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## The Work of Poverty

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## *La Pensée Vagabonde*

### VAGABOND THOUGHT

The first two chapters explored Beckett's aesthetic of poverty as public performance and how *Waiting for Godot* becomes an echo chamber for the powerlessness, need, and inconsolable waiting beyond the stage. This chapter turns inward to the private crisis of Beckett's characters. Beckett's figure of private crisis is the vagabond who speaks in interior monologue whose interiority crumbles in the face of unsheltered experience.

Early in *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon begins to relay a dream to Vladimir, and Vladimir violently interrupts:

VLADAMIR. DON'T TELL ME!

ESTRAGON. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if I can't tell them to you?

VLADIMIR. Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that.<sup>1</sup>

Vladimir does not permit Estragon to speak his subjective nightmare, the monologic and private crisis that constitutes the consciousness of the vagabond. Vladimir enforces strict decorum over what can or cannot be divulged in the course of a long wait. Estragon's dream cannot be shared and thereby brought into consciousness without paining others and does not belong on stage, though as we will see shortly, Lucky does stage vaga-

bond thought before he is similarly silenced by Vladimir and the others. Beckett's prose lifts this interdiction on the utterance of the vagabond's private nightmare. What goes unseen (like Estragon's sleeping in a ditch, his nightly beatings) and unsaid in *Godot* become the topic of Beckett's prose. Beckett's trilogy gives utterance to the vagabond dream, the work of the unsheltered dreamer who sleeps in full view. In *Godot*, instead of wandering off the stage to be besieged by something other than dialogue, the silenced Estragon merely threatens to leave:

ESTRAGON. (*coldly*) There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better  
for us to part.

VLADIMIR. You wouldn't go far.<sup>2</sup>

Estragon cannot leave any more than he can speak his dream. These two prohibitions ultimately give *Waiting for Godot* its form. The dialogue rests on the ban of monologic consciousness and on the restriction on the vagabonds' erratic movement. The play sublimates derelict wandering into yoga, Vladimir and Estragon's exercise routine of levitations, elongations, and relaxations.<sup>3</sup> *Godot* then sacrifices these elements of vagabond experience so as to give us the couple on stage, dialogue, waiting: in short, Beckett's theater.

## Vagabond Thought

Beckett's work is about characters decomposing and the consciousness of their decomposition. I call the decomposition of consciousness *la pensée vagabonde*, or vagabond thought. *La pensée vagabonde* means both "vagabond thought" and "thought wanders." It suggests both a kind of thought and the erratic movement by which it cuts a path for thinking. The two meanings are simultaneous and entwined: "But how can you think and speak at the same time, without a special gift, your thoughts wander [la pensée vagabonde], your words too, far apart, no that's an exaggeration, apart, between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought, and feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing, that would be a blessed place to be, where you are."<sup>4</sup> Underlying the idea of vagabond thought in Beckett's characters is the separation of thinking from writing. These activities never occupy the same place and work on separate tracks. They are inherently apart: the one did not wander from the other. Hope for uniting the two is as

improbable as being deprived of either one or occupying what the narrator calls that “bereft” space lacking both thought and speech. Beckett’s impoverished characters fall short of saying what they think as well as this zero point of thinking and saying nothing.

Beckett’s work conceives vagabond consciousness as nonuseful and beyond the procedures of rational thought. It is an expression of the vagabond’s condition: disturbed by the law, the sound of something in the air, even his own speaking. This is Beckett’s turn from Joyce’s stream of consciousness and the freedom of association in philosophical speculation. Lucky’s speech in act 1 of *Waiting for Godot* is the most noteworthy instance of vagabond thinking in Beckett’s work. Commanded by Pozzo to “Think, pig!” Lucky responds by thinking aloud. This thinking begins in exigency rather than choice. The thinking is performed as a spectacle. Lucky’s monologue is a ramshackle collection of official-sounding decrees, public oratory. Through Lucky filter the rhetorical formulae from the discourses of medicine, law, science, theology. It is closer to a heterologue (consisting of many voices) than a monologue. From these discourses Lucky preserves only the oratorical debris. He puts the “turns” of these rhetorics into series, arrays, contradictory enumerations: “in short in fine” and “for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis the facts are there but time will tell I resume alas alas” “that as a result of the labors unfinished of Testew and Cunard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown that as a result of the public works of Puncher and Wattmann it is established beyond all doubt.”<sup>5</sup> We get endlessly prefatory proclamations without anything being proclaimed. The gesture of meaning thereby turns into nonproductive gesticulation. This is Lucky’s version of vagabond thought, one that lives up to its status as a performance and as an action. True to Vladimir’s verdict on Estragon’s private nightmare, the characters within earshot of Lucky’s speech all find it intolerable: the stage directions specify that Pozzo “suffers,” Vladimir and Estragon being to “protest,” and it ends with all three “throwing themselves on Lucky who struggles and shouts his text.”<sup>6</sup> The mechanisms of what passes for thinking become visible (it is Lucky’s “display” of knowledge). Their meaning and rational purpose sapped, these gestures of thought recover their quality of movement: this is the dimension of thought as performance and not just display. The key phrase in Lucky’s speech is “I resume,” repeated four times in the monologue and the only instances in which Lucky says “I.” “I resume” is the *cogito* of the vagabond (a kind of *cogito ergo resume*). This is not synonymous with saying “I repeat,” for vagabond thinking is more about struggle than doing the same (reproducing thought). Nor is it “I resume with” because

the resumption goes on without any accumulation to thought and almost against speech. The "I" of vagabond thought lurks between discontinuous and fragmentary statements and does little more than continually usher in more of them. He is the siphon, rather than the agent, of speech.

The homeless characters of Beckett's prose do not seek to share their thoughts any more than does Lucky. Instead, their thought seems forcibly and violently extroverted. Vagabond consciousness is always forced out in public because no private or domestic space is available for thinking. Consciousness itself is extruded and unsheltered; reality intrudes upon it at every step. It resembles a hobo's sock, one that is reused by turning it inside out.

Vagabond thought is extravagantly kinetic, characterized by process rather than knowledge. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit refer to the "learned derelict" and ascribe to this consciousness a familiarity with culture unmoored from meaning. For Bersani and Dutoit this is freeing: "There is no agonized reevaluation of a tradition," they write.<sup>7</sup> They oppose Beckett to the surrealists. Whereas the surrealists "preserved terms" to which their revolutionary project relates, Beckett by contrast preserves nothing. His work "proposes something far more radical: a work cut off from all cultural inheritance."<sup>8</sup> Yet there is little of utopian or redemptive potential in this freedom. What matters is that the consciousness Beckett cares about is rootless, "cut off" but not "free from" inheritance. Bersani describes Beckett's approach to culture as a rummaging: "Much like the learned derelicts of his fiction, he evokes art and philosophy of the past as if he were rummaging through a junkyard, giving an amused kick now and then at some useless and irrelevant relic of a dead imagination."<sup>9</sup>

Bersani and Dutoit use the figure of the vagabond to conceptualize more broadly Beckett's relation to literary history and to the relic of language. What gesture does their "learned derelict," and subsequently Beckett's work, undertake? "Rummaging" suggests that the vagabond relates to junk as if he were shopping for antiques. The "kick" of the derelict likewise evokes the kick a prospective buyer might give a tire on a used car to test its worth. These are owners' gestures. Bersani and Dutoit helpfully focus on how the vagabond mediates the understanding of what Beckett's work does, how it thinks about the past, and its language process. Yet it is also important to understand the nonproprietary nature of vagabond thinking. The homology drawn by Bersani and Dutoit suggests that works of culture have fallen into ruin and that it is the hobo who pores over this inheritance. They saddle the derelict with the critic's ambition. In doing so they miss the nonevaluative nature of the hobo's gesture and deep indif-

ference to thought, either as possession, assessment, or understanding of the world. Vagabond thought is without a proper place and renounces possession of what it says. This is the reason we pause before agreeing with Bersani and Dutoit's description of Beckett's characters as "learned derelicts." Vagabond thought does not stockpile itself or abide in the thinker in the past tense, as if it were a valuable hoard available for display. Walter Benjamin suggests that one reason we mistrust beggars is because we "forget that their persistence in front of our noses is as justified as a scholar's before a difficult text. No shadow of hesitation, no slightest wish or deliberation in our faces escapes their notice."<sup>10</sup> The vagabond mirrors our reading process. His obstinacy is reminiscent of learning. But the beggar is distinguishable from the scholar because he is motivated by desperation and existential need rather than curiosity, dedication, or knowledge.

