The Theatre of the Real

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Samuel Beckett’s dramatic works accelerate the degeneration of the tragic hero and the dissolution of universal symbolism with which Yeats’s final dancer plays end. As Gordon S. Armstrong recounts, “In conversation, Beckett acknowledged the importance of W. B. Yeats’s later work, in which he simplified dramatic constructions and symbol systems” (32). Beckett, for example, takes the figure of a female dancer, modifies her presentation, limits her movement, dampens her passion, and turns her into the pathetic, rocking wretch in *Rockabye*. While Yeats and Beckett share some interesting association, simple comparison between the two authors is not sufficient analysis. To grasp more fully Beckett’s relationship to Yeats and to Modern theatre as a whole, we must apply the same critical framework to his plays as we did to Yeats’s work. Little of this has been done, and the recent Lacanian scholarship on Beckett is troublesome, at best.¹

For example, in *The Imperative of Narration*, Catharina Wulf writes, “On the one hand, the gap between Auditor and Mouth [in *Rockabye*]...
evokes the irreversible split of Lacan’s subject and the impossibility of desiring being sated” (101). Wulf has the opportunity to advance both Beckettian and Lacanian scholarship, but she wrongly interprets the latter’s theories. For Lacan, stemming from Freud, as already pointed out in chapter 1 of this book, desire is precisely that which cannot be satisfied; it is the drive which cannot be sated, and it is precisely that insatiable drive that Beckett’s work addresses.

Much classic Beckett scholarship focuses on close textual or performance analysis or new biographical details. These works, by much-admired Beckett scholars such as James Knowlson, Ruby Cohn, and Paul Davies, are important and useful texts, but they certainly do not exhaust the wide range of possibilities for Beckett studies.

Alain Badiou’s book *On Beckett* stands as a great example of the ways in which Beckett’s work and theory can inform each other. Badiou essentially claims that Beckett’s work offers a variety of ontological explorations revolving around a tripartite imperative that “bears on going, being, and saying” (2). These three verbs are the core actions or states of each of Beckett’s dramas. They are not at the center for how they are present, however, but for how each is uniquely absent or missing from the particular work in question.

For an easy example, we can recall *Waiting for Godot*. Gogo and Didi famously wait for Godot for what the audience surmises is and will be an infinite amount of time. The protagonists claim that they will go, but they never do. Thus, the act of “going” is missing. This non-act is not the Modern, universalizable condition of ennui, but it is unique to these two men and their relationship to “Godot,” the figure whose being is also missing. It is the intensely personal experience of each character in relation to what that character lacks that defines Beckett’s drama. “Godot” is a generic stand-in, or understudy, for the chronic non-presence of the master signifier without the transgressive results that follow from such a position being empty.

Certainly, great theatre theorists, such as Robert Brustein, are correct to classify Beckett as an existential searcher, but the meaning of life for which his characters search is not representable and not replicable. Because of the missing master signifier, Beckett’s characters are from the beginning “crazy” and must then search for something like what Lacan terms *le sinthome*. To remind ourselves, the *sinthome* is the subject’s basic materiality out of which she defines herself in relief against the conventional world. Such a *sinthome* can be created only in a new space, which Beckett’s theatre provides. For that space of laborious creativity, Beckett refashions the traditional pastoral spaces. His characters, however, fail to recognize the
glimmer of newness in the spaces they occupy and thus stay mired in the refuse that dominates the scenes. I use the term “missing” to refer to this compilation of neglected spaces, avoided action, and neglected creativity. The term is a simple one, but it refers most basically to any work of theatre, especially as exemplified by Beckett, that sets forth a void occupied by characters who do not recognize it for the Real value of its emptiness. The missing is then a kind of pastoral mistake, or eglio. Samuel Beckett’s drama best exemplifies the missing scene of Modern theatre through its ironic excesses juxtaposed against the lack at its center.

The missing scene of Modern theatre is one of enormous excess, especially in relation to the usage of language and discourse. Lacan’s discourse of the master places the Symbolic master or the Signifier, as the name of the father, in the position of power. That reduction assumes that the master is in possession of both truth and knowledge, but as Lacan explains, “If the master’s discourse can be seen as reduced to a single signifier, this implies that it represents something. Calling it ‘something’ is already saying too much. It represents x, which is precisely what is there to be clarified in the matter” (Other Side 29). The x in Lacan’s equation of the master’s discourse is a letter devoid of meaning, a material synthomatic letter. It is not Real, though, because those involved in the master’s discourse still believe that the x has a Symbolic meaning. The meaning is missing and will always be missing, but the master cannot think this way.

The master must believe in the full extent of his knowledge and will to give meaning. According to Lacan, the master believes he has knowledge to fill the void of the missing letter, but he is actually in the position of Hegel’s master, who knows nothing but is in ironic service to his slave, or the actual keeper of knowledge. The work of Hegel’s slave, the master’s discourse, and Beckett’s pastoral explorations all begin at the same place that Lacan defines: “It is with knowledge as a means of jouissance that work that has a meaning, an obscure meaning, is produced. This obscure meaning is the meaning of truth” (Other Side 51). This position highlights the intense significance of language as that which can both cover and expose the truth as it approaches jouissance. The jouissance possible through language, however, is not the most extreme version of this moment of simultaneous pleasure and pain. It is, instead, an experience secondary or degenerated from the surplus jouissance of the hysteric who is able not to master but to see the falsity of language completely.

As Lacan states, “What hysterics ultimately want one to know is that language runs off the rails concerning the magnitude of what she as woman is capable of revealing concerning jouissance. But this is not what matters
to the hysteric. What matters to her is that particular other called a man knows what a precious object she becomes in this context of discourse” (Other Side 34). It seems that what Lacan wants to explain about the hysteric is not that she has privileged knowledge or position, but that she knows that the only way she can achieve privilege is by making herself into that object that is missing from the master’s discourse. The hysteric makes herself into her own muse; she cannot really create art for herself to enjoy, but she creates something and relishes in the idea that the Other will enjoy it. It is not freedom, but it is a new version of the slave position of ironic mastery.

For Beckett’s work to expose what Lacan terms the jouissance of language, he must indulge in nearly endless repetition of words and entire conversations. This is particularly present in his drama, which itself assumes the position of the hysteric to the Other of the two languages, French and English, between which Beckett vacillated in his writing. The repetition of language is a formal mechanism that halts the character’s ability to engage in it in her own desire for meaning, even while she is following the rhythmic movement of the drive. For formal repetition to delve below the surface and become a new structural composition of the subject, the language repetition must be devoid of meaning for the speaker, and it must be a nearly empty form endowed with the subject’s drive. Although conscious abandonment of the search for meaning is missing in Beckett’s characters, his work insistently performs such formal evacuation and play, as the audience hears and sees the meaninglessness of the words delivered.

Beckett’s dramatic personas cling to the meaning of language because they are too mired in Cartesian philosophy to relinquish their at least superficial belief in primacy of intellect and thought over the visceral reactions of the body. Beckett, whose early academic life, especially while he was a lecturer in Paris, focused on understanding Descartes’ work, aims to show that thought is really nothing but the exposed void of the individual subject. 2 While Descartes believes wholeheartedly in the primacy of the mind to compose and define the human person, Beckett’s work proves that the individual really knows nothing but still exists. Beckett’s characters have a false belief that the human mind can think and that thought has the power to save. Such belief is the tragic position of the Beckettian hero. The “missing” element from each character is the recognition of the uselessness

2. See James Knowlson’s Damned to Fame for a history of Beckett’s academic relationship with Descartes’ work.
of knowledge in any traditional sense, for the characters blithely continue
to live out their desires for meaning even as their drives undo and expose
the falsity of all meaning.

While trying to learn about themselves and each other in frequently
comedic ways, Beckett’s characters unwittingly enact a simulacrum of the
analytic experience. Instead of one character listening to another unburden
his soul, both characters attempt to abject their conscious minds simulta-
neously; no one is listening, and thus no transference can occur. This
comedic pretense is always doomed to tragedy. Instead of the beneficial
transfer of energy necessary in the analytic experience, Beckett’s charac-
ters are governed by parapraxis. It is the parapraxis that makes the sin-
themhome most evident in Beckett’s work and gives his characters their greatest
freedom, even while diffusing the little energy produced during the slipp-
ages or comedic moments. This dispersion attacks the solid, unary focus
necessary for sinthomatic creation and thus creates the final missing ele-
ment in Beckett’s work.

Beckett’s dramatic personas are so mired in the abjection of the words
they spew and their creations of Imaginary tragedies that they fail to see
and often miss opportunities to manifest their own sinthomes that could
be created out of the remainders of their meaningless words and actions.
Instead, Beckett’s dramatic characters become their own transitional
objects. Out of desperation, they cling to their original concepts of self pro-
duced by their interactions with their surroundings, and they never throw
away those conceptualizations in favor of new materiality.

THE PASTORAL BECKETT

The inability of Beckett’s characters to rid themselves of their old Imagi-
nary ideas is directly related to the conditions and places in which Beckett’s
characters reside. They adhere to conventional separations of time and
space, but, as Andrew Gibson states in his recent book Beckett and Badiou,
“Time and space are constructed with the help of a continuum conceptually fashioned and already available” (16). In the conventional pastoral
world, time and space are distinctly separate entities, with time generally
portrayed as the adversarial force that can overtake or damage space. We
can recall a number of Renaissance love lyrics, including those of Campion,
Marvell, and Shakespeare, to hear lovers use the threat of time as a means
of seduction. Badiou’s use of mathematics denies such separation, favoring
instead the concept of “actual infinity.” Gibson explains that “potential infinity is never complete and can never be complete. The concept of potential infinity is thus intrinsically linked to a concept of becoming. The potentially infinite is ‘an inescapably temporal notion.’ However, any general concept of becoming is illogical since, if becoming becomes, it must transform itself in becoming, putting itself beyond conceptual reach” (10). Potential infinity is false because it is governed by time as separate from space. Actual infinity is real because it links itself to the merger of time and space as symbiotically linked and never-ending forces. Actual infinity, in this way, is linked to the Real, as it takes parts of previous theories and merges them into one foreign and nearly inexplicable concept. Beckett’s work creates a space and mood that is much like Badiou’s actual infinity. His characters exist in settings where time and space are linked because they are both laughable and damnable conditions of the self.

