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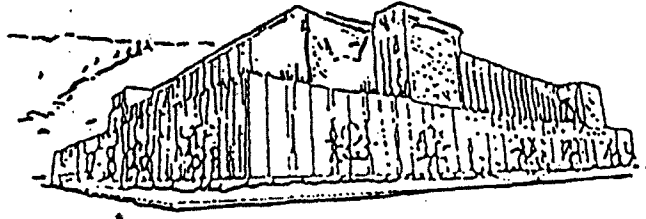
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**The Power of Negativity in the Wastelands
of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett:
A Study of Absence in *The Waste Land* and *Endgame***

by

Dennis Hockman

B.S. Towson University, 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

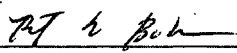
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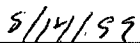
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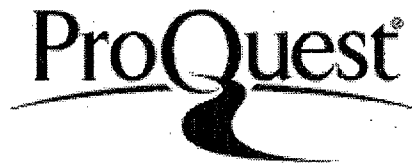


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The Power of Negativity in the Wastelands

of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett: A Study of Absence

in *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* (76 pp.)

Chair: Dr. Bob Baker *RAMB*

The role of absence in literature was the dominant preoccupation of this essay. In both *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* a devastated, wasted, meaningless world is presented. Absence becomes a primary theme. In *The Waste Land* Eliot explores the absence of meaningful social and spiritual models in modern society, and presents a quest that searches for some type of renewal or redemption. Beckett furthers this exploration in *Endgame* where he presents a world that is marked by an extreme emptiness. Even a hope for possible renewal has disappeared. The theoretical works of Maurice Blanchot, especially *The Writing of the Disaster*, also explore absence. It is the goal of this essay to prove that the ways these three writers evoke absence, by making it a presence, can be seen as a presentation of a new hope, one that does not emanate from a faith in some god, but rather comes from facing the absence of the salvific without despair.

Although Blanchot is a peculiar thinker, a sort of negative/secularized theologian, drawing on his theory, and taking it against the grain of his own preoccupation, helps to elucidate the hopeful absences in *The Waste Land* and *Endgame*. In Eliot's poem he recalls cultural, literary, and spiritual models from the past as solutions to the "death-in-life" situation he perceives in the present. In doing so, though, he also opens up the possibility of hope in "nothingness." Beckett addresses a similar "death-in-life" situation, but his world is even more bleak. An overriding absence pervades. The only thing possible in the world of *Endgame* is stagnancy and uncertainty. According to the interpretation of Blanchot provided in the essay, facing the devastated situation is the only way of creating a new sense of hope. Both of these texts invite the reader to confront a reality that is meaningless, in which the possibility for redemption is absent. *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* jolt the reader out of complacency. Once we can face the universe free from the illusion of redemptive forces, we can create renewal and hope for ourselves.

The Power of Negativity in the Waste Lands
of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett:
A Study of Absence in *The Waste Land* and *Endgame*

I. Introduction

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* can be considered two of the most important if not most influential literary works of the twentieth century. They have also generated a considerable amount of criticism and interpretation which began soon after their respective publications in 1922 and 1958. This criticism continues steadily into the present, making it difficult to say anything wholly new about either work. Although much has been written about these two texts, they continue to resonate for the contemporary reader. *The Waste Land*, in addition to being an exemplary "high modernist" poem, presents a landscape which remains emblematic of the human need for some redemptive quality in the universe. The grim universe cast on the stage of Beckett continues to gain power as it presents audiences with an intensified sense of their reality.

In many ways *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* are quite similar. Each depicts what Martin Esslin in his book *The Theater of the Absurd* refers to as a "situation of being." Eliot's and Beckett's "situations" are in many ways the same. Each presents a world that has been laid to waste. *The Waste Land* precedes *Endgame* both historically and in the extremity of desolation. Eliot's world has been physically devastated by the horrors of the First World War.

Individuals are dislocated from relationship and spiritual connection. In *Endgame* Beckett illustrates a world that is even more deteriorated than that of *The Waste Land*. In this play, everything, including the most basic elements of life, is marked by a pervasive absence. In my exploration of each text, I will concentrate on the main themes related to absence, including the concept of “awaiting” in a world of absence, the absent relationships presented in that world, and the ways in which language itself comes to evoke a sense of absence. These absences lead to a world in which “earthly” hope in general is absent.

Although Eliot and Beckett present nightmarish worlds where traditional hopes are futile, both suggest the possibility that a hope may exist. *The Waste Land* becomes a sort of search for that hope with fragments of possibility interwoven throughout the poem. In Beckett much less possibility, much less hope is provided. The project of writing itself, though, should be considered the most profound hope created by either of these texts. Both explore the devastation man has wrecked upon man in order to jolt the reader into a sense of awareness. While Eliot seems to want this acknowledgment to create some sort of change in the way society functions, Beckett presents his reality so that through acknowledgment his readers might stop searching for meaning beyond themselves -- both seem to oblige human recognition.

This paper will attempt to account for the extreme absences in each text by first exploring a few of the more typical readings in order to go beyond them into a discussion of aspects of the works which are often slighted by the more

conventional attempts to make meaning. I will frequently draw on the theoretical writings of Maurice Blanchot to help elucidate aspects of *Endgame* and *The Waste Land* that deal specifically with the absences evoked by each text. Absences in these two works, and often in art in general, struggle toward illustrating something positive in the negative, thus providing a new way of making meaning. While *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* both seem to explore the positive, glimmers of hope in a dead world, the theoretical work of Blanchot seems to block any possibility of hope for renewal or redemption. His work becomes an in-depth analysis of the operations of literature and humankind where hope cannot exist. According to my reading of Blanchot, though, this exploration is exactly the genesis of a new sense of hope, a hope that hinges on the freedom and possibilities created when one realizes that traditional structures of hope do not exist. For this reason I believe that while his concerns are far different from Eliot's, and even somewhat bleaker than those of Beckett, Blanchot presents a way of confronting reality that can lead to a recognition of absence itself which illuminates the once hidden images of possibility that permeate the world we perceive.

I read Blanchot as close to Esslin in his notions concerning our confronting a meaningless, uncertain universe. In our recognition of absurdity, humanity is shocked out of an existence that has become "trite, mechanical, complacent, and deprived of the dignity that comes of awareness" (Esslin 291). This awareness creates a type of secularized spirituality in which we search for the

ineffable, and are instilled again with “a lost sense of cosmic wonder” (Esslin 291). In this way Eliot, Beckett, and Blanchot all seem to be presenting impressions of reality in their texts that shock the reader out of complacency and create again the wonder, the awe which inspired humankind to create religion in the first place -- to create a sense of hope. So while Blanchot dwells in a universe governed by negativity and paradox, he can be read against the grain of his own preoccupations by realizing that facing the negative and paradoxical nature of reality creates a space, however small and inaccessible, for a glimmer of hope. The extreme emptying effects of *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* can jolt the reader into an awareness that the experience of absence is akin to experiencing the sublime. The existence of absences in the universe opens again the wonder that religion provides for those who do not accept the “death of God.” Paradoxically, this wonder is created by the absence of the salvific. The wonderment created by sheer nothingness is similar to the awe inspired by faith in a God we cannot possibly understand.

II. *The Waste Land*

Seventy-five years after its publication, *The Waste Land* continues to satisfy the modernist battle cry: “Make It New.” One of the marks of this newness, which is crucial to a contemporary reading of *The Waste Land*, is typical of the modern arts in general and can be described in a word -- *absence*. Both thematically and formally, absence seems to become a sort of project for the modernists. My exploration of absence is related to Lionell Trilling’s view of

modern literature. He locates within the modern framework an impulse to question ourselves about what is missing or absent from our lives. He is convinced that “no other literature has been as shockingly personal . . .” and that modernist literature “. . . asks every question that is forbidden in polite society. It asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our daily lives, with our professional lives . . . it asks us if we are content with ourselves” (Trilling 64).¹

The questions posed by texts such as *The Waste Land* compel the reader’s attention to turn toward the self. It is hard to imagine readers who could prevent themselves from reflecting on their romantic or interpersonal relationships after encountering Eliot’s typist home at tea time and the young man carbuncular. Likewise, I doubt many readers are able to avoid some amount of self-inspection when Eliot offers to show them “fear in a handful of dust.” Not only Eliot, but modernist literature for the first time in any significant way, has asked society to take an objective look at its own “heart of darkness.” The Romantic Quest inward has been upended. The quest is no longer one that seems to lead toward renewal, self-understanding or the sublime, but rather toward an understanding of the complicity of society as a whole in the horrors of the world or at least a recognition of their existence.

The Waste Land does not trace the quest of one specific personage, rather the poem itself becomes the quest. But despite this metamorphosis, *The Waste*

¹ Generally my use of parenthetical notation is standard except when I refer to *The Waste Land*, The Bible, or Shakespeare -- in these instances the numerals correspond to line numbers, verses, or Act, Scene, Line respectively.

Land does, after all, remain essentially a poem that relies on the concept of a quest. Before I specifically address my concerns with the role of absence, it is important to acknowledge a more traditional reading of the poem. The significance of what I am calling absence in *The Waste Land* can only be properly understood if we consider Eliot's preoccupations, and attempt to comprehend what would seem to be his intentions for the project. The quest enacted by *The Waste Land* is one that seeks to move from a crisis toward a recovery. The poem is also highly elegiac; the present is meaningless and the past provides the only resources possible for making meaning out of the horrors of the world around us. Embracing the past, relying on it to provide meaningful structures of life, is one way of moving from crisis toward recovery. It is interesting to reflect on the paradox that Baudelaire detects in such a project. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, he writes:

By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. . . . This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty, like that of the first woman before the fall of man. . . . In short, for any 'modernity' to be worthy of one day taking its place as 'antiquity', it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it. . . . Woe to him who studies the antique for anything else but pure art, logic, and general method! By steeping himself too thoroughly in it, he will lose all memory of the present: he will renounce his rights and privileges offered by circumstance -- for almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations. (Baudelaire 13-14)

Baudelaire addresses the importance of modernity's recognition of the past but also the dangers of becoming absorbed by the past. This is part of Eliot's dilemma -- within the past he detects structures of meaning now lost that may help to renew the modern waste land, but he realizes that a poem that does not also address contemporary concerns risks the possibility of being erased from the present.

Eliot attempts to make meaning and create unity by concatenating fragments of the past and the present. The poem is preoccupied with past literary and cultural figures, attempting to present their importance in creating meaning in the present and for the future. Critics often concentrate on locating unifying principles of in *The Waste Land*, including, for example, the mythopoetic quest, the allusiveness, and the orchestration of fragmented materials and speakers. Each of these approaches benefits any reader attempting to make sense of *The Waste Land*.

One of the first aspects of the poem that should strike the reader is the poem's overriding concern with loss. Through its allusiveness the poem juxtaposes meaningful structures of the past with images of the present that evoke a dead land inhabited by hollow beings. In this sense, *The Waste Land* feels elegiac. The principle themes of the poem generally evoke the absence of any genuine connection between the individual and the world outside the self. Meaningful connections between the individual and the other, the individual and nature, and the individual and the spiritual are absent from life. The poem mourns

these losses and meditates on specific examples of each. *The Waste Land* also attempts to provide some solution to this loss. The gathering of disparate elements --allusions to a meaningful past -- suggests that the material for renewal surrounds us, if only we had enough sense to acknowledge it.² The strategy of the poem, then, is to proceed as a sort of quest through the fragments of a waste land. These fragments include both the promise of possibility and stark examples of lives emptied of meaning.

