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Lyotard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime

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Samuel Beckett, The Sublime, The Worst

Samuel Beckett's texts are populated with characters who have been so deprived of their humanity that humanity appears as essentially absent from his texts. The characters' presence in the diegesis is marked by unmistakable absences—absence of vision, of mobility, of sense, of name. Beckett's characters are often without; without hair, without teeth, without foreseeable future. The human character is at the limit of humanity and runs the risk of passing over into the grey zone of the inhuman. They lose track of their place, of their time, of their names. They frequently belong to no time and no place. When they are specifically situated, they are in and among ruins. "Ruins true refuge long last towards which so many false time out of mind," begins his own translation of "Sans" (without) as "Lessness."¹ Beckett's writing begins in ruins as a refuge with neither ingress nor egress, "true refuge, issueless."² Ruins are "scattered," diffused across the imaginary plane that the text creates. The text seems not to refer to anything worldly or mundane, but is instead an imaginary creation, proceeding from the refuge of the ruins in which ruined figures dwell.

Beckett's texts are figurations of the ruined subject in which text and character become coextensive with the ruins that are the object of the writing, "Little body same grey as the earth sky ruins only upright."³ The human body is a body in ruins, differentiated from its surroundings only by its posture. This sense of the ruined body is coextensive in Beckett's works with the ruins of the mind, the ruined ideas of modernity, and will be the main theme for

our consideration of the sublime in his works. His texts bear witness to an intensified assault on the category of the human, all the while they recognize that the human was never fully what Enlightenment philosophy claimed it to be. Enlightenment philosophy taught that Man could liberate himself, individually and collectively, from the chains of his misery and servitude by the right exercise of reason. Reason was to excise all traces of superstition and falsity that kept "us" from liberating ourselves. Enlightenment was not just a philosophical, cultural, and religious moment of modernity, but a comprehensive intellectual, cultural, and political mobilization of Reason in the service of liberation. The fruits of that mobilization are, at best, a mixed bag. Nevertheless, at the center of this mobilization was a philosophy of Man that made him the artificer of his own future and the sufficient condition for his own liberation. The idea of Man, then, is at the origin of Enlightenment as the final cause. It is the end and the aim of Enlightenment, and also its organizing principle. Enlightenment insistence on reason and its conception of Man lie at the origin of Beckett's writing as impetus and hurdle. It is this idea of Man that Beckett's sublime seeks to reconfigure; it is an effort to remember what Enlightenment ideology had already, in its organizing moments, forgotten.

Beckett's writing participates in an anamnesis of the human and inhuman. Let us recall that Lyotard conceives of the inhuman as secret source of what constitutes the human. Beckett's concern with the inhuman comprises part of an effort to carry out the anamnesis of the assault on humanity that never abated in the twentieth century and even continues on and on. To illustrate the processive nature of Beckett's anamnesis of the inhuman, we will begin with an explication of the 1946 radio essay, "The Capital of the Ruins."⁴ This text, which is rarely accorded much weight with Beckett scholars, nonetheless makes a clear statement as to his concerns as a writer, and it illustrates a thoroughly political dimension to his writing that is too often obscured. Then, we will discuss the difficulties in writing about Beckett, the risks that writing about Beckett open to criticism, and the ways in which the reflective judgments of the aesthetic of the sublime can obviate these difficulties. Such judgments exclude determinate claims that would make their objects into discrete cognizable units. Determinate judgments proceed according to a pre-given set of categories that are either generated by the mind itself or by reference to historical events, facts, or figurations. "Beckettlessness" is the name of the infection in criticism that urges the critic to accomplish for Beckett what Beckett could not—to arrive at the silence of a still point. By necessity, judgments of the sublime never permit thought this final arrival at the destination. We will argue that the most adequate "understanding" of Beckett's writing is one that releases itself from the project of understanding by determinative

judgments. That is, the aesthetic reflective judgment is the mode in which Beckett's work ought to become the object of our attention. Third, we will present *The Unnameable* as a prelude to *Worstward Ho*. Here, we will emphasize the way in which Beckett begins to question the process of narrative and its destinies. By the 1950's Beckett had opened and entered the zone of writing that crystallizes in his last books in which narrative becomes a response to an obligation. This is present already in *The Unnameable*, but is the *sine qua non* of narrative in the final books, *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and especially *Worstward Ho*. Finally, we will argue that the worst as it is articulated as a principle of narration in *Worstward Ho* is a process of lessening language that seeks to present what is unrepresentable in language— "the unnullable least." It is in this text that we come into contact with Beckett's Thing, that never present, never absent, immaterial material of the sublime sentiment. The worst is a way of figuring the sublime that attests to the terror that comes with the idea of a humanity in ruins. The worst is a response to a cultural failure that itself adopts the logic of failure in order (perhaps) to succeed.

The Human in Ruins

In 1946 Beckett delivered the radio address, "The Capital of the Ruins," from the Irish Hospital at St. Lô in Normandy. The text is not often taken as an important work by Beckett scholars partly because it has been, as S.E. Gontarski notes, "shrouded in mystery, confusion, and error since its discovery amid the archives of Radio Telefis Éireann in 1983 and its publication in 1986."⁵ The text, furthermore, had seen some editorial reworking of a stylistic and not substantive nature, though S.E. Gontarski's editing was able to restore Beckett's original language.

Gontarski's editorial notes to the Grove Press edition of Beckett's *Complete Short Prose* adds to the obscurity of "The Capital of the Ruins" in two ways. First, rather than incorporate the text into the body of the book, in which the texts are arranged chronologically by date of original publication, he places it as an appendix. This may seem to be an understandable choice, for it seems odd that this nonfiction address would be placed among "First Love," "The Expelled," "The Calmative," or "The End." But, the discontinuity it would add to the text would serve to give a more complicated and nuanced impression of Beckett and his writing rather than detract from it. Second, Gontarski limits the heft of the text by calling it, "a short piece of reportage."⁶ Gontarski also reports that Beckett had no memory of having made the text,

thus insinuating, if not outright claiming, that the text is incidental. As we will show below, if considered carefully, it is not just reportage, but an assessment of the site of the struggle for modern consciousness and especially, of modern self-consciousness, and is programmatic of Beckett's work in the years after the war.

In *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, James Knowlson corrects the view offered by Gontarski, although he does not offer a detailed reading of "The Capital of the Ruins." Beckett had been engaged in Resistance activities during the War and had worked very hard to set up a hospital in St. Lô. For Knowlson, this experience proved decisive for Beckett's later artistic concerns: "this period at St. Lô was probably vital in terms of the content of his postwar writing."⁷ In St. Lô, Beckett witnessed misery and devastation that affected him deeply and brought him into contact with groups of people with whom he had little contact before the war.⁸ "The Capital of the Ruins" attests to this.

Stylistically, "The Capital of the Ruins" is perhaps Beckett's least elliptical, least playful, least Beckettian text. Yet, it treats a serious problem that is not incidental to his artistic concerns, as Knowlson suggests, but does not specify. Even though Beckett claims to have forgotten "The Capital of the Ruins," the text is part of the basis of his artistic experimentation. It is one appearance of Beckett's Thing, always forgotten, but unforgettable, as Lyotard phrases it. The experience of the Capital of the ruins in France is one source of anamnesis that Beckett's later texts address.

"The Capital of the Ruins," begins with a description of the Hospital at St. Lô that had been operated by the Irish Red Cross. By the end of the war, the grounds of St. Lô were a muddy, ruined mess, like much of the rest of Europe. The buildings were prefabricated huts that were in general, better than what was available to everyone else:

There is real glass in the windows. The consequent atmosphere is that of brightness and airiness so comforting to sick people, and to weary staffs. The floors, where the exigencies of hygiene are greatest, are covered with linoleum. There was not enough linoleum in France to do more than this. The walls and ceiling of the operating theatre are sheeted in aluminium of aeronautic origin, a decorative and practical solution of an old problem and a pleasant variation on the sword and ploughshare metamorphosis.⁹

Beckett's description of the site and layout of the hospital emphasizes the practical connections of material to function; he is concerned with giving a description of the hospital that is both accurate, and moving. It is a description of suffering and the attempt to alleviate it. But, Beckett is not satisfied with this description, it becomes the beginning of a political and

aesthetic intervention that will stay with him (even when he has forgotten it) through his last writings.

