

Queer sexuality in Samuel Beckett's late prose

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Abstract

During the 1960s, Samuel Beckett's prose work stopped sniggering about sexuality in his mother's bedroom and began to address it in a bolder way. Although some of Beckett's earlier and even post-war works have been considered in relation to debates in queer theory, the peculiar situation of the 1960s prose requires a more systematic approach to questions of gender and sexuality. Here is not an isolated, jocular nod to deviance or perversion, as hitherto has been the case. Characters change gender and undertake explicit sex acts. This has broadly been glossed over due to the texts' minimalist qualities: the narration's professed drive to lessen creates readings that believe the texts have been successful in what they describe. What results, instead, is a form of queer relationality and counter-intuitively negative accumulation that acts minimally but cannot merely be described as minimalist. This thesis offers an argument for reading queer theory with Beckett's œuvre to address problems that have long dogged Beckett Studies, such as fragmentation, liminality, and lessening. Reading these through queer debates provides a route away from stultifying binary conceptualisations such as transcendent versus material or normal versus abnormal, and addressing the historical backdrop of the 1960s and Beckett's position therein speaks to debates about desire in sexuality studies. Closely reading minimalisms in the context of these frameworks — especially the debate around negativity intrinsic to the 'antisocial thesis' in the work of Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant, José Muñoz and Robyn Wiegman — creates further engagements with psychoanalysis through a preoccupation with an evolution of the 'partial object' of *Disjecta*, as it appears in the late prose. Critical race theory is also used through a study of whiteness and engagement with the history of visual art and culture, and as a nexus of the antisocial debate. Desire undergirds each of these issues, which is why queer theory — though a broad field in itself — remains central to each one. The pivotal text in which Beckett turned towards sexuality was *How It Is*. This text was written during what he termed the 'Sade boom', when scholarship reckoned with the Marquis de Sade as an example of a philosophy that pushed the limits of sex and power. Drawing on this context, Chapter One explores how the concept of the limit is reconfigured in this faecal text, and how quantification inflects the possibility of reading sex and gender. Chapters Two and Three examine *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, two texts that in their minimalism demonstrate a refusal to allow a static definition of gender, instead only permitting a form of placeholder to occur, taking further the ultimately sexual problem that a quest for limit creates. Boredom is a crucial theoretical axis, as the focus on quantification finds these works addressing the extremities of over- and under-stimulation that boredom brings with it. Reading minimalism through this lens highlights the queer conceit of this mode: a 'bitchiness' that enacts a resistance to teleology and direct correspondences. Chapter Four offers a re-reading of *Enough* in order to demonstrate what is lost in readings of Beckett's work that do not apply to gender the same deconstructive modes that are afforded other aspects of categorisation. This amounts to a reversal of the critical reception of the end of this text, which has been accepted as an unproblematic revelation. There can be no debate over the graphic, sexual content of Beckett's late prose; once read through a queer lens, it is stultifying to assume a heteronormative reading. Turning back to Beckett's queerest work queerly, this thesis argues, can resolve some of the most puzzling lacunae in contemporary scholarship both in Beckett Studies and sexuality studies.

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett is not often associated with the 1960s. Jokes about ejaculating after hanging oneself and unpunctuated descriptions of ramming a tin opener between one's neighbours buttocks perhaps do not align entirely with the cultural imaginary of a decade often remembered as an optimistic, psychedelic period in which sexuality became more 'free', politics turned towards the revolutionary, and in general a heady combination of both individualism and 'togetherness' were touted as the response to domestic and international wrongs.¹ It is perhaps for this reason, and for their laconic opacity, that Beckett's short prose works written during the 1960s are not very popular. They do not appear to fit, either in terms of the rest of the *œuvre* or in terms of the decade itself. *How It Is*, the text with which this thesis begins, is usually identified as the pivotal point at which Beckett emerges from the 'trilogy' mode and moves into 'late' mode: it marks a shift in style from novel to prose, presenting an entirely unpunctuated onslaught of short paragraphs. As the 1960s progress, so too does the formal minimising of the prose texts. In so doing, these texts align with the motions of a queer reading.

Beckett's most famous works were written and published in the 1940s and 1950s, but his subsequent work carries the stereotypical pennant of 'lateness'. In other words, it is not quite Modernist, a bit too short to be serious,² and not quite sexy enough to be transgressive in an instantly appreciable or remotely gratifying way. Never much of a joiner in the literary sense, Beckett's work from the 1960s onwards is

¹ Samuel Beckett, 'Waiting for Godot' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 18; Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 57.

² As titles such as *Foirades*, translated into English as *Fizzles* but readable in French also as 'wet farts' or 'screw ups', indicate.

not technically within any of the movements that it seems to be in dialogue with, either: minimalism, the avant-garde, the nouveau roman. Tim Lawrence's reflection, in *Samuel Beckett's Critical Aesthetics*, sums up Beckett Studies' overarching attitude towards this oblique moment in the œuvre,

[t]he apparent evacuation of influence that took place through processes of rarefaction in Beckett's minimalist prose from the 1950s to the 1970s is an integral part of their sustained figuration of unknowable and liminal spaces lying outside the constraints placed upon representation by the 'subject-object relation'.³

It is perhaps because these texts deal with queerness more clearly that all that seems to be recalled about them is their whiteness and their drive towards this 'rarefaction'. These texts invite us to read them as precisely the enactment of the disappearance that they profess to attempt to perform. However, as Lawrence notices, this evacuation is only 'apparent', and instead a pivotal alteration to the possibility of relation takes place, creating those scare quotes around 'subject-object relation'. This approach to Beckett is common in contemporary scholarship, which often reads against prior critics who have sought a key to a robust and often metonymic understanding of the work, instead arguing as David Cunningham does for Beckett's 'ongoing resistance to the 'finalisation' of any aesthetic programme'.⁴ This extends to sexuality, as Peter Boxall suggests of homoeroticism in the entire œuvre, it is 'such an

³ Tim Lawrence, *Samuel Beckett's Critical Aesthetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 167-168.

⁴ David Cunningham, 'Asceticism against Colour, or Modernism, Abstraction and the Lateness of Beckett', *New Formations*, 55.55 (2005), p. 114.

important connecting and networking element in the Beckettian psychosexual complex, that it can become invisible'.⁵ Boxall identifies an 'underlying gay economy' that is so directly relevant to the interrelations in Beckett's work that it is no longer readable as 'gay'.⁶ This complete invisibility is a little too convenient. If an underlying homoeroticism is screaming at us like a gaudy doormat, alongside recent biographical information about the author, then why are there no book chapters entitled, for example, 'Was Beckett Gay?'⁷ This invisibility is due not only to a gap in Beckett Studies but this perceived rarefaction which gestures towards a seductive limit or universality, rendering it easier than it might usually be for positions under the guise of 'universal', such as heterosexuality, to persist. This thesis examines not only what happened to Beckett's work in the 1960s and how this informs an understanding of the oeuvre, but also the implications that these critical readings have for queer studies.

Whiteness and Minimalism

Nowhere is this universality more significant than in the texts that are allegedly erasing themselves: playing with invisibility. In enacting this abnegation, the 'rotunda' texts, as they have been dubbed owing to the frequent presence of a white skull-like space, enter neatly into the symbolic order of whiteness. As Richard Dyer notes,

⁵ Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 115.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf: Terry Castle, 'Was Jane Austen Gay?' in *Boss Ladies, Watch out! Essays on Women, Sex, and Writing* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), pp. 125-136; Deirdre Bair, *Parisian Lives: Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir and Me: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020).

White people have a colour, but it is a colour that also signifies the absence of colour, itself a characteristic of life and presence. In the transparent representation of the culture of light, the white face has to be read in the blanks on the paper or screen.⁸

The mechanics of whiteness are structurally integral to the late prose works, as they underpin the very possibility of Beckett's work being read as abstract or minimalist. A methodology that reads this whiteness as whiteness rather than as a blank permits its selectively permeable boundaries to be read as such. This means that the 'subject-object relation' could be interrogated without its possibilities becoming entombed in an all-consuming blankness. Reading whiteness in the late prose affords the possibility of reading other limits and other voids that impinge on and problematise what is present or visible.

Due in part to this whiteness that asks to be read as a universal abstraction, among other more significant reasons which will be elaborated in the chapters ahead, Beckett has been allowed a universality not afforded to other writers whose works can be subsumed under a particular genre or movement. Beckett's work plays with ideas of the limit — be it of nothingness, of being or of language — but crucially it never reaches the threshold of any of these. As Daniela Caselli notes after Stephen Thomson in *Beckett and Nothing*,

⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 207.

Perhaps the nothing peculiar to Beckett lies there: the peace is in the indefinite place of the receding mist, the wish is to cease 'trading these long shifting thresholds' and to live in a paradoxically impossible space, not immune, however, from dialectic movement. Like in the case of the strip of light in *Footfalls*, it is important, when staging our critical theatres of the Beckett oeuvre, not to let this impossible 'space of a door / that opens and shut' grow a landing around it.⁹

This encapsulates the ways in which Beckett's work in fact resists the regime of whiteness: it works in this 'paradoxically impossible space' — very much white — but crucially remains open to 'dialectical movement': something that whiteness cannot allow. Dyer explains that,

the relative fluidity of white as a skin colour functions in relation to the notion of whiteness as a coalition, with a border and an internal hierarchy (...). Whiteness can also determine who is to be included and excluded from the category and also discriminate among those deemed to be within it.¹⁰

This selective fluidity precludes dialectics because it relies upon a border that is only selectively permeable, and also on an unstable notion of 'nature' that is shored up by its paradoxical invisibility. Beckett's playing with paradoxical invisibilities offers

⁹ Daniela Caselli, *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 14.

¹⁰ *White*, p. 51.

instead the opportunity to read this impossibility. In other words, to build on Caselli's image, Beckett's work creates the possibility of avoiding the growth of a landing space around the doorway without losing the ability to see and situate that door as a threshold in itself. Following on from an examination of the Sadean limit in Chapter One, Chapters Two and Three use this reading of whiteness as a starting point in order to prevent this landing from forming after the fact, using critical race studies alongside queer theory to make the invisible or impossible readable.