Despite Eliot's devastatingly bleak representation of the world, the common impulse is to read this poem with a measure of hope. If the poem's strategy is to proceed as a kind of quest, a journey from crisis to recovery, it seems, according to many interpretations, that Eliot has attained some level of success. In Part I of the poem, "Burial of the Dead," the reader immediately confronts the waste land. The lives presented and the images unfolded speak of the loss of possibility for renewal. The sources of renewal no longer exist or are unable to be found; even spring, the universal symbol of regrowth and regeneration, has become cruel. "April is the cruelest month," because it mixes memory and desire (*WL* 1-3). In the first few lines of the poem Eliot unfavorably introduces the concepts of memory and desire. As the poem will go on to illustrate, memory only allows one to recall a lost past that was once meaningful, and desire itself is improper because it impels us toward unprocreative,

² In this sense Eliot seems to align his "solution" to the problems facing humankind distinctly to the notion of a Messiah. The possibility for redemption/salvation is always there, it is simply the individual's responsibility to acknowledge such possibility. Later, we will see how Blanchot twists this concept to create a sense that salvation is impossible.

meaningless relationships. Winter, on the other hand, is looked upon favorably--it "kept us warm" and covered "the earth in forgetful snow" (WL 5-6). The common perceptions of reality have been inverted. Upon entering the text, the reader is entering a world where the tools by which meaning has typically been created are no longer useful. The rest of the poem becomes an exploration of this world and a search for new tools, new methods of making meaning or providing redemption in a dead land.

In this way the search becomes a kind of Mythopoetic Quest. In the notes to the poem, Eliot informs the reader that "not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*" (Eliot 68).

Exploring this anthropological work, one discovers that much of *The Waste Land* is based loosely on the legend of the Fisher King. Many critics locate the meaning of the poem within this legend.³ The Fisher King has been wounded; he is dying. In the legend, the king is closely associated with the land--his prosperity becomes the land's prosperity, and his misfortune, likewise, becomes the land's misfortune. Because he is wounded and dying the land becomes a sterile and dry wasteland. The purpose of the resulting quest is to heal the king, thereby renewing the land -- moving from a state of social crisis to a state of social recovery. Eliot allusively recalls this legend and relates it directly to his perceptions of the contemporary world. Although the poem is inhabited by many

³ In Cleanth Brooks' essay "The Waste Land: The Critique of Myth," he explores this mythopoetic quest which serves to help unite the poem.

characters and perspectives, it is important to look at the Fisher King as an allegory for humanity. Many of the characters presented in the poem are not “part” of the quest, rather they become stage props which demonstrate the crisis of modern times. The poem, thus, presents at once the crisis and the quest. In a mythopoetic reading the themes evoked become quite important, both as they relate to the myth and as an additional way of providing unity. The themes of dryness, sterility, lack of recognition, lovelessness, the decline in spirituality, all lead to a sort of “death-in-life” situation that the fractured “quest” of the poem attempts to resolve.

The second and third sections, “A Game of Chess” and “The Fire Sermon,” address the situation of the poem more specifically. If the first section generalizes about the wasteland and the absence of possibilities for renewal, the following two sections present specific contexts. Eliot reveals a society plagued by people’s inability to connect or formulate meaningful relationships with one another. Part II and Part III of *The Waste Land* explore the failures of interpersonal connection and the decay of romantic love into a routine based on nothing more than lust, sex unaccompanied by communion or concern.

In “A Game of Chess,” Eliot depicts two scenes of decayed relationships, relationships of artifice which are more easily compared to the pieces on a chess board than to actual people. “The pieces mimic a social hierarchy from ‘The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,’ to ‘Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.’ It is a silent unnerving warfare” (Kenner, *Invisible*

Poet 152). The first depiction, which portrays the upper-class, relies heavily on allusions to *Antony and Cleopatra*, the rape of Philomel, and Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. These three main allusions create a thematic descent from the grandeur of Cleopatra, through the rape of Philomel, and finally to the recognition that "we are in rat's alley / Where the dead men lost their bones" (WL 115-16). This thematic descent falls from the past into the present.

By presenting a wasteland in which contemporary figures as well as characters from The Bible, history, and Shakespeare exist simultaneously on the same plane, Eliot depicts a world which is unified by disparate subject matter. In addition to providing the poem with thematic unity, the allusions to myth, literature, and history in the passage I just introduced create a sense of universality by allowing the poem to exist on several planes of experience, suggesting likenesses between various wastelands.⁴ In sections two and three, Eliot predominantly explores the personal and social wastelands, but by the end of the poem the wasteland becomes mythic. By allowing numerous wastelands to collide in *The Waste Land*, the poem seems to suggest that the chaos of the modern dilemma can be unified.

In addition to evoking multiple times and situations, the scene presenting the wealthy couple also presents a realistic description of a modern dilemma. When the actual characters appear, after a long descriptive passage in which nothing takes place, Eliot represents a relationship in which connection is absent

⁴ For a reading of the poem as an attempt to unite the disparate elements of life, see Matthiessen.

even on the verbal level; the dialogue between the two is filled with non sequiturs and improper responses. The second scene in the section depicts the failure of romance in lower class relationships and is punctuated throughout with the bartender's portentous reminder, "Hurry up please it's time." Marriage has become an institution where love often does not exist, children are unwanted problems, and physical relations are wholly void of meaning.

"The Fire Sermon" continues to explore the idea of meaningless, loveless, non-procreative, and non-consensual sex. Tiresias, the blind seer, who has experienced life as both man and woman, is introduced as the poem's "speaker" for the first time. He bears witness to the failure of the romantic and sexual relationships he observes. Tiresias revisits the rape of Philomel "So rudely forced" (WL 205), disapproves of homosexuality, compares humanity to a machine, describes the act of sex as mechanistic, meaningless, and mundane.

After this portrayal of the failures of human connection, Part IV, "Death By Water," asks us to think on our death. The poem obliges the reader to consider Phlebas the drowned Phoenician sailor "who was once handsome and tall as you" (WL 321).

The final section, "What the Thunder Said," is the most traditionally quest-like movement in *The Waste Land*. The possibility of a heroic figure that pursues an objective, in this case renewal or redemption, is most evident in "What the Thunder Said." Contemporary London and Europe fade and are replaced by a quasi-mythic wasteland in which one could imagine a Christian Pilgrim or a

Percival wandering. The layering of worlds and times becomes most prevalent as the reader, entering the wasteland in search of water, is confronted with images and themes derived from distinctly religious models. When the distant thunder turns into “a damp gust / Bringing rain” (WL 394-95), a list of imperatives from the Upanishads unfolds. The hope, which seems to be a direct result of the rain, manifests itself in a suggestion to “give, sympathize, control” (Eliot’s note to lines 402, 412, and 419). The imperatives become a sort of prescription for redemption. These injunctions, it would seem, become part of the hope for renewal. By following this advice, humanity might be able to escape the wasteland in which it lives.

In the end, though, the Fisher King is dying. He and the land have not moved from crisis to recovery. In the Part V humanity has glimpsed a vision of the possibility of hope. But just as quickly as that hope had arrived, symbolized by a flash of lightning and a damp gust bringing rain, it has disappeared. The image we are left with is tinged with only a whisper of hope. The dying king sits on the shore with an arid plain behind him, fishing. In this act he remains somewhat hopeful -- he continues to fish. But he also realizes that “London Bridge is falling down” (WL 427). In the last lines of the poem Eliot breaks from the more traditional movement that has been explored in the final section and returns to a fragmentary collage that neutralizes the redemption on which the poem seems to verge. The poem does not provide a sense of renewal but rather

presents the possibility that *hope* for renewal exists within the past, within the fragments Eliot has “shored against [his] ruins.”

The gathering of fragments is one of the most prominent elements of the poem. Many critics, such as F. R. Leavis, strive to find unity in the poem by reconciling the fragments. Using the fragmented nature of the poem to create meaning helps develop an understanding of the poem’s erudite disjointedness that has frustrated many readers. According to Leavis, the disparate allusions to anthropology, Greek Mythology, Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Chaucer, The Upanishads and the Bible, among others, should give readers a sense not only of Eliot’s project, but also of the poem’s meaning. Hope for renewal lies in an understanding that the past is not irrecoverable; it may exist within the present.

If we concentrate on the poem as chiefly quest-like rather than an elegiac investigation of the dead past, *The Waste Land* has a way of suppressing the concept of time. The quest in the poem is fragmented and exists on multiple planes and times. The poem itself is the quest and also part of the answer; the exploration itself of the problems one is faced with is, in a sense, the glimmer of possibility. In discussing this concept in relation to Eliot, Michael Edwards writes:

The view begins in a perception of disorder, to which Eliot added a Flaubertian dismay at the plethora of books and histories and ways of seeing which a late civilization has accumulated, and also a strong feeling for classical security. This produced the belief that art, by making an order suggests an order in the world; it invites one to discover the order which is already there if only one could see it. Yet that order must surely be, not a pattern of fixities, not the eternal harmony which remains when everything accidental

has been shaken out, but a dynamic, and a dynamic which knows no such hierarchy. The surmise which best takes account of this, as far as I can see, . . . is that the concern of art is not order but possibility, and that it contrives possibility all the way along, down to the least significant detail.

Writing rewrites the world in the interest of hope.
(134).

The Waste Land is a quest for this hope. The traditional reading I've summarized here works toward finding a unity, because in unity lies hope, because in harmony lies redemption.

While it is an important step, the attempt to find a unified meaning in *The Waste Land* tends to ignore the most striking aspect of the poem. Granted, Eliot's initial draft, entitled "He Do the Police in Different Voices," was much a more narratively unified poem than Pound's revision which closely resembles *The Waste Land* we are familiar with today, but even the original title suggested that the poem would be fragmented, ventriloquistic, and multi-voiced. Pound pushed Eliot's impulse toward the fragmentary, urging him to make the poem even less traditionally unified than the early draft already was. The sheer strangeness and the radically disjunctive nature of the poem, which Pound encouraged with his revisions, dissolve when critics attempt to unify the poem. By organizing the fragments, the fragmentary nature of the poem vanishes. Although the poem does project a thematic unity, it remains a disjunctive collection of voices and images from the present and the past. The more traditional readings impose unity on *The Waste Land* by tracing thematic patterns or allusions. No one claims that the poem is unified in any traditional sense; rather they claim that it presents a new

unity, a unity that is rooted in disjunction, an absence of traditional structure and presentation. But while these disjunctions are recognized, they are not addressed as the most significant aspect of the poem.

I believe that a contemporary reading of the poem should foreground the disjunctive nature of *The Waste Land*, considering both the motivations and the effects of this disjunction. If the form and technique of this poem do not become of utmost importance to an understanding of his project, Eliot easily could have stayed with the more traditional draft he showed to Pound. If demonstrating the fragmentary nature of the world were not highly significant, the poem just as well could have been linearly organized, with a single speaker, in straight iambic pentameter. The initially off-putting and confusing disjunctions and fragments that scatter themselves across *The Waste Land* create gaps, silences, and absences within the text that parallel the gaps, silences, and absences characteristic of the world Eliot surveys. Drawing on the theories of Maurice Blanchot to explore the concepts of the fragmentary and absence more deeply, both textually and contextually, I will demonstrate the ways in which absence can be additive, a reinforcement of a hope in the *possibility* of renewal.

