



**THE INCURIOS SEEKER:
WAITING, AND THE SEARCH FOR THE STRANGER
IN THE FICTION OF SAMUEL BECKETT
AND J.M. COETZEE**

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In *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett*, Patrick Hayes argues that Coetzee, while influenced by Beckett’s prose style, assimilates it in such a way that his writing not only departs from the latter’s solipsism but also provides “an anti-foundational imagining of moral community” (71). While there is much merit to this argument, Hayes’s distinction between Beckett’s solipsism and Coetzee’s concern with community downplays the extent to which the human subject’s conception of herself depends on the differential process through which community establishes itself. In the first section of this paper I show that, already in *Murphy*, we find evidence in support of Ileana Marculescu’s argument that Beckett inscribes solipsism in his writing only to subvert it. Murphy’s attempts at solipsistic knowledge fail precisely because he has been estranged from himself by language and community. What appears to be solipsism is, in fact, a search for the self from which he has been divided by community. In Beckett’s writing, the self’s concern with its ability to know itself is always a concern with community.

By the same token, Coetzee’s concern with community is always a concern with self. So, although I agree with Hayes that Coetzee’s writing is more engaged with community than Beckett’s, I contend that this engagement proceeds from an extension of the Beckettian search for the stranger, and is therefore grounded in a profound suspicion of community. Instead of attempting to imagine the ‘good community,’ Coetzee’s fiction seeks always to interrupt the exclusionary process through which community constitutes itself. The opening passage of “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” in *Dusklands* already shows that Jacobus Coetzee is eminently aware that community determines itself negatively, that the ‘we’ it constructs is defined by what it is not: “The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity. We are Christians, a folk with a destiny. They become Christians too, but their

Christianity is an empty word” (61). From these sentences, it is apparent that the community of Dutch settlers in the Cape in the eighteenth century depends on the outsider, the foreigner, and therefore on the exclusions which enable its inclusionary movement. My argument, then, is that the principal difference between Beckett’s and Coetzee’s writing lies in the latter’s configuration of the search for the stranger. Since the forms of identification that community renders available to its members are predicated on its construction of the foreigner, the search for the lost self is ineluctably tied to the question of the foreigner. If the seeker is to find this self, she must see the foreigner as a stranger.

Despite this important difference, the search for the stranger in the fiction of these two writers proceeds along similar lines. That is, it oscillates between active, subjective intention and a passive, receptive state of non-intentional consciousness. For the subject to find his lost self, he must forgo his position as a subject in community. To use Jacques Derrida’s formulation, an “unconditional” form of hospitality is exacted of the subject (*Of Hospitality* 77). In other words, the subject that seeks the stranger cannot adopt the position of a host who invites and names his guest in advance, since doing so would be to receive this visitor from within community’s structures of recognition and thus foreclose on his strangeness. Such a gesture of welcome would simply affirm community and consolidate the subject’s position within it. Instead, the seeker must try to say “yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification” (*Of Hospitality* 77). I argue that *Murphy*, although published several decades prior to Derrida’s thinking about unlimited hospitality, thematizes a very similar notion in its descriptions of non-intentional waiting. If the stranger is to be found, the search must proceed without object or subject. In order to receive the stranger, the subject must relinquish the position from which she searches. To use Molloy’s phrase, the “seeker” must become “incurious” (Beckett, *Molloy* 59).

Finally, I discuss the way in which this aporetic tension between search and waiting informs Beckett’s and Coetzee’s conception of the writing process itself. For both these authors, I argue, the search for the lost self is informed by an ethic of responsibility. The author is responsible for this stranger that community has produced. Through his writing, the writer must make a home for that which exceeds language. Since this is not a task that could ever be completed, the author’s responsibility is without term, and writing is itself therefore a form of waiting for a stranger who, if she were to arrive, could not be recognized. In its conception of the possibility of such an arrival, Coetzee’s work differs from Beckett’s. For the latter, the arrival of the stranger would obliterate the seeker. By contrast, for Coetzee the obliteration of the seeker

holds out the possibility of redeeming the self from its state of disgrace in community. My particular concern is with the way in which Coetzee self-reflexively figures this impossible possibility in his chiasmic portrayals of writing and reading as forms of dying and redemption.

Beckett's characters certainly are obsessed with knowing themselves. Quite early in *Murphy* we learn that the novel's eponym, to whom the narrator refers as a "seedy solipsist" (53), is on a quest of sorts.¹ He seeks "what he had not ceased to seek from the moment of his being strangled into a state of respiration—the best of himself" (46), the "self whom he loved" (121). Since it involves a withdrawal from body into mind, this quest for a lost self has a Cartesian dimension.² Early in the novel, Neary observes that Murphy's "conarium has shrunk to nothing" (6), a statement that alludes to Descartes' location of the conarium or pineal gland as the point at which the soul, that is, the principle of thought, interacts with the body. The implication here, as Hugh Kenner notes, is that Murphy "leads a completely dual existence" between body and mind (61). Significantly, though, Murphy's quest for "the best of himself" also involves a withdrawal from community itself. He resists working for a living, is indifferent to money, commodities, property, love, marriage, and procreation. Through his strategic idleness he refuses to occupy society's roles and to perform the identities those roles inscribe and prescribe.

Murphy's search for the "self whom he loved" thus takes him out of both body and community, the implication being that these have divided him from himself. Its Cartesian inflection seems to suggest that his search is for the stable ground from which the non-material, rational "soul" in the "machine" is able to become the object of its own gaze (Descartes, *Discourse* 116–118). By immobilizing his body in his rocking chair, he tries to gain access to his mind, which Beckett spatializes by dividing into three "zones." It is the third of these, namely "the dark," that Murphy finds most "pleasant," and to which he seeks to 'travel' (*Murphy* 72). Crucially, however, once there, he finds "nothing but

¹ Several readers have commented on the importance of the quest in Beckett's fiction. For example, Lance St. John Butler sees the entire Beckett oeuvre as a "search for a self that will be more than a self" (12). For an insightful discussion of Beckett's use and abuse of the quest narrative, see Leslie Hill (59–61, 77–78, 82–83, 137). See also Shira Wolofsky.