"These few facts, chosen not quite at random, are no doubt familiar already to those at all interested in the subject, and perhaps even to those listening to the present circumlocution. They may not appear the most immediately instructive,"¹⁰ Beckett states as he begins his address. This beginning says what it should not have to say were it true. That is, his intervention is obvious and so it is not necessary to be published. What he is saying is well known, and hence not in need of repetition. His characterization of the address as a "circumlocution" is important because Beckett will consistently adopt circumlocution, a talking around his topic, as a rhetorical strategy to get at a key experience that would otherwise retreat from his approach. His intervention must therefore be heard, even by those in the know, because the manner in which he approaches the reality of the Irish Hospital will reveal what has yet to be seen about it. Circumlocution will show what other forms of address will not be able to show.

Circumlocution, however, anchors itself to the real through certain determinative sentences: "St. Lô was bombed out of existence in one night."¹¹ The audacity of this sentence, its clear and simple structure, troubles Beckett's text. It is simple and even banal and yet not reducible to mere hyperbole. This is the source of its terror. Not only was St. Lô so bombed from existence, but many other places as well, both within and beyond the borders of France, in Europe and elsewhere around the globe. The sentence menaces thought because of its simplicity, its lack of nuance, of detail, of flourishes. It is the negation and inverse of the *Fiat lux* of the classical tradition, yet no less sublime, in its capacity to draw thought to its own limit. If St. Lô was so bombed from existence, how then, can the experience of St. Lô be phrased? This question is a repetition and displacement of the question that opens Lyotard's *The Differend*. In that text, Lyotard asks how it will be possible for survivors of a death camp to speak of their experiences. If they are survivors of a death camp, then they were not in a death camp and their testimony is false. Or, they were in a death camp, but since they can only know a portion of it, they cannot testify to the existence of the camp itself and their testimony is false. Lyotard does not defend this argument, which bears the form of arguments made by Holocaust deniers. Rather, it opens the question of the possibility of testimony in an impossible situation.

The creation of the hospital in the throes of devastation, in the ruins of St. Lô is the sign of continuity in the universe, of an impossible continuity: "'Provisional' is not the term it was, in this universe become provisional."¹² Here we can begin to sense the recasting of the sublime as sentiment and fig-

uration that bears within it a belief in the future in spite of itself; that is, Beckett does not despair in spite of the terror and destruction that appear to be necessary and inevitable.

In the provisional universe, that is, a universe with a borrowed, limited, and uncertain existence, human beings get on with living, with dying, with negotiating between the two. The workers in St. Lô learned this, most of all, and that opens to them a special kind of possibility:

I mean the possibility that some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realising that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. These will have been in France.¹³

In these closing lines of what most writers find to be a marginal and incidental intervention of uncertain status, Beckett nevertheless lays bare the political, philosophical, and aesthetic stakes of what will have been his own history. The war does not only scar the human psyche, it is not just a mass form of traumatization, but assaults the very idea of the human and the human's humanity. This assault cuts deep and does not leave politics and art untouched. In these closing lines Beckett attacks the very core of Enlightenment humanism which art and thought can no longer sustain. The tasks of art and thought will be to rethink our condition in the new terms that the experience of St. Lô has bequeathed to us.

In the fall of this humanism, "our condition" has to be reconceived. The ruins of St. Lô are not just in St. Lô; they will be the material with which thought must grapple if it is to re-think its condition without falling into the amnesia of repetition or the conscious repetition of remembrance. "The Capital of the Ruins" is the beginning of a rewriting in Beckett's art that traverses all of his post war writing. "The Capital of the Ruins" becomes the object-cause of an anamnesis, a project of rewriting that spans all of the post-war years.

While many of Beckett's critics think that they can finish this rewriting, Beckett most decidedly could not. Nevertheless, the interminable work of rewriting has a two-fold heritage: it belongs to Beckett in as much as he signs the works, and it belongs to the critics who sign on to this project. The desire to finish with anamnesis, which is an interminable work though not without its own sense of finality, becomes a sickness in Beckett criticism that infects even the best writing on Beckett. For critical writing, not unlike the novel, the play, the film, has its own sense of style, of project, of aim and end. However ill defined, however held in suspension, those concerns guide its writing without predetermining it. Experimental writing, of the kinds produced by Beckett

and others of the avant-garde, require an equally experimental criticism. We share Beckett's trajectory, but after Beckett, we plod our own way, shoulders hunching under the inheritance we cannot forsake or forget.

Beckettlessness

Many of Beckett's critics hope to accomplish what none of Beckett's works could—they hope to finish. Beckett expressed an overwhelming desire to be done with language, identity, being and to arrive at a "still point" that would erase all those stains on silence and nothingness that writing produces. This nearly maniacal drive which belongs to Beckett and his narrators is reproduced in the criticism of his work with a decisive difference. Beckett never finishes. He never arrives at the end. The texts barely begin and often they end in abandonment more than resolution or conclusion. In Beckett's writing, every step is a misstep, each stroke of the pen is subject to immediate erasure by the sentence which follows it. The linking of the phrases of his narrations appears to be without rule, certainly without the finality implied in narrative emplotment as Paul Ricoeur describes it in *Time and Narrative*. For Ricoeur, who follows Aristotle, emplotment is decisive in the creation of a meaningful narrative. The placement of events in time makes meaning and without this placement, narrative devolves into nonsense. But, plot in Beckett's writing is not the source of his texts' agonistics. The significant drama of his texts originates in the struggle of language to come into being, to utter the truth of failure. Beckett's words fail to accomplish their aims. The aim, ironically, is to fail. The failing words fail to fail; this is the drama of his writing.

Beckett's critics work continually to discover in his writing the conceptual and critical devices that will disclose the truth of the texts's articulations, the truth of failure. This drive certainly betrays the work of Beckett's books—such critical apparatuses are doomed to betray, cannot but betray, the silence he sought to occupy and which the texts long to inhabit. But, this betrayal is the least problematic of betrayals since it is unavoidable lest the critical imagination be reduced to a silent witness of Beckett's writing. Such an avowal would make of us those witnesses who never testify, who never intervene, and hence are relegated to oblivion.

The unforgivable betrayal is the critic's determination of the concept or concepts that he or she insists will explain Beckett's writing and which need only be deployed by the critic. The concept as critical tool is prone to betrayal

because of its aspirations to being definitive, comprehensive. It is neither necessary nor possible to perform a total ascesis of concepts from our minds and thought since understanding obliges us to them. We have to make use of them, but they are not as positively explanatory as we like to believe. The concept is explanatory in a limited, restrictive way and subject to continual revision even when it is applied to the same object. Beckettlessness enters criticism when the concept becomes the fixed source of understanding and knowledge. Such concepts show a basic contempt for the plurality that constitutes the artwork. Plurality is itself a concept, but a concept that merely delimits the range and number of possible significations of the artwork. The engagement of the concept ought to follow this model; we should make use of the concepts that the heritage leaves us, all the while denying their claims to authority. Authority, if such a term still has a meaning, will have to be generated anew through the deconstruction of authorizing terms. Such is the position that writing about Beckett creates for us.

Beckettlessness is the result of a critical drive to explain, to understand; it is the condition that infects Beckett criticism and manifests itself as the critic's desire to have had the last word on Beckett. He or she hopes that finally the silence will be had, that finally respite is at hand, that narrative can be finished, identity finished, history finished. Thinking about Beckett tempts critics to speak the words that Beckett's books never could, that the plays never could, that the television and film never could, to translate what was never said, written, or seen into another register where the figurations could then be given a full conceptual accounting. Beckettlessness shows our desire to be sure that Beckett's failures were not entirely failures.

The search for the determining concept of Beckett's texts as the resolution to their indeterminacy is not a good solution to the difficulty of reading Beckett. The modernist dream that the artwork ultimately is a unity whose complexities can be clarified, exposed, and whose contradictions can be harmonized within its complexity dupe Beckett's reader if he or she remains tempted by it for too long. It is an idea, like so many of Beckett's, that is best left aside, jettisoned with the rest of the ruins and detritus of the culture.

Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit remark on the odd situation that Beckett's critics feel as comfortable as they do when talking about Beckett:

There is something not only admirable but eminently acceptable, and even respectable, in this career, which may explain why we are struck by the ease with which he is talked about, by how little he seems to have troubled the admirers of his demonstrations of cosmic meaninglessness and the demise of western philosophy—in short, how comfortable Beckett makes his critics feel.¹⁴

Beckettlessness.

After listing a selection of "heady claims" they let the irony stand but back away from claiming any truth or falsity: "we quote these heady claims not to suggest that they are wrong, which is not the point."¹⁵ They indicate only certain symptoms that Beckett's critics exhibit in relation to his writing, symptoms which, according to them, might best be described as an undeserved sense of comfort that one gains from having read, or engaging in the reading of Beckett.

What is the origin of that comfort? What is the latent thought that the manifest content of the claim is hiding? What thoughts are the source of the symptom? Beckettlessness is not an answer to these questions; it is only a name for the affliction of wanting to be done with Beckett, to finish where Beckett did not.

Two contemporary writers whose work suffers from Beckettlessness, but who offer, nonetheless provocative readings of Beckett's work are Leslie Hill in *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words* and Thomas Tresize in *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*. The modes of their symptoms are not entirely the same, though. Tresize displaces Beckett from one intellectual history into another. On his view, Beckett has been wrongly understood as an existentialist writer. His books, on this view, treat existentialist themes of absurdity, freedom, guilt, obligation. Tresize's claim is that Beckett is not an existentialist, but a post-structuralist. His experimentations in the novel are not about the existential, but prefigure and follow upon the philosophical and linguistic insights of Jacques Derrida. So, *Into the Breach* portrays a Beckett who is a Derridean and novelist of *différance*. The change in perspective that the theoretical shift that Tresize defends may offer a new way of reading Beckett, but it also displaces and then repeats the trappings of the earlier reading. In this manner, Beckett becomes the object of fashion and each generation will uncover the real Beckett as the critical rage of the day demands. This is a betrayal of Beckett's aim to fail and to seek failure radically. It is a view of Beckett that lets us off the hook with Beckett by putting him in the company of others who can better explain his failures. Leslie Hill, unlike Tresize, undertakes a detailed analysis of Beckett's major prose works and, in many ways, produces an admirable book. Yet, for all that, his book is prone to the forgetfulness of Beckett that characterizes criticism infected with Beckettlessness.

The risk of criticism is Beckettlessness; it intrudes on criticism at those moments when criticism claims and aims to understand and to communicate its understanding through a conceptual armature. This risk is not our invention, but is intimated by Beckett himself in the "Three Dialogues."¹⁶ This text is cast as a dialogue between Beckett and Georges Duthuit, though it is generally regarded as the invention of Beckett himself. Widely cited as one of Beck-

ett's clearest interventions into the nature of the artist's work, it also illustrates and engages what we mean by Beckettlessness:

B.~ Would it not be enough if I simply went away? D.~ No. You have begun. Finish. Begin again and go on until you have finished. Then go away. Try and bear in mind that the subject under discussion is not yourself, not the sufist Al-Haqq, but a particular Dutchman by name van Velde, hitherto erroneously referred to as an artiste peintre.¹⁷

Beckett's interlocutor, Duthuit, insists that he go on, that he must "finish," even as Beckett himself just wants to go away without saying anything further. His interlocutors force him at least to gesture toward completion, and when that does not happen, they complete his task for him. This is an infidelity, according to Beckett, to the artist's drive toward failure:

My case, since I am in the dock, is that van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticized automatism, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living. No, no, allow me to expire.¹⁸

Beckett's desire, expressed through his interpretation of Abraham van Velde, is to be left alone. Not to die, but to be permitted by his interlocutor to drift from our consciousness. To permit him to be what he is, as he is. Beckett continues,

I know that all that is required now to bring this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.¹⁹

Beckett's interlocutors push him, against his will and even without his knowing it, toward the betrayal of failure. Every time the critic accomplishes what Beckett could not, to finish or to begin, to act, the critic suffers from Beckettlessness. Fleeing from the risk of failure, criticism betrays its object and Beckett criticism loses its object and aim. And in this vein, thinking after Beckett takes on a decisively chronological meaning: to think after Beckett means to think after the passing of Beckett. Whereas what we need is a thinking after Beckett in which Beckett is both before and behind us. Even if we would like to be done with Beckett, we are never done with Beckett. We never finish with him; he expires. This perspective preserves his relation to failure, and by proxy, our own.

In *Le Monde et le pantalon*, Beckett raises the question of the role, function, and work of criticism in relation to painting, and again in relation to the

painting of the van Velde brothers, Abraham and Gerardus. Beckett wrote this text in 1945 for the exposition of their canvases at the Mai (Abraham) and Maeght (Gerardus) galleries and it was first published in *Cahiers de l'art* 20/21. The text was later published with another writing on the van Velde brothers, "Les peintres de l'empêchement," by Minuit. In the first article, Beckett scoffs at the possibilities for criticism, especially any criticism that pretends to attain to any degree of refinement, he does not even want to speak of such things: "Let's not talk of what is properly called criticism. The best ones, the likes of a Fromentin, of a Grohmann, a McGreevy, Sauerlandt is all like Amiel. All hysterectomies by trowel. And how might it be otherwise?"²⁰

How might it be otherwise? How might criticism become something less violent, less violate than a hysterectomy at trowel point? The hysterectomy is not just an emphatic and provocative metaphor, but goes to the core of what art does as the work of human creativity and freedom.²¹ Just as the *hyster* is the source of human creativity and the hysterectomy by trowel is an assault on that creativity, so is criticism an assault on art. An assault that is not just a denunciation or a misunderstanding, but is an attack on its essential functions and features. But still, criticism will be written, but how? How can criticism not violate its object? How can it proceed?

Criticism and art have a difficult relationship. The artist is aided or hindered by his or her critics, the criticism will work or not for the artist, it can be more or less adequate to its objects. Beckett lists some possibilities:

Either you do a generalized aesthetics like Lessing; a charming game.

Or, you report on anecdotes, like Vasari or Harper's Magazine.

Or, you make *Catalogues Raisonnés*, like Smith.

Or, you can just open yourself to a confused and disagreeable rambling. That is the case here.²²

Beckett's practice of criticism, at least as he exhibits it here, cannot be called criticism, properly speaking; it is a rambling, confused and unpleasant, profusion of words. Not an aesthetic theory, not anecdotes and gossip, not a systematic listing of works, but a bold surrendering to the profusion of words. It is thus difficult to say what constitutes "good" criticism from "bad," as the speaking about the work is less an autonomous activity than an obligation to which one must surrender. We have to remember that art, for Beckett, takes place under the sign of an obligation. In the "Three Dialogues," Beckett claims,

B.- the situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since his is obliged to paint. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints since he is obliged to paint.

D.- Why is he obliged to paint?

B.- I don't know.²³

Just as art is an obligation, so criticism becomes a form of responsibility. The affliction of Beckettlessness arises from a failure to surrender boldly to the demands of an obligation one does not quite enjoy or understand— to feign that understanding is to succumb fully to the infection.

Infected or not, let us now turn toward the manner in which Beckett's art responds to the demands of revising the conception of the human as detailed in "The Capital of the Ruins." From the perspective that the risk of Beckettlessness opens, Beckett himself becomes an event, forgotten and unforgettable, present only through negative presentation, thought only in the wake of the disaster of our inability to circumscribe Beckett. To write about Beckett opens a reference to the sublime, even when that reference appears most remote.

Obligation

Worstward Ho is Beckett's rewriting of narrative, of his own art and of art in general; it seeks to attest to the deflation of the idea of Man that is among his chief obsessions and which dates at least to "The Capital of the Ruins." *The Unnameable* occupies a place in Beckett's writing that is analogous to *Worstward Ho*. Both texts are third in a series, and each text works and reworks problematics from the texts that preceded them. "The Trilogy," as it is often, if erroneously called, of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable* are Beckett's first major attempts to work through the deflation of the human being to inhuman form, though they are certainly not his last. And the third novel's opening question, "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning,"²⁴ prefigures the question of the later "trilogy" of *Company*, *Ill seen*, *Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho* which were published collectively by Grove Press under the title *Nohow On*. *The Unnameable* and *Worstward Ho* are companion texts, texts that can be seen to accompany one another, though with considerable differences. These differences are largely rhetorical and bear on Beckett's late insistence on subtracting from language and from the traditional characteristics of the novel

in order to arrive at that silence and stillness he had sought throughout his life.