As I have suggested, a main concern of *The Waste Land* revolves around the need for renewal in the waste of modern life as Eliot conceives it. The Fisher King (humanity) is, according to Eliot, in a danger of metaphorical death; in fact, most of the personages introduced in the poem plod through a “death-in-life” existence. It has been said of Eliot’s poetry that his personae “sit and wait

without hope of redemption” and that “the personal need for deliverance . . . is only partially relieved through the depersonalizing ritual of art. It exhibits the capacity for partial detachment, a capacity that turned passion into poetry but failed to redeem the man” (Schwartz 207). I believe that Schwartz’s assertion here is quite valid. Looking specifically at *The Waste Land* in light of this quote, leads one to recognize absence as the poem’s main theme. The *absence* of “that which once was” evidences the failures of humankind. Nothing exists in the wasteland of the early twentieth century: sex is meaningless, without love or hope of procreation; daily life has become routine. Absence becomes such an important theme in the poem that it becomes the poem’s subject. Blanchot maintains,

When the subject becomes absence, the absence of a subject, or dying as subject, subverts the whole sequence of existence, causes time to take leave of its order, opens life to passivity, exposing it to the unknown, to the stranger.
(*Disaster 29*)

This idea is related to the concept that *The Waste Land* exists on different levels and at different times simultaneously. As the poem becomes more and more concerned with dying, the need for redemption to prevent that dying, and the absence or loss of that possibility, the sequence of existence is subverted. Eliot uses a fragmentary writing to subvert the sequence of existence, and the subject matter itself reinforces this tactic, causing time to take leave of its order.

Absence, then, is not merely a primary concern, theme, or subject of the poem; it is an active agent in carrying out the project of *The Waste Land*. Not only is

absence the subject of this poem, it becomes, in this sense, one of its main characters. I find a comment of Blanchot's on Mallarme appropriate to Eliot as well: "In absence he grasped a presence, a strength still persisting, as if in nothingness there were a strange power of affirmation" (*Space* 109).

In *The Waste Land* "what is not" becomes more important than what is, which can become, strangely, an affirmation of absence. Although Eliot does not seem to have intended any affirmation of absence, the weight that "what is not" bears is so significant I feel that a full reading of the poem requires an appreciation of the meanings that can be derived from deliberate absences. Among the poem's absences are these: no shelter, no relief, no sound of water (23-24), inability to speak, failing eyes, knowing nothing, silence (38-40), blank tarot cards, inability to see and find (53-54), lidless eyes (138), non-consensual sex (205), non-reproductive sex (213-14), meaningless sex that encounters no defense, vanity that requires no response (240-41), an unlit stairway (248), a fishless river (276-77), absence of connection (301-02), no expectations (304-05), no water, no water, no water, not even solitude (331-43), no end to the landscape (370), and no center.

Absence is also evoked by the fragmentary nature of the poem itself. The speaker of the poem changes from section to section and even within sections. The spaces that exist between speakers can be viewed as gaps or blanks in the text -- a speakerless void, if you will, where the reader is invited to ascribe meaning to the presence of absence. What do we make of Eliot as "He do the police in

different voices,” frequently changing or fusing speakers? But not only do the speakers change, they often disappear completely. At times the reader is unsure which speaker is responsible for the telling. Not only does Eliot himself seem to disappear from the poem, but evidence of any specific central speaker disappears as well.

Although in one of his notes to the poem Eliot himself contends that Tiresias can be viewed as the central figure, this idea seems like a convenient afterthought to me, a way to impose a type of unity on the poem that does not in actuality exist. Tiresias, being eternal and privy to the experiences of both man and woman, would seem to be logical meeting of the many voices in *The Waste Land*, but often there is no concrete textual evidence that any specific persona is speaking. The gaps between speakers and the frequently (con)fused speaker then lead absence to become meaningful in that the lack of a central speaker becomes emblematic of the absence of significant or authoritative voice in the early twentieth century.⁵

Blanchot characterizes fragmentary writing in a way that relates specifically to the primary concerns of *The Waste Land* and the multiple voices that fragment the poem. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot writes:

The interruption of the incessant: this is the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing: interruption's having somehow the same meaning as that which does not cease. Both are effects of passivity. Where power does not reign . . . there, dying is living. There dying is the passivity of life.

⁵ While nothing I've read specifically addresses the absence of a central speaker as meaningful, this way of understanding the fragmentary texture of the poem, its ventriloquistic tendencies, is commonplace and most likely began with Eliot's own sense of his project.

-- of life escaped from itself and confounded with the disaster of time without present which we endure by waiting, by awaiting a misfortune which is not still to come, but which has always already come upon us and which cannot be present. In this sense, the future and the past come to the same, since both are without present. So it is that men who are destroyed (destroyed without destruction) are as though incapable of appearing and invisible even when one sees them. And if they speak it is with the voice of others. (*Disaster* 21-22)

The voices and structures of the past which fragment Eliot's poem interrupt the incessant movement of process and time which itself is constantly repeatable on the space of the page. The fragments from various times, cultures, and systems of belief speak to the notion according to which the poem may exist in the past and future simultaneously. Furthermore the (con)fusion of the speakers and the lack of an authoritative voice evidence a space where a single power does not reign. According to Blanchot, in this space dying is living. In the poem the personae experience a "death-in-life" because life exists without meaning. They live by "awaiting a misfortune which is still not to come, but which has always already come upon us and which cannot be present." We see this in the crowd that flows over London Bridge who have been undone by death -- they are both already dead and waiting for death. The first couple in "A Game of Chess" is also awaiting death, "waiting for a knock upon the door" (WL 56). The poem itself is waiting -- for rain and for redemption. To relate the poem in general to the last lines of this quotation we can see Eliot as the voice that speaks the fragments which he either perceives or remembers into being. But we never hear Eliot's own voice, for it

comes through the masks of multiple personae; he is incapable of appearing, and would be invisible even were one to see him.

By absenting himself from the poem, Eliot illustrates that language is marked by an absence of true connection or communication. In a sense, he is not writing the poem merely in order to communicate his views, rather he is orchestrating the personae in order to present a situation. This situation is one in which we can understand some of others, but often their actual meanings are negated when we impose our own interpretations or meanings. This misconnection is evoked in "The Fire Sermon," after the long description of the room turns to a transcription of the dialogue between the two people who inhabit the room:

'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
 'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 "I never Know what you are thinking. Think.

I think we are in rats' alley
 Where the dead men lost their bones.

'What is that noise?'
 The wind under the door.
 'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
 Nothing again nothing.

'Do
 'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
 ber
 'Nothing?'

I remember
 Those are pearls that were his eyes.
 'Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head?'

(WL 111-26)

The most obvious form of absence here is the absence of any genuine relationship between characters. The female speaker begins, "My nerves are bad to-night. . . Stay with me," and the man she is addressing refuses to respond; interpersonal communication has ceased. When she demands that he "Think," he responds strangely with desperation and disregard of her needs: "I think we are in rats' alley." The conversation then descends into a deeper recognition of absence itself. As she continues to question him -- "what is that noise?" and "what is the wind doing?" -- his response is, "Nothing again nothing." His comprehension of the world is absent.

When the woman, frustrated with his non-recognition, probes further and asks what he knows, sees, and remembers, the response is again quite cryptic: "I remember / Those were pearls that were his eyes." This statement echoes "Ariel's song" in *The Tempest*. She attempts to console Ferdinand as he contemplates his father's death. "Full Fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; Those are pearls that were his eyes." (*The Tempest* I, ii, 397-99). Ariel suggests that death is only a transformation, that all things are connected and that Ferdinand's father lives on as coral and pearls. In this scene of misconception the consolation fails. These people cannot even connect with one another, let alone understand the inter-relatedness of all things.

At the height of her frustration the female speaker presses more questions: "What shall we do tomorrow? / 'What shall we ever do?" The answer speaks of the absence of meaning and purpose in the lives of these two. Even the tone of

the following lines suggests a profound indifference. Imagine the speaker of these lines sighing:

The hot water at ten
 And if it rains, a closed car at four.
 And we shall play a game of chess,
 Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.
 (WL 135-38)

Life itself is absent of meaning, reduced to a series of rituals by which we structure our days -- tea, a taxi ride if it rains, a game which will prevent us from having to risk genuine relationship, and finally a dull recognition of the concept that life is a period spent awaiting death.⁶

This idea of misconnection is perhaps best treated, though, in a sudden moment of tension that forces itself into language, "I can connect / Nothing with Nothing" (WL 301-302). While it is not my intention to hang the crux of my argument on a single phrase, I think that these lines in particular are perhaps the most obvious instance of my contention. It is important to put pressure on this ambiguous language to determine its various meanings and how they add thematically and technically to *The Waste Land's* project. The most obvious interpretation would be "I can't make anything connect." A second interpretation would be "I can see similarities between the different types of nothing." Yet a third way of looking at these lines would be "I can't connect any specific thing with the concept of nothing." I find the fourth interpretation to be the most interesting and powerful. Understanding the reasons that this may be perhaps the

⁶ The concept of awaiting will be discussed at length later when I address Beckett.

most convincing relies on close scrutiny of line break. The first statement is positive-- "*I can connect*" (my italics). For the first time in the poem it seems that a solution to the meaningless, inharmonious, disconnected, spiritual wasteland is given. The speaker of these lines has made a connection.

Connections between the self and other fail, connections between the self and landscape fail, even connections between the self and history or that which held meaning in the past are incomplete, but a very real connection is understood between absence and absence. Hence the resultant half of the aphorism, "*Nothing with nothing*" (my italics). The second line contains implications of two specific entities bound by a relationship with one another. Therefore, we might read the lines according to this fourth interpretation as: "I find meaning and connection between one 'meaningful nothing' and another 'meaningful nothing.'"

Meaninglessness itself has become meaningful.

While initially it seems that the speakers are standing in the waste land -- a space of nothingness where meanings are lost, human relations are fruitless, and renewal is impossible -- a tool by which to help make sense and meaning from the void has been unearthed. It is as if Eliot were peering through a kaleidoscope toward the past. The image that returns to him is the poem, fragments of both near and distant past. "The new, because it cannot take place in history, is also that which is most ancient" (*Disaster* 37). Because, as Baudelaire has stated, modernity is "ephemeral," constantly dissolving and reconstituting itself, it cannot exist as part of history. Only the past, even the most recent past, yesterday for

example, can, upon reflection, provide meaning for the future. For Eliot, the old cultural and mythological models offer scraps of meaning that layer upon one another and exist simultaneously but, in the end, I don't find them wholly satisfying. A contemporary reading must acknowledge the possibility of the past but also of an understanding of *nothing* as a frontier for possibility. True spiritual renewal may come only by conceiving meaning, form, and existence in light of what has traditionally been regarded as their absence. A real connection exists between nothing and nothing. To ascribe meaning to the word *nothing* is to negate it -- it is an impossibility. To create a space, then, where the impossible is manifest and nothingness gains meaning is to create a glimmer of possibility for a future.

The future is given form in the poem, the fragments that Eliot has "shored against" his "ruins." The fragmentary nature of the poem's focus on reality is also a type of absence. By allowing the text to proceed in parts, scraps, and fragments, a vision of reality is created that seems to align itself with William Blake's vision of the self. Human beings are fragments of a whole, and we are represented by aspects such as the creative imagination, reason, rage, compassion, or some combination thereof. In *The Waste Land* this concept expands into the world at large. Since humanity is comprised of incomplete and fragmented beings, eventually the perceptions of the world they inhabit must become fragmented. In *The Waste Land*, perception becomes fragmentation and manifests itself in a poetry that is marked by an unpredictable form, one that both establishes form and

creates disjunction, one in which the conventional expectations of poetry are broken.

Eliot handles the formal aspects of the poem in much the same way as he does its content. By relying on traditional poetic forms as models, he combines them to provide a seismographic record of his perceptions of the collective consciousness. Faced with the recognition that connection between self and other is difficult, if not impossible, and that individuals do not often present themselves in any consistent way, the form of the poem is mimetic of both its content and the various poses people assume to present themselves to others. If we were to look specifically for the types of traditional prosodies that Eliot uses in *The Waste Land*, we would find rough approximations of a fairly strict rhyming iambic pentameter, blank verse, the traditional four beat line, and frequent use of end-rhyme. To this he adds choppy song-like interruptions and juxtapositions of long-line passages with three or four syllable line passages. The shape of the poem on the page is initially unsettling. Traditionally, longer poems made use of a fixed form that readers could quickly recognize. When form was broken the reader took particular notice of the aberrant lines. In *The Waste Land* formal elements of the poem are changed so often that readers can never hope that their expectations will be fulfilled. In a way, Eliot is teaching his readers to understand a fragmented world where they may need to abandon their traditional or received hopes and expectations and concentrate on developing new ones.