This threshold is sometimes erroneously given a landing by quotation — for example, what has now become a corporate axiom, 'live laugh love' equivalent and tennis player tattoo: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'¹¹ These phrases, outside of *Worstward Ho*, might suggest that to improve on failure is, really, to improve in general. They might suggest that in fact failure is good and can be repurposed or redeemed, that it does not derail one's plans for productivity and success, or a perfect game. What *Worstward Ho* details is the precise opposite of this; the text refuses to go beyond failure, and in fact to fail better does not impinge on the meaning of 'fail' as much as it impinges on 'better'. Failure is dwelt upon, made to fail even more failingly than it did at first. This is taken to the level of meaning, such that the narrator exclaims of words, 'How true they sometimes almost ring! How wanting in inanity!'¹² Reading Beckett's prose in light of its ongoing project of undoing the redemptive qualities that lurk beneath all that appears 'worse', the whiteness that redeems its deathly qualities by returning to its conjured universality and

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *Company: Ill Seen Ill Said; Worstward Ho; Stirrings Still*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 81.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 88.

unmarkedness, cannot be attempted without queer theory, whose remit often lies precisely in remaining with this refusal of redemption.¹³

Why Sexuality, Why Beckett, Why Both?

Aside from the significance of sexuality within a broader scope, encompassing desire and interrelations on a scale that goes beyond physical intercourse, it is worth noting that the prose during the 1960s contains a great deal of explicit sexual acts:

- In *All Strange Away*,
 - ‘First face alone, lovely beyond words, leave it at that, then deasil breasts alone, then thighs and cunt alone, then arse and hole alone, all lovely beyond words’,¹⁴
 - ‘Imagine him kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking and bugging all this stuff, no sound’,¹⁵
 - ‘And how crouching down and back she turns murmuring, Fancy her being all kissed, licked, sucked, fucked and so on by all that, no sound, hands on knees to hold herself together’,¹⁶
 - ‘ohs and ahs copulate cold’;¹⁷
- In *Enough*,

¹³ The reparative turn will be addressed later in this introduction.

¹⁴ Samuel Beckett, ‘All Strange Away’ in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 171.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 172-173.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 175.

- 'When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so. I drew satisfaction from it',¹⁸
- 'He did not like to feel against his skin the skin of another. Mucous membrane is a different matter',¹⁹
- 'cruder imperatives of an anatomical order',²⁰
- 'We turn over as one man when he manifests the desire',²¹
- 'Enough my old breasts feel his old hand';²²
- In *Lessness*,
 - 'Little body little block genitals overrun arse a single block grey crack overrun';²³
- In *The Lost Ones*,
 - 'The bodies brush together like dry leaves. The mucous membrane itself is affected. A kiss makes an indescribable sound. Those with stomach still to copulate strive in vain',²⁴
 - 'the thud of bodies striking against one another',²⁵
 - 'making unmakeable love',²⁶
 - 'The lovers buckle to anew',²⁷
 - 'No other shadows than those cast by the bodies pressing on one another wilfully or from necessity as when for example on a breast to

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'Enough' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. 186.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 187.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 190.

²¹ Ibid, p. 191.

²² Ibid, p. 192.

²³ Samuel Beckett, 'Lessness' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. 198.

²⁴ Samuel Beckett, 'The Lost Ones' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. 202.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 203.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 214.

²⁷ Ibid.

prevent its being lit or on some private part the hand descends with vanished palm',²⁸

- 'The desiccation of the envelope robs nudity of much of its charm as pink turns grey and transforms into a rustling of nettles the natural succulence of flesh against flesh. The mucous membrane itself is affected which would not greatly matter were it not for its hampering effect on the work of love. But even from this point of view no great harm done so rare is erection in the cylinder. It does occur none the less followed by more or less happy penetration in the nearest tube.'²⁹

This list is important because Beckett Studies has until now characterised the late prose, and Beckett's oeuvre in general, as a desexualised, almost de-gendered form of embodied abstraction:

the post-*How It Is* stories were just the latest in a series whose end was only Beckett's own. In these generically androgynous stories Beckett produced a series of literary hermaphrodites that echo one another (and the earlier work as well) like reverberations in a skull. Taken together the stories suggest the intertextual weave of a collaboration between Rorschach and Escher.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid, p. 215.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 220.

³⁰ *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. xxx.

Lateness here does a lot of the work of whiteness in flattening gender, subjectivity and chronology. Where the earlier works might be divided by decade, where for example a text from the 1930s would never be compared without context to a text from the 1950s due to the stylistic and historical shifts, texts from the 1960s and 1980s are unquestioningly concatenated here. Beckett's later works are categorised as from the 1960s to his death in 1989, which marks a period of twenty-nine years. Similarly, gender is imbricated with genre, with the rotunda pieces described as 'generically androgynous' and 'literary hermaphrodites'. This attention to gender flagrantly belies the importance of sexuality in these texts: the terminology here attempts to reach metaphorically for a descriptive mode that can accommodate the difficulty of the prose, and in an aptly Freudian slip hits upon precisely the location of this discomfort. Even the references to Rorschach and Escher suggest, respectively, psychoanalytic concerns combined with 'scientific' or formalist ones. Aptly, Gontarski shifts from sexuality and gender to issues of impossible space, a gesture that in its disavowal reveals the interconnection of these two ideas in Beckett's late prose.

Suspicious Bitchiness: Why Queer?

If bringing queer theory to Beckett's work in the 1960s needs a little explaining, then so too perhaps does bringing Beckett's 1960s prose to queer theory. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, Jennifer Doyle hits upon the significance of this confluence in conversation with David Getsy, here describing the meeting of minimalism and queer politics; 'I was talking to Ron Athey the other week, and he described that

Minimalist aesthetic as “bitchy” — he said this with a real appreciation for it.’³¹ While camp is often characterised as excessive, kitsch or maximalist, this is — as Ron Athey pithily suggests — just one perspective on the much broader remit of queer aesthetics. While this thesis will make no moves towards camp itself, it will examine this ‘bitchy’ quality of minimalism and consider what it means to refuse certain information and provide too much of another sort. Furthermore, in addition to this bitchiness, there is a characteristic lateness. Queer time has often been theorised as characteristically out of joint. Elizabeth Freeman builds on the Marquis de Sade’s temporal structures in *Time Binds*, noting that Sade insists,

eroticism consists precisely in *mobilizing* the tableau, as Beauvoir herself seems to recognize when she discusses Sade’s use of mirrors to multiply his scenes and achieve a certain temporal asynchronicity. Indeed, Marcel Hénaff suggests that the tableau was useful to Sade precisely because of its “double emphasis on motion and motionlessness.”³²

The queer theorists that people this thesis link sexuality unerringly to issues of time and space, beginning with Sade’s violent structures which interpolate *How It Is* and echo through the 1960s prose. Inculcated by Sadean sexuality, the queer sexualities that continue to elaborate in the 1960s do so through a reliance, in particular, on

³¹ Jennifer Doyle and David J. Getsy, ‘Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation’, *Art Journal* (New York, NY), 72.4 (2013), p. 62.

³² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 150.

quantification. The characters in Beckett's late prose often mirror the tableau: making shapes and images that are suggestive of, but do not always constitute, a scene.

The best way to encapsulate — or perhaps decapsulate — Beckett's relationship with space is via a woman whom he rather disliked: Nathalie Sarraute. Sarraute was a fellow purveyor of the *nouveau roman*; in her text *Tropisms* it is possible to see the beginning of her suspicious dynamic with fiction. Turning to the relationship between the author or reader and the fictional character as fragile to the point of extinction, Sarraute suggests that 'not only are they both wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other.'³³ Sarraute goes on to argue for the prominence of the author, in an almost direct opposition to Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', but it is Sarraute's mutual suspicion that seems to align best with the kind of hermeneutics that is made possible by Beckett's late prose. The idea of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was being explored by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur in the late 1960s and early 1970s, although he abandoned it a decade after having first used it. Alison Scott-Baumann observes that '[t]he value of his use of suspicion was to provide an opportunity to resist extremist reaction to the complications of the postmodern world.'³⁴ Although Ricoeur ultimately rejects a form of hermeneutics whose methodology is that of peeling back the veil, Scott-Bauman argues that Ricoeur did continue to use methods of both hermeneutics and suspicion separately in his later work. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously addresses the hermeneutics of suspicion decades later in *Touching Feeling*, which has been canonized by queer theorists and feminists alike for mapping out the critical response to Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of suspicion as it grew out of

³³ Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 85.

³⁴ Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 171.

the theory of the 1960s. Sedgwick observes early on that ‘imperative framing will do funny things to a hermeneutics of suspicion.’³⁵ Here is a version of queer theory that appears not to fit as comfortably into the refusal of redemption — or a refusal to grow a landing around a door — mentioned previously. Sedgwick refers to the way in which hermeneutics of suspicion can be undercut by an imperative, which plays out especially in prose works such as *All Strange Away*, with the narrator repeating abstractly ‘all most clear’, or in *Enough*, whose opening line begs, ‘all that goes before forget.’³⁶ It is with regards to this notion that Beckett’s late prose works become most prescient: an application of a language problem like impossible imperatives, the Cretan liar, or the Irish bull, to issues of hermeneutics itself. Frequently, another problem is brought to bear on language that does ‘funny things’ to the possibility of suspicious hermeneutics: that of impossible space. As Lois Oppenheim observes, ‘the ever-increasing minimalism that characterises the evolution of Beckett’s fictive and dramatic style is a paradoxical result of his preoccupation with the visual as a prototype’.³⁷ The idea of the visual as a prototype — the entire realm of the visual — is used to break the concept of language as a depth to be plumbed.

Reading Sedgwick alongside the late prose underlines the curious tangents between Beckett’s relationship to the spatial and reparative reading. Sedgwick is describing Melanie Klein’s use of psychic positions in her psychoanalytic work, showing that,

³⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 125.

³⁶ *All Strange Away*, 171; *Enough*, p. 186.

³⁷ Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett’s Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 29.

[from] the depressive position it is possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or "repair" the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*.³⁸

The motion of queer reading aligns directly with the frameworks present in the late prose. This component of absence or difference that must exist in the idea of reparative reading is what inculcates the spatial aspect of its expression — as Oppenheim attests to. It is by looking at the reparative processes happening within Beckett's late prose that a mode of hermeneutics that handles suspicion but is not invested in revelation might be imagined.³⁹ Sedgwick articulates this problem with suspicion in literary criticism that Beckett's work re-enacts. The texts' engagement with this literary problem is undergirded by the continued referral back to spatial problems.