What kind of thinking does not even bother to refuse reason, as if occurring in a completely different order? This chapter explores this question by discussing *la pensée vagabonde* in terms of its double emergence, both thought itself and a path for thinking. In the spirit of *la pensée vagabonde*, I weave through seven distinct operations of vagabond thought that supplant reasoning as a method for thinking for Beckett's characters: (1) thinking by hearing (by murmur), (2) radiographic understanding, (3) thinking by force (by axiom), (4) thinking by naming or designation of things (as a dictionary or thesaurus), (5) thinking by obligation (the *pensum*), (6) thinking as extroversion (as terror), and (7) mythic tense: thinking in the permanent present.

## Thinking by Hearing: The Murmur

We were confronting, as it were, a new and infinitely delicate point in the texture of reality, from which something far greater than ourselves seemed to be appealing to us as if seeking help. At the same time and all through the intervening years I believed that that independent sound, taken from us and preserved outside us, would be unforgettable.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, "Primal Sound"<sup>11</sup>

Beckett's vagabonds substitute *ratio* with listening. Molloy indicates that he hears a murmur *with his head*. This is different both from a sound that is heard either *with the ear* or *in the head*. The murmur Molloy hears is not perceived through usual means, nor is it simply imagined. As an unconventional organ of listening, the exact working of the head is poorly under-

stood. It does not offer simple ways to shut itself off or to stop sound. Unlike the ear, the head cannot be stuffed with cotton or wax. Even the location of this thought is unclear: as a murmur, this thought seems to surround Molloy rather than emanate from him. Molloy can neither interrupt this murmur nor put space between it and himself. The murmur is a kind of thinking that cannot be stopped or owned by the self. Can it even be heard? Molloy observes, "It's not a sound like the other sounds, that you listen to, when you choose and can sometimes silence, by going away or stopping your ears, no, but it is a sound which begins to rustle in your head, without your knowing how, or why. It's with your head you hear it, not your ears, you can't stop it, but it stops itself, when it chooses. It makes no difference therefore whether I listen to it or not, I shall hear it always, no thunder can deliver me, until it stops."<sup>12</sup> The murmur that penetrates everything exists in a state of indeterminate proximity to the listener, and Molloy speaks as if it had the nearness of a radio implant. Molloy says that there is no place, either in silence or in deafening thunder, which is outside its sonic range. He therefore cannot gain perspective on, or possibly even hear, a sound that always persists and cannot be interrupted. A murmur does not present an item for listening, and is unlike the sound of a bell or a gong whose clarity pierces the moment.<sup>13</sup>

Beckett measures a life not by the sound of thought but in terms of the thought to which that life is a mere backdrop. Molloy charts aging as if it were not the development of personality by experience, reason, or understanding but as a transition of sound: beginning as rumor, evolving into murmur and rising to a scream. Commenting on an old man he sees in the street, Molloy observes, "He looks old and it is a sorry sight to see him solitary after so many years, so many days and nights unthinkingly given to that rumor rising at birth and even earlier, What shall I do? What shall I do? now low, a murmur, now precise as the headwaiter's And to follow? and often rising to a scream. And in the end, or almost, to be abroad alone, by unknown ways, in the gathering night, with a stick."<sup>14</sup> Rumor acts prematurely, "rising at birth and even earlier," and this prematurity suggests a moment of possibility, even if this possibility extends no further than *boy or girl?* Molloy suggests that life itself is precipitated by this rumor, and we are never equal to this moment of possibility (rumors being well-known instances of stories that are impossible to both author and stop). He describes, moreover, the time in which the old man was unthinkingly given to this sonic boom after which his life has followed. Molloy formulates aging as a fall from the high velocity of rumor to a waiter's *sotto voce* murmur. In the process, the question about our possibility ("what should I

do?") transforms into a choice made within the closed system of a restaurant menu, the future arriving as the next dish.

The precise formulation in which Molloy describes his abandonment to nonrational thought makes his experience of life similar to an animal's. The description of the old man as "unthinkingly given to that rumor" suggests we are intimately tied to noise through our ignorance. This transaction takes place in the passive voice: we are given to it, displaced and uprooted by it. Vagabond thought follows our expropriation by sound. The murmur enjoins Molloy to keep leave wherever he happens to be, to keep moving. In *Malone Dies*, the title character refers to the murmur as a buzzing: "The noises of the world, so various in themselves and which I used to be so clever at distinguishing from one another, had been dinning at me for so long, always the same old noises, as gradually to have merged in 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."<sup>15</sup> The buzzing Malone hears challenges his "faculty for decomposition," both impossible to hear and impossible to avoid. Like an enormous doorbell it beckons and specifically addresses the listener.<sup>16</sup>

Malone notes that he once found noise to be a source of information and meaning: "worlds" were knowable to him through the sounds that represented them. Noting the loss of this enlightened faculty, Malone asks us to imagine noise without its referential and distinguishing marks. In this sense the sound that Malone hears loses the world. Worldless, this sound becomes what Beckett calls "fundamental." The more Molloy gives himself over to thinking by hearing buzzing and tries to exercise a discerning ear over the noise of his life, the more arthropodic his life becomes. Hearing a swarm of bees is the first step toward becoming a bee. The shift of his language is unannounced and indicates a sense of measure being lost: "I could not help thinking that the notion of a wandering herd was better adapted to him than to me. But I have never thought anything but wind, the same that was never measured to me."<sup>17</sup> A disturbing and decentered restlessness characterizes this brief passage as much as it is its subject. "To think wind" is to think without measure, in such a way that retains the empty sound of the wind and scatters references and distinctions.<sup>18</sup> In another context "to think wind" might designate a kind of transcendental exercise, and expansion of self, but here it denotes a process in which thinking is given over to notions one cannot help thinking. "Helpless thinking" is thinking like an insect or animal. It means several things—involuntary thinking that is determined from an outside, thinking that cannot be assisted by us, thinking that is lost to our charitable efforts at interpretation, thinking that

does not help us picture the thinker: “the same that was never measured to me.”<sup>19</sup> In some way thinking like an insect qualifies Molloy for one of Augustine’s injunctions for sainthood: to engage unthinking, only at the level of base existence, heroically, epically. Molloy is a modern-day Odysseus equipped with an antenna, unable to draw nearer to or farther away from his Sirens. When Malone says that the notion of the wandering herd was “better adapted to [Jackson] than to me,” he speaks of the process of metaphor blending with and becoming indistinct from an identity in the same way that one speaks of an insect trying to merge with its environment through adaptation. Here a metaphor does not inscribe an identity so much as it undergoes an evolutionary mimicry and becomes part of a larger camouflage. Beckett’s character conceptualizes as an insect rather than as an entomologist.

By way of contrast one could consider the manner in which Franz Kafka formulates the drama of Gregor Samsa becoming a beetle in the heart of the family household, saddled with his old cares, habits, and anxieties. When Samsa is transformed into an insect, he had already lived like one and thought like one—his metamorphosis, though bizarre, is coherent, organic, and the natural consequence of metaphor. Being transformed causes Samsa no suffering. It is his family that suffers. Beckett’s characters have no family to suffer any transformation: not only is there no one to knock on their door about their well-being, there is no room, no door. Beckett’s characters do not definitively cross the limits of the human form. Instead of becoming analogical, experience swarms in Beckett’s prose and is marked by the loss of qualities and the surge of forgotten residues of past experience. Malone compares his acquaintance not to a cow but to a “wandering herd,” a multiple grouping. It is a comparison that was originally applied to him: acting like a weather vane for metaphor, he renounces the comparison, turns it backward, and says it suits its maker better. The path a herd suddenly cuts across space, the sound of its hooves, the dust made, the forgetting of the immediate past: these bring us closer to understanding Molloy’s manner of speaking than any linguistic analysis.

