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The Work of Poverty

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Duerfahrd, Lance.

The Work of Poverty: Samuel Beckett's Vagabonds and the Theater of Crisis.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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Textual Indigence

THE READER IN AN AESTHETICS OF POVERTY

So forgive me if I relapse . . . into my dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving.

—Samuel Beckett¹

Making Less of Less

Critics widely observe that Beckett's work, characterized by broken syntax and a dearth of discernible narrative structure, verges on the unreadable.² Much of Beckett criticism tries to deal with this problem. The best criticism of Beckett makes a paradox of this, taking the view that the reader's difficulty is the point. In his essay appropriately titled "Trying to Understand 'Endgame,'" Adorno writes that understanding *Endgame* can only mean "understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning."³ According to Adorno, the most we can do is scrupulously take stock of all the ways Beckett frustrates our effort to grasp or anticipate his work. Beckett does not discourage the experience of unintelligibility Adorno finds constitutive of his work. He is famously indifferent to this effort as he is to the struggle of audiences with his drama. "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin."⁴

In his dialogue with Georges Duthuit, Beckett, perhaps unwittingly given his predilection for almost cruel statements, furnishes an enigmatic key to his work. Beckett says he has a vision, a “dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence.” What does this mean? Beckett does not intend to impart a supreme value for humanity or that art should add to the stockpile of cultural monuments. Beckett dreams neither of an art replete with redemptive potential nor, unlike other dreamers, of striking it rich. Rather, Beckett dreams of an art uninterested in giving anything to the spectator, of a literature capable of a forthright and unapologetic expression of its poverty.

Beckett’s work is guided by this dream and its surprising and discordant elements. The surprise begins with the terminology itself. Beckett juxtaposes the terms *insuperable* and *indigence*. This conflation challenges us to envision a state of need so needy that it cannot be redeemed, surmounted, or made a positive value through articulation or representation in a novel, a paragraph, or even a word. The ultimate node of Beckett’s dream as informative of his own creation may not be of art’s indigence (as this for Beckett is perhaps constitutive of art per se) but a thing even more improbable: an attitude toward this condition, that his work express an equanimity, an unresentful disposition toward this inherent and unalienable indigence.

The challenge to Beckett’s reader is made more difficult because his dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence does not involve either reader or reading in any stated way. In fact, it is not clear that a reader is welcome, or even necessary. Insofar that Beckett’s dream requires the participation of the reader, it is less to do something than to not do something: not to annul, not to distort the carefully stacked poverty of Beckett design.

How can readers insert themselves into so tight a loop? It is not easy to participate in another’s dream. The most obvious paths of response are blocked since most interpretations seek to make the text into a resource or a repository of significant traces. Reading in the spirit of Beckett’s design means avoiding precisely this making more of less, this cancellation of Beckett’s carefully designed poetics of indigence. The reader is asked to encounter Beckett’s dream of a work of need—needfully. In other words, the reader should be open to the surprising and unforeseen outcomes that emerge when approaching Beckett’s poverty as such without any additional determination or dissemination, without annulling it or transforming it.

Beckett makes no mention of any image within this dream, only of art’s relation to itself. This relation is the only one remaining after Beckett shears world (represented object), artist (represented subject), and audience

from the work of art. Beckett praises Dutch painter Bram van Velde as the first artist "to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms."⁵ Beckett's insistence on negativity and indigence without any repeal or redemption suggests that any attempt to read his work within "the humanities" would annul art's essential indigence. The problem is mirrored in the inaugural address that awarded Beckett the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature. Beckett's award goes to the "author who has transmuted the destitution of modern man into his exaltation."⁶ This is precisely the misunderstanding that Beckett sought to avoid and that Beckett's dream of an insuperable indigence counters so clearly. Yet this charitable negation of the poverty of Beckett's art remains a temptation to all readings of his work. Like the Nobel Committee, commentators see Beckett as a kind of Midas figure equipped with a typewriter. As Steven Connor remarks, the motto "less is more" has become the "standard way of interpreting Beckett's texts."⁷ Connor also accurately defines the problem with this approach, when he writes that this interpretative model is "the rate of exchange whereby criticism has been able to move the dwindling 'lessness' of his work from the red into the black of cultural profit."⁸

Taking Beckett at his word requires of his reader both deep familiarity with and also distance from the text. For Jacques Derrida, notably, distance to Beckett was difficult to achieve. Of why he does not write about Beckett, Derrida says, "this is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me [to write about him], too easy and too hard."⁹ Derrida does not feel Beckett to be at the right distance to permit "writing transactions."¹⁰ He claims that this is partly a problem of language itself. Derrida says that he can write about foreign authors such as Joyce, Kafka, and Celan precisely because his own writing, in French, allows him to develop a language in response to the work of these authors. By contrast, Beckett writes in what Derrida calls a "particular French" that makes it difficult to reply: "How could I write in French in the wake of or 'with' someone who does operations on this language which seem to me so strong and so necessary, but which must remain idiomatic? How could I write, sign, countersign performatively texts which 'respond' to Beckett?"¹¹ Beckett's "operations" on the French language remain, for Derrida, so unassailably idiomatic that they paradoxically cannot be translated into Derrida's French. Without this distance, his treatment of Beckett can only devolve into a mediated discourse, or what Derrida calls "the platitude of a supposed academic metalanguage."¹² Yet Adorno, who has the advantage of

writing in a language other than Beckett's French, has a problem similar to Derrida. Of *Endgame*, Adorno writes that a reading of Beckett "cannot pursue the chimerical aim of expressing the play's meaning in a form mediated by philosophy."¹³ In the absence of a philosophical narrative about Beckett's work, Adorno proposes a reading that keeps closer to the text: understanding *Endgame*, he writes, "can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning."¹⁴ Adorno proposes that the reader treat Beckett's text with the meticulous attention one might give to a crime scene: the most the critic can hope for is recreating, step by step, the way Beckett's language assaults meaning and parts company with our understanding. For both Adorno and Derrida, in other words, critical mediation of the Beckett text requires both nearness and distance, the use of a language at once familiar and unfamiliar.

My purpose here is to avoid both the platitudes of academic language and the imposition of language not "vouched for by the work's imminence."¹⁵ In their *Arts of Impoverishment* to which my study is indebted, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit observe that Beckett "has given us, by common consent, unforgettably original images of meaninglessness and failure, and reasonably literate people all over the world recognize encounters, spectacles, verbal exchanges they unhesitatingly qualify as Beckettian."¹⁶ Yet Beckett's work also presents a type of impoverishment not so easily recognized, one that the reader can qualify or name only with hesitation. The needfulness of Beckett's work not only renders our "reasonable literacy" insufficient but also requires us to rethink the reading process altogether. To this end, I assemble here six key strategies for reading Beckett's aesthetics of indigence, culled from Beckett's own texts. They are conditions of poverty that characterize Beckett's poetics and that affect our encounter with his work. They are (1) begging the question, (2) the syntax of weakness, (3) writing and abandonment, (4) deliberate provisionality, (5) the hypothetical imperative, (6) worsening as narrative strategy. These six operations call attention to what we do differently on account of the meagerness, both slim yet ineradicable, offered by Beckett's work. I introduce the topic with "A Poetics or an Ethics of Indigence," a perceptively titled chapter from James Knowlson and John Pilling's *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett*.

A Poetics or an Ethics of Indigence

Beckett challenges the reader to take on his poverty without annulment. Beckett's poverty is a vanishing and incalculable figure, rendered as an

abyss (“the inverted spiral of need”) or an insurmountable height (“an insuperable indigence”), that seems to call for an ethical problem.¹⁷ Knowlson and Pilling raise this issue in converting indigence into a summary term for Beckett’s work. What could be more difficult to isolate, to endow with fetish status, or *possess*, they ask, than poverty? They observe, “perhaps [indigence] is the only word that can encapsulate the obsession with ‘need’ and ‘poverty’ that has been at the heart of Beckett’s thinking through such a long and distinguished career.”¹⁸ For Knowlson and Pilling, Beckett’s obsessions with poverty can be brought within a functioning aesthetic. But because they fail to consider the ethical demands imposed by Beckett’s work, Knowlson and Pilling risk containing or “encapsulating” the very poverty Beckett sought to leave undomesticated. Ethics questions our implication with an ever-withdrawing figure of need. The homeless narrator of Beckett’s short story “The End” allegorizes the reader’s predicament when faced by this figure. He describes how his cries for assistance sounded unintentionally like their opposite: “I tried to groan, Help! Help! But the tone that came out was that of polite conversation. My hour was not yet come and I could no longer groan. The last time I had cause to groan I had groaned as well as ever, and no heart within miles of me to melt.”¹⁹ Here the character cannot reckon his need to groan with his inability to do so. His last great groan came and went unheard by anyone who might have offered him a sympathetic gesture. Reading Beckett in terms of pure aesthetics runs the risk of fastening its attention only on this tone of polite conversation, the formal conventions of bourgeois society. The groan of Beckett’s characters is both untimely and of unrecognizable form. The distress is not imprisoned in the form of the work.²⁰

This idea is not necessarily inappropriate for many works of art. In colloquial understanding, the artwork is a cry for help. In this view art becomes a displaced statement of despair (usually the artist’s). Here the cry is both audible and legible, and it bears the mark of a strictly psychological or existential distress.²¹ But Beckett tends to work within and against this idiom. We need rather to ask: How do we attune ourselves to the groan under, or within, the tone of polite conversation? Beckett conceives of the artist’s helplessness as an absolute disenfranchisement of means. Asked by Georges Duthuit why he claims that the artist is “helpless to paint,” Beckett replies, “Because there is nothing to paint and nothing to paint with.”²² This startling proclamation deprives us of the means by which to understand the work of art, since for Beckett art happens in a space without objects (things to be painted) and without means (brushes, canvases, paint, but also hands, eyes, and skill). Beckett’s comment pulls art away from all the instrumental terms with which it has traditionally been surrounded.