There are two types of pastoral settings in which Beckett’s plays are set: the expansive exterior of the ruined natural world or the narrow dankness of the barren interior. Exterior spaces in Beckett share similarities with the eclogic pastoral tradition and are the spaces of the abjected Symbolic. The interior landscapes contemporize the Georgic tradition and are the spaces of the wasted Imaginary. In the exterior eclogic space, characters make the mistake of thinking that human beings can still master the natural world. Such mastery derives from the pastoral tradition of song competition codified by Virgil. In the first Eclogue, Meliboeus and Thyrsis act as antithetical figures, with easily discernible and often oppositional characteristics. They are able to use their different forms of logical assertions to make arguments about pastoral life and love to each other.

We can now return, in more depth, to Beckett’s most famous pastoral pair, Didi and Gogo of Waiting for Godot. The logic and thought of Virgil’s characters is replaced by near-mindless repetition; instead of the differentiation of character along well-drawn lines, we have characters who are near-facsimiles of each other. As Nancy Leidham writes, “Vladimir and Estragon belong to an alternative line that stretches from Meliboeus’s projections of himself as a wandering exile” (252). Gogo and Didi are not modernizations of two classic pastoral types; they are both weakened versions of one figure. As two incomplete representations of one figure, they cannot really compete with each other to produce a typical pastoral eclogue, but instead they provide repetitive and episodic bits of one song. This strategy can also be found, not so comically, in Yeats’s work: “Yeats’s instinct to personify conflict in a single person as two separate characters was sound, and marked his maturation from beginning playwright to experienced man of
the stage. . . . Only in *En Attendant Godot* was Beckett able to split his central vision into two distinct creatures, Vladimir and Estragon” (Armstrong 90). We can easily read Emer and Eithne Inguba as two split sides of the same drive for the heroic Cuchulain. Their plights seem grand, set against the backdrop of a semi-dead hero and a raging sea. Gogo and Didi are both stalled, as their drives are limited by their desires for nothing. Beckett uses this strategy to show that the current state of the pastoral is one in which subjects are too interdependent on each other to gain true freedom or even enough aggressive momentum to propel themselves to action. Beckett’s exterior pastoral is one of autumnal damnation.

The only scenic element mentioned in the play, and one to which Beckett paid enormous attention, is the tree. The tree is first mentioned as a place, not a natural element; it is where they wait, for according to Vladimir, “He said [to wait] by the tree” (*Godot* 8). The characters then muse over what type of tree it may be, first asserting melodramatically that it must be a weeping willow and then turning to sarcasm with Gogo’s comment, “Looks to me more like a bush” (*Godot* 8). The pastoral world is not sacred, not helpful, and commands no respect from these characters. By the end of the act, the tree has assumed a purpose; it is the place from which the characters can hang themselves, but these inert characters never follow through with their intent. The pastoral is robbed of even its most bastardized purpose, yet it lives on. Vladimir comments about the tree, “But yesterday evening it was all black and bare and now it’s covered with leaves” (*Godot* 58). Estragon replies, “It must be the Spring” (*Godot* 58). The promise of overnight restoration lives in nature, even when the characters cannot appreciate or understand it. The pastoral world and the human beings in it have no bonds with each other and thus are destined to make mistakes in and about it.

To read Beckett’s *Happy Days* as a traditional pastoral also requires some creative revisioning of the Modern pastoral space. Just as shepherds till the fields, stripping away the unusable vegetation to get to fertile soil, so Beckett’s exterior works are set in places already stripped bare. These spaces lack the fertility of the traditional pastoral landscape, though. Lindheim explains of Beckett’s pastoral:

> [T]he process of stripping away, the finding “what will suffice” beyond mere survival, is crucial in defining the human situation of the twentieth and now into the twenty-first century. The most significant stripping away in this drama [*Godot*]—beyond class, occupation, home, family, nation—concerns those ideas that have traditionally lent value to human activity: civilization,
social progress, beauty, art, self-realization, nature. Their absence creates the particular void that is the work's setting. (255)

Although Lindheim is referring to *Godot*, the same ideas are applicable to *Happy Days*. In this later play, the last of Beckett's three staged evening-long events, Winnie is buried up to her waist in a graveyard of trash while the unmediated sun beats down on her. She is like a living corpse trying vainly, and in vain, to halt the encroaching and killing rays of the sun. Winnie speaks to a husband who does not respond, yet she tries to maintain her appearance for him, brushing her hair and applying make-up while she still can. The audience recognizes the absolute futility of her actions, thus stripping them of importance and stripping her of dignity. The little work that she is able to do is meaningless, but only the audience admits this fact. Winnie, as a character immersed in her daily routine, does not recognize her lack and thus cannot embrace its potential for freedom from the actions she performs as homage to a society that no longer exists.

Winnie is trying to engage in competition, but without the acknowledgment of any other character, especially her husband, Willie, her challenge is left untaken. Her entire attempt at eclogue is a mistake of not seeing what is missing in her life and how she could use those missing elements to create a new life without the burden of the desire of the eclogue structure.

Winnie, Gogo, and Didi make the same type of error, thinking that they can still win the competition in which they imagine themselves engaged. Winnie tries to engage her husband, Willie, in conversation or some sort of emotive exchange of language and history, but he refuses, echoing the refusal of the natural world to comply with the pastoral expectations of both character and audience. Not only are Didi and Gogo absorbed by their desire for and resentment of each other, but also their relationship is an echo of that relationship they imagine themselves having with the missing Godot. Beckett does not allow the characters to abandon the artifice of their imagined conflict in favor of recognizing the absence of the character with whom they compete. Beckett’s work then provides us with a pastoral landscape that allows for internal conflict, which can ultimately free a character from interpersonal restraint. His characters cannot take advantage of what they are given.

Beckett's interior landscapes operate in a different fashion. The characters inhabiting Beckett's dark interiors, with the notable exception of the overt aggression between Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, are less involved in the competitive nature of the eclogue tradition and more engaged in the work ethic of the Georgic aspects of the pastoral tradition. According to
Anthony Low in his The Georgic Revolution, “‘To be truly georgic, a poem should come face to face with the realistic details of farming life, see them for what they are, yet accept and even glorify them’” (Low 87). This conventional interpretation seems hard to locate in Beckett’s work, especially in his interiors, but we need to understand its larger scope, which gives us the georgic as “‘an informing spirit, and attitude toward life and a set of themes,’ which in practice enlarges the subject from farming to labor, often redemptive labor” (Lindheim 87). Certainly, Beckett’s characters are not farmers; many have no contact or very limited contact with any type of organic material, but still they till the soil of their own minds. The work is arduous, as it is not fertile or generative soil, but it is a location without circulation. The repetition and the revisiting of old memories replicate farming without crop rotation. That which rises from the soil is literally the same old crap, or abject material, which is the only material these characters have to work.

Krapp immediately comes to mind as one such character who can only revisit the refuse of his life, even while trying to make something new. As Armstrong observes, “Yeats’s Old Man [in At the Hawk’s Well] turns inward to become a paradigm of subjectivity who progressively denies the world outside his own being” (121). On his sixty-ninth birthday, Krapp follows his yearly ritual of recording the previous year’s events on tape while revisiting his old memories. Krapp chooses to listen to the memory of his missed moment of romantic and erotic fulfillment; this moment, and the relationship that could have accompanied it, are things Krapp sacrificed for his artistic career, which was also a failure, as time proved. Krapp’s work as a writer could not thrive because he made the wrong choice in his psychic life. Instead of connecting with his potential love in erotic eclogue, which could have led to a form of transference reminiscent of the analytic experience, Krapp decided to abandon the relationship in favor of solitude. The resulting loneliness gave Krapp no energy or new material with which to feed his creativity; thus his labors die. Krapp’s work is quite literally a failure setting up a Beckettian Georgic poetic. Instead of the redemptive potential of work, Beckett’s interior pastoral is one of decay. The Georgic pastoral in this play is degenerative, as it shows the results of combining the exterior landscape with the replacement of human contact with posthuman audiotape. Krapp’s isolation and mechanistic replacement for human touch lead him to regret over missed opportunity, not redemption.

The pastoral spaces of Beckett’s drama, whether exterior or interior, are presented to the audience as leveled, barren wastelands, an image familiar to any twentieth-century audience. Beckett wants to expose the mistake of
the wasteland itself. The mistake of the wasteland is that of the double error. First, the characters fail to see their surroundings as wasted, and then they fail to react to that wasteland in any kind of creative way. In *Endgame*, Clov is confronted by the literalization of the wasted figure; Nagg and Nell live in trash bins, actual waste receptacles, but Clov does not acknowledge that which he sees before him. Clov and Hamm both act as if there is nothing absurd about two human beings living in trash cans. The wasted nature of the elderly figures inhabiting the trash simply layers on ironic symbolism for the audience that Clov misses. In not confronting the human trash in his home, he is failing to see the interior wasteland. By failing to see, he is willfully choosing not to react and is thus missing his own chance to correct the mistake of the wasted pastoral with which he lives.