The murmur that solicits the tramps on stage in *Waiting for Godot* has a different thought function than it does for Molloy. The dialogical structure of the stage neutralizes the murmur’s engulfing confinement of the solitary Molloy. What happens when a murmur is perceived by two people instead of the one? What casts Molloy into the confusion of thought seems indisputably present on stage for Vladimir and Estragon and without the imperative function it has for Molloy. The murmur is tellingly drowned out by the banter of Vladimir and Estragon trying to describe it:

VLADIMIR. They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON. Like leaves.

VLADIMIR. Like sand.

ESTRAGON. Like leaves.

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR. They all speak at once.

ESTRAGON. Each one to itself.

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR. Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON. They rustle.

VLADIMIR. They murmur.

ESTRAGON. They rustle.<sup>20</sup>

The back and forth between Vladimir and Estragon puts their dialogue in close approximation to the murmur: though they do not both “speak at once,” they often seem to “speak only to themselves.”

The dialogue between the vagabonds usurps the function of the murmur in *Molloy*. The critical success of *Waiting for Godot* depends in part on its successful sublimation of the murmur into voice. In his monologue in act 2, Vladimir speaks of “those cries for help still ringing in our ears.”<sup>21</sup> Whereas Molloy claims to have heard voices with his head, Vladimir reclaims the ear as a repository where sound goes to vibrate. This ringing takes on the quality of an ethical alarm rather than the force that decomposes the listener. Where sound compels Molloy into metamorphosis, the cry in *Waiting for Godot* becomes the figuration of the human: “At this moment in time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not.”<sup>22</sup> The animal enters only as an exemplary indifference to sound (the tiger that slinks back into its thicket).

The helplessness of thought and its usurpation by the murmur appears in *Waiting for Godot* only comically, not horrifically. Molloy’s encounter with sound as something that thinks through him returns faintly in the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon. Vladimir states, “What is terrible is to *have* thought.” Estragon replies, “Did that ever happen to us?”<sup>23</sup> Vagabond thinking is something undergone, not something that we do but something that happens to us (and, as Estragon suggests, without leaving any traces). In Beckett’s landscape, the *cogito* cannot be an active verb. Thought is a deponent of something that happens, something that might not even

be happening. Estragon's question about whether thought ever occurred to them is matched only by the certainty that it has ceased:

VLADIMIR. We're in no danger of ever thinking any more.

ESTRAGON. Then what are we complaining about?<sup>24</sup>

## Radiographical Understanding

He describes the radiographical quality of his observation. The copiable he does not see.

—Samuel Beckett, *Proust*<sup>25</sup>

Vagabond thought operates on Beckett's characters radiographically. Molloy is bombarded and surrounded with noise in a manner similar to a radio surrounded by waves. Scraps of sound hit Molloy from indeterminate locations, and the radio replaces the *ratio*. Molloy describes sound in technical terms: "Sounds unencumbered with precise meaning were registered perhaps better by me than by most. What was it then? A defect of the understanding perhaps, which only began to vibrate on repeated solicitation, or which did vibrate, if you like, but at a lower frequency, or a higher, than that of ratiocination, if such a thing is conceivable, and such a thing is conceivable, since I conceive it."<sup>26</sup> Molloy speaks of a channel that is "lower . . . or higher" than ratiocination, then credits himself with conceiving the idea. This thinking proceeds not by means of ratiocination but by registration, through waves, frequencies, repetitions, solicitations, and poor reception. Despite a suspected and self-admitted defect in understanding, Molloy is nothing like the "unreliable" narrator in the style of Emily Brontë or Thackeray—characters who offer a partial or biased perspective on the events they narrate. Molloy is rather a *reliable* narrator, involved in a wholly original quest to investigate what can be transmitted, an unbearable situation of listening without comprehension.

Noises for Molloy are not subject to the doubt of the speaker: they are not ambiguous. To the contrary, Molloy says he hears noises with distinct clarity. The clarity is alarming because it is apart from meaning. He continues: "Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard for a first time, a second time, and even a third as pure sounds, free of all meaning, and this is probably one of the reasons why conversation was unspeakably painful to me. And the words I uttered

myself, and which must nearly always have gone with an effort of the intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect, And this is perhaps one of the reasons I was so untalkative."<sup>27</sup> Here Molloy returns to discussing his murmur as insectlike. When Molloy claims his ear is "sensitive" he is referring to the precision with which it registers sound and not to an ability to hear nuance or overtone. He is deaf to sense. Unlike those who, hard of hearing, eventually "get" the message upon hearing it repeated a second or third time, he claims that language abandons its sense for him—as it does for words that children repeat—with more frequent repetition. Molloy desists from all habits of listening that make for easy understanding and that are as surely ingrained as habits of speech. Heard as "pure sound" rather than as traces within a differential system, language does not leave any deposits behind after its disappearance.

Molloy speaks of his experience as if he were a radio, a receptive system destitute of interpretive and calculative ability. He supplies an apparatus rather than a metaphor: instead of providing an intelligible figure in which to encapsulate the nonsense of his acoustic world, the description leads through the wires and knobs of an instrument of "nonunderstanding." It leads not into an image but into the box of Molloy's head, right to the working component of his radiophonic ear: a "defect of the understanding." Nonsensical hearing is merely another "station" on the dial with rational understanding and works at a slightly different radio frequency. Molloy thereby places these not in opposition but in continuity with one another. Through this schema Molloy tries to explain how understanding occurs only when its defects are solicited. Understanding remains an elusive experience. "It is true that in the end, by dint of patience, we made ourselves understood, but understood with regard to what, I ask you, and to what purpose."<sup>28</sup> Molloy's question here is drawn from the language of ratiocination, inquiring into the means (understood with regard to what?) and ends (and to what purpose?) of understanding. We are hardpressed to offer an answer. The point, however, may be to rearticulate the question. He implores the reader to think temporarily with terms that the vagabond's discourse has actively impoverished.

Vagabond thinking cobbles together an alternative image of the understanding process, based on the sound, registration, and the radiophonic ear, rather than on reason and the extraction of sense. Molloy asks us to consider about the possibility of an understanding between two people without remainder or higher purpose, and that does not secure anything. Molloy asserts that an understanding transpired but without proof: it remains fictitious. In his quick aside to the reader, he may be asking

whether such a thing is conceivable. Our goal is to orient ourselves in such a way toward vagabond thinking, expressed here as a reaction without desire for enlightenment, which one is allowed to say, with Molloy, yes, it is conceivable, because we conceive it.

Molloy exposes the ear as the last outpost of the Enlightenment and submits the rational selectivity of the ear to an acoustic catastrophe: his own words are not spared. Thinking by radiophonic ear rather than by *ratio* raises questions, in other words, about the very basis of a consciousness steered by Enlightenment logic, questions that we perhaps do not hear because we reason. Painstakingly Molloy asks us to interrogate what we hear in the word “understanding,” graspable not by quantifying variable terms as by a calculator but by the reception of wave signals as by an audio receiver. “And to the noises of nature too, and the works of men, I reacted I think in my own way and without desire of enlightenment.”<sup>29</sup> Molloy’s ear, exposed to the vacuous quality of language, asks what understanding can be communicated about a process that leaves nothing behind, where language does not communicate meaning. Molloy says it best: he does not react with the desire for something and does not exchange the sound of language for something to which he can then lay claim. Molloy listens without outcome, and in the process gives expression to the long-standing philosophical incompatibility of analytical enlightened thought and the murmur.<sup>30</sup>

## Thought by Force: The Axiom

The murmur that courses through Beckett’s work is part of a general radioscopy of consciousness in perpetual withdrawal. Another mode of this withdrawal I call the “axiom.” By definition an axiom is a generally accepted or self-evident truth, such as “The whole is greater than the parts.” It appears in mathematical or logical arguments as a premise that does not require demonstration. Beckett is not interested in the truth of axioms or in collecting them. He is interested in the “force” of axioms.