It is through this spatial approach that Beckett's work deals with the problem of normativity — Sedgwick's tentative formation of '*not necessarily like any preexisting*'⁴⁰ begins to broach this, elucidating the way in which ideas of wholeness and partialness are already inflected with the coda of repetition and difference. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson describe the spatial aspects of normativity as follows:

³⁸ *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, p. 128.

³⁹ Cf: Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works after the Nobel Prize* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴⁰ *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, p. 128.

In imagining the norm as a device that divides the world into centers and peripheries, antinormativity misses what is most engaging about a norm: that in collating the world, it gathers up everything. It transverses networks of differentiation; it values everything; it plays.⁴¹

The play within wholeness is what is crucial in deconstructing normativity, antinormativity, anti-essentialism and essentialism at the same time. Sexuality is central to this move because it is one of the ways in which it also operates — as a spatial mode. The dialogue between Beckett's work and queer theory is precisely at the muddy juncture of the disassembled norm: both interested in undoing a form of cultural or aesthetic imperatives, and in expressing the ways in which language does not have a depth to be plumbed and can instead fold back upon itself in order to elucidate a slippage at the point of meaning. Beckett's work lies directly in the remit of the 'funny things' that are being done to suspicion by re-enacting this relationship through minimalist geometries. This troubling of meaning is something that Beckett Studies has come across before, as for example Caselli notes in relation to the threshold, but queer theory has not yet been brought into dialogue with it. The queer spatiality that Beckett's work inculcates is not merely an abnormal phenomenon to be observed behind glass: it intervenes in existing systems of meaning and has implications for the way we read and understand literature beyond Beckett's œuvre.

⁴¹ Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, 'Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions', *Differences*, 26.1 (2015), p. 17.

Sexuality, Gender and Spatiality

If we take Lisa Palac at her word that ‘sex is eroticised repetition’, or at the very least take sex to be fundamentally repetition, eroticised or not — then sex is not incomplete as such, but it is also not empty.⁴² Rather, it stages the moves that Alenka Zupančič and Gilles Deleuze describe as a split or crack. When something is split it is not lacking, but it is also not complete. To sidestep slightly, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit say of a section in *Waiting for Godot* that ‘[r]epetition reduces the strain of invention.’⁴³ Perhaps, therefore, sex in Beckett through queer theory — consisting at least in part of repetition — can be seen in this productive, rather than reproductive, mode. It is this discursive problem that *How It Is* stages — or rather, writes — into visibility. The deferral of genitalia but insistence on sexual difference, even an ambivalence towards it, enacts the decentring of sex as an indicator of ‘biological’ or ‘natural’ gender, and at the same time upholds the oscillation at play in the work of repetition. This might offer a new approach to the interpretation of the ‘total object, complete with missing parts’ that *Disjecta* claims art ought to be.⁴⁴ Rather than an object that is incomplete by definition, the object is transformed by its successive clause into something that must be in flux: the ‘missing parts’ — note the plural — are what informs the object and what simultaneously undoes it. Writing on the impossibility of gender without race, Diane Detournay critiques ideas of sexuality that create a normal and abnormal, even where the abnormal is framed as natural,

⁴² Joseph W. Slade, *Pornography and Sexual Representation: A Reference Guide*, Volume II, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) p. 723.

⁴³ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 33.

⁴⁴ *Disjecta*, p. 138.

This understanding of difference as quantifiable is, indeed, only the logical extension of cisgender's account of sex/ gender, wherein 'subconscious sex, gender expression and sexual orientation' are the attributes of transparent subjects that might as well be plotted as points on a graph.⁴⁵

Critiquing the use of 'cisgender' to mean either an alignment between sex assigned at birth and the way a person identifies, or as the opposite of 'trans', Detournay notes that the term 'cisgender' positions 'trans' as the site of all instability, while it acts as a stable norm from which one might deconstruct. Using Wiegman and Wilson's critique of queer antinormativity alongside Detournay's account of this problem in gender studies, it is possible to ask whether the use of mathematics combined with a refusal to elucidate gender in *How It Is* provide the possibility for a postcolonial, queer reading. Can we be reassured that 'the essential would seem to be lacking'?⁴⁶ The fact that gender in this text cannot coincide with strenuous, repetitive mathematics, but must instead remain in the realm of voice, memory, the not-now — that is, fiction — suggests that to read gender apart from this mathematical cisgender paradigm is the only possibility. Indeed, readings of Beckett's late prose verify this, from Shari Benstock's assumption that no gender means no sexuality, to S. E. Gontarski's stacking of androgyny and hermaphroditism.⁴⁷ In *All Strange Away*, the narration continues to

⁴⁵ Diane Detournay, 'The Racial Life of "Cisgender": Reflections on Sex, Gender and the Body', *Parallax*, 25.1 (2019), p. 69.

⁴⁶ Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, ed. Edouard Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 112.

⁴⁷ Shari Benstock, 'The Transformational Grammar of Gender in Beckett's Dramas', in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 173; *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. xxx. This is examined in depth in Chapter Two.

return to the position and measurement of the body described, returning to the phrase ‘mathematically speaking’.⁴⁸ As Zoe Gosling explores in relation to *Watt*, mathematics ‘provides a formula for producing, *ad infinitum*, a form of sameness that keeps changing.’⁴⁹ The use of mathematics here, and by extension the attention to quantification, size and space, sets up the imperative framing that is ultimately undercut which is, as Gosling notes, a sameness that counterintuitively keeps changing.

I term one mode of this counterintuitive quantification that occurs in the late prose ‘agglutinative negativity’. The term ‘agglutinate’ is taken both from a moment in *How It Is* in which many Pims are imbricated with one another, and also from Sianne Ngai’s essay and book chapter on stuplimity. Ngai refers to stuplimity as ‘shocking and boring’, two modes which ‘prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible.’⁵⁰ Further implications of this word include the stupid and the sublime taken together at once, affects that can be appreciated especially in the vast and dull calculations in *How It Is*, for example. Agglutination is effectively a clumping up into a mass, be it of morphemes or blood cells. As Lauren Berlant notes when considering the negativity of queerness,

My preferred figuration is to see negativity as overdetermined—that is, a piling on of relation that is experienced as cleavage or negative drama

⁴⁸ *All Strange Away*, p. 176.

⁴⁹ Zoe Gosling, ‘Mathematics and Modernism’ (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2020), p. 155.

⁵⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 262.

only when one is dying to be sovereign. The neither/nor is actually a both/and.⁵¹

This conception of queerness is the one that will be mobilised in relation to minimalism: a negative accretion, where negativity is always in relation to mastery. Building on Ngai's stuplime affect, this thesis questions why the building or clumping up of language in the 1960s is still perceived as minimalist, and in what ways this negative agglutination can be read through the lens of queer theory in order to understand gender, sexuality and embodiment in Beckett.

Judith Roof claims that, in Beckett's 1953 text *The Unnamable*, '[t]he loss of sex and gender among other things results in a different kind of narrative sense altogether.'⁵² Throughout the essay, Roof claims the radical loss and 'disintegration' of gender.⁵³ However, further on in the same paragraph she states that there is 'a kind of desire that comes as if from nowhere', referring to the various motivations of the protagonist to, for example, get away from a bad smell.⁵⁴ In circumventing sexuality, desire no longer becomes readable. Although it is tempting to follow the suggestions in Beckett's works — that we read them as universal, as the real limit of all language beyond which no other author can pass — what they present us with is the failure to transcend to this universality, and sexuality is central to this failure. Indeed, much of the work done in Beckett Studies in recent years has argued this, whether it be in

⁵¹ Lauren Berlant, 'A Momentary Anesthesia of the Heart', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28.3 (2015), p. 278.

⁵² Judith Roof, 'Is There Sex after Gender? Ungendering/"The Unnameable"', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 35.1 (2002), p. 62.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 62.

regards to historicism or aestheticism. Caselli's *Beckett and Nothing* notes that '[c]ontext, in other words, can promise to finally deliver a solid materialism that the Beckett oeuvre seems instead stubbornly to both promise and rebuff.'⁵⁵ This recognition of the rebuffed promise of Beckett's historical contexts has also taken place in response to the prevalence of aesthetics over politics, and the separation of the two. William Davies and Helen Bailey's *Beckett and Politics* builds on Emilie Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* in recognising Beckett's investment 'in the political potential of art qua art'.⁵⁶ In other words, aesthetics in Beckett's work cannot be reduced to its context, and yet it remains stubbornly tied to the political. Similarly, as significant as historical context can be, Beckett's works are not purely a cipher for Irish, French or international politics. While historical context is important, it has often been used to dampen the queer content of Beckett's texts into issues of religion and censorship related to Beckett's criticisms of the Irish state in the 1930s. By the 1960s, Beckett was a different writer. These arguments have been central in Beckett Studies because, perhaps unlike Joyce Studies, for example, Beckett's work gestures opaquely towards a limit, and that limit makes it extremely uncomfortable to read without looking for a key. A limit: but a limit to what?

Why the 1960s?

The approach of this thesis will not be solely historical, suggesting that aesthetics are merely a signifying system for echoes of an Irish or French foundational milieu, but

⁵⁵ *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett*, p. 12.

⁵⁶ *Beckett and Politics*, ed. William Davies and Helen Bailey, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), p. 22.

will engage with historical context alongside theoretical works from the period and their resonances in contemporary theory. Beckett's work is often neatly divided into pre and post-war, with emphasis on the war. Instead of reaching back from the 1960s to 1945, I suggest that in 1960 there was a critical turning point in Beckett's work that can be read with both its own contemporary historical and theoretical context.

Focussing on the 1960s as a decade requires not only a consideration of the political implications that this period had on Beckett's work, but also a turn away from a purely historicist approach and towards the important cultural and theoretical moments that the 1960s heralded. By the end of the decade, these would violently coalesce.