As counterintuitive as it may be for readers who seek to understand the text through interpretation, Beckett seems to ask his reader for an inability to understand, that the readers be defeated by their attempt at understanding rather than have a light go on in the mind. This makes the reader a participant in the poverty rather than a factor for eliminating it. In *Malone Dies*, for example, the reader encounters the title character bedridden and writing in his exercise book. He notes, "For I want to put down in it, for the last time, those I have called to my help, but ill, so that they did not understand, so that they may cease with me. Now rest."²³ Is it not conceivable to think here that the *name of the reader* might be inscribed on Malone's list of those who did not understand his cry for help? Can the reader be a mere bystander here—free to walk? Or are we not as readers inscribed within the novel, as in a necrology, and belonging to those who failed the call?²⁴ The failure of the reader to respond is not a failure of critical judgment or insight. Rather, it connects us to the cry in the most intimate but also encrypted way. We merge with the work at the point where it cannot communicate with us, cannot get us to respond. Malone acknowledges that his demand for help may not have been apprehended in the first place, since his cry partakes of his distress and is made "ill."²⁵ In other words, the call to action is itself afflicted, made "ill" instead of made known. Rather than conveying the picture or message of need, language itself is in need. But the error or illness of the imperative does not reduce its urgency: it only eliminates the reader's ability to heed that call, to provide aid or to redeem a need.

In his review of the poetry of Denis Devlin, Beckett himself formulates a theoretical relation between the reader and need. Contrasting art with "opinion" (what Beckett calls an "escape from need"), Beckett describes Devlin's poems as "no more (!) than the approximately adequate and absolutely non-final formulation of another kind [of need]."²⁶ In other words, poetry's "own terms" are paradoxically those that mark it as unfathomably dispossessed. Beckett goes on to say that "art has always been this—pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric—whatever else it may have been obliged by the 'social reality' to appear, but never more freely so than now, when social reality . . . has severed the connection."²⁷ Beckett does not assert that artworks *state* these needs, but rather that they offer its "approximately adequate and absolutely non-final formulation." Faced with a poem, a reader is not faced with a need *for* something. That is, the terms of poetry are not about need but are instead themselves needy, do not refer to a particular need but are in need of reference, seek out their reality by lacking it. As a "non-final formulation," Devlin's poems offer a

need that is unstable and itself in need of articulation. To use the expression of Beckett's narrator, it calls ill. In "Cascando," Beckett refers to "the black want splashing their faces."²⁸ Want, like need, is never in the expression of the face but running over it, discoloring it, evaporating from it. This is why for Beckett the opposite of need is not fulfillment but opinion, the idea hardened into a position that can be unambiguously appropriated and exchanged.

Beckett's pure interrogation of need and its place in literary articulation suggests for the reader a role beyond the mere divestment of subject (an agency that poses the question) and object (something asked for). The question of art and the responsibility of the reader operated through a constitutive subtraction: *a rhetorical question less the rhetoric*. Beckett defines literature in such a way that the reader approaches it primarily through its dispossession. There are two consequences to this neediest of states in which the rhetorical question has been stripped of its rhetoric. Without the rhetoric, a rhetorical question lacks the means of its enunciation. This question, then, is so close to the being of the artwork that it cannot be distanced, or turned, in order for it to be posed: in short, it loses the material form by which it is recognized. This means there are questions that are not formulated in Beckett's text but posed by the text and weigh on the text through their absence. The title character in Beckett's prose work *The Unnamable*, for example, makes a distinction between *not formulating* questions and conceding their inevitability: "Decidedly it seems impossible, at this stage, that I should dispense with questions, as I promised myself I would. No, I merely swore I'd stop asking them. And perhaps before long, who knows, I shall light on the happy combination which will prevent them from ever arising again in my—let us not be over-nice—mind."²⁹ Beckett's work constitutes a search for an arrangement that situates or exposes a question rather than simply poses one. This combination is the site where questions insinuate themselves into the text. Beckett does not seek to formulate questions per se; he does not systematically seek the question the way a philosophical treatise might. Beckett's character expresses the hope that he will fall upon the desirable combination that will *obstruct* formulation and make the question-formula fail. Beckett's work dethrones ostentatious form of the question in favor of making its problems ostensible.

There is another potential implication for the reader to Beckett's definition of art. Purified of rhetoric, the question of literature is purified of its rhetorical *function*. Rhetorical questions conventionally lend continuity to arguments: they do not expect a response to be given. Beckett's definition of literature within these parameters requires from the reader a response.

Some of Beckett's best critics have inverted Beckett's statement and insisted that Beckett's minimalism produces an autonomous artwork, art that witnesses the complete disintegration of the dialogic structure of question and response. In his essay on *Endgame*, Adorno writes, for example, "Beckett spells out the lie implicit in the question mark: the question has become a rhetorical one."³⁰ My point here concerns the way in which Beckett does not offer us the sign that designates a question (the *Fragezeichen*, literally, the question mark) but withdraws that sign in a gesture of radical poverty. Reading Beckett entails nothing other than the search for questions in need of their sign, a search for unwritten questions. Contrary to the picture offered by Adorno, there seems to be in fact considerable urgency, one might say emergency, in the way in which this unasked question needs the reader for its articulation.

Beckett's oeuvre of need seeks to multiply the missing questions and actively *unask* questions in order to implore the readers to realize the question themselves. This clashes with the tendency within modern art and philosophy to define themselves through their struggle to remember questions. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe their project as a search for questions that do not already contain their answers. They take Henri Bergson's definition of a false problem to be one rooted in the "badly stated" question: a drive toward its proper articulation guides their thinking all the way up to *What Is Philosophy?*³¹ Deleuze and Guattari observe that this question, which entitles their final work, has never been heard because it was always asked too abstractly and "can perhaps be posed only late in life, with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely."³² When Martin Heidegger writes that "questioning is the piety of thought," he references a disposition (piety) habitually associated with faith and *not* questioning to assert the unquestioned need of the question.³³ He begins *Being and Time* by declaring that we have forgotten the Greek question of Being.³⁴ Heidegger furnishes us with a way, a lexicon of Greek philosophical language, to access this question. Ultimately, Beckett sides with amnesia rather than with philosophical recollection. Beckett's novels are gerontological in a way that surpasses the scenario furnished by Deleuze and Guattari. Instead of old age's recent arrival and the opportunity to speak concretely, Beckett gives older age and speech frozen into a series of non sequiturs. Beckett's forgetful work functions like a trap into which questions fly in from the outside.

Beckett's tactic of spurring the reader to ask questions works with the assumption that answering and posing of questions is not the difficult task. The decisive moment for Beckett comes earlier: in formulating the condi-

tions for a question. Beckett's disposition toward the rhetorical question in this sense runs contrary to established critical notions about literature. Beckett's literary destitution proposes a model in which the work (and not the author) needs the reader. This dependency is reminiscent and possibly modeled on the predicament of the vagabond. Beckett's active dispossession of the question mark differentiates his work sharply from that state of deferral or suspension, or a state of fundamental ambiguity, that other theorists regard as the defining mark of literature. Roland Barthes writes:

It is ambiguity which counts, which concerns us, which bears the historical meaning of an oeuvre which seems peremptorily to reject history. What is this meaning? The very opposite of a meaning, i.e., a question. What do things signify, what does the world signify? All literature is this question, but we must immediately add, for this is what constitutes its specialty, *literature is this question minus its answer*. No literature in the world has ever answered the question it asked, and it is this very suspension which has always constituted it as literature: it is that very fragile language which men set between the violence of the question and the silence of the answer.³⁵

Whereas Beckett defines literature as a rhetorical question minus its rhetoric, Barthes defines literature (its "specialty") as this question minus its answer. Barthes's math sets literature aside as a space of questioning "for its own sake" and as the perpetual deferment of meaning and answering. Instead of meaning, literature proposes only questions (*What do things signify? What does the world signify?*). Not only is literature for Barthes an endless posing of questions; its ambiguity is itself posed or "set" between "the violence of the question and the silence of the answer." Though its language is unable to resolve its ambiguities and too weak to answer itself, literature for Barthes is protected by its place in a structure between violence and silence.