² As I proceed, it will become clear that I disagree with the claim that *Murphy* is a "Cartesian novel" (see Mintz; and Cohn 49).

commotion” and a “flux of forms” that coalesce and then disintegrate (72). While his eyes are wide open, as both the narrator and Ticklepenny reveal (3, 120), he sees nothing. In visiting himself or, in the etymology of this word, seeking to see himself (“Vide” definition 4), Murphy finds that he is not at home. He does not see the Cartesian “soul,” the supernatural homunculus, who, from its “principal seat”—the conarium, or ‘third eye’—directs the material “machine” by processing all the perceptual information it receives (Descartes, *Passions* 347–348). If his conarium has shrunk to nothing, there can be nothing to see because there is nothing that sees.

Although Murphy’s search may initially appear to stage the movement of Cartesian scepticism through which the self, in doubting that which lies beyond itself, confirms its ability to experience its mental processes, it finally has much more in common with Arthur Schopenhauer’s argument that “the I or ego is the dark point in consciousness” which, like the eye, “sees everything except itself” (2: 252; see also Bond 13). Murphy is not a transcendental subject who can make of his mind an object of reflection. Rather than solipsism, then, his introspective quest enacts yet another of Schopenhauer’s arguments, namely that

as soon as we enter into ourselves [...] and wish for once to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. But the cause of this voice is not to be found in the globe, and since we want to comprehend ourselves, we grasp with a shudder nothing but a wavering and unstable phantom. (1: 278)

From Beckett’s parody of the movement of Cartesian doubt, it is clear enough that Murphy’s best self is not the Cartesian homunculus, the ‘little man’ who has somehow gone missing in the machine. Accordingly, the reader must look elsewhere if she is to ascertain the nature of this self and the reason for its loss. An answer of sorts to these questions is provided by Beckett’s depiction of the “third zone” as a space outside language and the positions it articulates. If Murphy loses rather than finds himself in this space, the implication must be that the self’s identity is dependent on community, that it only encounters itself as a subject in an intersubjective world. Evidently, the self that Murphy “hates” is the one that has been enabled by the community from which he withdraws (121). By extension, the self that he “loves” (121), and for which he seeks, has been displaced by the identity he possesses within community. Ironically, he seems to be looking for what he himself negates.

As early as *Murphy*, Beckett thus provides us with a character obsessed with knowing himself because community has divided him from himself. While never articulated in as many words, Murphy's scepticism of self is finally no different from that of *The Unnamable*, whose following words indicate that the subject is always already an object: "I, say I. Unbelieving" (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 285). Like this later character, Murphy has been estranged from his best self by "the words of others" (308). Beckett's point is not just that the subject is intersubjective, but that it is so because it is constituted in and through language. In a sense, it is therefore always outside of itself. As Michel Foucault explains, Descartes's "'I think' led to the indubitable certainty of the 'I' and its existence," whereas "'I speak' [...] distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear" (13). In yet another of his reflections, the eponym of *The Unnamable* refers to the emptiness of this "emplacement": "They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking" (363). When the 'I' says 'they,' it is using not its own word, but a word of others: it is they who say 'they,' and the 'I' that is positioned in opposition to 'them' is also their word, an object. As such, the "words of others" reduce the self and, in the process, render it invisible, anonymous and unnamable. What is left, as Foucault puts it, is "A language spoken by no one: any subject it may have is no more than a grammatical fold" (54).

My argument, then, is that Murphy seeks a self that has been displaced by language but which is nevertheless still somewhere within him. It is his search for this lost self, which both precedes and exceeds what he calls 'I,' that takes him to the alinguistic "third zone." Given that it is precisely his entry into community upon having been "strangled into a state of respiration" that has led to the loss of this excessive self, he must leave behind not only community and its forms if he is to find his lost self, but also that part of himself that community and its forms have enabled. Herein lies the importance of the narrator's observation that Murphy sees nothing in "the dark," which, as I have already noted, implies that he loses himself. This point requires some elaboration. Murphy's consciousness has no content because it is not conscious of something. Not being directed at an object relative to which he can define himself negatively, his consciousness is not self-distinguishing. The reason he does not see anything in "the dark" is thus quite simply because he is not there as a subject to direct his gaze. He cannot conceptualize or identify anything as an object, and cannot thereby locate both it and himself in a cultural context. What is described here is therefore consciousness in the absence of a controlling subjectivity. Indeed, we are told that "the dark" is "without love or

hate,” which is to say wholly impersonal. Earlier, exactly this anonymity is suggested by the absence of possessive pronouns in the narrator’s description of Murphy in his chair: “The breath was not perceptible. The eyes, cold and unwavering as a gull’s, stared up” (3; see Bohman-Kalaja 115). While in “the dark,” Murphy is in “the will-lessness” and “not free,” which is to say deprived of agency (*Murphy* 72).

This absence of subjectivity is, of course, deeply ironic. After all, Murphy is engaged in a quest, an action—usually involving a journey from a home to a foreign destination—undertaken by an agent with a goal in mind. Because a quest has an object, it is intentional and teleological. A quest proceeds from the assumption that it may be completed and that its success or failure will be determinable. As I have indicated, Murphy’s journey to the “third zone” does involve a departure of sorts. He leaves community, which, however, he does not regard as ‘home.’ For him, indeed, life is “a wandering to find home” (4). In his rocking chair, he sets out for the “third zone,” a space where he, as we have seen, believes he is able to “love himself” and so feel at home (6). As I have also indicated, though, he reaches this destination only through leaving himself behind. The subject that seeks to find the self that it loves can only do so by losing the subject that seeks and therefore the ability to seek, find, and love.

Since it is neither intentional nor self-distinguishing, the kind of consciousness that is here depicted is passive and receptive. The search, in losing the subject that seeks, and therefore its object and telos, lapses into a form of non-intentional waiting that has much in common with Maurice Blanchot’s description of attentional consciousness:

Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something with which one might concern oneself. Attention waits. It waits without precipitation, leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, our horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it in. (*Infinite Conversation* 121).