In an interview with Juliet Mitchell and *m/f* journal, Jacqueline Rose suggests 'that "semiotics" and the attention to language, how we identify etc, was the result of the need to analyse and understand the failure of '68.'⁵⁷ The events of May 1968 were not a sudden unexpected jolt: the 1960s were a ferment of this clash between or painful separation of the semiotic and the political, Herbert Marcuse being one example of this. Marcuse and Beckett had a mutual admiration for one another's work, as is evidenced in Marcuse's frequent references to Beckett in his writing and in Beckett's dedication of a poem to Marcuse in 1978 to celebrate his 80th birthday — quite a feat for Beckett, who rarely wrote pieces for a specific occasion or special issue. This is explored in more detail in Chapter Four. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* identifies the political dimensions of an opposition between an idea of a poetic imaginary and scientific reason, finding that a tendency to reduce into one dimension in contemporary society drives towards redemption:

⁵⁷ Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, 'Feminine Sexuality: Interview - 1982', *M/f*, 8 (1983), p. 7.

[t]his society turns everything it touches into a potential source of progress *and* of exploitation, of drudgery *and* satisfaction, of freedom *and* of oppression. Sexuality is no exception.⁵⁸

Marcuse refers to this problem as ‘controlled desublimation’: in other words, obscenity becomes onscenity. David Alderson describes this as a ‘flattening out of the radical tensions’, which Marcuse suggests were present earlier in history.⁵⁹ Onscenity, a word coined by pornography studies, describes the qualities of obscenity, but shifts it to connote visibility, rather than invisibility. In this way in particular, aesthetics and politics were being understood as intertwined during the 1960s. This connection is echoed two decades later by Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s analysis of sexual difference rings oddly Beckettian, perhaps because of the weight of sexuality in Beckett’s late prose,

What would a “sexual” discourse or a discourse “on-sexuality” be without evoking farness [*éloignement*], an inside and an outside, dispersion and proximity, a here and a there, birth and death, a between-birth-and-death, a being-with and discourse?⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Herbert Marcuse and Douglas Kellner, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 81.

⁵⁹ David Alderson, *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture: From Liberation to the Postgay* (London: Zed Books, 2016), p. 65.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘Geschlecht Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference’, *Research in Phenomenology*, 13.1 (1983), p. 82.

This logic returns to the significance of conceptual space when considering sexuality. Beckett's agglutinative negativities approach this issue by a counterintuitive negative building, which complicates the possibility of conceptualising an oscillation between two possibilities. Instead, the late prose builds up an 'impossible heap' of options that are all at once, or have been, possible, which all are at once, or have been, erased. The difficulty of this sentence is reflective of the difficulty of navigating being in Beckett, and therefore of navigating desire. Whereas sexuality is made unnamable and certainly not heterosexual through this process, the final question becomes: what remains? In *The Lost Ones*, a conditional form of heterosexuality is reintroduced in this same queer economy, and the possibility of this effect — that is, an unstable gender undermining sexuality — going both ways is brought into question. For this reason, *The Lost Ones* is dealt with only in the conclusion of the thesis. As Beckett's prose work reaches the end of the 1960s, the final section of this thesis explores not only what is queer, but how queer acts on these frameworks.

Beckett Studies and Queer Theory

There are a great deal of 'Beckett and...' texts that exist, and many of them are brilliant, but this thesis seeks to avoid leaving Beckett sitting alone before a conjunction.⁶¹ It is

⁶¹ Examples included in this thesis: Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 110–32; Daniela Caselli, *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); *Beckett and Politics*, ed. William Davies and Helen Bailey, 2021; James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Beckett and Sade*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

not that these books do not contain important work that challenges the ways in which Beckett is read, but it is rather this trend of 'Beckett and' that signifies the way in which Beckett is marketed and perceived as untouchable: too clever, too difficult, too big to fail. Beckett speaks back to a great deal of theory, and just as it speaks to him, this thesis will show the effect that reading Beckett can have on sexuality studies more broadly. In order for this to happen, all that is queer in Beckett needs to be divorced from its current designation as functional category. There should never be a book entitled 'Beckett and Queer Theory'.

Despite Beckett Studies' apparent recalcitrance to queer theory, it is a hotbed of thwarted yearnings for and movements towards queer theory and sexuality studies. In 2018, the year that this thesis was begun, the Samuel Beckett Society held a conference entitled *Beckett Beyond the Normal*, calling for papers that, amongst a list of other 'others', addressed what was queer about Beckett's work. In 2020, the annual Beckett Society conference, had it not been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, would have addressed 'Sex and Gender in Samuel Beckett's Work': this has now been rescheduled for 2022 with the updated prefix of 'Lost Bodies'. Evidently, the possibilities of this critical avenue are being tangentially recognised as germane; crucially, however, they remain inchoate. Although the queer sexuality that undergirds Beckett's work has been slowly siphoned out — with all the petroleum-stealing clandestinity that this implies — ever since Peter Boxall's chapter 'Beckett and Homoeroticism' in Palgrave's *Samuel Beckett Studies* volume in 2004, it has not been enough to have any reverberating influence on the field, with the exception of historicist readings of the earlier works and their relationship to Irish censorship

laws.⁶² This is partly because this very positioning of ‘homoeroticism’ as a chapter title belies both its influence on the œuvre and the internecine discourses it represents. The homoerotic does not exist comfortably alongside the heterosexual in Beckett’s work.

Queer remains a category in Beckett Studies, positioned as one among many ‘others’ in the category of abnormal.⁶³ What can also now occur, perhaps uncomfortably, is reading queer sexuality queerly. The tautology of this phrase is part of the work it is necessary to undertake to undo the possibility of again trying to orientate oneself towards normality and abnormality, inner and outer, central and marginal. In using queer theory to undo these dichotomies, topics that hound Beckett’s work might also be disentangled: the existentialist — which relies on the normal and abnormal — and nihilist — which relies on the possibility of nothingness and somethingness — might be put to rest. These might be read, via Marcuse, as collapsing multi-dimensionality into a single dimension. Conversely, this thesis will not ignore the value that thinking through these frameworks has had. Using Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, as well as the article preceding the upcoming book with Duke University Press entitled *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*, this thesis will consider queerness as not another ‘other’ position but instead the signifier that sits astride the ‘nothing’, holding its place, and which in doing so undermines and reconfigures the possibility of an uninflected sexual category. Zupančič’s *What is Sex?*

⁶² Patrick Bixby, ‘The Ethico-Politics of Homo-Ness: Beckett’s *How It Is* and Casement’s *Black Diaries*’, *Irish Studies Review*, 20.3 (2012), pp. 243–61; Lloyd Meadhbh Houston, ‘“Sterilization of the Mind and Apotheosis of the Litter”: Beckett, Censorship, and Fertility’, *The Review of English Studies*, 69.290 (2018), pp. 546–64; Seán Kennedy, ‘First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 22 (2010), pp. 79–91.

⁶³ Seán Kennedy, ed. *Beckett Beyond the Normal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

has been crucial in recognising this placeholder quality in Beckett's work. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's *Arts of Impoverishment* is also an important intertext for this thesis and a starting point for thinking about minimalism in Beckett's work. This approach to failure or impoverishment is also present in Bersani's queer theoretical writing. Sedgwick's work on deconstruction and difference in queer theory is fundamental to the ways in which this thesis approaches close readings. Wiegman's work on antinormativity and its pitfalls also reinforce the tenability of this 'placeholder', which will enter the thesis in Chapter Two. Paul B. Preciado and Andrea Long Chu's polemical, humorous works inform not only the prosthetic, whimsical avant-garde modes that Beckett's work can evoke, but also the ways in which Beckett approaches, via Sade, a notion of limit in terms of the body and in terms of sexuality. Freeman and Heather Love's work on queer temporalities also intersects with analysis of space and place in this thesis, considering ways not only to think of queer time, but also queer space. Berlant and Michael Warner's *Sex in Public* informs analysis of the re-inscription of heterosexuality in *The Lost Ones* in the conclusion, which ultimately addresses this final question: is there a queer aesthetic that perseveres in Beckett's work after the queer sexualities of the mid-60s are exhausted?

Beckett Studies' issue with queerness — beyond merely ignoring it — is reducible to a notion of queer as the same as, or as a form of perversion centred around the anus.⁶⁴ Beckett had engaged with Freudian theory and sought analysis with Wilfred Bion, as Chapter One explores. To find a rebuttal to this limited idea of

⁶⁴ John Mowitt, 'Queer Resistance: Michel Foucault and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*', *Symplokē*, 4.1/2 (1996), pp. 135–52; Paul Stewart, 'Queer Relations or the "Incoercible Absence of Relation" in Beckett's "Watt" and the Post-War Prose', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 27 (2015), pp. 103–14.

perversion, one might look into the index of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and find,

Perversions—

abortive beginnings of normal sexuality in.⁶⁵

Perversion, as Freud has it, is everywhere. It is also striking that Beckett frequently refers to the ‘mucous membrane’ from this particular moment in Freud, which alludes to the perversity of that most supposedly normal of interactions, the kiss.⁶⁶ Therefore according to ‘queer as category’ logic, queer is defanged: normal. This may be, in part, because much of the homoerotic in Beckett has been read as anal sex between two men, and as a result the notion of queer pivots around this particular materiality.⁶⁷ Queer has been immobilised, whether it stands for antisociality or radical communality to the extent of depersonalisation: each of these misses the dynamism of queer’s signifying paradoxes. This thesis will examine the ways in which Beckett’s work troubles gender much more persistently and troublingly than these characterisations.

Zupančič’s placeholder is important to establish in order to understand this argument. Zupančič states that ‘human sexuality is the placeholder of the missing signifier.’⁶⁸ By this, Zupančič refers to Lacan’s suggestion that with discourse emerges

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Connecticut, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011), p. 131. This edition has been used due to its inclusion of an index.

⁶⁶ *Enough*, p. 187; Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 57; *The Lost Ones*, p. 202.

⁶⁷ Work on this topic has often relied heavily on Leo Bersani’s classic: Leo Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, *October*, 43 (1987), pp. 197-222.

⁶⁸ Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 42.

a gap in the signifying structure of language — or equally, that with this gap in the signifying structure, discourse emerges. Zupančič's contention is that sex *is* this gap, that it holds its place. Sex, in other words, is what happens at the point of a breakdown in sense. This coincides with Edelman's positing of the 'figural burden of queerness', that is, 'that queerness is phobically produced precisely to represent (...) the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void'.⁶⁹ This is the coincidence of sex and of queerness, and this is why it is not possible to map onto either of these a concept of 'beyond' — there is nothing beyond the Symbolic that can be constituted symbolically.