**BECKETT’S NO-GITO/COGITO**

Clov is an example of the doubled pastoral failure that results from the dramatic characters’ insistent and useless clinging to the myth of the cogito. Beckett uses his characters to set up and then debunk Descartes’ famous dictum “cogito ergo sum.” Beckett needs to knock down the primacy of thought so that, in Lacanian terms, he can deflate the engorged supremacy of the phallic position or the master signifier. Thinking is related to the analysis of any supposed objective or scientific knowledge. It is always commanded by an Other, so the thinker is in the position of the signified (S2) or the servant. The thought becomes the objet a, or fetish object. The meaning of the thought is secondary to the act of superficial presentation of that thought. Beckett shows this through his emphasis on comedic presentation.

As Beckett presents it, thought is always a joke. In Freud’s *Jokes and the Relation to the Unconscious*, jokes are the gateways to expose unconscious desires or wishes. The utterance of the joke, which makes no sense in the Symbolic realm, is a way for the joker to fulfill his antisocial wish. When the joker is embarrassed by an accidental joke or slip of the tongue, it is because he is ashamed of his unusual wish. When the comedian is delighted by the laughter accompanying the telling of his joke, it is because he is attempting to co-opt the fringe desires of his audience, so that they can collectively address and then shoo away the uncouth desire.

In Beckett’s work, the characters onstage either are not aware of the audience laughing at them or take themselves and each other too seriously.
to laugh on stage. Beckett forces his characters to “miss the joke” so that he can show the audience the danger of too much seriousness or too much “thought.”

This is the case of Lucky’s famous monologue prompted by Pozzo’s command “Think, pig!” (35) in Waiting for Godot. Lucky, Pozzo’s donkey-like servant, is ordered to “think” for nearly seventy uninterrupted lines to entertain and amaze Gogo and Didi. The thought process can occur only when Lucky dons his hat, playing with the visual icon of the dunce cap. Beckett plays with language here, in a Joycean homage, presenting the anthropological theories of men such as “Fartov and Beltcher” and repeatedly lamenting the “light of labors lost” (Godot 37). The monologue addresses the Georgic pastoral tradition in its repeated emphasis on work that has been left incomplete, giving a type of ironic hope to the inert pastoral setting of the play. The prompting of the monologue, Pozzo’s famous command, “Think, pig!” is also reminiscent of Eliot’s “The Wasteland.” In the poem’s second section, “A Game of Chess,” the female speaker, in lines that O’Neill will echo in A Long Day’s Journey into Night, laments exhaustedly, “I never know what you are thinking. Think” (ln. 114). Underlying the speaker’s command is the confidence that her lover can “think” in a way amenable to conventional expectation. Furthermore, there is a notion on the part of both the speaker and the author that some thought is still salvageable and able to save. The reader knows this from the speaker’s next accusing questions, “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (ln. 125). The connection of these two questions implies that life and thought are inextricably mixed; Eliot has confidence in the cogito. Beckett’s characters do too, but the play’s tone mocks this in a way that Eliot’s high Modernist tone does not. The utter absurdity of Lucky’s monologue leaves both the characters and audience in awe, but for opposing reasons.

The characters are so overwhelmed by the thoughts Lucky spews that their only reaction is to angrily stop him by stomping on his hat. The audience can assume that there are feelings of jealousy or inadequacy that motivate Didi’s stomping, but the audience feels no such incompetence. The audience is able to see that what is missing in Lucky’s thought is any semblance of meaning or academic training. His word salads are like those of the hysteric in the throes of utter mania. The audience knows this and sides with Lucky for his ability to use his own servile position to make a mockery of his master and the master’s acquaintances. The audience sees the value of that which is missing, but the characters do not see that and thus miss the opportunity to escape language by claiming to see the universal truths it is supposed to impart.
The audience does not miss out on the comedic aspects of Beckett’s dramas. For the audience, the appreciation of the comedy onstage allows for a glance inward at the comedic nature of the self, which in turn brings the self-reflective audience member closer to a Real moment. Beckett’s comic figures think themselves to be rogues, or they want to fashion themselves into rogues and fail. We should remember that the rogue figure of comedy is “a ‘cheat’ at the banquet of life. . . . If he or she can get something for nothing—or for the small effort that it takes to be adopted by the rich man, or to pretend a deathbed agony and bilk the would-be heirs—then neither the intelligent nor the foolish is immune from victimization” (Storey 171). In Waiting for Godot, Gogo and Didi believe themselves to be rogues, exerting the minimal effort of waiting for the master figure who will grant them something they desire. They do not consciously realize the enormous strain of their waiting; they believe themselves to be doing the easy thing that will produce the greatest results. The audience sees disconnect between the characters’ self-awareness and the audience’s interpretation of them and is able to laugh at the so-called rogue figures as they would laugh at fools.

In the comedic tradition, “the fool lacks mastery—a mastery measured not only by its defense against roguery but also by the norms of the fictive world with which his or her behavior is incongruent” (Storey 169). It is difficult to determine what is incongruous in Beckett’s dramatic worlds, as we cannot use our daily lives as the norm against which to judge. The norm must be found within the play’s presentation of its history. We can turn to Endgame as an example. Hamm recounts the story of how he came to be Clov’s guardian. The scene of Clov’s earlier life, as described, is one that is familiar to us through legend. Clov’s father is a poor farmer who is willing to trade services for bread to feed his son, and who ultimately leaves his son, under the promise of a better life than the one he can offer. Here is a traditional narrative of the past, but the current world in which Clov lives is totally foreign in presentation to the audience’s scope.

In this new, wasted world are Clov and Hamm in their decaying symbiotic relationship. Clov lives in a world of death, yet he is unable to perform an act of killing, choosing to let the bug and the rat live. He does not want to follow the norms of death that his world sets up. We, in the audience, laugh at the futility or foolishness of trying to contradict the world, yet we also cheer a little for any character willing to act out of the norms. Beckett makes his audience feel both for and against the fool, so that the audience can see the hardship and even uselessness of trying to reverse or interrupt an existing pattern, while still wishing, just a little, that it will
work. The audience knows Clov is a fool for staying with Hamm, and Gogo and Didi are fools for waiting for Godot. We want them to move on, but since the audience also knows the enormity of the pain involved in moving on, it simultaneously wants them to stay. Most subjects understand intuitively that they must move on, but they are stymied in their own habitually myopic patterns. The nearsighted stasis is like desire, in which we long for only a portion of the thing that actually drives us. The gravity of the drive is not only what can pull us out of desire but also what can force us to collapse under its shear force, and so we are caught. Beckett’s plays present this conundrum.

If comedy and all of its repercussions allow the audience to see thought as farce, then Descartes’ cogito is denuded. In place of his supposed truth is an empty space. To replace thought, Beckett gives the audience nothing. He does not give an alternative to thought because he does not want to turn his audience into fools. Beckett’s drama shows a deep understanding of the necessity of the void, and he does not want to stop that emptiness from making contact with his audience. In *Ethics*, Alain Badiou explains “that at the heart of every situation, as the foundation of its being, there is a ‘situated’ void around which is organized the plenitude (or the stable multiples) of the situation in question” (68). The space left when thought as truth or the foundation of being is abjected is this void or emptiness, which carries with it the promise of new and multiple foundations.

Badiou goes on to explain that “to believe that an event convokes not the void of the earlier situation, but its plenitude, is Evil in the sense of simulacrum, or terror” (*Ethics* 71). Terror, for Badiou, is the idea that for a subject to exist, nothing must exist (*Ethics* 77). That statement implies that existence is always dependent on an Other, or a master signifier. For Badiou, the master’s discourse is the discourse of terror. Beckett’s characters are not terrified or terrorized because they are not defined by that Other. They are defined by what is missing from their lives that may or may not extract from them the desire to make contact with an Other. It is not the Other itself but contact with the Other that drives the Beckettian subject. This drive is outside the parameters of thought or logical evaluation, so the void in the center remains intact.

Such are the positions of Gogo, Didi, and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. Very early in the play Gogo asks, “We’ve lost our rights?” to which Didi responds, “We got rid of them” (*Godot* 13). To have lost one’s rights would mean that there was a master controlling the rights. To have “gotten rid” of them means to have cast off the supposed freedom that one has. It is the latter position in which Beckett places his bedraggled pair. Gogo and
Didi have agency; they make the choice to submit themselves to inertia and ennui. Their reasons for submission are intentionally not clear, thus leaving the void of their being open. What is missing from their lives and our comprehension of them is logical understanding. They give no sign of having thought about relinquishing their rights; they just have. In forgoing thought, or worse, its simulacrum, Beckett eschews the expectation of causality or understanding that underlies Descartes’ cogito. Thus, at their core, Gogo and Didi are empty. They are not submitting to Godot as a master, but to their own lack of initiative not to wait for him. Their choice does not make sense, but it is a choice nonetheless, and thus, they have enacted a way of living that is anti-Cartesian.

Beckett’s next evening-long work for theatre, Endgame, addresses the author’s anti-Cartesian stance more directly than Waiting for Godot. In Endgame, the audience is presented with Hamm and Clov, an adoptive father/son duo. Hamm can be interpreted as the debunked or abjected myth of the name-of-the-father, who, like his namesake, Hamlet, is likely to question life and not choose to act. The ability to question seems, at first glance, to lend itself to support of the cogito, as the questioning and subsequent answers lead to self-definition. Hamm’s questions and questioning, though, are logically futile. They lead to no new knowledge or discovery about the self, and they lack grandiose subject matter. Instead of “To be or not to be,” Hamm asks questions such as “What time is it?” (94) and “Are there still fleas?” (115). The mundane nature of the questions portrays Hamm as a simple, even simple-minded, character. If these are the types of questions that produce the definition of human nature, then Beckett seems to be saying that humanity is rather dull.

