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Earth, World, and the Human

Samuel Beckett and the Ethics of Climate Crisis

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Abstract

This essay reads the ungraspable relation to death in Beckett's works as a means to think through our contemporary era of climate crisis. Beckett's singular aesthetics of human finitude can be a powerful resource for thinking the unthinkable. By envisaging finitude in terms of the limits imposed on life by both space and time, this essay seeks to ground the existential framework of Beckett's *oeuvre* in terms of an always embedded self. Looking at the short story "The End," I show how such embeddedness may work to evade totalisation or abstraction in terms of a universal worldview, yet also how it poses problems for any privileging of materiality as such. Beckett's writings are thereby seen to produce a dynamic ethics between world and earth, the global and the local, life and death.

Résumé

Cet essai interprète la relation insaisissable à la mort dans les ouvrages de Beckett comme moyen de penser notre ère contemporaine de crise climatique. L'esthétique singulière de la finitude humaine chez Beckett nous aide à penser l'impensable. En envisageant la finitude en termes des limites imposées à la vie par l'espace et par le temps, cet article tente d'enraciner le dispositif existentiel de l'œuvre de Beckett dans un soi toujours intégré. Nous examinerons la nouvelle "La Fin", afin de montrer comment une telle intégration pourrait permettre d'échapper à la totalisation ou l'abstraction d'une vision du monde universelle. Et pourtant, celle-ci rend problématique la mise en avant de la matérialité comme telle. Les écrits de Beckett peuvent ainsi être considérés comme produisant une éthique dynamique entre monde et terre, global et local, vie et mort.

Keywords

Anthropocene – climate crisis – death – earth – Posthumanism – world

1 Introduction

In this essay I will sketch how the writings of Samuel Beckett talk to our current climate crisis. As Roy Scranton writes, in his *We're Doomed, Now What?: Essays on War and Climate Change* (2018): “The next twenty years will be tough. After that, it gets worse. The middle and later decades of the twenty-first century [...] promise a global catastrophe whose full implications any reasonable person must turn away from in horror” (321). I argue that Beckett’s unflinching aesthetics allow us to grasp this horror from the perspective of its very ungraspability. Beckett’s grappling with human finitude, which is fundamentally entwined with a perceived crisis in representation following the Holocaust and Second World War, provides a way of processing the unrepresentable forms of the ecological apocalypse, seen as both imminent yet abstract and hard to capture meaningfully in terms of everyday experience.

The focus of this essay is therefore to articulate the ecological thinking of Beckett’s writings in terms of an earth ethics implicit his sustained engagement with the question of the human. I extrapolate this thinking by drawing on Maurice Blanchot’s writings about the ungraspability of death and on the recent work of philosopher Kelly Oliver, who reframes the debate about finitude in the works of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida in material terms. Accordingly, I explore how Beckett’s short story “The End” (1946) allows us to resituate human finitude at the confluence of the existential-phenomenological notion of world and that of the spatial-materialist notion of earth. This confluence yields an earth ethics grounded in the finitude of life itself.

Beckett has often been framed as the twentieth century’s greatest writer of the ungraspable, and this essay aims to exploit both the literal and metaphoric meanings of this word. For Beckett’s earliest French reviewers, such as Maurice Nadeau, Beckett constitutes “an ironic genius [...], an adept of nothingness elevated to the level of all, and conversely, a formidable master of ungraspable reality (*réalité insaisissable*)” (1963, 263). Georges Bataille echoes a similar conclusion in a review of *Molloy*, identifying Beckett’s literature with silence not only via the negation of sense but due to Beckett’s capacity to capture the true sense of reality, its unrepresentable silence: “What we have here is so assuredly the essence of being (but this expression alone, ‘essence of being’, could not determine the *thing*) that we need not hesitate: to *this*, we cannot give a name,

it is indistinct, necessary and elusive [*insaisissable*], quite simply, it is *silence*" (1979, 86–87). For Bataille, this ungraspable silence is linked to a radical questioning of the human, and he repeatedly notes the "absence of humanity" (61). Contemporary commentators have followed in their description of Beckett as an artist of the ungraspable. As Laura Salisbury writes of the late play *Quad* (1981), Beckett confronts his audience with the "ungraspable difficulty of describing what is going on in affective terms where there is no pre-digested lexicon to outline its distinctions" (2012, 215).