Although ‘to wait’ is a verb, in Beckett’s novel it connotes a passivity that is not simply the opposite of subjective action but a product of the absence of a subject who intends and acts. Because he is rendered passive in “the dark” by the dissolution of subject-centred consciousness, Murphy’s waiting is not something that *he* does. Waiting here is deprived of a subject that waits. The “incurious seeker” waits without waiting for anything that may be described as

an object constituted by an intentional act of consciousness.³ He is open to, and utterly defenceless against, whatever may arrive. Being “in the will-lessness,” he is unable to invite or welcome anyone or anything. As the root of ‘welcome’—*wilcuma*—indicates, to welcome is to will a comer (“Volition” definition 14). It is exactly his inability to will a comer that defines Murphy’s waiting. He waits for that to arrive of which he can have no expectation. In other words, he waits for the stranger, the self from whom he has been estranged by the words of others.

In this non-intentional state, Murphy is unable to seek, to see, and so to discover an object. Somewhat incongruously, though, as I have already indicated, his eyes are wide open. What is intimated by this curious detail is a passive mode of perception. In waiting, Murphy watches. As its etymology indicates, ‘to wait’ is to watch (“Vigor” definition 8).⁴ By becoming passive, that is, Murphy becomes vigilant, which is to say attentive to that which exceeds an intending subject’s perceptual and conceptual grasp. The fact that there is nothing to see in “the dark” does not mean that there is nothing there, but rather that there is nothing visible as an object for intentional consciousness. Murphy waits and watches for this excess or nothingness.

When it arrives, the excess in question does so in the formless form of the invisible gas that annihilates Murphy. As Murphy’s earlier etymological speculation reveals (110), the word ‘gas’ derives, through the Dutch *gas*, from the Greek word for chaos. Chaos is not only the nothingness from which form derives, and therefore its enabling condition, but also what exceeds it, and which may without notice or warning irrupt into and disable it. In the novel, gas serves as a figure for the excess of social form, including forms of identification and recognition. Gas is a catachresis for the remainder, the stranger that the house tries to keep out but which, ironically, is already inside, has always

³ In the passage in which these words occur, Molloy describes the effect on him of his perception of a “little object” which, very importantly, is not identified: “For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker” (58–59). To be an “incurious seeker” is to be “in the will-lessness.”

⁴ In some respects, my distinction between seeing and watching is related to that which Uhlmann draws between perception and apprehension. Whereas perception defines an object by investing it with “continuity in time and place among all the other perceived objects in space,” apprehension decontextualizes the object. In apprehending it, that is, the subject divorces an object “from all relation,” including that between it and itself (75). While I agree with much in this insightful discussion, I find Uhlmann’s choice of the word ‘apprehend’ a little odd. Etymologically, to apprehend something is to seize it, to grasp it with the mind (“Prehend” definition 5). In Uhlmann’s description of apprehension, the self forgoes precisely its ability to grasp anything cognitively. It is no longer a prehending subject.

already invaded it by stealth, and can at any time destroy it. In Dutch, I should add, the word ‘gas’ is a homonym of *gast*, that is, ‘guest.’ The gas that enters his garret is the invisible visitor for which Murphy waits, but which he has not invited.⁵ Indeed, this guest only arrives because Murphy is not there as a knowing and intending subject to see and welcome it. Although he receives it, inhales it, is possessed, overwhelmed and, ultimately, even consumed by it, he does not know that this is so. In other words, the arrival is something that happens to him rather than something he has willed. The guest comes not by design, but unbidden or, to use the novel’s word, by “accident” (163).⁶

Murphy’s waiting is thus profoundly aporetic: he waits for the stranger because he seeks to know himself, but is absent from the waiting and so cannot know himself. The knowing ‘I’ is not at home to will and welcome this comer. So, although Murphy dies, he is not present at his death. His death reveals that his search for his best self, the one he loves, has all along been a search for the death of the self that seeks and loves. He has been waiting to die. The arrival of the stranger he has sought inevitably displaces the self that seeks and by whom it has been displaced. It follows that Murphy’s death does not complete his search because it is an accident rather than an action that the seeking subject has undertaken.

Since it continually lapses into a form of non-intentional waiting that is entirely ateleological, Murphy’s quest is interminable.⁷ Because his absence from his vigil precludes him from experiencing and grasping—as a subject—its present, the time of waiting is radically divorced from the time of the search. What he watches in his vigil he does not see, and because it is therefore not present as an object for consciousness, it cannot be remembered. As such, the time of waiting and the time of the arrival of the stranger cannot form part of a retentional past—nor part of a present—from which a future may be protended

⁵ Prior to the arrival of the gas, Murphy receives another uninvited visitor during a vigil, namely Ticklepenny, who, earlier in the novel, decides against introducing himself as “Gussy or Gus” (60), and who happens to be the person who installed the gas in Murphy’s garret. On leaving, this guest, whose arrival Murphy has not noticed, warns him to “watch himself,” to which the latter responds with the question “in what way?” (121).

⁶ See Coetzee’s discussion of the word ‘gas’ in his essay on Gerrit Achterberg’s “Ballade van de Gasfitter” (“Achterberg’s” 73–75). Apart from reflecting on its homonyms, Coetzee examines this word’s symbolic import in the poem. Especially insightful, in this regard, is his argument that the gasfitter is a figure of the poet, and that the gas, which “enters every home” as guest, symbolizes “the spirit, ghostly, overwhelmingly, coming upon us with fatal power, smelling of the void, tamed only by the *dichter*-priest” (73).