The narrator of *The Unnameable*, the unnameable, situates himself in a landscape that is as barren as it is frightening. What is striking is how comfortable he is in that emptiness, so comfortable that he seems little frightened by the emptiness he occupies. Fright is absent from his descriptions as if he were simply following a procedure that will allow him to make a narrative, "how proceed," he asks:

For I am obliged to assign a beginning to my residence here, if only for the sake of clarity. Hell itself, although eternal, dates from the revolt of Lucifer. It is therefore permissible, in the light of this distant analogy, to think of myself as being here forever, but not as having been here forever. This will greatly help me in my relation.²⁵

The unnameable is obliged to speak and this obligation to speak lies at the origin of the novel as its impetus and rule. The phrases of his narration come to pass as responses to this obligation. He seeks to explain his obligation, to give it a basis in reason, for without the explanation his situation and relation lose the semblance of sense. For the sake of clarity there must be a beginning to his situation, he claims.

The unnameable's identity is produced in and through the references to prior stories. The story of his identity will be buried in other stories. Identity, like the value of the sign in Saussurean linguistics, is presented as a differentiation without positive determination. The unnameable exists as a nameable entity only through the fact that signs are differentiated from other signs. Identity thereby proceeds also from a negation; it produces its positive content by negating the determinate "name." The unnameable annihilates identity as a stable, underlying substratum that receives determinations. To put it another way, the concept of identity functions in Beckett's text as an effect of narrative and not as its source.

The unnameable is as Lucifer was; one who has revolted (from what though, has he revolted?) and thereby has been put in his current situation by virtue of an alien agency. In the old story, God casts Lucifer to hell and this single act solidifies his presence on the cosmic scene for all eternity. The unnameable resides as he is where he is because he is the distant relation to that original criminal. The analogy complicates itself. We must remember that Lucifer's fault is that of pride, the audacity of thinking himself the equal of God. The form of his fault is a misrecognition of his own stature. Lucifer falls from heaven because of an error in judgment that he refuses to relinquish. The unnameable, though, runs the risk of his distant relation only in as much as he is obligated to speak. The obligation to speak does not dictate at the same time

the content of the speech. Thus, the faulty analogy is as good as or as ill as another one. The analogy looks ahead to Beckett's late notion, presented most clearly in *Ill Seen, Ill Said*, that any saying or seeing is necessarily faulty—the good and bad views are equally faulty. Failure, then, lurks everywhere. Beckett clearly adopts a view of narration and experience that makes statements both equally true and equally false. Reporting on the senses is fraught with difficulty, but they function nonetheless. Even when they do not function they are functional. This is not an endorsement of a banal relativism, but a forceful critique of the power of conventional meaning making systems. In this view, necessity flees from the drama of his narrative and only contingency and relation remain.

The unnameable is not alone in his narrating, but has some company. Namely, the company of those characters who populated Beckett's earlier writings: Malone, Molloy, Mercier and Camier, among others. In this, the unnameable as narrator takes on the position of the implied author, to refer to Wayne Booth's concept from *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. The company, though, is a company of words (and of works: books) and thus ephemeral and fleeting via the modulation of his breath and the effort of the imagination in presenting the images of those others. These images belong as much to Beckett's reader and his or her fantasies about Beckett's writing as they belong to the unnameable himself. Thus, we are drawn into an imaginary plane that is not our own; we are solicited from the interiority of our own egos by the exteriority of the other. We are drawn to this narrator who is barely a narrator. *The Unnameable* undoes subjectivity as the representation of subjectivity that sustains the classical novel and also the subjectivity of a reader who engages with Beckett in this undoing.

Like most of Beckett's narrators, the unnameable is a figure in ruin, his vision is weak, his eyes barely work, and this fact makes his comprehension of his position difficult to determine and renders his being there all the more difficult to bear: "For the visibility, unless it be the state of my eyesight, only permits me to see what is close beside me....In a word, I only see what appears immediately in front of me, I only see what appears close beside me, what I best see I see ill."²⁶ Seeing and saying are linked in their disfunction which nonetheless continues to function. What is best seen is ill seen.

Like vision, speech is impaired in Beckett's narrative. The unnameable speaks an unregulated language in which phrases happen without reference to the modality of their linkages. Why one phrase follows on another is rarely clear, yet the narrative functions. Here, narrative functions by virtue of the fact that it continues to go on. Thus, the function of narrative is divested of any essential character that narrative would have to fulfill in order to reach its

proper perfection. Likewise, the condition of his vision intensifies the sense that good and ill are self confounding, a fact that becomes the hallmark of Beckett's later writing. In this vein, to see well is to ill-see; we have yet to come to saying as an ill-saying, though the grounds of its appearance have certainly been introduced. The individual phrases of Beckett's narration do not necessarily contain within them the seeds for what follows. Each phrase is an event in itself, a rupture in narration that solicits more narrative. Thus, the meaning of any given text will not be given through the semantic content of the phrases that constitute it, but through the links between one phrase to the next. The obligation to speak drives the links and directs the continuity which itself becomes the content of the narrative. Narrative becomes a game of continuity and drops its concerns for communication. Or, more provocatively, Beckett's narrative language becomes a collection of differends oriented toward an end that is elusive and in retreat.

And Yet I do not despair of one day sparing me, without going silent, and made an end, I know it. Yes, the hope is there, once again, of not making me, not losing me, of staying here, where I said I have always been, but I had to say something quick, of ending here, it would be wonderful. But is it to be wished? Yes, it is to be wished, to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am.²⁷

Under the questions imposed by the obligation, "Where now? Who now? When now?"²⁸ the unnameable perdures in an intermediary position between the beginning and the end; always already begun, he hopes only that he might be able to end. But, he is trapped in a narrative that goes on. His situation as the distant relation of Lucifer emphasizes his peculiar positioning as having an interminable beginning. The misery of this position inside of language (the obligation to speak) offers no possibility of passing to its outside (of ending) and forces the narration toward its end which cannot have been dictated by some other finality than the non-finality of his narrative situation. If rules govern the linkages between sentences, we begin to sense that those rules cannot be trusted as rules. This give rise to the drama of the novel as the search for an end of speech within speech.

The miserable position is not yet despairing; the speech hopes its end will appear. The unnameable hopes that his end will appear. He waits for an avatar to guide him toward that end. The identity of the I and the designation of its location can all be relinquished for this one chance wish which were it to come true, it "would be wonderful:"

I hope this preamble will soon come to an end and the statement begin that will dispose of me. Unfortunately I am afraid, as always, of going on. For to go on means going from here, means finding me, losing me, vanishing and beginning again, a stranger first, then little by little the same as always, in another place, where I shall say

I have always been, of which I shall know nothing, being incapable of seeing, moving, thinking, speaking, but of which little by little, in spite of these handicaps, I shall begin to know something, just enough for it to turn out to be the same place as always, the same which seems made for me and does not want me, which I seem to want and do not want, take your choice, which spews me out or swallows me up, I'll never know, which is perhaps merely the inside of my distant skull where once I wandered, now am fixed, lost for tininess, or straining against the walls, with my head, my hands, my feet, my back, and ever murmuring my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time. So there is nothing to be afraid of.²⁹

The obligation to speak is a misery whose end can only be the object of a hope, for the likely scenario shall be the repetition of misery. The miserable space opened by the obligation to speak has a processive quality which annihilates valences of difference in the possibilities for speech. And in Beckett's novel, speech stands in the place of experiences, as all experience is mediated through the obligation to speak. The horizon of the obligation is an uncanny space which is made for the unnameable but does not want him. The urge here would be to interpret the phrase as a reference to the construction of the physical space that surrounds him, to say that in Beckett's world the earth has become an inhospitable place for human beings to dwell. Yet, no one needs to read Beckett to learn this. Rather, the unnameable should be seen as a locus of speech within language itself that language would rather do without, but cannot. The unnameable is made of language, at home in language, and not wanted or needed by it. He is thus an expression of the alienation of speech within language and is obligated to search within this hostile environs for a speech which would authorize the end of speech. There is nothing to be afraid of in this process precisely because of its processiveness.

