss... But my prepuce, sat verbum, oozes urine, day and night... Can one speak of pissing, under these conditions? (M 82)

This condition is in a pot-like relation to urine, in that it is closer to urination/pissing than anything else, but nevertheless does not accord exactly with it, perhaps because the distinction between pissing and not pissing, the acts of a subject, disappear in an extra-subjective flow. The formulation

'can one speak of X, under these conditions' recurs periodically during the novel, and indicates the insufficiency of language to particular situations. In short, however truthful Molloy may be, he ends up spreading falsehoods because of the irreducibility of reality to language. The 'pot-like' relation of things to their names, in which the name is never quite the thing, prevents direct and literal communication and renders all statements false.

This combination of the grotesque with the 'pot' effect is repeated in an incident in Molloy's mother's house:

The room smelt of ammonia, oh not merely of ammonia, but of ammonia, ammonia. (M 14)

What does the second repetition signal here? Perhaps it is an intensifier, suggesting double the effect, or a further indication of the implicit meaning that the smell is of urine, not simply ammonia. More likely in a Beckettian context, it may suggest that the meaning of the word 'ammonia' is insufficient to the smell, which is particular and unique, establishing a sensory memory irreducible to the broader generic concept, as familiar experiences often do. That this familiarity impacts on the smell of urine is a typical instance of Beckett's combination of the grotesque or abject with the intimate or sublime, similar to Watt's love of rats. The phrase 'ammonia, ammonia' is also reminiscent of 'Pot, pot', as if the ammonia, unlike the pot, *can* be identified with its essence.

While Molloy's story is marked by ignorance from the start, Moran undergoes a becoming-ignorant alongside his becoming-impotent. At the start of Moran's story, we are told:

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. (M 95).

At the end of his story, we are told:

Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining. (M 184)

This apparent contradiction offers several possible meanings. One is that a 'realistic' author may

use the present tense, incorrectly, to describe past events, or a fictional author to describe imagined events. Another is that words like 'midnight' and 'rain' are, like 'pot', abstractions which do not capture the *unheimlich* experience of a Beckettian character, and/or the particularity of each instance. Somewhat earlier, or later, Moran, like Hamm in *Endgame*, is unable to confirm such things for himself, relying instead on his son, in a master-slave dialectic typical of Beckettian pseudo-couples:

Go to the window and tell me if it's still raining. He went to the window and told me it was still raining. (M 108).

Moran undergoes a transition from a realist structure of knowledge and presentation to a Beckettian structure. Similar changes can be seen in the style of Moran's part of the book. For instance, the early part of Moran's account is divided into short, clear paragraphs and sentences. This presentation breaks down cumulatively as the narrative progresses. The process of undergoing a shift in perceptions is recounted by Moran, when he reports:

The colour and weight of the world were changing already, soon I would have to admit I was anxious. (M 100).

The completeness of identity and reality begins to fray, as 'fit' is undermined:

The sight of my moustache, as always, annoyed me. It wasn't quite right. It suited me...

But it ought to have suited me better. (M 123)

In addition to bodily attributes, this process affects external connections:

either my house had nothing to do with the kind of nothingness in the midst of which I stumbled or else the whole of my little property was to blame. (M 128)

He relates to the real Molloy much as Watt does to the pot:

Between the Molloy I stalked within me thus and the true Molloy... the resemblance cannot have been great. I was annexing, perhaps already, without my knowing it, to my private Molloy, elements of the Molloy described by Gaber. The fact was there were three, no, four

Molloys. (M 119)

The fourth, apparently, is that of Youdi (God), and the suggestion here is that an external impression is intertextual, combining one's own impression of a person with others' impressions, and perhaps with the social place of the person (as seen from a God's-eye view). The resultant image is never identical to the actual person, and in Beckett's worldview, is actually an immense distance from the subjectively experienced self.

At another point, Moran suggests that he picked up 'my haversack, I nearly wrote my bagpipes' (M 131), suggesting an emerging difficulty with names. On still another occasion he twice repeats that he is and is not ill:

He did not know I was ill. Besides I was not ill.

But then he would have seen I was ill. Not that I was exactly ill. (M 148)

The second formulation suggests that this statement (and similar self-contradictions) express a "pot-like" situation where the term "ill" is both the best available, and not exactly right. Later he expresses frustration that his son says he is feeling well when not asked, whereas he, in contrast, says nothing when asked (M 150). A more literal parallel occurs when Moran says of his son's cap that it 'lay plumb on his big blond skull as precise as a lid on a pot' (M 135), suggesting that the human mind is as vulnerable to the loss of meaning as Watt's pot. It also suggests the ill-fitting hats common to many of Beckett's protagonists, by way of continuity and differentiation.

*"To be incapable of motion... that must be something!" Negation in Molloy*

To an extent, Molloy's impotence can be seen as a proactive negation. Weller (2010: 119) suggests that Molloy resists an absurd world through passive resistance. However, many of Molloy's gestures seem less conscious than this implies. Nevertheless, some instances of negation

occur. Molloy calls his mother 'Mag', because the letter G abolishes the 'ma' (M 14); *mag* is also a Gaelic particle used in traditional naming. Other passages suggest that Molloy and/or Moran is pursuing impotence as a goal. For instance, Moran suggests that it is difficult to be impotent:

Unable, unable, it's easy to talk about being unable, whereas in reality nothing is more difficult. Because of the will I suppose, which the least opposition seems to lash into a fury.  
(M 145)

Hence, impotence as a fixed state is difficult to reach, and requires a proactive process of becoming-impotent through the exhaustion of possibilities.

This desire to negate and to become-impotent runs up sharply against the norms and interferences of a welfarist social infrastructure. The following passage is particularly relevant here:

Let me tell you this, when social workers offer you, free, gratis and for nothing, something to hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. The Salvation Army are no better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defence that I know of... To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. (M 21)

Beckett is here referring to the propensity in modern societies which Foucault terms biopolitical: the replacement of the sovereign power to 'kill or let live' with a new power to 'make live or let die' (Foucault, 2004). The subject in such a regime becomes unable to die or feel pain by their own volition or by self-induced neglect, because a regime of compulsory welfare steps in to command survival, even though the survival it encourages is often miserable. The reference to the Salvation Army is both literal – this organisation provides charity similar to social work – and figurative, in that it suggests that the biopolitical project also contaminates ideas of religious salvation. The project of forced salvation is counterposed to the desire to become-impotent, or to die.

Another passage suggesting an affirmative project of becoming-impotent, pursued through means of negation, compares religion to anthropology:

What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not. But my ideas on this subject were always horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and the meaning of being beyond me. Oh I've tried everything. In the end it was magic that had the honour of my ruins... And the thing in ruins... It is in any case a place devoid of mystery, deserted by magic, because devoid of mystery. (M 37-8).

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it repeats the anti-humanist claim that humanism has placed man in the place of God, and thus repeated for man the antinomies of religion. Secondly, it suggests that the natures of man and God are both unknowable. The reference to exhaustion ("I've tried everything") is revealing. So, too, is the sense that man is 'no better than God', a strange turn of phrase given God's usual superiority, but completely logical in that one normally assumes that one knows men better than God, and that God's inaccessibility is a special case. Thirdly, Molloy is living in 'ruins' – the remnants of existence after the loss of secure meanings, the deaths of God and man – and this creates a simultaneous necessity and possibility of magic. Magic is the only available explanation since meaning has collapsed, but the absence of meaning also makes magic seem absent, since there is no 'mystery', only automatism. One might speculate that exhaustion, combined with knowledge of the impossibility of knowledge, eliminates 'mystery' as the possibility of knowledge which is contingently absent, but possible in principle. This in turn replaces magic, which in some respects is humanistic in its inference of causality, with an experience of incomprehensible, inhuman forces.

On the same topic, Beckett establishes a positive affinity for ruins, and the possibilities they

offer:

For what possible end to these wastes where true light never was, nor any upright thing, nor any true foundation, but only these leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away, beneath a sky without memory of morning or hope of night. (M 38)

The ruins are here portrayed as endless, hopeless, and reflecting an asymptotic state of decay, with neither life ("memory of morning") nor a definite end ("hope of night"). It is then added that the ruins are the site in which voices come (M 38-9), establishing a continuity between the empty, external imperative or compulsion and the zone of meaninglessness. Ruins become a site for becoming-other because they are not constrained by striated space. They are unfounded, and thus in a state of becoming in which *bricolage* becomes possible, outside homogeneous empty time. It is in this context that one should read Moran's statement that he wanted to avoid 'proper shelters', preferring his umbrella, or else 'a ruin' (M 180).

There are further suggestions through the novel of a deliberate process of negation. For instance, one passage reads:

I was bent double over a heap of muck, in the hope of finding something to disgust me forever with eating (M 57)

This passage suggests that Molloy actively *seeks* to become alienated from sensations and experiences. A more detailed consideration of this question arises in relation to an object Molloy has taken from Lousse. The reason for his attachment to this object is that he 'could never understand what possible purpose it could serve', while also being sure it was a functional and not an aesthetic object (M 63-4). This allows him to:

puzzle over it endlessly without the least risk. For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker. It is then

that the true division begins, of twenty-two by seven for example, and the pages fill with the true ciphers at last. (M 64)

The risk here is possibly that of succumbing to meaning or functionality, disrupting the pursuit of an empty mind. It is here suggested that ignorance is actively pursued, so as to obtain a meditative state conducive to 'true' writing. This is comparable to Moran's bees.

At the end of the story, it is suggested that Molloy has successfully completed an exhaustion of possibilities:

Well, I suppose you have to try everything once, succour included, to get a complete picture of the resources of their planet. (M 93)

Similarly, Moran ultimately concludes: 'I could no longer be bothered with these wretched trifles which had once been my delight' (M 168). In both cases, it seems the character has succeeded in failing, rather than failing to fail.

Impotence seems, in *Molloy*, to preclude pleasure. For instance, the narrator does not refer to activities he enjoys, but to those which 'have given me only a mild pain in the balls', which seems to amount to the same thing (M 12-13). He enjoyed blowing the bicycle horn, but 'I blow it no more... because it has gone dumb', and because bicycles and cars 'have no horns nowadays' (M 13). The idea that the horn cannot be blown is suggestive of anhedonia, the loss of the ability to enjoy, and the reference to the elimination of horns suggests that modernity is the source of anhedonia. Moran enjoys his bees prior to his abjection, but they are dead when he returns. On the other hand, action remains possible. Molloy's poor condition does not prevent his resisting:

People imagine, because you are old, poor, crippled, terrified, that you can't stand up for yourself, and generally speaking that is so. But given favourable conditions, a feeble and awkward assailant, in your own class what, and a lonely place, and you have a good chance

of showing what stuff you are made of. (M 86)

The colloquialism 'showing what stuff you are made of' is somewhat ironic here, given that it is applied in contradiction with the condition of bodily impotence which defines Molloy's 'stuff'.

However, there are also passages which suggest that becoming-impotent is itself satisfying, perhaps on a level of drive which is deeper than that of pleasure. One passage clarifies the affirmative project underlying Moran's becoming-impotent:

When of the innumerable attitudes adopted unthinkingly by the normal man all are precluded but two or three, then these are enhanced... You explore it as never before and find it possessed of unsuspected delights. In short it becomes infinite. (M 146)

And it would not surprise me if the great classical paralyses were to offer analogous and perhaps even still more unspeakable satisfactions. To be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something! ... And mute into the bargain! And perhaps as deaf as a post! And who knows as blind as a bat! And likely as not your memory a blank! And just enough brain intact to allow you to exult! And to dread death like a regeneration. (M 146)

This suggests a motivation for the project of becoming-impotent: it allows intensified enjoyment through a focus on whatever minimum of capacity remains, and through this process of relearning what a body can do, it offers access to the infinite. It may also stem from the rationalist desire to separate the brain from the body, from Murphy's secession from the 'outer world', and from the hatred of the body which Beckett attributes to Molloy, in imitation of classical and Christian attitudes. As a result of this position, the experience of decaying, ageing, or collapsing is also like 'clawing towards a light... that I had once known and long denied' (M 155), and Moran speaks of going outside to 'savour my exhaustion' (M 170).

In the secondary literature, such aspects lead to views of becoming-impotent in *Molloy* as

partially or wholly successful. O'Hara (1982) suggests that Molloy is almost successful, but resists the call of his unconscious to seek his anima. 'In place of a thorough-going change of Self Molloy accepts only an endless decay' (O'Hara, 1982). Kaelin (1981) echoes this reading of Molloy as a quest for selfhood. For instance, he suggests that Moran murders his old self (1981: 96). Similarly, from a poststructuralist perspective, Begam suggests that Molloy undergoes a self-disintegration of barriers to his destiny (1997: 116).

To conclude, therefore, both Molloy and Moran undergo a becoming-impotent, which correlates in Moran's case with a loss of standard referents of meaning – religion, empirical reality and rationality (as well as social relations with his son). Ignorance is portrayed here in 'pot-like' terms, with a small gap separating objects from their names and rendering the process of naming simultaneously reflexive, insufficient and difficult. The boundary between self and world breaks down as a result of the retreat to the inner world. This process seems, on some level, to have been chosen, yet also destined. It reflects a project of intensification through reduction and exhaustion. The process is delayed by various stops in places within an Order of Things: Lousse's house, Moran's house, the beach. It is intensified by movement, and impelled by a recurring drive. Moran's process seems to be focused on the quest for Molloy, his shadow, a quest which is ultimately a becoming-Molloy. Molloy is focused on the return to his mother's room, which is simultaneously a loss of movement and a fusion with the pre-subjective field. Overall, Beckett constructs impotence and ignorance as desirable responses to forms of knowledge and power which are inauthentic, and are based on illusions and sadism.

## Chapter 5: Impotence and Ignorance in *Malone Dies*

The Trilogy involves a series of mutations in Beckett's style, with a cumulative increase in the degrees of impotence and ignorance of his characters. It exists on the cusp between Beckett's earlier and later literature. *Malone Dies* is one of the texts which performs narrative permutations (Begam, 1997: 143), associating it with Deleuze's Language I. However, it has also been argued that the work is distinct from *Murphy*, *Watt* and *Molloy* in that it is creating, rather than reporting (Toyama, 1983): the authorial function is more centrally visible throughout the work, which thus combines narration with authorial introspection (by the fictitious author Malone), rather than focusing on storytelling throughout. Malone 'speaks as though the world were absent' (Toyama, 1983), yet is still far more of this world than the narrators of *The Unnamable* and *How It Is*.

### *'A little creature in my image': Selfhood and authorship in Malone Dies*

The authorial function and Malone's subjectivity in relation to it receive considerable discussion in this novel. There is a gesture of authorial reflexivity when Malone/Beckett insists: 'I shall not watch myself die, that would spoil everything' (MD 3). The character's death, perhaps, would spoil the autographical character of the novel, establishing as it would the separation of author and character, and the closure of a typical novel. However, Malone suggests that he shall wait for death, and '[w]hile waiting I shall tell myself stories, if I can. They will not be the same kind of stories as hitherto, that is all' (MD 4). The purpose of the stories is to give 'great satisfaction' to the author (MD 4). He states that he will say nothing that is not false, or at least 'calculated to leave me in doubt as to my real intentions' (MD 33).

One sees here the idea of deliberate pursuit of negation as a means of achieving a minimalist beauty. The authorial function is here portrayed as a distractive or time-passing activity pursued by individuals in a process of death. But how will they be different from before? The ambiguity here is whether Beckett is simply distancing Malone from the traditional novel (in that *all* Beckett's novels are not "as hitherto"), or establishing that Malone will progress further down the process of asymptotic collapse than Murphy, Watt, or Molloy/Moran. *Malone Dies* is, indeed, structurally different from Beckett's earlier works. While the sections dealing with Macmann and Saposcat are broadly similar to *Molloy* and *Watt*, long sections of the novel are written in the first person, and deal with the experience of the purported author of the intervening segments. This differs from earlier works, in which the authorial sections are largely contained at the beginning and end.

The author and character are established at opposite ends of a binary associated with free will and determinism. The author, according to Malone, is able to command characters deterministically, like a puppet-master:

If I said, Now I need a hunchback, immediately one came running, proud as punch of his fine hunch that was going to perform. It did not occur to him that I might have to ask him to undress (MD 4).

A character such as Sapo is thus a doll or mannequin, as is common in Beckett's symbolisation of the authorial function (Begam, 1997: 132). He is thus 'not a kindred soul' but a 'technical convenience' (1997: 132). Yet this gesture of summoning seems inadequate for Malone, leaving him 'alone, in the dark' (MD 4). Nakedness here is probably allegorical of subjective destitution: the character "undresses" his false pretensions of being a human being, to reveal the authorial function behind, or the emptiness of being, or the field of becoming. Malone is said by readers to be unable to control his creations or bring them to life, and is described as falling back into his own present as a result of this (Toyama, 1983).

Malone then commits imperatively to refuse his refusal to play, and from now on, to 'never do anything... but play', or rather, to 'play a great part of the time'. He suspects he may fail as before, and find himself alone, 'without anything to play with', in which case 'I shall play with myself' (MD 4). The scatological pun (to play alone, but also to masturbate) is suggestive of a structure of desire in which the activity of play does not require an other. Begam suggests that this play is to occur 'in the past', but that Malone repeatedly falls back into the present (1997: 127). Similarly, Toyama (1983) argues that the characters are attempts at authorship, which represent through fiction because direct representations are necessarily false.

Authorial intent as a kind of God-like creation recurs later in the novel:

Yes, a little creature, I shall try and make a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image, no matter what I say. And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it. Then be alone a long time, unhappy, not knowing what my prayer should be nor to whom. (MD 53)

Here again, Beckett seems resigned in advance to failure. The most notable aspect of this passage is how the authorial process is deemed to produce mirror-images of the author, despite his intent or declarations to the contrary. This is frustrating to Beckett/Malone, who is seeking not to be "alone", and therefore trying to create or summon difference. There are also two distinct religious myths combined here: the Christian theme of God creating humanity in his image, and the ancient Roman legend of Saturn, father of the gods, eating his children, which entails returning the universe to chaos. Beckett thus constructs the authorial stance as that of an insufficient God, seeking to escape loneliness and solipsism through creation, failing to do so, and returning to chaos.

The failure of authorial creation is established through its negative function, and ultimate return to the subjectivity of the author:

What tedium. And I call this playing. I wonder if I am not talking yet again about myself.

Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject? (MD 13)

The author is here dragged back to his own subjectivity as the infrastructure beneath his characters. The reference to tedium suggests that the reason for this is a kind of entrapment in repetition, related to anhedonia (it is maybe because of unresolved blockages that a relation outside the self is impossible). The idea of 'lying' here implies that all novel-writing is fictitious, but also, following Watt's pot-example, that all meaning-construction as such is fictitious. There is also the implication that, since all of reality is a single field of becoming, Malone will always be talking about himself, as his self fuses into the whole of reality. At the same time, the act of playing is associated with enforced sociality:

The grown-ups pursued me, the just, caught me, beat me, hounded me back into the round, the game, the jollity. (MD 20)

Malone then suggests that he cannot live himself, or does not know what living is, but he tries unsuccessfully to cause another to live in order to fill this gap (MD 20). Having decided he will fail, he now acts with the intent of failing (MD 20). Writing is thus a game in which one cannot succeed, but into which one is compelled, either by outer or inner forces.

Malone's absence takes him beyond previous Beckettian protagonists. Gendron argues that writing subjects are 'nothing more than language' for Beckett, with a name such as Malone being a mere word (Gendron, 2004: 58-9). The work was originally to be titled *L'Absent*, and the name "Malone" seems to stem from "M alone", the protagonist originally being designated "M". The work has thus been interpreted in terms of the difficulties in expressing the view that one is absent (Katz, 1999: 96). However, Toyama (1983) argues that Malone fails in his attempt to find a personality unable to survive in the world, instead undergoing decomposition, while Tønning (2009: 111) suggests that the essential Self which Malone seeks is actually the authorial function, and thus

self-defeating.

Subjectivity and creativity are closely associated in Beckett's work. In one passage, Malone suggests that the purpose of writing is to preserve memory:

I did not want to write, but I had to resign myself to it in the end. It is in order to know where I have got to, where he has got to. At first I did not write, I just said the thing. Then I forgot what I had said. A minimum of memory is indispensable, if one is to live really. (MD 33)

The confusion of subjects (I, he) is notable in this passage, as is the compulsion to write, when at first Malone did not want to. He seems to wish to create meaning, to situate himself in space or thought, through writing. In another passage, Malone reflects on the continuities established in his writing between himself and his characters:

And yet I write about myself with the same pencil and in the same exercise-book as about him. It is because it is no longer I, I must have said so long ago, but another whose life is just beginning. (MD 33)

It seems that Malone here expresses a feeling not only of death, but of a death-rebirth cycle in which writing is also self-transformation.

The author is also a kind of god of death for his characters. Malone says of his characters that:

I watched them come and go, then I killed them, or took their place, or fled... I stop everything and wait. Sapo stands on one leg, motionless, his strange eyes closed. The turmoil of the day freezes in a thousand absurd postures. The little cloud drifting before their glorious sun will darken the earth as long as I please. (MD 19)

The author is here portrayed as both God and puppet-master, showing the utterly determined and

contingent nature of characters, and their consequent inadequacy as representations of people.

Later, after his apparent "death", Malone becomes less confident of his control over his characters, writing: 'for Macmann, thank God, he's still there' (MD 58), as if his own character might wander off from where he was left.

The relationship between Malone and previous Beckettian characters is kept deliberately ambiguous. Malone explains his situation as follows:

One day I found myself here, in the bed. Having probably lost consciousness somewhere, I benefit by a hiatus in my recollections, not to be resumed until I recovered my senses, in this bed. ... But perhaps I was stunned with a blow, on the head, in a forest perhaps, yes, now that I speak of a forest I vaguely remember a forest. (MD 7)

This creates a deliberate parallel with Molloy, whose story ends with his losing consciousness while on his way to a room with a bed. As with many such parallels, the indications are such as to flow in multiple directions (as Malone also claims to have authored Molloy). Perhaps Molloy "returns" to Malone, the author, when his story ends. The construction of the last sentence is ambiguous, as it also suggests a constructed memory in which Malone imagines the forest and then "remembers" it based on his suppositions, similar to the self-fulfilling deductions and imaginings in Beckett's other novels. Other passages draw parallels with other characters:

A boot, for example, can a boot roll behind a piece of furniture? And yet I see only one boot. (MD 22)

While this is only indicative, and there are many possible explanations for the missing boot, this statement creates continuities between Malone and Watt, who, it will be recalled, wore one boot and one shoe. There is a further case regarding Macmann's hat:

And in theory his hat should have followed him, seeing it was tied to his coat, and the string twisted itself about his neck (MD 74)

Macmann here shares an eccentricity with Moran and Molloy. As in other novels, Beckett plays with intertextuality as a way to undermine the solid reality of his protagonists, and to create multiple paths forward and back in time among them.

Other indications suggest that Malone is the culmination of the evolution of the Beckettian characters. Malone states that '[t]he search for myself has ended' (MD 24). This makes sense relative to Molloy and Moran, who in a sense are searching for themselves (Moran for his past/future self Molloy, and Molloy for his maternal origins). The search seems to have ended, however, not in identity but in subjective destitution and near-nonexistence. He refers to a life he could never manage, 'through pride, or pettiness, but I don't think so', which is associated with 'the fields I so long to love' and other idyllic images of clouds and snowflakes (MD 24). This absent life resonates with the skin-ego analysis, in which Beckett is unable to obtain sufficient distance from a parental envelope to connect directly to the world.

Another framing of the relationship to other characters pictures Malone, or rather, who or whatever is speaking through him, as the author beneath the other characters, similar to the later idea of 'delegates' in *The Unnamable*:

But let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise... Then it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave. (MD 63)

One of the notable aspects of this passage is that the author's current proper name, Malone, is included in a list with what seem here to be fictional characters. The speculation that writing may continue beyond the grave (or after the death of the author) harks back to Beckett's earliest fiction and the idea of a novel written from purgatory. That it may go on beyond the grave, like Echo's voice, is suggested a few pages later:

And when (for example) you die, it is too late, you have been waiting too long, you are no longer sufficiently alive to be able to stop. (MD 69)

Life is here portrayed both as a capacity for free will and as a habitual state of being. Since it takes an act of will to break out of a habitual state of being, Beckett implies that someone who has lost their willpower through impotence and asymptotic approach to death is unable to achieve the act of dying.

In the same context, Beckett refers to characters 'killed' during his novels:

How many have I killed, hitting them on the head or setting fire to them? Off-hand I can only think of four, all unknowns, I never knew anyone. (MD 64)

The reader is here encouraged to count the characters killed in Beckett's novels, and whether they are indeed anonymous. (The stranger – perhaps Molloy – killed by Moran is the clearest example). Alternatively, the 'deaths' may be those of characters abandoned – though it would be strange that Malone could only remember four, after listing five (admittedly including himself). Beckett provides deniability in that the characters are 'unknowns' in the special sense that he 'never knew anyone' – either because the characters are fictional, or because one cannot adequately 'know' another person anyway. Later, Malone/Beckett writes:

Moll. I'm going to kill her. (MD 94)

He means that he is about to write an account of her death. It is unsurprising that Beckett is attracted to metaphors of writing as negation, and it is also not entirely unusual to refer to an author 'killing off' a character. Beckett, however, seems to take this particularly literally, portraying characters as creations who are literally killed. In his particular world-view, this is not, of course, a bad thing, since it serves to free characters from their suffering.

The phenomenon of the death of characters takes on further complications at the culmination of the novel. Here, Beckett/Malone has Lemuel kill Malone and the other patients, or maybe

Malone kill Lemuel (MD 118-19). This has been interpreted as a symbolisation of authorial intervention, with characters always killed by the author rather than dying (Begam, 1997: 146-7). The end of the book, however, suggests a failing of the authorial function which also prevents the characters from killing or dying. Lemuel 'raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry', but 'he will not hit anyone any more' (MD 119), as the narrative descends into poetic nonsense, in which Lemuel's hammer, Malone/Beckett's pencil, Cartesian light, and the eponymous Beckettian stick are rendered part of an equivalential series (MD 119). It seems Lemuel is unable to kill, and the blood cannot dry, because the novel has reached its end and the characters are forever frozen:

never anything

there

any more (MD 119).

This ending is taken by some readers as indicating a failure to encapsulate experiences into a single signifier (Hill, 1990).

Beckett is also careful to indicate authorial inadequacy and display the process of writing and rewriting, undermining the usual illusion of the omnipotent author. At one point, to avoid 'darkness' in his story, Beckett/Malone says he 'must try and discover, when I have time to think about it quietly, why Sapo was not expelled when he so richly deserved to be' (MD 14). This is taken by Toyama as evidence of a lack of authorial control, since such a detail should be easy to establish (Toyama, 1983). In a similar way, Beckett/Malone uses self-corrections to show the authorial process at work:

Sapo had no friends – no, that won't do.