Indeed, it is this sense of the relation between the breakdown of the epistemological order, and the possibility of adumbrating "yet unnamed possibilities for thought, feeling, and action" (Salisbury 2012, 215), that makes Beckett's ungraspability so apt for engaging with issues of climate crisis. The alarming state of our present and collective plight is hard to exaggerate. As Scranton writes, in order to return to the global population levels of Beckett's contemporary, around 1940, we need to lose 70% of the current human population. He continues:

In the almost eighty years since then, the human species has burst the boundary for sustainable life on Earth through what some scientists call the "Great acceleration," an unprecedented spike in socioeconomic and earth systems trends—everything from carbon dioxide emissions, surface temperature, and tropical forest loss [...], water use, and population (from approximately 2.3 billion in 1940 to 7.6 billion today).

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The now unstoppable desperation of our situation staggers belief; it is ungraspable. "We all see what's happening," Scranton writes, "we read it in the headlines every day, but seeing isn't believing, and believing isn't accepting" (3). Hegel once wrote that "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk" (2003, 23). Hegel's sense of the belatedness of wisdom—and of the impossibility of knowing and acting in time—speaks to Beckett's similar sense of the historical present as oppressively unrepresentable in terms of knowledge. Throughout the 1930s the ungraspability of the present surfaces repeatedly and is summarised by the account of the severing of subject/object relations, as in the 1934 "Recent Irish Poetry" or the 1938 review "Intercessions by Denis Devlin," where Beckett writes: "Art has always been this—pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric—whatever else it may have been obliged by the 'social reality' to appear, but never more freely so than now, when social reality [...] has severed the connexion" (1984, 91). This essay argues that "The End" captures how, for Beckett, this severing of the connexion not only

accounts for our difficulty in representatively mastering the present (as a historical totality) but also of ever escaping it (as an existential reality). As we shall see, this conjunction of horizons, those of historical world and material earth respectively, offers a means of conceptualising the current expansion of the problem of human finitude from the level of the individual to the level of the species.

2 The Great Refusal

“The End” was the first of Beckett’s post-war *Nouvelles*, a series of four stories that lay the groundwork for the great “frenzy of writing” (qtd. in Knowlson 1996, 355) that would result in the trilogy (they include “The End,” “The Expelled,” “The Calmative” and “First Love”). The posthumously narrated tale concerns a first-person narrator-protagonist who has been kicked out of an institution and left to expire on the streets. As the early critic René Lalou writes, the narrative technique of the *Nouvelles* strongly anticipates the later writings: “we already find his constant use of monologue as an artistic technique, his implacably pessimistic vision and his insistence of the degrading functions of the human body” (151). Written in light of the ungraspable events of Holocaust and Atom bomb, “The End” outlines the nascent negative anthropology of the later trilogy. However, its usefulness in the context of discussing the climate crisis results from the way it overtly captures the ethico-political stakes of Beckett’s writings. These stakes arise as a strong aversion to totalising or utopian world-views, as thematised by the Marxist humanism the narrator encounters during his descent to oblivion and discussed below in the second section.

This aversion epitomises a non-representational aesthetic impulse that is expressed by the fact that “The End” was composed on the cusp of Beckett’s transition from English to French, a decision that marks an increasingly attuned sense of the incommensurable relation between language and reality (as attested to? by Beckett’s English-language wartime novel, *Watt*). Building on the critical writings of the 1930s, including his art criticism and the appeal to a non-representational “*Literatur des Unworts*” (2009, 515), “The End” anticipates the language issues of the trilogy, and this incommensurability informs a mocking attitude which is given voice by the narrator: “She had a strange accent. But so had I with my way of assimilating the vowels and omitting the consonants” (42). Beckett’s turn to French marked a desire to write without style and the connotative freight of English, and through its own monologic form and opaque narrative self-reflexivity, “The End” situates this attitude to language at the heart of its titular focus: death. By combining elements of Beckett’s ear-

lier commentary from the 1930s on language and subject/object relations with an ongoing aversion to anthropomorphism, “The End” epitomises the sense of death that will pervade the trilogy and come to define Beckett’s writings. That is, death as fundamentally ungraspable, both in the representative and material sense, yet as ineluctably embedded. In “The End,” therefore, we have a combination of factors, from formal technique to historical context, that open onto the way in which Beckett explores human finitude not merely in ahistorical or existential terms. Instead, as I explore below, finitude marks not merely a bodily or material condition but the liminal status of the individual, a figure increasingly prioritised with the switch to the solipsistic first-person form in the *Nouvelles*.