Fragility in this picture acquires a paradoxical functionality: when Barthes speaks of literature's inability to answer, it is depicted as a silence that is guarded (defended, something "kept" by literature) and not a situation of dumb muteness.³⁶ For Barthes, the position and suspension of this fragility recuperates its powerlessness and even its value. He describes the language of literature as "set," much like a diamond or a figure in a glass case. Barthes describes this fragile language as a kind of tender membrane separating question and answer. It is not to be disturbed. Beckett's literary indigence takes a contrary route: it breaks with the aesthetics of suspension

by exercising and *worsening* the fragility of language and pursues a *provisional* state in which it is unable to found itself. Beckett's work is not set either for permanence (as in stone) or to accentuate its value (like a diamond), but strikes a more provisional posture. *Not* to shelter or *not* to suspend its disability means to pursue an art of broken pieces and in a combination that renders the pieces less distinct.³⁷ For Barthes, the subtraction process in literature stops at the irreducible questions it poses.³⁸ Beckett does not stop there and includes asking in the list of activities (among them, answering) literature fails to do.

Begging the Question

That is typical. I know no more questions and they keep on pouring
from my mouth.

—Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*³⁹

The expression “begging the question,” an idiomatic translation of *petitio principii*, refers to the way an argument takes for proven something that it ought to be proving.⁴⁰ A line of reasoning that begs a question therefore assumes possession of what could only be acquired later, namely, through proof. The counterintuitive nature of the begging in this idiom makes the expression pertinent to our understanding of Beckett's work. First, “begging” as it is described here is in no way a loud or imploring gesture of want. In fact, this want is not even uttered. The state of need must be discerned by the listener in the aberrant reasoning. Second, the idiom suggests that the proper response to this begging is not an answer but a question. Ordinarily, begging would seem synonymous with questioning as an asking *for* something. Yet the statement that begs a question asks nothing. Asking for nothing, however, it asks to be asked.

The figure of speech therefore bears this insight into Beckett's work: that an utterance can bear unconscious questions. What Beckett's figure calls “typical” about himself holds true for Beckett's work: that it does not “know” questions and yet questions come forth at each instant. These questions in the text emerge in an encounter with the other, through reading and in the reader, at the place where these questions are refused.

To pose a question not only to Beckett's text but for Beckett's text turns the reader toward what the text does not know about itself and what it cannot ask. Enoch Brater says, “The major dramatic question is not raised by the figures onstage in the language one of them speaks, but is developed

instead by the observer: it is we who must postulate a harmony between what we see and the 'sad tale a last time told.'"⁴¹ Yet making sense out of Beckett's work may not require us, as Brater claims, to "postulate a harmony" out of our experience with it. In fact, the true questions with which we respond to Beckett's text may not be restorative of unity between form and content but may in fact be "begged" by their precise ordering: the readers' questions are a reaction to the formal coherence of Beckett's work in which form and content seem forcibly reconciled. If, as Hans Robert Jauss claims, modernist free indirect discourse compels the reader to make *evaluations* of the narrative data, Beckett's hermetic style invites a wholly different reply.⁴² This is quite different from Brater's suggestion that the reader is to "postulate" something like a formula for the text, estranging the reader from the irrational silence of Beckett's world.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's characters do not like to be asked questions. They are existential challenges and mildly disrupt the discursive status quo on stage. In response to Estragon's objection to the treatment of Lucky, Pozzo shouts: "*(violently)* Don't question me!"⁴³ And yet this objection or deflection of the question results not in its being suppressed but in its being enhanced—acted out. In other words, though Pozzo wants the question of why Lucky does not put down his bags to "go away," it reappears not by being restated but through Estragon's charade: "*(forcibly)* Bags. *(He points at Lucky.)* Why? Always hold. *(He sags, panting.)* Never put down. *(He opens his hands, straightens up with relief.)* Why?"⁴⁴ This question goes to the heart of the power dynamic in the play. Estragon wants to know why the slave never stops working, and why he displays a peculiar attachment to his burden. He resorts to pantomime when faced with the futility of more explicit questioning, making each component of his question visible through gesture.

Questions do not disappear on stage. Going unheard, they emphatically reappear as a performance that grabs the eye of the addressee. Pozzo replies to Estragon's performance, "Ah! Why couldn't you say so before?"⁴⁵ Yet Estragon's need to corporealize the question offers us an inkling into how Beckett's novels submerge their questions past the point of visibility or the silence of pantomime. This moment in *Godot* signals a fundamental bifurcation of questioning between Beckett's novels and his theater. Beckett's stage will increasingly make questions explicit through the performer's body. In *Rough for Radio II* and *Rough for Theater II* (whose titles indicate both a provisional art form—the rough draft—and the roughness of force applied between the characters) the activity of questioning that befalls the reader of Beckett's novels is aggressively staged. The questions at the heart

of *What Where*, “Did you give him the works?” “He didn’t say anything?” “Begged for mercy?” allow the Beckettian vectors of work, need, and physical distress to converge in the scene of interrogation.⁴⁶

We measure the impoverishment of Beckett’s work in its failure to call or to command the reader, yet at the same time without ceasing to invoke the reader. If it calls on the reader, it calls “but ill.” The reader shares Molloy’s difficulty in answering the call of an imperative whose voice is always dissipating and that seems to alert the addressee only to its impotence. How does the impoverished text ask questions? In his Beckett study *L’Oeuvre sans qualités*, Bruno Clément states, “In truth, the Beckettian text is outside questions in the traditional sense: it does not ask any, does not ask any of itself any more than it leaves any out.”⁴⁷ For Clément, Beckett’s work neither poses questions in the traditional sense nor leaves questioning off to the side. Beckett does not utilize the question mark with frequency. His writing shows “how it is” (the title of one of his novels) and our route to his work is through the question “How did it get this way?” *How It Is* as a title, for example, seems to cry out for its formulation as a question (How is it?). As Clément observes, a provocation to question lurks even within Beckett’s titles: *Watt* is recast by the reader as *What?* and *The Unnamable* as *Why?* Even Beckett’s characters seem to deflect questions with a shrug of the shoulders. As the narrator of “Enough” explains, “What do I know of a man’s destiny? I could tell you more about radishes. For them he had a fondness. If I saw one I would name it without hesitation.”⁴⁸ The topic of man’s destiny, the convergence of life and questioning, is dropped in favor of talking about radishes. Nevertheless, the seemingly cohesive statement about naming radishes comes apart as it provokes us to ask: What would a radish be named? Are radishes as numerous as mushrooms, and with as many types and species? Could a radish be given a proper name? Talking about radishes is not, for Beckett, the opposite of raising questions. It is precisely this affirmative gesture of Beckett’s prose that forecloses questions, but in the process saddles the reader with the responsibility for asking them. This injunction to question *is* man’s destiny in the twenty-first century.

And yet the way Beckett’s work closes out questioning is not without interest.⁴⁹ An example of how *Molloy* begs questioning can be seen in the single encounter Molloy describes with his mother. Here he foregrounds how he “got into communication” with her:

The room smelled of ammonia, oh not merely of ammonia, but of ammonia, ammonia. She knew it was me, by my smell. Her shrunken hairy old

face lit up, she was happy to smell me. She jabbered away with a rattle of dentures and most of the time didn't realize what she was saying. Anyone but myself would have been lost in this clattering gabble, which can only have stopped during her brief instants of unconsciousness. In any case I didn't come to listen to her. I got into communication with her by knocking on her skull. One knock meant yes, two no, three I don't know, four money, five goodbye. I was hard put to ram this code into her ruined and frantic understanding, but I did it, in the end. That she should confuse yes, no, I don't know and goodbye, was all the same to me, I confused them myself. But that she should associate the four knocks with anything but money was something to be avoided at all costs. During the period of training therefore, at the same time as I administered the four knocks on her skull, I stuck a bank-note under her nose or in her mouth. In the innocence of my heart! For she seemed to have lost, if not absolutely all notion of mensuration, at least the faculty of counting beyond two. It was too far for her, yes, the distance was too great, from one to four. By the time she came to the fourth knock she imagined she was only at the second, the first two having been erased from her memory as completely as if they had never been felt, though I don't quite see how something never felt can be erased from the memory, and yet it is a common occurrence. She must have thought I was saying no to her all the time, whereas nothing was further from my purpose.⁵⁰

This is Beckett's hermetic world, in which there is not enough air to laugh. Our gasps of disbelief, the painful chuckles under breath, even the way we imitatively hit our palms against our foreheads at the proceedings, constitute attempts to decompress the text. Molloy's description of his communicative laboratory, turning his mother's head into a hybrid Morse code receiver and ATM machine, is disarmingly matter-of-fact. Its unperturbed and unalarmed tone requires us, however, to take up questions (and alarm) on our own time.

The brutal abbreviation of Molloy's semiotic system magnetizes our inquiry. Following the logic of the *petitio principii*, we seek the premises overlooked by Molloy's assertions. Our questions interrupt the business-as-usual mood of the passage: we want to learn the costs and profits of this system of "fundamental sounds." If the smell and taste of money anchors its signification to four knocks, by what sensory hinge did Molloy connect "yes" to one knock or "I don't know" to three? Inherited wisdom tells us that money does not smell (*pecuniam non olet*): Does it smell enough to establish a syntax? Is its smell more pungent than the double-knock

emphasis of Molloy's claim that her room smelled not only of ammonia but "ammonia, ammonia"?

The mother's forgetfulness becomes the agency for our questioning, a source for questions that the passage is unable to articulate. This forgetfulness calls our attention to the learning scenario described by the narrator. Molloy claims he was "hard put to ram this code into her ruined and frantic understanding, but I did it, in the end." But what end is there to forgetting? By what signal or measure did he estimate that his mother understood this code? Is the institutor of the code merely an institutor of violence? How are we to discriminate between bludgeoning the other and purveying a message to her? Amnesia challenges the Pavlovian principle that repetition produces learning and memory. Amnesia provides the frame for the questions with which we disturb the *fait accompli* of the communicative transaction.