In the instances when vagabond thought operates axiomatically, logic is not displaced by noise or sound. It is instead embedded within thought. A solicitation creates a moment of interruption and sudden depropriation, but again the initiative for understanding is missing. The axiom fills the void. Though a drifting character, Molloy’s thoughts are not freely adrift in stream-of-consciousness style. Instead his thought process is engaged at all times with multiple categories of necessity, principle, and conceptual

rule. A strange evisceration of his thought is palpable even in this simple passage in which Molloy is walking down an alleyway at night: "Espying a narrow alley between two high buildings I looked about me, then slipped into it. Little windows overlooked it, on either side, on every floor, facing one another. Lavatory lights I suppose. There are things from time to time, in spite of everything, that impose themselves on the understanding with the force of axioms, for unknown reasons."<sup>31</sup> Molloy speaks here of his inexplicable subjection to the axiomatic. For the straggler Molloy, even this negligible experience of identifying the lights in the window as "lavatory lights" involves susceptibility, and unusual attentiveness, to the ways a conclusion is imposed. Here "lavatory lights" is a conclusion reached involuntarily, as if it were someone else's. This imposition of a form, the symmetrical arrangement of lit windows, on the understanding does not contradict Molloy's earlier claim that it was always the defect of his understanding that reality made vibrate. This "defect" of understanding is particularly active here where an understanding has been imposed on Molloy. As Molloy says, he cannot grasp the premise of this understanding, and the axiomatic force is imposed "for unknown reasons." Molloy reminds us of what needs to be forgotten before every gesture of identification: its premise. Forgetting this premise endows the identification with its completely natural and "of course" quality, with force. An identity, to have an identity, must silence its basis. Something comparable happens when a person is asked to explain his or her prejudices: their foundation, like that of Molloy's supposition, cannot be stated.

Molloy thinks in such a way that he grasps neither the premise of his "understanding" nor the motivation, the reasons for his logical certainty. The axiomatic nature of this architectural symmetry, what it denotes, is based on a kind of *déjà vu* (through what experience do I know these to be lavatory lights?) that is not his, however, to remember. The conclusive designation is stated in fact as a supposition ("Lavatory lights I suppose"). Suppositional thinking is the equivalent in logic to homelessness. The supposition is a mode of understanding that seems equally removed from its conclusion as from its occasion: the understanding it offers does not give us means to communicate with its premise, and since it is often made in the absence of all premise, its premise is something that itself must be supposed. There is a homelessness that is endemic to axiomatic society, since its forms do not give us the means to understand how we know what we know. We are in short abandoned to its conclusions.

Molloy is not dazzled by the light. Instead, his thinking becomes a screen that sensitively registers the larger logical operations that society

enforces through its individuals. The simple symmetry of small, lit windows overlooking an alley initiates Molloy into a simple conclusion that they were lavatory lights, a knowledge he perhaps did not know he had. What happens when architecture and society in general impose their meanings axiomatically, when their forms bear the force of axioms? It is at this moment that the law becomes immanent to form. The conclusions drawn are deduced through the individual, given an air of self-evidence. Molloy bears witness to the self-alienating effect of this axiomatic moment, since on second reflection he cannot understand wherefrom comes this “of course” feeling.

Molloy’s knowledge of architecture comes at the cost of its shelter. This recognition of architecture is uncanny, a testament to his own abandonment by architecture and its interior. His knowledge of this particular aspect of architectural design is disarming because he is not privy to the use of this space in the same way as those who inhabit it. Only for the man unfamiliar with beds, sleeping in the alley with the newspapers and filth, can the lavatory law and expedience of architectural space be lifted into the realm of pure knowledge. For the derelict, the home can only be supposed: its inside is truly hypothetical.<sup>32</sup>

## Lexicographic: Supposition as Thinking

A third mode of vagabond thought I call “lexicographical thinking” because it substitutes supposition as word association for *ratio*. In his essay “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” Roman Jakobson distinguishes between the “syntagmatic” and “paradigmatic” aspects of language.<sup>33</sup> A syntagmatic disturbance is structural and occurs on the level of syntax and grammar. The paradigmatic disturbance is operational and on the level of sense or the morpheme. Beckett’s characters’ lexicographical thinking is unlike the syntagmatic thinking of the true aphasic where disturbance results in incomprehensibility. Nonetheless, the lexicographical thinking that characterizes the vagabond thought is akin to a syntagmatic disturbance in the sense that thinking and speaking become a kind of supposition by substitution of morpheme, a paradigmatic flipping through the dictionary.

Supposition articulates the logical as the condition for Molloy’s vagabond thought. This supposition is not a condition in the sense that it becomes the ground for a conclusion. For Molloy supposing is not an activity performed once and for all, waiting in the expectation of verifica-

tion, but rather continuously, obsessively. Molloy's entire monologue has the tone of a repeatedly made and repeatedly abandoned supposition. The homeless condition that underlies Molloy's surprise at his familiarity—though speculative, from the view in the alley—of an interior space is also inflected in the torrent of words that describes the alley itself. In Molloy's description of the alley in which he is searching for a resting place, language moves laterally and not vertically, tirelessly picking itself up to resume the process. Molloy relates,

There was no way out of the alley, it was not so much an alley as a blind alley. At the end there were two recesses, no, that's not the word, opposite each other, littered with miscellaneous rubbish and with excrements, of dogs and masters, some dry and odorless, others still moist. Ah those papers never to be read again, perhaps never read. Here lovers must have lain at night and exchanged their vows. I entered one of the alcoves, wrong again, and leaned against the wall, my feet far from the wall, on the verge of slipping, but I had other props, the tips of my crutches. But a few minutes later I crossed the alley into the other chapel, that's the word, where I felt I might feel better, and settled myself in the same hypotenusal posture. And at first I did actually seem to feel a little better, but little by little I acquired the conviction that such was not the case. A fine rain was falling and I took off my hat to give my skull the benefit of it, my skull all cracked and furrowed and on fire, on fire. . . . At last I began to think, that is to say listen harder.<sup>34</sup>

Far from being a figure that adopts indifference as a way to cope with his existence under siege, the derelict is attuned to the smallest of differences. Molloy overhears his own speaking, and consequently speaks with an incredible finickiness, listening for the more exact word for his experience. First he says "alley," and then "blind alley." "Recess" is replaced with "alcove" and then "chapel." It is important not to confuse dereliction with inebriation: Molloy does not stumble around drunk in his speech but soberly seeks out the right term. The monologue transmits destitution by not allowing meanings to take root despite the profusion of small differences. Molloy is picky with his words, and this scrupulousness requires an empty hand. Being picky means never really allowing your hand to grasp or possess. Contrary to popular wisdom, Beckett's beggar can indeed be a chooser, but only a chooser, and without laying claim to what is chosen.

None of the words toward which his precision tends ever add up—they do not become building blocks for anything. Molloy's search for the

“proper” word for his resting place in the alley does not seem to be a search for deeper significance. He does not, for example, find any solace in the religious or ceremonial overtones of the word “chapel.” Though he places a chapel in an alley littered with excrement and trash, Molloy never suggests this to be a profane or transgressive gesture. There is no prose that is bowed so low as Molloy’s. He seems oblivious to connotation, and in words such as “chapel” he finds the forgotten, literal designation of a hallowed rather than a hallowed space. Molloy’s homelessness is conveyed by his ignorance of idiom, by his being out of reach of both the morality and popularity of certain phrases or meanings. He speaks as if he learned the words very long ago, prior to the idiomatic significance they later acquired. Molloy is a lexicographer of the alley who does not grab onto these meanings but quickly lets them go. His substitutive gestures are precise but endless and oblivious to their rhetorical function. It could be said that Molloy uses an architectural dictionary in a way that is, paradoxically, nomadic, as if to exhaust words, run through them, sacrifice them, and abandon them. Closely tied to Molloy’s attentiveness to particular words is this neglect of the signification they have for us.

In making thinking synonymous with listening, the final line of this passage above underscores the centrality of the ear in Beckett’s conception of homeless existence and recalls the first mode of vagabond thought mentioned above, the murmur. More than the face, the ear is our most open feature. This “listening harder” is not a state of repose but of restless exposure and susceptibility, and I have already described the ways Molloy is subject to endless injunctions, calls to order, and murmurs that compel him to move on. In the above passage it is possible to see the discriminating activity of Molloy’s ear.

The sobriety with which words are employed in Molloy’s description of the alley is such that these words are striking without our noticing it. One of these is Molloy’s use of the word “excrements.” In his penchant for specific designations, Molloy has no need of the singular case of this word. His desire to divide and distinguish divorces him from the habit of speech that confers an abstract plural unity upon “excrement” (as upon “trash”). This is a testament to the life lived in the alley. Molloy’s speech refers to specific producers, and not just the idea, of excrement.