That is not, however, what Beckett is trying to convey. True Beckettian nature is found in comments Hamm makes. In conversation with Clov, Hamm says, “Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough?” (115). Hamm implies here that humanity is no longer rational but is worthy of study. Still, even in his cynicism, Hamm clings to the extinct rational view when he continues, “And without going so far as that, we ourselves . . . we ourselves . . . at certain moments . . . To think perhaps it [life] won’t all have been for nothing!” (115). Hamm is not saying that life will have meaning, but that we can “think” that it has meaning. Hamm is fully aware that thought is deception.

Truth, in Endgame, lies in the language patterns of questioning that mimic the circular repetition of the drive. When Clov, in typical childlike fashion, asks to be retold the story of how he came to live with Hamm,
Hamm responds, “Ah the old questions, the old answers, there’s nothing like them!” (118), implying that there is a pattern of question and answer that sustains daily living but neither adds nor subtracts wisdom or insight. Nothing changes in this interrogative pattern; the pattern itself is enough. The repetitive inquiry mimics the circulation of the drive; questioning is the circuitous route that bypasses desire.

It also replicates Freud’s fort/da game, in which the toddler uses a spool or toy in a hide-and-seek-like game to master his feelings of abandonment when his mother leaves the room. In the game, the spool is a stand-in for the parent; for Clov, the story Hamm tells is like the toy. Clov, via Hamm’s telling, is able to call the story back at will and thus can gain some false sense of control over his past, and over Hamm as the story’s teller. When Clov asks that the story be told, he asks a specific question whose answer, he hopes, will lead to fulfillment. The answer, in the form of the story, never completely does.

Descartes’ questions may not have definitive answers and may lead to more questions, but underlying them is the concept of a final answer that will quell the desire to continue questioning. Beckett’s questions have no such ending answer. Beckett’s subjects can continue to flourish in relation to their drives and can have access to some level of jouissance. That does not imply that the world at the end of the play is one of generative potential. It is still a deadened pastoral space, where sexual beings are condemned as “[a]ccursed fornicator[s]” (98). In a parody of Joyce’s ending to A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Hamm says of himself, “Old stauncher! . . . You . . . remain” (154). Unlike Stephen Dedalus, seeking to create the underpinning of all of humanity, Hamm will make nothing new. He will simply stay. Without Clov, he cannot create a sinthome for himself because he has nothing against which he can place himself in relief; Beckett’s anti-Cartesian presentation ends with the innovative idea that for a self-creation to occur, the creator must have a specular image present which he can recognize and reject as a stand-in for both the Symbolic and the Imaginary. That image must be experienced and rejected before the Real moment can occur.

**BECKETT’S MISSING MASTER**

Beckett’s work is open to a Real moment because, in addition to missing pastoral and logical expectation, it is also missing a master signifier. The
missing master exposes flaws in the master’s discourse, thus negating its supremacy. It is important to recall that the primary position of the master’s discourse is the S1 or the Big Other. This Other, according to Lacan, is not alone but is supported at the level of knowledge by the

S2, which is the one I call the other signifier. This other signifier is not alone. The stomach of the Other, the big Other, is full of them. This stomach is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides the foundations for the fantasy of the totality-knowledge [savoir-totalité]. It is, however, clear that its function entails that something comes and strikes it from without, otherwise, nothing will ever emerge from it. And Troy will never be taken. (Other Side 33)

The representation of this other Other, the S2, has a different function in many of Beckett’s works. It is a partial object that is not separate from but part of the master signifier, meaning that the Trojan conflict which Lacan references in his explanation is an internal war. The S1 and S2 are part of the same character, or subject. Because the S1 and S2 are not separate entities but parts of one being, a truth about the master itself is revealed. For Beckett, the master’s discourse and the position of the master create an internalized struggle, leaving the psyche as the stage of a bloody pastoral battle.

Beckett complicates the matter of purely internalized psychological drama by using projections of the self, via either recordings or disembodied voices, to dramatize the conflict between the two signifiers. Tape recorders are major players in both Krapp’s Last Tape and Cascando. In Krapp’s Last Tape there are actually three moments or three signifiers who speak. The sixty-nine-year-old Krapp exists in the position of the master signifier, or S1. It is he who controls the events, he who chooses what tape will be heard, and he who comments on that tape. The present Krapp is not a typical master, though; he is described as “White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair. Unshaven. Very near-sighted (but unspectacled). Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk” (Krapp 221). Krapp is a decaying old man, one whose life is governed by the number of bananas he consumes in relation to the amount he is able to defecate. This is not the expected image of phallic power. Even as Krapp consumes his bananas, in a scene that seems as if it should be wrought with classic Freudian interpretations, Beckett defies the expectations. Krapp’s banana eating does not fulfill some longed-for homosexual desire. Instead, it is a constipating effort, one that allows him, literally, to retain his crap. Krapp’s
eating habits then follow the same motive as making the tapes. He is a supposed master signifier who fears losing his knowledge, so he hoards it.

The figure of the S2 is the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp on the tape. This should be the figure who holds the knowledge and supports the master signifier, but even though this S2 may have “strong voice, rather pompous” (*Krapp* 223), he lacks knowledge. Three times, Krapp plays the same, now famous, passage, “I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently up and down, and from side to side” (*Krapp* 237). The thirty-nine-year-old Krapp remembers the greatest chance of his life, the chance to consummate the relationship with a woman he loves. He does not make love to her, but the lack of consummation is not a choice. Krapp is impotent. It does not matter whether the inability to consummate is physical, psychological, or both. What matters is that without that phallic power, the S2 figure, underlying the S1, robs the S1 of any chance to be the master. For the present-day Krapp to be the master signifier, the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp would have had to consummate the relationship to achieve the sexual knowledge needed to pass on to the master. The couple would have had to act creatively in the pastoral space, but Krapp and his partner did not till their pastoral land as they should have. They could not procreate or create, and they leave the work of generation to nature itself, which had to exhaust itself to rock them in their womblike boat.

The thirty-nine-year-old Krapp is provoked to record this event after he says, “Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check the book, but it must have been at least ten or twelve years ago. At that time I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business!” (*Krapp* 224). We learn that the Krapp of his mid-twenties was also ineffectual with women, also lacking phallic power and the ability to create. The tier of Krapp’s phallic power is a teetering mess of missed opportunities to assert his drive and follow through with his passion thanks to the lack of knowledge of his younger selves. If the younger voices, or S2 and S3, of the play had been able to perform their duties and sustain or gather transferable knowledge, the present Krapp may have had a chance at being a true S1, but the earlier manifestations know nothing. The result is the sixty-nine-year-old failed writer, who can only sell seventeen copies of his last book.

*Cascando* is another, much shorter, Beckett piece for radio that involves three voices or signifiers, one of which is a failed artist. The play casts an Opener, who controls the music; the Voice, who loosely narrates the drama; and the Music itself, which both underscores the Voice and speaks
alone. Because this is a play for radio, the visual aspect has been denied to the listener, making the entire presentation dependent on language to translate meaning, which is a doomed effort from its inception because language is nontransferable and always governed by méconnaissance. The play upholds this assertion, as nothing is created within its boundaries, yet the discourse hovers around or circles the moment of creation. Lacan’s statement that “knowledge is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to jouissance” (Other Side 18) makes this evident. The voice, or the S2, in the position of the slave with the ability to transmit knowledge is aware that the creative effort is halted. The voice repeatedly says, in various arrangements, “story... if you could finish... you could rest... sleep... and before... oh I know... the ones I’ve finished... thousands and one... all I ever did... in my life... with my life... saying to myself... finish this one... it’s the right one... then rest... sleep... no more stories... no more words” (Cascando 343). The “oh I know” is the key to this passage, as the voice admits that it has knowledge. That knowledge inhibits the finishing of the story, the “right” story or creative output that would allow the Opener to experience jouissance, but in this presentation, jouissance is characterized as an ending of creativity, or an ending of the circulation of the drive. Since the drive only ends with death, the Voice cannot finish, because its moment of greatest pleasure will be not only its simultaneous moment of greatest pain, but also its demise.

Beckett uses the Music as the function which forestalls the ending of the fictional story being discussed in the piece. Music, as an S2, is able to delve below the level of knowledge to pure essence or visceral experience. Music and Voice never merge without the Opener’s control. The Opener, in the S1 position, is aware that neither Voice nor Music can singularly provide the information or experience that it seeks. The Opener, as the master signifier, is missing the combined forms of knowledge that its slaves can provide. Only when it has them operate simultaneously can things be, as its last word states, “Good” (Cascando 351). “Good,” though, is not an utterance of satisfaction, but one of continuing struggle, as the Voice, underscored by Music, begs, “—this time... its the right one... finish... no more stories... sleep... we’re there... nearly... just a few more... don’t let go... Woburn... he clings... on... come on... come on...” (Cascando 351). The pleading desperation with which the play ends is necessary to bring together its missing elements and prove that the master signifier, or Opener, cannot command the ending it desires, because the drives of the S2 and S3 “know” more than it does.

Several of Beckett’s famous female characters also help to illuminate the
ways in which the master signifier is missing in Beckett’s work. Beckett’s female characters, especially Winnie in *Happy Days* and the rocking figure in *Rockabye*, welcome, even ask for, the pain that their master signifiers, Willie and the Voice, respectively, induce. This pain creates an anxiety in the female characters that encourages these characters to continue their physical journeys or actions, but the characters do not follow their paths of anxiety. Beckett’s scenarios give the women the potential to move on, but they don’t use that potential because there is no alternative space within the dramas to which they can go. Beckett voids the worlds in which they live, making them blistering or sinister, but he gives them no other space. The voiding of the master signifier removes the possibility of belief or existence in any kind of conventional pastoral, but the works do not provide the chance for the female characters to create or move into any new position.