The questions elicited by Beckett's scenario are also literary. To what extent is Beckett returning here to the episode in Marcel Proust's *Nom de Pays: Le Pays*? In this section of *La Recherche*, the narrator Marcel cannot fall asleep in his strange new setting of Balbec. Marcel communicates with his grandmother, who is in the adjoining room, by knocking on the wall between them, signaling his distress in the moments he needs warm milk. Years later he is overwhelmed with an involuntary memory of these transmissions when he sees this wall: the wall, the former obstacle of contact, through time becomes an instrument that still registers and emits those percussive signals between him and his grandmother. In *Molloy*, Beckett sees no need to have a wall. Beckett works with reduced means and the knocking happens directly on the skull. Yet the closed circuit of Molloy's communication invites us to ask about the supposed directness of this communication. Time for Beckett does not arrive, through memory, with the redemptive force it displays in Proust. Forgoing memory, Beckett's character tries to communicate directly with forgetfulness.

Beckett precipitates our questions most intensively around that vault of the unsaid, the cliché. In the passage cited above, "She was happy to smell me" varies only slightly from "She was happy to see me," and constitutes the new idiom for greeting in Beckett's sensory-deprived universe. Another cliché that calls upon our scrutiny occurs in *Malone Dies*. Very open minded, the narrator enumerates his efforts to make friends with a broad array of peoples, including the institutionalized:

My relations with Jackson were of short duration. I could have put up with him as a friend, but unfortunately he found me disgusting, as did Johnson, Wilson, Nicholson and Watson, all whore-sons. I then tried, for a

space, to lay hold of a kindred spirit among the inferior races, red, yellow, chocolate, and so on. And if the plague-stricken had been less difficult of access I would have intruded upon them too, ogling, sidling, leering, ineffing and conating, my heart palpitating. With the insane too I failed, by a hair's breadth.⁵¹

In solitude, making a mental list of friends may help us affirm some connection to the world. Malone undertakes a more Beckettian task: a list of failed friendships. He seems to make his attempts according to various taxonomical systems. He offers us, for example, his failure to befriend people with the family name ending in *-son*. The genre of his recollections more closely resembles a phonebook rather than a diary. He itemizes the races using two colors and a flavor. The verbs by which Malone describes his befriending gestures remain intransitive and prepositionless. He sidles but not up next to anyone, ogles without ogling someone. The words he enumerates display the disengagement of a thesaurus entry. He ineffs about how he ineffs, breathing and leaving everything unspoken around his friend-target. With some surprise then we find at the end of this list a measurement, an estimate of how far Malone was from potential friendship. He says he failed with the insane "by a hair's breadth." What would be the signs of successful, rather than failed, friendship with the insane? On what side of the ledger would we put their smiles, or their laughter at our jokes? Does this "hair's breadth" refer to an institutional isolation, the width of a wall that makes the insane "difficult of access"?

In most circumstances we accept an idiom without further inquiry, for we know what it means without having to interrogate its form. Yet after the Linnean systematicity of the passage, we set about measuring and decomposing this expression in order to see how we can situate Malone's effort at relationship. We have here the very opposite of an appropriative discourse, or literature that seizes everyday figures of speech in order to renovate or claim their meaning. Beckett's matter-of-fact presentation sentences what is unsaid in the cliché to appear. Our questions are what get the cliché to confess.

Syntax of Weakness

"Someday somebody will find an adequate form, a syntax of weakness," says Beckett in an interview with Lawrence Harvey.⁵² This utterance is surprisingly optimistic for Beckett because weak syntax implies a form and

method for expressing the sine qua non of Beckett's literary reality: movement toward a minimum that verges between the adequate and inadequate (as in the phrase "adequate food and shelter").⁵³ Beckett's own search for this form and syntax becomes apparent in the way he contrasts his work with James Joyce. He describes Joyce's project as seeking an utmost in signifying potential: "[Joyce] was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn't a syllable that isn't superfluous. . . . The more Joyce knew, the more he could."⁵⁴ Beckett is not interested in clarifying any details (what Joyce knew, what Joyce's work could do). Beckett opposes the direction of Joyce's *more*, the addition of knowledge and the subsequent amplification of literary capacity. By contrast Beckett observes, "I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. . . . I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er [somebody who cannot]."⁵⁵ Beckett follows Joyce in the sense that neither is interested in literary realism where expression provides "adequate reference" in forging an inherent and intuitive resemblance between literature and the world.

Throughout his career Beckett experiments with impoverished and broken syntax. *How It Is* is perhaps the best example of this. The story features a character on his way to Pim, who crawls face down in the mud; his only possessions are a sack of tinned food and a can opener.⁵⁶ Like the narrator in *The Unnamable*, the subject exists in an acoustic whirlwind of voices: he only says, into the mud, what he hears. The novel begins:

how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I
say it as I hear it

voice once without quaqu on all sides then in me when the panting stops
tell me again finish telling me invocation

past moments old dreams back again or fresh like those that pass or things
things always and memories I say them as I hear them murmur them in
the mud

in me that were without when the panting stops scraps of an ancient voice
in me not mine⁵⁷

Beckett's weakened syntax mirrors the weakened condition of his character. As Christopher Ricks observes, "It is not that such syntax is weak; rather,

that it is a 'syntax of weakness,' pressing on, unable to relinquish its perseverance and to arrive at severance."⁵⁸ Ricks suggests that the syntax cannot even lay claim to weakness, but emerges from the component incapacities to either continue or stop. The story can be discerned from its syntax. As the removal of grammar leaves words stranded, the character is likewise stranded. Pim is unreachable without a grammar. And without punctuation or grammar to structure the relation between language and experience, their mutual relationship becomes forlorn. How are we as readers to refer to these words scattered across the page? Are they sentences or paragraphs? Are they citations dictated to the narrator by a voice he hears?⁵⁹ The words of the text are not domesticated by the sentence that conventionally organizes words into meaningful units (the hierarchy of subject versus object or the main versus subordinate clauses). Consequently, we look at the words before we are able to arrange them into a pattern of meaning. We see the page without being cued as to how to construe its organization. *How It Is* does not look like a novel. The words are arrayed like separate organisms on a microscopic slide, or like the marks in a cutting board.

Beckett's impoverished and broken syntax makes us, as readers, into beggars. The nonrelation between terms on the page forces our eye to take a vagrant itinerant path rather than obeying a syntactic linearity. A period delineates the literary utterance. In the absence of this delineation our eye moves from left to right and from right to left, as if to plumb the orientation each phrase has toward its neighbor. The process is repeated on the morphological level. Here we do not move from word to word as if crossing a river. In place of this transversal *How It Is* gives us those words as if they had been haphazardly dropped into a lake, offering no guidance. We are forced to assess each word by the ripple of water over its form, or by its submersion.

The broken and impoverished syntax in *How It Is* is beyond appeal to Beckett as author because the novel reads as a work of amanuensis rather than authorship. Our reading process acknowledges the fact of each word's inscription before its relational status: as a place in relation to a group of words. Beckett detaches the formal clarity of the statements from their revelatory or communicative function. Philosopher Stanley Cavell characterizes Beckett's writing as having a "hidden literality." By "hidden," however, he refers to the way in which it is the reader who hides what is exposed in Beckett's prose. Cavell locates the language that Beckett has discovered or invented not in its use in dialogue but rather "in its grammar, its particular way of making sense, especially the quality it has of what I will call *hidden literality*. The words strew obscurities across our path and

seem willfully to thwart comprehension; and then time after time we discover that their meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare—totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view.”⁶⁰ “Totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view” describes the condition of Beckett’s vagabonds both on stage and in his novels (and in our world). Cavell’s comment brings to mind Molloy’s description of his nightly efforts at finding a place to sleep. He calls this “Hiding, but not provocatively.”⁶¹ Like the vagrant Molloy, Beckett’s text can hide only in the open. The prose of *How It Is* lives up to its title: it shows us a state of being *thus*. The secret of Beckett’s text is not something it willfully keeps but the unremitting problem it poses for us. The provocation of literature that claims an inner lair or fictional reserve (how the court system operates in Kafka’s novels, for example) is to be contrasted with Beckett’s “invocation,” this voice that dictates the novel.

Because the syntax is so broken and scant we as readers have to supply syntactical construction in order to make any sense of the text. Taking the second group of words from *How It Is* as an example: “voice once without quaqu on all sides then in me when the panting stops tell me again finish telling me invocation.” Eager to condense the words into larger but more comprehensible units we might join “without” to “quaqu,” creating the impression that this voice is “without quaqu” or without nonsense.⁶² Yet we have to annul this conclusion because this quaqu nonsense *is* the voice. “Without” designates the locus of the voice.