The unnameable cannot come to an end of his speaking; there is no last word or final phrase. The authority to end speech retreats from his speech and whether he speaks truly or lies is of no significance:

This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says, too old perhaps and too abased ever to succeed in saying the words that would be its last, knowing itself useless and its uselessness in vain, not listening to itself but to the silence that it breaks and whence perhaps one day will come stealing the long clear sigh of advent and farewell, is it one?³⁰

Speech stains the silence it interrupts; this is a well known theme in Beckett's works (and not one that we will pursue here) that dates from the "Three Dialogues." Speech stains silence, but silence also infects speech as the fantasmatic other that inhabits it and forces it on. Silence functions as the end of all the speaking, but it is an end that solicits the speech. It forces speech, not true speech, soporifics, odes, or speech of any specific determination, but

speech. The obligation to speak has been issued by silence. Silence commands the speaking to take place and becomes the unrepresentable of language that language must present. Thus he goes on:

So it is I who speak, all alone, since I can't do otherwise. No, I am speechless. Talking of speaking, what if I went silent? What would happen to me then? Worse than what is happening? But fie these are questions again. That is typical. I know no more questions and they keep on pouring out of my mouth. I think I know what it is, it's to prevent the discourse from coming to an end, this futile discourse which is not credited to me and brings me not a syllable nearer silence.³¹

Not a syllable nearer to silence, the unnameable's discourse fails though he will insist that he is doing his best: "I am doing my best, and failing again, yet again."³² Failure constitutes one key set of problematics in Beckett's writing and was transformed by Beckett himself into an alibi to go on— the "Try again, fail again, fail better" of *Worstward Ho*. As energetic as this effort to fail is (or becomes), it is never divorced from pain and pleasure. The couple, pleasure-pain, inhere in failure as its sentiment. "I don't mind failing, it's a pleasure," the unnameable says. Yet, he follows that proclamation with, "but I want to go silent."³³ Indeed, that silence would open (he thinks) a horizon of possibilities for a life "worth having:" "Then it would be a life worth having, a life at last. My speech parched voice at rest would fill with spittle, I'd let it flow over and over, happy at last, dribbling with life, my pensum ended, in the silence."³⁴

The obligation to speak imposes itself on the unnameable and is, of itself, not justified by reference to any other prescription or command. "Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the idea of obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something."³⁵ As if *ex nihilo* it appears and has to be swallowed; the unnameable thus becomes coextensive to his obligation to speak which appears as an obligation to say something. Saying something and speaking are not reducible to the same thing, that is, the obligation directs only the action to be undertaken (speak) and does not dictate the content of that speech. There is thus a difference between the event of speech and its content. To place too much importance on the content of the unnameable's words yields a picture of Beckett's writing as incomprehensible madness, such is the view of Lukács.³⁶ To understand the narration as an event itself, an event of witness born of the obligation to speak permits us to approach the text in the truth of its self-presentation. The text is not about anything that can be named (a banal point, considering the title), but about the naming of that event which is, in itself, unnameable because it is both within and without the language that both wants and refuses its presence and presentation. The sublime of the worst, in *The Unnameable*, is that feeling of immobility which erupts in the miserable

space that the narration constructs between the cognitive demand for sense and the imagination's capacity to form an image. The obligation to speak bars the passage from one side to the other.

Faced then with the material impossibility of going any further I should no doubt have had to stop, unless of course I elected to set off again at once in the opposite direction, to unscrew myself as it were, after having screwed myself to a standstill, which would have been an experience rich in interest and fertile in surprises if I am to believe what I once was told, in spite of my protests, namely that there is not road so dull, on the way out, but it has quite a different aspect, quite a different dullness, on the way back, and vice versa. No good wriggling, I'm a mine of useless knowledge.³⁷

Mastery

Rarely is a character in Beckett's narrations without some kind of master, a controlling figure that the discourse of the novel acknowledges all the while the actions the characters undertake in the diegesis struggle against him. This figure is a minimal condition of communication. In *On Stories*, Richard Kearney insists that all narratives, even Beckett's narratives have a communicative function that takes the form of someone, x, telling some other, y, something about z.³⁸ In *The Unnameable* Mahood performs this function that establishes a minimal form of communication.

Mahood does not start out as Mahood, but becomes him through an act of naming bereft of all ceremony and ritual. The unnameable gives the name as a whim, as a phrase that follows upon the phrases he is obligated to utter. Mahood begins as Basil who enters the narration in conjunction with the notion of time: "I say years, though here there are no years. What matter how long? Years is one of Basil's ideas. A short time, a long time, it's all the same."³⁹ Basil introduces the unnameable to the idea of time, though that idea does not function as time would have functioned for a modern sensibility. Modernity makes time one of the key constituent elements of experience. Through the work of time, events become experiences through an act of consciousness that unifies the disparate sense data into a cognizable whole. Time determines experience in the modern world of Enlightenment thought, while in the unnameable's world time is but an idea that Basil has. Who is Basil? It does not matter; what matters about Basil is that he can become important: "Decidedly, Basil is becoming important, I'll call him Mahood instead, I prefer that, I'm queer. It was he who told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head."⁴⁰ Mahood becomes a mediating figure in the unnameable's self-

narration; he gives the unnameable the horde of stories he has to tell. He is an occupying presence who tricks the unnameable into believing the determinations of the stories he tells. "That's one of Mahood's favourite tricks, to produce ostensibly independent testimony in support of my historical existence."⁴¹

The Unnameable is a struggle with this historical existence that moves toward a configuration of being as a minimal presence. The unnameable struggles with language. This struggle configures being with the language a dispossessed of consciousness that is nonetheless conscious of the disposition. In this, the unnameable moves us toward the worst.

The Sublime, The Worst

While *The Unnameable* is the first definitive move toward a minimal subject and hence minimal novel, it is yet to participate in the aesthetic of the worst. For Beckett, the worst is the effect of a processive worsening, the effect of an effort at trying to worsen: "Not yet to try worsen," and "To try worsen."⁴² To try worsen entails the work of narrativity searching for its "least," "unnullable least" without which it becomes "naught." The aim of the worst is not to unword the world, but to approach presence in its ever retreating vivacity and decay. It is thus an aesthetic program that figures language as the figuration of presence. As such, presence is indeterminate and resistant to determination: as soon as it has been determined it transforms itself such that the determination reveals itself as inadequate to the event. Determinations become phantoms of presence; they are the shades that populate the late Beckett narration. Narrative determines the shades and undoes them. The work of doing/undoing permits Beckett to approach the real as approachable and not just fundamentally horrifying as the vacant landscapes and ruined figures of his narratives, the likes of Molloy, Moran, Malone, the Unnameable, or the woman of "Rockaby," might encourage us to venture. To argue that the worst offers a representation of our world as it has been fled by the gods and meaning is to render unto Beckett a simplicity that his writing does not possess (though, perhaps, he would have liked it to have had it). The doing/undoing that characterizes the mechanism of the worst as narrative work is part of a strategy that Beckett engages in order to be able to witness new demonstrations of being.

What, then, is the truth of the worst? Does the worst aim at the truth? Certainly it aims for something? It must seek something otherwise the project as project drifts into meaninglessness. Truth in narrative typically appears as

the narrative's adequacy to a set of events that are, in principle, witnessable. Witnessing is an effort (is at least conceived, juridically) to determine the truth of an event. To bear witness requires the witness to speak truly of the event or events that came to pass before him or her. Thus, if Beckett's writing should be considered an attempt to bear witness to the real, then it should be possible to determine the truthfulness of his witnessing. The question is how to determine Beckett's truthfulness. The question places Beckett in the general context of Realism, certainly of that Realism that Georg Lukács found himself at pains to defend in many of his essays. In "The Ideology of Modernism," Lukács engages in a polemic against "Modernist" writing as ahistorical, ideological, insanity. Lukács claims that Beckett forsakes any kind of objectivity in the "simple description of reality."⁴³ "Lack of objectivity," writes Lukács, "in the description of the outer world finds its complement in the reduction of the reality to a nightmare. Beckett's Molloy is perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of this development."⁴⁴ Lukács's estimation of Beckett's novel depends not the least on Beckett's novel, but on a prior commitment to a set of values that literature must have and which includes an emphatic belief in the capacity of language to determine reality adequately. Lukács believes that a "simple description of reality" is possible, but more importantly, that from such axiomatic claims, the truth of the reality in all of its complexity can be represented and ascertained. That is, description is thought of as both possible and adequate.