In *Happy Days*, the obscenely cheerful Winnie is buried first up to her waist and then up to her neck in the cracking Earth while being burned by the sun and facing the aging process as a miniature version of what has happened to the pastoral world. The world is dry and cracked, caked and tamped down by years of what seems to be the final result of global warming. Winnie is described as the opposite of this image; she is “about fifty, well preserved, blond for preference, plump, arms and shoulders bare, low bodice, big bosom, pearl necklet” (*Happy Days* 275). The image described is both ironic and perfectly symmetrical to the landscape presented. Winnie seems to be attractive, with all the attributes of Western female sexuality: blond, voluptuous, bejeweled but not clothed. She is, however, fifty—beyond childbearing age, which makes her sexually useless, as barren as the mound in which she lives. Even if she were able to procreate, access to her genitalia is not available. She is literally cut off from her sexual functioning, yet throughout the play, she flirts with her husband and tries to stay attractive for him by brushing her teeth and applying her make-up. Winnie actively and knowingly participates in the masquerade of womanhood to control her place in it.

She is quite conscious that the world around her is fleeting and she is falling into its abyss: “Words fail, there are times when even they fail. Is not that so, Willie, that even words fail, at times? What is one to do then, until they come again? Brush and comb the hair, if it has not been done,

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3. Remember that Beckett would not have been thinking of global warming as a factor or an image in creating this landscape, but the analogy is an effective one for the contemporary audiences of this book.
or if there is some doubt, trim the nails if they are in need of trimming, these things tide one over” (Happy Days 284). Her actions seem to reflect almost perfectly Lacan’s comments on the hysteric: “What hysterics ultimately want one to know is that language runs off the rails concerning the magnitude of what she as woman is capable of revealing concerning jouissance. But this is not what matters to the hysteric. What matters to her is that that other called a man know what a precious object she becomes in this context of discourse” (Other Side 14). The hysteric understands the limits of discourse and her position as helping to establish that limit, but her power in demolishing the master signifier is not of ultimate concern to her. What she really wants is for the master to recognize and credit her for the ability to bring him to his knees.

Winnie reveals, “What I dream sometimes, Willie. That you’ll come round this side where I could see you. I’d be a different woman. Unrecognizable. Or just now and then come around this side and let me feast on you. But you can’t, I know” (Happy Days 296). Winnie knows that Willie is stuck in his position in his mound of dead Earth. She knows that because he is stuck, she is not subject to him, but she still wants him to see her. His recognition of her, according to her, has a sinister underside. Winnie wants to “feast on” him, which implies both spiritual and sexual consumption. In the conversation which follows, Winnie asks Willie to define “hog” for her, and he obliges. Winnie, the hysteric, longing to feed on her master, is also still willing to succumb to him and his supposed knowledge. By asking that final definition for clarification, Winnie forecloses on her ability to define a word for herself, or create her own meaning and space.

In Rockabye, the rocking motion of the Woman, subjecting herself to the Voice, is the potential creative force of the hysteric’s position. In this play, the Woman, or rocking figure, barely speaks, only asking for “More” on her own, juxtaposed against her seemingly contradictory echo of “time she stopped.” The request for “More” puts the Voice clearly in the position of the hysteric begging to be objectified, as a traditional objet a, while knowing the potential harm of this position. The hysteric borders on masochism, but in terms of potential jouissance, masochism is positive, because it allows the subject to experience pleasure from pain or to dominate the pain she is receiving. The Woman in Rockabye, however, limits her pain threshold with “time she stops” or the final halting of her rocking motion. When she stops rocking, she halts the repetition she had been enacting. Thus, she stops the drive to jouissance, which pushes her back into the traditional master’s discourse. The Woman was in the process of creating a new space, one of constant motion or orbit around her own pain, but she
chooses to end that. Although the choice is of her own free will, Beckett does not want his audience to think that this character has attained something freeing. Her ending position is still, frozen, nearly dead.

BECKETT’S REPETITIVE OPENINGS

The Woman’s catatonic state at the end of Rockabye is likely a result of her inability to speak for herself. Her silence has ended the repetitious language cycle that she was part of during the drama. Ruby Cohn’s seminal work on Beckett, Just Play, devotes an entire chapter to Beckett’s usage of repetitive language, entitled “The Churn of Stale Words: Repetitions.” While the chapter is a testament to the value of close reading, it does not create a theory as to the reason for the repetitions or their cumulative effect on interpretations of Beckett’s work. The closest Cohn gets to theoretic interpretation or performative suggestion is a statement about Happy Days. Cohn writes, “Repetition is a stabilizer for Winnie in her resolution to pass happy days and avoid a ‘wilderness’ of lonely silence. Repetition marks Mouth’s [Not I] cumulative consternation; she doesn’t know who her protagonist is, what she is saying, and yet she and ‘she’ find themselves saying again and again. Frenzied repetition belies her denial of suffering” (131). The reader wonders why and how such repetition exposes suffering and to what and where that suffering might lead.

The answer lies in Lacan’s connection of the use of repetition with the jouissance of language. Lacan asserts that “knowledge is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to jouissance. For the path toward death—this is what is at issue, it’s a discourse about masochism—the path toward death is nothing other than what is called jouissance” (Other Side 18). When we think we know something or can control something, as in the Woman in Rockabye’s false sense that “time she stopped” is a literal occurrence, we end the quest or the cycle of searching for the truth. For Lacan, truth and knowledge are oppositional forces, with the former being on the side of jouissance and the latter being opposed to it. When a Beckett character, to use Cohn’s phrase, “belie her denial of suffering” through repetition, she is acquiescing to her drive and unknowingly illustrating Lacan’s point that “what necessitates repetition is jouissance, a term specifically referred to. It is because there is a search for jouissance as repetition that the following is produced, which is in play at this stage of the Freudian
breakthrough—what interests us, *qua* repetition, and which is registered with a dialectic of *jouissance*, is properly speaking what goes against life. It is at the level of repetition that Freud sees himself constrained, in some way, by virtue of the very structure of discourse to spell out the death instinct* (Other Side 45). What is important in this passage is the connection between death, or ending, and discourse. As long as discourse continues, there is a battle being waged against death, and the drive for *jouissance* goes on because in our contemporary culture we use discourse as self-definition and protection against deadening silence. It is almost as if we can replace the cogito with a new dictum, “I speak, therefore I am.”

Although Scott McMillan’s comments in *The Musical as Drama* directly reference repetition in song structure and lyric, they are useful for illuminating repetition in any drama. He writes, “A sign must signify something other than itself to be a sign, but the close call is exciting. . . . The repeated line threatens to abandon semiosis by standing for itself, and by actually standing for itself-in-repetition” (McMillan 111). Beckett’s repeated words are void themselves and allow the speaker the ability to void herself, or create the space of abjection that results from the friction of the sign and the signified. Meaning in the speech is optional, even discouraged, if the speaking being is a hysteric approaching a Real moment.

Gibson reminds the reader of the glimmer of such a Real moment in *Rockabye*, “where the words, ‘fuck life’ abruptly explode into the play’s hypnotic rhythms” (243). Since the word “fuck” has a connotation of passionate, if not violent, even perverse, sexual acts, to “fuck life” would be to master it by a means that would produce *jouissance* for the doer, if not for the recipient. For the woman in *Rockabye*, it would mean breaking the cycle that enacts the control the Other figure in the play has over her. She does not, however, follow through or act. Instead, she only speaks the words, so the break in repetition of language does little to break the more potent underlying pattern of silent acquiescence.

In Beckett’s texts, language, because it is a product often highlighted in staging, is a repetition of words or sounds that link to a fixation of the oral desire. This fixation, though, because it is so narrowly focused, turns the speaker into an *objet a* for the master figures also present on stage. *Not I, Rockabye, and Krapp’s Last Tape* all exemplify this pattern.

In *Not I* the audience witnesses one of Beckett’s most unusual visual presentations: “Stage in darkness but for Mouth, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone. Auditor downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose
black djellaba, with hood fully faintly lit standing on an invisible podium about 4 feet high” (405). The two figures involved are both partial objects. The Mouth speaks in an unending torrent of words but cannot move, while the auditor can move, albeit limitedly, but cannot speak.

It is important to address the question of gender in regard to these two figures first. Many critics, including Ruby Cohn, refer to the Mouth, at least, using the feminine pronoun “she.” I would like to assert that gender is irrelevant to these figures. The figure of the hysteric, according to Lacan and his followers, the figure most able to access jouissance, is most frequently also referred to as feminine, but Lacan points out that “in saying ‘she,’ we are making the hysteric a woman, but this is not her privilege alone. Many men get themselves analyzed who, by this fact alone, are obliged to pass through the hysteric’s discourse, since this is the law, the rule of the game” (Other Side 33). What Lacan wants us to understand is that the position of the analysand trumps the limits of gender. If we take Beckett’s play to somewhat produce, or reproduce, the process and outcomes of analysis, then unless he specifies, gender is unimportant.

BECKETT’S WORDY REVERBERATIONS

The Mouth and the Auditor of Not I are two partial objects of the same missing master signifier. The belatedness of the Mouth, as it says, “out . . . into this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time” (Not I 405), proves that the master is missing by highlighting time as a value or judgment. The “tiny little thing . . . before its time” has been born before the master signifier was ready to accept it, and so it is left to float, like a broken piece of asteroid, out of orbit. The Auditor is able to display the “helpless compassion” of movement that Beckett requires because the Auditor is in the same psychic position as the Mouth; whereas the Mouth can only repeat the narrative it knows in a style that assembles itself like a mosaic of words, the Auditor can only move its arms like the wings of a dying bird. Both figures are slowly running out of momentum as their repetition of the past and their reactions to it continue.