The syntax we devise for the words we read on Beckett’s page has a provisional quality. The text invites us to make errors and then forces us to rescan them. We read in a rocking motion rather than in a strictly forward or prospective one. This is intimately connected to the process of the text itself. What the narrator says is only what he hears. Conventional syntax runs aground on the dispossession of the voice, of language unattached to grammatical subjects. How would the rules of grammar arbitrate this situation in which everything is a citation? The phrase “tell me again finish telling me invocation” suggests, though we cannot be sure, that the voice tells the speaker its invocation. In Beckett’s scenario, the speaker does not invoke the voice as he might the wisdom of the ancients (though he calls it an “ancient voice”). Beckett’s novel turns this inside out: the voice invokes, literally lodges its voice inside the speaker. Bersani and Dutoit describe the situation in Beckett’s text: “He [the narrator] may be just that: not a person with a history, but merely a kind of stopping point for voices, an intersection of extortionary speech acts, a collecting depot for all the words whose source of transmission remains uncertain.”⁶³ The figures offered by Bersani and Dutoit seem to cancel the poverty of Beckett’s work. Instead of becom-

ing a *stopping point* for voices, Beckett's personae transmit and disperse the voices they hear; instead of becoming a *collecting depot* for words, the narrator becomes an *aquilex*, a semi-open and unclenched hand through whom language flows. Beckett's weakened syntax presents a record or the invoice of this tale charting the dispossession of voice.

Abandonment

Beckett's text is accessible to his reader through awareness of strategies of textual abandonment. If the typical story of an abandonment begins with presence or ownership and leads through misadventure to abandonment or loss, Beckett is its inversion. For Beckett abandonment is a premise rather than an outcome. Georges Bataille acknowledges this when he writes that a line from Dante's *Inferno*, "Lasciate ogni speranza voi qu'entrate,"⁶⁴ "could well be the epigraph for this absolutely striking book [*Molloy*], whose exclamation, uninterrupted by paragraphs, explores with such unflinching irony the extreme possibilities of indifference and misery."⁶⁵ Bataille suggests that shedding hope may be a precondition for reading Beckett's work, an imperative we must endlessly undertake. Abandonment in Beckett occurs at the very beginning of the story rather than at its end (where it might have functioned as a gesture of being done with it all).⁶⁶ His characters enter the stage, already abandoned, and the abandonment continues as the story unfolds. The economy of abandonment enacts chance and dispossession. The alternative, the more conventional story of being abandoned, is for Beckett a farce. He calls this the "farce of giving and receiving."

Beckett's career, in other words, goes beyond a limited view of abandonment defined as leaving something unfinished or unconcluded. Abandonment is also "to" something: abandonment to the elements, to an uncertain future, to chance, the orphaning of Oedipus rather than just nailing him to a side of the cliff. These measures, which I argue make Beckett's view of abandonment close to impoverished dereliction, commence long after the intention to begin has died ("I don't know when I died") and finish only when the formula for stopping has been given up.⁶⁷

This nonlimited view of abandonment becomes clearer if we consider Beckett's pivotal short story, "From an Abandoned Work." The narrator of the story seems pressed into finishing some arbitrary tale involving, in no particular order, his mother seen waving to him from a window, a white horse, his aimless wandering through thickets, his sore throat, and a man, Balfe, who terrified him as a youngster ("Now he is dead and I resemble

him").⁶⁸ Cohn's description of the incidents as "unconcatenated" suggests how the story is in fact a collection of contained rather than far-reaching failures.⁶⁹ The travails of the hero are productive of one thing: conclusiveness. By being able to push on without being taxed, the narrator leaves his condition of ever-trying intact, as if it just had not hit upon the right means, no matter how irrational, to express itself: "There was a time I tried to get relief by beating my head against something, but I gave it up."⁷⁰

S. E. Gontarski uses the term "abandonment" to describe Beckett's textual history rather than an operative principle to his work: "Abandoned in 1966, 'Le Dépeupleur' was also unabandoned, 'completed' in 1970, and translated as *The Lost Ones* in 1971."⁷¹ Though Gontarski's quotation marks around "completed" hint that even the published work both appeared and was abandoned, he uses the term "abandoned" as little more than a synonym for "unpublished." Abandoned works end up in the Beckett archive, whereas unabandoned ones end up on the shelf. Gontarski's perspective overlooks the paradoxically generative function of abandonment in Beckett's writing. The character Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* may be so named because his thinking, a hymn to labors left unfinished by Testew, Cunard, and others, invites chance. On the surface, Gontarski seems to have it right: if Beckett abandons his work, does this not mean that he stops writing it? The abandonment of literature, the abandonment of something fictional, allows abandonment to seep into the process of its creation. It is not about abandoning something once and for all, but about persistently giving something up, giving it up to an unknown future.

Many of the themes from Beckett's oeuvre make an appearance in "From an Abandoned Work," but only in congealed and almost dead form. The murmuring that envelops Molloy, for example, is reduced to a muttering, "the sound of my voice all day long muttering the same old things I don't listen to, not even mine it was at the end of the day, like a marmoset sitting on my shoulder with its bushy tail, keeping me company."⁷² Agonizingly ubiquitous in *Molloy*, the disembodied voice here assumes the same friendly proximity as a captain's parrot, an isolated point of enunciation. Beckett allows the speaker some distant claim of ownership over this voice: "only a voice dreaming and droning all around, that is something, the voice that once was in your mouth."⁷³ In similar fashion, the ending of *The Unnamable* ("you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on") atrophies here into a question, an option: "But what's the sense of going on with all this, there is none."⁷⁴ The Unnamable never inquires about the meaning or sense of his *going on*, as his speech is wrapped up in this impossibility and necessity of speaking. The coercive state of dereliction in the novel is absent in

the short story. Going on *with* suggests an accompaniment and instrument for going on: if he does not go on with this story, the narrator implies, he can go on with something else. The short story appends such prepositions and adverbs to going on in order to cushion its horror. Elsewhere the narrator says that questions come to him when he walks: "How shall I go on another day? and then, How did I ever go on another day?"⁷⁵ This question separates a capacity to go on from his understanding. The narrator articulates it as a daily struggle, like a man living from paycheck to paycheck. It is a struggle by sunlight.

At the conclusion of the story the narrator says he just went on, "my body doing its best without me."⁷⁶ The separation of body and self is so neat that the body functions fine without him. The isolation of the *cogito* resolves itself. Yet there is no feeling here about the abandonment of one by the other, or of both. It must be the only instance in all of Beckett in which the best is achieved, rather than the worst, or the worse.

Beckett's abandonment of reference is frequently contrasted to the model of the committed artwork as defined by Sartre. In his essay "Commitment," Adorno groups Kafka's work with Beckett's:

The minimal promise of happiness [Beckett's works] contain, which refuses to be traded for comfort, cannot be had for a price less than total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness. Here every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art. . . . This paradox, which might be charged with sophistry, can be supported without much philosophy by the simplest experience: Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays, or the truly monstrous novel *The Unnameable*, have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about.⁷⁷

In Adorno's dialectical understanding, the autonomous work achieves an effect that is the project of its opposite, the committed work. According to this claim, Beckett's work acquires political resonance not through engaged writing but through the reader's "simple experience" of this text that has "abandoned every commitment to the world." Adorno accurately remarks that Beckett does not enter easily into philosophical elaboration and that the truth of Beckett's work is not measured by its stated project (about which Beckett was notoriously silent) but by our experience of his work. At the same time, the simplicity of Beckett's work is not one that strikes the reader as a completed simplicity. And in avoiding all precon-

ceived vehicles of sense, Beckett's text assigns a challenging task of understanding to the reader.⁷⁸ We can qualify Adorno's argument that Beckett's writing as "autonomous" in light of the impoverishment that characterizes Beckett's writing. In the above passage Adorno insists on abandonment as the constructive principle of Beckett's work. Adorno understands this more as a gesture of abandonment, however, and less as a condition, more as an operation that is performed (once and for all) than as a task. He says, in short, that Beckett has abandoned "every commitment to the world" in order to "satisfy the ideal of the committed work." Yet Beckett's work clearly raises as a question whether abandonment can be understood dialectically, whether it is—in the derelict existence of his characters, for example—something that can be substituted for or exchanged for its opposite (the hallmark of dialectical thinking). Adorno inscribes the gesture of abandonment within an economy of means: in saying that abandonment serves a project (in fact, the *opposite* project), Adorno suggests that abandonment is something that happens purposefully. But is it possible to ascertain the precise destination and outcome of what is abandoned? This recuperation is something that Beckett's work systematically forecloses as part of its pursuit of abandonment. In *Endgame* this is apparent in a succinct exchange:

CLOV. Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM. Mine was always that.⁷⁹

The words of redemption persist, as in this exchange between Hamm and Clov, but they are used in a context in which they are useless. Hamm's response suggests the way life has and has not always been displaced by the real life, the life to come. Even where the transcendence—the hereafter—is asserted, it does not attain credibility and flusters the reader by turning everyday life into a life still to happen, a life stricken by a great pause, a life in which nothing happens. Beckett draws us in through these words that seem forlorn of meaning. He draws us into a discussion that takes place not only between helpless characters but through the helpless condition of language itself. It asks something impossible of us, namely, to conceive our present life as a life to come, and to conceive this *present* life within the terms of a transcendence that has been *lost*. In this typical Beckettian exchange, the language is preeminently closed, assertive and pithy. At the same time it relies on and needs the reader to complete its sense (a completion it constantly reminds us is impossible). In this exchange between Hamm and Clov, we are asked implicitly to assist

the words toward a meaning, a meaning those words deny. Beckett's text does not "cry out" for help: the state of need in his language is balanced by that language's indifference to the interpreter. Therefore, helpless writing is in a strange dependency on the reader, since it is helpless to say *how* it is that it requires our assistance. But fundamentally, Beckett's writings do not, as Adorno claims, simply abjure commitment to the world. Much of Beckett's writing hobbles toward a state of disability that it cannot name, a state that language in fact annuls: "Unable, unable, it's easy to talk about being unable, whereas in reality nothing is more difficult."⁸⁰ The opposite of talk, chatter, and discourse, the reality of being unable rips open Beckett's fiction. In the process, Beckett's work disables our normal questioning powers: it makes us sensitive to the way in which this absence of capacity exceeds our temptations to coerce and designate it.