⁷ I should add that this is where Murphy’s quest differs from mysticism, which usually requires that one lose oneself in order to find oneself.

or anticipated.⁸ From the perspective of the subject that seeks, the vigil thus belongs to an immemorial past, and is therefore always radically anterior to the quest itself. Rather than forming part of it, then, the time of non-intentional waiting precedes and inspires the quest. In fact, the search for the stranger is a response to the vigil, an always-belated attempt on the part of the seeker to present this irretrievable past, to recuperate a happening that cannot be forgotten because it cannot be remembered. Accordingly, the subject that seeks, which is to say acts, is acted upon, by that which he seeks. In Beckett's novel, the irony is that Murphy is already possessed by what he pursues. He is haunted by a ghost in the machine: not the Cartesian homunculus but an immemorial memory of the stranger that he is during his vigil. The stranger he seeks to see and be in the time of the quest is what he already is in the time of waiting.

There is, of course, a profoundly self-reflexive dimension to Murphy's quest. Like it, Beckett's literary endeavour may be read as a search in language for the stranger who exceeds the subject that writes, that says 'I' unbelievably. Beckett's writing, this is to say, is a search for the alien he bears within himself, and who demands to be acknowledged. It is a search for what has, in fact, generated it, but which it itself—that is, the medium through which the search is conducted and of which the 'I' that writes is a part—precludes it from finding. By implication, the stranger is not only the origin of the quest, but also its excess and telos. Beckett's writing is a search for its own excess, for that which produces and disables it.

If this is so, it follows that Beckett is doubly possessed. On the one hand, he is possessed by what he pursues. Like Murphy, he seeks that which is already within. On the other hand, like *The Unnamable*, he is "possessed of no utterance but theirs" (*Unnamable* 362). In other words, he is possessed by "their" utterance, by the words of others. The means that he has at his disposal to find and say what he is compelled to find and say are not only inadequate to the task, but also posit an identity that displaces what he seeks, and thereby precludes him from completing his quest. Again it is *The Unnamable* who best articulates this double bind: "I have to speak in a certain way [...] first of the creature I am not, as if I were he, and then, as if I were he, of the creature I am" (329). Blanchot's comment on writing in general, namely that the "existence of the writer is proof that within one individual there exist"—"side by side"—"a

⁸ For Levinas, the time of the self's encounter with the Other cannot be grasped as a here and now by a prehending subject, and has therefore always passed. Being entirely non-phenomenological, the "moment" or "instant" of this event is a "lapse of time." Hence he refers to "the diachrony of the instant," which is "something irrecuperable, refractory to the simultaneity of the present, something unrepresentable, immemorial, prehistorical" (38, 49, 50).

mute who has lost all words,” and “an orator, [a] master of discourse”—“firmly wedded” together—(“From Dread” 346), thus holds particularly true for Beckett’s aporetic writing endeavour. In *Murphy*, exactly this relation without correlation is externalized in Murphy’s feverish attempts at communicating with Mr. Endon—whose name, as many commentators have noted (see, for example, Coe 24), means ‘within’—through the wholly inadequate medium of chess. As Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja persuasively argues, Mr. Endon, “though he moves in turn, is never really responding” to Murphy’s moves (125). In fact, it is precisely the former’s lack of communication, his muteness, which requires that the game be played. The game is a response exacted by this silence of sorts. At the same time, however, Mr. Endon’s failure to respond to Murphy’s moves prevents the game, which requires closure, from ever being completed. Accordingly, the form of communication involved in the game is only ever a monologue that is always yet to be concluded. Murphy must continue to play because he is waiting for Mr. Endon to play.

It is just so with Beckett, whose double possession by the stranger and by community’s forms makes of his writing a waiting of sorts. To the extent that it is an end-directed quest, his writing demands closure. But, to the extent that the quest involved is a search for its own excess, his writing cannot find closure, and consequently requires that its endless duration be endured. In ceaselessly moving toward an unattainable closure, the quest inevitably becomes a form of waiting, which, in Foucault’s description, “has the endurance of a movement that will never end and would never promise itself the reward of rest” (56).

The quest is thus itself a form of waiting. Unlike non-intentional waiting, though, writing is a waiting *on* the stranger by which the writer is already possessed, and not just a waiting *for* this stranger. The writer waits for the stranger because he already waits on him. He writes not because he is a free agent but because he has been inspired by this uninvited *gast* who has always already arrived. The search that the writer undertakes through his writing is thus a response demanded by the stranger. In a sense, Beckett writes under dictation. Like Murphy, he acts, which is to say writes, but does so because he is acted upon by the stranger for whom he is responsible. It is his responsibility, through his writing, to make of language a home for that which is refractory to language. He must make the mute within him speak. While this is not a task that could ever be completed, Beckett cannot but continue to attempt to do just that: his responsibility for the stranger permits him no choice in the matter. The aporetic logic of this ethic of responsibility is articulated by the protagonist of *The Unnamable*, who, after saying “I have to speak,” adds: “No one compels me to, there is no one. It’s an accident, a fact. Nothing can ever exempt me

from it, there is nothing, [...] nothing that can lessen what remains to say” (308). The fact that “there is no one,” that “no one” is, compels Beckett to write. He is obliged to pursue the remainder of what he says.

Since Beckett’s search is for the excess of his search, for what remains after whatever he has said and done, it is never concluded by the completion of the individual text. The story that must be told is always yet to be told, and thus extends beyond the compass of the individual work. For this reason, Beckett repeats in the narratives that follow *Murphy*, with varying degrees of variation and ingenuity, the same story. The inevitability of this repetition is self-reflexively foregrounded, even parodied, in the refrain of Voice and Music which ends “Cascando” by gesturing toward its incompleteness:

—don’t let go . . . finish . . . it’s the right one . . . this time . . . [...]
 —this time . . . it’s the right one . . . finish . . . no more stories . . . sleep
 . . . we’re there . . . nearly

 . . . just a few more . . . don’t let go . . . Woburn . . . he clings on . . .
 come on . . . come on—

 [*Silence.*]

(303–304)

The “right one” is, of course, the story that would complete the quest for the stranger, and so obviate the need for “more stories.” But, of course, yet more needs to be said. A new story is required, and because in its turn it will prove unable to bring the search to a close, it will be the same story as its predecessors and, indeed, the same story as its successors. The new story is always already the old one, and therefore not “the right one.” Like *The Unnamable*, Beckett goes on, even though he cannot go on (see *Unnamable* 407). He is never “there,” and his writing is thus always incomplete, and so in need of supplementation. My argument is not new. Blanchot maintains that Beckett, in his narratives, “has entered a circle [...] that does not begin, does not end, yet is greedy, demanding, will never stop.” Beckett’s writing, he goes on to say, “is an experiment without outcome, although from book to book it is pursued in an ever purer way, rejecting the weak resources that would allow it to pursue itself” (“Where Now?” 210).