Another word of surprising precision is Molloy’s description of his body posture as “hypotenusal,” which means that he is leaning like a hypotenuse facing the right angle formed by the ground and the wall. The word sounds like hypertensional, but this would only designate an antonym to this posture in which Molloy—with one of his legs shortening and

the other stiffening—finds rest possible. Moreover, “hypotenusal,” unlike “hypertensional,” is not an adjective describing a psychological or “inner” state but rather Molloy’s posture as it functions in a larger figure, namely, the triangle formed by body, ground, and wall. His posture expresses less a habit than an axiom, less a self in repose than a segment inserted into a larger geometrical function, dictated by the space offered by the blind alley.

## Thinking as Obligation: The Pensum

I have said that we undertake our works on the basis of several kinds of freedom: freedom with respect to material, with respect to size and shape, with respect to time; the mollusk seems deprived of all these—a creature that can only recite its lesson, which is hardly distinguishable from its very existence.

—Paul Valéry, *Sea Shells*<sup>35</sup>

Vagabond thought in Beckett’s characters is the substitution of *ratio* with a strenuous search of verbal exactitude. This thirst indicates that his characters labor under a lesson that needs to be learned. Beckett’s word for this unremembered lesson is a kind of cognate for the thought itself: the pensum.<sup>36</sup> This word recurs throughout the Beckett oeuvre.<sup>37</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “pensum” as “a charge, duty, or allotted task; a school task to be prepared, often imposed as punishment.”<sup>38</sup>

The derelict is devoted to the unrecitable pensum as he is to everything unremembered. Beckett’s characters abandon their possessions and abjure the world in favor not of spiritual clarity but of the thing they cannot dispense: the imperative to speak. The title character in *The Unnamable* admits,

Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I’ve forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation. I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I’ve forgotten what it is. But was I ever told? . . . Strange notion in any case, and eminently open to suspicion, that of a task to be performed, before one can be at rest. Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself. Strange hope, turned towards silence and peace. Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the idea of obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something.<sup>39</sup>

The *pensum* is described as a punishment for having been born, something he has forgotten (“but was I ever told?”). Beckett pictures this *pensum* as an interval between Molloy and his existence, between Molloy and his thought. As the imagined key to his silence and as that which always remains to be thought, the *pensum* addresses the thinking subject from the position where he would no longer be thinking, where his response would be rote, a reflex of habit. This is the manner in which the *pensum* is significant to Beckett’s art of poverty: it is emblematic of the way thought can be directed or assigned without being informed or given content. The *pensum* is the cause or the task for thinking and speaking that never reveals itself. The *pensum* is of great interest to Beckett’s depiction of the vagabond since it is the vagabond’s, but at the same time the vagabond cannot appropriate it. Were he to remember it, Molloy even specifies that he would recite it not in his voice but in “the voice.” Molloy frequently frames his monologue with reference to a duty that he has forgotten but that he must nevertheless perform. Interrupting his thought with pedagogical exactitude, Molloy says that just speaking freely cannot be equated with a freedom from the obligation enforced by the *pensum*: “And truly it little matters what I say, this, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a *pensum* one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept.”<sup>40</sup> Here the *pensum* appears as the force that impoverishes expression. Since it cannot be remembered, the *pensum* cannot be dispensed with, exchanged, or gotten rid of. For that very reason Molloy describes it as the content of his thought: it controls what he says. Even while improvising, Molloy claims he remains under the spell of the *pensum*, its “remnants.” As with Lacan’s understanding of the unconscious as an interval that is both unthinkable and ethical, Beckett’s *pensum* is predominantly that which recurs and recurs at odds with what the thinking subject thinks. It is in force when we think ourselves farthest from it. Here we seem to be very far from poverty as it is ordinarily understood. But the *pensum* pertains to loss, and a loss with which we cannot dispense and cannot overcome. It is the lesson that has been lost: the moment when thinking, expression, meaning, and performance seem to meet in the student in front of the blackboard. The final words of the passage above describe the complete terror of this dispossession: “a life without tears, as it is wept.” Nothing would seem more natural than the equivalence, the simultaneity, of weeping and tears. The *pensum* intervenes between these moments, separating meaning from expression, sign from value. Something is therefore missing from this

image of loss, and in Molloy's picture the subject is absent to his own sum, and weeps without crying. Loss and grieving are never relieved in Beckett's work through emotive or sentimental signs. It is always the burden of the reader to discern the destitute state of his characters, as it is registered in their evaporated stares.

The wandering of vagabond thought is not its identity but its torment. Molloy's wandering monologue is a kind of response, a searching for response, to the educational imperative. This imperative—to remember, recite, to speak—originates in an immemorial time, and it is as if the demand of the schoolteacher were the first form to be imposed on the drifter and the last to be abandoned. Some critics regard Molloy's increasing forgetfulness as a philosophical lesson, a renunciation of worldly possessions, and a station on the way to pure reflection. Leo Bersani conjectures,

The poverty of Molloy's projects and resources creates a dramatic vacuum in which he can develop the logic of a more radical poverty and thus prefigure his later incarnations in the trilogy. The crippled derelict is an ideal image for a philosophical apprenticeship. The trilogy carries the Cartesian process backwards, starting with a bodily *je suis* and ending with a pure *cogito*. Molloy's infirmities give him more time for reflection. Unable to move and to think at the same time, Molloy can enjoy, or suffer, an absolute mental concentration during the pauses between his painful movements. . . . His thought rarely "reaches" matter, and this provides a grotesquely comic confirmation of that autonomy of mind which Descartes experienced as the strength and dignity of mind.<sup>41</sup>

This is *Molloy* as *bildungsroman*, an educational novel in which knowledge is hoarded in its alienation from the world, and experience is gathered up as a kind of capital. It makes Molloy's resolute dereliction sound downright advantageous as it gives Molloy "more time for reflection." In this sense Bersani misstates the nature of the task—a task as much for us as it is for Molloy—in the thought of the beggar.

Bersani converts the pursuit of thought into a leisurely activity, a kind of hobby in which he can "develop the logic of a more radical poverty." But impoverishment does not obey logic. Its expression—the imperative of the lesson to which the beggar is submitted—is akin to an unconscious structure, something Bersani perhaps misses in trying to understand Molloy as a parodic fulfillment of *Cartesian* philosophy. Molloy presents a more "radical" poverty than is seen in Bersani's model. Molloy's thinking is directed toward an outside in which the self is dispossessed of its presence in

thought. Molloy's repeated acknowledgment that he is not where he thinks stands counterposed to Bersani's claim that Molloy offers a confirmation, however grotesque, of "autonomy of mind." The alienation of Molloy from the world does not allow him an opportunity to retreat to the irreducible point of the *cogito*.<sup>42</sup> Rather, his alienation is truly alienated and a sign of his absolute dependence, his helplessness, before the demands of the outside. According to Bersani, poverty creates "a dramatic vacuum," but the pathos of the derelict and the tenor of his thought in his dependency deserve a wider situation, a situation of terror from which no possessions and no self can serve as protection. The alienation of Molloy presents a particular incidence of a situation of *absolute exposure* in which Molloy is turned away, not in a voluntary fashion toward inwardness (as is implicit in the notion of a "dramatic vacuum") but in an involuntary fashion away from himself.

## Thinking as Extroversion

Hearing nothing, I am nevertheless prey to communications.

—Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

Though it is a type of drifting, dereliction has nothing to do with being free. It means having nowhere to go, but also having nothing to retreat to. In his poem "Enueg" Beckett writes, "Sweating like Judas / tired of dying / tired of policemen / feet in marmalade." This describes three ways in which Beckett's characters are locked into contingent, external situations rather than internal or moral ones. The drifting beggar is not a drowned figure but a forever drowning figure, not a mortal figure but a permanently mortal figure. The vagabond is importantly not "tired to death," or to the point of respite, but rather tired of dying. He is subject to an exhaustion enforced by the law. Beckett does not express the mortality of his characters by saying they have feet of clay. He emphasizes their impoverished and endlessly dying status by remarking that he trudges like a Sisyphus through preserves. The viscous medium through which the character moves is also a jumbled reference to an impoverished literary figure that precedes him. "Marmalade" offers a submerged reference to the derelict Marmaladov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>43</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy observes that one is always abandoned to something as much as abandoned by something. "One always abandons to a law," he writes. "The destitution of abandoned being is measured by the limitless severity of the law to which it finds itself exposed. . . . [Abandonment] is a

compulsion to appear absolutely under the law, under the law as such and in its totality."<sup>44</sup> In Nancy's description, every day is a court date for the derelict, not because he appears before the court at such and such a time, but because his mere appearance is an appearance before the law, the law "as such." The vagabond experiences the law "as such" because nothing mediates or tempers its exercise over him. There is no recourse for vagabond thought to disappear, to remain silent, to retreat. "If only I were not obliged to manifest," regrets Beckett's Unnamable.<sup>45</sup> The burden on the derelict is not composed of manifesting something particular for the law such as respect or desire. Rather, he remains in an intransitive relation to the law and is obliged to merely manifest. Molloy describes this obligation to manifest as a state of perpetual eviction and of having no place from which to withstand the provisions of the law. He is looking again for a place to sleep:

But already the day is over, the shadows lengthen, the walls multiply, you hug the walls, bowed down like a good boy, oozing with obsequiousness, having nothing to hide, hiding from mere terror, looking neither right nor left, hiding but not provocatively, ready to come out, to smile, to listen, to crawl, nauseating but not pestilent, less rat than toad. Then the true night, perilous too but sweet to him who knows it, who can open to it like the flower to the sun, who is himself night, day and night. . . . The night purge is in the hands of technicians, for the most part.<sup>46</sup>

There is a strange lack of obviousness to the poverty described in such a passage. Rejecting all sociological references to the phenomenon and the historical plight that produces begging, Beckett's prose nevertheless conveys something about the experience of poverty. Small details accomplish this. "The walls multiply": the city's structure becomes opaque, self-reproductive, active, producing a labyrinth around the life of the beggar. There are no houses, no interiors, no architecture per se, just their rudiments—their walls—that exclude, hunt, and overwhelm Molloy. Molloy is imprisoned paradoxically by being locked out, and his description of this indicates the way in which his experience is strewn before the very etymology of the mur-mur, the sound that grows between walls. Still more delicate and alarming, and characterizing the coup offered by Beckett's prose, is Molloy's use of "obsequiousness." The word denotes deference to authority with the hope of gain or improvement of one's position. This is a surprising term to describe Molloy's life, devoted to loss and subject to permanent eviction. In the beggar the obsequious posture becomes permanent. Even objects such as the wall or a walking stick seem to extrovert Molloy

and turn him out of himself in a gesture of complete dependency on the world.<sup>47</sup> Making no great claims for himself, Molloy asserts that he is nearer to the indolence and impassivity of the toad (and by implication the toady, i.e., the obsequious sycophant) than to the animal stereotyped for its survival techniques, the rat. For Beckett the derelict is not a survivor whose instincts carry him past the crisis but rather the permanent inhabitant of that crisis, the sensitive wound registering its demands (always ready to “smile, to listen, to crawl”). Molloy’s readiness is the catalyst for his metamorphosis, as if obsequiousness and its bent posture placed him outside the realm of upright creatures. Molloy’s state of mind can be summed up with “You never know . . . (what may happen, what may come in the night).” Instead of inaugurating a condition of doubt, however, this inaugurates a state in which the self is readied for constant disintegration.

Vagabond thought is consciousness ransacked by terror. The domination of this consciousness and the experience of terror increases as the trilogy proceeds. In *Molloy*, the conditions for depropriation are embodied in the figure and situation of the derelict. As the trilogy evolves, the vagabond as subject—this most marginal of figures—is chased off and pushed out. In the harassed monologue of *The Unnamable*, for example, we encounter the narrator buried under thinking torn in a process of dispersion: “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.”<sup>48</sup> Badiou remarks of this passage, “like all terror, this one is also given as an imperative without concept, and it imposes an obstinacy that gives no quarter and allows no escape.”<sup>49</sup> Badiou exposes the force and duress that scar the monologues of Beckett’s characters—an imperative to speak but without any concept or understanding that authorizes the imperative. Badiou goes on to say that Beckett enacts a gradual and literal “torture of the cogito” at the hands of a “terroristic imperative to sustain the unsustainable.”<sup>50</sup> But here Badiou overstates the role of philosophy because the absence of concept does not truly account for Malone’s terror. Beckett’s texts formulate a terror that exceeds philosophy not because of any limit of philosophy but rather because of a limit of the mind. Beckett removes the figure of the mind (and therefore thought), replacing it with a hive susceptible to rapid disinternalization. In other words, vagabond thought occurs in the level of the hive—or at best the brain—rather than in the mind. Forgetting that the basis of vagabond thought is the vagabond risks philosophizing Beckett. The result is that we end by speaking philosophically and generally about terror: “All terror,” as Badiou calls it. Taking the perspective of the beggar reminds us that Beckett is no more interested in all humanity than he is in all terror. Rather, Beckett sees and is interested in the difference between all

terror and what the vagabond undergoes and what ultimately constitutes his consciousness: daily terror.

Life without shelter is a daily terror depicted with typical understatement by Beckett, though a brutal amputation is taking place. A simple contrast with the beggar of Maurice Blanchot's *La Folie du jour* is instructive in this regard. Blanchot's story is in many ways inspired by Beckett's novel and brings the themes of *Molloy* to explicit theoretical exposition. The narrator reports, "I was beginning to sink into poverty. Slowly, it was drawing circles around me; the first seemed to leave me everything, the last would leave me only myself."<sup>51</sup> The passage that contrasts most strongly with Beckett's approach describes the way the narrator explains his metamorphosis and his vulnerability in his new situation. "Even though my sight had hardly weakened at all, I walked through the streets like a crab, holding tightly onto the walls, and whenever I let go of them dizziness surrounded my steps. I often saw the same poster on these walls; it was a simple poster with rather large letters: *You want this too*. Of course I wanted it, and every time I came upon these prominent words, I wanted it."<sup>52</sup> Blanchot controls the metamorphosis of his character more than does Beckett. Where Blanchot's character turns to the walls for support, no laws of physics intercede to relieve the condition of Beckett's derelict. Vertigo, curable in the former, consumes the life of Beckett's character and becomes almost palpable in the way he says the walls multiply. Above all it is important to notice how comprehensibly social and legible the helplessness of the beggar is for Blanchot. His weakness is signaled by the fact that he is addressed more strongly by the poster, by his inability to resist the function of the advertisement that informs the viewer of his wants.

This can be called, borrowing Beckett's phrase, a resentful indignance because it is replete with desire for what it cannot have. The openness of the narrator to the socioeconomic signifier, *ces mots considérables*, is the openness of a fully functional and employed subject. Like Kant's idea of a law that both needs and commands our attention (*Achtung*) and respect, these considerable letters in the advertisement address the care and consideration of Blanchot's beggar unproblematically. The susceptibility of his desire and imagination to its message is in a way indistinguishable from anyone else's: he occupies the same subject position of any consumer and occupies it more literally, as each time he sees the slogan, in Blanchot's words, *he wanted it*. His destitute condition is there merely to provide his desire with melodramatic value: the beggar is both full (of desire) and empty (of means) before the advertisement. The advertisement's system of socially sanctioned meaning therefore undergoes no distortion under the gaze of the dispossessed.

In Molloy's description, the extroversion of the beggar is not toward a commodity or the letters in its advertisement, but toward the night. Molloy says he is open to the night the way a flower is open to the sun. "Proust," Beckett observes, "assimilates the human to the vegetal. He is conscious of humanity as flora, never as fauna . . . and this preoccupation accompanies very naturally his complete indifference to moral values and human justices."<sup>53</sup> Molloy follows this inverted or chiasmatic natural law: his openness is compared to a heliotropism that directs him toward the sounds of the night. Therefore, the condition of the homeless wanderer is not only focused around an absence—the night that holds his peril—but the necessity and inevitability of this focus is graspable only by the disruption of a natural metaphor.