The absence of predictable form also reinforces the fragmented allusions to meaningful cultural or literary models of the past. Not only is the modern perception of life disjunctive, filled with fragments of the past, so contemporary poetry is a collage of traditional prosodic forms. Additionally, form mirrors the modern dilemma -- just as we are cut off from others, nature, and redemption, so we are cut off from our means of expression. Writing a sonnet or *terza rima* is still possible but cannot completely convey true internal or external states. Both internally and externally, all forms exist simultaneously as individual fragments of the shattered whole. In the same way that the notion of absence becomes a type of presence, and that meaninglessness becomes a meaning, disjunction becomes a type of unity that is not unity.

We must try to recognize in this “*shattering*” or “*dislocation*” a value that is not one of negation. . . . to write and to read this poem is to accept bending our listening to language toward the experience of a certain breaking up, an experience of separation and discontinuity. . . . The fragmented poem, therefore, is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens another manner of accomplishment -- the one at stake in writing, in questioning, or in an affirmation irreducible to unity. . . . Fragmentary speech is never unique, even should it want to be. . . . A new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance, or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite center from out of which, through speech, relation is to be created: and arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes, that is to say, leaves each of the terms that come into relation *outside* one another, respecting and preserving this *exteriority* and this distance as the principle. . . of all signification.
(Blanchot, *Conversation* 308)

Therefore, absence of a clear unity is not the negation of unity, merely a redefining of the term. While most traditional readings attempt to locate unity in *The Waste Land* by tracing thematic patterns or allusions, thus illustrating the ways the poem presents a new unity, doing so often ignores the fact that the experience of the poem remains erratic and disjunct, filled with absences that break continuity and oblige the reader to explore new ways of making meaning. While this does not necessarily align itself with Eliot's preoccupation, I feel that by looking through the telescope in reverse toward the past, the absence of a traditional unity is, in part, an important aspect of the project. Blanchot conceptualizes the fragmentary as:

the mark of a coherence all the firmer in that it has come undone in order to be reached, and reached not through a dispersed system, or through dispersion as a system
Fragmentation is the spacing, the separation effected by a temporalization which can only be understood -- fallaciously -- as the absence of time. (*Disaster* 60)

In 1922, when the poem was published, the nature of its presentation was radical in the extreme. For this reason it makes sense that readers attempted to find organization and unity within the poem. Seventy some years later, readers of poetry have become accustomed to some level of disjunction and fragmentation. In *The Waste Land*, though, this fragmentation goes beyond simple mimesis of a psychological or social condition. In Blanchotian terms, the disjunction locates the speaker and the readers in a quest that exists in the absence of time. In Eliot's poem, we are always on the verge of arriving but have never arrived at redemption. The fragmentation itself provides both unity and meaning in *The*

Waste Land. Although for Eliot there can be no meaning in absence, in fact he seems to evoke absence as an illustration of the problem; meaning is created through the absences of the poem. Optimistically connecting nothing with nothing is an act of authentic consciousness that exhibits a way of coping with futility. Locating true unity in the absence of traditional unity, in disjunction and fragmentation, provides a sense of hope. Eliot's rejection of a traditionally redemptive ending to the poem and a return to a series of fragments which can be shored against his ruins illustrates this nicely. In *The Waste Land* the presented unity derives its meaning from facing the timeless, shattered reality that confronts humankind.

III. Transition

If *The Waste Land* is a poem in which absence is evoked through form, content, and theme, providing the fragments of the poem with a strange cohesion, *Endgame* is a play that harbors the concept of absence and presents it merely as the situation. Any meaning outside the absence is questioned. Although the two projects, Eliot's and Beckett's, share many surface similarities, they also exhibit an equal number of differences. When Beckett published *Endgame*, some fifty-five years after *The Waste Land*, he had the dubious benefit of having witnessed a second World War. World War II eclipsed "The War to End All Wars" both in devastation of human life and in annihilation of the land on a wide scale. If Eliot compared post W.W.I. Europe to a wasteland, to what then could Beckett possibly compare the world after the devastation of Aushwitz, Belsen, Hiroshima, and

Nagasaki? Living under post-atomic threat, Beckett's vision appears conspicuously darker than Eliot's. Despite the differences in W.W.I and W.W.II, both of these works were written in the shadow of great disaster--disaster that was categorized not as "an act of god" but rather as an act of human beings. The god Eliot hoped for has retreated even deeper into hiding; the quest for renewal remains a failure. *Endgame* presents a new "answer" for society, one less reliant on outside forces, but equally dependent on the concept of absence. If the exploration of this absence was begun in *The Waste Land*, we can say that it is furthered, if not brought to a culmination, in a new wasteland, Beckett's sparse drama of attrition.

Like Eliot, Beckett needs to write. As I've already noted, the opening lines of *The Waste Land* address memory and desire which have been awakened by the cruel spring, taunting us with the promise of renewal which the speaker believes can only go unfulfilled. If we view memory as a recognition of that which once held meaning, and desire as a type of need, then in a sense, in *The Waste Land* April has become the cause of the writing. Unfortunately, though, for the characters in the *Endgame* the possibility of seasonal change no longer even exists. The origin of the stark drama in which they are trapped emanates similarly from their memories of the past. But in the case of Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell, their desire is not stirred by a longing for a promised, albeit suspended, renewal; these characters desire only to end, to finish.

When Hamm asks Clov to tell him of the weather, the report is much different from that provided by Eliot in the opening sequences of *The Waste Land*. Clov informs Hamm that the weather is “As usual” (EG 27). Over the course of the next scene Hamm, who is blind and paralyzed, and therefore completely reliant on Clov as his witness of the world, asks to be updated on the state of the earth, the sea, the waves, and the sun. Clov retrieves his telescope and, before he looks out of the windows at the back of the stage, he turns it on the audience and claims that he sees “a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy.” He continues after lowering the telescope and returning to center stage, “Well? Don’t we laugh?” They do not. The statement is not funny; even the audience suffers the world of the characters in *Endgame*. When Clov attempts to respond honestly to Hamm’s queries he reports that the earth is zero; this he repeats four times, possibly suggesting each of the four directions. The ocean is described as a sunken light, the waves as lead, and the sun as zero (EG 30,31). The color of the landscape is gray: “Light black. From pole to pole” (EG 32).

The landscape of *Endgame* is even more wasted than that of *The Waste Land*. The sterility of the world is referred to over and over again throughout the play. The play’s setting has been interpreted as a “post-Armageddon bomb shelter, protecting the last remaining human survivors on earth” (Athanason 24), while Hugh Kenner has suggested that the stage can be viewed as a metaphor for the interior of a human skull (Beckett 155). In *The Long Sonata of the Dead*, Michael Robinson observes that, according to the engraver in Hamm’s story, the

world is ashes. Likewise Clov describes the world as “corpsed”; even the seeds he has planted in his kitchen will not sprout. The world of Hamm and Clov is one of continual loss. Robinson points to the following passage in *Endgame* to demonstrate: “Nagg loses a tooth: it is part of the long decline into old age (‘But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!’)” (274-75). The only vision of nature provided in the play is one of decay. The audience can only assume that this decay will continue until all that is left is the world of the engraver.

Although the world Beckett presents is much bleaker than that of Eliot, it should not be regarded as a different world. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot universalizes an image employed by both Eliot and Beckett. Blanchot describes the “suffering of our time” as “‘A wasted man, bent head, bowed shoulders, unthinking, gaze extinguished.’ ‘Our gaze turned to the ground’” (*Disaster* 81). It is difficult not to recall the “crowd that flowed over London Bridge” in *The Waste Land*, with each man’s eyes fixed before his feet (*WL* 62-65), or Clov’s description of himself leaving at the end of the play: “I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit” (*EG* 81). The image is strikingly similar even in its one main exception. In Blanchot the gaze is extinguished; for Clov the world is extinguished although he’s never seen it lit. The literal meaning here could just as easily be a metaphor for a gaze that is extinguished, never been lit.

At any rate the result is the same. In the Old Testament, when King Hezekeiah becomes sick, Isaiah comes to him and says: "Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live" (Isaiah 38:1). At the end of *The Waste Land*, when death seems imminent, a speaker asks, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (426). Similarly, it seems that Clov has been preparing for the end all along. When Hamm asks, "What are you doing?" Clov responds, "Putting things in order" (EG 57).

A world reduced to routine is also described by both of the texts in question. In *The Waste Land*, the characters' lives are guided by habit, by routine. Eliot depicts this routine in the men who routinely stare at their feet as they cross London Bridge on their way to work. The wealthy couple's routine is examined in Part II: "The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. And we shall play a game of chess" (WL 135-37). Likewise the typist in Part III returns to her flat for her routine of tea which further degenerates into routine sex. In *Endgame* the day presented on stage is like any other day, "As long as it lasts. (Pause) All life long the *same* inanities" (my italics, EG 45). Hugh Kenner offers another example: Clov asks, "Why this farce, day after day?" to which it is sufficient for Hamm to reply "Routine." The lives portrayed on stage are a routine, but Kenner takes the routine of life a step further, suggesting that the routine is also one of an actor who returns to the stage nightly, portraying the same life in the same way (Kenner 162). The routine that causes the despair for the characters of *The Waste Land*, though, runs deeper for Hamm. Kenner goes

on to point out that, for Hamm, the despair is a conviction, not a philosophy. The characters in *Endgame* are imprisoned by despair. In the world they inhabit hope for any traditional redemption is impossible. Even the possibility of God does not exist. The despair itself becomes a subject of mockery, “as when [Beckett] has Hamm require that God be prayed to in silence (‘Where are your manners?’) and then berate him (‘the bastard!’) for not existing” (Kenner, *Beckett* 164).

Michael Robinson draws comparisons between Hamm and Apollinaire’s Tiresias: “His Universe is the play / Within which he is God the creator” (Robinson 270). From this perspective, Hamm not only replaces god but also becomes linked to “the most important personage” of *The Waste Land*. If both of these texts are orchestrated by similar figures, they are likewise developed with deliberate attention to the past. Leonard Pronko insinuates that Hamm is much like the dying Fisher King with one important difference. The traditional Fisher King figure is a scapegoat for all of humanity; he suffers alone, but Hamm refuses to bear the weight of human suffering alone and drags Nell, Nagg, and Clov along (Pronko 137). I have already shown how allusions come to bear on *The Waste Land*, and just as Beckett suggests the Fisher King, so he suggests many other allusions, making *Endgame* equally, if not more, erudite than Eliot’s poem. Yet while Eliot utilizes allusion in order to suggest the value of the past, in *Endgame*, “the old questions . . . the old answers,” routines, and habits, fail. (Robinson 273). Even though Eliot’s attempts to recall the past as a way of renewing the present ultimately fail as well, he still seems to believe that models

from the past may provide answers for the future. Beckett suggests that any memories or allusions to the past can only perpetuate and prolong the meaningless present.