The earlier critical writings again reveal how for Beckett the problem of representation is fundamentally entwined with the question of the human. In the 1930s there emerges in several art commentaries and letters a sense of what Beckett terms the ‘inhuman.’ Painters like Paul Cezanne and Jack Yeats are said to reveal nature as “inhumanly inorganic” (2009, 540), as Beckett writes to McGreevy in 1937. The inhuman for Beckett marks a non-representational aesthetic which his own work will go on to develop. Beckett’s interest in the “heterogeneity of nature” (2009, 540) can be seen as marking a liberation of earth from world. This can be appreciated by contrasting the notion of ‘inhuman’ as ethical judgment and Beckett’s sense of the ‘inhuman’ as an aesthetic principle of abstraction that does not simply sublimate nature but rather corresponds with the heterogenous materiality of the earth as *nonhuman*. Accordingly, against a familiar existentialist reading of Beckett’s works which understands death as defining of the human being as such (by orientating our meaning-making projects), the ‘inhuman’ marks the very impossibility of being *as such*. Rather than an ethics of the human (which the judgment ‘inhuman’ attempts to demarcate), I argue that Beckett’s inhuman ethics makes finitude a point of contact between earth and world which importantly gives up on death as the foundation for the individual.

Death is a destroyer of worlds and operates by returning us to the earth, where we belong in excess of all belonging, in excess of the cognate notions of conceptual propriety and of material property. As such, the ungraspability of death in Beckett can be seen to function as more than analogous of the ungraspability of the contemporary climate crisis. As Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), the events of climate crisis and global warning “haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms. [...] [T]his makes climate change events peculiarly resistant to the customary frames that literature has applied to ‘Nature’” (32). The unthinkable events of Ghosh’s account of climate crisis parallel the ungraspable form (between life

and death) of what Beckett, referring in a letter to his narrator in “The End,” calls his “creature” (2011, 14); both evade “a lyrical, elegiac, or romantic” (32–33) mode of representation.¹

This ungraspable conjunction of life and death in the text can be made visible by comparison with the later works. Beckett’s misanthropic monologuer in “The End” shares several familiar traits with those who populate the trilogy; a penchant for philosophical Occasionalism (that of Arnold Geulincx), a fascination with uncouth bodily functions, an aversion to sociality. As, for instance, in *Molloy*, where our eponymous protagonist recalls a perfunctory if not inhuman encounter with a now deceased lover, and ponders quizzically: “But is it true love, in the rectum?” (56). Like the later Molloy, the narrator of “The End” is similarly detached and dislocated in a way that anticipates Theodor Adorno’s appraisal of the “worldlessness” (191) of Beckett’s works.² The condition of worldlessness that afflicts Beckett’s narrator-protagonists renders them like islands, solitary and detached from social life. Perhaps the epitome of the island-narrator, at least in the dramatic works, is Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961). Her movement entirely circumscribed by her imprisonment in the mound, she recalls towards the end of the play her last encounter with the outside world: “Next thing they’re away—hand in hand—and the bags—dim—then gone—last human kind—to stray this way” (157). In the earlier *Murphy* (1938) this worldlessness is not yet to be taken as a given, as it is for example in *Endgame* (1958) and *Happy Days*, but is instead figured as a personal quest to fulfil Murphy’s preference for the “little world” over the “big world” (112), a preference for a world in which to be oneself is to deny or negate everything that is extraneous. There is an equivocation, however, in the solipsistic outlook of Beckett’s island-narrators and room-dwelling denizens. Always on the verge of expiration, or

1 The philosopher Timothy Morton has described the ungraspable nature of climate change in terms of a “hyperobject”; something “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). As hyperobjects the events of climate crisis might be said to avoid a masterful or worldly perspective, they evade totalisation and metalanguage, yet remain distinctly “nonlocal” (1). One might argue?? that Beckett’s life-forms function similarly as hyperobjects in an anti-representational aesthetic which distrusts both totalisation and particularisation equally.