Advertisement makes little appearance in *Molloy*. Its absence is consistent with the law of his extroversion that follows a second-order natural necessity.<sup>54</sup> Yet it is instructive to note the care with which advertisement does enter the story of the derelict. Molloy is telling one of his countless stories of sleeping in gardens and ditches, and he remarks, "But it is useless to dwell on this period of my life. If I go on long enough calling that my life I'll end up by believing it. It's the principle of advertising."<sup>55</sup> Unlike Blanchot's character, Molloy is not susceptible to the lures of the advertisement and does not mercilessly want what it sells. Rather it is the mythic principle of advertising—the fact that repetition will produce belief—that sustains the structure of Molloy's interior world, his conviction, and his ability to designate his experience as "my life." To tell or write his life, Molloy must resort to exterior equipment: the slogans and reiterations of advertising become for Molloy a kind of self-training that evokes the various methods of *askesis* recommended by Seneca: memorization, abstinences, silence, listening, and, above all, the *hupomnemata* or account books that offered to the self everything that required repetition for the self to take shape.<sup>56</sup>

## The Mythic Tense: Thinking in the Permanent Present

What is it defends her? Even from her own. Averts the intent gaze.  
 Incriminates the dearly won. Forbids divining her. What but life ending.  
 Hers. The other's. But so otherwise.

—Samuel Beckett, *Ill Seen, Ill Said*

Molloy's touching finickiness, his preference for one low spot on the food chain over another, should not divert our attention from the unbearable source of his pathos and what Molloy himself describes as "hiding from

mere terror." "Mere terror" means nothing more than terror, but also nothing but terror. The minimalism of this mereness, which is a part of the process of reduction undertaken by Beckett's writing, suggests that between Molloy and the experience of terror there are no intermediaries, neither rights, nor personality, nor private space. In the figure of Molloy, Beckett asks us to think about the form life assumes when it is made the exclusive object of a technique. Beckett shows us how, paradoxically, the individual abandoned by society becomes its target. The "night purges in the hands of technicians," like the constant injunctions to leave, are part of society's war on poverty.

Critics frequently point out the way in which Molloy's interminable ambulations offer a challenge to the laws of Newtonian physics, an inexhaustible careening of crutches, bikes, and legs in various states of dysfunctionality.<sup>57</sup> Molloy does not cast himself beyond the laws of physics as much as he is cast out of a society that operates according to these laws. Molloy is put instead in a perpetual submission to the law, a perpetual motion machine *in vacuo*: "suppliant, not a transgressor," as a later character describes himself.<sup>58</sup> The derelict is in a state of mobility more intense than the soldier's. There is no time to think. A "No Loitering" sign hangs at the gates of Beckett's novel—Molloy's one confrontation with the law is his arrest for being in an "obscene state of rest." Sitting is a posture seemingly relegated to a former species: "The desire to sit down came upon me from time to time, back upon me from a vanished world."<sup>59</sup> Molloy speaks of the Salvation Army as if it were just that, a relentless military action against the impoverished: "[Social workers] will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. The Salvation Army is no better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defense, that I know of."<sup>60</sup>

*Molloy* documents the way in which being helpless has become synonymous with being defenseless, and of the way mere existence has become synonymous with mere terror. Walter Benjamin writes in one of his fragments, "As long as there is a single beggar, there will still be myth."<sup>61</sup> Benjamin's insight is illuminated by the defenseless existence of the beggar. For Benjamin, a single beggar stands between myth and its disappearance. Here Benjamin does not seem to be asserting the popular cliché, namely, that the beggar is the last outpost of a culture's ancient wisdom, its prophet and its storyteller. Benjamin's comment locates the possible sources of myth in the routinely terrorized situation of the beggar. The placelessness and miserable anonymity of the beggar mimic the way the origins of myth are obscured and belong to a time outside history.<sup>62</sup> Molloy himself notes the way in which the familiar markers of time have lost their clarity in his

story. Noting how he cannot distinguish between events that have happened, those that are happening, and those yet to happen, Molloy must “speak in a mythological present” that includes all tenses.<sup>63</sup> Molloy’s story is not alerted to the passage of time. The routine of the beggar partakes, in fact, of the ambiguous iteration of myth. His habits are at once an expression of his idleness and a force of necessity—the need to find food and a place to sleep has, in a parody of the prehistoric condition, become a routine. The derelict simultaneously has no habits and has only his habits. His routines are the expression of how unfree it is to be out of the loop: Adorno compares the gestures in Beckett’s plays to the repetitive and automatic behavior of the prisoner in his cell.<sup>64</sup> The enclosed unconscious space of habit entirely swallows the life of the derelict. Like mythic form, the derelict life is trapped in a state of repetition without memory. The activity of the beggar seems “habitual” because the beggar occupies a space that is both self-enclosed and unfamiliar: his activity designates a loss of self but without the context, the domestic interior, in which this loss is wagered in safety. The self-enclosed space of the beggar excludes the familiar.

The mythic situation of the beggar becomes more palpable as we try to imagine the conditions of Benjamin’s statement, the concept of the “single beggar.” Without community, beggars are never anything but single. Yet the vagabond inhabits a strangely eviscerated solitude, and his singleness lays claim only to isolation, rather than to differentiation. In the epigraph above from *Ill Seen, Ill Said*, Beckett asks, “What defends her?” Beckett deepens this question as he explains it: “Averts the intent gaze. Incriminates the dearly won. Forbids divining her.” Molloy, too, averts the intent gaze of the reader and incriminates the claims that are made on him: in reading *Molloy*, confronted with the derelict existence of its character, every assertion, every attempt to discern the proper space of the beggar and establish his belonging, comes with a receipt. Georges Bataille proposes that *Molloy* is closer to myth than to a novel. This perspective on the work begins with Bataille’s realization that no proper terms suitably designate our encounter with the vagabond. This encounter with Molloy in fact seemingly spills over into Bataille’s biographical encounters with street people (“I can say something more about him, and that is that both you and I have met him”). Bataille writes,

There is in this reality, the essence or residue of being, something so *universal*, these complete *vagabonds* we occasionally encounter but immediately lose have something so essentially indistinct about them, that we cannot imagine anything more anonymous. So much so that this name *vagabond*

I have just written down misrepresents them. . . . This thing we name through sheer impotence *vagabond* or *wretch*, which is actually *unnamable* (but then we find ourselves entangled in another word, *unnamable*), is no less mute than death. Thus we know in advance that the attempt to speak to this phantom haunting the streets in broad daylight is futile. Even if we knew something about the precise circumstances and conditions of his life (?) and his wretchedness, we would have made no headway: this man, or rather this being whose speech, sustaining him, might have made him human—whatever speech subsists or rather exhausts itself in him no longer sustains him, and similarly, speech no longer reaches him. Any conversation we might have with him would only be a phantom, an appearance of conversation. It would delude us, referring us to some appearance of humanity, to something other than this *absence* of humanity heralded by the derelict dragging himself through the streets, who fascinates us.<sup>65</sup>

For Bataille the situation of the beggar signals the mythological dimension: language loses its state of possibility, its conversion value. The typography of Bataille's effort to speak of the vagabond creates an obstacle course of italicized terms. Their profusion indicates the foreign nature of each critical designation for Molloy. It also indicates a perpetual need to resume or reestablish emphasis, to enumerate terms to categorize this "essentially indistinct" figure that seems to undo each assertion of emphasis. Molloy does not actively undo or subvert the critic but rather proffers a passivity and destitution that inspire a strange hesitancy or, to use Beckett's terms in the epigraph from the beginning of this section, a sense of the incrimination of the dearly won. Bataille says we name the vagabond only through "linguistic impotence." In the vagabond Bataille notes that language no longer sustains itself or helps him survive, but rather is weakened (*il s'épuise en lui*).