From this observation, it follows that Beckett is not entirely in control of his writing: it has its origin not in the writing subject, but in its own excess that

constantly calls into question the ‘I’ who writes.⁹ In fact, the subject that writes does so in order to be displaced by the stranger it has displaced. Beckett’s responsibility for the stranger demands that he sacrifice himself to the stranger. Like Murphy’s quest, his writing seeks the death of the subject that seeks. He writes in order to die. Ironically, though, his writing necessarily asserts what it seeks to destroy, and this, in turn, means that the ‘I’ that writes must continue to do so because it cannot die.

If it is a search for an unlocatable origin that requires the sacrifice of the self that seeks, Beckett’s writing cannot possibly be solipsistic. Indeed, its emphasis on a pre-reflective non-intentional consciousness questions precisely intentional consciousness’ assumption that it is able to take as its object the non-material self and its mental processes. Beckett writes because he does not know himself, and must continue to write because he cannot know himself. Instead of solipsism, what emerges from the endless waiting that is his oeuvre is a conception of writing as a form of self-sacrificing responsibility for the stranger that has been produced by the exclusions through which community establishes itself. In this respect, the ethic that compels Beckett to write is remarkably congruent with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose starting point is exactly the radical priority of non-intentional consciousness over intentional consciousness.¹⁰ Having said this, I must immediately add that Beckett’s focus is the effect on the self of its otherness to itself, whereas Levinas’s is the effect on the self of the otherness of the other person. In the next section of this paper, I demonstrate that this is also where Coetzee’s writing differs from Beckett’s. As I argue, though, this difference marks not a departure from, but an extension and development of, the Beckettian search for the stranger. Despite the fact that Coetzee himself seems to agree with Hayes’s argument that Beckett’s writing is solipsistic (“Eight Ways” 23), the search for the stranger in his own work is ultimately a search for the stranger within the self that writes.

⁹ With reference to *The Unnamable*, Blanchot argues that “the one writing is already no longer Beckett but the demand that led him outside of himself, dispossessed him and let go of him, gave him over to the outside, making him a nameless being, the Unnamable, a being without being who can neither live nor die, cannot cease or begin” (“Where Now?” 213).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the relevance of Levinas’s philosophical ethics to Beckett’s writing, see Uhlmann (162–186).

As I have already noted, Coetzee's writing proceeds from a recognition that the Beckettian emphasis on the stranger cannot but imply the foreigner, since the forms of identification that community makes available to its members depend on the latter. At some point or other, the identity of the individual in community must always intersect with the collective's identification of the foreigner. As such, the telos of the search for the stranger is never simply the strangeness of the individual in community, but also that of the foreigner on whom community depends in order to establish and sustain itself. Coetzee's writing evinces a clear awareness of the fact that the distance signified by the foreigner is finally impossible. By locating the search for the stranger in both community's inside and outside, Coetzee's fiction constantly questions its boundaries. Indeed, his writing configures this search as a responsibility for the otherness of the foreigner. If the writer were to see the foreigner as a stranger, he would find the stranger within himself.

In Coetzee's novels, the search for the stranger is variously inflected as a quest for the lost, unborn, damaged, stillborn, or dead child. The protagonist of *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren, a white South African, realizes that she is possessed by South Africa's colonial history, that the crime of apartheid through which black people were rendered foreigners in their own country was perpetrated in her name and that it is therefore a part of her. "A crime was committed long ago," she says, "So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it":

Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death [...]. Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. I raged at times against the men who did the dirty work [...] but I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me. So that when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too. (149–150)

While Mrs. Curren says 'I' and 'they,' she does so unbelievably. Like Beckett's *The Unnamable*, she knows that both these words are the words of others, and that the distance they install is specious. Her knowledge that she is possessed by the language of her community and the discourse of race that it bears, brings with it the realization that she cannot use the distances language posits to exculpate herself from the crime of apartheid. This is why she constantly articulates her strong sense of shame and her desire for redemption from her state of disgrace.

Like Beckett's *Murphy*, Mrs. Curren is dissatisfied with her intersubjective identity. Her possession by the language of her community has dispossessed her of what she was or may yet become. As her following words

indicate, her quest in this novel is to find the child that has been displaced by the context in which she is located: “From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I” (100). Only through finding this lost child, who is a stranger to that which she calls ‘I,’ can she be saved and become other than she presently is. To pursue her quest, Mrs. Curren has to see the foreigner as a stranger. So, for instance, she tells Vercueil—whom she compares to a child (52–53, 100), and whose name puns on the Afrikaans word for ‘hidden,’ that is, *verskuil* (34)—that she wants to “see” him as he “really” is (165).¹¹ She seeks to see what is concealed from her by the language and discourse with which her community has made of race a signifier of difference.

In this regard, Mrs. Curren is no different from any number of Coetzee’s other protagonists. The Magistrate, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is similarly obsessed with seeing the “barbarian girl” as she was before she was tortured by Empire—that is, before Empire inscribed itself on her body. He wants to see what the very words “barbarian girl,” which identify and so position her within his community’s system of cultural differences, preclude him from seeing. This is the point of the foot-washing ritual in which he engages. Through it, he enters a stupor of sorts, a receptive state in which he is open to the possibility of affirming “*who or what turns up*,” to borrow again Derrida’s phrase from *Of Hospitality* (77). The state of consciousness here connoted is a form of attentionality, of non-intentional waiting, and is juxtaposed with Empire’s intentional waiting for the arrival of what it expects and therefore knows in advance: the ‘barbarians,’ the foreigners through which Empire constitutes itself as a community.