Beckett's literature of need, its tireless effort at being without, is therefore not graspable as an "autonomous" entity that has sworn off every reference to the world. Quite the opposite is true, as its inabilities insert it into a dependent relation on the world. Franz Kafka, whose writing Adorno compares to Beckett's in the above passage, describes just such neediness as the defining characteristic of writing: "Writing's lack of independence from the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, does not dwell in itself, is frivolity and despair."⁸¹ The situations that Kafka depicts as being situations of dependency—the maid tending the fire, the cat by the fire, the man by the stove—are not helpless situations in the extreme and singular way that writing is helpless. These needs are met functionally, the way a cold man is dependent on the fire for warmth. By contrast, writing is without tools. Nothing can help writing, and because it does not follow a law of the "self" or subject, it cannot help itself. The absence or need implicated by writing is intolerable. When Kafka discerns the vagrancy of literature in claiming that writing "does not dwell in itself," he means this lack that is writing's is not the possession of writing, something it actively showcases and that we can designate as a "lack." Writing cannot propose its own house rules by which to represent and dispense with its need: it goes elsewhere.⁸² As if to prolong or accentuate its helpless condition, writing ends up being dependent for Kafka on relations that seem to leave it out: on the cat, the maid, and the "poor old human being." Writing has no choice but to forfeit its security of self-enclosure.

Hypothetical Imperatives

In his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant contrasts the “categorical imperative,” the imperative declaring an action to be of itself objectively necessary without reference to any purpose or end, with the “hypothetical imperative,” which prescribes an action but only as a condition of a possible goal.⁸³ For Kant, in other words, the categorical imperative involves a good in and of itself. The hypothetical imperative, by contrast, is a good with a purpose—as a means to something. The categorical imperative for Kant is the moral necessity and thus absolute and global. The hypothetical imperative is normative and lacks the absolute. Kant’s thinking is structured by this dyad, whereby the morally categorical or necessary is opposed to the morally hypothetical or normative.

For Beckett, morality and rules of conduct cannot be anything other than an impoverished form of the normative. Beckett therefore eliminates the categorical first half of the Kantian dyad. Unhinged from moral necessity, Molloy’s hypothetical imperative assumes the urgency, the imperative necessity Kant reserves for the categorical. By moving the imperative mood to the side of the hypothetical, Beckett simultaneously impoverishes it. Thus a critique of Kant’s categorical can be glimpsed: if Beckett’s hypothetical imperative indeed retains the force of the categorical, then it impoverishes grammar and even perhaps the Kantian system of moral distinction. Furthermore, Beckett’s hypothetical imperative is an imperative mood made poorer even than Kant’s normative nonnecessity. It is actually hypothetical—an imperative estranged from any premise, any goal. Kant’s figures are always endowed with necessary resources for thought, philosophical and aesthetic contemplation,⁸⁴ but Beckett’s characters lack the mind, status, and full stomach to be anything other than hobos and desperados.

In Beckett’s world of impoverished means, the imperative is less a grammatical mood than a loose signifier, liberated from obligation to meaning and flapping in the wind. In the novel *Molloy* the character claims to detect in a murmur, his only companion, something other than white noise: “In its framing I thought I heard something new. For after the usual blarney there followed this solemn warning, Perhaps it is already too late. It was in Latin, *nimis sero*, I think that’s Latin. Charming things, hypothetical imperatives.”⁸⁵ For Molloy, interpretation of the murmur is vital and faithlessness to it unthinkable. He receives the hypothetical imperative of the murmur like a gong signaling a lost thing, a marking of the passage of time more than a command. The hypothesis has swallowed the imperative,

yet without producing a merely undecidable world of ambiguities, a world in which contraries flourish. Shorn from its end, the hypothesis becomes strangely *categorical*. In the totality of its supposition, the hypothetical imperative becomes a parody of an activity done for its own sake.

Theodor Adorno sums up the rationale of Beckett's world in writing that "the senselessness of an action becomes the reason for doing it."⁸⁶ Molloy refers later to his "so-called imperatives."⁸⁷ Between the French *soi-disant* and the "so-called" lies the difference between the imperative's self-saying authority (its diction intrinsic to its event) and its so-called (by Molloy, via Kant) or supposed or rumored status. Molloy experiences ongoing uncertainty about what the imperative says, whom it addresses and in what language, and about whether an imperative has been enunciated at all. This imperative follows an irrational or kettle logic.⁸⁸ Molloy notes that only a slight shift separates what he hears from the usual "blarney" or prattle of the murmur: he is addressed by the sudden "framing" of the murmur, which marks Molloy as the addressee without providing any content to the frame. The murmur deposits only a fragment of sense, an urgent but enigmatic marker of time: *nimis sero*.⁸⁹ Molloy can translate the Latin for us but cannot offer a reference for the imperative: late for what? The demanding nature of this imperative is that the reference of the imperative has been cut off, so that instead of being late for something, Molloy is late, period.

Address without reference is the subject of endless experimentation in Beckett's work. Beckett is interested in the hypothetical demand because the impoverished artwork communicates to the reader through need. The artwork may be needy because it can in fact only make hypothetical demands: the inability of literature to enact something or to authoritatively enter the practical world of action is the source of its vagrancy and poverty. Beckett's work to this end reorients the conventional separation of performative speech acts from constative or descriptive ones.⁹⁰ Throughout his late novella *Worstward Ho*, Beckett employs the imperative "say":

It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Or better worse remains. Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain. Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand. Somehow up. Somehow stand. Remains of mind where none for the sake of pain. Here of bones. Other examples if needs must. Of pain. Relief from. Change of.

All of old. Nothing else ever. But never so failed. Worse failed. With care never worse failed.⁹¹

The text commands us to resuppose these elements, to say bones, say ground, say mind, to say everything in short that might be supposed of a character who stands. The imperative “say” is hypothetical because it truly asks us to suppose something where there are literally no grounds for supposing it. The imperative transpires in the face of its impossibility. On the one hand, “say” enlists us to mouth the words in succession, the way the lips of readers sometimes mimic what the eyes see. On the other hand, the verb entails a wholly provisional demand, active only within the supplementary space of the example (as encountered in such phrases as “say you are walking down the street and . . .”).⁹²

The hypothetical imperative prolongs the poverty discerned by the text in its opening sentence. Disavowing that anything can be supposed or taken for granted, or *as* granted, around it, the text demands us to suppose these things. The text asks us—tentatively, yet imperatively—to concede something to the representation. In a way our interest in the text is sustained by a sequence of charitable gestures sustaining a sentence that only apparently stands on its own. This “say”—directed at the reader as well as at the author—asks that something be given or granted that the text does not possess. The reader’s charity is implored by a double movement in Beckett’s text, a back-and-forth movement that renders the feeling that the text is unable to get started, cannot stand or push off from any sure ground. At the same time there is the feeling of there being only premise, an abyss of presuppositions. Presupposing is an endless task, not because anything can be presupposed but because nothing can be presupposed. Nothing is taken for granted in the simplest of predicates: it must be shown to be supposed and then, once this is withdrawn, must be conceded by the imagination of the reader.

Predication becomes a technocratic activity. Though the narrators of *The Unnamable* and *How It Is* both ascribe their words to a situation of dictation, *Worstward* Ho assumes the cadence of an office memo: “Other examples if needs must. Of pain. Relief from. Change of.” Abbreviation is not just the method of this text but its very subject. The imperatives to rescind, to undo, to correct, are executive decisions on the text itself. Every predication seems submitted to official review in order to excise all excess. Though it aspires to the brevity of an office memo, Beckett’s text is not merely a formal exercise. Such strange phrases as “Old and yet old” barely seem to inch forward. Yet the phrase suggests that there is a strange residue to even

the term “old,” as if the old had changed in the moment of its assertion, and this quality had to be reasserted. Did we forget that this image of “it stands” was “an image of old” as soon as it was described as such? This is the memorial function of this memo. What makes a “picture of old,” an “old picture,” this cliché of a thing standing, is our forgetting how it was made. And Beckett’s text scrupulously labors through the discrete components of this picture (the pain, the bones, the mind) as if they were a set of weary joints that needed to be aligned just for the first sentence to become possible. The very syntax of the passage is gerontological.