In Rockabye, the Voice and the Woman dramatize a pattern similar to that of the Mouth and the Auditor in Not I. In this play, unlike Not I, gender is specified, at least for the Woman, and is hugely important. The play’s stage directions reveal its treatment of womanhood. Beckett separates out and describes eyes, costume, attitude, chair, and rock, all in rela-
tation to the Woman. The delineation of parts that Beckett defines marks the Woman in the various manifestations of her status as partial object. She is not conceived of as a whole, and thus Beckett not only translates the concept of Modern episodic writing into character development but also makes this female subject only a fragment or series of fragments of herself. It seems that Beckett is taking a typical misogynistic view of womanhood by objectifying parts, but we find in his stage descriptions his most gentle and sentimental lines. The chair is described as having “rounded curving inward arms to suggest embrace” (462). The chair is a part of the Woman, though, making the image one of part embracing part, or an attempt at creating wholeness or unity.

The attempt at unity is repeated throughout the words and actions of the play. The most obvious example is the simultaneous and repeated utterance of “time she stopped.” Time is an agent of fragmentation as it separates life into arbitrarily constructed units that humanity accepts as belonging to the governing mastery of the Big Other. The repeated and combined effort to stop the dictatorship of time is an effort to end the domination of the Symbolic. The Woman figure, however, is not ultimately successful in her control of time. Instead of co-opting time and using it to her advantage, she stops it completely, ending the repetitive motion of the drive represented by the incessant rocking motion. It does not matter whether or not she controlled the rocking during the play, as she does control its ending. Thus, repetition, in Rockabye, like the Woman figure herself, is partially successful in bringing that character toward a Real moment.

In both Not I and Rockabye, the characters focus on repetition related to language. The plays both demonstrate that repetition, because they still follow a prescribed circuit, even if related to the drive, and confine the locus of jouissance. The only kind of jouissance possible for these characters is jouissance of language. To experience fully a Real moment, the subject must live surplus jouissance, which is hidden from the subject under the loss of any other form of jouissance.4 The secondary forms of jouissance that are experienced though the Woman’s rocking and the Mouth’s verbal abjection serve to prevent these subjects from their penultimate experiences.

The repetition of language in Waiting for Godot and Happy Days varies slightly in form from that of Not I and Rockabye. The language repetition in the longer plays relies on verbal echoes, which create a circuit or orbit

in which the subject resides. Despite that locus of repetition being deemed “home” for the subject, the subject lacks understanding of self, or truth. The characters, Gogo, Didi, and Winnie, put themselves in the orbit and willingly inhabit the edges of it. What these characters do not recognize is the emptiness in the center around which the subject is circulating. The subjects are blind to the positive aspects of the lack at the center of their lives. They either cannot see, for Gogo and Didi, or cannot face, for Winnie, the barrenness of their landscapes. Until the subject is willing to embrace the starkness of the death at their center, she continues to long for generation that will keep her tethered to the outside orbit of her drive instead of plunging into the swirling vortex of her center.

In Waiting for Godot, the question of generation and its relationship to death arises early in the first act:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?
VLADIMIR: Hmm. It’d give us an erection.
ESTRAGON: [highly excited] An erection!
VLADIMIR: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That’s why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you know that?
(Waiting for Godot 11)

Estragon, the more childlike, or Hegelian slave, of the pair, instinctually wants to die and thrills at the idea of sexual arousal that is not dependent on orgasm. Gogo explains that the result of the “little death,” combined with the actual death, is the generation of a mythic creature personified as a shrieking evil root. Sexual release is damning to the pastoral landscape, infecting it with unnatural beings.

The sexual innuendo continues throughout the play with repetition of the erection joke, in relation to the carrot that Estragon begs for and is then disgusted by, saying of the phallic snack he craved, “Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets” (Waiting for Godot 15). The repetitive motion of sucking on the carrot is not satisfying but revolting, which makes both eating and sex unfulfilling acts in this play. The circle of the drive is not halted by the desire for the completion of either of these typical acts.

The drive is also, and most famously, kept in motion by the repeated endings of Act One and Act Two. Both end with Estragon asking, “Well, shall we go?” and Vladimir replying, “Yes, let’s go,” followed by the stage direction “They do not move” (Waiting for Godot 47). The words close both acts because, as the play’s action or nonaction proves, words are meaningless. The characters know this, too. What they are saying does not matter;
their words are merely part of the orbits of the drives, parts of the meaningless centers around which they circulate. Beckett does not want them to move, because moving would force them into an unnatural act. They would acquiesce to what the audience wants—resolution—which they refuse. They also, however, do not seem to acknowledge their choice, and in that, they miss their opportunity to push themselves wholeheartedly into the void.

Winnie, too, avoids the void through her repetitive language. Each of Winnie's monologues features several words that get deployed and repeated with slight variation, but that reveal the psychic drive of the character at that moment in the action of the play. For example, Winnie's first monologue is governed by the words “begin,” “poor,” and “what,” which are each said at least three times. Taken out of context, the words can be assembled by any reader into a myriad of different narratives. None would be true to Winnie's usage, but we must question if that really matters. Winnie questions rhetorically, “Is not that so, Willie, that even words fail, at times?” (*Happy Days* 284). If words fail, their meanings are voided; the repetition of words has that effect on the ear. When Winnie and her audience, Willie and the theatre patrons, hear her monologues of repetition, the individual words begin to lose their relationship to their definitions, and the listeners start to appreciate them for the familiarity of the sound they produce. Instead of “poor,” the listener hears the individual letters, especially, in the case of this word, the heavy double “O” sounds of the middle, lulling the hearers out of thought.

Beckett uses this technique as a riff on his emphasis on the word “spool” in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, which was written in 1958, two years before *Happy Days*. In *Krapp*, the word “spool” is the title character's link to the past; he casts out the word like a slinky and brings it back to him with refuse that it picks up on the return journey, like a sophisticated version of Freud's fort/da game. Winnie's usage of repetitive language is different from Krapp’s, as it is that which allows for destabilization; whereas Krapp's repetition of the word “spool” brings him security, Winnie's repetition forces her deeper into hysteria. Winnie's repetition reminds us of Lacan's claim, “Through the instrument of language a number of stable relationships are established, inside which something that is much larger and goes much further than actual utterances, can of course, be inscribed” (*Other Side* 13). Winnie's repetition displays the undercurrent of language that Lacan describes. Her repetition yanks word from meaning, like the mandrake being pulled from the Earth, exposing void at the heart of every subject.

The play ends with Winnie commanding herself, “Pray your old prayer,
Winnie” (Happy Days 297). She is trying to force herself into a sense of stability with the words of her prayer, the way Krapp does with his repetition of the word “spool.” The difference is that the audience hears each of Krapp’s repetitions, but it does not hear Winnie say her prayer. The audience is left in the void of meaningless banter, just as Winnie is, and from there she and the audience might be able to vocalize an entirely meaningless sound, or vocative sinthome.

BECKETT’S CLUMSY CHARACTERS

The lack of shared meaning produced by individual words in a Beckett play constitutes a portion of the definition of his work as “missing.” Another missing element of his plays is centered in the misstep of the analytic experience that is dramatized in his work. One of Freud’s most basic principles, and one that is still accepted to a lesser degree in psychology today, is that of transference and countertransference. The analyst and the patient must be able to become each other’s objects of desire; for the patient, the experience of desire can become one which the patient controls instead of one in which the patient is controlled.

In Lacanian terms, the analyst must become the objet a for the hysterical patient, and the patient must become the analyst’s objet a. This destabilizes the energy cathexis of the objet a because the former master, embodied by the analyst, is the new partial object of desire. The false assumption that the master is whole or unified is exposed, so the hysteric is able to see that the subject-supposed-to-know really knows no more than she does. Ultimately, this explains the mysterious Lacanian claim that anxiety does, in fact, have an object. We usually characterize anxiety as a free-floating, surplus affect that does not have a trajectory. Anxiety is the opposite of desire and related closely to, perhaps even the motivation of, the drive. Anxiety can, however, both be related to the drive and have an object if we reconsider what its object might be. If the hysteric is able to work in analysis, because she understands the analyst to be the objet a, then the position of the master, just like the primacy of the cogito, is debunked. The anxiety of the hysteric does have an object, but that object is atypical because the object itself is destabilized or knocked off its pedestal in the position of

5. See both The Other Side of Psychoanalysis and The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis for reference to this claim.
the master, which would allow the hysteric to control her own anxiety and turn its affect into a sinthome.

In Beckett, the subject's final process of making a partial object into a sinthome is precluded by the missing transference and countertransference. The two subjects do not desire each other and choose not to desire anything or anyone in the present moment. Instead, Beckett's subjects only desire objects in their pasts. The present moment, or the convergence of time and space with radical desire, is missing; to return to Gibson's explanation of Badiou's use of mathematics, actual infinity is missing.

Not I and Play are two of Beckett's works that stage this missing present. In Play, two female characters and one male character tell the story of their previously interconnected lives while confined in urns. Only their heads are visible; the actors are totally denied the use of their bodies; only their faces can move. As Beckett describes it, “From each [urn] a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn’s mouth” (Play 355). The urn and the body of the subject are melded into one post–human being, with, as Beckett points out, “toneless voices” to further inhibit the actors’ means of expression. Without body and inflection, the story must be told exclusively through words and facial expressions. Each of the three characters speaks out into the darkness without any attempt to communicate with each other; therefore, none of the characters can serve in the position of analyst for any of the other characters. Instead, the position of the analyst is, at best, placed in the audience. Since the convention of the fourth wall is solidly in place in all of Beckett's work, he does not intend for the audience and characters to interact. That means that the character, or analysand, cannot complete the transference and turn the analyst into object because the analyst is missing. W1 expresses this when she states, “I can do nothing . . . for anybody . . . any more . . . thank God. So it must be something I have to say. How the mind words still!” (Play 362). W1’s attempts to “say” something show that she is part of the analytic experience, but she is not in conversation, nor is anyone listening. Her analysis is missing because there is no one in her environment who hears her.