One of the main reasons that queer theory is so important to Beckett, therefore, is to undo the simplistic positioning of homosexuality as an 'other' or perverse alternative. Beckett's late prose can function as a form of cultural critique for the 1960s, so often characterised as the time of 'free love', revolution and self-determination. The concept of love as applied to sexuality, Beckett's work shows, does not do the emancipatory work that we might be led to believe it does. Speaking back to his contemporary moment, Beckett's texts find themselves at the intersection of antisociality and a logic that prevents 'anti' as a prefix from doing its prescribed work. For Beckett, the mere presence of 'sociality' in this word would posit itself as a present erasure that merits attention. Reading Beckett's counterintuitive negativities through queer theory can offer a critique of the antagonisms that the 1960s presents through a sentimental definition of 'love'.

⁶⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 22.

Thesis structure

Perhaps partially as a result of Beckett's new, late style that was occupied more than ever before by reckoning with a Sadean definition of limit, *How It Is* addresses sexuality more vehemently than any previous text.⁷⁰ There is no longer a struggle to escape from the mother's room, or a struggle to come into existence that puts sexuality in dialogue with reproduction: this is something different. While *How It Is* is the starting point for this thesis, this is in order to explain a different kind of transition: one in which sexuality is central.

This thesis has four main chapters, the first of which is divided into three parts in order to address this crucial turning point. The texts are treated in chronological order for clarity, but not in order to posit a canonical status or indeed to suggest that there is a purely linear development that occurs as time progresses. In Chapter One, the impasse at the heart of Beckett's writing is attended to with reference to Sade, and specifically *The 120 Days of Sodom*. This chapter engages with scholarship at the beginning of the 1960s, marking it as the beginning, too, of a resurgence of interest in Sade and in particular of a reading of Sade that views his work as approaching a limit, or threshold. The chapter considers how this limit impinges on an idea of the prosthetic body in Beckett. I ask how queer theory can allow us to re-read the prosthetic body in Beckett as not fragmented or incomplete but 'total object, complete with missing parts'.⁷¹ This chapter begins to explore the possibility of placeholding

⁷⁰ Sade pushed mathematical permutations further and further until logic and reason became contorted: this is explored in Chapter One.

⁷¹ *Disjecta*, p. 138.

bodies, asking if queer theory can break the theoretical impasse between ‘nothing’ and ‘something’ that has loomed over the discipline.

Chapter Two examines *All Strange Away*. In this chapter, Beckett’s minimalist or minimising style is interrogated and brought into dialogue with queer theory and with pornography, as Beckett saw it and as it is defined juridically and as a genre. This chapter asks: can Beckett’s late prose be defined as minimalist? If not, what gives it the appearance of minimalism, or where is its minimising drive to be located? Extending the notion of ‘limit’ that Beckett’s Sadean interests inculcated, it engages with Marc Botha’s claim that minimalism is a co-extension of quality and quantity simultaneously, and Sianne Ngai’s concept of stuplimity. In order to analyse the sexualities that emerge in the late prose, Chapter Two first establishes the spatial dynamics that undergird their possibility.

Chapter Three analyses *Imagination Dead Imagine*, with a particular focus on boredom, defined by Elizabeth S. Goodstein as an ‘experience without qualities’, and how this might inform a queer reading of the late prose.⁷² The multivalent possibilities of boredom as an experience create the possibility for the particular spatial economies that have been established in Chapters One and Two; Chapter Three asks, how can boredom as an effective non-affect that mediates the spatial economies that sexuality operates within, help us to re-read desire in this even more ascetic work? Nathalie Sarraute, a contemporary purveyor of the nouveau roman, is brought in to compare the use of chiaroscuro in this text and to consider Beckett’s ties to this movement both in terms of literature and in terms of cinema.

⁷² Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Chapter Four examines *Enough*, showing how queer theory can help us to re-read the ending: a moment that has been read as a surprising ‘gender reveal’. Using Stephen Thomson’s analysis of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, this chapter, building on analysis of the prosthetic body in Chapter Two, asks what the role of the revealed breast at the end really is. It addresses the use of flowers in the context of the 1960s and in relation to Mallarmé, attending to the newly fleshed out diegetic in comparison to *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*.

What happened to Beckett and his work in the 1960s can inform a reading of not only the remainder of the œuvre, both earlier and later, but also the ways in which sexuality is conceptualised in queer studies. The persistent misreadings of what is categorised as queer in Beckett’s work are instructive of the ways in which reading queerly can refute accepted narratives and critiques in other disciplines, too. This thesis will examine the ways in which this attention to space and minimisation in the 1960s affects sexuality, using queer as an element both of the text and in dialogue with it.

‘Sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry’: queer feelings in *How It Is*

‘should be half way through With Pim by the time I leave, leaving only second half & how it is. Then
retype all and off before end of Feb. And then what? Translate Textes Pr Rien? Play? Merde.’⁷³

Part One

The Marquis de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*, published in 1875, is one of Beckett’s most pronounced intertexts: a debauched helter-skelter of sex, faeces, child abuse and murder. It was described by filmmaker and journalist Gideon Bachmann in 1975 — on the tails of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film adaption *Salò* — as ‘one of the most monstrous books ever written’.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, it has had a turbulent literary career and still represents one of the most sustained examples of explicit sex and torture in the history of Western literature. Sade endured as a palpable influence on Beckett a long while after he initially stated in 1938 that he was ‘interested in Sade and had been for a long time’, because his work evinced an impasse that was also at the heart of Beckett’s writing.⁷⁵ By the 1960s, *Sodom* was still banned from publication, but it was seeing a

⁷³ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 16th January 1963, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume III: 1957-1965*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 526.

⁷⁴ Gideon Bachmann, "Pier Paolo Pasolini is Filming One of the most Monstrous Books Ever Written, the Marquis De Sade's 120 Days of Sodom." *The Guardian*, July 8th, 1975, p10.

⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 11th February 1938, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1: 1929-1940*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 605.

resurgence in scholarly and literary interest due in part to the publication of a two-volume biography of Sade by Gilbert Lély, which met with rave reviews.⁷⁶ Such was the resurgence that in 1972 Beckett referred to it as ‘the Sade boom.’⁷⁷ *Yale French Studies* ran a special issue devoted to Sade in 1965, and his work also continued to be an important touchstone within Beckett’s literary milieu; the journal *Tel Quel* would remain preoccupied with Sade, running its own special issue in 1967 and most famously influencing the work of Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud.⁷⁸ Simone de Beauvoir suggests in her essay ‘Must We Burn Sade?’ written in 1951, but much revisited in the 1960s, that Sade ‘is trying to communicate an experience whose distinguishing characteristic is, nevertheless, to be incommunicable.’⁷⁹ This particular reading was typical of France in the post-World War II period, and especially the 1950s and 1960s, as is evidenced by titles such as ‘L’écriture sans mesures’ by Hubert Damisch, an essay published in the 1967 special edition of *Tel Quel*.

Bataille, who also contributed to this issue, suggests that ‘Sade’s doctrine is nothing more nor less than the logical consequence of these moments that deny reason.’⁸⁰ This type of language is frequently used with regards to sexuality in Sade: ‘doctrine’, ‘more nor less’ or ‘logical’ all create an understanding of sexuality that, although it attempts to describe blind and immeasurable chaos, must be mathematical, methodical and structural in its expression. Jean-Michel Rabaté

⁷⁶ Marcel Françon, review of *Review of Vie du marquis de Sade*, by Gilbert Lély, *Italica*, 32.1 (1955), pp. 56–57; Albert Sonnenfeld, review of *Review of Vie du Marquis de Sade*, Gilbert Lély, by Gilbert Lély, *Books Abroad*, 40.4 (1966), pp. 429–30.

⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett to George Reavey, 24th August 1972, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume IV: 1966–1989*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 306.

⁷⁸ *Yale French Studies*, 35, (December 1965); *Tel Quel*, 28, (1967).

⁷⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, ‘Must We Burn Sade?’ in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, (London: Arrow, 1991), p. 4.

⁸⁰ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 168.

suggests via *Justine*, in opposition to Bataille, that in Sade bourgeois notions of rationality ultimately justify crime itself because their reliance on reason and law are distanced from human affect.⁸¹ Sade, in Rabaté's reading which draws on Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Kant's pure reason in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, shows us the logical conclusion not of a denial of reason, but of a perverse amplification thereof. What might appear to be chaotic, inhuman and unreasonable to the Sade boom might, from this perspective, be simply rationality, communication and reason taken to their limit. It is this idea of the limit or impasse that is reframed in *How It Is*.

This chapter will not argue that Beckett's structures function as an implication of an awful void that opposes them, but rather that by repurposing Sadean structures, sexuality in Beckett returns repeatedly to a reframing of incommunicability. This is inculcated by these works' newly focussed attention to gender as a mutable placeholder, the beginning of a mode of categorisation that affects sexuality, too. Since gender becomes at best transient, sexuality is thrown into disrepute along with it, as any stable opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality comes into question. If gender, as will be shown, becomes not fluid but instead occupying a particular space in a particular and temporary way, then desire — which is not malleable, and which Teresa de Lauretis, after Freud, describes as a 'stubborn drive' — is fundamentally resituated with regards to gender.⁸² Gender is not made unimportant, transcendent or amorphous. Rather, the structures that attempt to explain and situate it are undone, as Sade might hope they would be, by being brought to their logical limit.

⁸¹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Beckett and Sade* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 28.

⁸² Teresa de Lauretis, 'The Stubborn Drive', *Critical Inquiry*, 24.4 (1998), pp. 851–77.

Placeholdering as a concept seems to fit gender in Beckett: something that is physically present and relevant for a finite period of time. Using something as a placeholder both implies its suitability for that role in a spatial sense, but also its impermanence and its deferral of meaning onto a finality, which in this case never arrives. This is the Sadean impasse that runs through *How It Is* and continues into the prose works during the 1960s. Alenka Zupančič suggests that sexuality is something ‘whose non-being [in an epistemological sense] does not reduce it to mere nothing.’⁸³ Zupančič is here explaining how negation functions in Lacanian psychoanalysis, whereby negation, or non-being, is not the opposite of affirmation but instead something that leaves traces *in* being. Beckett’s work, and especially *How It Is*, draws on precisely this problem: that of the persistence of *something* in the face of non-being. This continuum hinges on the possibility of reading, through Zupančič and Lacan, a connection between Sadean obscenity and Sadean existentialism, or the impasse that these sexual structures create. When both Beckett and Sade inscribe sexuality as part of a mathematical process that reveals its inexpressibility most flagrantly — Sade in terms of intense multiplicity, and Beckett in terms of an agglutinative negativity — a constant slippage at the point of nothingness, that is, an inability to be nothing even in purely empirical terms, reveals a circularity in this regard: sexuality and mathematical structure form feedback loops.