Sapo was on good terms with his little friends, though they did not exactly love him. (MD 14)

Sapo loved nature, took an interest

This is awful. (MD 15)

Writing is also altered as the author goes along:

Then Lemuel took it from him and struck him over and over again, no, that won't work, then Lemuel called a keeper by the name of Pat (MD 105).

These passages reveal the authorial process, displaying the production of a text in a way which is usually invisible in its final form.

The authority of Malone as author is also undermined by his reflexive statements. In another passage, Malone writes that he feels he must have fallen asleep and dropped his pencil and exercise-book. He says that he hopes 'this is not too great a distortion of the truth' (MD 34), although it seems to be a performative contradiction: if he had lost his book and pencil, how could he write this experience? In yet another passage, Malone stops writing mid-sentence and then starts again by saying that he has taken 'forty-eight hours (see above) of intermittent efforts' to re-obtain his pencil (MD 49), implying that, on this occasion, no writing occurs in the absence of the proper tools.

*"If life was a possible thing": Impotence in Malone Dies*

Malone's impotence reaches depths unprecedented in Beckett's previous novels. He is close to death, and frequently questions whether he is alive or dead. He opens the novel with a comment on his forthcoming death, already prefigured in the title:

I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all (MD 3).

As with *Molloy*, the character questions his existence within a process of dying which never seems to reach its *telos*. However, the nature of this approach to death is ambiguous. Malone feels he will be dead shortly, but is unable to distinguish this feeling from similar feelings 'that have abused me ever since I was born' (MD 3). As Malone becomes asymptotically closer to death, he constantly experiences the presence of a limit he never reaches. In other passages, death is treated as cumulative, as when Malone observes, 'I have sufficiently perished in this room to know...' (MD 79). In another passage, he questions whether a weakness is passing or fatal:

I don't feel very well, perhaps I'm going, that would surprise me. It is a passing weakness, everyone has experienced that. One weakens, then it passes, one's strength comes back and one resumes. (MD 80)

Readers of Beckett have interpreted death in terms of disempowerment. Shaw argues that Malone's dwindling power can be seen in phallic terms, linked to his shrinking pencil (Shaw, 2010: 57).

Similarly, Nixon argues that Malone is threatened with erasure should he lose his last possessions, his notebook and pencil. This is because Beckett's work conflates life with literary creation (Nixon, 2009: 23). One can also add that death does not seem to be final:

For he knew that the dead and buried tend, contrary to what one might expect, to rise to the surface, in which they resemble the drowned. (MD 39)

Hence, death is an ambiguous and reversible state, which may amount to a continuation of the ongoing process of asymptotic decline.

Death seems to be a blessing to Malone, yet he also questions whether he is alive. In an early instance of this line of reflection, Malone states:

The truth is, if I did not feel myself dying, I could well believe myself dead, expiating my sins, or in one of heaven's mansions. But I feel at last the sands are running out, which

would not be the case if I were in heaven, or in hell. (MD 8)

Hence, it is the experience of movement (towards death) which determines for Malone that he is alive rather than dead. Malone should be able to decide between Heaven or Hell based on his degree of suffering. Later, he similarly refuses, apparently for lack of time, to distinguish between misfortunes and blessings (MD 33). His inability to decide suggests either that he has lost the ability to feel, or that his state is ambiguous between pleasure and pain. Malone's ambiguous state between life and death has been interpreted in terms of the inconceivability of death (Critchley, 1998: 118). In an early version of *Malone Dies*, Malone speculates that he is 'dead already and that all continues more or less as when I was not', because he 'expired in the forest, or even earlier' – a possibility he would be disappointed to confirm (MD 126), presumably because it means his suffering and his writing are both pointless. But his 'horse-sense' tells him he is still alive, and it is confirmed by observations of his possessions, feeding, the sky and so on (MD 126).

Malone undergoes a possible change in status during the novel, when he experiences an event similar to death. Even after this apparent death, Malone concludes that he is alive:

For my stories are all in vain, deep down I never doubted, even the days abounding in proof to the contrary, that I was still alive and breathing in and out the air of the earth. (MD 61)

But have I not perhaps just passed away? Malone, Malone, no more of that. (MD 79)

A few lines to remind me that I too subsist. (MD 114)

This has been interpreted as a case of Malone being caught between real and authentic deaths (Kaelin, 1981: 107). The theme of two deaths is found in both existentialist and Lacanian literature, and symbolises the difference between physical death (which is continuous with the social and natural order) and existential or social death (which is inconceivable). Malone is arguably already beyond the 'second death', even while awaiting the first.

Death is also metaphorised as a kind of molecular decomposition. In one passage, Malone recounts:

And I must say that to me at least and for as long as I can remember the sensation is familiar of a blind and tired hand delving feebly in my particles and letting them trickle between its fingers. (MD 51)

An earlier draft read:

And it is without excessive sorrow that I see us again as we are, namely to be removed grain by grain until the hand, wearied, begins to play, scooping us up and letting us trickle back into the same place, dreamily as the saying is... [T]he sensation is familiar of a blind and tired hand feebly delving in my particles and letting them trickle between its fingers. And sometimes, when all is quiet, I feel it plunged in me up to the elbow, but gentle, and as though asleep. But soon it stirs, wakes, fondles, clutches, ransacks, ravages, avenging its failure to scatter me with one sweep. I can understand. (MD 131)

This involves a mixed metaphor drawing both on religion (the hand of God) and science (the malleable, molecular level beneath molar being). It suggests an image of God as himself impotent, unable to cause the ruptural death which Malone desires. Toyama suggests that it involves a deliberate act of becoming-liquid to escape material substance (Toyama, 1983), although the metaphors used suggest determinism rather than freedom. Tajiri (2006: 55) suggests that the experience of an expansive, porous body is an effect of the absence of a skin-ego. Without an imaginary boundary, the body seems open to such acts of reaching-in. In addition, Malone's walls and window-pane form a contrast which looks like the edge of an abyss (MD 34). This also suggests an experience on the edge of collapse.

In a distinct series of statements, Malone contradicts his apparent belief that he is approaching death, and that he is alive, by reflecting on an apparent impossibility of life or death, at

least for him. Hence, he remarks:

But why this sudden heat, has anything happened, anything changed? No, the answer is no, I shall never get born and therefore never get dead, and a good job too. (MD 52).

But what matter whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, I shall go on doing as I have always done (MD 53).

The state of being unborn thus precludes death:

Yes, an old foetus, that's what I am now, hoar and impotent, mother is done for, I've rotted her... No, the answer is no, I shall never get born and therefore never get dead, and a good job too. (MD 132)

Life is also deemed impossible, an unsurprising conclusion if birth is impossible:

One could live there, perhaps happy, if life was a possible thing, but nobody lives there. (MD 117)

Nothing has 'happened', perhaps, because the process of death is a process of gradual becoming, an imperceptible change in state, rather than an event. Yet if Malone/Beckett is not born (a logical consequence of the skin-ego hypothesis), he cannot truly die either. More accurately, his state of being, which is already that of pre-birth 'nothingness', is not transformed in the process of dying.

While death sometimes seems impossible, it is also desirable. Death is desired as an end to the process of dying, and its exhausting effects:

Weary with my weariness, white last moon, sole regret, not even. To be dead, before her, on her, with her, and turn, dead on dead, about poor mankind, and never have to die any more (MD 93).

Hence, Malone entertains a 'hope' to be killed by a visitor (MD 99). Similarly, Macmann enjoys the dulling of his 'faculties of memory and reflection' and the death of Moll (MD 108), who has presumably been freed further suffering. These passages are consistent with the discussion of

darkness (see above), in which impotence is a goal rather than a state of being.

Another variant on the theme of life and death suggests that Malone is living because he is surrounded by living others. He suggests that 'the living are there, above me and below me' (MD 45), apparently not counting himself as one of them, although his presence among them suggests that he is alive (or at least not in a Christian afterlife). This said, he is uncertain of their status:

But the noises that I say rise up from below, the steps that I say come climbing towards me, do they really do so? I have no proof that they do. To conclude from this that I am a prey to hallucinations pure and simple is however a step I hesitate to take. (MD 45-6)

Malone here repeats in a worldly context the Cartesian deductions which challenge empirical knowledge. They also serve to throw into doubt Malone's belief that he is alive, or 'among the living'. His choice to believe he is alive is made to seem arbitrary and ungrounded.

There are also moments when Malone refers to his situation as somewhere between full life and full death. In one passage he asks:

And yet I feel [my feet] are beyond the range of the most powerful telescope. Is that what is known as having a foot in the grave? (MD 62)

The joke here, of course, is that "one foot in the grave" is an idiom, and Beckett is taking it literally. However, the feeling of his feet being beyond detection is a mark of impotence and ignorance. Impotence is here allegorised as partial death. The loss of the ability to stand upright is associated with the absence of a skin-ego or body-envelope (Tajiri, 2006: 58).

There is also the recurring theme, encountered already in *Molloy*, of the foreclosure of death due to others' charitable actions. Impotence does not lead to death because of welfarism:

There is a providence for impotent old men, to the end. And when they cannot swallow any

more someone rams a tube down their gullet, or up their rectum, and fills them full of vitaminized pap, so as not to be accused of murder. (MD 81)

Malone implies that this is an unfortunate interference in a process of death he desires. His rejection of such sustenance contrasts with Knott's apparent acceptance of similar vitaminised broth, and the demands of Nagg and Nell in *Endgame* to be sustained in this way. Malone also speculates that people may be generously aiding his death:

Are they depriving me of soup on purpose to help me die? One judges people too hastily.

But in that case why feed me during my sleep? But there is no proof they have. But if they wished to help me would it not be more intelligent to give me poisoned soup...? (MD 84)

The reversal of the usual loading (the poisoner is helping, the feeder is harming) is in keeping with Beckett's wider views on death. This discussion is also reminiscent of *Watt*: the deductive process to explain apparently anomalous facts, ending in frustration. Similar issues arise for Macmann, following Moll's death:

And when he grew calm again at last he mourned the long immunity he had lost, from shelter, charity and human tenderness. And he even carried his inconsequence to the length of wondering what right anyone had to take care of him. (MD 95)

It is unclear from the syntax of this passage whether Macmann gained immunity as a result of Moll's care (which had reduced his impotence – a disaster in Beckettian terms), or whether he had gained an immunity *from* care, since others' care did not equal Moll's. In all of these passages, Beckett implicitly criticises modernist projects of welfare, religious and humanitarian projects of support for the poor, and disciplinary institutions of the Foucauldian type, for usurping the power to "make live or let die", and using this power to prolong suffering and prevent release.

Objects play a central role in all of Beckett's works, most often as a prop against impotence or a mark of identity. In *Malone Dies*, however, objects also become directly relevant to the

question of impotence. Malone argues:

It is my possessions have weakened me, if I start talking about them again I shall weaken again (MD 81).

The obvious neo-Marxist reading, that objects suck life from people through alienation, is here suggested alongside other possible readings. Perhaps the objects cause weakening because of their resistance to being named or classified (like Watt's pot), or because they distract attention from the ego or the inner life, sustaining a relationship to the outer world. Having once faced this, Malone suggests that he can no longer speak of objects:

I should have liked to speak of the cap of my bicycle-bell, of my half-crutch, the top half, you'd think it was a baby's crutch. But I can still do it, what is there to prevent me? I don't know. I can't. (MD 81)

The outright self-contradiction (I can, I can't) is connected here to a performative contradiction: Malone *does* speak of these items, in the very act of saying that he cannot. A little later he claims impotence to write an ending to the Macmann-Moll relationship:

A few words in conclusion on the decline of this liaison. No, I can't. (MD 93)

Statements of this kind serve to reveal the authorial function, and also to portray the author as exhausted and impotent. Yet again, however, Malone/Beckett proceeds to write a conclusion on the end of the relationship, by 'killing' Moll.

Since Malone is trapped in a state of impotence, the question arises of what he is to do with his time. He seems to seek difference to break the tedium:

That would have introduced a little variety into my decomposition. How was it that never occurred to me? (MD 83)

As elsewhere, suicide is refused as an option:

If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the

knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought. (MD 45)

This is also true of Malone's character Lemuel:

Lemuel glared with loathing at the sun. He had reached his room... whence on countless occasions he could have thrown himself in perfect safety out of the window if he had been less weak-minded. (MD 111)

Having eliminated the option of suicide, Malone is effectively drawn into the authorial practice which forms the basis for the novel, in which storytelling is a way of killing time and seeking company.

As with other Beckettian characters, Malone is marked by physical impotence of various kinds. At one point, Malone observes that he must not be completely impotent (rather, one may speculate, becoming cumulatively so). For instance, his penis 'must still drip a little piss from time to time, otherwise I would be dead of uraemia' (MD 62). He is not thirsty, perhaps because he is reprocessing his inner secretions (MD 103-4). He is fed soup because he is 'toothless' (MD 9). His nails are 'long, yellow, sharp and brittle for want of chalk or is it phosphate' (MD 129). Beckett here plays with ignorance as well as impotence (he is unable to recall the correct element, calcium).

Malone further states:

My body is what is called, unadvisedly perhaps, impotent. There is virtually nothing it can do. Sometimes I miss not being able to crawl around any more... My arms, once they are in position, can exert a certain force. But I find it hard to guide them. (MD 10)

Malone is thus characterised by a general incapacity, though this seems to arise in the coordination of action rather than in his physical abilities *per se*. He suggests that the 'speed' he is 'turning at makes things difficult' (MD 104), a sideways reference to the Bergsonian conception of duration, as well as to Watt's walk, Moran's description of Molloy, and both the narrator of *The Unnamable* and the character who kills his family in this work. Malone writes of a condition in which he will:

give my body the old orders I know it cannot obey, turn to my spirit gone to rack and ruin,  
spoil my agony the better to live it out (MD 14)

In another passage, Malone's impotence is also glossed as social:

I have time to frolic, ashore, in the brave company I have always longed for, always  
searched for, and which would never have me. (MD 18)

Malone's inability to find company (even through his creations) may be an expression of the fundamentally alienated nature of his world, or an effect of his own impotence. Following his own inner imperatives, he might encounter others only as Watt does, when their preferences coincide, or he might be left waiting. Another passage outlines:

To old dogs the hour comes when, whistled by their master setting forth with his stick at  
dawn, they cannot spring after him. (MD 16)

Impotence here entails a loss of companionship and of *joie de vivre*. On the basis of both passages, one can conclude that Malone is unable to find companionship because he is always in a state of being analogous to the dog which cannot spring forwards, or take part in the "coming and going" of social life. The master's call may also be glossed as the compulsion to "keep going" which impels Beckett's authorial characters to write.

Malone is also apparently hard of hearing, but he recounts sometimes recovering his hearing 'in the dark, on stormy nights' (MD 32), perhaps through hallucination. He says of his ears:

of late their hearing seems to have improved. Oh not that I was ever even incompletely  
deaf. But for a long time now I have been hearing things confusedly... the noises of the  
world, so various in themselves and which I used to be so clever at distinguishing from one  
another, have been dinning at me for so long, always the same old noises, as gradually to  
have merged into a single noise, so that all I heard was one vast continuous buzzing. The  
volume of sound perceived remained no doubt the same, I had simply lost the faculty of

decomposing it. (MD 33)

His hearing problems seem to be problems of distinguishing different objects – an understandable problem for someone whose sense of linguistic meaning has broken down, and who therefore perceives an undifferentiated chaos, or plane of becoming. The continuous buzzing here references William James's 'blooming, buzzing confusion' which occurs in the absence of language. Therefore, the fact that his hearing is better amidst negativity – just as he is able to make true claims only if they are about something negative (such as what he does not know) – is largely consistent with his account. In another passage, Malone is unable to hear what his visitor says, though he is 'not deaf', and concludes there was 'nothing to hear' (MD 99).

Malone's impotence is also discussed in relation to his subjectivity. Malone does not feel himself to be a complete self:

For a mere local phenomenon is something I would not have noticed, having been nothing but a series or rather a succession of local phenomena all my life, without any result. (MD 62)

This passage is teeming with meanings on multiple levels. First, it is an account of ego-disintegration, consistent with psychoanalytic readings of Beckett. Secondly, it suggests once more that reality exists on a molecular level, and/or as a zone of becoming. Thirdly, the context of the discussion – Malone's inability to feel his feet – adds force to the treatment of impotence as partial death. If the self is a composite of local phenomena, then death is simply an accumulation of local impotences. Fourthly, it seems to suggest that the loss of Malone's feet is something *more* than the usual local phenomena, having a greater significance in some sense. Readers of *Malone Dies* have suggested that Malone is a fragmentary self, who speaks in both first and third person of both himself and his characters (Kaelin, 1981: 102). Malone also suggests that he is only ever with things, such as an aeroplane, 'in spirit' rather than 'in body' (MD 98). This further emphasises his

impotence.

Malone's status, alone in a room, is similar to those of Molloy and Watt at particular points. However – perhaps to frustrate interpreters following these lines – Malone insists that '[i]t is not a room in a hospital, or in a madhouse' (MD 7). Malone is treated much as if he is in such an institution, raising the possibility that this is a "not" of the "pot" type: it *is* a hospital or madhouse, but not identical with the concept of one. More likely, however, Beckett is seeking to distance his account from common lines of interpretation which misconstrue the fundamental fantasy of his work. Nevertheless, readers persist in assuming that Malone is in an institution of some kind (Begam, 1997: 40-1).

Similar disabilities and illnesses are heaped upon Malone's creations. Macmann's fellow patients/inmates are marked by impotence and ignorance. The first, described as 'dead young' (a play on words), was constantly seated in a rocking-chair (a familiar trope from Beckett's *Rockaby*), and has to be accompanied to 'make him move forward' (MD 112), presumably due to catatonia. Similarly, Macmann is described as follows:

For the posture is completely lacking in abandon, and but for the absence of bonds you might think he was bound to the bench, the posture so stiff and set in the sharpness of its planes and angles (MD 54)

He is also portrayed as losing his ability to walk:

And sometimes you cannot, get to your feet I mean, and have to drag yourself to the nearest plot of vegetables (MD 60).

He is able to navigate on the basis of a few fixed stars, or to stay put on the plain (MD 68).

However, he is unable to decide where to put down his feet, and also to exert such a movement were he able to decide, 'so little was he the master of his movements' (MD 73). The idea of

'movement' here suggests the force of becoming, which is excessive over mastery, while 'vegetables' may be a play on vegetative states and institutionalisation. As a result of his periods of stillness, Macmann only spends half or a quarter of his existence in motion (MD 73). Another passage says of Macmann:

he sat and lay down at the least pretext and only rose again when the *elan vital* or struggle for life began to prod him in the arse again. And a good half of his existence must have been spent in a motionlessness akin to that of stone... but which little by little invaded, I will not say the vital parts, but at least the sensibility and understanding. (MD 71)

This passage, which references Bergson's concept of the *élan vital*, is consistent with a Bergsonian or Deleuzian world-view in which Macmann spends at least half of his time in the zone of becoming, perhaps in something akin to quietist meditation. For Bergson, the *élan vital* is connected to the will to live in the spatial world (here paired anomalously with a Nietzschean or Darwinian "struggle for life"), so that Macmann is arguably retreating to the world of the 'time-image' in his periods of rest. This might imply that the temporal world, in which continuous becoming is primary, is gradually corroding the representational functioning of his spatialised thought, or "attention to life". Beckett paradoxically associates the temporal zone with stillness, in defiance of the Bergsonian association of temporality with movement.

Similar difficulties in walking are exhibited by Sapo, an earlier incarnation of Macmann.

Sapo moves in a manner similar to Watt and Molloy:

So he went, limp, drifting, as though tossed by the earth. And when, after a halt, he started off again, it was like a big thistledown plucked by the wind from the place where it had settled. (MD 21)

In a later passage, Sapo's movements are said to be 'those of one floundering in a quag' (MD 31).

These descriptions suggest that Sapo is carried around by the force of becoming, or by the will of

the author, controlling him like a marionette. Sapo, like Watt, is also associated with goat's milk (MD 30), at once maternal and Satanic.

Physical impotence is also extended into the sexual sphere. For instance, there is a vaguely humorous depiction of Macmann's relationship with Moll:

The spectacle was then offered of Macmann trying to bundle his sex into his partner's like a pillow into a pillow-slip, folding it in two and stuffing it in with his fingers... And though both were completely impotent they finally succeeded, summoning to their aid all the resources of the skin, the mucus and the imagination, in striking from their dry and feeble clips a kind of sombre imagination. (MD 89)

Later, Moll adds that '[i]t's all these bones that make it awkward' (MD, 91) – perhaps suggesting that an interpersonal fusion is frustrated by bodily structure. Moll observes that she and Macmann 'will soon die, you and I, that is obvious' (MD 90), though their age has certain redeeming features, notably that they are no more ugly than their contemporaries (MD 90-1). Previously, Moll had been 'ugly and misshapen', though she only knew it from others' testimonies (MD 90).

Impotence is desirable in some ways, but not in others. Physical pain is deemed to help Macmann greatly. In contrast, emotional pain, described as being '[f]layed alive by memory, his mind crawling with cobras', is unbearable. It leads Macmann to utter cries, either in 'moral anguish', or to ward off moral anguish (MD 97). Macmann also causes himself physical pain by hitting his head, the 'seat of all the shit and misery', which is contrasted with the legs, which are 'only human' (MD 97). The implication is that the mind is extra-human, perhaps divine, and is the source of the problems afflicting Beckettian characters, perhaps through the failure of representation, the misery caused by the ego (according to mystical conceptions), or the connection between body and soul. Toyama (1983) suggests that Malone experiences mind-body dualism but

does not experience his self as either mind or body. A little later, Malone similarly writes of an '[i]ncandescent migraine' and a head 'on fire' which is 'almost unbearable, upon my soul' (MD 104). He also suggests that his head 'will be the last to die', with his feet the first (MD 114). While this conjures images of a cumulative death from foot to head, it also suggests that his rational faculties are the hardest part of his being to render impotent.

Impotence is also manifested in the form of futility. Futility is an important part of the novel, exemplified by Mrs. Lambert's impossible task of sorting lentils:

To stop in the middle of a tedious and perhaps futile task was something that Sapo could readily understand. For a great number of tasks are of this kind, without a doubt, and the only way to end them is to abandon them. She could have gone on sorting her lentils all night and never achieved her purpose, which was to free them from all admixture. But in the end she would have stopped, saying, I have done all I can do. But she would not have done all she could have done. But the moment comes when one desists, because it is the wisest thing to do, discouraged, but not to the extent of undoing all that has been done. (MD 40)

The futile task is perhaps a metaphor for the sorting of reality, which is in fact a continuous field of becoming, into specific categories and units, eliminating 'admixture', a task which is by its very nature futile. Interestingly, impotence is here a performative declaration rather than a state of being: one can never in fact be finished with the Sisyphean task, but a decision to declare oneself impotent allows one to draw a line under an otherwise endless activity. That a task can only be abandoned or exhausted is a common Beckettian theme, in this case differing from cases such as Molloy's pebbles, Watt's biscuits and the academics' calculations by the apparently nondenumerably large set on which the sorting is performed.

Malone later adds that 'there are other tasks, other days, of which one may fairly safely say that they are finished, though I do not see which', and indeed that the lentil task may be completable if the goal is more modest, though the author says he doesn't know (MD 40-1). It seems, then, that the characteristic of imperfection is constitutive rather than contingent. While the contingent features of the pile of lentils make it a telling case of an incompletable task, all tasks are constitutively incompletable for Beckett, perhaps because of the gap between conceptual definition and physical actualisation (e.g. the task "pick up a pot" cannot be completed successfully if all "pots" are not in fact pots, or if, in the language of *Endgame*, "there are no more pots"). Reality, as a flow of becoming on an irreversible trajectory towards death, can never be stopped well enough for a completion of any kind.

A different kind of impotence is manifested in discussions of non-Beckettian characters. Unable to face up to their fundamental impotence, such characters get caught-up in endless, impotent processes of meaning-production which fail to have any effect. The Saposcats parents are typical of this approach. Beckett/Malone writes:

He was the eldest child of poor and sickly parents. He often heard them talk of what they ought to do in order to have better health and more money. He was struck each time by the vagueness of these palavers and not surprised that they never led to anything. His father was a salesman, in a shop. (MD 11)

This way of life is conditioned by fixed points of meaning which are treated by Beckett as both meaningless and rigid:

And who will look after the garden? said his wife. The life of the Saposcats was full of axioms, of which one at least established the criminal absurdity of a garden without roses and with its paths and lawns uncared for. (MD 12)

The Saposcats are so obsessed with money, that even life and death become matters of financial

calculation:

But she was easily persuaded that she could not do more without exposing herself to the risk of dying before her time. Think of the doctor's fees we save, said Mr. Saposcat. And the chemist's bills, said his wife. (MD 12)

Saposcat's parents are typical of how Beckett writes non-Beckettian characters – as petty-bourgeois lovers of order whose life consists of an automaton-like repetition, but who are utterly naive about their own impotence and ignorance. Here as elsewhere, they are closely associated with the Establishment and the middle-class way of life. Here more than elsewhere, the connection to capitalism is particularly strong, with Saposcat's father shown to think like a salesman not only at work, but in all of his life. We are later told that they have no conversation strictly speaking, but use words like a guard uses flags (MD 13) – in other words, that their communication is phatic, repetitive and schematic.

The Saposcats seek, in a salesmanlike way, to draw up a rational plan of their life and find ways to optimise health or money. Yet they run up against the rigid system of their own 'axioms', which leads them back to their current situation as the optimal one. Even though the process arrives at the same conclusion, they seem unable or unprepared to forego its repetition – perhaps as a way of marking their own dissatisfaction. There are overtones here of a refusal to engage directly with the world of death and impotence. The Saposcats treat even death in a salesmanlike way, in terms of doctor's and chemist's (pharmacy) fees. It seems, therefore, that their subordination to market logics is a way of managing the otherwise traumatic impact of death, and remaining within a world of naiveté and unknowing ignorance – a world which, in Beckett's work, is always seen as a contemptible mirror of the knowing ignorance of Beckettian characters. Yet matters are not so simple, because they also fantasise about retirement: 'It was as though the Saposcats drew the strength to live from the prospect of their impotence' (MD 12). Other passages also show the

Saposcats meeting every proposal with objections (MD 37). Hence, negation seems to provide the active force which is alienated in their pointless conversations.