2 Adorno writes: “Philosophical apologists may laud his works as sketches for an anthropology. But they deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject. Beckett’s *Ecce Homo* is what human beings have become. As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out of his sentences. The spell they cast, which also binds them, is lifted by being reflected in them. However, the minimal promise of happiness they contain, which refuses to be traded for comfort, cannot be had for a price less than total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness. Here every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art [...]” (2007, 190–191).

somehow from within the liminal state of living/dying, Beckett's protagonists signal an equivocation between death as possibility and death as impossibility.

Beckett's liminal beings provide a stark contrast to Martin Heidegger, for whom the integrity of the human as an individual is guaranteed by death. In *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (1929–1930),³ Heidegger describes human beings as world-building (*Weltbildend*) and animals, by contrast, as poor in world (*Weltarm*). Proper to this sense of the human (or *Dasein*) as world-building is the capacity to die, whereas animals, Heidegger argues, merely “come to an end” (1995, 267). As Kelly Oliver summarises: “Animals are mortal in the sense that all living beings are mortal, but, for Heidegger, only human beings realize that all living beings are mortal; only human beings have a relation to death as death” (2015, 177). Accordingly, death becomes a form of possibility; the human has a relation to death beyond merely having to come to an end. Heidegger elsewhere terms this relation “being-toward-death” (1996, 319), and as that which provides our finitude with a project-like or purposeful structure. For Heidegger death underscores the integrity of the human being and therefore its necessary solitude, its uniqueness and self-sufficiency as an individual. It is the indivisibility of the human, of the human as *individual*, that sets apart the human as world-building. In contrast, Beckett's liminal creatures, between life and death, also lack this capacity for individual self-sufficiency, rendering the solipsistic monologue form profoundly equivocal. In “The End,” just at the point when the narrator leaves the world behind and enters a state of worldlessness, a radically new world opens, a solipsistic island of consciousness. As we hear at the end of “The End,” with the narrator in his enclosed boat hallucinating: “The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on” (57). Beckett's use of narrative self-reflexivity—a technique widely deployed in the later trilogy—suggests that just at this point of expiration, at the *heart* of an experience where the truth of one's life appears on the horizon of one's death, we have a dissimulation; the truth as yet another story, the heart of one's individual experience as nothing more than a further reminder

3 The title of Heidegger's work echoes those comments famously put to Alan Schneider in 1957: “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.” Such fundamental sounds can be regarded as evidence of the intractable sense of embedded being in Beckett as prior to propositional or, what Heidegger would term, *proper* thought.

of one's crushing dependence on external material forms, both narrative or linguistic and bodily ("a mighty systole"). It is important thus that the monologic narration is not only paradoxically posthumous but also anonymous. As in the trilogy, Beckett leaves the work of individuation fundamentally bereft; improper dying is linked to improper selfhood. This failure to escape the big world, to consummate the self in terms of either life or death as absolute (*as such*), displaces what it means to end: to have an end or to aim for one.

In "First Love" a similar anonymous narrator-protagonist expresses this displacement of ends in terms of the body, in particular, his pains. Like "The End," "First Love" features another monologuing solipsistic outcast who is expelled from social reality and who lives seemingly outside of history, between life and death. As with "The End," however, it is not simply the case that the body or embodied life returns the self to the world. "But even them, my pains, I understand ill. That must come from my not being all pain and nothing else. There's the rub" (68). Being not "all pain" induces a minimal difference; he cannot grasp his pain because he cannot coincide with it. Yet if he were to simply *be* pain what would there be left to grasp, what sense can the body or pain have without a mechanism to distinguish pain from non-pain. As the allusion to *Hamlet* suggests, Beckett's text is aware at a deep level—regardless of its narrator—that pain is only meaningful as such in the context of its relation to non-pain; that death is only meaningful in the context of its relation to life, which is why suicide is so often presented as a paradoxical and impossible choice. In other words, Beckett's materialism is not a privileging of mere matter but an investigation into the *mattering* of matter, of how matter is always mediated by contexts that inscribe it as meaningful or not. What is irreducible is not embodiment as such but the body's embeddedness in structures (both temporal-affective and philosophical-conceptual) that prevent a sense of indivisible or *individual* being.⁴