If Beckett could just remain a Realist, he would have fewer problems in his testimony. "The literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings in extreme situations of this kind [that is, of the tragic kind]. A character's concrete potentiality once revealed, his abstract potentialities will appear essentially inauthentic,"⁴⁵ so Lukács asserts. If Beckett could be a realist the "real" possibilities for the likes of Molloy would appear to him and to us in plain relief, for indeed the being of reality is such that "concrete" determinations make the abstracted ones fade into the meaninglessness that supports their allure. But to consider Molloy as obsessed with abstractions is ludicrous; Molloy obsesses over the most concrete things, they just happen to be those things that the synthetic views of Lukács's variety of realism finds meaningless, for indeed, they are the kinds of observations and determinations that do not well serve the finality of realism. The truth of Beckett's texts, then, falls outside the range of those texts that are valued and extolled by the purveyors of realism. Realism believes in the possibility of its project and does not question its fundamental commitment— that reality is representable. As soon as this question appears, as soon as it is posed in writing, the project of realism and the criteria it elaborates to judge works, recede into the background. Truth in

narration as the adequate representation of an event holds no sway in the judgment of Beckett's narrations. To insist on those criteria as the source of judgment will inflict on Beckett's work a charge to which it is unable to respond save by a refutation of the criteria that make the charge itself possible. Between the charges of realism and the stammerings of Beckett's work lies a differend. It is this differend that the worst as a figuration of the sublime sentiment aims to address. The worst is a search for the minimal language that resides just this side of annihilation. The approach to this limit produces the sublime sentiment. The work of the worst is not a refutation of realism, but an operation that has forsaken the rules of narrativity that make realism what it is. The worst is the effort to witness the retreat of the event from language in language.

Worstward Ho and the Sublime

Worstward Ho is a narrative that aims to go on, to move on, to continue on when it is no longer possible for its narrator, Beckett, to continue to narrate. Writing appears finally to fail: "On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on."⁴⁶ Beckett tries to go on until going on is no longer possible. He tries to go on until it is no longer possible to be going on, even for it to be said that he will have gone on. He tries to go on until he reaches that moment when there will be no way to go on. His name for this condition is "nohow on." The narration aims to accomplish what until this point of writing it had not been able to accomplish. It aims to reach a point from which it is impossible to continue to go on, a definitive and permanent end. In the opening passage, *Worstward Ho* lays bare the limits of its narrative scope. First, there is an external limit to the text; it seeks to become what it is not, to transform itself into the stillness that the text's stammerings fill. Second, the text proceeds from an internal limit that is the capacity to imagine, to invent presence where there is but absence, holes, silences. Thus the text aims for the nohow on and proceeds from it. The two limits, the internal and the external, propel the narrative toward its end which continually withdraws. The withdrawal of the end shows every step to be a misstep: "Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid."⁴⁷ Every narrative saying missays.

The saying-missaying relation is a relation of tense or time. "Say" becomes "be said" is a shift either from the present indicative active or present imperative to the present subjunctive, which in English indicates an uncertainty in

states of affairs or an indeterminability of them, and thereby opens the horizon of the yet to be, or the future. The text attends to the determination of its own unfolding even as it calls those determinations into question. It questions the textual events that constitute it, and it does so in the very instants in which it becomes what it is. *Worstward Ho* takes this interminable indetermination as its starting point and uses it to establish a new point, a zero time in which it will be possible to affix all of the narrative stammerings to their proper moment. But, the indeterminability of time menaces the narrative, troubles its coherence as a narrative, and interrupts its narrativity. Time fails narrative.

As time fails narrative, so will space and place. "Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still."⁴⁸ The subjective limits of space and time do not hold the text together. From its paradoxical dual limitation, the text seeks a different route to failure: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."⁴⁹ Beckett's conclusion to the first section of *Worstward Ho* is both a statement of purpose and a commentary on the writing he produced until that moment. On the first account, all of *Worstward Ho* dismisses time and space as the constitutive components of narrativity and yet they reappear. Even though they fail, are doomed to fail in Beckett's vision, they will be unleashed again in a narrative that will try to do better with them than they had done before. Even though narrative does not end, he tries to bring it to an end.

This passage is also a commentary on his writing. The first paragraphs which had been stripped bare of language, especially those signs which would function as grammatical subjects, seem to carry through what *The Unnameable*, for example, could not: to get rid of the authorial I. Yet, even this move does not gain Beckett enough, and must be reconsidered, tried again, such that he might fail better and to solidify the aims and ends of narrative. Narrative in Beckett's vision is a means of reconceiving the idea of the human that had been lost at Saint Lô and which Beckett sought to reconceive.

The first part, then, of *Worstward Ho*'s twelve parts, each separated by three asterisks at the head of the section, sets the program that the rest of the experiment will follow. Like any experiment, it has its limits and its goals: the paradoxical limit of seeking the nohow on from within it and trying again to fail better. The text is a repetition, but not a replaying. It is a rewriting that is not just a rescription, but a rewriting that writes anew what came before. It is an experiment that hopes to present the unrepresentable of narration: the worst. The anamnesis of the worst, its rewriting, is the concrete figuration of the sublime in Beckett.

Subtractive Method

Worstward Ho proceeds from image to image by a subtractive method. The image that Beckett begins with is, almost in the next breath, negated. The process of lessening the text pushes Beckett to find the minimum required for the narrative to happen at all. He begins with the body and the place.

First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all⁵⁰

The difficulty in beginning the text lies in finding with what to begin: body or place. Then Beckett plays a game with the terms: either/other. It seems that either the either or the other gets him the same thing: failure. The text is going to fail, Beckett believes, but rather than succumbing to rage or despair the narrative transforms failure from being the mark of a defeat to being the aim of narration. Since the text is going to fail, make it then fail like no other dare to fail, or so the Beckettian stance appears here. In this paragraph, better and worse become replaceable terms in a single minded teleological narrative that drives itself toward what it has never seen, heard, or been. From what has been done, Beckett attempts to see what will have been the possibility of his narrative.

Since neither body nor place provide any ground, any static or stable point of departure the narration continues on its search. Emphatically, it continues on and on. But its continuity is reticent, with each step it takes, with each word it ventures, it can also slide back, erase, and negate what it has just ventured to present. And it must continue to proceed in this way until it discovers that ground that can support its continuity, however provisionally. "It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain."⁵¹ The sentences of *Worstward Ho* stammer. They do not concern themselves with their referentiality; if the content of the sentence, its meaning or sense, does not correspond to actual states of affairs, an emphatic saying supplements it so that the sentence does not become sheer nonsense. The status of reality is not fixed or given, but established in narrative acts. Lyotard makes a similar gesture in *The Differend*. In §3, he claims:

Reality is not what is 'given' to this or that 'subject,' it is a state of the referent (that about which one speaks) which results from the effectuation of establishment procedures defined by a unanimously agreed upon protocol, and from the possibility offered to anyone to recommence this effectuation as often as he or she wants.⁵²

Reality is here conceived as the effect of a phrase, which is an instance of language. Where Lyotard differs from Beckett is in his notion that the procedures which make the establishment of a reality possible are public and repeatable. Beckett's phrases effect the establishment of a reality, but this reality is not yet established according to a protocol which has unanimous consent. This "yet" is crucial and marks the postmodern aspect of Beckett's project. Remember that one of the traits of the postmodern is a relation to time indicated by the future perfect. Postmodern works do not operate only (or primarily) with the "given" rules of narrative, but experiment with those rules in order to forge new ones which will become recognized as modern. The postmodern forges the rules of the modern and so the "reality" which its phrases effect do not yet belong to the genre of cognitive phrases or cognitive judgments. The reality that Beckett's text refers to is a reality in the offing, which has yet to be recognized as reality.