The problem with seeing the foreigner as a stranger is therefore that she has been rendered invisible by the language and discourses of the community in which the seeker is located. It is for this reason that Mrs. Curren reflects that she must love the boy, John, precisely because she does not love him. She must doubt herself, what she thinks and feels, because her position in community locates her values and attitudes to both herself and others. Hence she must love John “despite herself” (125); that is, despite what the words of others have made of her and, indeed, have made of him. If she is to love, she must do so ecstatically. Her love must be divested of an intending subject and therefore of the object that such a subject inevitably intends. If she can love in this way, her love will be directed not at John, who is a “child of iron,” a child who has been

¹¹ In his commentary on an earlier draft of this essay, Brian Macaskill rightly points out that *verskuil*, in its turn, resembles *verskil*, which means ‘difference.’

damaged by culture, but at the invisible child that is hidden within him. Only if divested of subject and object can her 'love' be for this stranger.

It is instructive to compare this treatment of love with Beckett's in *Murphy*. While Murphy claims to love his lost self, the "third zone" to which he travels in order to find this stranger is, as I have noted, characterized by exactly the absence of love or hate because it is a non-intentional state of consciousness and thus profoundly impersonal. The 'I' that professes to love the self from whom it is estranged cannot experience this love because the 'I' is not there to experience love. If Murphy loves in the "third zone," he does so anonymously and therefore selflessly. In fact, his annihilation by the arrival of the gas invests his love with a sacrificial dimension. The same dynamic of self-sacrifice is evident in his relationship with Mr. Endon, whom he also claims to love (*Murphy* 115). In the chess game, he eventually surrenders to the latter:

he dropped his head on his arms in the midst of the chessmen, which scattered with a terrible noise. [...] Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence [...] not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. (153–154)

From this description, it is clear that Murphy surrenders not the game, which is inconclusive because his opponent does not occupy an oppositional position, but himself, the subject that plays and who claims to love.

Because of its emphasis on the strangeness of the foreigner, Coetzee's writing treats the forfeiture of the 'I' that seeks to love somewhat differently. If one were able to love the foreigner anonymously, and therefore not see him or her as a foreigner, the stranger would have arrived and would have destroyed the 'I' that seeks to love. At the same time, though, this would have liberated the stranger within the self that loves despite itself. In having been freed from its possession by the words of others, including the first-person singular pronoun, the self would have become other than it had been. This is why Mrs. Curren intuits that her salvation somehow depends on her ability to love John, even though she has no desire to do so. It is also why she associates Vercueil's "uninvited" entry into her home with a disturbance of the "stillness" and "stagnation" of her mind (*Age* 74), a description that resonates with Levinas's depiction of the effect on the self of the unexpected arrival of the Other as a liberation from its "enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself" (124). To open oneself to the Other, Levinas later adds, is "to free oneself by

breathing from closure in oneself” (180). Significantly, Vercueil is throughout Coetzee’s novel figured as both a saviour and an angel of death. As the novel’s ending makes clear, Mrs. Curren expires in having been inspired by his uninvited arrival: “He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (*Age* 181). Apart from the image of expiration, the detail that Mrs. Curren finds no “warmth” or love in Vercueil’s “embrace” suggests the death of the ‘I’ that seeks to love despite itself. Through his unannounced arrival, Vercueil kills her and therefore saves her from her enchainment to herself.

Given that Mrs. Curren, the letter writer in this epistolary novel, writes her own death, the novel’s ending is not nearly as clear-cut as I have suggested. The ‘I’ that does not experience love because it is not there to do so writes about the fact that it does not experience love because it is not there to do so. In various permutations, this irony is apparent throughout the novel. How does one love despite oneself? Can one choose to love despite oneself? In other words, can one control one’s loss of control? How does one “learn” to “let go,” as Mrs. Curren puts it (119)? Can one will “will-lessness”? Or, more to the point, can one will one’s death to come?

While Martin Heidegger describes death as that “possibility which is one’s ownmost” because no one can die for someone else (294), it is equally true, as Blanchot points out, that death cannot be experienced by a subject (*Space* 95–100). Since death is the end of the subject, it is not an action that may be accomplished in a realm of agential possibility. To choose to die is to attempt to control one’s loss of control. It is to place oneself in the paradoxical position of the suicide who, in killing herself, seeks to reduce death to an object that may be grasped and thereby controlled by a subject.¹²

In *Age of Iron*, this problem is figured in Mrs. Curren’s writing. Like Beckett, this character writes in order to die. Since her writing has its origin not in the ‘I’ that writes but in the interplay between the stranger without and the stranger within, she is not entirely in control of it. To appropriate Elizabeth Costello’s appropriation of Czesław Miłosz’s words, Mrs. Curren is a “secretary of the invisible” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 199). She writes in order to forfeit the subject that writes. As with Beckett, the irony is that she is possessed only of the words of others with which to accomplish this task.

¹² In a section of *The Space of Literature* entitled “Death as Possibility,” Blanchot discusses the notion of death as a task and achievement. After asking the questions “Can I die? Have I the power to die?” he reflects on Kirilov’s words, “I recommend my death to you, voluntary death, which comes to me because I want it to” (96–100). See also Critchley (77–85).

Through what she calls “misshapen” words, that have been “vomited up from the belly of the whale” (*Age* 128), she must locate the child that has been damaged by language. This is why she is so intent on “find[ing]” her “own words, from [her]self” (91). She seeks words that are *not* the words of others. The “right word” is, of course, the word that would destroy the ‘I’ that writes. While Mrs. Curren writes in order to die, to sacrifice herself so that she may become other than she is, she cannot do so because her writing asserts the ‘I,’ the word of others that she is. Partly at least, this is what the presence of the ‘I’ at its own death in this first-person narrative suggests. It suggests, that is, an endless dying, a waiting to die.