One thing all of the characters in both *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* share in common is the act of awaiting. Earlier, I described *The Waste Land* as a mythopoetic quest in which the crisis is a “death-in-life” situation, wherein the characters await recovery. *Endgame* can be viewed in much the same way; it is a play in which the characters also experience a “death-in-life” situation awaiting the end. In a passage from *The Writing of the Disaster* which I’ve already cited, Blanchot approaches the idea of waiting as a place where “dying is living.” “There dying is a passivity of life -- of life escaped from itself and confounded with the disaster of time without present which we endure by waiting” (*Disaster* 21). This is the time outside of time, the time of infinite time, in which all human beings can do is wait in recognition of despair, the time in which the voice they use is not their own but the voice of the other “which somehow accuses them, interrogates and obliges them to answer for a silent affliction which they bear without witness” (*Disaster* 22).

Just as the voices in *The Waste Land* are (con)fused, the speaker speaking with the voice of others, so Hamm often shifts his voice to that of the storyteller. In *Endgame*, though, Hamm seems to adopt this “other” voice as a way of verbalizing his complicity in the disaster. The notion of “answering for a silent affliction” bears significantly on the dramatic tension of *Endgame*. If any tension

beyond the awaiting exists in the play, it relies on Hamm's responsibility for the wasteland that Clov observes outside the shelter. The text makes it clear that Hamm is at least partially accountable for whatever tragedy has left him, Nagg, Nell, and Clov as the only seeming survivors in the world. Hamm can be seen as Tiresias, also as god of his world, but when he speaks it is often with the voice of another. The story he tells, his "chronicle," suggests autobiography. Many of the events in which the audience knows Hamm has been involved occur in his "chronicle," but whether or not the story is about Hamm's life is never affirmed. By masking what is most likely autobiographical as fictional, Hamm is able to answer for his transgressions without openly admitting that he was in the wrong.

IV. *Endgame*

Before I go on to summarize a few of the traditional readings of *Endgame* and explore the play's relationship to absence, I feel that I must describe the absurd world of the play, the world that may have been created by Hamm's "crimes." James Eliopoulos categorizes *Endgame* as a "static drama," one in which "the mood is immobilized to evoke eternity." The drama "does not move forward but is charged with electricity" (Eliopoulos 55). This notion is a predominant characteristic of absurdist theater which Martin Esslin defines in his book *The Theater of the Absurd*. In the book he addresses approximately twenty playwrights and classifies them as dramatists of the absurd. Beckett enjoys the distinction of being the first dramatist Esslin discusses.

According to Esslin, one of the most significant aspects of absurdist theater, one that is evident in *Endgame*, is that the plays often do not contain events, but rather situations that forever repeat themselves (Esslin 39). In the final, controversial moments of the *Endgame*, Clov indicates to Hamm that he is leaving: "This is what we call making an exit" (EG 81). Beckett's stage direction conducts Clov toward the door. Clov exits and returns "*dressed for the road. . . . He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end*" (EG 82). As Clov remains, the audience does not know whether to believe he will leave or to assume he stays. Faced with this uncertainty, the audience must recognize that one of the options is that he does stay and that this drama will forever repeat itself.

Esslin further elaborates on this "situation" in the theater of the absurd as one that is concerned primarily with communicating a "sense of being." He likens absurdist drama to imagist and symbolist poetry which presents images and themes which are interwoven to create a total and complex impression of a basic and static situation (Esslin 294-95). In *Endgame* this situation primarily relies on the concept of awaiting the end, as is suggested by the title which alludes to chess, wherein the endgame is a move toward winning closure. In addition to striving to communicate a situation or "sense of being," absurdist theater seeks to express an anxiety and despair which springs from the recognition of being surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness (Esslin 314). If *Endgame* closes on a note of uncertainty, it is precisely because the universe is filled with uncertainty. The

goal of absurdist theater, then, is to somehow transform that uncertainty, the despair which emanates from the darkness in which the divine is seemingly absent. By facing the despair it can be negated (Esslin 314). In the light of Eliot's concerns, "redemption" or "renewal" is possible in absurdist theater but not in the traditional sense. The despair presented on stage can be negated if the characters and the audience come to an understanding of their inability to understand. Furthermore, a fragmented meaningless text can be redeemed through recognizing the inability of language and the logic of cognitive thought to explain reality (Esslin 15). In an absurd world dignity lies in the ability to face the senselessness, "to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions -- and to laugh at it" (Esslin 316).

Although Beckett seldom gave interviews and rarely talked about his work, in *Back to Beckett* Ruby Cohn has recorded a number of statements he has made specifically about the play which provide both insight and confirmation. If we regard *Endgame* as an absurdist drama in Esslin's terms, then it is not surprising that Beckett's favorite line of the play is one of the few spoken by Nell: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Cohn, *Beckett* 154). Beckett also explains to the actor playing Hamm in his production of 1967 that Hamm "is a king in this chess game lost from the start. . . he knows he is making loud senseless moves. . . . He is only trying to delay the inevitable end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end." Finally Beckett admits: "Hamm says No to Nothingness" (Cohn, *Beckett* 152). While Nell has attained

some level of dignity in her ashbin by accepting despair and laughing at it, Hamm only realizes his own futility. As I have suggested earlier, his is a life of waiting. He is doomed to wait incessantly, to await; he avoids his situation by hopelessly sustaining the moment of despair.

Blanchot calls this moment “the time of patience (time of time’s absence, or time returning never present, the time of dying)” (*Disaster* 18). It is from within this situation of being in time’s absence that *Endgame* speaks. Blanchot continues this thought, wondering, “then by what language other than the fragmentary -- other than the language of shattering, of infinite dispersal -- can time be marked? . . . But the fragmentary, of which there is no experience, also escapes us. Silence does not take its place; scarcely even does reticence” (*Disaster* 19). If the characters in *The Waste Land* are living a “death-in-life” situation awaiting redemption, then this relates to the fragmentary nature of the poem I elucidated earlier. As I will attempt to illustrate later, the dialogue in Beckett also exhibits the qualities of the fragmentary, of shattering, of infinite dispersal. Clov’s dream is for “A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust” (*EG* 57). But, according to Blanchot, silence cannot take the place of its “opposite” because silence, like absence, cannot truly exist. “To be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 11).

The best way to attempt some understanding of this concept is to look briefly at Blanchot's treatment of the disaster. For Blanchot the disaster cannot exist, but it also cannot not exist:

When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it ; there is no future for the disaster just as there is no time for its accomplishment.

(*Disaster* 1-2)

Ann Smock's preface to her translation of *The Writing of the Disaster* helps to explain how Blanchot's thought works. Just as the theater of the absurd concerns itself with a situation of being and therefore is not guided by the logic of cognitive thought, Blanchot is obsessed with an exploration of that which eludes understanding. "Sameness is among the obsessions of this book" (*Disaster* viii). Furthermore, the time evoked in both *The Waste Land* and *Endgame* falls into what Blanchot calls the absence of time, which is *a* time. Smock explains:

This "absence of time" is the undepletable intervening time between the disaster and that very catastrophe which, long past when it occurs, has still to happen when nothing can happen any more. Blanchot calls this interval, between *no longer* and *not yet* -- this endless wait for the time already exhausted -- the lapse of time (*le laps du temps*) or the interim (*le delai*). Or, sometimes, the immediate (*l'immediat*). (*Disaster* xi.)

The need to speak and the need to be silent are great during the time of time's absence. But silence is impossible, and words, for the characters in Beckett's drama, become "alms against oblivion" (Hoy 258).

As with *The Waste Land*, before I continue with *Endgame*, I'd like to introduce the dominant critical approaches to the play because they are building blocks necessary to understanding the issues of absence. Most readings of *Endgame* are thematic readings. These themes relate to the puns evident in the text, the text's allusiveness, the obsession with ending, the notion of the play as a play, and the preoccupation of the characters with, as Ruby Cohn refers to it, "the grains-of-time." These approaches to the text provide meaning and unity which I find necessary to an initial understanding of the text.

If the situation of the play is post-apocalyptic, a world where the characters on stage are the only survivors of some great disaster, then the relationships among the characters in the play become one of the dominant themes. The importance of these relationships is reinforced by exploring the various "meanings" of the character's names. While I find this to be one of the least interesting aspects of the play, it is one that few critics have ignored. The puns on the names of the characters in *Endgame* immediately establish their mutual dependency on one another. Hamm can be read as a pun on hammer and the rest of the characters as puns on nail. Cohn has pointed out that Clov is strikingly similar to the French word *clou*, meaning nail, Nell is a pun on the English nail, Nagg is a derivative of the German *naegel* meaning nail, and even Mother Pegg, a character outside the actual drama, is a peg or type of nail (Cohn, "*Endgame*" 45). In addition to this way of looking at the names, Hamm and Clov can be easily seen as ham and clove--a type of meat and the spice used to flavor

and preserve that meat. Certainly in *Endgame* Clov is the primary reason Hamm and the other characters are still alive. Hamm cannot walk or see; Clov is responsible for taking care of Hamm, seeing to his needs. Hamm constantly orders Clov to wheel him about the room, to look out the window, to bring his dog. This is one of Hamm's needs--to be Clov's master. They depend upon one another to provide each other with purpose and meaning. Clov is just as reliant on Hamm to define him as "servant" as Hamm is on Clov to define him as "master."

Like *The Waste Land*, *Endgame* is full of allusions to literary works and cultural models of the past. While Beckett, unlike Eliot, does not allude to the past in order to introduce some sense of meaning into the fragmented meaningless present, evidence of his use of allusion to augment the play's content is widespread. The allusions to Shakespeare, The Bible, and Greek philosophy are not intended as a recommendation to restore models of meaning that have been lost, rather they accentuate the absurdity of the present moment with a caricature of the past. In other instances the allusions are made merely to intensify the situation. The notion of finishing, a major concern of the play, is reinforced over and over by subtle use of allusion, for example, when Hamm demands to know what Clov sees on his wall and irately mocks: "Mene, mene?" Critics note that this passage refers to Daniel Chapter Five. In this passage Daniel is summoned before King Belshazzar to interpret a dream in which the words "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" had been written on the wall. The literal translation is numbered, numbered, weighed, divided. Daniel translates the words *mene, mene*

as meaning "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it" (Daniel 5:26). Other allusions help to establish relationships by suggesting or twisting Biblical relationships. Ruby Cohn and Kristin Morrison explore many of these Biblical allusions extensively in their examinations of *Endgame*. Beckett's erudition, though, differs from Eliot's drastically. While it seems that through his use of allusion, Eliot intends bring meaning into the modern wasteland, the allusiveness of *Endgame* merely augments what is already there. The Biblical allusions universalize the present "situation of being" by subtly reminding the audience of a situation that has come before (Morrison 95).

Beckett's allusions to Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks work in the same way as the Biblical allusions, supporting themes or ideas already present in the text. The allusions to Shakespeare often reflect the nature of theater--actors as actors and the drama as a fiction. Through their dialogue, Hamm and Clov also refer specifically to the Greek philosophers Zeno and Eubulides of Miletus when they separately employ the image of life as heaps of grain which never quite materialize or disappear (Cohn 144). The important recurring theme of ending or finishing is related to the idea of these heaps that never quite add up to a life because the "non-plot" of the play itself will never amount to an end. Conversely, the other heap will never quite disappear, leaving the characters trapped in a life that will neither finish nor flourish.

Clov begins the play by pronouncing the word *finished* four times, and later in the play Hamm balances those *finisheds* with four *ends*. At one point

Hamm specifically expresses his desire to die and asks Clov, "Why don't you finish us?" to which Clov responds, "I couldn't finish you" (EG 37). Only death can end the game that unfolds on the stage, but for these characters, Beckett has created a world wherein death is impossible. Hamm's concern with finishing throughout the play adds to the notion of the play as a space in which the characters await the end. *Finished* becomes both an end and a completion. When the world ends, only then will it be complete (Cohn 143-44). But, as I have suggested previously, the play does not end satisfactorily -- Clov remains. He does not leave the stage; therefore, in Blanchot's terms, the end of the play is not an ending. Because the world of the play, in one sense, must be seen as an allegory for the world at large, the sense of incompleteness in *Endgame* describes a universal lack of completion. In this regard the idea of the play as a play becomes all the more significant. For the characters of *Endgame* nothing exists outside the play; as Hamm remarks, "Outside of here it's death!" (EG 70).