The choral round-robin that begins Play is its greatest demonstration of the missing present. In this round, each of the three characters speaks in an orbitlike fashion around certain key words, much like Winnie does in her monologues. W1 focuses on “strange” and “darkness”; W2 repeats “shade” and “right,” while M uses “peace” and “one assumed.” Only one of the repeated words, “assumed,” is a verb, and it is in the past tense. The verbs in the chorus are all either past or future tense. None is in the present,
so audience/analyst cannot respond to them as a proper objet a should because they are not reaching that object in the same time.

The belatedness that governs Not I also places its action out of the present. The Mouth, taking the place of the analysand, is located upstage, whereas the Auditor or analyst is downstage. This stage position reverses the typical visual depiction of the analytic situation, in which the analysand is either downstage or across from the analyst. In Not I the analysand takes the physical position of power, but the position is meaningless as no transference can occur. The Mouth is depicted as a partial object from the beginning of the play, but the description of the Auditor, totally robed in black, makes the Auditor seem not only untouchable, but also so unified in blackness as to be unbreakable. If there is nowhere to breach the master, then that position cannot be partialized. The Auditor does, however, want to reach out for some type of countertransference, as its movements are described as “a gesture of helpless compassion” (Not I 405). The Auditor or analyst is powerless and thus could be broken apart, but the Mouth fails to recognize this potential because the Mouth is not engaging in desire in the present moment; the Mouth is so totally absorbed in the past, again revealed through the consistent usage of past-tense verbs, that it cannot see any freedom in the present.

When the verbs switch to present tense in the last fifty lines of the play, the actions described are still things that have happened; the Mouth employs the present tense to try to relive the past in the present. We hear the desperation in lines such as “darkness . . . now this . . . this . . . quicker and quicker . . . words . . . the brain . . . flickering away like mad . . . quick grab and on . . . nothing there . . . on somewhere else . . . try somewhere else . . . all the time something begging it all to stop . . . unanswered” (Not I 412). What is leaving is the Mouth’s connection to the past that it does not want to lose, even though it causes much angst. The Mouth intuits that only angst makes it live, but here the pain is not present, but past. Life is not happening now but has happened already. The present is a mere facsimile. The Auditor hears the pleas of the past and knows that the Mouth cannot be helped; hence the Auditor can only move its entire body sympathetically, instead of breaking itself apart in empathy.

Because Beckett’s characters believe in the present moment, all energy in the plays is dead in the past or only expected from the future. If there is no cathexsis, the audience is left to wonder what force allows the characters to exist in a present moment that can be observed. The cathexsis, or energy transfer of the analytic experience, is replaced by parapraxis. Beckett makes energy into a joke. The hole left by the missing energy of the present
is filled by laughter. Laughter is more productive than silence because in silence, language is not in play, but in comedy, language is manipulated to the subject’s desire, so there is a chance of laughter. That laughter is indicative of the possibility of a Real moment. However, Beckett’s characters fail to recognize their own absurdity and stay stuck in their starting spaces instead of moving to new positions.

BECKETT’S FUNNY FACES

Beckett’s usage of vaudevillian techniques is widely recognized as characteristic of his work. Ruby Cohn’s description of the comedic elements in Beckett points out the heart of its necessity. She writes, “His wide appeal, however, rests uneasily upon his humor. Even scholars, embarrassed at professional gravity, have guffawed at the vaudeville gags of Godot—unbuttoned flies, insistent blows, speaking while chewing, juggling hats, manifest odors, and suicide feints. Underlying most of these lazzis are the recalcitrance of objects to mere human manipulation” (11–12). Cohn implies that the objects being used for comedic effects are in fact comedic because they represent parts of the self that are unassimilable to the Symbolic order or master’s discourse. The parapractic action is the result of the exposition of the realization that the subject has parts of himself that cannot be mastered. This reminds readers of Yeats’s “The Dialogue of Self and Soul” in which the two parts of the human subject, the logical and the spiritual, can never actually discuss anything; their conversations will always miss each other because part of the spirit or psyche must always be unreachable so as to allow for the creation of the sinthome.

Cohn speaks indirectly to this méconnaisance when she discusses Godot’s vaudeville antics as masking the essential question of salvation or damnation of the characters within the play (58). Cohn’s comments assume the traditional interpretation that Godot is a god figure, but what if that is not true? What happens if Godot is the void or lacks any type of interpretation, including the need for guesses at his Symbolic content? The audience is left with a center that is meaningless. The jokes do not mask the existential question that Cohn identifies, but they show the misstep of the logic of believing that Godot has to have a meaning. Comedy proves to the audience that meaning is unnecessary, even when the characters believe it is. Early in the play, Gogo and Didi try to determine a way to accomplish their suicide. Estragon commands, “Use your intelligence, can’t you?” and
Vladimir responds, “I remain in the dark” (Godot 11). Between the two bits of dialogue, Beckett provides the stage direction: “Vladimir uses his intelligence” (11). The actor must convey the failure of that attempt, and it is from the expression which conveys that failure that the audience is able to laugh. The audience snickers because it, too, is in a position of denial. The audience wants to believe that it would not have the same foolish inabilities, but secretly, each audience member knows that she does have those flows. The energy created by the character’s misstep on stage transfers to the audience, so that the audience is able to laugh at its substitutes and be comforted knowing that illogical and ridiculous behaviors are more universal than logical maneuvers.

Badiou explains the appeal of Beckett’s humor brilliantly when he writes, “Beckett must be played with the most intense humor, taking advantage of the enduring variety of inherited theatrical types. It is only then that the true destination of the comical emerges: neither a symbol nor a metaphysics in disguise, and even less a derision, but rather a powerful love for human obstinacy, for tireless desire, for humanity reduced to its stubbornness and malice” (On Beckett 75). One of the most common vaudevillian types is the tramp. Certainly, Godo and Didi are tramps, but so are other Beckett characters: Krapp, the Women of Come and Go, and the figures of Cascando are all tramping about their pasts trying to recapture some deluded aesthetic memory clouded by nostalgia. Tramps such as these exist also in Yeats’s plays as the guards in The Resurrection and the Dionysian revelers in Calvary. Each of these tramp pairs or groups possesses the “tireless desire” about which Badiou writes. Such endless longing is the motion of the drive. For Badiou, what makes Beckett’s comedy fascinating is that it belies all categorization into one type or one partial object and encompasses bits of all types or merges a variety of partial objects into one new form that is endurance itself. Comedy arises out of the ironic persistence of character faced with the impossibility of the goal being pursued, unless the very goal is the act of persistence. Certainly, Beckett’s characters believe they have tangible outcomes: Godot will arrive, Krapp will eat his banana and finish his tape, Clov will leave, Winnie will pray. These ends do not happen, though.

Beckett’s characters do not fulfill their goals because action, typically conceived as the change in status from point a to point b, does not happen in these plays. Instead, Eric Gans explains, Beckett’s characters act through not acting:

[T]he action such as it takes places in an interval of waiting for something else. The primary dramatic action is thus the waiting itself. The primary
action may be said to “fail” in a peculiarly Beckettian way. This is not because Godot never shows up; indeed his absence is the *sine qua non* of successful waiting, since as soon as he arrived the waiting would be over . . . the very choice of “waiting” as dramatic action condemns the writer of failure, but this is failure that can be perfectly well expressed in its own right, since everything that happens, or can possibly happen, expresses it. (Bloom 97)

Waiting as action is Beckett’s way of displaying the importance of pursuing one’s passion, to remind us of Badiou’s usage of the term *love*, or residing in the space of the drive. Comedy is the means through which the energy of the drive is felt via the parapraxis that leads the characters to believe their action will occur in the future and is not yet happening. It is through this ultimate mistake that Beckett forces his characters to miss their chances at the Real.

Waiting as a form of comedic action is most obvious in, but not exclusive to, *Waiting for Godot*. We can see it in each of Beckett’s evening-length works. In *Endgame*, each of the four characters is waiting for something different, which serves to particularize their drives more than the nearly identical wants of Gogo and Didi. The question of time arises very early in *Endgame* when Hamm asks, “What time is it?” and Clov replies, “The same as usual” (94). Time is portrayed as a persistent and unchangeable force that both limits and stabilizes these rickety personalities. The answer to the question is basically comic, though, as it does not provide what is expected, a unit of time, either measuring day versus night or giving the hour of day. We laugh at the sarcasm embedded in the answer and are thankful that the veiled anger is not directed at us in the audience.

The discussion of time also introduces the theme of waiting into the play. Whenever a character is concerned about time, waiting is an underlying theme, as time indicates how long the characters have until the next plot development. Time is, then, a measure of anxiety, with the next plot development as its object. Its presence in the play begins with what Gibson calls history. He writes, “The beginning of history is a theme in *Endgame* on two specific occasions: the panic over the flea, where it is treated with riotously ironical wit, and the appearance of the small boy, where the irony is less assured” (241). The flea and the boy represent the term later used in the play, “accursed fornicator,” and indicate simultaneous hope for and fear of the potential future, or potential infinity. In *Endgame*, we can also identify four interconnected and anticipated actions that indicate actual infinity, or that endless waiting leftover from Godot: Clov is waiting to leave, Hamm is waiting for Clov to leave, Nell is waiting to die, and Nagg
is waiting for sustenance to continue living. The anticipated actions are all basic daily events made epic through Beckett’s emphasis on them. In the world created, the “bare interior” (91), as Beckett indicates in the stage directions, the most mundane or expected events are highlighted because there is nothing else on which to dwell. The audience wants to laugh at the supposed “patheticness” of these lives, devoid of excitement, but something holds the audience back at the beginning of the play. The laughter comes, though, as the characters wait absurdly long for basic things, which lose their relevance as they persist.