In this passage from Beckett's text, he is able to discover an underlying ground, a substratum of experience that will permit him to continue: Pain. The saying of pain (which is also an ill-saying) fixes it as the modulating ground of narration. The factuality of this pain keeps the text moving, keeps the project of narrative itself on the move toward its relief or change:

No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Or better worse remains. Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain. Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand. Somehow up. Somehow stand. Remains of mind where none for the sake of pain. Here of bones. Other examples if needs must. Of pain. Relief from. Change of.⁵³

The progressive worsening of the prospects for narrative corresponds to a progressive intensification of its presentations. That is to say, the contraction of narrative possibilities does not eliminate the project of the novel or deaden it, but rather invigorates it. The worsening of narrative is an infusion of life into literature; it is an insistence on survival and on discovering modes in which to articulate and testify to survival. The task of modulating pain, of transforming it, of inventing a human being such that narrating pain is even possible in the dark and dying culture in which Beckett lived and in which we survive menaces literature. It troubles its existence at all levels, political, social, moral, and aesthetic. *Worstward Ho* is then an ironic and jubilant struggle to the end of the possibilities of literature in general, and of Beckett's writing in particular. Pain is not just the risk of this struggle, but the ground. In Beckett's

perspective, pain becomes the *arche* and *logos* of all reality, the underlying substratum of human experience with which narrative must find a way to narrate. The feeling demands to be put into phrases, as Lyotard says in *The Differend* §23:

In the differend, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist.⁵⁴

The feeling demands to be put into phrases, yet the idioms in which to phrase the feeling does not yet exist. Beckett's work, especially *Worstward Ho*, is an experiment in the invention of an idiom. It does not, therefore, relish in senselessness, but seeks a way to present the feeling that energizes it in a manner that does justice to the feeling. This is the way in which the pain of failure may become pleasurable through the invention of a new idiom.

Worstward Ho is predicated upon an emphatic claim about the nature of failure and on the drive to go on in and toward failure, to continue to write with failure, and in spite of it. "All of old. Nothing else ever. But never so failed. Worse failed. With care never worse failed."⁵⁵ In the prospects of failing differently, Beckett finds the means whereby writing will continue. Failure here becomes the chief concern of the writing; but not any kind of failure will do.

This passage, like most of Beckett's writing, is highly referential to Beckett's other works. Hence, the first sentences entail a claim of accomplishment that has become stale and a prediction of the future. The "all of old" further situates *Worstward Ho* in a different relation to time than all of those works that gained their existence before it, not just all of Beckett's works, but all works. Beckett refuses to acquiesce in tradition, to be bound by it, even if that means future possibilities will have been eclipsed. Nevertheless, by the end of the section what appears as a hopeless position of misery becomes a way into a future of possibility: "No future in this. Alas yes."⁵⁶ The future that Beckett affirms is the future of narrative. *Worstward Ho* begins in an experience of contraction in which the possibilities for writing are but few; it employs a subtractive method that allows writing to continue. So it starts with a body in pain and that body slowly stands for it has, "No choice but stand." The body stands out of necessity; it is not the act of a free agent in possession of his faculties,

but a ruined body fulfilling obligations. With the one body "up at last,"⁵⁷ Beckett continues his project: "With care never worse failed." The worst has never failed for it has yet to be tried, has yet to be mined for its possibilities. Pursuing the worst, then, becomes the genuinely new.

Beckett's understanding of the worst does not imply an ethical claim, but an epistemological and ontological claim: "Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no. Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere-most minimum."⁵⁸ Here the classical symbol of knowledge and being, light, appears as a diffused and unspecified presence. This perception of light has to be understood in contradistinction to Plato's understanding of the Sun and of light in *The Republic* (especially Book VI) and to the medieval understanding of *lumen naturalae*. Arcane differences aside, both the Greeks and the medievals used images of light, the sun, illumination, as proxies for knowledge and Being. These constellations of images inaugurate an entire heritage of prejudice in which what is deemed most valuable, treasured, and loved, are those things that participate in, or are illumined by light. In this heritage, to be is to be visible and to be good mean to be most luminescent.

Beckett tries to break from this heritage, to find a way out of the pull it has on the culture of writing, which, as we have said, is also a political culture. To find the worst, Beckett will have to find a point in being which is not nothing, but which is the most minimum quantum or intensity of presence that writing can encounter. This is one of the explanations for the spare and bare prose that we find in *Worstward Ho*. Beckett engages a minimal writing to approach the minimal conception of being that presses him on.

With one minimal being up and standing, groaning from the pain, the text then shows another: "Another. Say another. Head sunk on crippled hands. Vertex vertical. Eyes clenched. Seat of all. Germ of all."⁵⁹ The saying of the other is an ill-saying of the other. But, as we have said above, it will do for Beckett. This figure becomes the source of hope in this portion of the text. It is a figure of imagination that Beckett has presented before in *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Imagination, which is a field of contradictions and impossibilities, a field where any saying is as good or as ill as any other saying, is the source of the work that will take Beckett to the worst. It is also the site, or the faculty of mind, whence sublime affect will originate when imagination fails to present a cognizable image of the real. Wittingly or not, the sublime is in league with the worst. The worst is an uncognizeable presence that menaces imagination and understanding which in turn vacillate in the impossible difference which distinguishes them. The worst is thus of the sublime and the remainder of narrative after its lessening has been fully pursued and "accomplished."

The figure with clenched eyes stands in a place that is "small" and "vast": "How if not boundless bounded."⁶⁰ The contradictory space illustrates the nature of sublime presentation which resists any determination in space or time according to the rules of cognition. The place where Beckett's "couple" is is not a place that is determinable according to such rules, but is just there. Wherever that is. "Beyondless. Thenceless there. Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there."⁶¹ Neither origin nor destination, without interior or exterior limit, the space is just there. It is a place which is nowhere, not determinable on a map and yet a place that Beckett occupies in writing and which his reader witnesses through the text. The classic conceptions of the sublime permeate the text and render the worst an unmistakable figuration of it.

Throughout the novel, oral and aural metaphors shift to metaphors of vision: "see for be seen. Misseen. From now see for be misseen."⁶² The text repeats what we have already read in an earlier section of the text. What had been said and missaid is the imaginative space the writing of the worst tries to open. Two figures, then, were said in a space which is there and nowhere and hence: "Where then but there see now—."⁶³ See now what? "First back turned the shade astand. In the dim void see first back turned shade astand. Still."⁶⁴ As the narrative approaches closer to its images, to those elements which focalize its attention and our own, the prose turns toward a poetic rhetoric. The sentences do not convey meanings, but are saturated with it in the sense that poetic objects themselves are so saturated. This is a key difference between poetry and prose, especially between poetry and the novel. In the novel, style is frequently understood to function in the service of the texts message or aim, whereas in poetry style is the aim. The novel communicates an event by its style while the poem is the style of an event. In poetry, form and content are unified while in the novel they are antagonistic. Beckett's novel, however, plays these divisions nearly to death. One might suggest that the worst that can happen to prose is to transform it into poetry, to nullify the differences between the poem and prose, between lyric and novel.

Beckett's prose unleashes a very simple poetic device; the repetition or refrain: "Where then but there see now another. Bit by bit an old man and child. In the dim void bib by bit an old man and child. Any other would do as ill."⁶⁵ In this vein, the effect of the repetition is to continue the poeticizing of the novel, to draw the reader to the minimal qualities of narrative. The sentences in this project gain their sense and effect through the saturation of image in the sound of the signs.

The aim of the writing is to seek the worst, and its objects are objects of imagination or memory. Bit by bit these figures appear, an old man and child. Now we have seen the introduction of two couples: first, the shade whose

ground is pain, then the clenched eyes in the place where there is no place. These minimal beings become the objects of memory, the old man and child who plod on. The old man and child are the effects of an addition, from the minimal, barely human beings, beings which are human solely by their ability to feel pain, we arrive at beings which are determined according to their ages.