These feedback loops are central to a queer reading of Beckett’s work. They form a structure different from the repetition and permutation that Beckett’s pre- and post-war writing is so well known for: Molloy’s sucking stones or fart counting,

⁸³ Alenka Zupančič and Randall Terada, ‘Sex, Ontology, Subjectivity: In Conversation with Alenka Zupančič’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 20.2 (2015), p. 201.

Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot*, or the description of Celia in *Murphy*. Instead of a repeating, or a repeating of difference, there is the crucial element of feedback.

Sadism, as we discover, is not itself without a scream in response. Although *How It Is* suggests at every turn that communication is impossible, as its characters cannot see one another face down in the mud, they repeat only what they hear from above and they struggle to distinguish between the present reality and the life above, they do interact and respond to one another. This occurs variously through carving, touching and thumping, with or without the aid of implements. Communication is primarily in the realm of touch, and of sexuality.

It would be difficult to give an overview of sexuality in Beckett's work during the 1960s without addressing the quagmire or 'self-styled qua qua' of *How It Is*.⁸⁴ If congress with Mercier's wife Toffana was 'like fucking a quag', then that implied slackness of space or failure to arouse resonates through *How It Is*, and indeed in the parallelism of Mercier's description of his current predicament: 'hectolitres of excrement'.⁸⁵ From bad to worse, it might seem. *How It Is* was begun in French as *Comment C'est* in December 1958. By November 1959, Beckett wrote to Barbara Bray, 'Drunk and $\frac{3}{4}$ dead already. Nothing changed except the fraction.'⁸⁶ This seems perhaps the most appropriate springboard into *How It Is/ Comment C'est*: nothing changed except the fraction. The movement of desire in *How It Is* is fundamentally undergirded by reliance upon scale. The ground is wet with mud, the characters quickly slip from the definition of 'character' and into extensions of one another, the

⁸⁴ Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, ed. Edouard Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 122.

⁸⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 69.

⁸⁶ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 13th November 1959, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 254.

narrative, the mud, and occasionally to the other extreme: solipsism. Beckett complained frequently about the process of writing the text. He told Bray by December 1959 that he was ‘so tired and dizzy with Pim.’⁸⁷ This performative dizziness doubles the movement that the text stages: the potentially, and not always, cyclical relationality of a broken feedback loop that is nonetheless an entirely closed system. *How It Is* presents an oxymoronic expansive claustrophobia, with a distinct opacity regarding who speaks and acts, what is pleasure and what is pain: it is not surprising that Beckett’s inner ear was in tumult. The hellish structure of *Sodom* is dizzied and fractured in *How It Is*, its more explicit elements emerging in bursts of profanity and penetration, and its drive to categorise deconstructed.

As will be discussed in relation to *All Strange Away* in Chapter Two, Beckett was enraptured by *Sodom* and had agreed to translate it into English in 1938 despite the risk to his reputation. This was already somewhat tarnished due to his fledgling short prose collection *More Pricks Than Kicks* having been consigned to the Irish Censorship Board’s ‘Index of Forbidden Books’, on the back of low sales figures and the publication of Beckett’s essay *Censorship in the Saorstát*. Eventually he withdrew from the translation job, despite needing the money, primarily it seems for fear that it might affect his future.⁸⁸ He wrote to George Reavey, ‘I don’t want to be spiked as a writer, I mean as a publicist in the airiest sense’, later admitting ‘Anyhow it can’t be a rational decision, the consequences are unforeseeable’.⁸⁹ Even here, Beckett betrays an oddly chaotic relationship with Sade; one wonders why this matter of to translate or

⁸⁷ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 1st December 1959, in *ibid*, p. 259.

⁸⁸ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 293.

⁸⁹ Samuel Beckett to George Reavey, 20th February 1938, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume I: 1929-1940*, pp. 604-605.

not to translate cannot be a rational decision. Perhaps that would play too plainly into Sade's order of being. As Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon point out,

This procedure of enumerating becomes a narrative strategy in *Watt*, possibly inspired by the system of exhaustive enumeration as a critical perversion of the Enlightenment project in the Marquis de Sade's *Les 120 Journées de Sodom*. At the same time, the human being's pride in his rational capabilities is satirized by means of inconsistencies in the logic of his argumentation.⁹⁰

This process is perhaps echoed here in Beckett's refusal to approach even his involvement with Sade in a rational way. It is curious here that *Watt* is mentioned, but the enumerative strategies that emerge thereafter are not. This translation project was brought to the attention of Beckett Studies relatively late with the publication of Deirdre Bair's biography in 1978, and since then scholarship has reckoned with Sade. These studies include John Pilling, who provides important context for Beckett 'acting by way of Sade while not actually falling under his influence' and finds that Beckett was drawn to Sade's own impossible position of confinement, 'a kind of limit case' and the pessimism that issued from it;⁹¹ Shane Weller, who finds in *How It Is* that Beckett is 'one of Sade's inheritors', insofar as desire in the work necessitates cruelty in a

⁹⁰ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 187.

⁹¹ John Pilling, 'BECKETT/SADE: texts for nothing' in *Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 124, p. 122.

polarisation that creates constant, dispassionate incommensurability;⁹² Elsa Baroghel who unequivocally finds evidence of Sadean influence in *Comment C'est* and reads this through a focus on obscenity and the poetics of looking;⁹³ and Jean-Michel Rabaté who finds in Beckett a post-human rival to God, skirting sexuality in stating, 'Beckett distinguishes between "surface obscenity" and pornography, because Sade's conception was "metaphysical," the creation of an antitheology.'⁹⁴ These insights have created fertile ground for a study of sexuality, as each of these notions of limitation, cruelty, obscenity and metaphysics is involved in some sense with sexuality in both Beckett and Sade.

Despite this alignment of the two, there has been no extensive study of sexuality in itself in relation to Beckett's interest in Sade until now: where most studies pivot on ethical problems, the structural aspects of sexuality and desire across *Sodom* and *How It Is* merit further attention. Although he had turned down the translation job, Beckett remained a vigilant Sadean, quite possibly for political reasons.⁹⁵ Pasolini's re-interpretation of Sade in 1975 stages it as an anti-fascist political statement, or as filth connoisseur John Waters put it, 'pornography of power'.⁹⁶ The employment of sexuality and/ as power in *Sodom* makes it uniquely suited to this role,

⁹² Shane Weller, 'The Anethics of Desire: Beckett, Racine, Sade' in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 112.

⁹³ Elsa Baroghel, *Beckett, with Sade: Sadean intertext and aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's works*, (PhD thesis. University of Oxford: 2018).

⁹⁴ Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 110.

⁹⁵ For example, Beckett lent Patrick Magee *The Revolutionary Ideas of the Marquis de Sade* by Geoffrey Gorer to help him in portraying Sade in a stage production of *Marat/ Sade* at the RSC in July 1964. (Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 10th July 1964, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 607.) Beckett also went to see Magee play 'the divine Marquis' in *Marat/ Sade* in February 1965. (Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 8th February 1965, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 651.) Beckett continued to read critical works on Sade into the 1970s, as noted in Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.79.

⁹⁶ John Waters, 'Why You Should Watch Filth', Big Think, <<https://bigthink.com/videos/why-you-should-watch-filth>> [accessed: 5 April 2022]

and indeed it is possible to trace ways in which Beckett's work has been similarly deployed, for better and for worse.⁹⁷ Sade's 'immense fragment', so called due to being unfinished, has a great number of parallels with Beckett's work more broadly.⁹⁸ It is especially significant from the 1960s onwards due to the particular focus on mathematics, form, torture and sexuality in the late prose. *How It Is* is a particularly apt comparison, not only due to its direct references to Sade, but as it is repeatedly preoccupied with 'justice' and 'torture', and while these two aspects of the text have been examined, it is possible to triangulate them — as Sade so vigorously did — with sexuality. Sade's influence in *How It Is* can be seen to herald the turn that Beckett's work takes as it moves into the 1960s.

Beckett's engagement with Sade was by turns direct and indirect, as it seems he first encountered him through a critical work by Mario Praz entitled *The Romantic Agony*, later becoming familiar with a tide of so-called neo-Sadeans and identifying with Maurice Blanchot, who writes in 'La Raison de Sade' of Sade's use of the limit, finding that 'Sade, having discovered that for man negation was power, made a claim for the future of man based on negation pushed to its limits.'⁹⁹ Thus, as negation is sovereign in Sade, pleasure finds itself extended, '[h]e will sovereignly enjoy himself beyond all limits.'¹⁰⁰ Blanchot addresses issues in Sade that arise again in *How It Is*,

⁹⁷ Susan Sontag's August 1993 production of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo, former Czechoslovakia; San Quentin State Prison 1957 and 1961 productions of *Waiting for Godot* in California, US; Simon Dormand's May 2014 production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Arcola Theatre, London; Silent Faces' June 2021 production of *Godot is a Woman* at Pleasance Theatre, London.

⁹⁸ D. A. F Sade, 'Foreword', *The 120 Days of Sodom: And Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (London: Arrow, 1991), p. ix.

⁹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1963), p. 42. My translation. Original French: 'Sade, ayant decouvert qu'en l'homme la négation était puissance, a prétendu fonder l'avenir de l'homme sur la négation poussée jusqu'à son terme.'

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 46. My translation, 'royally' suggested by Prof. Daniela Caselli. Original French: 'il jouira souverainement de soi au delà de toutes les limites.'

especially those of pleasure and mastery. It is perhaps unsurprising that this negative limit-pushing operates through sexuality; as Zupančič notes, ‘Sexuality is the paradigm of research and exploration, not in the sense of the reduction to the last instance but, on the contrary, because it brutally introduces us to the lack of the last instance.’¹⁰¹ This might be why it is possible to read the overt sexuality in Sade as ‘beyond’ limits: because sexuality reveals itself to be the lack, not precisely of limits in general, but of the ability to be delimited by language. *Sodom*, perhaps more than any other text, tries to repeatedly demarcate sexuality with language, and in so doing create sexual responses.