Discussions of Sapo, always carried on in a tone suggestive of an external, interfering gaze, follow from these constructs:

What age is he now? asked Mr Saposcat. His wife provided the information, it being understood that this was of her province. She was always wrong. Mr. Saposcat took over the erroneous figure, murmuring it over and over to himself as though it were a question of the rise in price of some indispensable commodity, such as butcher's meat. (MD 12)

The double absurdity of this passage is that, first, Mrs. Saposcat always provides the wrong answer, and secondly, Mr. Saposcat mistreats the answer by dealing with it in a salesmanlike way. The passage continues:

At least his health is good, said Mr. Saposcat. Not all that, said his wife. But no definite disease, said Mr. Saposcat. A nice thing that would be, at his age, said his wife. They did not know why he was committed to a liberal profession. That was yet another thing that went without saying. It was therefore impossible that he should be unfitted for it. (MD 13)

Like other Beckettian pseudocouples, the Saposcats seem to be engaged in a kind of verbal duel, in which the approximateness of communication is part of the stake. The figure of speech "nice thing", here used sarcastically, is also ironic in Beckett's account, as he is suggesting that impotence may indeed be a 'nice' or positive thing, compared to normal life. It is then implied that important decisions are brushed over as habitually decided – 'without saying' – in such a way as to foreclose realities which may well be true, in this case, the younger Saposcat's impotence. In the lifeworld of the Saposcats, the rigid framework of axioms forecloses communication and questioning, presumably halting the slippage of the signifier which leads Beckettian characters to the abyss. Yet this foreclosure, and the resultant suturing of meaning, runs up against the intractability of the

problems faced by Beckettian characters.

Elsewhere, the non-Beckettian mass get the usual dismissive treatment:

For an instant they cluster in a daze, huddles on the sidewalk or in the gutter, then set off singly on their appointed ways... And God help him who longs, for once, in his recovered freedom, to walk a little way with a fellow-creature, no matter which, unless of course by a merciful chance he stumble on one in the same plight. Then they take a few paces happily side by side, then part, each one muttering perhaps, Now there will be no holding him. (MD 57)

The "herd" are here portrayed as both atomised and collectivised. Their actions are described almost mechanistically, showing their automaton-like status in Beckett's world-view. However, they are also akin to Watt and Sam, who are able to socialise only because they simply happen to be on the same, individually determined trajectories. The impossibility of communication – easily associated with the modernist theme of alienation – seems as true for Beckettian as non-Beckettian characters, the only difference being that the latter exist in less eccentric and less self-aware forms of isolation. (The fact that isolation persists within pseudocouples and relationships of domination, such as those of the Saposcat parents and the Lamberts, only deepens this insight).

The inferiority of the "herd" seems to stem from their denial of death. They are connected to the stupid pursuit of life, and disconnected from the real nature of existence. When each dies, Beckett suggests, 'the others go on, as if nothing had happened' (MD 61). Another passage clarifies their status:

the corridors of the underground railway and the stench of their harassed mobs scurrying from cradle to grave to get to the right place at the right time... Yes, those were the days, quick to night and well beguiled with the search for warmth and reasonably edible scraps.

And you imagine it will be so till the end. But suddenly all begins to rage and roar again, you are lost in forests of high threshing ferns or whirled far out on the face of wind-swept wastes, till you begin to wonder if you have not died without knowing and gone to hell or been born again into an even worse place than before. (MD 53-4)

The relationship between Beckettian and non-Beckettian characters is here clarified. The zone of confusion in which Beckettian characters reside is a consequence of a line of flight in which one is carried away, apparently without choice. Non-Beckettian characters hide from this ultimate reality through a repetitive activity which is either pointless or focused on material survival. The image of a 'rat race' in which one is trapped, and which is ultimately undesirable, is here powerfully implied, showing resonances with modernists such as Adorno. However, members of the swarm can be dragged at any time into the Beckettian zone by external forces. The Beckettian zone is such that one cannot tell if one is alive or dead – a common theme – but part of the reason seems to be that one is thrown about by incomprehensible forces. These forces are metaphorically associated both with Molloy's wanderings and Malone's pre-history (wandering in forests) and with what happens to Malone when he really closes his eyes as others cannot (being whirled around by winds).

This said, the activity of the "herd" is not unilaterally denounced. It is shown to have a real underpinning:

Because in order not to die you must come and go, come and go, unless you happen to have someone who brings you food wherever you happen to be, like myself. (MD 59)

The apparently pointless swarm-activity thus seems in fact to have a vital function, to meet basic material needs. The apparent anomaly is resolved if one remembers that Beckett's characters do not see continued life as a desirable goal. We have already seen how Beckettian characters seek to wither away, but are saved against their will by welfarist good Samaritans. Hence, swarm-like mass activity can make sense as survival activity and yet be pointless at the same time.

*"Nothing is mine any more": Ignorance in Malone Dies*

Ignorance in *Malone Dies* is structured somewhat differently from ignorance in *Watt* and *Molloy*. Malone's circumstances are sufficiently constrained that it is not necessary for him to make sense of the world, and he seems to have given up doing so on the whole, despite occasional relapses. Ignorance is a central aspect of his condition. In contrast to *Watt*, Malone portrays himself as avoiding the process of deduction, in order to emphasise his death:

Everything divides into itself, I suppose. If I start trying to think again I shall make a mess of my decease. (MD 6)

The first part of this passage suggests an endless repetition within a univocal being, in which constant asymptotic decay leads ultimately to repetition of the same. The second part suggests that death is in large part a loss of ego, and that it is disrupted by thought, or by the Cartesian subject. At one point Sapo musters considerations, some perhaps closer or further from the truth, but the author declares himself unable to keep listing them (MD 21), suggesting that he tires of the ordering function so prevalent in *Watt*. In another passage, Malone claims to be generally ignorant, and hence socially invisible:

I have spoken softly, gone my ways softly, all my days, as behoves one who has nothing to say, nowhere to go, and so nothing to gain by being seen or heard. (MD 82)

While this passage speaks to communication and power as well as ignorance, it would make sense than a generally ignorant being would have nothing useful to say.

The relationship between ignorance and death is paradoxical for Beckett. On the one hand, life is portrayed as an object of ignorance, and perhaps the basis of the inability to tell life from death. Malone's ignorance is compounded by his impotence, and the most central question on

which he ponders – and remains ignorant (though he reaches conclusions) – is whether he is alive or dead. The asymptotic, non-ruptural nature of Malone's "death" is such as to provoke questioning of his beliefs:

I used not to know where I was going, but I knew I would arrive, I knew there would be end  
[sic] to the long blind road. (MD 6)

This suggests that Malone no longer knows, or believes, there will be an end, and that this non-knowledge is fundamentally different from simply not knowing *where* the end will be. In another passage, ignorance is applied to the idea of life itself:

I say living without knowing what it is. I tried to live without knowing what I was trying.  
Perhaps I have lived after all, without knowing. (MD 20)

In such a framing, death becomes a welcome release from ignorance and impotence. In one passage, dying, or perhaps writing, provides a release from ignorance and anxiety:

And during all this time, so fertile in incidents and mishaps, in my head I suppose all was streaming and emptying away as through a sluice, to my great joy, until finally nothing remained, either of Malone or of the other... And I rejoiced furthermore, quite apart from the spectacle, at the thought that I now knew what I had to do, I whose every move has always been a groping, and whose motionlessness too was a kind of groping, yes, I have greatly groped stockstill. (MD 51)

Death, if such this is, is once more portrayed as joyous, providing an end to the 'groping' which is a Beckettian life, and destroying not only the author Malone, but also 'the other' – the character perhaps, or the inner voices and unconscious. Yet the anomaly here is that this occurs less than halfway through the book – Malone keeps writing long after this point.

Later in the novel, however, Malone rejects the distinction between life and death:

I ought to content myself with [my little pastimes] instead of launching forth on all this ballsaching poppycock about life and death... It's vague, life and death. I must have had my

little private idea on the subject when I began, otherwise I would not have begun, I would have held my peace, I would have gone on peacefully being bored to howls, having my little fun and games with the cones and cylinders (MD 52).

The life-death distinction is here portrayed as nonsensical because it is insufficiently clear. It is here implied that the authorial interludes are about life and death, whereas the stories about Sapo and Macmann are pastimes. The suggestion, furthermore, is that the pastime of writing, and the pastimes of non-Beckettian characters engaged in the social construction of meaning, are disrupted by concern about the issue of life and death, which haunts the 'pastimes' much like a Lacanian Real or Freudian repressed. For Macmann, meanwhile, death is both punishment and sin:

And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living. (MD 67)

Macmann also felt 'he could grovel and wallow in his mortality until the end of time and not have done' (MD 69). Macmann is here used as the spokesperson for a view of life as seemingly endless suffering, a view which questions the very possibility of death.

More contingent sufferings are of indeterminate cause. Speaking of rainfall, Macmann: was quarter-inclined to wonder if he was not mistaken in holding it responsible for his sufferings and if in reality his discomfort was not the effect of a quite different cause or set of causes. (MD 70)

The inability to locate a source of suffering is at once counterintuitive, and consistent with psychoanalytic reflexivity. Beckett suggests that suffering is lessened by conceptualisation:

And sticklers have been met with who had no peace until they knew for certain whether their carcinoma was of the pylorus or... the duodenum. But these are flights for which Macmann was not yet fledged, and indeed he was rather of the earth earthy and ill-fitted for

pure reason, especially in the circumstances in which we have been fortunate enough to circumscribe him. (MD 71)

The idea that conceptualising or giving meaning to suffering renders it less painful is consistent both with psychoanalysis and trauma theory. It also coheres with Beckett's wider account of the function of reasoning and language as a way of managing meaninglessness. Macmann is taken, however, to be unprepared for such manoeuvres, which for Beckett are associated with a Cartesian subject. This may be due to his impotence, or his status as a fictional character.

Another important aspect of Malone's ignorance comes to the fore in relation to his attempt to provide an inventory of his possessions. Malone declares his intent to compile an inventory of 'the things that remain in my possession, that is a thing I have always wanted to do' (MD 5). However, this project is beset by problems. He puts it off because it is always 'too soon' (MD 5), presumably because he wants to make an inventory at death – something clearly impossible. This echoes a deeper impossibility: the impossibility of ending, for a Beckettian character. Once he embarks on the inventory, the issue then becomes whether he can be sure enough of the status and presence of his possessions to be able to lay claim to ownership. This dilemma arises early in the novel:

The room seems to be mine. I can find no other explanation to my being left in it. (MD 6)

Hence, Malone does not *know* whether the room is his, but simply deduces his ownership of it as the most viable explanation for his presence. Malone later defines ownership as knowledge of an object's whereabouts sufficient to be able to lay hold of it (MD 78). This Cartesian sense of ownership, associated with the possessive gaze of the owner, is probably designed to indicate the coextensiveness of ownership, ego, and knowing subject. It is also mildly reminiscent of Proudhon (property is use), Stirner (property is power), and Locke (property is enclosure). It might thus be read as an allegory of capitalism and modernity, or of existential territory. It is disrupted, because

Malone's lifeworld seems to shift unpredictably:

For I have sufficiently perished in this room to know that some things go out, and others come in, through I know not what agency... So that, strictly speaking, it is impossible for me to know, from one moment to the next, what is mine and what is not, according to my definition. (MD 79)

Malone thus realises that his knowledge of his possessions is incomplete:

For now I know that the image of these objects, with which I have lulled myself till now, though accurate in the main, was not completely so. And I should be sorry to let slip this unique occasion which seems to offer me the possibility of something suspiciously like a true statement at last. (MD 21)

The true statement here seems to be an observation of negativity: that Malone's knowledge is incomplete. It is further disrupted by an apparent exception:

The pots do not seem to be mine, I simply have the use of them. They answer to the definition of what is mine, but they are not mine. Perhaps it is the definition that is at fault. (MD 81)

It is pots, as in *Watt*, which begin the disruption of ownership/knowledge, for if an object is not identical with its name, and possession is determined by knowledge, then no object can truly be owned at all. Shortly afterwards, Malone generalises his observation:

In the meantime nothing is mine any more, according to my definition... except my exercise-book, my lead and the French pencil, assuming it really exists. (MD 84)

This frustrates and brings an end to the apparently simple task of compiling an inventory. It also gives rise to a particular case for the authorial function:

For all I ever had in this world all has been taken from me, except the exercise-book, so I cherish it, it's human. The lead too, I was forgetting the lead, but what is a lead, without paper? (MD 100)

This exercise-book is my life, this big child's exercise-book, it has taken me a long time to resign myself to that. (MD 104)

Ultimately, therefore, Malone concludes that he owns nothing aside from his pencil and book.

These exceptions to the general breakdown of knowledge suggest a special status for authorship, which somehow escapes the otherwise general existential collapse.

This conclusion has provoked a lot of interpretation, as it bears centrally on Beckett's framing of the authorial function. Gendron interprets this diminution of Malone's possessions as symbolising self-erasure in writing, and self-reduction to the level of disposable characters (Gendron, 2004: 59). Uhlmann, in contrast, sees the work as a 'book of reckoning that demolishes the idea of judgement' (1996: 117), the writing at the end of life standing in for Judgement Day, but reaches an ambiguous and decaying outcome. For Uhlmann, it is an immanent assemblage of desires which frustrates transcendental finality. He suggests that Malone, Macmann and Sapo are all able to proactively escape judgement through their rejection of temporal order (1996: 124). Malone is able to break out of the 'sealed jar' of subjectivity, exist as a 'haecceity', and define himself by his affects rather than by representations or value-judgements – even though his affects are mainly impotent (1996: 119-20). This follows the Deleuzian reading of Malone as a grouping of unsubjectified particles or affects (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 262). However, the above quotations also suggest that Malone attaches humanistic properties to his last remaining objects. The idea that the book is 'human' is unusual. Perhaps this is simply a case of Beckett/Malone's broader tendency to blur human-object distinctions, exemplified earlier in his 'beloved' objects. Perhaps the object is 'human' because it is owned, and therefore mixed with human capability, through a relation to humanity. Or maybe novels are peculiarly human because of the human characters they contain, or the potential future readers to whom they speak. It makes sense that Malone, who lacks contact with humans, should be attached to the authorial function which

establishes a kind of ersatz humanity. Alternatively, he may simply mean that his desire to cherish something is human.

While the accessibility of objects has a particular significance for Beckett – relevant to his critique of Cartesian assumptions – the problem also arises in other areas. For instance, interpersonal recognition is also a problem:

But surely I have seen him somewhere before. And the people I have seen have seen me too, I can guarantee that. But of whom may it not be said, I know that man? Drivel, drivel.

(MD 102)

Malone can say he knows all "men" for several reasons. Perhaps he is able to infer from the human condition, as in an existentialist reading; or perhaps all people are mutually continuous, as are Beckett's characters. After this, he adds that he may be able to see them as he should only 'too late' (MD 103).

The limits to Malone's knowledge are internal as well as external. In an early draft, Malone complains of ideas drifting from his head and being lost, and also of their seeming alike (MD 132). In the final version, Malone knows he is old, but not how old:

All I know is that I was very old already before I found myself here. I call myself an octogenarian, but I cannot prove it. Perhaps I am only a quinquagenarian, or a quadragenarian. It is ages since I counted them, my years I mean. (MD 10)

The strange idea of one's years as objects one can count is a literary alienating device perhaps imported from French, in which one would say how many years one has.

Malone's writing is excluded from his silence by virtue of its deliberate and self-admitted fictitiousness. At the same time, it compounds ignorance. The process of writing is deemed self-

erasing:

A thousand little things to report, very strange, in view of my situation, if I interpret them correctly. But my notes have a curious tendency, as I realize at last, to annihilate all they purport to record. (MD 88)

This suggests a double inadequacy of writing: on the one hand, experiences are almost too strange to express in language, and on the other, representation effaces what it renders. Malone's ignorance or impotence is modelled in his writing through formal failures to follow through on his initial, orderly project. Near the beginning, Malone declares that he will tell four stories:

each one on a different theme. One about a man, another about a woman, a third about a thing and finally one about an animal, a bird probably. I think that is everything. (MD 5)

It seems that the point of the exhaustive series is to critique the division of the world found within empirical science (and maybe also religion), in which men, women, animals and things are separate orders. In Beckett's world, where the basic level of existence is a zone of undifferentiated becoming, and naming is necessarily inaccurate, such categories fuse into one another, and the four stories turn out to be a single story, with the states of man, woman, thing, animal being zones of affect through which the character passes. However, this order breaks down in Malone's authorial practice. On a surface level, Malone does not follow through on this plan, at least not as four separate stories. One could speculate that the man is Saposcat or Lambert, the woman is Sucky Moll and her "story" is that of Macmann, and that maybe the thing and the animal – Worm – are references to *The Unnamable*; other glosses might treat Lambert's mule as the animal, or Macmann at the end of the novel as an animal or thing. However, it seems more likely that Beckett deliberately has Malone fail to follow through, either because he is unable to finish his first story (about a man) or because the boundaries between the stories become blurred. Already on the next page, the list has been reduced to 'three stories', in a series of five items also including present situation and inventory (MD 6).

While writing cannot combat Malone's underlying ignorance, it has a useful place in his universe as a place-holder for the pursuit of a meaning which can never come. Once more, as for Moran and Watt, the ordering function is portrayed as a way of passing time and creating a sense of meaning, with Beckett/Malone saying of Saposcat:

He made a practice, alone and in company, of mental arithmetic. And the figures then marshalling in his mind thronged it with colours and with forms.

What tedium. (MD 11)

The figure here is familiar: like non-Beckettian characters including the early Moran and the academics, and some Beckettian characters such as the early Watt, Saposcat seeks to marshal the chaos of existence through the application of language, reason and science. As in other cases, Beckett's portrayal of this strategy is cynical and dismissive. The appearance of life or meaning is simply a tedious flight from the progression of death. Badiouian readings stumble on such passages, which associate mathematics with artificial ordering processes. Another notable parallel is with Malone's account of his own activities, both his planned inventory of possessions, and his activity of telling stories. While Malone can observe from the outside how pointless and tedious such ordering activities are, the novel also provides a sideways indication that perhaps Malone's own activities are no more meaningful. A few pages later, Malone indeed uses the same phrase – 'What tedium' – of his own activity (MD 13).

For the character Sapo, thought is resisted from the start, disrupted by the 'murmur' of the field of becoming. Sapo's teachers thought he had a 'remarkable head' but were irked that they could get nothing into it (MD 15). This seems to be because Sapo is a Beckettian subject; he can observe things, but not classify them satisfactorily. Hence, regarding nature, it is observed that 'he did not know how to look at all these things, the looks he rained upon them taught him nothing

about them' (MD 15). This ignorance seems to be partially motivated by enjoyment:

He was sometimes tempted by the knowledge of these strange things, sometimes beautiful, that he would have about him all his life. But from his ignorance of them he drew a kind of joy, as from all that went to swell the murmur, You are a simpleton. (MD 16)

Murmurs are common in the Beckettian canon, and usually reflect the plane of becoming, and/or hallucinations of unspecifiable noises. Ignorance may, then, be a source of joy in that it keeps things in their holistic, almost mystical state of constant becoming. It may also be a source of joy for reasons well-known in labelling theory: Sapó preferred to be viewed as a simpleton, in line with his identity.

Another murmur occurs later in the novel:

like a sweat of things the moment streamed away in a great chaotic conflux of oozings and torrents, and the trapped huddled things changed and died each one according to its solitude... Little by little the haze formed again, and the sense of absence, and the captive things began to murmur again, each one to itself, and it was as if nothing had ever happened or would ever happen again. (MD 109)

Here as before, murmurs and oozings are sensory effects of the chaos which results from appreciating the underlying zone of becoming, in which each entity has its own duration, but all are continuous and indistinguishable. The entities which are part of the flow are normally 'captive' to representations and systems of meaning and order. Sapó admits, but later regrets, his refusal of logical, Cartesian thought:

Then he was sorry he had not learnt the art of thinking, beginning by folding back the second and third fingers the better to put the index on the subject and the little finger on the verb, in the way his teacher had shown him (MD 17).

This passage reveals an interestingly anomalous view of thought, in sharp contrast to a Cartesian

model. For one thing, thinking is here treated as a corporeal rather than a mental activity. For another, the act of thinking is seen as a taught skill, imparted through advancement in education. Further, thinking is here identified explicitly with language, or the analysis of language (the identification of subject and verb).

Murmurs are not the only elements which haunt knowledge, disrupting its production of meaning. In one passage, Beckett refers to certain phrases which disrupt language:

I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing*. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into the dark. But I am on my guard now. (MD 17)

Being on one's guard is suggestive of a post-traumatic alertness, also suggested by the previous observation that Malone is 'easily frightened' (MD 17). Macmann, in contrast, seeks knowledge, and is satisfied that Moll apparently tells him everything (MD 94). This desire of Macmann's establishes similarities to controlling characters such as Moran and Hamm, whose insistence on being given full knowledge overdetermines their sadistic relations to others.

While Malone usually avoids deductive games of the kind beloved of Watt, there are occasions where he falls into this pattern. Having seen shadows fusing together, Malone suggests 'they must be loving each other, that must be how it is done' (MD 66), repeating the theme of inability to understand love or sex. He then adds, 'Back and forth, back and forth, that must be wonderful. They seem to be in pain' (MD 66), fusing pain and pleasure in his description, and affirming once more his enjoyment of negativity. Within the stories, logic puzzles reappear regarding the grey hen or hens, which could be one or many (MD 29-30). By the time it was urgent for Sapo to solve the problem, it was too late (MD 30). When Malone finds an exercise book, the first pages are covered with 'ciphers and other symbols and diagrams' which stop prematurely,

apparently 'discouraged' (MD 35). These indicate an earlier, more Watt-like self who seeks to make sense of the engulfing chaos rather than to embrace it.

There are also moments in *Malone Dies* which echo the famous "pot" example in Watt, in which objects are distinct from their names. In one passage, Sapo is said to have 'the fond impression of having been present at everyday scenes of no import' (MD 30). The implication that this is a false impression might mean several things. It could be an observation of the "pot" type, in which the impression of objects is distinct from them. Alternatively, the scenes may have had more import than Sapo realised. Finally, Sapo may have a false impression because he is simply a created character, who was not really present at any scenes at all. In another passage, Beckett/Malone writes:

It is a pretty little object, like a – no, it is like nothing. (MD 75)

This indicates the uniqueness of each object and the inadequacy of representational comparison, in a manner similar to Watt's perceptions of objects. Another example uses a clichéd metaphor to similar effect:

An aeroplane passes, flying low, with a noise like thunder. It is a noise quite unlike thunder, one says thunder but one does not think it (MD 98).

Beckett here questions the cliché of a "noise like thunder", showing how authors use non-realistic terminology in realistic accounts. In addition, he once again mobilises self-contradiction to show the inadequacy of meaning, and points towards a "pot-like" uniqueness of sounds.

Similar phenomena also occur in the opposite direction, with the general conceptualisation deemed to have greater subjective or objective reality than the empirical reality. Take for instance the following discussion of the ocean:

at the edge of the ocean, it is not the ocean, but for me it is the ocean... The ocean looks so

unnatural that you'd think you were in a studio, but is it not rather the reverse I should say?

(MD 80)

In this case, Beckett designates something (either an "ocean" which is not quite an ocean, or a fictional construct, or something else) as the ocean, and admits the arbitrary decision involved. However, he also suggests that perhaps the play-space imagined to be an ocean is really an ocean imagined as a studio – perhaps with the ocean as a metaphor for the field of becoming, or for the authorial process. There is also a similar anomaly following the "noise like thunder" discussion:

I said, The sky is further away than you think, is it not, mama? ... She replied, to me her son, It is precisely as far away as it appears to be. (MD 98)

In some respects, this is a meaningless question, since one cannot determine how far away the sky appears to be. However, it seems to indicate a certain circularity between perception and reality in cases such as distance. Since the sky is incomparable to other distant objects, it cannot be said to be nearer or further, and therefore, is exactly as far away as it seems. By extension, this might be true of all objects, to the extent that they are deemed incomparable.

Macmann's fellow patients or inmates are also marked by ignorance. One is always 'asking himself questions in a low voice, reflecting, replying' (MD 113), reminiscent of Watt. Another has an 'air of perpetually looking for something while at the same time wondering what that something could possibly be' (MD 112), a kind of double ignorance which does not preclude ongoing activity. He is 'called the Saxon, though he was far from being any such thing' (MD 113), a strange misuse of naming, or perhaps another "pot-like" non-equivalence. He is described as 'tottering, too proud to collapse' and as demanding 'to be enlightened in tones without anger' (MD 115).

While rational and empirical claims are the main foci of Malone's ignorance, there is also some discussion of supernatural reference-points. Religion is portrayed as being exhausted:

Mortal tedium. One day I took counsel of an Israelite on the subject of conation. That must have been when I was still looking for someone to be faithful to me, and for me to be faithful to. (MD 44)

The archaic word 'Israelite' establishes this as a religious discussion, despite its connotations of personal relations. Presumably the Israelite in question is either Jesus or an Old Testament author. The impossibility of interpersonal trust is here the rock on which religion overturns. Interestingly, Beckett frames religion as a question of *mutual* trust: in order for the believer to be faithful to God, it is implied that God must fulfil his part of the bargain, and provide a meaningful world. Conation is will or effort, and the passage suggests that Malone has lost his belief in free will due to the loss of a meaningful universe with predictable causes and effects.

A related set of considerations appear in one of the stories. Macmann ends up 'in the House of Saint John of God, with the number one hundred and sixty-six' (MD 84). The contradiction here is that the building is holy, yet the assigned number is unholy (the Number of the Beast). Saint John of God is also notable for being detained as insane, as well as for being a healer, and for giving his name to the Brothers Hospitallers of St. John of God, who provide both mental asylums and hospitals for poor people. Begam portrays it as a 'little paradise' which caricatures Eden (Begam, 1997: 138). Perhaps the most famous religious reference in *Malone Dies* is a passage in which Moll is revealed to have crucifixes in her ears, representing the two thieves one of whom was spared, and one in her mouth, a carven tooth which added to Macmann's pleasure (MD 93). We are also told that Jesus spent Easter weekend in Hell pending his resurrection (MD 111). Saint John of God's is also an object of ignorance in another sense:

When asked for example to state whether Saint John of God's was a private institution or run by the State, a hospice for the aged and infirm or a madhouse, if once in one might entertain the hope of one day getting out and, in the affirmative, by means of what steps, Lemuel

remained for a long time plunged in thought (MD 96).

Not only is Macmann ignorant of the answers to these questions, but Lemuel, a staff member of the institution, is unable to answer them.