No longer rejuvenated by the speaking "I," language undergoes an exhaustion and emaciation in the derelict. For Bataille this situation signals the mythological dimension of the beggar. Language loses its state of possibility in the beggar, its conversion value: we cannot have a conversation with him, Bataille curiously notes, but only the appearance of one. Language fails to perform another conversion as well: the beggar is not transformed from *l'être* into *l'homme*. Bataille employs an array of figures to mark this demise of language at the terminal self of the beggar: *il ne porte plus*, language no longer delivers, carries, or supports the derelict from a state of "being" to a state of being something (*l'homme*). Language loses its capacities in the impoverished instant of the derelict. The beggar has a mythological status for Bataille because he at once is both this absence of humanity

and signifies or heralds this absence. In the following description, Molloy emerges as a kind of phoenix in reverse, as ashes risen from the creature:

Doubtless the birth we should attribute to Molloy is not that of a scholarly composition, but rather the only one that would be suitable to the elusive reality I have been speaking of, that of myth—monstrous, and arising from the slumber of reason. There are two analogous truths that can only take shape in us in the form of a myth, these being death and the “absence of humanity” that is death’s living semblance. Such absences of reality may not indeed be present in the clear-cut distinctions of discourse, but we may be sure that neither death nor inhumanity, both non-existing, can be considered irrelevant to the existence that we are, of which they are the boundary, the backdrop, and the ultimate truth.<sup>66</sup>

Earlier I note the way in which Benjamin asks the reader to think the intrinsically mythological nature of the beggar in which the *presence* of the beggar is the *sine qua non* of myth. This dependent relation of myth on the single beggar is inverted in Bataille’s picture in which the beggar is a living *absence* (“death’s living semblance”), at a mythological remove from both clear-cut discourse (“scholarly composition”) and from our existence as it is. Bataille’s approach to Molloy is both tactful (in the hesitancy it marks in what to name this vagabond being) and apocalyptic (in its understanding of the unnamable, a living absence). The emphasis on the latter draws our attention away from Molloy’s self-named “mythological present.” Benjamin’s comment has the effect of forcing us into that present as an eternal present, one without memory and without projects. Bataille paradoxically gives the vagabond a kind of home in the conceptual landscape. He writes, “The profound apathy of death, its indifference to every possible thing, is apparent in him, but this apathy would encounter in death itself its own limit.”<sup>67</sup> The vagabond shakes hands with “death itself,” and the apathy of the vagabond in turn reminds us of this death limit.

In this gesture the signifying operation of the vagabond—whose apathy Bataille has described as inaccessible, immune to language, and impersonal—becomes rather familiar to us. Bataille draws a conclusion that betrays the observations (pertaining to both Molloy and personal experience) on which it is built. Though there is no proper name for this being that is “no less mute than death,” Bataille says that the beggar both announces this absent condition and embodies it. Bataille takes the unnamable and transumes it in the description of the vagabond as a kind of ghost or undead figure. The activity of the vagabond is described as a haunting:

"This horrible figure painfully swinging along on his crutches is the truth that afflicts us and that follows us no less faithfully than our own shadows . . . the spectre that haunts the streets in open daylight."<sup>68</sup> A ghost no longer able to haunt his house, forced to walk the streets by day, a faithful shadow: these figures evoke the drifting situation of the beggar at the same time they force us to ask whether Molloy's dislocation precisely resembles a ghost's. The ghost has a sense of belonging to a place that in fact exceeds the beggar's: its dislocation is specific and imposes a particular debt on the living because the dead has been removed from the final "resting place." Ghosts are restless; beggars are forbidden sleep. Molloy does not seek the place, once and for all, but a place. The final sentence of Molloy's monologue is "I longed to go back into the forest. Oh not a real longing. Molloy could stay, where he happened to be."<sup>69</sup> The contingency of the beggar's resting spot, of resting where he happens to be, is entirely offset by the comma and preceding conditionality: "Molloy *could* stay." Contingency is not a continuous privilege of the beggar as might be suggested if the sentence were written as "Molloy could stay where he happened to be." This unitary statement is interrupted by the comma indicating that "where he happened to be" is a spot that must be sanctioned by his solicitors, the policemen and night watchmen or by their absence.

The restless resumption of this contingency under law differs from the predicament of the undead or unburied. Consider once more the brief litany of Beckett's poem "Enueg": "Tired of dying / tired of policemen / feet in marmalade / perspiring profusely / heart in marmalade." Tired of dying, the vagabond is subject to an exhaustion enforced by the law. The insuperably helpless situation of Molloy is reflected in the fact that everything, even help, contributes to this dying. His situation actively blackmails the common sense of the social management of poverty. Of his mother Molloy complains, "Her charity kept me dying."<sup>70</sup> There is no way for the helpless in Beckett to break with their condition, and not even death is permitted to them. Help, or charity, ends by accelerating and deepening helplessness, so that in trying to keep the vagabond from dying, charity paradoxically condemns him to dying.

Beckett writes to show us the world seen from the standpoint of the helpless, through eyes withdrawn into dying. There is a glimmer there that provides us with an understanding—to which Bataille and Benjamin gesture—of the experiential structure of myth in the situation of need. The figure of need is separated by a gap that the ancients understood to exist between mortals and the immortals. But this gap in Beckett exists between mortals. A few lines from the monologue of Beckett's Unnamable can give a sense of this:

Et l'autre. Je lui ai prêté des yeux implorants, des offrandes pour moi, un besoin d'aide. Il ne me regarde pas, ne me connaît pas, ne manque de rien. Moi seul suis homme et tout le reste divin.

[And the other? I have assigned him eyes that implore me, offerings for me, need of succour. He does not look at me, does not know of me, wants for nothing. I alone am man and all the rest divine.]<sup>71</sup>

It is alarming to encounter the term "other" in Beckett's prose since the monologues of his derelicts are not anchored in the premise of the self. In the transition from Beckett's French to his English, the stance toward the other becomes a question. The other is both something superadded and a question, both an unquestionable surplus or excess (*le reste*) and open to a type of philosophical thinking (and hence the prospect of conceptual assimilation). The truth of the other is in a way expressed as the gap between the two languages and between expressions. The sentences that follow therefore appear as a kind of answer to the simple question of "And the other?" This answer brings the questioner into a quandary of need. The sentences that follow are not answers but rather enumerations, open to infinite incompleteness. The French version emphasizes that what follows is not an answer but a list, soberly laid out without Beckett filling in the connection for us.

At first, the figure states that he has lent the other (*prêté*) the signs of need: imploring eyes, a "need of succour." These indices of need are lent to the other, that is to say, given over provisionally, as in a situation of crisis in which one lends another a blanket. The crisis here is precipitated by the question of the other. But lending is always an expectation of a return. It is in this sense that the gesture of assigning the signs of the vagabond to the other, this conversion of the other into a beggar, is an answer to the question of the other. This question ("And the other?") offers no qualifications by which to lead us and does not fill in any blanks for us. It is answered most coercively, therefore, by instituting the state of discernible need in the other. The self secures an answer to the monstrous question about the other by serving a philanthropic function, by making the ego charitable. It has lent to the world the pure sign of its purpose: vagabond signs signifying total need that nevertheless promise "offerings" (*des offrandes*) to that self in return.

The second sentence sounds like it should undo the first, yet it does not hold dialogue with the first gesture and does not aim at contradiction. Here the question of the other approximates the version of the other as posed by Beckett's French, the other as the *unintégrétable* surplus and

elusive remainder. Beckett's character speaks of the other as one who is *unreciprocal*: the other is indifferent to and ignorant of all relation to the self, is blind to the self. This other does not communicate with us. These sentences do not form a progression, a revision, or even the basis of recognition in the character. They are juxtaposed as discontinuous moments within which Beckett's character catches a glimpse of the human. The last sentence is delivered with the Beckettian mixture of clarity and puzzlement and conveys a sense that is both precise and in the process of evaporating. It connects the vicious circle of need and indifference, their nonexclusive though contradictory nature, to the permanent mortality of the speaker and his exclusion from the divinity.<sup>72</sup> Need and insufficiency are the markers by which the self imagines itself to integrate the other; the impoverishment of the other emerges here as an instrument by which the self acts out its relation to the world before its own poverty, its own absence of relation, is noted. Poverty is not just in "the other," and it is the return of the self to a condition of poverty that marks mortal time for Beckett's character. Beckett's figure says that he is nothing to the one whom he imagines to have nothing and to be in need of him. Yet this turn is already at the heart of the first charitable gesture by which want is discerned in the world, since it is in that first estimation of the vagabond nature of the other that the self has unwittingly testified to the helplessness and truly involuntary aspect of the other, having nothing and yet offering something to us. For Beckett, to be "man" does not mean to join a species but to feel oneself to be the last man, the single beggar.