Sexuality, in Sade, appears to rely on being perceived as excess and as failure while simultaneously under the pressure of structuration. This is the reported reasoning for the mathematical structure in the first place in the text itself. Although it fails to adhere to its own crescendo, it does also acknowledge this failure. In a section entitled ‘Mistakes I Have Made’ at the end of the first section of the book, the narration notes, ‘I have been too explicit, not sufficiently reticent, about the chapel activities at the beginning; must not elaborate upon them until after the stories in which they are mentioned.’¹⁰² It points out various other oversights, and continues, ‘And not having been able to reread all this, there must be a swarm of other mistakes.’¹⁰³ Although the manuscript for *Sodom* is technically unfinished, and these might be read as Sade’s notes meant only for himself, there is evidence in the text that this kind of admission of failure serves to further amplify the sexual transgressions

¹⁰¹ Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 35.

¹⁰² D. A. F. Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom, or, The School of Libertinage*, ed. Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 316.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

that occur. That is, not only are these acts in themselves transgressive: they have been revealed before time in another act of transgression. I emphasise this in order to highlight not only the performed divestiture of authorial mastery, but also the way in which the structure of the text itself invites a leakage, failure and refusal all at once. The intricate filigree of Sade's rules and regulations could never have been adhered to by the debauched characters that must live them: failure here might as well be success.¹⁰⁴

Blanchot also examines the relationship between Sadean mastery and otherness in 'La Raison de Sade', 'He [Sadean man] is therefore inaccessible to others. Nobody can harm him, and nothing alienates his power to be himself and enjoy himself. This is the first aspect of his loneliness.'¹⁰⁵ The version of sadism that plays out in Sade — that pushes negation to its limits, as Blanchot suggests — creates a paradox whereby the sadist must be alienated from the victim, but simultaneously relies on their presence. The mastery that ought, perhaps, to reside in the narration, is transferred to the limitless — although reportedly limited — Sadean man, that is, one of the four dukes in particular. Although Sade is the basis of our word for sexual cruelty, it seems that his version of sadism is also fundamentally non-reciprocal, according to Blanchot. In *How It Is*, Pim states that what is occurring is not 'sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry'.¹⁰⁶ To relate this to the torturer, rather than the victim: this implies the same kind of loneliness that Blanchot suggests is present in the alienating power of

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that Sade's notes have also been used in studies of authorship: Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" *Partisan Review* 42, no. 4 (January 1, 1975) pp. 603–614; Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1963); Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1976).

¹⁰⁵ 'Il est donc inaccessible aux autres. Personne ne peut lui porter atteinte, rien n'aliène son pouvoir d'être soi et de jouir de soi. Tel est le premier sens de sa solitude.' *Lautréamont et Sade*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁶ *How It Is*, p. 54.

Sade's characters. Sadism proper, for Pim at least, must go both ways.

As Caselli notes,

Both the disintegration of speech caused by the mud clogging the mouth and the merging of the self in an inseparable continuum of flesh exist as the oscillation between self and non-self, between language and matter, and both are given an erotic and violent quality at once: "a hundred thousand prone glued two by two together", or in French "cent mille gisant collés deux par deux."¹⁰⁷

In both languages, the proximity of 'prone glued' or 'gisant collés' enacts an uncomfortable imbrication through the omission of a conjunction. In English, the use of 'prone', more than the French 'gisant' meaning simply 'lying', implies the vulnerability of these bodies, and therefore a form of intimacy between them, be it purposeful or accidental. This juxtaposition of sexuality and violence is not just a structure related to the abject oscillation between self and non-self, language and matter in *How It Is* but the foundation of the very possibility of this mobility: they are 'how it is'.

The way that both sexuality and violence are maintained hinges upon the structural rigour that Beckett admired in Sade.¹⁰⁸ This is brought about mathematically; for example, in *Sodom*, one entry in a long list of scenes, ordered by

¹⁰⁷ Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 158.

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 21st February 1938, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume I: 1929-1940*, p. 607.

number and by date, describes the following:

The 17th. 81. He has himself flogged while kissing a boy's ass and while fucking a girl in the mouth, then he fucks the boy in the mouth while kissing the girl's asshole, the while constantly receiving the lash from another girl, then he has the boy flog him, orally fucks the whore who'd been whipping him, and then has himself flogged by the girl whose ass he had been kissing.¹⁰⁹

This passage is a good example of how Sade also came to be criticized not only as scandalous, but simultaneously boring. The only adverbs used here are to describe spatial or temporal aspects of the undertaking, rather than any appeal to the senses. Roland Barthes highlights this in stating, of Sade,

[l]anguage has the property of denying, ignoring, dissociating reality: when written, shit does not have an odor; Sade can inundate his partners in it, we receive not the slightest whiff, only the abstract sign of something unpleasant. So libertinage appears: a fact of language.¹¹⁰

This is, of course, true enough; but it is also a reflection of Sade's refusal to evoke the smell of shit for the ever-vulnerable nasal passages of the eager reader. The text's rendering of violence, excretion and sexual assault into an 'abstract sign' — and

¹⁰⁹ *The 120 Days of Sodom, or, The School of Libertinage*, p. 326.

¹¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 137.

further to this, one that is quantifiable — has parallels with the minimalist approach to language that Beckett takes in the 1960s. The polysyndeton, listing and repetition render the tone almost puerile; if it weren't for the subject matter, this might be the school report of a ten-year-old returning from a trip to the zoo.

The way in which the bodies in *How It Is* intermingle corresponds to this, the numbering extracting a particular kind of sadistic relation:

a million then if a million strong a million Pims now motionless
agglutinated two by two in the interests of torment too strong five
hundred thousand little heaps colour of mud and now a thousand
thousand nameless solitaires half abandoned half abandoning.¹¹¹

The numbering of the pairs here is followed on directly by 'in the interests of torment', suggesting that it is not just the pain and discomfort that is tormenting but the sheer vastness combined with the relation of only two, and the impossibility perhaps of escaping the two. From 'imbrication of flesh' to the 'conglomeration', this numerousness is prefigured by Sade's 'while's, laying act upon act in a seeming desperation to achieve if not exactly balance, then completion or exhaustion.¹¹² There is very little space for dwelling on each act, and therefore disgust is bypassed in detail and given a position in broad strokes. In *How It Is*, too, the bodies involved are imbricated and sometimes quite literally joined, 'his mouth against my ear our hairs tangled together impression that to separate us one would have to sever them good so

¹¹¹ *How It Is*, p. 100.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 122, p. 124.

much for the bodies the arms the hands the heads'.¹¹³ Although the syntax here implies that 'them' refers just to the tangled hairs of Pim and Bom, the ensuing phrase 'so much for the bodies the arms the hands the heads' deconstructs the idea of a bodily hierarchy of head as first, instead extending from arm to hand before considering the head — indeed, *How It Is* repeatedly enacts an extension to the hand and beyond the body as a sexual move: contact with the other, repetition of bodies or actions, permeation of bodies and interlocking, be it of mucous membranes or rather less permeable ones.

This deconstruction also occurs in the relation of these body parts to the tangled hair: an example of a body part that is often shed and shifts from a secondary sexual characteristic to an abject waste matter. Caselli notes that this moment harks back to Dante's *Inferno*, part of an 'endless infernal genealogy' that destabilizes the mastery of Dante as a source, and simultaneously the notion of a coherent self or character.¹¹⁴ Caselli also notes the 'erotic and violent quality' of the connection between the bodies in *How It Is*.¹¹⁵ This erotic violence with an occasional moment of bathos is reminiscent of the *Inferno* XXIII, nine cantos prior, which ends with the couplet 'By now they were both crisped within the batter. With that entanglement, we left the matter.'¹¹⁶ Of course, none in *How It Is* can leave the matter, as Dante and Virgil can. *How It Is*, as Caselli shows, deals precisely in matter and matter alone. Through the entangled hair, the trauma of a severed limb is reduced to a natural albeit still somewhat unpalatable shedding, and hair is raised absurdly to the status of limb.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 79.

¹¹⁴ *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*, p. 158.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno, 1*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick, (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 195.

This reordering of sexual relations — in the sense that this is dealing with an unconscious hierarchy of disgust and desire — is a direct result of the geometric approach to embodiment that has been influenced by both Sade and minimalism, and will inflect the very possibility of relations as the text progresses. Categorisation in this abject realm serves to illuminate other problems.

Sadism, or the proxy for it, in *How It Is* does, of course, differ from *Sodom*. As Elsa Baroghel notes, while many have seen Beckett's work as a rewriting of *Sodom*, this is not entirely the case. As with the later works of the 1960s, she notes that it departs from the trilogy in its manner of 'combining radical stylistic minimalism with an aesthetic preoccupation with graphic violence and bodily matters'.¹¹⁷ However, *How It Is* began this trend of radical minimalism undergirded by a clear structure: no punctuation, short paragraphs, three sections – and an invisible fourth. *Sodom* is quite different: it is expansive, opulent and maximalist. It makes use of mathematics not, as Beckett does, to reduce but instead to work out complex combinations and rules. What the two have in common is the fact that they both entice and imagine the exhaustion or limit of relations, and their relationship with this impasse is not further exhaustion, but productivity: a feedback loop between intensity and failure. Examining gagging in Beckett's trilogy, Laura Salisbury finds a similar kind of feedback, which is characterised instead in relation to a single body, and specifically the digestive system. She suggests, 'What appears most insistently, however, in Beckett's gagging, in his use of reflexive and compulsive elements of the peristaltic system to figure incomplete incorporation and unfinished expulsion, is the production

¹¹⁷ Beckett, with Sade: *Sadean intertext and aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's works*, p. 213.

of a textual body that is not the peaceable servant of intention.¹¹⁸ For Salisbury the same problem that sadism poses is here posed by peristalsis: the notion of a sovereign self is broken down, and therefore the notion that one might be a ‘peaceable servant’, be it to one’s own intention or to the Machiavellian instincts of another, is not precisely dispensed with but refigured. Salisbury notes that ‘language becomes reflexive rather than an expression of consciousness.’¹¹⁹ This reflexivity of language traces the shape of the feedback loop that sadism also inculcates.