At one point, Malone rather strangely establishes ignorance and knowledge as absolutes:

For there is no point, no point in not knowing this or that, either you know all or you know nothing, and Macmann knows nothing. But he is concerned only with his ignorance of certain things, of those that appal him among others, which is only human. (MD 59)

This could be an absurdly literal take on the saying "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing", suggesting that anything short of full knowledge is total ignorance. Alternatively, it could be a Zen- or Taoist-like insight that those who think they know are in fact ignorant, because of the illusory nature of a reality filtered through perception and desire. This would clearly contrast with Macmann's status: he is ignorant of everything, since his linguistic categories are inadequate, but he is concerned only about certain kinds of ignorance, those pertaining to empirical objects. In another passage we are told: 'All hangs together, I am in chains' (MD 45). This suggests a kind of double-bind regarding will: the attainment of a meaningful reality, which 'hangs together', is sufficient to entail the success of determinism and the loss of will (demonstrated poetically in the idea of hanging chains), yet without such a reality, will is impossible because of impotence and ignorance.

*"The soul that must be veiled": Negation in Malone Dies*

There are indications in *Malone Dies*, as in many of Beckett's works, that impotence and ignorance are not simply states of being. Rather, they are chosen as part of an existential project by Beckett's characters, who are seeking some kind of release, mystical experience, knowledge, or authenticity in the act of negating or becoming-impotent. In one such passage, Malone suggests

that his own impotence is chosen, out of frustration with the authorial function:

That is why I gave up trying to play and took to myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding. (MD 4)

Malone here adopts the Beckettian stance, or zone of affect, a positionality the character "takes to himself" as a matter of choice or resonance (albeit one he announces he will give up in the next two sentences).

In another passage, Malone suggests that he is specially able to obtain an experience of darkness:

And if I close my eyes, close them really, as others cannot, but as I can, for there are limits to my impotence, then sometimes my bed is caught up in the air and tossed like a straw by the swirling eddies, and I in it. Fortunately it is not so much an affair of eyelids, but as it were the soul that must be veiled... in the night without haven or craft or matter or understanding. (MD 48-9)

Malone's special ability, therefore, is to shut off his perceptual or conceptual processing system so as to no longer be caught by what he perceives through constructed categories. When he exercises this ability, he is metaphorically lifted into a state of chaos, akin to Murphy's third zone. Drawing on such passages, Ackerley argues that Malone is seeking 'great calm' from the 'tumult' of life (Ackerley, 2004: 38), while Begam suggests he is seeking a 'return to an idealized pre-Cartesian condition' (Begam, 1997: 106), and Tønning identifies Malone with 'Schopenhauerian mysticism' (Tønning, 2009: 111). Critchley, meanwhile, sees Malone's gesture as the pursuit of a void (1998: 121), and the existentialist Kaelin suggests that Malone dies so as to experience a holism of life which is unobtainable within life (Kaelin, 1981: 88). What these very different readings have in common is the view of an affirmative motivation behind Malone's activity of negation. However, it

has also been suggested that Malone *fears* a fall into darkness (Begam, 1997: 128).

'Darkness' recurs as a trope throughout the novel, as a metaphor for ignorance (MD 14), the place Malone is left without his characters/playthings (MD 4), the suspension of narrative (MD 19), the place one is dragged down into when meaning decays (MD 17) and the place to which one returns (MD 20). In these cases, impotence and ignorance allegorise one another: to be unable to see (in darkness) is equivalent to being unable to understand, or to be alone. Darkness is also a zone in which everything fuses into a single being:

For they cleave so fast together that they seem a single body, and consequently a single shadow. (MD 65)

Another passage from a published early draft states:

But the light, instead of being the dawn, turned out in a very short time to be the dusk. (MD 126)

This could be read as an allegory for enlightenment, in which discovering the nature of existence, which seems to be a dawn, in fact has the effect of exhausting thought by showing that ignorance is necessary in relation to the underlying level of becoming.

Negation has an affirmative force because it gives access to the zone of becoming, but also because it allows for a reflection on universality. Impotence is seen as giving access to objects in themselves, beyond their particularity:

Now that I have lost my stick I realize what it is I have lost and all it meant to me. And thence ascend, painfully, to an understanding of the Stick, shorn of all accidents, such as I had never dreamt of. (MD 83)

"Accident" here is a pun, meaning both contingent features of an object, and a source of impotence after which one may require a stick. The point Beckett/Malone is making is profound: the object-

in-itself is visible only in the absence of any particular object. Impotence is thus a condition for knowledge. This apparently ironic view provides both a motivation for a deliberate becoming-impotent (or for Beckett himself, of writing on impotence), and a self-destructive paradox, in that impotence also, for Beckett, leads to ignorance. Malone also shows a determination to die in a particular affective state:

I shall pay less heed to myself, I shall be neither hot nor cold any more, I shall be tepid, I shall die tepid, without enthusiasm (MD 3).

This statement suggests that there is a desirable way to die for Malone, associated with an embrace of impotence.

In one passage, Malone/Beckett serves to 'wish' Macmann a near-total paralysis 'sparing at a pinch the arms', in a place safe from the weather and with a food supply (MD 73), much like Malone's situation. In another, Malone bemoans his resistance to decomposition:

The fear of falling is the source of many a folly. It is a disaster. I suppose the wisest thing now is to live it over again, meditate upon it and be edified. (MD 83)

In another passage, Beckett suggests that one ultimately realises one's exhaustion:

And without going so far as [the end of time]... there comes the hour when nothing more can happen and nobody more can come and all is ended but the waiting that knows itself in vain. (MD 69)

Yet this is also a state of being which can be celebrated, as in the case of Macmann:

For having reproached himself with what he had done, and with his monstrous error of appreciation, instead of springing up and hurrying on he turned over on his back, thus offering all his front to the deluge. (MD 69)

All of these passages suggest that impotence and ignorance are desirable states, or at least necessary states, arising at the end of a process of exhaustion which brings an end to life.

If death is a positively desirable state of being, it is logical for Beckettian characters to seek it for others. Hence, when Malone seeks to dispose of objects to which he has formed intense attachments (as if 'they too needed me'), he does so with a decisive negation which precludes a reversal of decision:

And those of which I wearied, or which were ousted by new loves, I threw away, that is to say I cast round for a place to lay them where they would be at peace forever, and no one ever find them short of an extraordinary hazard... But many a wooden friend I have sent to the bottom, weighted with a stone. Until I realised it was wrong of me. For when the string is rotted they will rise to the surface... In this way I disposed of things I loved but could no longer keep, because of new loves. (MD 77)

The treatment of objects as akin to people suggests a blurring of categories consistent with a plane of consistency. The act of near-irreversible disposal seems to be a favour done to the objects, since they would be 'at peace', like a person who is dead, unable to enter into new relations or to return to Malone. Usually, such a killing would seem an abuse, but in Beckett's world-view it makes sense to view it as instead a gesture of kindness – wrong only in being insufficiently decisive. At the same time, the gesture is necessary in order to break a relationship of ownership, which for Malone is established by the ability to specify whereabouts (MD 78). In a related passage, Malone does not feel he needs to repay or forgive anyone, but rather, he wishes others 'an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell and in the execrable generations to come an honoured name' (MD 4). The juxtaposition here is comedic, with reputation seen as similarly worthless and undesirable as pain in life and after death. Questions may also be asked whether Malone is here showing cruelty, or simply actualising his specific aesthetic: to suffer to the maximum is in some respects a realisation of a distinctly Beckettian beauty.

The desire to negate is a particular way of being in the world which creates unconditional attachments, undermining instrumental tasks. Macmann's love of negation is deemed to render him unfit for work. When farming for instance, he is unable to clear a patch of weeds without succumbing to 'the urge to make a clean sweep and have nothing before his eyes but a patch of brown earth rid of its parasites' (MD 72), i.e. all living plants including the crops or flowers.

Meaning-production figures in this process:

Or without going so far as that, suddenly all swam before his eyes, he could no longer distinguish the plants destined for the embellishment of the home or the nutrition of man and beast from the weeds which are said to serve no useful purpose, but which must have their usefulness too, for the earth to favour them so (MD 72).

Hence, Macmann's existence in a zone of becoming, a 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of existential chaos which is basically continuous, renders him unable to draw representational distinctions, and to exercise sovereignty – the selection between useful and bare life. Similar problems arise if he attempts sweeping:

even he himself was compelled to admit that the place swept by him looked dirtier at his departure than on his arrival, as if a demon had driven him to collect... all the dirt and filth which chance had withdrawn from the sight of the taxpayer and add them thus recovered to those already visible and which he was employed to remove. (MD 72)

Macmann is here performing a literal equivalent of Beckett's authorial project, digging up and displaying the hidden "dirt" of modernity and putting it in plain sight, a kind of disalienation which subverts the world of commodity fetishism. This figures Macmann, perhaps, as a Deleuzian schizorevolutionary subject, whose deterritorialising force is too strong to be put to work within the capitalist axiomatic, because it continues to the limit. It could also be taken to suggest that the inner, expressive nature of Macmann's work runs up against the alienating nature of the work-system (in line with modernist and existentialist readings), or that his presence in the zone of

becoming renders him unable to draw the contextual distinctions necessary to function in an instrumental, spatial register. Later, he destroys a laurel bush while trying to hide in it, which brings no reproof, whereas bringing a bramble back leads to a beating (MD 105-6). He also tears up a photograph of Moll (MD 110). All of these passages suggest a proactive process of negation.

As a result of the valorisation of impotence, Beckettian characters come to value the failure of their own projects, including the authorial process. Explaining why he continues to write in spite of his certainty he will fail, and to write 'no longer in order to succeed, but in order to fail', Beckett/Malone argues:

What I sought, when I struggled out of my hole, then aloft through the stinging air towards an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home, to him waiting for me always (MD 20).

The absent figure whom the author seeks to please is ambiguous, and could be God, or the author's character, or the absent reader. However, the general emotional motivation for negation is here clearly stated. It is at once a cathartic moment of release and freefall, and a return to completeness, derived from Beckett's association of nothingness with holism.

One of the motivations for negation is that it allows creativity. The collapse of fixed meanings provides space for imaginative freedom:

After all this window is whatever I want it to be... What strikes me to begin with is how much rounder it is than it was... No matter, provided there is something on the other side.

(MD 64)

The window may be contingent because of Malone's ability to reclassify and reimagine entities from the third zone, or alternatively, because the window, as a literary fiction, can be described however the author wants it. The 'other side' might here be the reader, the field of becoming beyond

the author's imaginings, or possibly the other side of death/birth.

Another recurring theme in *Malone Dies* is the association of birth with death. Death is sometimes metaphorised as birth:

live it out, far already from the world that parts at last its labia and lets me go. (MD 14)

The feet are clear already, of the great cunt of existence. (MD 114)

This has been noted by Begam (1997: 139) and Takahashi (2002: 38) as a birth-death equivalence.

Other passages repeat the life-death equivalence in different ways. For instance, Beckett portrays death as life-giving:

A great calm stole over him. Great calm is an exaggeration. He felt better. The end of a life is always vivifying. (MD 38)

Another passage makes clear the Schopenhauerian idea of reproduction as a sin:

But between [Macmann] and those grave and sober men, first bearded, then moustached, there was this difference, that his semen had never done any harm to anyone. So his link with his species was through his ascendants only (MD 68).

The death-rebirth motif is here given a crudely literal meaning that witnessing death is enjoyable.

Such an experience makes sense in Beckettian terms, as death is the culmination of life. The birth/death association is repeated regarding Moll's sickness:

Half a century younger she might have been taken for pregnant. (MD 94)

Moll is, of course, 'impotent' in this respect (as a post-menopausal woman), and Beckett draws attention to this (a fact which perhaps explains why sex among the elderly is the only kind found in his novels). At the same time, he draws attention to parallels between processes of (giving) birth and death, both of which may be preceded by vomiting. A similar non-reproductive act is suggested later, when Malone fantasises about a 'little girl' who will 'put a plug in my arse-hole' after he has 'die[d] delighted' (MD 103), the three implications of necrophilia, paedophilia and anal sex all

figuring as negations of reproductive sexuality, while also sexualising an act (the pre-funereal arrangement of corpses) which is not usually given sexual content. The idea of refusing reproduction has been read as conveying a deeper project in Beckett's work. In a context where reproduction is refused (perhaps for Schopenhauerian reasons, because death is preferred to a life which is meaningless and entails suffering), authorial creation substitutes for physical reproduction (Stewart, 2009). Similarly, Shaw argues that Malone gives birth to Macmann, but gives a 'putrid' womb made of words (Shaw, 2010: 62; c.f. Stewart, 2009: 179). Macmann also depicts love as a 'lethal glue', a view Beckett/Malone associates with 'mystic texts' (MD 92). Furthermore, it is suggested that Malone will tell stories which are 'almost lifeless, like the teller' (MD 4). This may be a way to minimise the harm done to characters, by not bringing them too much to life.

Other references to negativity occur by way of humour. There is a mysterious item wrapped in newspaper, which Malone prefers to leave in this state:

It will be a little mystery, all my own. Perhaps it is a lack of rupees. Or a lock of hair. (MD 22)

This is a pun on the Anglo-Indian *lakh* (10,000), developed further through the equivalential series lakh-lack-lock. In this incident, Malone leaves the item unopened (frustrating his own inventory-writing process), in a parallel with other cases where Beckett suggests that the unknown is vivifying and enjoyable. In another passage, Malone admits his negativity causes him losses:

What fine things, what momentous things, I am going to miss through fear, fear of falling back into the old error, fear of not finishing in time, fear of revelling, for the last time, in an outpouring of misery, impotence and hate. (MD 23)

The phrasing here is somewhat unusual. The truism that great things may be missed through fear is given a negative twist in that part of the fear is a fear of a greater force of negativity. Malone seems to be afraid, above all, of failing to die sufficiently harshly.

Non-Beckettian characters also perform a labour of negation, although it has a different significance. Along with the Saposcat parents, the Lamberts are non-Beckettian, with a heavy dose of sadism. Big Lambert, the father and husband, beats his wife to ensure compliance. She had hopes of 'bringing him to heel, by means of her cunt', but this was trumped by his violence (MD 26). As a result, they never become a true Beckettian pseudocouple, though they display many similar features. Negation and negativity are more specifically associated with Big Lambert's treatment of animals. Lambert dreads 'the thinning effects of exercise' for his pigs, a fear which is self-defeating, as he ends up with weak, blind, lean pigs. Despite this weakness being his own fault, he upbraids the pigs for 'ingratitude', '[f]or he could not or would not understand that the pig was not to blame, but he himself, who had coddled it unduly' (MD 27). Lambert is also a 'connoisseur of mules', buying nearly exhausted mules at the yard of the slaughterhouse, in the hope that he might 'screw' more working-time out of them (MD 38-9). The mules are much like Beckettian characters, surviving indefinitely on the edge of death. In the case of the current mule, Lambert had obtained two years of work, when he expected only six months (MD 39), paralleling the prolonged dying of Malone and others.

Lambert, like the Saposcat parents, seems to view life in terms of its exploitability. Another case involves rabbits, which 'die before they are killed, of sheer fright', and which a butcher, seeking to minimise their suffering, will be unaware are already dead (MD 41). This possibility of invisible death is in keeping with the asymptotic decline of Beckett's characters, who seem almost dead already, and for whom the life-death boundary is invisible. When Sapo leaves, the Lamberts show 'a little smile, a little rictus rather, but without malice' (MD 31), perhaps reflecting the living death in which non-Beckettian characters are ignorantly trapped. Another instance of a bizarre logic used to construct meaning in a sadistic manner is the case of the rules of the House of Saint John of God,

under which 'no questions were never asked' but 'stern measures were simply taken, or not taken, according to the dictates of a peculiar logic' (MD 106). Hence, non-Beckettian characters must negate, but the modality of their negation is different from that of Beckettian characters. They negate so as to hide from negativity.

To conclude, therefore, *Malone Dies* extends the treatment of impotence and ignorance found in *Watt* and *Molloy*, but with a much greater emphasis on the life-death binary and the condition of being close to death. For the first time, an authorial narrator is placed at the centre of the novel, instead of his creations. This narrator is cast in a death-like situation of asymptotic decline, a situation which both motivates his creative activity, and is conveyed to his characters. Ignorance again has the double meaning of a desirable rejection of representation and an undesirable inability to fulfil the compulsion to narrate, while impotence is figured in increasingly immobile ways, yet also associated with the flows of the process of becoming, and the resultant inability to draw and act upon categorical distinctions. The sequence of evolution in the novels involves an increasing visibility of the authorial voice, and a cumulative increase in the impotence and ignorance of the characters. This process will reach its culmination in the third volume of the Trilogy.

## Chapter 6: Impotence and Ignorance in *The Unnamable*

In many respects, *The Unnamable* follows through to its conclusion the process of change which has marked Beckett's writing style throughout the works studied. Stylistically, the work deploys long sentences with few sentence breaks, and even fewer paragraph breaks. It is constructed without even a rudimentary plot, with characters whose self-definition is even more tenuous than in the previous novels. It deploys what has been termed 'an endlessly proliferating and self-undoing series of sayings and unsayings' (Critchley, 1998: 124) and a 'play[ing] out [of] variations on a series of largely binary formulas' (1997: 180). This is sometimes seen as a process of exhaustion which creates the conditions for someone to be unnamable and unrepresentable (Dowd, 2007: 168) or as a way of reverberating until one loses consciousness (Kaelin, 1981: 108). It is taken by Deleuze as one of the instances of 'Language II', which involves participants acting as if flayed by language, trying to have done with language by voicing only a murmur (Critchley, 2004: 179). This is the final stage reached in Beckett's written works, with Language III confined to his televisual works such as *Quad*.

*“This latest surrogate”*: narrator and characters in *The Unnamable*

The relationship between the narrator/author and the characters, or 'delegates', who offer potential identities is a central theme of the novel. Again, as in *Malone*, the narrator writes of his 'puppets', this time declaring his intent to 'scatter them, to the winds, if I can' (U 2). The narrator repeatedly articulates a compulsion to speak. For instance, he declares: 'No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities' (U 4). He also suggests that he is seeking once more to ward off tedium: 'Personally I do not intend to be bored' (U 2). He speculates that he

is subject to a 'need to know' (U 4). He suggests that he is still 'murmuring my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time' (U 13). Such statements are also negated:

no point in telling yourself stories, to pass the time, stories don't pass the time, nothing passes the time, that doesn't matter, that's how it is, you tell yourself stories, then any old thing, saying, No more stories from this day forth, and the stories go on (U 102).

The production of stories is here portrayed as extra-authorial and almost mechanical. As is typical of this novel, the claims made about the art of storytelling are simultaneously reversed, leaving a fundamental uncertainty regarding the status of the novel.

The narrator may or may not be continuous with the characters of earlier novels. In the first sections, in which the Unnamable is located in a mostly empty space, he also sees Malone, who 'passes before me at doubtless regular intervals' (U 2). Part of the purpose of this presence seems to be to head off the interpretation that the Unnamable is the next stage of Malone. The relationship between them is, rather, more like the relationship between the Unnamable and Worm: narrator and puppet. Molloy, in contrast, is apparently absent, leading to speculations as to whether he could be present without the narrator's knowledge, and a statement: 'I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on' (U 3). Belacqua, the only pre-Murphy protagonist, is arguably not there, since he returns to life. The narrator also nearly refers to Worm as Watt (U 52). Later, the narrator suggests that the 'Murphys, Molloys and Malones' are just excuses not to speak of himself, as he should have done (U 14). He declares that 'it's myself I hear, howling behind my dissertation' (U 26). Later still, he insists that he is not Murphy, Watt, Mercier or any of the others (U 38). He even finds himself wondering if he is identical with certain of the images provided (U 32). 'I think Murphy spoke now and then, the others too perhaps, I don't remember, but it was clumsily done, you could see the ventriloquist' (U 63). At one point, the narrator mentions, 'we have even piano-tuners up our sleeve, they strike A and hear G, two minutes later' (U 89), linking an experience of impotence and delay to

the earlier example of the Galls from *Watt*. These various constructions suggest a continuity between the different Beckettian characters, who are all stand-ins for the narrator, or his former selves.

Authorial creation is treated in a way which blurs the divisions between self and other. Katz observes that *The Unnamable* deals with stories of others told as if they are one's own, and vice versa (Katz, 1999: 91). The narrator suggests that he used to be able to lose himself in storytelling, 'when I still had some imagination' and could for instance 'be in a wood, or on the seashore' (U 109) – hardly coincidental choices, given the terrain favoured by Molloy in particular. Characters perform a particular role for the narrator:

Perhaps I shall be obliged, in order not to peter out, to invent another fairy-tale, yet another, with heads, trunks, arms, legs and all that follows, let loose in the changeless round of imperfect shadow and dubious light. (U 18)

It seems the narrator requires characters in order to have a body in the world, since his own nature is spherical, impotent and otherworldly (see below). This perhaps identifies the narrator with the mind relative to the body, or the unconscious relative to the ego, as well as with an author relative to characters. A parallel is also drawn here between the 'light', the opposite of the darkness of indeterminacy and the third zone, and the quality of being a character with a body. Each character the narrator invents becomes an identity, so that he despairs, 'now I'll have to find a name for this latest surrogate, his head splitting with vile certainties and his doll's eyes' (U 110).

The standpoint of the narrator is one of the most complex and problematic aspects of the novel. Brewer (1987: 154) suggests that Beckett's *The Unnamable* enacts an 'impossibility of naming', but also suggests that the unnamable can only be actualised through naming and writing, 'that is, within a system of signification that willy-nilly presents as re-presentable that which the

title states is neither nameable nor representable within any language that names' (1987: 154). The Unnamable thus performs a 'discursive instance that names its own impossibility' (1987: 155). She suggests that the Unnamable is 'that which the paternal *logos* cannot or will not name', which negates the name and law of the Father (1987: 156), i.e. as a lack in or excess over the big Other, corresponding to psychosis in Lacan. It is sometimes suggested that, as Barry puts it, '[t]he Unnamable's material being is... comprised of the wraith-like substance of language' (2006: 153). Even an existentialist such as Kaelin recognises that *The Unnamable's* narrator is 'a mere function of the meaning of words' (1981: 107). Elsewhere, Levy draws attention to the problem that one cannot claim ownership of one's words: the Unnamable 'loses himself; for which [words] belong to him alone without dragging in the beliefs and associations of strangers?' (1980: 58).

Readings of the narrative voice in *The Unnamable* divide into those which see it as the ultimate voice of the Trilogy, in contrast to the personae or delegates, and those which see it as an arrival at Blanchottian neutrality (Katz, 1999: 71). Katz insists that the unnamable is not a name, but a marker of a space beyond names, a space of voice-production (Katz, 1999: 80). Similarly, Connor (1988: 40) suggests that the unnamable marks a difference and a movement of slippage between names. Webb suggests that Malone becomes the Unnamable when he dies, and the previous characters were fictions created by Malone (1970: 76), or that all the characters are created by the Unnamable (1970: 77). Similarly, Stewart suggests that 'Malone is strangely not quite exterior to the Unnamable, as if he were on the cusp between autonomy and being a mere invention' (2006: 123). The Unnamable's reference to 'Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones' suggests both a 'quasi-authorial voice "behind" Malone' and a possible rebirth of other characters in *The Unnamable* (Tonning, 2009: 108). Characters other than the Unnamable seem to feel depths below the conscious self, whereas the Unnamable does not (Webb, 1970: 77).

The 'delegates' of the novel substitute for characters of earlier novels, existing mainly in their relationship to the narrator. Mahood, initially named Basil, is the primary named member of the delegates early in the novel, and is given little narrative of his own, being used mainly as a prop for presentation of the relationship between the narrator and the delegates. Mahood, we are told, 'told stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head' (U 20). Mahood is later replaced by Worm. These characters are given stories and lives of their own, but are never able to gain full adhesion from the narrator, who ultimately rejects them as fictions. Anyway, their existence seems premised on the narrator's ignorance and impotence. The narrator suggests that it is hard to see how Worm could stay or go if 'brightness' occurred. 'Let there then be light, it will not necessarily be disastrous. Or let there be none, we'll manage without it' (U 77). Religious imperatives ("let there be light!") and rationalist themes of enlightenment are here combined as on the one hand destroying Worm's current condition, and on the other as apparently irrelevant.

The stories are problematic for the narrator because they involve power-manoeuvres in his game to either achieve or preclude life, and achieve silence. At one point he states: 'This story is no good, I'm beginning almost to believe it' (U 42). This is ambiguous, because the "better" the story is in conventional terms (as convincing), the "worse" it is for the narrator, in resisting believing it. At other points, the stories are seen as creations of the delegates, who may or may not be equivalent to the characters. The delegates have a habit of stranding the narrator the moment any 'adhesion' occurs, 'leaving me high and dry, with nothing for my renewal but the life they have imputed to me' (U 42). They also tend to pick him up 'at a much later stage', apparently to give the impression that he lived independently inbetween (U 43). At one stage the narrator suggests that there's 'never anything to be got from those stories', even from his own (U 97). At another point he observes:

he thinks he's caught me, he feels me in him, then he says I, as if I were he, or in another, let

us be just, then he says Murphy, or Molloy, I forget, as if I were Malone, but their day is done, he wants none but himself (U 122).

This suggests that the narrator is drawn towards identification with the characters, and hints at the possibility that the narrator is also a character.

*"You soon find yourself powerless": Impotence in The Unnamable*

If the series of characters is traced from Moran through Molloy and Malone, the characters of the Trilogy have passed through cumulatively greater degrees of impotence. The narrator of the Unnamable is the culmination of this process. At the start of the novel, the narrator suggests that he has finally arrived at his endpoint of impotence: 'you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again' (U 1). There is an implicit performative contradiction in this statement, since the narrator keeps speaking. He later reaffirms that 'I do not move and never shall again, unless it be under the impulsion of a third party' (U 39).

The narrator feels himself to be outside life, and to always have been outside life. However, the smallest alteration in the orderly equilibrium of his netherworld would land him back in 'all the fun of the fair' (U 4-5). Presumably as a result of this, 'all change is to be feared' (U 5). Beckett still writes of 'the inestimable gift of life' having been 'rammed down my gullet' (U 8). Yet now, death is no longer evidence of a preliminary life (U 56). His nature is such as to preclude life: 'I'm like dust, they want to make a man out of dust' (U 62). He refers to himself as 'someone, if I may so describe myself' (U 92), throwing into doubt his status as personality.