Neither wholly of the world nor of the material earth, life and death in Beckett thus remain bound together so that neither is afforded the opportunity of becoming proper, of becoming one's property. In *The Infinite Conversation*

4 The refusal of the reduction of the human to the body or mere matter is attested by the persistent presence of theology in Beckett's writings. Shane Weller writes: "Like both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno before him, Beckett takes his distance from modernity in such a way as to disrupt any clear alignment of Enlightenment and secularization: in short, the Beckettian 'on' discloses a religious impulse at the heart of the Enlightenment project" (100). Conceding that Beckett's theological or religious impulse remains detached from any ultimate religious 'signified', I argue that Beckett's use of religious concepts and frameworks can be seen instead as a way of infinitising the finite.

(1969), and in a section entitled “The Great Refusal,” Maurice Blanchot articulates this fundamental impossibility of death, of death as such (and therefore also of life as such), that we discover in Beckett. For Blanchot, death indeed spurs action, but this action arises not from a relation but a non-relation to our necessary end: “We untiringly construct the world in order that the hidden dissolution, the universal corruption [of death] that governs what ‘is’ should be forgotten in favour of a clear and defined coherence of notions and objects, relations and forms—the work of tranquil man” (33). We construct a world order, as Blanchot puts it, “to not belong to the earth, where everything passes away” (33). What remains concealed through our constructive and discursive labours in the realm of the possible is the impossibility that lurks behind all possibility. It is in the mode of possibility that death functions as the sovereign power to negate being; accordingly, “all speech is violence, [...] a violence that is already exerted upon what the word names and that it can name only by withdrawing presence from it” (42). With regard to our own ecological catastrophe, such a violence is attested to by the language we use to name nature: the euphemism that is ‘climate change’ when we really mean climate crisis or climate breakdown, ‘extinction’ when we really mean ecocide. Against this violence, Blanchot calls on the impossible as “a kind of reserve in thought itself, a thought not allowing itself to be thought in the mode of appropriative comprehension” (43). Such a thought will instead require, as Anthony Uhlmann has described Beckett, a “poetical thinking” (2010, 92)—a poetical thinking or literature of the unword pioneered by Beckett’s novellas. For Blanchot the impossible does not absolve us of thinking but, rather, allows thought “to announce itself according to a measure other than that of power. [...] the measure of the *other*, of the other as other” (43). Crucially, however, what is other is not absolute; it is not a negative theology of the earth or of physical life but, following Beckett’s “First Love,” emerges through an experience of pain, of the singularity of suffering both in a place, in a body, but also in time, in a mediating experience of the “present without end [...] indefinitely distended. [...] a time that can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse. A time without event, without project, without possibility” (Blanchot 1969, 44).

It is this unredeemable finitude which starves Beckett’s narrator-protagonists of world, that makes them animal-like in Heidegger’s sense of being poor in world. Yet such a finitude, marked by a ceaseless ending entwines life and death in Beckett’s work, returns us to the ground of the earth—the earth not as a value, or idea, not the earth or embodied life *as such*, but as the groundless ground upon which a new thinking might commence. In Jacques Derrida’s critique of Heidegger’s human/animal distinction, the idea that animals are short of world is not a problem. Rather: “what seems more problematic still to my

eyes is the confidence with which Heidegger attributes dying properly speaking to human Dasein, access or relation to death properly speaking and to dying as such" (2011, 116). The ethical task is therefore not to redeem animal or embodied life but, instead, to de-world the human. This reversal is typical of Beckett's works too, as in "The End" where—comically—the narrator declaims: "I didn't know our cows too could be so inhuman" (48). Far from enthroning an alterity in excess of reason, of elevating animal or embodied life to a higher plane, Beckett's text instead works consistently to pull the rug out from the possibility of any such thing. By reversing a typical metaphoric substitution (man as animal to animal as man) Beckett helps to remind us that any escape to animal plenitude in fact repeats the trap that is the fallacy of human self-sufficiency; that is, a fallacy of unmediated being, of having access to life or death *as such*. However, by withdrawing the possibility of a relation to death *as such* Beckett acknowledges that humans too are short of world and therefore split, inhuman, fundamentally divisible; that our bodies are not wholly ours but are of the order of what Blanchot terms the 'other.' Anticipating Bataille's sense of absence in *Molloy*, the narrator in "The End" states: "Strictly speaking I wasn't there. Strictly speaking I believe I've never been anywhere" (51).