Beckett once served as James Joyce’s amanuensis, taking dictation as Joyce composed *Finnegan’s Wake*. In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellman recounts the well-known but possibly fictitious moment during this dictation in which there is a knock at the door that goes unheard by Beckett. When Joyce says, “Come in,” Beckett dutifully notes it down as part of the text. Beckett recollects the moment for Ellman: “Joyce thought for a moment, then said, ‘Let it stand.’”⁹³ Joyce says “*Stet.*” *Worstward Ho*’s disaggregation of “it stands” into its missing components serves both as a reply to and an undoing of Joyce’s fiat, his royal permissiveness to let the error stand. Joyce’s nod to the error signals the mythic inclusiveness of the Joycean text that absorbs the errors of its own transcription, the accidents of the world. Joyce proclaims “come in” to accident and absorbs it into his text.

By contrast, Beckett’s text presents us with a different source of error and a different readerly relation to it. *Worstward Ho* invites us not to “come in” but to knock again on language in order to disperse and excise its excesses. Subjecting “it stands” to a withdrawal of all support, Beckett’s prose cuts back and forth between the poverty of the predication and the provision of what it needs. The supposition “say” concedes something to the reader and to the author himself, something that is necessary so as to go on. It is in this sense that I call the supposition a provisional form: the supposition, in the absence of a ground, does not manufacture a ground as much as it temporarily offers us one. It is the offering of a state of crisis, and to one in a state of crisis. Colloquially, “provisions” denote supplies meant to help endure a temporary crisis: etymologically, these are resources that look toward a future after the crisis and toward a time of permanence. In Beckett the provisional never ends. Even the provisional gestures are helpless: each provisional supposition in the passage I have been discussing seems exposed to a need for further supposition and further assistance. A state of temporariness has become final in Beckett’s prose, as if it had no future to look forward to. Beckett’s work everywhere testifies to a

condition very different from Baudelaire's description of the modern artist as one who distills the eternal from the ephemeral: "Il s'agit de dégager de la mode ce qu'elle peut contenir de poétique dans l'historique, de tirer l'éternel du transitoire."⁹⁴ Instead of merging opposites dialectically so that the one (the eternal) appears in the guise of the other (the ephemeral), Beckett's provisional mode seems without alternative and without opposition, and yet at the same time threatened.

The Provisional

Beckett's work can be characterized by its provisionality, its temporality of need. The microscopic adjustments and incisions performed on words such as "worse" or "less" (resembling the minutes of an office meeting) suggest the meticulousness of the process by which Beckett writes worstward (or by which he wrote *Worstward Ho*). Its economy (both in the sense of its minimalism and in the transactions it enters into with the reader) is not *laissez-faire*. Returning to the passage quoted above from *Worstward Ho*: "It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand."⁹⁵

In Beckett's difficult prose, the reader lands with initial relief on the predication "It stands," one of only a handful of complete sentences in the entire book. The sense of relief is quickly dispelled since it becomes clear that this is provisional. Beckett, whose stage direction in a play discussed earlier prompts "no verticals," feels that even this brief "it stands" should not in fact be allowed to stand. It says too much. "It stands" implicates an entire anthropological and semiotic history: the two-word statement suggests something standing as well as something to stand on, a ground for the figure. "It stands" reflects the relation of figure to ground in its most architectural moment: it holds a position and can become the basis of the narrative of assertions, even if that position is of an abstract/formal nature (as in the phrase "it stands to reason"). This passage proceeds neither to empty out nor fill in the first sentence, but rather sets "it stands" adrift and turns it into a shipwreck.

The entire passage exposes the provisionality of the first assertion. The text proceeds to deny the existence of everything connoted in the statement and all the suppositions that seem necessary to it. The question "What?" following the first sentence of the quotation indicates a sense of surprise

internal to the text, as it constitutes not an accommodating question, as in “*What stands?*” but rather “*What do you mean, ‘it stands?’*” The text itself therefore seems shocked that things were progressing or were being built up so rapidly. It is intent on reminding us of the void that its own utterance cannot presume to dispel. There is a total absence of what is supposed to be in the predication “*it stands,*” and against this absence of what it asserts.

Beckett subjects “*it stands*” to such thorough examination because the task of failure seizes upon any error (and for Beckett, all saying is mis-saying). The text’s flaws, its lacks, its absence of bones, ground, etc., its needfulness, are the moments at which we are addressed by the text. Simultaneously transcribing, dictating, and recording, the text employs the “*narrow writing*” etymologically denoted by the term “*stenography.*” *Worstward Ho* narrows and reduces the space between such antinomial terms as the worst and the best, the less and the more. In bringing the *mere* nearer to the *most* in the goal of the meremost minimum, Beckett forces us to redraw the graphs of value and quantity around new axes.

What lies behind Beckett’s aesthetic interest in the provisional? Written in 1946 while he was a volunteer for the Irish Red Cross hospital in France, Beckett’s radio broadcast “*The Capital of the Ruins*” provides insight into the way we are addressed by the hypothetical imperatives of *Worstward Ho*.⁹⁶ In this piece, Beckett writes about the hospital in Saint Lô, a city “*bombed out of existence in one night.*” Unexploded bombs continued to go off after the conclusion of the war and the hospital, which was no more than a group of ramshackle huts, nursed the military and civilian wounded from both sides. In saying that the hospital would need to be in service for years after the end of the war, and that its function could not be a temporary measure, Beckett writes these striking words: “*‘Provisional’ is not the term it was, in this universe become provisional.*”⁹⁷

The provisional therefore does not become “*universal*” for Beckett the way Charles Baudelaire speaks of the ephemeral being substituted for the eternal. For Beckett, the meaning of “*provisional*” is unrecoverable now that it is has ironically become the condition of the universe itself. The provisional can no longer be grasped dialectically, in contrast to the permanent or the necessary, because it has become our condition and our misery. The antonym of provisional has died. Man’s attempt at technological mastery over the world has ushered in a state of his total helplessness and his perpetual hospitalization. The observation here exacerbates the joke encountered frequently in Beckett’s work in which a pair of haphazardly patched pants is compared to the world.⁹⁸ It is against the backdrop of the bottomless need of the war’s victims at the clinic that we need to understand the

utterly provisional form of Beckett's literature. Beckett takes the urgency and frailty overheard in the word "provisional" when applied to governments or hospitals and renders it the status quo of his work. We should not be misled by the etymology of provisional that suggests that such a work might look to the future, to recovery. In Beckett's work, there is no future for the provisional to look forward to. His work seeks out—with a poor memory—what is irreparable in the present, caught not between the provisional and the permanent but between the provisional and the obsolescent.

Beckett's provisional retains something of a memory—not the possession of the man with a memory capable of resentment, but a memory nevertheless. Beckett's dialogue with Georges Duthuit, the editor-in-chief of the magazine *transition* in which Beckett publishes several translations, took place in 1949. It is strongly informed not only by the aesthetic debates raging in the circles of *transition*, but by Beckett's experience as a hospital volunteer in 1945. Through his discussion of the artwork with Duthuit, the memory of his radio report runs softly but pronouncedly. The paradoxical title of Beckett's address, "The Capital of the Ruins," elevates the provisional and proposes a formal center to disaster, the highest ruin of the ruins. It reminds us that the "insuperable indigence" he speaks of elsewhere in his dialogue with Duthuit is perhaps best understood as another form of the provisional. In this radio address, Beckett sums up what passes in the charitable moment between volunteers (the "we") and sufferers (the "they"): "What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none, nor the unregarding munificence of the French Ministry of Reconstruction, but the occasional glimpse obtained, by us in them and, who knows, by them in us (for they are an imaginative people), of that smile at the human conditions as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of Burroughes and Welcome,—the smile deriding, among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health."⁹⁹ The condition of the hospital is not what Beckett finds enduring. It is the smile deriding everything eternal and even that which mocks the eternal. The last line in the citation above is reminiscent of his comment to Duthuit on how the impoverished artwork is "too proud for the farce of giving and receiving."

Beckett ultimately discovers the provisionality of the place and function of art in a temporary hospital set up in a landscape of desolation following the war. At first glance both Beckett's art and the smile he glimpses belong to a system of meaning and associations that he is in fact critiquing. Though some critics read the radio address as an indication that Beckett believed charity to "be our salvation as we await Godot," the above passage shows

that Beckett is *not* saying that this smile is the signpost of eternal humanity or the expression of an understanding.¹⁰⁰ To a certain extent our reading of this radio address (and through it, of his conversations about art) needs to retain the nonintegrated remainder that “humanist” readings of the address (as of his work) would brush over. What is alarming about Beckett’s report from Saint Lô is the way the smile seems to have a strange inaccessibility and can neither be “wiped off” nor intensified into laughter. Beckett says this smile is not widened by charity nor reduced by suffering. In the context of suffering Beckett finds the death’s rictus, the smile of the skull, on the face of the living. There is an obtuse feeling of stasis in this smile since it is out of order, outside exchange, and derides among other things the “having and not having, sickness and health.” This smile is therefore not a reaction to circumstances, suggesting neither relief nor thanks, and is paradoxically both immune and helpless. Outside the particularities of historical circumstance, it merits that name given to the slight lift at the corners of the mouth on ancient Greek statuary: the archaic smile. This smile does not end. For all of its momentum toward the worst and its impulse to amputation, Beckett’s work is in fact exclusively dedicated to such negligible and irreducible expressions. Beckett does not look for a particular expression in the face of the suffering or the poor (there is no face in his radio address) but rather for what is inaccessible, the indelible residue, in the face of catastrophe. Beckett pluralizes the expression “human condition” (words not native to the Beckett lexicon) as if to suggest the loss of a common condition following this catastrophe. At the same time, this impoverished smile is on the faces of both doctors and patients. As a novelist and as a reporter, Beckett was attuned to that which could not be imparted, that impassive and truly helpless thing on the face of helper and helped alike.