If the narrator has escaped both life and embodiment, he nevertheless remains within existence through the mediation of language. At one point the narrator suggests that he aspires to be

outside language: 'your words too... between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought' (U 90). He then suggests the words are there to bear responsibility for the state of affairs (U 91). The status of the narrator has been widely interpreted in relation to the idea of a voice without a body. For instance, Tajiri argues that the voice, particularly in *The Unnamable*, is what remains after the body has deteriorated (Tajiri, 2006: 43). Analysing Beckett's narrators, Ackerley suggests that Beckett applies Jung's conception of the schizoid voice in *The Unnamable*. Jung conceived the schizoid voice as a kind of ego which liberated itself from external determinations and conscious will (2004: 39, 41). A passage in which the Unnamable loses his voice, fears he is going silent, listens to the silence and then hears/recovers his voice is seen by Ackerley as antedating the rest of the novel (Ackerley, 1993) and as 'the most emphatic statement of the novel's major theme, the search to locate the mysterious voice, a search doomed to frustration' (2004: 46). The antinomies of voice are also connected to the source of creativity (Ackerley, 2004: 40). Similarly, Weller (2009a) suggests that Beckett's construction of the schizoid voice is modelled on the psychotic author Hölderlin, and that Beckett also deconstructs psychoanalytic approaches to schizoid language. The narrator has been described as lingering at the threshold (Dowd, 2007: 167), kept on the wrong side of it by a gap or lack, perhaps the incapacity to retain information (2007: 171).

The narrator is portrayed as existing in a kind of netherworld, marked by minimal sensory elements and regular cyclical motions. The zone he is in is calm but troubled:

But what calm, apart from the discourse, not a breath, it's suspicious, the calm that precedes life, no no, not all this time, it's like slime, paradise, it would be paradise, but for all this noise, it's life trying to get in, no, trying to get him out (U 80).

The zone also appears to be deterministic, obeying regular laws. At one point it is suggested that determinism renders agency superfluous: 'until the order arrives, to stop everything or to continue

everything, no, superfluous, everything will continue automatically, until the order arrives, to stop everything' (U 86).

Begam suggests that *The Unnamable* is the first case of a successful negation in Beckett's canon, arguing that the narrator has reached James's 'blooming, buzzing confusion' and Murphy's third zone (1997: 175, 179). He suggests that this success is achieved by replacing an impasse with a space (1997: 182). From a poststructuralist angle, *The Unnamable* is seen as a shift from absence to a coexistence of presence and absence (Katz, 1999: 96). It is suggested that the narrator thus exists in, rather than through, language (Thobo-Carlsen, 2002: 247). Badiouian readings, however, see *The Unnamable* as a despairing text, in contrast to later works such as *How It Is* (Rabate, 2010: 105). From a Badiouian point of view, the failure of the narrator of *The Unnamable* arises because the narrator remains within the terms of the existing situation, and fails to achieve an Event (Gibson, 2007: 190). The narrator is in an *evenemental* situation yet unable to achieve an Event (2007: 196), instead engaging in a 'manic but futile explosion of mock throws of the dice' (2007: 195). This evental situation locates the narrator in the field of the artistic creator (Gibson, 2007: 191; Bersani and Dutoit, 1993: 42).

Yet even freed from life, the narrator still seeks an end:

Yes, it is to be wished, to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am. I hope this preamble will soon come to an end and the statement begin that will dispose of me. Unfortunately I am afraid, as always, of going on. (U 12)

This echoes the laments of earlier narrators, except that now, the goal of ending is not framed in terms of life and death. The narrator clarifies his fear as a fear of beginning again and returning to the same state. The desire for death is no longer simply a desire for the third zone, which the narrator seems to have achieved. The reader is here introduced to the Unnamable's belief that a

particular statement is necessary in order to end the compulsion to speak. Still within language, the narrator dreams of escape through silence. He desires, when writing from partly within Worm, to 'be let loose, alone, in the unthinkable unspeakable, where I have not ceased to be, where they will not let me be' (U 48), and urges the earth to swallow him up (U 54). Also discussing Worm, having found a flaw in his reality-sense, the narrator suggests that he may 'succeed in dying... without having been able to believe I ever lived' (U 55). He then adds that 'it' (presumably death) has 'happened to me many times already', without the delegates granting him respite from life (U 55-6).

The narrator is unable to 'be born', because he doubts the integrity or existence of the characters with which he is identified. Once convinced he existed, he would 'know for certain and giving up the ghost be born at last', and would cease desiring to leave 'this world, in which they keep trying to foist me, without some kind of assurance that I was really there' (U 56). At this stage in the account, therefore, the refusal of life is not so much a question of desire or ethics as a question of epistemology: Beckettian characters wish to die because they are tormented by a reality which frustrates the possibility of certain knowledge.

The narrator persists in associating the silence he desires with death. In one passage, the narrator discusses an ambiguous relationship to life:

coming and going now in shadow, now in light, doing his best, seeking the means of staying among the living, of getting off with his life, or shut up looking out of the window at the ever-changing, is that it, to be unable to lose myself, I don't know (U 110).

To get 'off' (rather than 'on') with life seems to be a neologism referring to decay or death.

However, he then questions whether he is alive:

But can that be called a life which vanishes when the subject is changed? I don't see why not. But they must have decreed it can't. (U 68)

The narrator's experience of the characters is such that he occupies them only when thinking about them. Language arguably belongs to the delegates rather than the narrator, so they are able to define life even if the narrator cannot understand. The effect of their definition is that the narrator's type of life – always temporary and contingent in its relations to the outer world, even if permanent in its core – fails their criteria.

Life and death lie at the centre of the narrator's experience. While much of what the narrator hears and says is possibly nonsensical, he singles out the life-death discussions as uniquely meaningful:

But what's all this about not being able to die, live, be born, that must have some bearing, all this about staying where you are, dying, living, being born, unable to go forward or back, not knowing where you came from, or where you are, or where you're going (U 86).

Nevertheless, the narrator's situation is undecidable between life and death:

For a decision must be reached, the scales must tilt, to one side or the other. No, one can spend one's life thus, unable to live, unable to bring to life, and die in vain, having done nothing, been nothing. (U 73)

This passage shows ambiguities regarding whether a character can spend a "life" in a continuous lifeless condition, or whether, ultimately, personal identity is inevitable.

*"You must say words, as long as there are any": The compulsion to speak*

Another aspect of voice in *The Unnamable* is the compulsion to speak, touched on above. The narrator hears an obligation: 'you must go on... you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me' (U 134). This compulsion to speak has been deemed a 'mysterious demand which has neither origin nor finality' (Hill, 1997: 919). Trieloff (1984: 32) suggests that *The*

*Unnamable* 'emphasizes the compulsive, obsessive need to speak, to utter the ineffable'. This compulsive aspect of language creates problems for subjectivity. Beckett's characters feel they are forced to speak by a puppet-master (Shaw, 2010: 52). None of the words his characters use are their own (2010: 53). From a deconstructive perspective, this compulsion is productive. It is the voice which prevents one from being nothing (Critchley, 1998: 123). Hence, Beckett theorises the 'impossibility and necessity of narration' (Critchley, 2004: 196). Takahashi (2002: 39) suggests that for Beckett, we must speak even when dead. The *Unnamable* has a desire to stop narrating, which he cannot meet until he knows who is narrating (Levy, 1980: 55).

The narrator frames his speech in terms of the pursuit of an absent reward, which encompasses a right to silence. He sees his stories as a 'last chance' of 'going silent' (U 33), but later, as an attempt by the delegates to prevent him from 'doing what I have to do' to go silent (U 36). He also refers to 'brief spells of hush, as of one buried before his time... Then I resurrect and begin again. That's what I'll have got for all my pains. Unless this time it's the real silence at last' (U 112). It is also suggested that he cannot satisfy the obligation to speak: 'I say it wrong, having no ear, no head, no memory' (U 59). He also suggests that silence may have to pass by way of life. 'Perhaps I'll even end up, before regaining my coma, by thinking of myself as living, technically speaking' (U 63). He speaks of 'waiting alone, blind, deaf, you don't know where, you don't know for what, for a hand to come and draw you way, somewhere else, where perhaps it's worse' (U 99). Nojournian (2004) suggests that the limits to language are also limits to existence, so that silence is impossible, and yet is also a target towards which life/speech orients.

The narrator does not know where he is, he concludes, because he has 'something to say' and not 'something to do', the possible example he thinks of being a task of carrying water between places (U 115), a Sisyphean labour which suggests an image of hell. However, if he had been this

person, he would have been 'coming and going among his casks, trying to stop his hand from trembling, dropping his thimble... scraping round for it with his foot, going down on his knees, going down on his belly, crawling' (U 116). In short, the narrator cannot imagine himself except as a character who is impotent, analogous to earlier characters beset by impotence (though also to the comings and goings of non-Beckettian characters). The novel concludes with the famous line, 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on' (U 134), which can be read a number of ways. Perhaps the narrator goes on through the door beyond language, and achieves silence. Perhaps this is another performative contradiction: the narrator fails to go on, precisely when he says he'll go on. Or perhaps there are two or more subjects involved: this narrator cannot go on, but a different "I" takes up the task.

In another passage, the narrator's inability to achieve silence, by accomplishing whatever it is which he is meant to say, is framed in terms of a failure to negate:

I am doing my best, and failing again, yet again. I don't mind failing, it's a pleasure, but I want to go silent. Not as just now, the better to listen, but peacefully, victorious, without ulterior object. Then it would be a life worth having, a life at last. (U 21)

The narrator here portrays himself as failing to self-destruct, as he is seeking to do. Ambiguously, he here sees failure as a 'life', perhaps identifying it with the life-force of becoming (in contrast with dead words), but contradicting Beckett's usual association of becoming, and of the desired endpoint, with death. He later portrays this desired life as 'the right to stay quiet in my corner, alive and dribbling, my mouth shut... my mind at peace, that is to say empty' (U 22). Beckett here portrays something akin to a mystical, Taoist or Buddhist ideal of inner peace, and suggests that such an ideal is unachievable for his narrators because of the obligation to speak. He also terms it a 'strange hope' (U 22). The narrator also refers to wishing to stop 'this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing' (U 87), establishing a similarity with Echo and Belacqua, and suggesting that

the narrator continues simply as a voice, a situation which may refer to the characteristics of an authorial creation, or to the persistence of writing after death. Later he adds: 'Perhaps it would be better to be blind, the blind hear better' (U 89). This repeats Beckett's earlier observations on impotence as a path to expanded experience, linked specifically to the narrator's hypothetical failure to hear a crucial explanation. The narrator's impotence is one of the reasons he gives for his inability to achieve silence: 'I think I must have blackouts, whole sentences lost, no, not whole. Perhaps I've missed the keyword to the whole business. I wouldn't have understood it, but I would have said it, that's all that's required' (U 84). A little later, Beckett glosses the desired statement in terms of speaking and yet saying nothing (U 13). The Unnamable is impotent to speak in this way as 'you always overlook something, a little yes, a little no, enough to exterminate a regiment of dragoons' (U 13).

The narrator feels he was given a task, saying: 'I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for being born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I've forgotten what it is' (U 21). 'Pensum' is not an English word (the connotations of penitence, penis, and pensiveness aside), but a Latin or French word for a task, examination, or punishment (such as writing lines). The task is presumably the posited origin of the compulsion to speak or write, but is ambiguous in that the task has been 'forgotten', and hence cannot be completed except by random chance. It is left ambiguous if the task is a kind of divine malice, or a feature of the human condition (perhaps a punishment for original sin). A page later, Beckett once again negates the previous argument, suggesting that the idea of a task to be performed before being allowed rest is 'eminently open to suspicion' (U 22). The narrator claims to 'have to speak of things of which I cannot speak' (U 1), caught between a compulsion to speak and an incommunicable content existing beyond language. The compulsion may itself have come from the delegates: 'what I seek, no, what I hear, now it comes back to me, all back to me, they say I seek what it is I hear, I hear them' (U

105). The process of exhaustion of language is consistent with the narrator's constant search for the right thing to say.

The inability to fulfil his obligation to speak leaves the Unnamable feeling determined:

This obligation, and the quasi-impossibility of fulfilling it, engrossed me in a purely mechanical way, excluding notably the free play of the intelligence and sensibility, so that my situation rather resembled that of an old broken-down cart- or bat-horse unable to receive the least information either from its instinct or from its observation (U 32).

The loss of a feeling of free will, or free spirit, leaves the narrator with a feeling of impotence and ignorance even while responding mechanically to the obligation. This passage suggests that the lacking element may be the narrator's ability to self-subjectify, the element which gives the feeling of life and of free will.

*"Having won, shall I be left in peace?": The struggle for and against life*

The narrator is unable to obtain life through his creations. On one occasion, this leads him to declare victory over Mahood and the delegates:

There will never be another woman wanting me in vain to live, my shadow at evening will not darken the ground. The stories of Mahood are ended. He has realised they could not be about me, he has abandoned, it is I who win, who tried so hard to lose, in order to please him, and be left in peace. Having won, shall I be left in peace? It doesn't look like it, I seem to be going on talking. In any case all these suppositions are probably erroneous. (U 59)

Characteristically, the narrator here makes a series of contradictory claims: he has won against Mahood, he has 'lost' by failing to please Mahood (and was not trying to win), his victory has not achieved the desired effect, and anyway, these claims are probably false. This passage frames the epistemological questions of the novel in terms of a struggle between the narrator and the delegates

(here exemplified by Mahood) over whether the narrator is going to 'be born' or recognise his reality. The narrator's encounter with hurdles to believing in his existence – hurdles which appear more rapidly in this novel than for characters such as Watt and Moran – ensures that the delegates will lose, but may also ensure that the narrator remains caught in the struggle occasioned by his inability to say the last word (which, by parallel with *Not I*, may entail recognising self-identity). The narrator is thus caught between the obligation to create a self-identity and his incapacity, given the epistemological hurdles, to do so. He feels he is beaten by the place he is in:

I'm not the first, I won't be the first, it will best me in the end, it has bested better than me, it will tell me what to do, in order to rise, move, act like a body endowed with despair (U 131)

Hence, the narrator's netherworld of third zone is the reason he cannot come to life.

The stakes of the game or battle which the narrator has "won" or "lost" seem to involve coming to life. If 'the game would be won, lost and won', then the effect would be that Worm is 'suddenly among us, among the rendezvous, and people saying, Look at old Worm, waiting for his sweetheart, and the flowers... For here there is no face, nor anything resembling one, nothing to reflect the joy of living and succedanea, nothing for it but to try something else' (U 78). The effect of becoming-alive, therefore, is inclusion in the social and natural orders, which is also associated with the possession of faciality. Another notable element in this passage is the implication that the narrator and Worm are forced to "try something else" because of their distance from life.

Sucedanea is a rare word for 'substitute', suggesting the relationship of narrator to characters.

After such a victory, the narrator would:

return, to where I am, empty-handed, in triumph, to where I'm waiting, calm, passably calm, knowing, thinking I know, that nothing has befallen me, nothing will befall me, nothing good, nothing bad, nothing to be the death of me, nothing to be the life of me (U 79).

though he suggests it is too early to be able to do this regarding Worm. In another passage, the narrator suggests that his resistance (through impotence and ignorance) could cause the masters/delegates to collapse: 'they'll drop, or they'll let themselves drop, where they stand, and never move again, thanks to me, who could understand nothing, of all they deemed it their duty to tell me, so nothing, of all they deemed it their duty to tell me to do, and upon us all the silence will fall again' (U 92). He later suggests that his failure/success is due to insufficient suffering: 'I'm not suffering enough yet, it's not yet my turn, not suffering enough to be able to stir, to have a body, complete with a head, to be able to understand' (U 131). It is not his 'turn' to live, not 'my turn of the life-screw' (U 131-2).

Beckett also contrasts his characters, caught in their own domain of drive or attention to life, with the outsiders who are concerned about their welfare: 'The fact of my continuing, while they are thus engaged, to be what I have always been is naturally preferable to a lame resolution' of the deputies or masters (U 25). Against the delegates, the narrator asserts an ambiguous power:

Do they consider me so plastered with their rubbish that I can never extricate myself, never make a gesture but their cast must come to life? But within, motionless, I can live, and utter me, for no ears but my own. ... I'll sham dead now, whom they couldn't bring to life, and my monster's carapace will rot off me. (U 37)

The narrator here claims a kind of ambiguous power-through-impotence, on the one hand resisting the total control of the delegates and refusing his own impotence through an inner power, and on the other, feigning impotence so that the efforts to bring him to life will fail. He then suggests that he seeks a 'murmur of unconsenting man, to murmur what it is their humanity stifles, the little gasp of the condemned to life' (U 38), an experience of suffering, refusal and negativity which is apparently precluded by the delegates' language. He is frustrated that billions of humans are not enough for the delegates (U 48). He believes his master commands him to be well, but may as well be 'shouting at

a lump of inanimate matter' (U 24). He asks rhetorically, '[w]hy don't they wash their hands of me and set me free?' (U 25). 'I'll never stir, never speak, they'll never go silent, never depart, they'll never catch me, never stop trying, that's that' (U 98).

Later, he reproaches them for their 'insistence' on getting him out of his void, even while recognising that they have 'done all they could to be agreeable to me' (U 43). He also sees himself as a failed project: 'I myself have been scandalously bungled, they must be beginning to realise it' (U 88). They are here rather similar to the welfarist agents of earlier novels, such as the staff of St John of God's, the social workers tending to Watt, and characters such as Lousse. In another passage, the welfarist ministrations of Madeleine, the woman who alone notices the existence of Worm, is taken as evidence that her belief in his existence is weakening (U 57). This implies that welfare activities serve the function of addressing epistemological problems, affirming the existence (or perhaps the humanity) of their recipient.

Later, he suggests that he may succeed only by failing. 'Perhaps it's by trying to be Worm that I'll finally succeed in being Mahood, I hadn't thought of that. Then all I'll have to do is be Worm. Which no doubt I shall achieve by trying to be Jones' (U 53). He also has animation in mind, with Mahood (here meaning the jar character) wriggling to Montmartre or Worm being unable to bear any more (U 87). However, the narrator then suggests, '[t]he mistake they make of course is to speak of him as if he really existed, in a specific place, whereas the whole thing is no more than a project for the moment' (U 87). As fictional characters, or outer ego-projections, the delegates lack sufficient reality to animate themselves.

*"I'm a big talking ball": Impotence in the narrator's netherworld*

Impotence in *The Unnamable* also takes the usual Beckettian forms of bodily incapacity and disability. The narrator is beset by various complaints, such as permanently crying eyes:

I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly. (U 14)

Then there is the way of flowing of my tears which flow all over my face, and even down along the neck, in a way it seems to me they could not do if the face were bowed, or lifted up. (U 15)

The statement is deliberately contradictory (I know nothing / I know my eyes are open), and also creates an image of negativity as a constant feature of the narrator's condition. It suggests that even impotence and negation can form a basis for deductive knowledge, although the certainty of such knowledge is always in doubt.

The narrator also deems himself to lack organs, both particular and general:

No more obscenities either. Why should I have a sex, who have no longer a nose? All those things have fallen, all the things that stick out... I'm a big talking ball... I always knew I was round, solid and round... no asperities, no apertures, invisible perhaps (U 15-16)

Impotence is here extended to an extreme, with the loss of all outer organs. This is in line with the absence of a skin-ego, and also with the progression of losses (of legs, senses and so on) of Beckett's earlier characters. The idea of roundness has been interpreted as the subject's carrying meaning on his back (Begam, 1997: 173). It could also be read as smooth space or a body without organs, as a holistic and therefore global existence, or simply as the most minimal, austere type of body possible.

On another occasion, the narrator sees orifices growing:

I have no mouth, and what about it, I'll grow one, a little hole at first, then wider and wider,

deeper and deeper, the air will gush into me, and out a second later, howling. (U 101)

He also feels an ear at some points but not others (U 100). He suggests that he is 'thirsting' and 'starving' yet does not 'feel a mouth' (U 103). He is unsure how he is able to do what he does (presumably to think or speak or write) without an ear, head, body or soul, or 'how I manage, under such conditions, to do what I'm doing', later adding, 'it's a lie, what would I understand with' (U 105). He adds shortly afterwards that he does not know by what organ he emits or perceives, or by what intelligence he understands, and later still, how he manages to hear and whether it is he who hears (U 106). In the past he was 'tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with solitude and neglect, till I doubted my own existence' (U 108). This is contrasted with his current state. His ability to speak/write is a recurring problem:

How, in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly?

I don't know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee. (U 11)

The phrase "in such conditions" is a recurring motif in Beckett's work, contrasting the generality of language with the circumstances in which it is used.

In another passage, describing his appearance to others, the narrator lists a range of maladies:

here's the medical report, spasmodic tabes, painless ulcers, I repeat, painness, all is painless, multiple softenings, manifold hardenings, insensitive to blows, sight failing, chronic gripes, light diet, shit well tolerated, hearing failing, heart irregular, sweet-tempered, smell failing, heavy sleeper, no erections... inoperable, untransportable (U 94).

These descriptions occur in a passage in which others (presumably the delegates) are seeking to prove to the narrator his existence and need for identity, by various external records. As in other cases, the proof of existence is mainly negative.

The netherworld is also awash with marks of negativity. The zone the narrator occupies is grey shot with rose, like the plumage of a cockatoo (U 11), a gratuitously precise reference. The implication that the narrator is inside a brain is suggested by such a colour-scheme, though the colour grey is also a wider metaphor for indeterminacy in Beckett's work, used for instance in *Endgame*. Drawing on such clues, Hassan suggests that *The Unnamable* 'is a dramatic experience of the mind's search for itself' (1967: 166). However, Beckett seems to foreclose such readings. At two points the narrator entertains thoughts that he is 'in a head' (U 65, 88), though the second time he adds, 'what an illumination, sssst, pissed on out of hand' (U 88), suggesting that this, like other affirmative statements, is rejected. At another point he speculates that he's the tympanum, the point separating inside from outside, mind from world (U 100).

The narrator's apparent lack of physical form precludes reality-testing any of his propositions. For instance, the narrator cannot check for walls, as he does not have either a stick or a means to use it. 'But the days of sticks are over, here I can count on my body alone, my body incapable of the smallest movement and whose very eyes can no longer close' (U 11). Inner sensations have a problematic relationship to outer realities. The narrator comments: 'Nothing ever troubles me. And yet I am troubled' (U 3). In other words, his state of torment is not attributable to an external cause. In relation to the wavering lights of the narrator's netherworld, he speculates as to whether he is unusually able to perceive them, or if his impotence is what makes them waver (U 4).

*"I have dwindled": The impotence of Worm and Mahood*

The capacity to act reappears partially in the characters created by the narrator, but these

characters are also beset by impotence. When he begins reimagining an outer self, the narrator is once more without a leg, and in need of a 'narcotic' after each step (U 27). He also has a weak head and flaccid surviving leg (U 33). His only 'problem' was 'how to continue, since I could not do otherwise', given his 'declining powers' (U 31-2). Cumulative impotence is here seen as a trick to sustain activity:

This time I am short of a leg. And yet it appears I have rejuvenated. That's part of the programme. Having brought me to death's door, senile gangrene, they whip off a leg and yip off I go again. (U 27)

The implication is that the asymptotic decline undergone by Beckettian characters is paradoxical, in that it satisfies their desire for nothingness without taking them the whole way, and thereby gives them a renewed will to live.

The first character discussed in the novel – the character spinning in the yard (who may or may not be Mahood/Basil) – is marked by both physical and psychological impotence. He is unable to relate to the family who await his return. It also takes a few years for him to cover a short distance (U 30). The dialogue of family members attaches irrelevant and inadequate content to the narrator's material being. For example, 'And yet he was a fine baby, with those words they invariably closed their relations' (U 30). If he enters the house, he suggests, it will be to keep turning, perhaps overturning the furniture and then leaving, 'without having said good-evening' (U 33). This passage suggests that Beckett's character is caught in his own duration or rhythm, and does not enter into relations with his alleged family in the house; he simply happens to be in proximity for his own reasons. He may kill his family in the process, but would not notice it, taking the 'screams of pain and wafts of decomposition, assuming I was capable of noticing them', to be 'quite in the natural order of things' (U 34). His feeling is less one of empathy or sadness than 'annoyance' (U 36). He periodically falls to the ground 'of my own free will' so as to have 'peace

and comfort', and this is mistaken for collapse by others (U 32). As with many of Beckett's characters, he stops short of suicide, this time involving taking a lethal dose of painkillers (U 32).

His main imagined character, eventually termed Worm (and occasionally Mahood), is without legs or arms. He is not 'in order' but is tolerated by the police because he is 'speechless and consequently incapable' of either 'burning oratory' or 'subversive slogans whispered, after nightfall', and also because his face shows 'nothing but the satisfaction of savouring a well-earned rest', so that his condition is unlikely to diminish others' capacity for work or happiness (U 40). This discussion echoes that surrounding the arrest of Molloy, who admits he could conceivably demoralise others and reduce their work-rate.

Worm is 'half-deaf' and has to strain his ears for any sounds (U 58). He is capable in principle of pulling his head in and out of the jar, but, to punish his 'roguish character', is physically prevented from doing so by a collar, referred to as a 'cang' (U 45), a type of punitive collar formerly used in China. This establishes a kind of double-bind regarding autonomous movement: when the character shows power, he is physically restrained, compounding his natural impotence with externally-induced impotence. One should also remember here that, by moving his head autonomously, Worm is conforming to the delegates' demands, even though he is breaking the orders of his hostess. Worm also feels this punishment to be a reward, as it leads to him having 'approximately the same set of hallucinations exactly' before his eyes (U 45). This character is an example of Beckett's use of disability to signify impotence (Begam, 1997: 161). It also repeats the idea that all sensory input, or at least all input attributed to literary characters, is hallucination.

Worm also has a few remaining capabilities. He is still capable of shedding tears (U 41). He also has a penis, but, without hands, cannot test if it is usable. However, he suggests he can

make it 'flutter' by concentrating on a 'horse's rump' (U 45), a scatological mention used to affirm Worm's incapacity for "normal" sexuality or even masturbation. Something seems also to stir in his head, which gives him hope of death from apoplexy (U 46). He later speculates, however, that his head has lost feeling, as this would explain why he cannot feel a tarpaulin on it (U 59). He is also put to use by others. Standing outside a restaurant, he is used to grow lettuce, as an advertisement, and as a mascot (U 41). His impotence does not, therefore, render him unexploitable by capitalism. However, he is present as an object. He could as easily be replaced by a vegetable (U 42), so that his existence defies the categories of the order of things. He 'says nothing, knows nothing, yet' (U 71). While uncertain if this character is a continuation of the earlier one, having lost another arm and leg, the narrator concludes, 'I have dwindled, I dwindle' (U 44). This is a good thing: 'That qua sentient and thinking being I should be going downhill fast is in any case an excellent thing' (U 56). Later he adds that he 'went on looking without flinching until, ceasing to be, I ceased to see' (U 54).