3 Learning How to Die

By disclosing the liminal status of death through a dislocated global or planetary framework, "The End" helps us to conceive of Beckett's aesthetics in terms that answers Ghosh's call for a mode of representation suited to addressing the "nonhuman agencies" (33) of climate crisis. The novella invites us to consider the purported materialism of Beckett's works in terms less related to the intractable otherness of the body and more in terms of time and finitude.⁵ In other words, not simply in terms of animal or other modes of being but in terms of the *inhumanism* of the human itself. This requires turning away from form, as static or fixed, and turning towards processes of formalisation and de-formalisation. Beckett's *finite* aesthetics thus grasps human finitude in a way that "admits the chaos," as Beckett famously puts it in a 1961 interview, "and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else":

5 As Dirk Van Hulle discusses, alongside recent historical approaches, Beckett Studies has undergone a materialist turn which includes a focus on questions of "the embodied mind" (xix).

The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.

qtd. in GRAVER and FEDERMAN, 243

Such an accommodation involves neither transcending the ungraspable relation to death, as in religious or romantic modes, nor sublimating the body into something other than the body (i.e. as an amalgam of anatomical or other rationally delineable phenomena, or as allegorical of the 'human' in a realist mode). Both options, transcendence or sublimation, involve subordinating chaos to form, which is why the recalcitrant or liminal life-forms of Beckett's novels and later trilogy cannot be extracted from their narrative embeddedness in the text; they cannot be made to *mean* something. Yet there is much to be learnt from Beckett's unwillingness to teach, not least about how such a textual embeddedness, which evades a linear logic of causality (that is to say, of subordinating the literariness of the work to its role as a purveyor of meaning or truth), speaks to our state of material embeddedness. Beckett's materialism suggests instead a logic of simultaneity rather than causality, a logic of contradiction that underscores how we are both embodied and disembodied, chaos and form; how we are both of the earth *and* of the world.⁶

It is in this context then, where world is seen to be lacking but the animal-earth fails to offer a pure solution, that Steven Connor asserts: "Beckett's earth is perhaps also to be seen as closed or secluded in Heidegger's sense, precisely in the way it withholds or withdraws itself from being constituted as 'world', 'a world' or 'the world'. It is in this sense that all Beckett's characters are local, parochial, regional" (2014, 184). Condemned to parochialism, to a death without the possibility of redemption, Beckett's characters emblematised that status of his writing itself as a modality of *anti*-world literature. That is, the possibility of a writing not in the service of, or subordinate to, this or that worldview, to the world envisaged always in the form of a totality, but of a writing that can never be wholly *of* the world by virtue of its inherent questioning (its

6 This simultaneity is hinted at by Beckett's notion of the "ideal real" (75), as formulated in his early *Proust* monograph of 1930. This idea, however, is intractably linked to a sense of the "extra-temporal" (75), or an abstraction or idealisation of the real in Proust's high modernist writing. Beckett's later writing, epitomised here by "The End," involves instead a more disjunctive sense of combining both the abstract and particular in a way that corresponds to a sense of reality beyond representation, whether that be in the form of an abstract philosophical-conceptual schema or in the form of empirical observation.

poetical thinking or suspension) of the very possibility of ‘the world.’ Such a questioning can be seen as intrinsically ethical, as Derrida helps us to conceptualise. Rather than being toward death, Derrida presents us with a relation, as Oliver writes, of “being toward the death of the other” (176)—even if that other is one’s self—that helps to situate Beckett’s inhuman sense of death in relation to the frameworks of world, earth and our impending ecological catastrophe. Derrida suggests that ethics begins where the world ends, and that the world ends every time a living being dies; *the* world, not *a* world. By using this difficult formulation Derrida is referring to the world of *world-building*, the world defined, as Oliver summarises, as the system of stabilising apparatuses of “moral codes, universal principles, common languages, rational structures, religious doctrines, traditions, or conventions to which one can appeal in the face of the ethical obligation to the other” (197). In the absence of the very identity structures that allow individuation—identity structures that are, of course, ironically the same for everyone—an alternative ethics emerges from the embedded singularity of the living being in time and space, on the earth.