Worsening

In his last work, *Worstward Ho*, Beckett devises a final strategy of textual indigence. Despite the almost total absence of verbs in the text, *Worstward Ho* assiduously grinds out a figural and lexicographical reduction. From three figures called *shades*: a kneeling woman, an old man and a child, and a skull, the text systematically withdraws all recognizable and distinctive features. The kneeling woman undergoes this process first:

First one. First try fail better one. Something there badly not wrong. Not that as it is it is not bad. The no face bad. The no hands bad. The no—.

Enough. A pox on bad. Mere bad. Way for worse. Pending worse still. First worse, Mere worse. Pending worse still. Add a—. Add? Never. Bow it down. Be it bowed down. Deep down. Head in hat gone. More back gone. Greatcoat cut off higher. Nothing from pelvis down. Nothing but bowed back. Topless baseless hindtrunk. Dim black. On unseen knees. In the dim void. Better worse so. Pending worse still.¹⁰¹

A praying woman is a fragment or shade (no face, no hands, no—). Yet, as if this image was already too complete or too rich, not sufficiently impoverished, that image of the woman is further reduced and “defigured.” The text passes a verdict (“Enough.”) over the initial state of want of the figure. The text proceeds to scrape away any qualities we might impute to the figure. This process occurs on the figural level (the image of the woman) as well as on the linguistic level (the language used to describe her). It issues a fiat on surplus (“Add? Never.”) and removes the head in hat, everything below the pelvis, and “more back.” The greatcoat is hemmed. Yet the reductions in the text ultimately resemble neither an amputation nor a tailoring but rather a deprivation of the image via language. Words such as “hindtrunk” bring the human carcass suddenly into view, but the impression is aesthetic, as if Beckett were operating on words, figures, values rather than flesh and bone.

King Lear lurks in the background of *Worstward Ho*. Beckett’s “Sottisier” notebook contains his notations to Shakespeare’s play, most notably Edgar’s lines, “Who is’t can say, I am at the worst.” And “The worst is not so long as one can say, This is the worst.”¹⁰² Beckett is different from Shakespeare in the sense that Shakespeare makes language into the simultaneous barrier and capacity that separates us from the experience of the worst. According to Edgar, we are not in the worst as long as it bears speech, and as long as we can discourse about it. Edgar’s first observation casts doubt on the ability of the worst to be synonymous either with its assertion or with a state of being, the *I am*. The worst occupies a hyperbolic register for Edgar beyond language and existence. When we merge with the worst, presumably, it will be designated only by the absence of speech and by some default of our existence (our capacity to say, “I am”).

Worstward Ho constitutes Beckett’s literary reply to the theatricality of Edgar’s antithesis of speech (saying) and the worst, of language as a refuge from the extreme conditions of misery. Beckett’s text works on the impoverishment of both poles: the emphasis on missaying and saying less over saying, and on worsening over the worst.¹⁰³ It is not enough, according to Beckett, to say, “this is the worst.” *Worstward Ho* begins with the “mere

bad" and recedes from there. Alain Badiou observes that the void in Beckett is something named rather than encountered: "Existence is the generic attribute of what is capable of worsening. What can worsen exists. . . . What exists is what lets itself be encountered. . . . Neither void nor dim designate something that can be encountered."¹⁰⁴ Beckett agrees with Edgar insofar as the text can only designate the worst. Though pointed in the direction of the worst, Beckett's text never arrives there: this separation of the address from the destination of the worst is part of Beckett's textual impoverishment of the term.

Implied by Edgar's attention to language is a sense that "the worst" occupies a spectrum or escalating quantity of worseness. Beckett introduces aesthetic criteria to propel poverty past this method of measurement. Instead of an opposition between the more and the less or the good and the bad (as Edgar implies), in which the no sum and degree zero become the apex of poverty, there is a flattening, and a shuffling back and forth rather than a direct linearity: "Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst."¹⁰⁵ The nursery-rhyme simplicity of this passage hypnotizes us with its monosyllabic terms, but does not state its principles but works by force of them, instead enacting them. This plays into its point. "Worse less" sets a phonetic trap for our ear, sounding vaguely like *worthless*.

Beckett's texts do not seek an absence of worth but a diminishment of quality, a best worse. They monitor a movement toward the less and the worse. In *Worstward Ho*, experimental superlatives and comparatives collide. ("Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No.") There is an arraignment, rather than an arrangement, of terms in which the hierarchy of measure is put on trial. All this incandescent coupling and decoupling of the worse and less calls attention to the ultimately uncontrolled dimension of the remainder. The text above makes the hairline fracture between "Naught best" and "Not best worse." Worse, being in want of the worst (a kind of negative satiation) thereby becomes the preferable condition.

For Badiou, Beckett's worsening process involves stripping language of consequence. He asserts that Beckett's words are there in order to have their implications dismissed. Worsening is "the exercise of the sovereignty of saying with respect to the shades. Therefore, it is both saying more about them and restricting what is said. This is why the operations are contradic-

tory. Worsening is saying more about less. More words to better leaſten."¹⁰⁶ Badiou ſubverts the commonplace of Beckett criticism, that leſs is more and that ſaying leſs means more meaning. Badiou points out that Beckett is in fact inverting this interpretation, ſaying more about leſs. We can push this farther. Beckett's work confronts its own interpretation by inserting its own diſcuſſion into our reſponſe. Here, leſs is *worſe*, not more. The text thereby forecloſes any ſtrictly quantitative measurement of poverty. In this way Beckett's operations are not quite "contradictory" as Badiou claims. Inſtead of a counterlogical movement (the more becoming leſs) Beckett entwines two hyperbolic ſystems. Beckett introduces a third element (varieties on the worſe) in order to create a conſtellation of poverty rather than a conceptual dyad. Badiou's "ſovereignty of ſaying" refers to the exceptions, the diſtinctions, the forceful ſeparations that Beckett's text ſeems to decree. Beckett's text propoſes a different ſovereign: the concept. The text makes two ſtatements againſt this king: "Pox on bad" and "Pox on void."¹⁰⁷ If Beckett's text enacts ſovereignty, it alſo ſays down with it, let the face of the void be covered in acne, let us dethrone the mere bad. Beckett pithily denounces the nominal authority of theſe terms precisely becauſe they arreſt poverty: "bad" becauſe it embodies a criterion that is too preliminary, and "void" becauſe it names ſomething too ultimate. "Void" exiſts only in name, an effigy of what remains *in absentia*, not as textual proceſs. The word would ſeem to represent the apex of poverty, the achievement of total deſolation without remainder. Yet the "unmoreable unleſſable unworſeable evermoſt almoſt void" cannot be transformed, reduced further. The void conſtitutes the direction of the text, but not its ſtep-by-ſtep operation. Conceptual designations for impoveriſhment are ſubverted here in favor of a literary examination of language from the ſtandpoint of an ever-ſlimming remainder. This remainder afflicts, in the end, the void itſelf (it is an evermoſt *almoſt* void).

As an era of unremitting criſis, modern hiſtory provides multiple inſtances in which the worſt has come into view but not yet into language. The conditions of our exiſtence have repeatedly teſted our capacity for ſpeech.¹⁰⁸ We have been pushed paſt Edgar's predicament in which the worſt is ſeemingly yet to come.¹⁰⁹ In his review of John Herſey's *Hiroſhima*, Georges Bataille deſcribes the challenge iſſued by diſtreſs on a nuclear ſcale. He notes the injunction the ſovereign individual derives in the face of ſuch ſuffering: "The man of ſovereign ſenſibility, face-to-face with miſfortune, no longer immediately exclaims, 'At all coſts let us do away with it,' but firſt, 'Let us live it.' Let us liſt, in the inſtant, a form of life to the level of the worſt. But no one, for all that, gives up doing away with what they

can."¹¹⁰ For Bataille, the sovereign sensibility asks not how to live accordingly after Hiroshima but how to live up to Hiroshima. How can our life bear a form that somehow stands before and does not deflect the radiance of this catastrophe? Beckett, by contrast, does not suggest that we could ever really share the level with the worst. The "form of life" in Beckett's last work is perpetually being unmade, unassumed, and unspoken on its way to the worst, without ever getting there. Beckett seems to be closer to Bataille's description of the default of sovereign sensibility, what he calls the reaction of "no one," an unending "doing away with what they can." This is a good synopsis of Beckett's subtractive attitude. For Beckett, the relentless drive toward the worse requires diligence—a perpetual emptying out of capacity, like water from a sinking boat.

Though the texts themselves focus on the process of leastening and worsening, Beckett's work is put on a level with the worst in its performance. In prison, Sarajevo, and New Orleans, Beckett's form of life, his dramatic persona, are put in balance with the surrounding devastation. Beckett's work appeals to audiences in crisis situations precisely because the worsening process neither ends nor, like Edgar, calls attention to the impossibility of its expression and therefore its validity. Instead of being on a level with the worst, Beckett's work levels or reduces it to a worst worse. Beckett's worsening submits its forms of life to disintegration and thereby opens up something ineradicably inconsolable but also something deeply and ineradicably present.