Still later in the novel, Worm is treated more abstractly as an abject remainder in a pit. He is '[t]hat tiny blur, in the depths of the pit' (U 73). The delegates seek to dislodge him with 'gaffs, hooks, barbs, grapnels, saved at last, home at last' (U 74). Cordingley (2010: 139) suggests that this character marks the beginning of voice. Worm's impotence is also taken as a blessing:

And it is a blessing for him he cannot stir, even though he suffers because of it, for it would be to sign his life-warrant, to stir from where he is, in search of a little calm and something of the silence of old. (U 73)

Worm seems to be successfully extracted from nonexistence by the delegates, but such moves to subjectify him are rapidly reversed (Begam, 1997: 164-6). The "life-warrant" (an ironic inversion of a death warrant) is to be avoided, even if its source is the pursuit of "silence", or release from the compulsion to speak. The narrator suggests that in Worm's condition, as a 'head abandoned to its ancient solitary resources', one would 'perhaps even regret being a man, under such conditions',

listing a series of possible cravings for voice, a stick, an arm or fingers, or a missile, each to reach out of the pit (U 76).

Another ambiguity is later introduced, in that becoming alive is deemed rot:

The thorax rises and falls, the wear and tear are in full spring, the rot spreads downwards, soon he'll have legs, the possibility of crawling. More lies, he doesn't even breathe yet, he'll never breathe. (U 70)

Since regular decay (towards death) is figured positively in Beckett, this inversion offers a contrast to his usual presentation, using the usual negative connotation of decay to refer to the reverse process of gaining life, which Beckettian characters view with distaste. The passage may imply that life is an ongoing process towards death, akin to decay. This passage also provides an image of non-sexual reproduction through literary creation or identification: the character begins as a minimal being and then 'grows' its limbs and capabilities. As so often in *The Unnamable*, the passage also cancels itself at the end.

Worm also contemplates suicide:

Through the splendours of nature they dragged a paralytic and now there's nothing more to admire it's my duty to jump, that it may be said, There goes another who has lived. It does not seem to occur to them that I was never there... The last step! I who could never manage the first. But perhaps they would consider themselves sufficiently rewarded if I simply waited for the wind to blow me over. That by all means, it's in my repertory. (U 46)

there are even those whose sang-froid is such that they throw themselves out of the window.

No one asks him to go to those lengths. (U 83)

The inability of Beckett's characters to commit suicide, and arguably to die, is here given a clear interpretation: a decisive death is impossible because these characters have never been born. This is

continuous with the ideas of asexual reproduction of literary characters, and of the skin-ego. In lieu of suicide, the only option is to wait for death.

Shortly afterwards, the narrator declares that, whenever 'the world is assembled at last, and it begins to dawn on me how I can leave it, all fades and disappears' (U 47). This is the closest analogue in the novels to Badiou's conception of the Event: the perception of death/transformation is such as to produce a collapse of meaning, rendering futile the search for knowledge of an Evental moment. Instead of suicide, Beckett's characters seek a 'flight from self', though they are already so decomposed that they 'needn't go far' (U 83). Hence for instance, Worm is on the verge of disappearance:

Worm will vanish utterly, as if he had never been, which indeed is probably the case, as if one could ever vanish utterly without having been at some previous stage. (U 89)

Other passages similarly negate the narrator's characters. For instance, an unspecified 'he' is taken to be 'hairless and naked', his hands on his knees 'once and for all', and his eye pointless because 'there's nothing here, nothing to see, nothing to see with', his face being '[b]alls, all balls' (U 91). This cancels out a paean to the eye which appeared earlier on the same page.

The continuity of various different personae – such as the one-legged man circling his family home, Worm, and unspecified others (possibly Malone and Moran's son) – is questionable. Whereas the circling man and Worm could be continuous, the character having lost an additional leg and arm, the other characters are impotent in different ways, such as one 'when neither legs nor arms were lacking, but simply the power to profit by them', and another given up for dead in youth (U 43). Mahood, the narrator claims, seeks his 'adhesion' to this 'conception of me', but fails because he does not understand that 'I am there to be pained':

What they all wanted, each according to his particular notion of what is endurable, was that I

should exist and at the same time be only moderately, or perhaps I should say finitely pained. They have even killed me off, with the friendly remark that having reached the end of my endurance I had no choice but to disappear. The end of my endurance! (U 34)

He then suggests that the delegates forced him to turn aside from his current path before exhausting its potential, 'compelling me to beat in retreat under penalty of losing consciousness entirely' (U 35). At another point we are told of the delegates: 'Decidedly this eye is hard of hearing' (U 76). Even a well-functioning organ is in a certain sense impotent, relative to other senses.

Impotence also besets other characters in the netherworld. Malone, we are told, 'stops at the waist', although it is unclear if this is simply an appearance owing to his relative position in relation to the narrator (U 2). The narrator also suggests that the characters' pains are less, 'their pains are nothing, compared to mine, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it' (U 14). Characters are here framed as ways of resolving trauma through witnessing. The narrator also suggests that he projects his own impotence onto his characters: 'all these stories about travelers, these stories about paralytics, all are mine, I must be extremely old, or it's memory playing tricks, if only I knew if I've lived, if I live, if I'll live, that would simplify everything, impossible to find out, that's where you're bugged' (U 132).

*"At no moment do I know what I'm talking about ": The impossibility of reason and knowledge*

Ignorance is one of the central themes of this novel, with the narrator unable to claim knowledge about himself, his characters, or the delegates. At one point the narrator tells himself: 'I must not try to think, simply utter' (U 10). Later, he says that 'as far as thinking is concerned I do just enough to preserve me from going silent, you can't call that thinking' (U 17). Thought has been reduced to an asymptotic minimum, though speech seems to persist in the absence of thought. Later

the narrator declares, 'And now let us think no more about it, think no more about anything, think no more' (U 50). However, the persistence of speech seems to render the narrator impotent to do away with thought entirely. A few lines later, he resolves to 'ask no more questions, there are no more questions, I know none any more' (U 17-18). Of course, this does not stop the flow of questions, though perhaps it throws doubt on the "I" as their source. On the following page, he suggests that he may hear questions, but 'I shall not answer them any more, I shall not pretend any more to answer them' (U 18). Again, this resolution is not followed, although the Unnamable is always more reluctant to provide answers than were Watt, Molloy, Moran, or Malone. A little later, he declares that 'it seems impossible, at this stage, that I should dispense with questions, as I promised myself I would' (U 22). Later he admits that he is 'confoundedly well informed' (U 28).

In general, the tone of the novel is directed against knowledge. Thought is unnecessary for Beckett's characters:

No one asks him to think, simply to suffer, always in the same way, without hope of diminution, without hope of dissolution, it's no more complicated than that. No need to think in order to despair. (U 83)

Hence, existence in a netherworld of despair does not require analytical reason. What is most to be avoided is any empirical or dialogical reference:

anything is preferable to the consciousness of third parties and, more generally speaking, of an outer world... Speak of a world of my own, sometimes referred to as the inner, without choking. Doubt no more. Seek no more... carry on cheerfully as before. Something has changed nevertheless. (U 108)

This passage is rather anomalous given the status of the 'delegates' in the narrator's account, but also entirely consistent with the idea of the third zone. However, the narrator seems unable to achieve the third zone entirely, as this would amount to silence. He cannot 'carry on cheerfully' or remain in

an inner or private world, because of the compulsion to speak.

He later suggests that he is unable to reach knowledge:

At no moment do I know what I'm talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why, but I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit (U 52)

He later qualifies a similar statement, 'there might be a hundred of us and still we'd lack the hundred and first, we'll always be short of me' (U 52). Hence, the lack of a subject – an "I think" – is the fundamental barrier to knowledge for the narrator. Despite lacking knowledge, the narrator does 'tell stories'. He admits that he does not understand why he does this, denying that it is to 'pass the time', because time does not pass (U 107). In Bergsonian theory, time is able to pass due to the relation of past and present, which is confounded for the Unnamable by his lack of memory.

In the narrator's context, the content of knowledge-claims seems almost arbitrary:

you say any old thing, more or less, more or less, in a daze of baseless unanswerable self-reproach, that's why they always repeat the same thing, the same old litany, the one they know by heart, to try and think of something different, of how to say something different from the same old thing, always the same wrong thing said always wrong, they can find nothing (U 90).

However, some degree of knowledge becomes possible by way of negation:

but Worm cannot note. There at least is a first affirmation, I mean negation, on which to build. Worm cannot note. Can Mahood note? (U 53)

The narrator concludes that Mahood (now identified with the character in a jar, previously specified as Worm) can and does note. However, this act of noting is internal to the character's narrative. In general, the immanence of reason to a narrative – which is analogous to the interiority of knowledge

to an episteme or discourse – is taken to problematise its status as true reason/knowledge. All the things seen by a character, such as Worm, are deemed 'hallucinations' (U 45). On one occasion, a possible solution is foreclosed. The narrator has heard a 'murmur' of 'promising formulae' which may provide answers, but was distracted by his characters – a 'troop of lunatics' – and was resultantly unable to keep his mind on the topic, where his 'true interest lies' (U 18-19).

The alternative to knowledge and reasoning is to simply "go on":

if only they'd stop committing reason, on them, on me, on the purpose to be achieved, and simply go on, with no illusion about having begun one day or ever being able to conclude, but its too difficult, too difficult, for one bereft of purpose, not to look forward to the end, and bereft of all reason to exist, back to a time he did not. (U 102)

This passage suggests that the motivation for reason, and also for the desire to find an end or to "die", stems from the unbearable nature of an endless, purposeless existence. Beckett then writes of 'one last effort' to seek some unspecified outcome, 'past bearing it, going on bearing it' (U 103). In these passages, the emptiness of pure drive or becoming is contrasted with the exercise of reason and knowledge.

The process of 'going on' is connected to life (or whatever condition is equivalent to life in the case of the narrator). It is the possibility of practical use which determines the need to go on:

perhaps in the hope of being proven in the swim, that is to say guaranteed to sink, sooner or later, that must be it, such notions may be entertained, without any process of thought. (U 90)

The substance of this statement refers to Beckett's usual concern with life and death, in this case the belief that empirical proof through life is ultimately futile in a context of mortality. The second part of the statement suggests that such a belief does not require 'thought', an anomalous statement

which may indicate that such a belief is fundamental or intuitive for Beckettian characters, and not a deduced conclusion.

The absence of reason is connected to the bodily impotence of the narrator, in a way which fuses impotence and ignorance. In one memorable passage, reason is treated as a kind of organ which might grow on the narrator's body:

That one day on my windpipe, or some other section of the conduit, a nice little abscess will form, with an idea inside, point of departure for a generalised infection. ... And in no time I'd be a network of fistulae, bubbling with the blessed pus of reason. Ah, if I were flesh and blood, as they are kind enough to posit, I wouldn't say no (U 68).

This passage is ambiguous. On the one hand, the narrator offers the negative interpretation of ideas as 'infections' (prefiguring Dawkins' memes), reducing thought to the lower bodily stratum, and questioning why these emissions are privileged over others, thereby establishing continuities with Beckett's association of speech with belches and farts. On the other, the narrator's incapacity for self-directed thoughts seems to be fundamental, and contrasted with his thoughts under the pressure of outer voices or inner terror. This state of being is taken to be an effect of the absence of bodily life ('flesh and blood'), suggesting that, not having been born, Beckettian characters lack free will or independent thought, instead simply reacting to stimuli. (This is an ambiguous implication, since elsewhere the third zone is associated with freedom). The treatment of thought as a kind of bodily growth suggests that Beckett views thought and life as continuous, and also that thought is problematically dependent on the empirical level, in contrast with Cartesian claims.

In other passages, the substantial nature of knowledge is treated in a more negative way. On one occasion, for instance, knowledge is seen as excremental:

or for no other reason than their ignorance of what to do, whether to fill up the holes or let

them fill up of themselves, it's like shit, there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word, one has only to seek, seek in vain, to be sure of finding in the end, it's a question of elimination. (U 81)

Again the association of thought with the lower bodily stratum is notable here. This passage also seems to suggest that knowledge is analogous to holes filling with a substance, which perhaps suggests an antinomy between knowledge and silence. The fact of being empty – perhaps a mystical reference – is frustrated by the voices which compel knowledge.

This state of ignorance seems to apply to the creations as well as the narrator. Discussing Worm, the narrator suggests that he barely understands:

Yes, so much the worse, he knows it is a voice, how is not known, nothing is known, he understands nothing it says, just a little, almost nothing, it's inexplicable, but it's necessary, it's preferable, that he should understand just a little, almost nothing (U 74).

Knowledge is a secondary matter, at least for the character spinning in the yard:

Lies, lies, mine was not to know, nor to judge, nor to rail, but to go. That the bacillus botulinus should have exterminated my entire kith and kin... was something I could readily admit, but only on condition that my personal behaviour had not to suffer by it. (U 34)

Hence, for this character, knowledge becomes inadmissible only if it entails a change in condition. It is something external to his own rhythm, which continues interminably without reference to knowledge. This situation, in the context in which it is introduced, destroys the possibility of social connectedness.

Other characters are similarly infected with the inability to reach meaningful conclusions. The delegates are themselves impotent: 'give me something to do, something doable to do, poor devils, they can't, they don't know, they're like me, more and more' (U 103). It seems that the

incapacity to make the narrator act also renders the narrators impotent, creating a strange affinity between them. The narrator asks if he asked questions when he was in the jar, i.e. as Worm (U 44). This is perhaps a way of questioning whether the questioning function belongs to the character or the narrator. He later adds that the others are also innocent. 'I, them, the master, myself, we are all innocent, enough. Innocent of what, no one knows, of wanting to know, wanting to be able, of all this noise about nothing, of this long sin against the silence that enfolds us' (U 92).

*"Perhaps it's of him, I'll never know": The process of reasoning in The Unnamable*

Knowledge, when it is attempted, generally ties the narrator in knots, self-contradictions, and reversals. While apparently speaking as Worm, the narrator attempts to think, and ends up with a Watt-like paradox:

What about trying to cogitate, while waiting for something intelligible to take place? Just this once. Almost immediately a thought presents itself, I should really concentrate more often. Quick let me record it before it vanishes. How is it the people do not notice me? I seem to exist for none but Madeleine. (U 54-5)

He later suggests that, until the matter is cleared-up or others notice him, he cannot believe that he exists (U 55). Confirmation may as well be a kick or a kiss (U 56). However, Worm is instead marked by 'inexistence in the eyes of those who are not in the know', which supports the hypothesis that he is hallucinating (U 58).

The reasoning process employed by the narrator when he does so at all is uncertain and self-contradictory. He rejects the stance of Watt and Moran: 'The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system' (U 2). There is here a double ignorance: the unsystematisability of the narrator's universe, and his own ignorance of why this approach must be avoided. The reader, no

doubt, can deduce that such attempts would fail, just as they did for Watt and Moran, and that such approaches are incompatible with the field of undifferentiated becoming which marks Beckettian characters. But the narrator has been kept unaware of this. A page later, however, we are told that everything has proceeded with 'the most perfect order', with a few exceptions 'the meaning of which escapes me' (U 3). Later, it is suggested that the inability to speak and yet say nothing is an effect of 'the spirit of method to which I have perhaps been a little too addicted' (U 13). Hence, the narrator both rejects and remains tied to systematisation.

In *The Unnamable*, argues Levy, each statement splinters into different questions and hypotheses (1980: 60). Many examples of such confusion can be listed, particularly regarding the narrator's knowledge of his own situation. The nature of the netherworld frustrates attempts to obtain knowledge. The narrator is faced with uncertain sources of information. For example, he is relying on the wavering lights of his domain, even though he is unsure if they really waver (U 4), and whether they are the same lights, or whether he is moving (U 5). He sees a couple – possibly Mercier and Camier – but can catch only a 'confused glimpse' (U 7). He also repeats the theme of 'darkness' (U 1) from previous novels, again with connotations of the absence of meaning (enlightenment).

This situation leads to a series of unresolvable questions. Molloy, and other protagonists, are believed, but not known, to be present (U 2-3). The Unnamable has no knowledge of whether Malone will continue to appear before him, or whether others will do so (U 3). There may be other pits, deeper than the narrator's, though the Unnamable claims to 'know' (based on inner intuition) that 'we have all been here forever, we shall all be here forever' (U 3). The narrator claims that he can infer future order in his domain from present/past order, but it is unclear why, except that change would lead back to life (U 4). He concludes that nothing has changed so far, though only

after hesitating (U 5). He thinks Malone makes no noise, 'for I am not deaf', though he later admits he is only 'half-convinced' of this (U 5). He concludes that he knows that he is round, rather than cylindrical or ovoid, although he advances no reasoning for this view (U 16). He debates whether his netherworld is hell, heaven, earth, or a 'lake beneath the earth' (U 110). He claims to have resumed 'years later', which suggests that he can go silent, but then corrects himself that '[y]ears is one of Basil's ideas' (U 19), in other words, a false creation of the delegates. Later, the nature of the delegates is questioned: 'But who, they? Is it really worth while inquiring? With my clogged means? No, but that's no reason not to' (U 37). He is unsure if the delegates have deceived him, or if he has simply failed to understand what they were saying (U 99).

The general epistemological breakdown of the narrator's world interferes with any statement he attempts to make. Even some forms of impotence may be unknowable:

It is true one does not know one's riches until they are lost and I probably have others still that only await the thief to be brought to my notice. (U 45)

This sentence puns on a clichéd statement, suggesting that one literally does not know what one possesses (whereas the cliché applies more to the value of what one possesses), before adding the further complication that one may already have lost riches but not know of the theft. On other occasions, the statements made are mostly negative:

and yet I speak, perhaps it's of him, I'll never know, how could I know, who could know, who knowing could tell me, I don't know who it's all about, that's all I know, no, I must know something else, they must have taught me something, it's about him who knows nothing, wants nothing, can do nothing (U 123).

In this passage, it is suggested that the narrator either does not know, or knows only of impotence and ignorance. Other passages exhaust themselves in self-contradiction:

it was never I, I've never stirred, I've listened, I must have spoken, why deny it, why not

admit it, after all, I deny nothing, I admit nothing, I say what I hear, I hear what I say (U 132).

This passage suggests that the circularity of the narrator's explanations is connected to his ignorance. Another passage questions how the narrator can explain absence:

I see nothing, it's because there is nothing, or it's because I have no eyes, or both, that makes three possibilities, to choose from, but how do I really see nothing (U 130)

The narrator's ignorance is here conditioned by impotence. The absence of the potential to obtain knowledge practically, through the body, leads to an incapacity to determine which of several explanations for impotence pertains.

When the narrator claims knowledge, it seems to simply be a matter of personal belief. On one occasion, he selects based on usefulness:

Did I wait somewhere for this place to be ready to receive me? Or did it wait for me to come and people it? By far the better of these hypotheses, from the point of view of usefulness, is the former, and I shall often have occasion to fall back on it (U 6)

This presentation seems to deliberately blur the distinction between a scientific approach (selecting the hypothesis with the most explanatory power) and wishful thinking (selecting the most convenient truth-claim). Similarly, a little later, the narrator rejects a claim (that he emits the light himself) because there is 'nothing to be gained, for the moment, by supposing so' (U 10). At other times, belief is insufficient to ground knowledge. For instance: 'I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain' (U 5). This seems to be a reference to Cartesian or Copernican controversies.

*"Suppositions all equally vain": Empirical knowledge in The Unnamable*

The impossibility of empirical knowledge is a major source of ignorance. Mahood is said to play the trick of presenting 'ostensibly independent testimony in support of my historical existence' (U 30), only ostensibly in that the evidence is internal to a particular narrative. At one point, the Unnamable says that he is 'talking about things that do not exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point' (U 16). Shortly afterwards, he asks himself whether he should 'rather say some other thing, even though it be not yet the right thing', and resolves to 'try' (U 17). Later, he reverses this judgement: 'Suppositions all equally vain, it's enough to enounce them to regret having spoken' (U 91). On another occasion, the narrator observes that '[a] man may die at the age of seventy without ever having had the possibility of seeing Halley's comet' (U 6). This is true – the comet has a 75-year cycle – and serves to suggest that even a lifetime of knowledge may be incomplete, for reasons of unavailable information.

The absence of empirical referents in the netherworld is one reason for the narrator's ignorance. In one passage, the narrator suggests that the absence of an environment leads to his ignorance: 'if I could be in a forest, caught in a thicket, or wandering round in circles' – a clear allusion to Molloy – 'it would be the end of this blither, I'd describe the leaves, one by one', and he'd explore different environments seeking his 'own little corner' because he is tired and wants to stop and 'speak no more' (U 118). He resolves not to seek his home any more, as it 'would be occupied already' by 'someone far gone' (U 119).

Ignorance is sometimes given a slant similar to Watt's pot:

these windows I should perhaps rather call doors, at least by some other name, and this word man which is perhaps not the right one for the thing I see when I hear it, but an instant, an hour, and so on, how can they be represented, a life, how could that be made clear to me, here, in the dark (U 127).

The special unrepresentability of life and time arises from a character more abstract than that of doors and men (which are simply misnamed), and incommensurable with the narrator's experience. That life is incommensurable makes sense in relation to the skin-ego hypothesis, and also in relation to the narrator's claim to timeless eternity. The reference to time perhaps indicates Bergson's suggestion that time cannot adequately be represented in language or space, as well as to the narrator's timeless condition. In both cases, the concept seems meaningless without a form of life to which it refers, and is therefore distinct from empirical concepts which rely on sense-perceptions.

Time is a recurring problem for the narrator, compounding his ignorance. The narrator cannot measure time, or calculate the velocities of others in his void (U 9). This perhaps accords with the Bergsonian idea of a temporal sphere of the pure past in which measurement is impossible. The narrator faces dilemmas regarding his knowledge of the world, since he has forever been in his void:

These notions of forbears, of houses where lamps are lit at night, and other such, where do they come to me from? (U 4)

Possibly, the hypothesis of 'delegates' seeking to direct the narrator comes from such questions:

I can see them still, my delegates. The things they have told me! About men, the light of day. I refused to believe them. But some of it has stuck. (U 7)

Moments of time are discontinuous, and do not "pass" but rather, "arrive" and bounce off the narrator (U 113). The narrator remembers himself as always aged, with time making no difference to his condition (U 117). The eternal nature of the narrator's situation is one of the few knowable elements:

What I say, what I may say, on this subject, on the subject of me and my abode, has already been said since, having always been here, I am still here. At last a piece of reasoning that pleases me, and worthy of my situation. (U 12)

This may reflect the eternal nature of the force of becoming.

*" Safe in the arms of Jesus, for example": Religious knowledge in The Unnamable*

Religious knowledge suffers the same problems in *The Unnamable* as empirical and rational knowledge. The hypothesis of God is rejected as too great a depth to sink to:

The master in any case... we don't intend... to make the mistake of inquiring into him, he'd turn out to be a mere high official, we'd end up by needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still certain depths we prefer not to sink to. (U 91)

Divine power, expressed as word and light, is treated in *The Unnamable* as something reduced from command to contingency (Shaw, 2010: 67). Religious knowledge is also derived from the delegates (U 8). Yet the narrator adopts it for his own purposes:

I am Matthew and I am the angel, I who came before the cross, before the sinning, came into the world, came here. (U 11)

The delegates' task is sometimes seen in terms of salvation: 'he's saved, we've saved him, they're all the same, they all let themselves be saved, they all let themselves be born' (U 100). Referring to Moran and the Unnamable, Barry suggests that Beckett sees speaking and erasing speech as analogous to sinning and redemption, suggesting that 'human language is, from a theological point of view, fallen' (2006: 150).

Despite this religious pessimism, religious analogies are sometimes used as potential explanations:

I may therefore perhaps legitimately suppose that the one-armed one-legged wayfarer of a moment ago and the wedge-headed trunk in which I am now marooned are simply two phases of the same carnal envelope, the soul being notoriously immune from deterioration

and dismemberment. (U 43)

An analogy is here suggested between the Christian doctrine of an immortal and indivisible soul, and the narrator's own situation. However, this does not resolve the question of whether the standpoints occupied by the narrator (such as Worm) are real, and whether they are continuous or separate. He later suggests that he has 'stopped praying', but then contradicts this with, 'No, no, I'm still a suppliant' (U 50). This archaic (or Francophone) form of 'supplicant' perhaps references the Aeschylus play of the same name, and suggests a state of hiding behind walls (a possible reading of the narrator's netherworld), as much as a religious reference. In another passage the 'dear lost lamb' is qualified with the observation that he and the lamb were only *told* they cared for each other (U 97). In all of these passages, the ambiguities of reason pass over onto religion.

It is also unclear if the narrator has been in the netherworld forever, or has arrived there. He resolves this question by a religious analogy: Hell is both eternal and has a start-date (U 6). Another religious reference reads, 'all joined in a hymn, Safe in the arms of Jesus, for example, or, Jesus lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly, for example' (U 30), followed some lines later with, 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, for example, or Jesus, my one, my all, hear me when I call, for example' (U 31). These sentences use the recursivity of language and the nominal nature of song titles as ways to negate the hopeful content of the titles themselves, exposing them as merely clichés. The observation that Jesus, like the narrator, 'must have been a fine baby' (U 31) is possibly ironic, suggesting the elision of difference in the clichéd speech of non-Beckettian characters. In another passage, it is suggested that there is still 'ravening in heaven a sporting God to plague his creature, per pro his chosen shits' (U 52), analogising God with a person using a worm for fishing, and also with the delegates or masters. Those above are said to face punishment or pardon (U 80), analogising birth with ascension to heaven.

In yet another passage, the delegates are referred to as 'praying for Worm, praying to Worm' and calling on 'Jude' (an apostle and "brother" of Jesus, though Beckett is probably alluding to the traitor Judas Iscariot) for pity on them and on Worm, though 'fortunately it all means nothing to him' (U 77). Worm here figures as *homo sacer*, at once abject and Godlike. The text then adds, 'Currish obscurity, to thy kennel, hell-hound! Grey. What else?' (U 77). Grey is a recurring symbol for indeterminacy or indistinction in Beckett, and Worm seems to be deemed hellish because he does not respond to prayers either as deity or recipient, his object-like status being too fixed. The hell-hound and cur here join the black sheep and goat as symbols of irreligious animality.

*"Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them": The Narrator and the Delegates*

The relationship of the narrator to knowledge is complicated by the position of the delegates, who are alleged to attempt to fill the narrator with knowledge, reason and/or subjectivity. The Unnamable is haunted by a group referred to as 'they', who appear even before the narrator speaks of himself (Levy, 1980: 59). The Unnamable speculates that he can speak to the 'ancestors' and 'pedagogues', but that this can only emulate their reasoning and so cannot be autonomous (Cordingley, 2010: 136). Rose suggests that the delegates are seeking to force the self to stop escaping self-hood (1973: 47). The narrator suggests that he 'learnt to reason' from 'all the words they taught me' (U 127), 'they' here presumably referring to the delegates. He refers to 'these images at which they watered me, like a camel, before the desert' (U 130). The narrator resists, or more accurately is incapable of, being filled with knowledge by the delegates: 'Pupil Mahood, repeat after me, Man is a higher mammal. I couldn't' (U 50). Thought is also, on one occasion, termed one of the delegates' words, irrelevant to the narrator's real condition (U 48). Knowledge is deemed useful only so as to dismiss it as 'inapplicable to the case before him' in the 'next belch' (U 93). The narrator also suggests that he is 'immortal', whereas the delegates are not, and that the

delegates, like himself, are forgetful (U 100).