As Oliver argues, what is important for this ethics is not that “each being is unique in substance, but rather in its location in time and space” (186).⁷ Derrida writes: “What is absolutely new is not this, rather than that; it is the fact that it arrives only once. It is what is marked by a date (a unique moment and place), and it is always a birth or death that a date dates” (2002, 104). A similar sentiment is expressed by Beckett in a letter dating from his tour of Nazi Germany just prior to the catastrophic world-events of the 1940s. Beckett writes:

I am not interested in a ‘unification’ of the historical chaos any more than I am in the ‘clarification’ of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know. Meier says the background is more important than the foreground, the causes than the effects, the causes than their representatives and opponents. I say the background and the causes are an inhuman and incomprehensible machinery and venture to wonder what kind of appetite it is that can be appeased by the modern animism that consists in rationalising them.

qtd. in KNOWLSON 1996, 244

7 Connor makes a similar observation with regard to Beckett’s depiction of being as always a form of being-there (*Dasein*, in Heideggerian terms): “The finitude of being in the world, being in some particular circumstance, some here or other, is perfectly compatible with indefiniteness: if one is out of place, it is always in some particular configuration” (182).

It is this finite knowledge, this knowledge that is “all I can know,” that is bequeathed to us by the fictions. In “The End” our narrator—our posthumous narrator who has, as the narrative embeddedness makes clear, never in fact been anywhere but here, in this time and in this place—speaks of a similar disinterest towards what men have to say when they climb to the roof of cars: “He was bellowing so loud that snatches of his discourse reached my ears. Union ... brothers ... Marx ... capital ... bread and butter ... love. It was all Greek to me” (52). Behind such lofty and utopian ideals lurks the inclination to sacrifice life in the name of life, to destroy worlds in order to save the world, our world, *the* world.

One might say that such ideals are well named by the term ‘worldview,’ and that Beckett opens a perspective that affords a contrary ‘earthview’ instead. As Connor reminds us: “The word ‘world’ in fact derives from a Germanic root *wer* man, and *ald* age, the primary signification therefore being ‘the age of man’. World signifies [...] not a place, or environment, but a span of existence (the time of your life)” (185). As the earth enters its “age of man”—a condition dubbed the Anthropocene—Beckett’s contemplation of the ends of man, of human finitude, takes on a new resonance. By refusing the possibility of death as such, of death as one’s own, Beckett’s open onto the impossible experience of our current ecological catastrophe. As Scranton writes, climate change “unfolds in time” (328) in a way that refuses the linear causality of our conventional narrative ordering of life. Beckett associates such a narrative model with the writings of Balzac, the latter deploying an army of “clockwork cabbages” (qtd. in Knowlson 1996, 146) that simulate the mere surface of events and divest the artwork from its potential as a mode of engagement with the radically ungraspable.

Climate crisis, conversely, fails to match up to the frameworks of either our day to day time, of predictable cycles and patterns (which Scranton designates with Greek notion of *chronos*), or the event-time of *Kairos* (of ruptures and breaks). Without a single global event to focus our attention, there is no model for integrating the earth into our world. What is happening is happening now, yet there is no ‘we’ to register this change. Beckett provides a model for experiencing the impossible, for grasping the ungraspable, precisely by suggesting that it is here, where the world ends, that ethics begins; here, amongst what is called in “The End” “the universal muck” (55). Here death, which Blanchot calls “*the ungraspable that one cannot let go of*” (45), does not cater for a return to self but makes us most ourselves at the point of greatest divisibility; of the divisibility that marks every ‘here’ and ‘now.’ Thus Beckett teaches us that to learn how to live means to learn how to die, yet importantly this marks not merely an existential ethics but what Oliver terms an “earthbound

ethics”; an ethics that stems from the realization that “even if we do not share a world, we do share a planet” (206).⁸

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8 As the narrator of “The End” confesses: “To know I had a being, however faint and false, outside of me, had once had the power to stir the heart. You become unsociable, it’s inevitable. It’s enough to make you wonder sometimes if you are on the right planet” (55).

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