If "Hamm says No to Nothingness," then he says "yes" to the play. His existence is possible only through his attachment to the theater. As the play draws to a close the references to theater become increasingly frequent. Both Hamm and Clov appropriate theatrical terminology to describe their actions: "Me to play. . . Let's stop playing. . . An aside ape! . . . I'm warming up for my last soliloquy. . . Not an underplot I trust. . . This is what we call making an exit." Cohn asserts that the self-reflexivity of the play suggests "the gratuitous quality of all play, including art" (*Endgame* 50). In the end, when Hamm believes Clov is leaving,

he cannot escape his role as an actor in a play, cannot strip himself of the constructs which define him. He clings to the theater; if there is going to be an end, then it must end as a play would, with a last soliloquy. The phrase "Me to play," while it expresses the arbitrariness of play acting, is linked to the rhetoric of chess strategy. Anyone who's played chess must recognize that title of the play also describes the final moves in a game of chess. In his structural analysis of *Endgame* Athanason spends approximately six pages detailing the precise relationship between the content of the play and the final stages of a chess match. The vehicle of the metaphor is the two kings on a chessboard who, stripped of protection from other pieces, are forced to take the field, seemingly uncaring, as they execute the few limited moves still possible (Athanason 22-23). In *Endgame*, the level of indifference is even greater. Hamm is the only king on the board, and he is master of the other pieces. In this situation the endgame cannot end. The game could, conceivably, go on forever.

The possibility that the play could go on forever is bound with the tension of what Cohn calls "the grain-of-time theme." Hamm and Clov repeatedly evoke Zeno and Eubulides of Miletus. These two philosophers "proved" that

the incommensurability of the finitely measured with an infinite universe. Grains of sand or millet grains can never quite make a heap; grains of time can never quite make an eternity. (Cohn 144)

In *Endgame* the heap does not even begin. The desire for a representation of meaning is futile and contradictory to the play itself, the structure of which is

based on attrition. The world the characters inhabit is slowly disappearing. The play begins with the word *finished* and ends with the word *remain*. But what does remain? The heap Hamm and Clov have been looking for has been scattered by the winds of absurdity. The situation presented is one in which the necessities of life are becoming steadily, conspicuously absent. While the characters may be concerned about the "grains of time" that have or have not collected in their lives, the play itself is certainly more interested in exploring the reductive qualities of time.

Gradually, the literal absences in the play begin to mount up. The heap that grows is the heap of "what is not." Let us begin to examine some of the specific absences evoked in *Endgame*. There is no more pain killer for Hamm, no more pap for Nagg; there are no more bicycle wheels, no more sugars plums, no more coffins, no more navigators; there is no more nature. Actually nature does exist, but only in a ruined form. If the dramatic tension of the play revolves around awaiting death by constantly attempting to delay the inevitable, then the disappearance of the supplies that keep the characters living can only hasten that death. But, paradoxically, there is no more pain killer. Numerous critics have noted that Hamm's question, "Is it not time for my pain killer?", which incidentally is the most repeated line of the play, is a desire for the one true pain killer -- death. Each time Clov is asked whether it is not time for the pain killer, he delays the inevitable by answering, "No." When he finally admits to Hamm that there is no more, Clov establishes the improbability of death.

Beckett presents a stage on which the characters yearn for the end -- for death -- but also attempt to delay the inevitable. According to Esslin, this is characteristic of the theater of the absurd, where character motives remain incomprehensible to the audience. This works to prevent identification with the situation that the characters face, allowing us to view a somber, violent and bitter theater as comic, to combine laughter with horror (Esslin 300). The theater of the absurd presents a disintegrating world, a world without purpose, without unifying principle, without meaning -- an absurd universe (Esslin 301). Because the audience members don't identify with the characters, they can view this universe objectively and with a sense of humor. In the absence of identification, the misfortunes of characters can become funny. The characters in *Endgame*, like Eliot's characters, have lost the ability to identify even with one another. Perhaps this is what causes Nell to remark, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness." Absented from the possibility of identifying with the sufferer, any suffering is funny. Even the suffering of those who should be loved ones becomes humorous.

Antony Easthope mentions that this kind of cynicism, which is so evident in Hamm, is a desperate attempt to anticipate the cruel universe, indifferent to his wishes ("Dramatic Method" 63). Of all the characters Hamm is the most cynical. This cynicism causes any mercy Hamm may once have had to disappear. A world in which meaning and benevolence are absent has destroyed Hamm's ability to "mean something" and to be kind. He has become inhuman, reduced to the role he plays, a fiction without motives or mercy, so much so that Kenner compares

him to a ludicrous stage villain (*Beckett* 164). Throughout the course of the play we find out details of Hamm's life and do not know whether they are true or false primarily because many of the details are only suggested by his chronicle -- the story he routinely continues each day. Because the "story" closely parallels what we know of the events that brought Clov to Hamm, we assume that the narrative is autobiographic. The problem with making this assumption is that the audience remains uncertain. As in much of the rest of the play, no certainty is provided. Just as it is impossible to determine whether or not Clov gives an accurate description of the world as he turns his "*telescope on the without*" (*EG* 29), or whether or not he actually leaves at the end, we do not know for sure whether the story Hamm recounts is fiction or autobiography. Does Hamm intensify the severity of his cruelty so much that he becomes, as Easthope suggests, inhuman, reduced to an actor who cannot be complicit in the horrors of the world? ("Dramatic Method" 63). Does Hamm withdraw so completely that he believes his admission to Clov: "I was never there. . . . Absent, always. It all happened without me" (*EG* 74)? A few things are certain; he does have moments of guilt. In the "chronicle" Hamm speaks as a storyteller, using the "fiction" to exhibit his "crimes." He recalls those he might have helped, and Clov reminds him that he is also responsible for Mother Pegg's death. She died of darkness when Hamm deprived her of lamp oil.

Hamm is capable of these acts of inhumanity because the world is empty of meaning. There is no reason to be kind. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus suggests that

The certainty of a God giving meaning to life far surpasses in attractiveness the ability to behave badly with impunity. The choice would not be hard to make. But there is no choice, and that is where the bitterness comes in. (Camus 67)

For Hamm, the illusion that God exists is impossible, and there is no choice between good and evil. The consequences for each are the same. Clov on the other hand constantly searches for a purpose to his life. He contemplates leaving; outside may not be death. Clov might be able to travel beyond the range of his telescope and begin anew. In the absence of a clear purpose Clov invents work to do. Hamm asks where:

H: In your kitchen?

C: Yes.

H: What, I'd like to know?

C: I look at the wall.

H: The wall! And what do you see on your wall?
Mene, mene? Naked bodies?

C: I see my light dying.

H: Your light dying! Listen to that! Well, it can die just as well here, *your* light. Take a look at me and then come back and tell me what you think of *your* light.

(EG 12)

In this exchange one of the primary differences between Hamm and Clov is reinforced. Hamm has given up searching for purpose while Clov still clings to the hope that it can exist. In the world depicted in *Endgame*, Hamm appears the wiser of the two. He recognizes the absence of beauty, the absence of truth, the absence of happiness -- the world has become a subject for farce (Cohn, "*Endgame*" 51). The presence of anything which once held meaning is only evident through universal decay. Confronted with disintegration as the only proof of Nature's continued existence, Clov attempts to transform human decay into nature's benevolence: "Then she hasn't forgotten us" (Easthope, "Dramatic Method" 69).

The world these characters inhabit is stripped of meaning, without purpose, filled only with decay. Likewise the stage, on which they play night after night, is losing purpose as well. It is no longer a place of action; it is a place to wait. The characters wait, and as Kenner has suggested, the stage itself waits (*Beckett* 155). To a certain extent, traditional theater is viewed with a "willing suspension of disbelief" but in *Endgame* all illusions are dispelled. The "play as a play" theme punctures the artifice and the audience members can no longer delude themselves into thinking that the proscenium is a window on the world. The theater of the absurd does not mirror life in any "realistic" way, rather it presents, in all its deformity, what Esslin calls a "situation of life." Kenner suggest that despite the fact that *Endgame* fails to meet the audience's expectations of theater, they are provided with a reason to stay. It is the same reason Clov stays even

though he continually threatens to leave. When he asks what, in a world where everything seems to be vanishing, is left to keep him, Hamm responds, "The dialogue" (EG 58). Clov remains.

But convinced that Clov is going to leave, Hamm asks him for a few words from his heart. Irritated by the words Clov offers, Hamm suddenly shouts, "Enough!" (EG 80). But Clov disregards Hamm's command and continues (*as before*) but this time to himself.

I say to myself -- sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you -- one day. I say to myself -- sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go -- one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good, it'll never end, I'll never go.

(Pause)

Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes. I don't understand, it dies, or it's me, I don't understand, that either. I ask the words that remain -- sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say.

(Pause)

I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs, a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished though I never saw it lit.

(Pause)

(EG 80-81).

It will never end. The words have nothing to say. The earth is extinguished. Like *The Waste Land*, *Endgame* is riddled with absences. In this quote, Clov suggests the absence of finality, the absence of meaning in words (their emptiness), and the absence of living earth or light. Related to these absences are the seeming absences of hope and change and possibility. To these I'd like to add that in Beckett's play, as in Eliot's poem, there is a distinct absence of relationship. Just

as the characters in *The Waste Land* do not communicate in any genuine fashion, so too Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are incapable of meaningful relationships.

The overriding absence of the play, though, is the absence of humankind in general. Since most of the absences of the play are in some way related to the ones Clov evokes in this short monologue, I'll allow those to direct my exploration of absence in *Endgame*. As Clov first suggests, there is an absence of a clear conclusion; essentially the play may not have an end. Second, the play creates a world in which words themselves have nothing to say. Although Beckett's language is characterized by precision and clarity, it is still strangely capable of disintegrating under its own force, marking it with an absence of value. This disintegration of language is in turn emblematic of the disintegrated relationship which *The Waste Land* explored in detail. Third, the earth itself is extinguished. Since both Beckett and Eliot amply recall the Judeo-Christian tradition, I assume that the light of the world could be analogous with the Christ who is described as light in the Gospel According to John. Therefore, I interpret this statement, for my purposes here, as a metaphor for an absence of reason to hope for a redemption from above. In *Endgame*, not only is the light of Christ extinguished, Clov has never seen it lit.

As in *The Waste Land*, one of the primary concerns of *Endgame* is absence. The mark of what is not is so evident both in the text and in performance that absence becomes a kind of presence. Let us return to Blanchot's notion of absence as a subject, or dying as a subject, and remember that in such a case the

sequence of existence is subverted, time takes leave of its order. When time exists in a chaotic state life is opened to passivity (Blanchot, *Disaster* 29). In *Endgame*, rational concepts of time are not apparent. Moments after he is awakened, Hamm requests: "Get me ready, I'm going to bed" (EG 3). Hamm is completely apathetic: "Me -- (he yawns) -- to play" (EG 2). Hamm is both tired of the world and tired of playing in the sense that they bore him. Because the concept of time is absent, his life has opened to passivity and, like the kings in the endgame of chess, he is content to make his final moves with indifference.