The term 'delegates' in *The Unnamable* has a dual meaning. On the one hand, the group are introduced as 'my delegates' (U 7), and apparently associated with the narrator's 'puppets' or characters. (Read in this way, there is also a contradiction: Malone does not speak, and Molloy and others are not seen). Yet they are also treated as delegates of a higher power, similar to Gaber or Moran, and as similar to the doctors, carers, priests and police of the earlier novels, harassing the narrator to conform to an outer order.

There were four or five of them at me, they called that presenting their report. One in particular, Basil I think he was called, filled me with hatred. (U 8)

The mind-body relation is suggested here; the delegates might be the five senses. Also suggested here is the relationship between Hamm and Clov, in which Clov is the delegate. The presenting of the report suggests that the Unnamable may be Youdi (to whom Moran owed a report). Later the delegates are supplemented by masters, who may be a single person or a 'whole college of tyrants' (U 21), and who may be concerned for the narrator's welfare, but disagree as to its nature (U 24). They are also identified with the 'deputies': 'perhaps it's a meeting of deputies' (U 25). Yet he also suggests that the others are 'quite miserable because of me', because there is 'nothing to be done' to help him, 'and he so anxious to help' (U 23). Commands to be well and have no complaints are ineffective (U 24).

The delegates' status is also unclear:

Perhaps they exist in the way they have decreed will be mine, it's possible, I don't know and I'm not interested. If they had taught me how to wish I'd wish they did. (U 38)

The delegates are taken as the source of knowledge of the world. They have 'taught me to count, and even to reason' (U 8). It is unclear how they have done so, since there is no connection between

the netherworld and life. The source of knowledge – always the same one used by the delegates – would be 'suspicious', if the narrator 'hoped to obtain, from these revelations to come, some truth of more value than those I have been plastered with ever since they took it into their heads I had better exist' (U 49). Their existence raises a further problem, for the delegates exist in the outer world, and the narrator does not. 'Here, in my domain, what is Mahood doing in my domain, and how does he get here?' (U 26). The delegates try to force the narrator into identification with them:

Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. (U 37)

The image of speech as regurgitation is typical of Beckett's association of voice with other bodily emissions. In this case, it is given the added twist of portraying speech as simply repetition, and hence as the voice of the other, incommensurable with the position of the narrator. While the narrator is unsure they have ever spoken, and sure that nobody has intruded on his isolation, 'it can only have been from them that I learnt what I know about men and the ways they have of putting up with it' (U 7). He has never met them, yet knows their faces, and advances the Watt-like deduction that maybe this was from photographs (U 8).

However, the invocation of the delegates is juxtaposed to other fragments in which their existence is denied. For instance, the narrator claims to be self-contained in terms of knowledge. 'What doesn't come to me from me has come to the wrong address' (U 64). Yet he also suggests that he has been 'reduced to reason' (U 51). Later, he suggests the delegates do not exist; they are '[i]nexistent, invented to explain I forget what' (U 14). The facts of their stories are 'no better than any other' (U 35). He also claims to be caged, with no sense of an outside, echoing modernist readings: 'like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in

a cage and dead in a cage' (U 104). Reasoning necessarily leads to falsehood, with one passage reading, 'how I hear myself reasoning, all lies' (U 131). His memory is poor. For instance, being forewarned, he never remains so for long (U 60). His 'understanding is not yet sufficiently well-oiled to function without the pressure of some critical circumstance, such as violent pain felt for the first time' (U 64). This observation echoes Bergson's idea that thought is an effect of attention to life. As a result, he is incapable of abstract thought:

For others the time-abolishing joys of impersonal and disinterested speculation. I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest, once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded. (U 64)

The implication here is that the narrator is constantly in such a state of terror during the period of the novel, and presumably the other novels too. Such terror then becomes almost a normal state of existence – unless perhaps the novels are imagined to be written over an extremely long period (remembering that the narrator claims an eternal condition). A second ambiguity is that the narrator frequently engages in speculation which seems abstract, though it is never truly 'impersonal and disinterested'.

Shortly afterwards, he refers to:

long intervals, during which, hearing nothing, I say nothing. That is to say I hear murmuring, if I listen hard enough, but it's not for me, it's for them alone, they are putting their heads together again. (U 66)

This indicates two things regarding the impulse to speak: first that the terror the narrator feels is induced by a voice, and secondly that the speech is discontinuous. The theme of 'murmurs' as a metaphor for the undifferentiated sense-impressions occurring in the absence of categorisation by thought is a recurring theme in Beckett's work, as is the absence of true silence for Beckettian characters. On this occasion, the undifferentiated 'murmur' of being is given the additional

connotation of being evidence of the delegates (whose plural character is elsewhere questioned) speaking together, presumably an analytical deduction from the only known source of sensory inputs (though elsewhere the ability of the delegates to communicate with the narrator is also questioned).

On one occasion, the narrator concludes that the voice must be his own, since no other voice could reach him (U 114). Having dispensed with the narrators, he then reintroduces them, and resolves that 'we'll have to start killing them again' (U 121). Related passages continue the oscillations:

it's not anyone's fault, since there isn't anyone it can't be anyone's fault, since there isn't anyone but me it can't be mine, sometimes you'd think I was reasoning, I've no objection, they must have taught me reasoning too (U 121).

Strange, these phrases that die for no reason, strange, what's strange about it, here all is strange, all is strange when you come to think of it, no, it's coming to think of it that is strange (U 121)

The hypothesis of a companion is also considered:

Perhaps I have a companion in misfortune, given to talking, or condemned to talk, you know, any old thing, out loud, without ceasing, but I think not, what do I think not, that I have a companion in misfortune, that's it, they loathe me, to that extent, that wouldn't surprise me. (U 85)

While the hypothesis of a companion would preclude the logical necessity of the delegates, it is also taken as evidence of their malice. In this case, the narrator's situation is taken to be analogous to hell, as his companion is in a situation analogous to Tantalus or Sisyphus (as indeed is the narrator). In another case, the narrator lists the devil as the only possible visitor, and then refers to men as 'those in my image, whom I might resemble' (U 124-5), comparing himself to God (perhaps as

authorial creator) and establishing an ambiguity between Heaven and Hell.

When the existence of the delegates is accepted, their role is generally one of persecution. In particular, the narrator's need for rational arguments frustrates the delegates. 'I need explanations, of everything, and even then, I don't understand, that's how I'll sicken them in the end' (U 62). The delegates, as we have seen, do not accept the narrator's condition as life. The reason he imputes for their objection is epistemological:

They want me to have a mind where it is known once and for all that I have a pain in the neck, that flies are devouring me and that the heavens can do nothing to help. (U 68)

Beckett here parades the three types of knowledge: the rational self-knowledge of a subject, the external knowledge of an empirical observer, and religious knowledge or belief. He suggests that it is the absence of these three types of knowledge – and not impotence as such – which frustrates the search for life in the narrator. A little later, the narrator says: 'they don't know who they are either... So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it's human, a lobster couldn't do it' (U 88). This suggests a view of human nature which affirms an empirical order, while also identifying all characters with a Beckettian core of existential confusion.

*"The essential is never to arrive": Negation in The Unnamable*

Negation in *The Unnamable* is most prominently figured in terms of language. Iser terms *The Unnamable* a 'relentless process of negation... a ceaseless rejection and denial of what has just been said' (1974b: 707). Similarly, Sherzer suggests that *The Unnamable* is composed of 'an accumulation of techniques that render language awkward, askew, and quite efficiently misused' (1988: 89). Beckett engages in outpourings of words which manifest 'the principle of recursivity basic to generative-transformational grammar', while also aiming for diversity rather than semantic

unity, and manipulating contiguity to undermine redundancy in language (1988: 93). In this text, Beckett 'downplays the referential function of language and emphasises its metafictional and metalinguistic aspects' (1988: 90), constructing not so much a story as a discussion of storytelling. To this end, the voice in *The Unnamable* 'flouts all the rules' of language (1988: 91), creating new linguistic possibilities by redistributing phonic, syntactic and semantic elements (1988: 96).

This approach is sometimes taken to involve a deliberate strategy of negation for purposes of power-contestation. Gibson interprets the narrator as adopting a stance of 'intransigent stupidity' so as to resist the localisation of Being (Gibson, 2007: 190). He rejects all exchanges with life (2007: 192). On this reading, there is not a death of the subject in this work, but a refusal to be a subject, apparently in rebellion against the dominant common sense (2007: 188). Gibson suggests, following Bersani and Dutoit (1993: 54), that the narrator refuses to consent to human status (Gibson, 2007: 193). One passage in particular suggests such a proactive project of refusing categorisation and place:

The essential is never to arrive anywhere, never to be anywhere, neither where Mahood is, nor where Worm is, nor where I am, it little matters thanks to what dispensation. The essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line... I am he who never will be caught, never delivered, who crawls between the thwarts, towards the new day that promises to be glorious... praying for rack and ruin (U 52).

This passage suggests a deliberate project of constantly avoiding the localisation of being or the naming of the self.

The relationship between voice and creation is explored in depth in this work. The narrator must become a character, such as Mahood, to speak himself as the unnamable – though this renders such speech impossible (Stewart, 2006: 127). No matter how denuded his characters become, the

Unnamable is never convinced that he could be any such being (2006: 128). The first person becomes 'farical' because it never coincides with the speaker (2006: 129-30).

There is some debate on the status of the narrator. Stewart suggests that the Unnamable is the narrative voice of the whole trilogy. 'The centre has collapsed. The subject needed to bind these elements together is itself in a constant state of flux and non-beginning' (2006: 131). According to Begam, this work 'succeeds in collapsing the narrator/narrated into an undifferentiated third term, the mediating slash that formerly stood as the sign of demarcation but now disperses itself into an interstitial zone, the space of an in-between' (1997: 156). The location of the narrator or 'locutor' is 'shifting and inconstant' (1997: 159). In *The Unnamable*, it is suggested that names such as Malone and Molloy are a way to avoid speaking of oneself, and hence a waste of time (Ramsay, 1983).

Acts of description or creation are problematised by the narrator's netherworld. The narrator's situation leads to important questions regarding the best way to express himself:

what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple?

Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? (U 1)

With the yesses and noes it is different, they will come back to me as I go along and how,

like a bird, to shit on them without exception. (U 1)

The narrator later makes a similar statement, 'let me complete my views, before I shit on them' (U 51). All of these techniques (aporia, instant invalidation, future contradiction) are common to all of Beckett's novels, but deployed with intensified frequency in *The Unnamable*. This passage suggests that the choice of such techniques by the narrator (not only the author) is deliberate, and that they are a means to communicate a position of impotence and ignorance which is incommunicable through direct, affirmative statements.

The theme of asexual reproduction through authorial creation also appears prominently. Shaw (2010: 64-5) suggests that the narrator conceives children by words alone, for instance when Worm simply needs to sprout a head. Similarly, the narrator suggests that his words might 'engender others and finally, in an irresistible torrent, banish from my vile mouth all other utterance' (U 19). This suggests a theme of asexual reproduction through the creation of language or literary characters, and further suggests that this process of creation is a means to self-destruction, which for Beckettian characters is desirable. Hence, the final silence or 'end' desired by the Unnamable is to be found through his own succession by the characters he has created – though such a silence is never reached. He also sometimes suggests that he feels a 'longing' to have 'floundered however briefly, however feebly, in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans' (U 34), suggesting that he feels cut-off from the continuity of life, from the natural order and/or from what Bergson terms the *élan vital*.

In continuity with the earlier novels, birth and death are once more identified:

Please God nothing goes wrong. Mahood I couldn't die. Worm will I ever get born? It's the same problem. But perhaps not the same personage after all. The scytheman will tell, it's all one to him. (U 66)

That birth and death are indistinguishable to the 'scytheman' (the spirit of death) is an unsurprising conclusion for a Beckettian character. Beckett simply projects into a spiritual field his intuition that birth and death, as transformations in status, are basically equivalent. The status of the characters Mahood and Worm is more ambiguous: is the narrator appealing to them as external beings, or describing his own problems while within their identities? The narrator also repeats the common Beckettian sentiment that death, or a netherzone like his own, is preferable to life:

All ye living bastards, you'll be all right, you'll see, you'll never be born again, what am I saying, you'll never have been born, and bring your brats, our hell will be heaven to them,

after what you've done to them. (U 96)

He then adds, 'to your guns, spermatazoon' (U 96). This suggests a combative view of life and a power-struggle within which the narrator struggles not to live. It is also suggested here that the advantage of life is to not have to worry about being born, and that the netherworld of the narrator is better than the suffering inflicted on non-Beckettian characters by one another.

In another passage, the narrator suggests that the missed life of a sperm which does not find an egg is preferable to the pain of living:

some people are lucky, born of a wet dream and dead before morning, I must say I'm tempted, no, the testis has yet to descend that would want any truck with me (U 96).

Be born, dear friends, be born, enter my arse, you'll just love my colic pains, it won't be long, I've the bloody flux. (U 97)

Again, non-reproductive sexuality (anal or masturbatory) is considered as a desirable alternative to reproduction, though it is frustrated in both cases by impotence, in the first case associated with pre-pubescent childhood (undescended testes), and in the second sickness or old age. Similarly, the narrator discusses birth in negative terms. He writes of 'two cunts', an 'accursed' one which 'ejected me into this world' and another on which 'I tried to take my revenge' (U 35), portraying life as a curse, giving birth as a sin or crime, and sexual reproduction as a kind of revenge for birth. He also speaks of 'looking for my mother to kill her, I should have thought of that a bit earlier, before being born' (U 109). This passage, along with the spinning man who kills his family, gives a sinister connotation to Molloy's quest to return to his mother. In relation to the narrator, however, coming to earth 'by way of the vagina like a real live baby', and having then aged (U 43), is an illusion encouraged by the delegates. This is because his characters are always effects of non-sexual literary reproduction. In another passage, successful masturbation is referred to as 'finish[ing] dying', as if Worm needs to realise reproductive sexuality in order to die (U 46).

The narrator's negation also entails differentiation from the "comings and goings" of (potential) non-Beckettian characters (who barely appear in this novel at all):

that unfamiliar native land of mine, as unfamiliar as that other where men come and go, and feel at home, on tracks they have made themselves, in order to visit one another with the maximum of convenience and dispatch, in the light of a choice of luminaries pissing on the darkness turn about, so that it is never dark, never deserted, that must be terrible. (U 26)

The narrator here discusses in detail the non-Beckettian field of social life, establishing a series of equivalences between sociality, light/enlightenment, the denial of darkness (and thus of the third zone), authority (luminaries), convenience and welfare, free will, and the familiar trope of coming and going. Such a world seems to the narrator even worse than his own, because of the lack of darkness. His own desire is to slip further into the darkness, not to become more enlightened.

Elsewhere he observes:

That is to say I have to go on. Perhaps in the end I shall smother in a throng. Incessant comings and goings, the crush and bustle of a bargain sale. No, no danger. Of that. (U 2).

This intertextual reference to the 'comings and goings' of Malone – survival activities associated with the non-Beckettian masses – concludes with a claim that this could not happen to the Unnamable: he is irreversibly a Beckettian subject. The main non-Beckettian characters appearing in the work are the family of the narrator/Mahood, whom he inadvertently kills. Their main contribution is to make irrelevant statements about his nature and condition. Other brief appearances include visitors to Worm's restaurant, who seem unable to see him.

Themes associated with death and decay are also used to reinforce the general tone of negativity. Worm is located in an area known for cattle-slaughter (U 40), an economically revealing, though unlikely, site for a restaurant, and reminiscent of the slaughters in *Molloy*. The

narrator also attempts to remember a rhyme about a dog being beaten to death (U 95). Later, he narrator tells a story about a couple who fall in love and marry. The man is believed dead in the war, and the woman remarries. Then the first husband returns alive, and dies of emotion, and the second kills himself at the thought of losing the woman (U 125). Beckett here frames love as primarily tragic. Such incidents serve to maintain a negative tone even in the incidental aspects of the novel.

*"Tell me what I feel": Selfhood and subjectivity in The Unnamable*

The collapse of self-identity and resultant problems in subject-formation is a central theme of *The Unnamable*, which interrelates closely with issues of negation and impotence: the narrator is effectively unable to subjectify. The opening line of the novel reads: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I' (U 1). This line suggests that the self is a reflexive idea, and simply a word. However, this relationship of word to speaking subject is complex, because there must be an "I" to "say I". At the same time, the line incorporates the performative self-contradiction and erasure which typifies the entire novel: three questions and then "unquestioning". Later, it is modified into 'someone says I, unbelieving' (U 121). A little later, speaking the self seems difficult and problematic:

Me, utter me, in the same foul breath as my creatures? Say of me that I see this, feel that, fear, hope, know and do not know? Yes, I will say it, and of me alone. (U 10)

On another occasion, it is suggested of the delegates: 'They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking' (U 86). Elsewhere, he declares, 'I shall not say I again, ever again, it's too farcical. I shall put in its place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it' (U 69). He does not stick to this imperative, which is revealing in suggesting that the imperative to say "I" comes from outside, from what the narrator "hears", presumably from the delegates. These various

instances suggest a recurring problem with self-formation and the use of pronouns, which arguably provides a key to the narrator's anomalous situation.

The true self (if such it is) of the narrator is constantly contrasted to the identities of the characters or delegates, such as Basil, Mahood, Worm, Malone and Molloy. It is suggested throughout that the nameable characters are simply non-existent stand-ins for the unspeakable narrator. The narrator also says: 'I have been here, ever since I began to be, my appearances elsewhere having been put in by other parties' (U 3). The implication here is that the narrator of this work is the true narrator of the other books also, but that he has been using 'puppets' to communicate his largely incommunicable experience. It also implies that this narrator is closer to the authorial position than the others. He suggests that he has never spoken or listened enough to himself, instead seeking praise from a master (U 21). On one occasion Beckett writes: 'The subject doesn't matter, there is none' (U 76). On another occasion he adds: 'it's my turn, I too have the right to be shown impossible' (U 92). The author or true self is just as much impossible as Watt, Molloy or Malone, and is shown impossible in a similar way.

The narrator is sometimes taken to be commanded by the delegates to identify as a self: 'I have to speak in a certain way, with warmth perhaps, all is possible, first of the creature I am not, as if I were he, and then, as if I were he, of the creature I am' (U 48). The narrator is no more the creature he is than the creature he is not. Belief in a self or ego is taken to be an illusion:

Do they believe I believe it is I who am speaking? That's theirs too. To make me believe I have an ego all my own, and can speak of it, as they of theirs. Another trap to snap me up among the living. It's how to fall into it they can't have explained to me sufficiently. They'll never get the better of my stupidity... I don't say it's not the right method. I don't say they won't catch me in the end. I wish they would, to be thrown away. (U 59-60)

He attributes the failure to impotence – "stupidity" – rather than a desire not to conform. The delegates imagine they can induce a sense of self by 'piling on images', which seems not to work, since they can't 'prove to me that I am' (U 60). He eventually agrees to say 'I'm Worm', but only before adding 'that is to say I am no longer he, since I hear' (U 63). As with Malone's first death, this gesture seems to attempt and fail an Event, the transformation via identification which would end the process of compelled speech. It fails because of the impermanence of Worm. The narrator later suggests, 'he's getting humanised, he's going to lose if he doesn't watch out' (U 75). He suggests that he is unsure why he has not succeeded/lost through identifying with Worm: 'If only I knew what they want, they want me to be Worm, but I was, I was, what's wrong, I was, but ill, it must be that' (U 79). Admission of identity is itself an effect of the terror which causes thought:

And sometimes I say to myself I am in a head, it's terror makes me say it, and the longing to be in safety, surrounded on all sides by massive bone. And I add that I am foolish to let myself be frightened by another's thoughts... [and] noises signifying nothing. (U 65)

In this work, identity is treated as an artificial effect of social processes. Others can attempt to prove one's existence and identity through means such as photographs, medical reports and criminal records (U 93-4). At one point the narrator suggests that he, or his identity, is entirely linguistic:

I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me (U 104).

At another point, however, he concedes his selfhood:

there is I, yes, I feel it, I confess, I give in, there is I, it's essential, it's preferable, I wouldn't have said so, I won't always say so, so let me hasten to take advantage of being now obliged to say, in a manner of speaking, that there is I (U 106).

Even here, he suggests it is unclear *what* he is, whether he is words or silence for example (U 106).

He adds, 'I couldn't speak of me, I was never told I had to speak of me, I invented my memories, not knowing what I was doing, not one is of me' (U 114). A little later, he catches himself: 'now I've

told another little story, about me, about the life that might have been mine for all the difference it would have made, which was perhaps mine' (U 116). Later he adds, 'not to mention that all this is not about me, hell, I've contradicted myself, no matter' (U 117).

The absence of identity is related to difficulties with memory. The narrator has memories, but they are not his own:

and the row-boat, do you remember, and the river, and the bay, I knew I had memories, pity they are not of me (U 118).

The memories are here partially autobiographical and intertextual: the bay of *Embers*, reflecting the bay of Beckett's childhood, or perhaps Molloy's seashore, and the boats of Krapp (the girl in the punt) and Malone. This is perhaps why the recollected memories are "not of me". The narrator refers to self-identity as 'acting the infant who has been told so often how he was found under a cabbage that in the end he remembers the exact spot in the garden and the kind of life he led there before joining the family circle' (U 36). This suggests that all identity is a matter of false memory. Abbott terms this 'a process of self-resistance we can call recollection by invention' (1996: 28).

Slippage among pronouns is used to demonstrate the limits to the narrator's identity. For instance, he states: 'someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me' (U 123). This is anomalous, since the phrase cancels itself out: no pronoun for *me*.

Another passage reads as follows:

I don't know what I feel, tell me what I feel and I'll tell you who I am, they'll tell me who I am, I won't understand, but the thing will be said, they'll have said who I am (U 100).

The narrator suggests that he sometimes does and sometimes does not confuse himself with his shadow, depending 'what mood we're in' (U 53-4) – the first person plural referring to the self and shadow (or character) as separate beings. Worm, after his reality is thrown into question, is referred

to as 'he' (U 60), having previously been "I". The narrator also distinguishes Worm from the delegates by singular and plural (U 76). Pronouns perhaps interfere with the nature of reality as becoming and process, creating separations.

Secondary authors emphasise the dispersal of narrative voice in the late texts. In *The Unnamable*, the text shifts between "I", "we" and "he" as pronouns for the narrator, meaning that 'a speaking voice has dispersed itself across a field of grammatical and referential possibilities' (Begam, 1997: 160). At its extreme, such dislocation dissolves not only stable identity but identity as such (1997: 162). The speaking voice loses its centre, and also contains haunting traces of the committee and its reports (1997: 166-7). According to Critchley, in this text it is not an "I" who speaks but an impersonal "he", 'the third person or the impersonal neutrality of language' (1998: 127). This relates to Blanchot's view of language (Critchley, 1998: 128; 2004: 205), with stories functioning to conceal the failure of narrative identity (2004: 194). The reader is constantly referred back from the time of narrative to the time of dying (2004: 193). Worm, meanwhile, is said not even to speak, but to whine – 'the noise of life "trying to get in"' (Critchley, 1998: 123). Brewer (1986-7: 156) suggests that the author cannot stop the drift through the pronouns in this novel. Similarly, Sherzer suggests that the narrator 'makes himself a shifter', in a linguistic sense, with the switch between first and third person being one instance of this stance (1988: 89).

The standpoint of the narrator has been interpreted in a number of ways. Barry suggests that *The Unnamable* has been thrown out of language, and is unable even to borrow a subject-position (2004: 141). Dowd terms the character a 'hypothetical juridical location' (2007: 169). It has been suggested that the narrator of *The Unnamable* needs an other, even though this leads to false identity (Dearlove, 1978). Similarly, Sherzer (1988: 89) suggests that the novel is written as if it is a dialogue between two interlocutors, one of whom is silent. Levy suggests that the standpoint of

*The Unnamable* is that of a 'pure narrator', related only to words and silence (1980: 58).

Deconstructive readings associate Beckett with the speech of that which cannot be named. For instance, Lyotard argues that the purpose of literature is to 'reveal, to represent in words, what every representation misses... This *unnamable* is the secret of names' (Lyotard, 1990: 5). Critchley suggests that the "I" who speaks in Beckett's work is neither Beckett himself, nor a transcendent author-figure (1998: 125). Rather, the voice is 'impersonal, neutral, or indifferent', and also 'incessant, interminable, and indeterminable'. It functions to dispossess the "I" (1998: 126; 2004: 203). According to Katz, in *The Unnamable*, the 'voice flip-flops between a failed attempt to disassociate itself from its story and a failed attempt to identify with it' (Katz, 1999: 118). The Unnamable is a voice separated from any capacity for action or naming, and hence is at Derrida's 'edge of language' (Banham, 2002: 57). From a more phenomenological viewpoint, Dursun suggests that the Unnamable rediscovers himself through the negation of personae such as Mahood and Worm (2007: 28), 'moving towards his Self through a mediation over them, and reaching his Self as a result of the activity' (2007: 29).

To conclude, *The Unnamable* takes impotence and ignorance onto a different plane from the previous three novels. Before, Beckett's main protagonists had been embodied selves, albeit in various states of epistemological and physical breakdown. In *The Unnamable*, this condition afflicts the creations such as Mahood and Worm, but the narrator exists in a zone beyond life, unable either to live or to cut off his relation to life entirely. His impotence reaches a limit-point as a 'big round ball' without organs, and his ignorance extends beyond other characters because of his complete lack of potential reality-checks. The novel focuses on the ways in which this narrator seeks, is forced, or refuses to be actualised in living characters. The association of impotence and ignorance with death, the third zone, and the authorial position are all intensified in this novel. *The Unnamable* thus rounds off the trilogy with a peek into the third zone, which is at once affirmative

negation and near-total impotence.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion – *A Vast, Blooming, Buzzing Confusion?*

At the beginning of this thesis, a task was set to trace the ambiguous multiple meanings of Beckett's deployments of impotence and ignorance across four novels. It was suggested from the start that this task was complicated by Beckett's deliberate ambiguity, and aided but also perhaps misled by a plethora of theoretical approaches which have been advanced. As expected, the meanings of impotence and ignorance turned out to be complex and plural. Sometimes, Beckett paints a pessimistic picture of humanity and life as a process of irreversible decay and meaningless repetition. At other times, his spirit is more that of a deliberate, playful negation, somewhere between a radical critique of modernity and a Zen-like pursuit of a minimalist *satori*. It seems likely that Beckett was not aiming for a single effect, but rather, that multiple intersecting meanings were deployed to create a particular experience of reading in which the affirmative and negative are intermeshed.