Nell gets closest to the truth of the play’s state when she asks, “Why this face, day after day?” (101); the audience expects a profound or comforting answer but only hears Nagg say, “I’ve lost my tooth” (Endgame 101). The parapraxis that occurs between the metaphysical question and the base and irrelevant answer makes the audience laugh. Tone also contributes to the humor of the exchange. When Nell asks when the tooth was lost, Nagg responds, “[elegiac] Ah, yesterday!” (Endgame 101). Nagg almost seems a poetaster at the moment, but he is not even that. He is not aware of the humor his lament creates, and that lack of self-ironization hinders the freeing power of the humor of his situation.

The same pattern is true of Hamm and Clov. Hamm’s pathetic question, “You won’t come and kiss me goodbye?” is followed by Clov’s reply, “Oh I shouldn’t think so” (Endgame 123–24). Hamm then calmly taunts, “But you might merely be dead in your kitchen” (Endgame 124). Of course, no dead body could come and kiss anyone goodnight, but the line reveals the sadness driving the humor. Even more poignant is the idea that a grown man needs the infantile reassurance of being kissed goodnight. The request is not sexual in nature at all, but it is perverse. To carry it out would require a reversal of the family dynamic. Clov, the son, is being asked to take on the parental role, which he does, partially, throughout the entire play. The kiss, though, would make the reversal complete, and that must be refused in the world of the play because it would destroy the symbiotic relationship which fuels the dramatic aggression. We laugh at the prospect, though, so that we literally can hear the sound of the request, or make our anxiety over it audible. The laughter is like Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” which helps to bring us into being as we audibly manifest our contact with the edge of the Real.

Krapp’s Last Tape is another Beckett play which allows the audience’s laughter to be heard. Using tradition, even tired stunts such as slipping on a banana peel, Beckett orients the reader to the insular, solipsistic world of the protagonist, through these familiar jests that have been seen in other
places. Humor becomes the common ground or fertilizer, helping to cultivate the wild pastoral space of the stage for the seemingly more refined audience.

The banana peel gag, though, a physical Freudian slip which Krapp forces to happen with his careless behavior, is only the first level of humor in the play. The stage directions with which the play begins, again in relation to the banana, are also comedic in a traditional way. Beckett indicates that Krapp “stoops, unlocks the first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a reel of tape, peers at it, puts it back, unlocks second drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a large banana, peers at it, locks the drawer, puts the keys back in his pocket” (Krapp’s Last Tape 222). We laugh at the repetitiveness of the action because it indicates some inadequacy in the protagonist. The scene also reveals that the banana and the tapes are somehow linked, as Krapp behaves the same way toward both. Both objects, the audience will learn, are harmful to Krapp because they literally and psychologically constipate him. The tapes hold back Krapp and lock him into the past, so that he can recognize his missed opportunities but cannot do anything to change their outcome. This connection is not fully established until the play is finished. The laughter of the opening action comes from Krapp’s “peering” at both the banana and the tapes as if he cannot understand their meaning or function. Krapp’s parapraxis is that moment of missed recognition. That moment, though, is a glimmer of freedom for Krapp that he will not be trapped by their usual effects on him, but he is, in the end, trapped.

In Lacanian terms, Krapp cannot abject the refuse of his memories and becomes psychically constipated by them. The fourth-grade humor of his name does create giggles in the audience, though, despite its ability to define the character’s interiority. The audience is tempted to laugh at this bathroom humor, because it gives us a sanctioned space in which we can express the base and physical nature of being human. Essentially, Krapp’s name belies the cogito as it calls attention not to thought but to excretion as the basic means of self-definition. The space between what we want to define the self, our thought, versus what we know actually defines us, the crap, is a parapraxis that we laugh at because we realize it is true. As Lacan reminds us, “The truth flies off the very moment you no longer wanted to grab it” (Other Side 57). Truth is the abject because it is recognizable as such only when we give up on it. That is, truth is true only when it is crap. We laugh at what we give up, and in Beckett’s play, we can see an entire character who embodies the truth that he cast off. Such is the meaning of the scene Krapp revisits three times, the memory of his inability to con-
summate the relationship with the only woman he loved. Intercourse is then also crap, as it, too, eludes us when we want it most.

Instead of action, Krapp is left with a word, “spool,” which he repeats nearly ten times in the first two pages of the play. Krapp does not just say the word “spool,” though; he elongates the middle “oo” sound to pronounce it “spooooooooooool.” Krapp is like a child playing with language in an attempt to co-opt its meaning. The audience laughs because it sees Krapp’s attempts at reassigning new meaning or usage to old words as useless, but hidden in that laughter is a little bit of envy. The audience would like to be able to define its own terms of communication, but it cannot, so it chooses to mock him who can. The laughter hides the pain of the audience’s position.

Pain is both real and anticipated, not just for the audience but for the protagonist of *Happy Days*. Winnie says of her own condition, “slight headache sometimes” (*Happy Days* 277) and imagines “the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the noon has so many hundred hours” (*Happy Days* 281). Winnie’s pain is minimal in the present, but she knows it will reach an unbearable state as the little flesh not buried in the Earth will be charred off of her by the unrelenting sun. The pastoral is obviously a combatant that has already defeated the heroine. It seems conventionally wrong to laugh at Winnie’s pain, but the audience does because she is in a state of utter self-deception. Even as she is faced with a most agonizing approaching death, she brushes her hair and puts on her lipstick to maintain her appearance for her husband, Willie. At first the audience laughs because it thinks it can see its superiority to this frivolously vain woman, but soon the audience realizes that perhaps it is not so different from Winnie.

Winnie says, “Ah Earth, you old extinguisher. I presume this has occurred before, though I cannot recall it” (*Happy Days* 291). Beckett implies in this statement that the total dissolution of the Earth is part of some cosmic drive. If so, the Earth’s occupants must also be in a cycle of self-destruction which can occur through abjection. Winnie’s abjection is nearly complete as she says, “I used to perspire freely. Now hardly at all” (*Happy Days* 290). She has nothing left to in her body to abject. The audience, however, does, and the process through which it begins to abject itself in the theatre is laughter at Winnie’s absurdity. Our laughter at her ridiculousness is the conduit which allows the audience to abject itself by laughing at her.

*Come and Go*, a less-discussed Beckett short-work, provides another example of a play which allows the audience to use laughter at its characters as a means of abjection. The play’s title can be interpreted as a refer-
ence to the famous refrain of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo.” The frivolity and inanity of the women in Eliot’s poem, mindlessly discussing art they neither care about nor understand, is magnified in Beckett’s dramaticule. The three female characters, Flo, Vi, and Ru, are terribly vain and catty. They are amplified versions of Winnie, as they center on the appearance of each other instead of on themselves.

The women are costumed in what seem to be washed-out versions of their former glory. Beckett describes, “Costume: Full-length coats, buttoned high, dull violet (Ru), dull red (Vi), dull yellow (Flo). Drab nondescript hats with enough brim to shade faces. Apart from color differentiation three figures as alike as possible. Light shoes with rubber soles. Hands made up to be as visible as possible. No rings apparent” (Come and Go 387). The faded glory of the women is evident, as they wear colors drained of vibrancy. Against their bland dresses fall their hands “made up to be as visible as possible,” so that the hand-holding essential to the plot can be seen.

Beckett states that the women are of “indeterminate age,” but it is clear they have reached at least the mid-point of their lives, as they are meeting again after not seeing each other for a long time. When Vi asks, “When did we three last meet?” Ru responds, “Let us not speak” (Come and Go 385), as if the number of years is too much to bear. The dialogue of the play centers on the lines repeated for each character. The first example is in reference to Vi: “Flo asks, ‘What do you think of Vi?’ and Ru responds, ‘I see little change. [Flo moves to center seat, whispers in Ru’s ear. Appalled.] Oh! [They look at each other. Flo puts her finger to her lips.] Does she not realize?’” (Come and Go 385). Flo’s final comment in the exchange is “God grant not” (Come and Go 385). The women, acting very much like petty schoolgirls, are obviously mocking some negative physical change or attribute; instead of being true friends and confronting their friend about the change, they giggle and hide it. The audience, too, laughs, longing to be part of the “in crowd” of the two mockers while simultaneously feeling superior to the women on stage, who act less maturely than the audience assumes they would.

As the cycle of the play progresses, with each pair of women criticizing the left-out third, it becomes obvious that their criticisms are really mirroring what they recognize as problems in themselves but are too ashamed, too vain, to admit. The characters lack the ability to laugh at themselves and deny their own chances at abjection. The audience moves from laughing at the characters to laughing at its own vanity and insecurity.
The women in *Come and Go* try to return to childhood and agree to Vi’s question, “Shall we hold hands in the old way?” (386) which references the playground games of their girlhood. What follows is an intricately patterned square-dance–like switching of hands, which ends in Flo’s statement, “I can feel the rings” (*Come and Go* 386). The rings, according to Beckett’s stage directions, are not worn by any of the women but represent some bond of their past. The games of childhood allow the rings to manifest themselves, at least in the psyches of the characters. Instead of laughter, these women have their combined past experience. Through their movement and their hand holding, they are able to eschew that which they want to forget in the present and redefine themselves through their past. Instead of laughter, the women use regression as a means of attaining the void. The silence that ends the play leaves the audience feeling ambivalent about the women and their choice.

Ambivalence is the key to Beckett, though, even according to his own terminology. He calls *Waiting for Godot* a “tragicomedy” in two acts. Beckett purposefully straddles two genres, and although doing so makes his theatre unique, it also ties him to not one but two sets of expectations. When participating in a Beckett play, the actor and audience must recall the cathartic, peripatetic expectations of tragedy and bring to life the roguish merriment of comedic history. Beckett uses the two sets of overlapping rules to varying degrees in his work. The effort, though, of having to use two sets of standards is ironically limiting. Beckett misses the opportunity to make something totally new, as he must concern himself with rejecting the old. This is not to discredit Beckett’s work, as his plays are amazing works of theatrical genius; they are not, however, Real.