Hamm knows that nothing in the world is new. Life is simply a repetition of itself. In *Endgame*, everything is a memory, and everything has happened before. Ruby Cohn addresses this concept as "the echo principle" (Beckett 142). One of the themes that echoes throughout the play is that of finishing. Finishing becomes a paradox, though. It is impossible for an end to exist where time is governed by principles of uncertainty. If the play visits the audience with a lack of finality, a sense that an ending is forever suspended, then the end of the play is actually a suggestion of persistence rather than completion (Begam 184). The concepts of uncertainty and persistence are not uncommon in Beckett's oeuvre. In *Waiting for Godot*, as the title makes clear, the entire play is structured around the action of waiting for Godot. But after two acts Godot has never arrived, or at least not been recognized, and the main characters have not significantly changed -- the audience must assume that the characters will continue to wait. Begam suggests that perhaps the most famous example of this world of persistence can be

located in the famous last lines of *The Unnamable*: “it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (*Three Novels* 414).

As Alvarez contends, Beckett welcomes his audience into an “appalled, motionless world of catatonia” (93). In the a world of inimitable stasis, the characters desire *any* change, even death. But death still remains a source of fear. When Hamm, on a routine circumnavigation of his kingdom, reaches out to touch the interior wall of his basement dwelling, he manages: “Beyond is the . . . other hell” (*EG* 26). What if death is no change but merely the extension of a meaningless life? Michael Robinson eloquently describes the *Endgame* as a play in which “the extinct world rolls through nothing towards Nothing” (Robinson 262). There is safety in this notion. If we examine this quotation the characters move from a lower case nothing to a capitalized Nothing. In one sense traveling from nothing toward nothing suggests no change and therefore no risk, but in another sense Robinson hints at the play’s motion toward the certainty in Nothing. By remaining in their cell, the characters provide themselves with the only certainty of the play -- that they will remain. What if the “other hell” is worse? Although it might initially seem that the characters have given up hope, they have chosen to remain, questioning the uncertainty.

The play becomes one of contradiction. Hamm demands “Silence!” and then urgently questions reality: “Will this never finish?” (*EG* 23). But, Hamm himself cannot be silent and does whatever he can to prevent the end. Even in the

last moments of the drama he stubbornly remains silent for the first time as if protesting the outcome.

Not only does Hamm protest the outcome, he may in fact, as the audience does, mistrust the certainty of the outcome. He is blind. He does not know whether or not Clov is really gone. His uncertainty is plausible because early on in the play Hamm was quite concerned:

H: If you leave me how shall I know?

C: (*briskly*) Well you simply whistle me and if I don't come running it means I've left you.
(*Pause.*)

H: You won't come and kiss me goodbye?

C: Oh I shouldn't think so.

H: But you might be merely dead in your kitchen.

C: The result would be the same.

H: Yes, but how would I know, if you were merely dead in your kitchen?

C: Well . . . sooner or later I'd start to stink.

H: You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpses.

(*EG 45-46*)

Without Clov Hamm would be utterly uncertain. Even in the world of uncertainty that Beckett creates, Hamm is able to live by illusion through Clov. He tells Hamm what the world outside looks like, and so provides the world with order. But everything Clov says could be a lie. Outside the walls of the shelter Clov

could be harvesting mangoes and bananas; the horizon could be dotted with livestock. Neither Hamm nor the audience has any way of knowing. Primarily Hamm fears that Clov might leave him to a world of uncertainty. But, also, Hamm fears that Clov might not leave, that Clov might remain and not tell him. This is also plausible. If, as Esslin maintains, the theater of the absurd is on some level about uncertainty and if it relies on creating a static sense of being, then Hamm's anxiety could stem from the fact that yesterday and the day before Clov threatened to leave and did not, merely vanishing into his silent motionless pose near the door until the next day when the curtain rises once again. In this scenario Hamm would be left perpetually entrapped by an unresolvable dilemma -- Clov might or might not have finally gone.

Likewise we have no idea whether or not Nell dies. This information depends on Clov as well. But in this situation the uncertainty is even clearer. When Hamm asks Clov to determine whether or not Nell is dead, his response is, "Looks like it" (*EG* 62). According to Athanason, when Beckett was once asked if Nell does indeed die, his response was, "So it seems, but no one knows" (49). If we revisit the last scene in which Nell speaks, we notice that as Clov takes her pulse and claims she has none, Nell utters her final word of the play-- "Desert!" (*EG* 23). The uncertainty created by scenes such as these essentially prevent the play from ending. The dramatic tension of the play is based on an obsession with finishing or ending. Since, as Athanason notes, "no absolute finality is achieved," the play itself ends without an end to the dramatic tension. The audience shares in

the uncertainty and leaves the theater without a resolution. The actions of the play can endlessly run through the memories of the audience members until the actions, by remaining unresolved, force themselves to repeat. A lecture given at the University of Montana by Fred McGlynn drew my attention to an interesting scenario: What if the Playbill for *Endgame* announced it as "A play in two acts" and after the play as we know it ended, the curtains drew to a close, there was a fifteen minute intermission, and the second act, then, became an exact repeat of the first?

Even though the characters of *Endgame* are stuck in an infinitely repeatable routine, the likelihood of a disruption of this routine must still exist. When Clov spots a small boy wandering the wasteland outside the shelter, the possibility of a new start for humanity is introduced. If we assume that it is improbable that the boy is yet another possible invention -- although Clov entertains the notion, "You think I'm inventing?" (EG 79) -- then he represents a contradictory means of preventing the end. Like the flea and the rat in Clov's kitchen, by way of this child "humanity might start . . . all over again!" (EG 33). If a new element were introduced into the delicate situation in which the cast of *Endgame* perpetually waits, the cycle of repetition would be broken. "A potential procreator," Clov defines him. Once he enters the world of the play, the possibility of a clear end to the farce is absent. Using the definition of the end which is provided by the play -- death to all living creatures -- neither alternative

makes finishing the drama an option. Either the boy will live and potentially re-establish the human race or the boy will die and the awaiting game will continue.

According to Blanchot, if awaiting a future continues, there is no way to escape it. Awaiting, like the disaster, cannot take place in chronological time.

Awaiting -- just as it is not related to the future any more than it is related to an inaccessible past -- is also the awaiting of awaiting, which does not situate us in a present, for "I" have always already awaited what I will always wait for: the immemorable, the unknown which has no present, and which I can no more remember than I can know whether I am not forgetting the future -- the future being my relation with what, in what is coming, does not come and thus does not present, or re-present itself. (*Disaster* 117)

To help explicate this passage I refer to Blanchot's treatment of the coming of the Messiah. According to a certain Jewish Messianic tradition, there is a strong relationship between the event and its nonoccurrence:

If the Messiah is at the gates of Rome among the beggars and lepers, one might think his incognito protects or prevents him from coming, but, precisely, he is recognized: someone, obsessed with questioning and unable to leave off, asks him: "When will you come?" His being there is, then, not the coming. (*Disaster* 141-42)

The renewal Eliot sought is not possible. Once the renewal begins to come and is recognized, it is no longer coming. The space of awaiting the future is occupied by stasis; in it only awaiting awaiting is plausible. Even if the cycle of awaiting is somehow broken, by, say, a miracle, the future would still never arrive; it is only that which in coming can never actually come.

While this account aligns itself closely with more classical paradoxes of time -- the future can never arrive because reality is a present that is constantly arriving -- it further denies the validity of the concept of time. In awaiting, the future can never arrive, but the past is also inaccessible, and even the present is disintegrated. Awaiting does not situate us in the present because when we await, we await the unknown which has no present. In this sense, the time of awaiting can be said to be a fourth classification of time which exists outside the present and is bound between the inaccessible past and impossible future. The time of awaiting is infinite which is why the characters in *Endgame*, who are awaiting the end, are doomed to a stagnant repeatable life without end.

In regard to the situations presented *The Waste Land* and *Endgame*, though, Blanchot's awaiting is difficult to apply directly. If the characters are awaiting redemption or the end, these things will never arrive because they are being awaited. But the past does appear to be at least somewhat accessible. Both Eliot and Beckett are highly allusive, and memory is significant in the situations of both texts. Also, the present moment seems to exist in each of the texts, especially during a performance of *Endgame*.⁷ The present moment, though, can be regarded as the moment of infinite awaiting only in a sense that both of the texts are infinitely present, repeating the same situations endlessly. So while the

⁷ The idea of a present moment here refers to a moment that has passed only an instant ago. Readers or viewers experience these texts in the present only in a sense that they are experiencing an instantaneous reflection upon a situation only most recently past.

unknown of the future is blocked by *The Waste Land* and *Endgame*, they do account for links to the past and a type of present moment.

If the future, though, will never present or represent itself, what can be done while awaiting the impossible? In *Endgame*, Hamm attempts to solace himself with his story (Kenner, *Beckett* 85). While the audience is unsure whether the story is fictional or autobiographical, this information is irrelevant here. When Hamm is not working on his chronicle, the dialogue distracts him. But even were Clov to finally leave, Hamm would still speak to fill the silence. Hamm envisions calling to his father and to Clov and obtaining no answer. He questions himself: “and then . . .”

Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark. (*EG* 70)

And were Hamm to stop speaking, “then would come the moment of terrible discovery: when the talking stops, there is still talking: when the language pauses, it perseveres; there is no silence, for within that voice the silence eternally speaks” (Blanchot, “Where Now?” 86). In “Where Now? Who Now?” an essay he wrote for *Evergreen Review* in 1959, Blanchot detects this tendency in Beckett: an awareness that the language will continue without us. Well, then, why continue speaking? The answer: Speaking is the human effort to escape the treadmill of language by convincing ourselves that we are still its master, that at the moment we raise our voice, we might stop talking (Blanchot, “Where Now?” 86). In the essay Blanchot specifically addresses Malone (the protagonist of

Malone Dies), whom Kenner compares to Hamm in their shared need to solace themselves with story. Blanchot ponders the purpose of Malone's stories. He contemplates the reasons the stories exist, and determines that they are intended "to fill the void into which Malone feels he is falling; to silence that empty time (which will become the infinite time of death), and the only way to silence it is to say something at any cost, to tell a story" (Blanchot, "Where Now?" 87). This is Hamm's dilemma as well. Hamm is falling into the void and, like Malone, realizes that he must say something, anything.

In *Endgame*, Hamm tells stories to fill the void, but Clov seems to sense the futility of such an act. He looks to words in a desperate attempt to find meaning, yet the "words that remain . . . have nothing to say" (EG 81). The meaninglessness of time also gets caught in the meaninglessness of language, as when Hamm asks Clov:

H: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

C: (*violently*): That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore teach me others. Or let me be silent!
(EG 43-44).

From the very beginning of the play the audience understands that Hamm and Clov no longer value the concept of time in a world where it has become meaningless: "H: What time is it? C: As usual" (EG 4). Either there is no time and Hamm and Clov are trapped in the time of time's absence, or the concept of time simply cannot measure their temporal experience. Likewise the audience

soon finds out that the language itself, which the characters constantly use to fill the space of awaiting, has little meaning beyond that of disrupting the silence.

Esslin explains that the reason language becomes devalued in the theater of the absurd is because translating a “sense of being” into the language of logic and temporal sequence deprives it of its “pristine complexity and poetic truth”; thus it is only reasonable that “the artist should try to find ways to circumvent this influence of discursive speech and logic” (Esslin 296). He goes on to comment on the privilege theater enjoys -- the ability to explore the disintegration of language with poetic tactics and to go “further than pure poetry in dispensing with logic, discursive thought, and language” by exploiting the concrete imagery of the stage (Esslin 296). The visual aspects of the stage -- lighting, character movement, props -- add to language and create an interaction that surpasses the possibilities of poetry.

By putting the language of a scene in contrast to the action, by reducing it to meaningless patter, or by abandoning discursive logic for the poetic logic of association or assonance, the Theater of the Absurd has opened up a new dimension of the stage. . . . [and] Language appears more and more as being in contradiction to reality. (Esslin 297)

By giving examples of these tactics, and by providing evidence that the text itself devalues language, I will illustrate how language is portrayed as being absent of meaning in *Endgame*.