Coetzee’s negotiation of this aporia is directly related to his emphasis on the self’s dependence on the stranger for salvation. Although not a possibility open to a subject, a forfeiture of self is something that could be accomplished by a visit from a stranger. In *Age of Iron*, this possibility is mooted not only by the descriptions of Mrs. Curren’s relationship with Vercueil, but also by the text’s meditation on its reception by its reader and readers. Being an epistolary novel, it is of course self-reflexively aware that it is directed at a reader. Mrs. Curren’s letter is a letter and therefore has an addressee. Her intended reader is her daughter, someone she knows in advance and of whom she thus has expectations. For this reader, she translates, indeed transubstantiates, her body into words:

So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard. (8)

Ironically, though, it is exactly the kind of self-sacrificing love professed in this passage that is precluded by the fact that the sacrifice is directed and therefore affirms and consolidates the positions of giver and receiver within an economy of exchange. For her sacrifice to work, Mrs. Curren must love her daughter in the way that she would like to be able to love John; that is, despite herself. Her letter must address not (or not only) the daughter she knows, who is now an American and therefore a foreigner of sorts, but also the stranger she does not know, the black child not from her womb of whom she can have no expectations.

At issue in this self-reflexive reflection on writing and reading are the ways in which literary texts interpellate their readers and interpolate themselves

into the lives of their readers. Being situated in language and therefore community's structures of recognition, texts inevitably locate their readers, who are, of course, also situated in culture. Made up of "misshapen" words, Mrs. Curren's letter, like its writer, is possessed by 'the words of others' and therefore in a state of disgrace. It waits to be redeemed from this state by a reader it has not addressed, or by a reader who refuses, or comes to refuse, its address. This is why Mrs. Curren also refers to her daughter as her child who is estranged, who has grown strange (127). It is certainly why she exhorts her daughter as follows:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. [...]

Now, my child, flesh of my flesh, my best self, I ask you to draw back. [...] It would be easier for you, I know, if the story came from someone else, if it were a stranger's voice sounding in your ear. But the fact is, there is no one else. I am the only one. I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye. (95–96)

So, even as it interpellates its reader, Mrs. Curren's text holds out the possibility that she may be, or may become, a stranger. In other words, the reader it interpellates is not necessarily the one for whom this text waits. It waits, in particular, for a reader who will read it with a "cold eye" and thereby attempt to encounter those characters, like Vercueil and John, whom Mrs. Curren has inevitably misunderstood, misrepresented, and so silenced. The reader in question, this is to say, would be one who would venture beyond the economy of the text through reducing the reductions of its representations.¹³

If its actual reader were to read in the way suggested in this passage, his reading would inevitably seek to extend the novel's wholly inadequate search for the stranger. By not suspending disbelief in its representations, but rather engaging in an act of counter-focalization (see Spivak), a process which requires discerning what it has reduced, distorted, and therefore excluded, the reader would have become part of the text's quest. In fact, his reading would have become a search for the excess of the writer's search and would therefore necessarily betray its betrayal of the stranger. He would read—that is, seek to

¹³ In Johan Geertsema's fine argument, *Age of Iron* is "at once constituted by the attempt to render otherness and the attempt to render that rendering problematic" (259). Accordingly, it is the reader's responsibility to reduce this novel's reductions of the other.

see—with a “cold eye.” The crucial corollary here is that the reader, in supplementing the text’s representations, would have altered the text, made it strange to itself. In relation to the novel’s presentation of itself as Mrs. Curren’s sacrifice of self and endless dying, the reader would have enabled not this writer surrogate, but Coetzee, the actual writing subject, to give himself to a stranger, to become a sacrifice without object and thus intention, and thereby to become a stranger to himself. By extension, the reader would have inadvertently become the writer’s saviour by enabling him to die. The reader would have redeemed the writer from his state of disgrace by dispossessing him of the ‘I,’ the word of others, by which he is possessed.

Moreover, the reader, in making the text strange, would also have enabled it to make of her a stranger to herself. By engaging the text, the reader will have been visited and possessed by that which informs its search. In her reading of the novel, that is, she would have encountered what exceeds the differences inscribed by her language and culture and therefore will have deferred or will come to defer the patterns of identification they posit. Differently put, she would have encountered the stranger in herself. In terms of the trope of invisible air that pervades Coetzee’s writing, the reader will have inspired, and been inspired by, the writer’s expiration. At least, this is one of the implications of the analogous relationship of Mrs. Curren, the writer surrogate, to Coetzee, the writing ‘I.’ As I have already suggested, the one who reads has a role to play here; she must allow the writing ‘I’ to expire: not the Curren ‘I’ who speaks of its own death at the end of *Age of Iron*, and who has therefore not died, but the Coetzee ‘I’ who writes this character. If the reader does so, she will have been inspired by Coetzee’s dying breath. Significantly, in this regard, Mrs. Curren refers as follows to the affect and effect of her letter, the bearer of her remains, of her spirit, her dying breath, on its reader: “It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold” (*Age* 118–119). If inspired by the writer’s dying breath, it follows that the reader will have read anonymously, that is, despite herself, and that her reading would therefore not only be without a telos, but also without a locatable position in community. In short, the reader, through her engagement with the text, would have been unhomed from community. The ‘I’ that she is in community will have died.

To read in the manner here suggested is to enable the text to become unconditionally hospitable and thereby also to lose control over one’s reading and so render oneself unconditionally hospitable. To read in the manner here suggested is to read in a way that enables a “stranger’s voice” to sound in one’s

ear. Exactly this is connoted by the ending of Coetzee's *Foe*, which figures a visitation of the text by the reader and of the reader by the text. In the first part of the ending, an anonymous 'I' arrives at Foe's house, enters it unannounced, and encounters some of the novel's characters in postures of sleep. Their passivity suggests a waiting without object. The text waits for the reader it cannot expect, and when he or she does arrive, the arrival goes unnoticed. In other words, in this image of reading, the reader-figure visits the text by visiting herself upon it. Once in the house, this visitor searches it and eventually finds Friday, the novel's catachresis of the stranger. Thereafter, she places an ear to Friday's mouth, and lies "waiting" (154). Evidently, the seeker has become "incurious." Reading as an active search has lapsed into a passive, non-intentional waiting. As it is here depicted, reading is without object, a non-intentional waiting for the stranger's voice. In visiting herself upon the text, the reader-figure is visited by what has visited itself upon its writer.