The texts can now be considered in terms of their similarities and differences. In some ways, the texts occur as a progression, with the stripping of authorial and generic conventions, and the disempowerment of characters and intratextual authors, increasing cumulatively as the series progresses. Overall, a certain project can be traced beneath these differences. One of the continuous elements is the absence of marks of tellability. All of the stories are simply told, by narrators who have a compulsion to narrate, without any clear indications of how they intend to address the reader, or why the text matters to the reader or to the narrator. This is crucial to the open-endedness of the texts. They are difficult to interpret, precisely because they do not assertively signify their own meaning or importance.

The relationship of this crucial textual element to the themes of impotence and ignorance is clear. On the one hand, characters' ignorance of their own situation is part of what makes them unable to establish meaning sufficiently well to provide a case for their own tellability. On the other, the unremitting isolation and incommunicability of their experiences – whether as an affirmation of the “third zone” or a simple lack – denies to them both potency and interest in conveying meaning to the reader. It might be suggested that the social disconnection and epistemological doubts of the characters leave them in a situation where reality-checking is impossible. It might also be suggested that the zone of becoming in which Beckett situates his characters is fundamentally resistant to the production of meaning and subjectivity. Another crucial Beckettian point is that textual/narrative production remains possible (and maybe necessary) in such a situation beyond meaning. The compulsion to write or speak, to “go on”, is a recurring feature of Beckett's characters, creating a series of antinomies with their impotence and ignorance. It is in the knots tied between their inability to speak meaningfully and their compulsion to go on narrating in some form or another that the reading experience of Beckett's texts is constructed.

A certain function of critique, aimed possibly at the reader's presuppositions and possibly also at dominant social norms and values, can also be discerned in this construction. All of the novels involve a division between Beckettian and non-Beckettian characters or states. The Beckettian characters are caught in similar situations and dilemmas, and are part of a zone of becoming in which they fuse into one another. If these characters seem abject and desperate, at least they receive a modicum of respect within the novels. In contrast, non-Beckettian characters appear to be caught in similar aporias, yet unable even to reflect upon them, instead remaining trapped in a meaningless coming and going by means of which they hide from their true condition. The Saposcat parents, for example, are caught in a constant verbal duel beset with futility, rigid axioms, and empty repetition. Other examples include the academics, the Lamberts, the customers

unable to see Worm in his vase, and various characters encountered at the beginning of *Watt*. Such characters seem to lack free will and existential freedom, acting like automata. They are taken to deny the reality of becoming and the third zone. However, they are not simply Other to Beckettian characters. In both *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, Beckettian characters are treated as former non-Beckettian characters who are carried away on a line of flight pointing to a deeper, more ultimate reality than that offered by endless comings and goings.

Throughout the novels, impotence and ignorance go hand-in-hand, and characters become cumulatively more impotent as their sense of meaning or social connection deteriorates. This cumulative becoming-impotent is complicated somewhat by the subversion of linear time and the non-sequential reporting of events common to several of the novels. Nevertheless, the cumulative nature of decline is clearly conveyed. Impotence is often closely related to the ability to engage on a practical level with the world, as part of what Bergson terms “attention to life”. Beckettian characters lack “attention to life” because they are unable to divide the flow of becoming into sections or segments. Impotence is thus epistemic in origin, even when its symptoms are biophysical. Ignorance, meanwhile, relates to the incapacity of Beckettian characters to reach clear conclusions, based on the collapse of conventional forms of reasoning. The three reference-points of rational Cartesian deduction, empirical knowledge from the senses, and religious truth are recurring targets of critique. Impotence and ignorance are related to a radical epistemic doubt which prevents any kind of decisive reality-checking of beliefs.

### *The presentation of the novels*

The biggest discontinuities occur in the structural construction of the novels. Of the four, *Watt* and *Molloy* are more-or-less conventional narratives, whereas *The Unnamable* is a

discontinuous reflection, with *Malone Dies* somewhere in-between. *Watt* adopts a style of presentation similar to a realist text, or maybe a mystery novel. However, it introduces aporias and self-contradictions – some experienced by the character Watt, others not – which subvert the Cartesian underpinnings of these genres. Knowledge is further undermined by a metacommunicative discussion of the source of the tale, which was told in conditions which make it unlikely to be remembered correctly. Watt is engaged in a constant process of meaning-construction so as to negotiate an unknowable reality.

*Molloy* is written in first-person, in contrast with *Watt*. It contains two distinct narrative parts, one focused on a non-Beckettian character who becomes Beckettian (Moran), the other on a Beckettian character (Molloy). The account from “inside” a non-Beckettian character – unique in the texts presented – shows how such characters are secondary derivations from a Beckettian base. Molloy is portrayed as a zone of affect which attracts Moran, and the relationship between the two characters is complicated and ambiguous. The critique of realism is less prevalent in *Molloy* than in *Watt*, and *Molloy* adopts a more subjective tone. Nevertheless, it is marked with similar inconsistencies. Authorial reflexivity, and with it the compulsion to write, appear for the first time here, although *Watt* is also marked by a compulsion to speak and to “go on”, and a discussion of the limits to the author's knowledge.

*Malone Dies* takes authorial reflexivity further, with the main character's creation of other characters foregrounded in a way which focuses on authorship rather than the created characters. Beckett plays with free will and determinism in this novel, treating characters as mannequins, but also suggesting an incomplete and decaying authorial power. The theme of the Beckettian author being hounded into language and social reality by non-Beckettian persecutors appears for the first time. Continuities are established between authors and characters, in a way which extends the

continuous zone of becoming (which also affects Watt/Hackett and Molloy/Moran) explicitly to the author. In addition, intertextual references are used to establish continuities between Malone and earlier characters. *The Unnamable* in many ways culminates this process. It has no plot, little progression in the character's condition, and a writing style marked by long sentences without breaks. The emphasis on authorial creation in *Malone Dies* is taken further. *The Unnamable* exists in the world only through his characters, lacking even Malone's rudimentary connection to an outer reality. His characters here function in a dual form, as marionettes but also apparently as “delegates” whose role is to force the narrator into meaning and existence. Self-other boundaries are extremely blurred.

*“At the rate things are going, and I won't be able to move”*: *Cumulative impotence*

Beckett's characters become more impotent and ignorant over the course of the four works studied, reflecting the asymptotic, cumulative decline which the characters also undergo within each novel. In *Watt*, the scene is set for the whole series. Impotence is marked by signs including deafness, blindness, walking problems, hunched backs, inability to heal, inability to smile, old age, hearing voices, and absence from the symbolic order. Watt begins impotent, but apparently becomes more so at Knott's house. Impotence corresponds closely to social abjection and exclusion, and to the decay of meaning. Impotence is arguably more developed in *Molloy* than in *Watt*. If the novel is read as a Moran-Molloy progression, then the character undergoes a cumulative becoming-impotent. The final form of Molloy is bedridden and aged. The impression of cumulative dwindling is stronger in this novel. Forms of impotence used in this novel include ageing, loss or stiffening of limbs, genital impotence, inability to walk, hulking misshapeness, collapse, a loss of a sense of safe space, and also the decay of objects. Molloy is noted as unable to commit suicide or cut off impotent body-parts.

Malone's impotence is greater than that of Watt, Molloy, or Moran. He is alone in a room (like Molloy at the beginning/end of his story). He constantly refers to his impending death. In practice, what the reader sees is not death, but asymptotic decline, and powerlessness. Death is also treated as an impossibility of life, with Malone existing in a state between life and death, constantly questioning whether he is alive. Impotence is figured physically in terms of bodily paralysis, deafness, genital impotence, extreme old age, lack of teeth, incapacity to control bodily movements, social rejection, futility, and ego disintegration. Injuries and pains in the head figure both impotence and ignorance. Sapo and Macmann are beset with similar impotences to a lesser degree, in particular difficulties walking and having sex. Malone engages in a process of authorial creation, but seems resigned in advance to failure, and is constantly haunted by mistakes and incapacities. He is unable to kill himself. The novel also includes two instances which might constitute Malone's "death", one of which occurs at the end of the novel and ends the writing, the other of which sees writing continue. It is also suggested here that his impotence stems as much from inability to coordinate or distinguish using his body (difficulties distinguishing words, difficulties controlling bodily movements) as from physical problems. This connects impotence clearly to the collapse of meaning, and therefore to ignorance. Impotence is connected to futility, which is in turn connected to vulnerability to uncontrollable forces which cannot be understood.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* describes himself as 'powerless ever to do anything again' (U 1), aside perhaps from speaking/writing. Unlike Malone, he is decisively outside life, in a kind of netherworld or afterlife. He exists in the world, if at all, only through language, as a voice without a body. (Other characters have heard such voices, without ever *becoming* such a voice). The netherworld is deterministic and repetitive. Signifiers of impotence include minimal sensory input, apparent lack of a body or at least the usual bodily features (ears, head, legs, genitals, nose,

etc.), lack of free will and a corresponding sense of being subject to determinism, lack of access to objects, constant crying, and ascribed medical problems. The narrator portrays himself as a talking ball, without outer or inner organs (though they sometimes try to grow on him). He is unable to stop speaking/writing, to self-destruct, or to “be born”. He arguably seeks to, but cannot, achieve life through his authorial creations. His impotence provides a force of resistance to attempts to confer life and meaning upon him. As in *Malone Dies*, the creations of the narrator have more capacity than the narrator, but are still beset by impotence. The first character (Mahood/Basil?) walks irregularly and cannot relate to his family. The second (Worm/Mahood?) lacks arms and legs, and is kept in a jar. The third (Worm?) is confined to, or hiding in, a pit. Several of these characters contemplate but refuse suicide.

If a line is traced through the series of novels, Beckett's characters are marked by ever-increasing impotence, culminating in the narrator of *The Unnamable*, who apparently has no bodily existence or power at all, aside from his inexplicable speech/writing. He is a talking ball without limbs or organs. Increasing impotence seems to be connected to increasing disconnection from social normality or from a relationship of meaning-production which connects the subject to the world. Periods of relative normality, such as Molloy's stay at Lousse's house, slow the process of deterioration. I would suggest that this structure of becoming-impotent correlates with the broader, symbolic meaning of impotence for Beckett. Becoming-impotent correlates with entry into the “third zone” beyond social meaning, and involves an ambiguous state between life and death. There are also implications of cumulative exhaustion in a process which is asymptotic and endless.

While characters become increasingly impotent, they are also caught in an endless state of negative being which seems timeless. Death (including suicide) is impossible because Beckettian characters have never truly been born. The argument made by Tajiri (2006) and Anzieu (1992)

seems to me persuasive. Impotence is coextensive with the field of becoming in which Beckettian characters are located. Beckettian characters do not have, or else lose, a skin-ego, in which the skin provides a boundary between self and world. They are porous, experience body-parts as alien, and suffer a loss of the ability to support themselves by standing. Hence their impotence is timeless as well as cumulative. They approach death or silence, but presumably do not reach it, because they are caught in an aporia marked by an insoluble knot.

*“A great chaotic conflux”: The antinomies of ignorance*

While impotence undergoes cumulative increases through Beckett's work, ignorance is represented in different ways across the novels. In *Watt* and *Molloy*, the devices of exhaustion and aporetic deduction are the main ways of presenting ignorance, whereas in the later novels, ignorance is largely annexed to impotence as a feature of the characters' situations. Unlike most of the later characters, Watt begins as something of a rationalist. He enters Knott's house, which is a zone of immanence in which rational comprehension is impossible, and in which the three orders of rational, empirical and religious meaning break down. Watt struggles with this loss of meaning, providing interpretations of his experiences. Ultimately, he succumbs to what I term the “pot-like” state of existence, in which the name of an object can never accord properly with it. Hence, Watt becomes aware of the constructedness of meaning. Watt seems to become more satisfied with his lack of knowledge as the novel progresses. During his time on the ground floor, Watt tries to make meaningless experiences meaningful. On the first floor, he accepts the absence of meaning and becomes quiet. Crucially, the gap between things and their names also applies to Watt's subjectivity, as a result of which he is no longer confident of being a human.

Ignorance is less central to *Molloy* than *Watt*. When addressed, the structure is similar:

Moran, a rational subject, becomes ignorant through incommunicable experiences. Moran becomes unrecognisable to himself in a way similar to Watt. He is portrayed as losing illusions about the solidity of meaning and reality, and the reliability of his own mental capacities. While Molloy pursues some Wattian deductions in Lousse's house and on the beach, in general he is less prone than Watt to try to rationalise his situation. Moran seems to lose his reasoning capabilities as he becomes Molloy, and like Watt, is no longer able to make definitive statements. The “pot” episode remains paradigmatic of the collapse of meaning.

The treatment of ignorance in *Malone Dies* is distinct from that in *Watt* and *Molloy*. In the earlier novels, the main problem is to make sense of a wider world, unsuccessfully using logical deduction to do so. One of the lesser characters, Saposcat, pursues a strategy of this type (disrupted constantly by the “murmur” of becoming), but the first-person writer Malone does not. Malone, trapped in his room, has left such questions behind him, and instead focuses on his own impending death. Malone's deductions are more subjective in tone than those of his forerunners, and he often becomes tired of them. Malone is ignorant as to whether he is alive or dead, and this ignorance provides a motivation for writing. He is unable to inventory his possessions, partly because of difficulties in defining and confirming ownership. The futility of the social construction of meaning is strongly suggested here. Characters are constantly caught in processes of meaning-construction which exhaust options without reaching a satisfactory conclusion. Writing is excluded from ignorance because it is fictitious, but its lack of tellability is a mark of the ignorance underlying it. Writing seems to be a placeholder for a meaning which is impossible – a position broadly continuous with poststructuralism.

While Malone is still able to make tentative truth-claims, this capability is completely suspended in *The Unnamable*. There is, however, a major parallel between the two. The narrator of

*The Unnamable* considers most of what he says as nonsensical, but singles out life-and-death discussions as uniquely meaningful. Like Malone, however, he is undecidable between life and death. The narrator of *The Unnamable* takes ignorance to new extremes. He knows nothing about himself or his characters. Thought is reduced to the minimum necessary to maintain speech. Questions tend to lead to multiple answers or trail off in futility. The process of reasoning ties the narrator and characters in knots. Knowledge and reasoning are replaced by an empty compulsion to “go on”. Unlike the three preceding novels, the narrator is not located in anything like a conventional reality, and the only references to “realistic” experiences are explicitly fictive. We see here the culmination of a series. Watt, Moran and Molloy move in recognisable environments – woods, beaches, houses, gardens, rooms – even if the epistemological and ontological status of these environments is problematised. Malone is restricted to a single room, which is nevertheless recognisably a room. The narrator of *The Unnamable* is located in a netherworld of unknown ontological status, still more minimal in nature than a single room.

Impotence and ignorance are closely connected, in that knowledge or meaning seems to lead to the growth of bodily organs, and also in that the lack of bodily connections to existence leads to the lack of knowledge that characterises the narrator. There are no empirical referents in the netherworld, and the narrator is unsure of his reason and senses. The meaning of words is subverted in a similar manner to Watt's “pot”, but to a greater extent, in that they come from the “delegates” and not the narrator, and are alien to his existence. The narrator himself is unnamable in a more radical sense than Watt's pots and men, in that there is no approximate name for his condition. Religious argument is more extensive here than any of the other texts considered, probably because the narrator's condition has more in common with an afterlife than with life. The delegates seem to try to force the narrator into meaning and knowledge, but fail to do so. Furthermore, their own existence is affirmed and denied at different times.

I would hypothesise that Beckett works with an ontological theory, which is manifested in his characters' relations to the world. According to this theory, the meaning-systems of reason, empirical knowledge and religion are necessarily insufficient. Reality is a blooming, buzzing confusion, a constant “murmur”, an in-between zone (*tympan*), a field of becoming in which words do not equal things (the “pot” phenomenon), and a zone of chaos. Therefore, meaning is ultimately insufficient to relate to reality – not contingently, but constitutively. This field of unspeakable, unnamable existence also affects the self, which appears in Beckett as simply one object among many. The indiscernability or indistinction of states and processes means that everything is shifting, and binaries such as life and death cease to be meaningful or useful.

Non-Beckettian characters are unaware of this reality because they cover it over with rituals and reasoning, often related to survival. Their pragmatic orientation and rigid dogma protect them from awareness of reality, but are ultimately simply a variant on the strategy of meaning-construction, and serve to make such people passive and externally-determined. Beckettian characters, seeking (or falling into, or being dragged into) the “third zone” beyond social illusion, live in direct contact with the nature of reality. What is it like to live in awareness of such a reality? It is variously portrayed as a tedious waiting, a process of constant futile contingent meaning-construction, a deep existential loneliness, and an ecstatic process of revolving in place. An ambiguity is reinforced throughout the novels as to whether becoming-ignorant is a desirable process. Sometimes it seems to be a simple loss of meaning, but at other times, it is something more akin to a Zen unlearning of false appearances.

*“Even still more unspeakable satisfactions”*: *Negation and affirmation*

Impotence and ignorance sometimes appear as states of being, but they also seem to form part of a project which the characters in some sense desire. Beckett's characters sometimes seem to be positively pursuing impotence and ignorance so as to access the “third zone”, thereby attaining release, knowledge, mystical experiences, or authenticity. Watt seems to head towards a culmination which is exhaustion rather than knowledge, while Knott has the attributes of a Buddhist sage, existing entirely in a state of becoming. Affirmation also appears in the moments of ecstasy occurring between some of the characters. However, Watt does not seem to proactively pursue negation, but rather, to resist it. Molloy, in contrast, pursues various forms of negation. It is suggested that he is trying to become impotent, and that he seeks out ruins and the death of “man”, as well as passively resisting his welfarist confinement (particularly in the police episode). He also values objects which seem meaningless, and the exhaustion of all possibilities. Molloy speaks of satisfactions arising from cumulative impotence, so as to intensify experiences. Malone seems to want to die, and resents those who keep him alive for interfering with his decay. Death is at once joyful and a punishment. Malone writes of giving up trying to play, shutting off his conceptual and sensory abilities, and seeking darkness. The underlying aim seems to be to attain access to the field of becoming. Killing, or throwing away objects, appear as acts of kindness, since death is a desirable state. Even the failure of writing is ambiguously valorised.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* is in a zone beyond life and existence, and is caught in a constant “game” to either achieve or prevent life, and to achieve silence. Within this “game”, he is confused as to whether he wins by becoming alive or by resisting life. Life is here taken to mean inclusion in social and natural orders and in the order of meaning. He is pitted against the “delegates” or characters who seek to drag him into existence. He is sometimes seen as the first successful negation presented by Beckett (Begam, 1997: 175, 179). However, he is also trapped, like Malone, in an endless compulsion to speak which prevents him from achieving silence. He

seems to seek a silent, reflective state, but is tormented by the compulsion to speak/write, which he attributes to the delegates or to an outside voice. The narrator is often read as deliberately resisting inclusion in meaning. However, there is a recurring ambiguity about the desirability of such resistance. The narrator is constantly unable to identify with any character, no matter how impotent and ignorant they are. His refusal of identity is central to his impotence and ignorance. He is trapped between a compulsion to speak and an ignorance of, or impotence to follow through on, the required speech. It sometimes seems that his obduracy or impotence act as forces of resistance to the demand to live. At other times, he negates identity due to terror. He resists the welfarist ministrations of the delegates, insisting instead on a death-like state.

I would suggest that in these images provided by Beckett, there is a view both similar to and distinct from the Deleuzian valorisation of the field of becoming. Beckett seems to be able to hold simultaneous conceptions attaching positive and negative value to the “third zone”: characters are ignorant, but know the real nature of reality as ignorance; they approach death through impotence, and yet their sensory mindfulness is thereby heightened; they suffer pain and tears, but these give relief from the futility of non-Beckettian life. The eventual moment of “death” or disappearance into the field of becoming seems to be valorised as an affirmative, ecstatic moment, as for instance in the presentation of Knott. However, Beckett's characters are generally unable to arrive at this point because of the compulsion to keep writing and waiting (suicide is always ruled impossible for one reason or another). Writing is also ambiguous: at once a playful pastime, and a tedium, or even a danger (of capture). It is clear that the “third zone” is the best that one can hope for in Beckett's universe, and alternatives to it are rejected as undesirable (non-Beckettian “coming and going”) or impossible (suicide). However, it is also generally apparent that this zone does not offer an ecstatic or enjoyable experience. Rather, it offers a type of suffering which is somehow ethically or aesthetically valuable.

### *Interpreting Beckett once more*

It is clear from what has been discussed that Beckett uses a variety of literary techniques to challenge claims to knowledge and power. But why does he do this? Here the field of interpretations starts, dominated by but not limited to the seven large-scale schools of Beckett scholarship – existentialist, modernist, Derridean, Deleuzian, Badiouian, genetic and psychoanalytic. I would suggest that all of these approaches have to supplement Beckett in order to arrive at their own theoretical reading. Basically, any interpretation has to add to Beckett's work a certain tellability, which gives it a particular place in wider social discourses and assigns the text as a whole a “meaning”. This typically involves saying something about the point at which Beckett's characters stop talking.

Beckett's characters are constructed within self-referential textual worlds embodying something like the “third zone”, with few if any points of contact with wider systems of social meaning (unless one counts the subversive, negating relationship to clichés). They are written from a point on the verge of disappearance, death, or silence, a point at which meaning-construction almost (but not quite) ceases to function. In part, Beckettian characters do not offer tellability because their own position is indeterminate, unknowable, and impotent. They are not able to provide a reference-point within the field of meaning, because they do not operate within the field of meaning themselves. To address such a point of view theoretically (regardless of the theory used), it becomes necessary to reconstruct connections to the social meaning-systems absent in the text itself. The point one arrives at in “silence” or “death” is thus variously named by the seven schools as an existentialist self, an absurd reality, textuality, the field of becoming, the Event, an autobiographical or autographical reference, or the unconscious. Such readings fail to exhaust

Beckett, precisely because the absence of tellability, and thus of such a specific reference to whatever is beyond his characters' discourse, is such a central aspect of his texts. Yet at the same time, none of these readings misreads Beckett's texts, so much as supplements them with additional connections necessary to bridge between them and social reality. Using a Badiouian term, we might say that interpreting Beckett is always an act of "forcing", of reading Beckett relative to something else (even if only the reader's presuppositions) so as to reconstruct the tellability which the text so decisively lacks. The task of reintegrating Beckettian characters into social meaning is a task placed entirely on the side of the reader.

In this relationship to a reader to whom tellability is not offered, there is a certain implied authorial imperative. Beckett seems to set a challenge for his readers – including the theoretical interpreters whose interventions he pre-empts in advance (think for instance of his denials that Molloy is in an asylum, his oblique references to "Youdi" and the "Obidil", his consideration that the Unnamable is "in a head", his parodic academicians, and so on). There seems a lot of validity in Tajiri's (2006) and Anzieu's (1992) reading of Beckettian characters as lacking a skin-ego or a sonic sensory separation. However, it is unclear whether these aspects are autobiographical (as these readers assume), or a deliberate construct arising from Beckett's study of abnormal psychology. I would argue that there is a strategic literary significance in presenting characters of this type. It is precisely in the task set for the reader, of thinking without conventional references to forms of power and knowledge, from a standpoint of impotence and ignorance, that the affective production of the novels operates. In other words, Beckett may be encouraging his readers to think, question and doubt as his characters do.

Overall, therefore, I would suggest that the different schools of Beckett studies are right and wrong about Beckett in different ways. The modernists are right that Beckett views modernity as

absurd and meaningless, and that his characters reject the conventions of cliché, the comings and goings of everyday life, and the welfarist ministrations they sometimes receive. They are wrong that social (rather than existential) critique is the aim. The existentialists are right that Beckett has a reductive existential project of sorts (the pursuit of the “third zone”), but wrong that this project leads to an authentic self. The Derrideans are right that Beckett works in a zone of insoluble aporias and paradoxes, but wrong that this zone represents primarily the condition of language; it is the inadequacy of language to the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of life which is crucial to its rejection in Beckett. The Deleuzians are right that Beckettian characters exist in a continuous field of becoming which disrupts reified forms of being, but wrong to attach a primarily affirmative sign to this field as presented by Beckett. The Badiouians are right that Beckett brings about a literary collapse of the ontological order of the present, but wrong that he seeks or prefigures an Event – for Beckett, the Event is impossible because the knot preventing it has not been untied. The genetic and autobiographical scholars are right that Beckett draws on experiences of futility and aporia to construct a believable effect in his writing, but overemphasise the significance of such conjunctural influences to a project the concerns of which are almost ahistorical. The psychoanalysts are right that Beckett works with abnormal psychology and fields in which meaning breaks down, such as dream, free association, and slips of the tongue; they are wrong that this work leads back to a meaningful interpretation of such breakdowns.

Hence, one can arrive at a rough understanding of the meanings of impotence and ignorance for Beckett. Beckettian characters are ignorant because all meaningful symbolic references have broken down for them; this induces a state of futility, melancholia, subjective disintegration and even terror, not an existential choice, an Evental commitment, or an affirmation of becoming. These characters are impotent because their ability to act is corroded by the disintegration of their bodies, which is an effect of their subjective collapse. Beckett sees the nature of reality as a field of

becoming akin to those found in Taoism, Buddhism, Bergson, and Deleuze. However, unlike these approaches, he does not conceive of a possibility to achieve enjoyment or peace through engagement with this underlying reality. Rather, he sees the recognition of this reality as leading to an existential collapse – a process of bodily and mental decline which approaches, yet can never reach, silence and death. While this offers a stark image of a self reduced to impotence and ignorance, it is also for Beckett the most desirable path available to humans, in a field of options in which all the alternatives are bad.

To conclude, therefore, Beckett is uninterpretable in two senses, or for two reasons. First, his works are constructed so as to lack tellability, leaving it to the reader to construct a meaning. Secondly, his works construct a reading experience which points towards a field of becoming, beneath and behind representation, which language and textuality cannot reach. While this second aspect is by no means unique to Beckett, his work is unusual in giving this field a distinctly negative slant. These two features also give Beckett's work both its continuing contemporaneity, and its endless interpretability. Because of its resistance to any decisive interpretation, Beckett's work will continue to generate new interpretations which insert new theories or observations to fill the void which is its tellability. This, paradoxically, is what gives the works in practice the tellability they lack on paper: their inspiration for readers to create their own meanings and fill in the puzzle that the works construct. It is because Beckett's protagonists are impotent and ignorant – because, in a certain sense, they even crave impotence and ignorance – that they are able to provide this kind of uninterpretable. In working with impotence and ignorance, Beckett opens the possibility of the production of texts which can be subject to an endless, inconclusive interpretive productivity.

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