Hand in hand with equal plod they go. In the free hands—no. Free empty hands. Backs turned both bowed with equal plod they go. The child hand raised to reach the holding hand. Hold the old holding hand. Hold and be held. Plod on and never recede. Slowly with never a pause plod on and never recede. Backs turned. Both bowed. Joined by held holding hands. Plod on as one. One shade. Another shade.⁶⁶

This tender, almost sentimental, passage illustrates the fusion of novel and lyric gestures in Beckett's writing toward the worst. Hand in hand, the two shades fuse into one that remain two, but also one shade that is an addition to those that have already been presented. In that sense, it is an addition to the text that is at the same time a subtraction, a saying that missays, and a seeing that sees ill. The writing nearly gets carried away with the jubilation of addition, of the drive for more rather than less. Yet, Beckett catches himself and closes the possibility abruptly with the m-dash and negation. The more things that attach to the shades, the more human they will become and the task of this writing is to conceptualize the human in its minimal form—the “unnullable least,” and not as a being which borrows its existence from the sign of the Infinite.

These first sections of the novel present the initial stakes, aim, and object of the writing. They play with the working of imagination on its objects in the context of novelistic and lyric forms and figuration. In the fifth section, the imagination works on the shades. It places them, as if on a stage, into different postures, gives them cues to entrances and exits. “Head sunk on crippled hands. Clenched staring eyes. At in the dim void shades. One astand at rest. One old man and child. At rest plodding on. Any others would do as ill. Almost any. Almost as ill.”⁶⁷

Beckett presents a pair of shades: the old man and child, and the crouched, clench-eyed figure. Through a series of reduplications and reversals, the text seeks a means of change, a mechanism that will transfigure the image. Yet, it stumbles, at each instant, over the inevitable identity of the image—any image does as good or as ill as any other and hence the images may as well be the same. The text is dogged by a difference that is never different enough, a difference that produces cleaved identities. The modulation of the images leaves them, “Each time somehow changed.”⁶⁸

Even as the text is its own metatext in search of its own conditions for being, seeking its own means of self-justification, it forces its images on. On and

on. The text, as the images it engages, continues. But, there is no reason that the text should go on; narrative has no principle that renders its existence necessary. It is a provisional act with a provisional existence.

Next sudden gone the twain. Next sudden back. Unchanged. Say now unchanged. So far unchanged. Backs turned. Heads sunk. Dim hair. Dim white and hair so fair that in that dim light dim white. Black greatcoats to heels. Dim black. Bootheels. Now the two right. Now the two left. As on with equal plod they go. No ground. Plod as on void. Dim hands. Dim white. Two free and two as one. So sudden gone sudden back unchanged as one dark shade plod unceasing on.⁶⁹

The two shades are images of memory and of literature, of memories of literature, in that they belong to time past and to writings past. It is hard not to see Vladimir and Estragon⁷⁰ in this image, with the black greatcoats and the unending motion, as of their waiting. The passage indicates, then a recollection of youth and all of the writing of old. This memory is also the condition of Beckett's character, Krapp, who confronts his youth from his old age.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett presents us with a ruined figure who ruminates on his ruination. He makes the ruins speak, and they speak of the days prior to being ruined, even if it is only through a tape player. For Krapp, the mechanical reproducibility of youth protects him from the detritus he has become. In seeking the worst as a means of making something new, *Worstward Ho* falls at moments into repetitions of the past. But, with each repetition Beckett shows his memory as anamnesiac, for the fixation on the prior event is put to the service of the experiment that *Worstward Ho* itself is.

As it plods on, *Worstward Ho* puts us on the brink of the anamnesiac creation:

The dim. Far and wide the same. High and low. Unchanging. Say now unchanging. Whence no knowing. No saying. Say only such dim light as never. On all. Say a grot in that void. A gulf. Then in that grot or gulf such dimmest light as never. Whence no knowing. No saying.⁷¹

Here the beginning of the rewriting (in the Lyotardian sense of rewriting) that exceeds the grip of repetition and that opens on to something new, though we can say, with Beckett, very little about that something.

The situation of this passage places us in familiar territory, Biblical territory. The world as we know it requires a creative act, a primary and originary act without which there would be nothing to know. The creation of the world begins, in the Hebrew Bible with the introduction of light, the *fiat lux*, which figures prominently in the history of the sublime. The introduction of light becomes, according to that history the decisive model of sublime figuration. The introduction of light in the void, in the separation between the void, the

heavens, the water, the land, mobilizes the biblical story and feelings of awe and reverence we have for sublime figurations. Beckett's text participates in this history, but instead of trying to repeat it, instead of trying to borrow its power, it holds itself in abeyance. That is, the repetition of the old story, which places us in the zone of sublime figurations and hence of the sublime sentiment, is an occasion for Beckett to try to fail to narrate and hence avoid the traps of repetition and remembrance. The tradition of the sublime in writing becomes the inescapable noise that Beckett hopes to worsen.

But to worsen the sublime, will it really be enough? A sublime not of the noble, but of the worst? What happens to the sublime if Beckett worsens it? What can it mean to worsen the sublime? The terms the text mobilizes to articulate this worsening are not just the comparative adjectives— worse, worst, but a whole series of negative suffixes and prefixes: “un,” “less.” These terms continue the operation of Beckett's subtractive method of presenting the worst:

Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse.⁷²

This statement is Beckett's most direct description of the worst and the struggles he engages in to find it. The best way to say the worst is to name it the “unlessenable least.” The unlessenable least is the minimum presence available to language and thought that resides at the limit of nullification. The worst is not nullification or annihilation, but that limit where nullification and annihilation vacillate as possible determinations. The unnullable least is the worst. This is the direction that Beckett takes narrative, and the zone in which he reconfigures the sublime. The difficulty of this description is that it mobilizes a conceptual language to talk about what is unconceptualizable. The worst is not a concept in the classical sense; it is not a unity of discrete limits under which can be subsumed any number of sensible presentations. Determinate judgments, therefore, cannot provide any understanding of the text. The text cannot be constituted as an object of cognition; it is a text of ideas, in the Kantian sense. Ideas are objects of thought (not cognition) that cannot be subsumed under a concept because there is no directly perceivable sense data to provide the material for judgments. With the worst, we are in the context of presentation through negation, negative presentations, and not the positive constitution of objects of sense. The worst places us in the context of the reflective judgment.

Beckett approaches the limits of narrative, he seeks a narration that is not "all of old," a narrative that has yet to be seen, a narrative that resolves the failure of narrative to fail well enough. *Worstward Ho* is symptomatic in this regard, for rather than resolving the narrative, Beckett abandons it, suddenly, and cannot see the next move.

Enough. Sudden enough. Sudden all far. No move and sudden all far. All least. Three pins. One pinhole. In dimmest dim. Vasts apart. At bounds of boundless void. Whence no farther. Best worse no farther. Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on.

Said nohow on.⁷³

The abandonment of the text is not surprising. Beckett frequently abandoned texts. As his experimentations did not fail well enough, he abandoned them, sometimes taking them up again, as in "From an Abandoned Work." In the beginning of his abandonment Beckett seems to have found the point from which it will be impossible to continue to go on, the place of the "nohow on." It is like a game, three pins and one hole—how can you win? Since he cannot win, he has found the "unnullable least," from which there is "nohow worse." But, Beckett is never one to allow himself to indulge for long in the success of his narrative to arrive at the point of its longing. For "nohow on" comes round again to narrative: "Said nohow on." The narrative of the worst which aims to arrive at the point from which narrative cannot proceed leads to a point from which narrative originates itself again.

The sublime of the worst is the movement of narrative from its own collapsing into narrative; it is the suspension of narrative in narrative. A collapse and a suspension that finally succeeds at failing to fail. Beckett's sublime bears witness to this conjunction of contradictory forces. And it does so as an attempt to rethink the condition and the idea of the human that was bequeathed to him and to us at St. Lô. The sublime of the worst is a witnessing of the conditions of human life at St. Lô, to be sure, but more importantly it is a statement on the manner in which the condition of the human is to be thought again. The worst is the sublime of the inhuman human in ruins which, according to Beckett, we have become. *Worstward Ho* completes the experiment that was begun in the first "Trilogy," and which was crystallized in the unnameable's primary (un)question: "Where now? Who now? When now?"