It is therefore apposite that this reader-figure, in the second section of its ending, extends the novel's search for the child. She acts, which is to say searches, because she is acted upon by a stranger. Earlier, Susan Barton emphasizes in conversation with Foe the necessity of making the mute Friday's silence speak (142), thereby self-reflexively commenting on the telos of the text's search. Significantly, though, she concludes that this is a task for one who comes later. At the end of the novel, it is exactly this task that the reader-figure undertakes. In waiting for the reader it cannot expect, the text waits for her to complete its textual quest. On finding a manuscript in Foe's house, the reader-figure proceeds to read what turns out to be the opening sentence of the novel, after which she or he breaks with the text, and enters a watery underworld that is "not a place of words" (157). In effect, the figured reader is going where the text cannot take her and, in the process, taking it to a Beckettian and alinguistic destination. Once in this watery realm, she encounters Friday, the "child waiting to be born that cannot be born" (122), in a foetal position, and attempts to speak his silence. As it is here presented, her search is a waiting on the child who waits to be spoken and thereby to come into being as an object of and for consciousness. The Beckettian irony again evident here is that while it is the seeker's responsibility to articulate the silence of the stranger by which she is possessed, she has only the words of others with which to do so. At least, this is what is intimated by the failure of the reader-figure's attempt to speak Friday's silence: "Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused" (157). Since she has nothing to say and nothing to say it with, the figured reader must ceaselessly supplement her supplements of the text's supplements. The responsibility with which she has been charged is infinite because it cannot be discharged. Friday waits and she waits on him.

These images of the text's reception suggest that reading may become a space in which the reader visits himself upon the text, and the writer, through the text, visits himself upon the reader. If such a mutual visitation, or—now using words Mrs. Curren uses to describe her relationship with Vercueil—if such a “mutual election” were to happen (*Age* 179), it would have been entirely non-intentional and therefore pre-reflective. As such, the writer could not know whether or not the right reader, that is, the stranger, had arrived. By extension, he would also not know whether or not he had died and whether or not his “best self,” to use Mrs. Curren's Beckettian phrase, had arrived. The same would obviously hold for the reader. So, although it is true to say that the writer writes in order to die, and that the reader too reads in order to die, it needs to be added that writing and reading are, in this understanding, an endless waiting to die, and therefore an endless dying. It also follows that, for Coetzee, as for Beckett, the writer must tell the same story, albeit with endless variation, over and over again. In *Foe*, as much is implied by Susan Barton's following reflection on Foe's writing project:

And might not Foe be a kind of captive too? I had thought him dilatory. But might the truth not be instead that he had laboured all those months to move a rock so heavy no man alive could budge it; that the pages I saw issuing from his pen were not idle tales of courtesans and grenadiers, as I supposed, but the same story over and over, in version after version, stillborn every time: the story of the island, as lifeless from his hand as from mine? (151)

Foe is, of course, not just an author-figure in this novel. As the reader of Susan Barton's manuscript, he has been tasked with the responsibility of completing her story. His writing is also a reading. Quite clearly, the suggestion here is that the writer's aporetic task is shared by the reader. In his or her reading, the latter is always necessarily attempting to complete, and therefore to tell, the “same story.”

In Coetzee's fiction, to write and to read is endlessly to wait on the stranger who is excluded by community's forms of recognition. Accordingly, Coetzee's work continues and intensifies the kind of engagement with community that is already evident in the Beckettian search for the stranger. It does so through its recognition that the identity of the individual in community is contingent on the foreigner, and that the stranger is therefore both proximate and distant. The

search for the stranger within oneself is a waiting for the strangeness of the foreigner. As I have indicated, this logic extends to the writer's relationship with the reader, who is necessarily implicated in his search. Indeed, Mrs. Curren describes her letter's reader, her child who has "grown strange," as her "best self" (*Age* 95).

Despite these crucial differences, the nature of the search for the stranger is remarkably similar in the two writers under discussion. While the stranger can never be found, it is the seeker's responsibility to do just that. The seeker must make of community a home for the stranger, which means that the seeker must be unhomed by the stranger. By extension, the seeker must constantly seek to alter community in order to accommodate the stranger. The deep suspicion of community's forms of belonging apparent in Beckett is even more pronounced in Coetzee's writing. To belong, for Coetzee's characters, is to exist in a state of disgrace, and therefore to abnegate responsibility for the stranger. Indeed, belonging precludes the possibility of ethics. The diagnostic nature of the titles of novels like *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* indicate their disease with their 'worldliness,' and therefore their desire to become strange to themselves, to be unhomed from community. By implication, these titles indicate that the texts they designate wait for the stranger who may deliver them from what they are. Since the duration of their wait is without term, they are necessarily incomplete.

If Coetzee's fictional project involves thinking the 'good community,' it does not do so by conceiving of 'good community' as something that could ever be a *fait accompli*. The closest that a community could come to being 'good,' which is to say ethical, would be through conceiving of itself ateleologically. It would have constantly to interrupt itself by opening itself to its exclusions, and thereby disavowing its claims to completion, to being 'good.'¹⁴ The 'good community' is thus futural, always yet to come in a form presently unrecognizable. It should be noted in this regard that if the Coetzee-search for the stranger were to be completed, if it were indeed possible to see the foreigner as a stranger, community would be rendered impossible. Indeed, the kind of unconditional hospitality implicit in this search suggests a community that excludes exclusion, which is precisely what the differential construction of community precludes.

¹⁴ See Blanchot's discussion of the possibility of a community that disavows itself as it avows itself (*Unavowable*).

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Acknowledgements

I hereby acknowledge the financial support of the National Research Foundation of South Africa in the writing of this essay.