While it is impossible, working only with the text, to prove that the language of a scene is put in contrast to the action, Athanason notes that when Beckett directed *Endgame* he marked the performance with a decided split

between action and speech. In his book he alleges that Beckett instructed the actors: “Never let your changes of position and voice come together. First comes (a) the altered bodily stance; after it, following a slight pause, comes (b) the corresponding utterance” (Athanason 26). According to these instructions, not only is there a rift between action and language, action is more important than language. In an essay published in *Modern Drama*, Wolfgang Iser observes that Beckett’s dialogue is marked by an independence of language which prevents it from being conceived as either expression or communication (“Dramatic Language” 255).

James Eliopoulos examines Beckett’s language as one that devalues itself even more closely in his book *Samuel Beckett’s Dramatic Language*.⁸ He also comments that “most of the characters in Beckett’s play speak a language that is not disintegrated” (Eliopoulos 59). True, but in *Endgame*, even without overt fragmentation, Beckett is able to devalue language to a degree that illustrates its disintegration and absence of meaning. This absence of meaning is evoked by six characteristics of style: repetition, stichomythia, phatic communion, intentional dystax, indelicacies, and absence of language (silence) (Eliopoulos 60). Of these Beckett’s repetitive techniques are perhaps the most evident stylistic gesture in the play. The repetitive echo can be found in an excerpt from the play I used earlier:

C: I see my light dying

⁸This study of Beckett’s “dramatic language” is quite detailed and of notable interest. Here I’ve provided a short overview of Eliopoulos’ study and given an illustration of only one of the six characteristics.

H: Your light dying! Listen to That! . . .

This example seems to evoke disbelief, scorn, and pity. Although the effects of repetition are numerous and varied, Eliopoulos suggests that one of the results of repetition relates to the disintegration of linear progression (71).

The abundant repetitions reinforce a Blanchotian principle in *Endgame*, that of the time of time's absence where actions, situations, and speech are infinitely repeatable. Blanchot discusses repetition several times in *The Writing of the Disaster*. Early in the text he offers: "don't change your thought, repeat it, if you can" (4). This seems to point toward innovation's futility -- any new thoughts or speech acts are likely to be as impotent as the last, therefore, one might as well passively choose repetition. A few pages later Blanchot defines "Repetition as un-power" (*Disaster* 9). This should be a familiar concept: the word repeated incessantly until it ceases to mean. By depriving language of its meaning through repetition, absence itself is created. Once language ceases to be the vehicle for meaning, the perpetuation of its non-meaning creates an "empty center of eternal repetition" (Blanchot, *Space* 246). In *Endgame* it is uncertain how many "nights" Hamm and Clov have occupied the stage. Their routine, their awaiting, seems infinite, and they are meaningless -- "Mean something! You and I mean something! (*Brief laugh*). Ah that's a good one." According to these premises, then, the perpetual repetition of the characters' meaningless lives effectively creates an "empty center of eternal repetition" on the stage.

In *Endgame* the characters are awaiting the end, but as the title suggests, there should be a game-like quality to the play. Kenner calls the play a game of silences (Beckett 157). Just as the physical elements of life are slowly eroding, so is the language. Beckett's dramatic project is also moving toward silence. *Act Without Words*, which follows *Endgame* in the Grove Press publication, has eliminated language completely. It has been said that Beckett is moving toward a form of drama where the characters, feet trapped in concrete and mouth gagged, "will stare at the audience and say nothing" (Steiner 7). If language is devalued, then silence is revalued. The temptation of language is increasingly silence. Steiner posits that the theater of Beckett is haunted by the living truth that is no longer sayable (Steiner 52). The cessation of language becomes the space where the word no longer borders music or radiance, but night.

The devaluation of language by disintegration and at times silence becomes the vehicle for one of Beckett's primary themes -- where certainty is absent, language fails to bear definite meanings (Esslin 57). *Endgame* is in one sense a study of the disintegration of the theater. By concentrating on presenting a "situation of being," Beckett works toward presenting a drama devoid of plot, of props (one of the only decorative aspects of the stage consists of a painting that has been turned around), of action. Beckett presents physical disintegration on stage. All of the characters in *Endgame* are ailing; Nagg and Nell live in ashbins. Physical loss, the absence of certainty, the absence of a future, and the absence of

meaning combine to create a nearly overriding sense of inexpressible hopelessness.

Paradoxically, though, *Endgame* closely resembles a religious quest. This quest, however, seeks not the redemption provided by some god but the ineffable (Esslin 291). Clov realizes that the world is extinguished; he's never seen it lit. Awaiting a redemption that can never come is pointless. The characters are disfigured stumps of what humans should, ideally, be. The world they inhabit has been devastated by a tragedy which has left nothing but ashes. The characters have nothing left to lose but an awareness of what is lost. Like Eliot, Nagg and Hamm long for the past -- they believe that it may provide meaning. In order to pass the time, to keep the past alive, in order to not forget, they tell stories. Alvarez contends that "poignancy of the play depends on continual tension between a lost world of feeling, once known and still yearned for, and the devastated present" (90). The audience senses the futility of the situation. These characters are trapped in a moment, and the past is irredeemable. Ruby Cohn asserts that there is no hope and yet the play goes on ("*Endgame*" 40). Even the introduction of the small boy does not provide absolute hope. In a universe governed by uncertainty it is impossible to ever be certain. Even if he does exist, he only symbolizes a hope for a future which could not be enjoyed. The characters in *Endgame* have lost hope for the future, because only the end will alleviate their pain.

At the end of the play, just before the curtain closes, the scene is quite similar to the opening scene of the play. "The end is in the beginning and yet . . ." (EG 69). The audience realizes that nothing has changed, that essentially nothing has happened. Beckett has created a universe in which there *seems* to be no hope whatsoever. The endgame the audience witnesses does not end in checkmate. The king is not toppled and the game is not over. "The finite and the infinite remain apart in an unalterable stasis" (Robinson 265). In *Endgame* being born is entering into a world where one is a merely a playing piece on a chess board. To use the chess analogy essential to *Endgame*, we are moved through life by those who are playing the game and at the same time we are prevented from seeing them. Beckett seems to suggest that human beings are the playthings of forces over which they have no control. We can neither win nor lose, because it is not we who are playing the game. At the end of the play nothing is certain except that all of our received models of redemption have failed.

Confronting the theater of the absurd is confronting this failure. By definition, absurdist theater does not generally provide solutions to the situation presented on stage. Esslin asserts that the audience members must question the presented reality and create their own solutions, approach their own meanings (Esslin 305). In the theater of the absurd, the audience is brought into contact with

Human beings who in their daily lives confront a world that has split up into a series of disconnected fragments and lost its purpose, but who are no longer aware of this state of affairs and its disintegrating effect on their personalities . . . The challenge [for the audience] to make sense out of what

appears as a senseless fragmented action, the recognition that the fact that the modern world has lost its unifying principle is the source of its bewildering and soul-destroying quality, is therefore more than a mere intellectual exercise; it has a therapeutic effect. (Esslin 302-303)

In this way the “religious quest” involves the audience members’ responsibility for their own redemption, for providing *themselves* with meaning rather than waiting for meaning to come through a traditional religious or literary experience.

Yet *Endgame* need not be hopeless. According to Esslin, the hope of *Endgame* exists within the “great emptiness of nirvana, nothingness, of which Democritus the Abderite has said, in one of Beckett’s favorite quotations, ‘Nothing is more real than nothing’” (37). Now that the pervasive overriding hopelessness of the play has been explored, an emphasis on how the presentation of hopelessness creates hope is necessary. I detect profound hope in the play. The cathartic or therapeutic effects that coping with hopelessness creates redeems the play. *Endgame* attempts to present a situation of being that is stripped of the illusions that make human reality palatable, at times even pleasant. Perception of the world stripped of illusion is freedom from the prison of false reality. The truth in Beckett is not traditionally optimistic, but it is only from within the prison of traditional models of redemption that the play may seem hopeless.

These traditionally redemptive powers are absent in *Endgame* and the audience has been freed from the illusions that such powers exist. The “absolute” is hopeless but absolute uncertainty is not. In absence is the presence of possibility. Blanchot’s theory seems to closely resemble Beckett’s own

philosophy. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot states that “when there is nothing, it is this nothing itself that can no longer be negated. It affirms, keeps on affirming, and it states nothingness as its being, the inertia of being” (110). In *Endgame* Beckett has created a wasteland marked by absence, one in which absence has become its being, the inertia. It is within the time of time’s absence that that the non-events of the play take place. Hamm asks Clov: “Do you believe in the life to come?” to which Clov responds, “Mine was always that” (EG 49). Life can never exist in the moment. Life can only ever exist in the next moment as our memory of the last. Clov embraces absence, at one point he remarks: “Better than nothing! Is it possible?” (EG 59). If, in Eliot, connecting nothing with nothing is a mode of affirmation, then Clov’s statement may be an awareness of true redemption. While it is easy to interpret this line sarcastically, it possible to understand it as a genuine statement of disbelief. Can anything possibly be better than nothing?

V. Conclusions

Possibly. But in the wasted worlds depicted by Eliot and Beckett, it hardly seems likely. Even though Eliot endeavors to recall the past as a way of redeeming the future, he concludes his quest for redemption with a retreat into allusive fragments of myth, literature, and religion. In the culminating lines of *The Waste Land*, Eliot’s fragments have deteriorated from allusions to meaningful or redemptive models into ones that recall images of death, destruction, purgation, and murderous madness. Ultimately, the poem culminates with “Shantih shantih

shantih,” an appeal for “The Peace which passeth understanding.” The poem ends, but the search for redemption continues. Likewise, in the final tableau of *Endgame* Beckett presents characters who have spent the entire play awaiting the end, yet they remain, preventing a satisfactory ending. Nothing is final and “nothing” *is* final. For the characters in *The Waste Land* renewal is uncertain, and for Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell, the end is uncertain.

This uncertainty prevents us from continuing to harbor traditional hopes. When one believes in the possibility of the absolute and it is conspicuously absent, one is doomed to an infinitely repeatable search. While Eliot’s poem becomes a quest for a traditional redemption which never arrives, Beckett explores the impossibility of any traditional salvation. In his presentation of the absurd he calls for human beings to develop a new hope. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus addresses this notion by twisting Kierkegaard: “Earthly hope must be killed; only then can one be saved by true hope.” Despite its Christian overtones, Camus maintains that this quotation should instruct us to dismiss traditional, “earthly” hopes for a redemptive god in order to find the “true hope,” the hope that emerges during the process of trading illusion for clarity. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot begins to carve out a space for this “true hope” by connecting nothing with nothing. By the time *Endgame* is published, Beckett has built a room in this space. In it his characters and the audience face the absence of earthly reasons to hope. It is this clarity of mind which provides for the possibility that “true hope” will soon be uncovered.

When *The Waste Land* and even *Endgame* were written, the universe was perceived much differently than it is now. In 1922 the atom was considered to be the smallest particle of matter. Even by 1958, the echo of the "Big Bang" had not been discovered in the background of the universe, the "dark matter" of space was believed to be empty, fractal theory did not exist, and no one could even comprehend the shattering and disassociating effects that would be created by the infinitely possible divisions of cyberspace. While modern art was attempting to "make it new," science was expanding and redefining the universe. According to my reading of *The Wasteland* and *Endgame*, the best way to develop an understanding of the world is to probe that which is negated or absent for answers, for a "new hope," to enter the space created by silence and listen for its voice. The search for a traditional redemption either in the past or in the future is futile. But exploring that which fills the space of absence and understanding the possible affirmative qualities in nothingness -- that which has been traditionally considered absent of meaning -- will help to determine a new hope for a new type of redemption.

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