The narrative of *Sodom* is interspersed with another narration from four characters within the book about their own debauched lives: a polyphonic quality shared with Beckett’s works. Elsa Baroghel observes that, in *Comment C’est*, ‘[w]hat Beckett is doing is presenting us with the vestiges of a Sadean form that no longer holds together.’¹²⁰ This might be translated across to *How It Is*, too, with the ‘tableau des excitations de base’, which becomes ‘table of basic stimuli’ in the English.¹²¹ Sadism in Beckett and Sade is prefigured by mathematics, but in Beckett the quantitative and qualitative find themselves so close that sadism can no longer function as its usual dyad of victim-torturer, even though these are the terms that Beckett employs. The parrhesic, narcissistic, and ultimately rather lonely nature of any potential sadist — multiplied into and out of himself by a flat field of possibility — makes cruelty into a closed feedback loop. In Beckett, this is made clearer in that the ‘table of basic stimuli’ is not simply laying out an order of torture, but turns this torture into a code with

¹¹⁸ Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 85.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 106.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 219.

¹²¹ Samuel Beckett, *Comment C’est* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1961), p. 108; *How It Is*, p. 59.

which Pim and Bom can communicate.¹²²

The clear structural parallel of Dante's *Inferno* would also go further in explaining the degeneration that is hinted at in the invisible fourth section. Beckett remarked to George Reavey in 1938 on reading *Sodom*, 'It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy. The composition is extraordinary, as rigorous as Dante's.'¹²³ It is possible to read this 'metaphysical ecstasy' as the beginning of an interest in sexuality that is then reignited when Beckett returns to reading about Freud in 1960.¹²⁴ Where in Beckett's early work all was tied up in the terrifying bindle of reproduction on a teleological stick, with all of the ontological issues it created, Sade's ecstatic feats of physics and metaphysics are not concerned with futurity. Indeed, the temporalities of *Sodom* aren't very different from those that surround *How It Is*.

The matter of reproducibility in Sade is overwhelmingly separate from childbearing; the matter of literature within the text — that is, the stories told in between the systematic descriptions of sex — is left up to five women, all of whom are sterile due to either age or abuse. Furthermore, when pregnancy does occur, it is part of the same economy of desire that the entire text functions within, as Curval's speech makes clear,

"Why yes, 'tis perfectly true that I am not fond of progeny," quoth Curval, "and that when the beast is laden it quickens a furious loathing in me, but to imagine I killed my wife on that account is to be gravely

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Samuel Beckett to George Reavey, 20th February 1938, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume I: 1929-1940*, p. 604.

¹²⁴ *Damned to Fame*, p. 464.

mistaken. Bitch that you are, get it into your head that I have no need of reasons in order to kill a woman, above all a bitch that, were she mine, I'd very surely keep from whelping."¹²⁵

Curval moves here from the implication that he murdered his wife because she was pregnant — in other words, that her pregnancy enraged him enough to commit a terrible deed — to insult that pregnancy should have such importance to him as to convince him to commit such a deed. He is more than willing to commit murder not due to logic, but due to desire. Pregnancy is inscribed, here, in a logic of reason that the Duc rejects entirely in favour of a more expansive, mathematical ethics.

Throughout the text one notices that what also induces a furious loathing, in any of the aristocratic characters, is a breach of their own set of rules. In that it is outside of these, pregnancy is not desirable. However, it takes no precedence over any other embodied phenomena that might cause consternation — defecating too early, for example, or in the wrong location. The system remains the primary cause of pleasure and aversion for the operators within it. Rabaté suggests that there is a mechanistic quality to sexuality in Beckett, derived from Sade, such that 'the erotic machine materializes mechanical reproducibility.'¹²⁶ However, it is possible that Sade in fact reveals the mechanicity of eroticism itself. It follows, therefore, that disgust in *Sodom* arises not so much from bodily functions as much as from structural ones. Ingesting and defecating are but different modes of the machinic system that treats as perverse only that which errs from its own fabricated — and indeed to be effective the rules

¹²⁵ *The 120 Days of Sodom, or, The School of Libertinage*, p. 348.

¹²⁶ *Beckett and Sade*, p. 29.

must be evidently fabricated — structure.

Linda Ben-Zvi remarks that Beckett's letters often use 'disgust-evoking bodily functions and emissions [...] to describe his writing and the reactions of others to it'.¹²⁷ Herein lies a particular difference, only remarkable because Beckett's fiction focuses so intently on the interpersonal, the singularity of the style of which is illuminated by conjoined topics in his epistolary and fictional writing. There is an increasing fervour in Beckett's writing from the 1960s onwards for sensory deprivation: there is little attempt to render proprioception that is of any sense other than sight and, occasionally, sound. Where other senses are included, the input is always minimal and polarised: hot or cold, white or black, loud or quiet. In the aforementioned part of *Sodom*, each scene described in the extensive list is discrete, comprises of a series of actions that often — as they do here — attempt a kind of balance in terms of turn-taking and reciprocity. The designated categories, 'boy', 'girl', 'whore', hold a great deal of weight in terms of their necessary difference from one another — for example, these are children, as opposed to elderly people, and this is a 'whore' as opposed to a virgin — but these differences on the whole do not affect what happens to the different victims. In *Sodom*, gender, sex, age, and profession all pale in relation to virginity. Something else is happening in *How It Is*, which is concerned not so much with whether or not someone has been penetrated by something as with their reply when the penetration occurs, and whether that reply is correct according to its own internal logic. This, in its own way, is a Sadean structure: self-contained, with an internal logic. The imbricated feedback that occurs is what defines the relationship between Pim and

¹²⁷ Linda Ben-Zvi, 'Beckett and Disgust: The Body as "Laughing Matter"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 18.4 (2011), p. 693.

Bom. Time in *How It Is* doesn't seem to admit of virginity — instead, the roles of victim and torturer alternate. Virginity in Sade only exists as a placeholder category: in Beckett, these categories are all subject to the destructive force of indefinite, indefinable time.

In *How It Is*, Sade's use of gender as structure is informed by the undergirding suspended disgust, producing queer subjectivities. In Part Two, the protagonist touches Pim's body and concludes he has found a separate person,

good a fellow-creature more or less but man woman girl or boy cries
have neither certain cries sex nor age I try to turn him over on his back
no the right side still less the left less still my strength is ebbing good
good I'll never know Pim but on his belly.¹²⁸

Whereas Ben-Zvi remarks on the 'the constant slippage of pronouns' that occurs and invokes the title in *The Unnamable*, here there appears to be no slipping or morphological problem. As one might expect from a text entitled *How It Is* — rather than, say, the later example of *All Strange Away* where all values are listed as 'say [x]' [emphasis mine] — we are presented here with seemingly concrete options. Precisely how concrete, however, can these be taken to be? Despite the admission that there exists neither 'sex nor age', Pim is immediately addressed with masculine pronouns. Gender is couched in cruelty; the cries obfuscate the sense of this phrase in the absence of punctuation. It can be read that each 'cries' is simply an interruption to the

¹²⁸ *How It Is*, p. 46.

narrative. If one erased 'cries', therefore, the text would read thus: 'man woman girl or boy have neither certain sex nor age'. This implies that it is not Pim himself who is of indeterminate gender but 'man woman girl or boy'. This sort of disintegration of gender might be read, too, in the application of 'fellow-creature more or less' to Pim: more fellow less creature, or perhaps, less fellow more creature. This can account for the moment in the text two sections further along when the narrator moves, 'to feel the skull it's bald no delete the face it's preferable mass of hairs all white to the feel that clinches it he's a little old man we're two little old men something wrong there'.¹²⁹ If, indeed, 'man woman girl or boy' denotes neither sex nor age, then the conclusion that Pim is an old man may indeed be wrong: wrong in the sense that the word 'men' cannot match up to 'two' and 'little' in their capacity for description.

As Caselli states, '[m]eaning needs to be produced through discriminations; and yet, the power that these discriminations have to create the real as given and a-temporal is suffocated and engulfed by the muddy materiality of meaning itself'.¹³⁰ Caselli is referring to the juxtaposition of 'pretty' and mathematical terminology; this seems to occur similarly on the level of gender, as discriminations based on language are at once evoked and termed inadequate. The repetition of 'that clinches it' that occurs each time there is physical interaction with Pim that then concludes something about him might typify this: to 'clinch' can refer not only to confirming or settling something, but it is also a term — commonly used in boxing, of which Beckett was a fan — used to denote boxers grappling at close quarters, too close to swing at each

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ *Beckett's Dantes*, p. 166.

other.¹³¹ This suggests that at the same time as knowledge is acquired, the sheer physical proximity — or materiality, or perhaps intimacy — of Pim is what defies the possibility of knowledge, or by extension, sadism proper. Caselli's 'muddy materiality' seems also to extend to embodiment itself. Whereas Baroghel suggests that 'descriptions of sexual organs in Beckett's text systematically negate the possibility of natural intercourse or deprive the genitals of their inherent sexual charge altogether, as when the narrator tries to determine Pim's gender', it becomes clear in *How It Is* that the 'muddy materiality' extends to both the sexual organs and to intercourse itself, thereby making impossible the intervention of any concept of 'natural'.¹³²

The possibility of 'inherent sexual charge' of genitalia is not necessarily present in *How It Is*, suggesting that its inherency is, in the first place, at the very least unstable. This is one of the primary ways in which the use of Sadean structure in *How It Is* invites a queer reading, or rather, begins to operate queerly itself. As Heather Love suggests, the field of queer studies is not only magnetized repeatedly towards gay and lesbian subjects, but is also a necessary site of conflict because 'queer' must always include subjects and issues that go further than, or even subvert to some degree, these identities. Love finds that the 'tension between universalizing and minoritizing models of sexuality — between the anti-identity platform of queer theory and its inescapable links to nonnormative gender and sexual identities — has structured the field from

¹³¹ Steven Connor also notes that there is a reference to boxing in *Foirades* that is removed from the English *Fizzles*, 1973-1975. Steven Connor, *My Fortieth Year Had Come and Gone and I Still Throwing the Javelin*, paper given at the Beckett International Foundation Research Seminar, University of Reading, 18 June 2005.

¹³² *Beckett, with Sade: Sadean intertext and aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's works*, p. 226.

the start.¹³³ It is not only possible to find in Beckett's work examples of homosexuality, but also this precise tension between reading for gender or sexual identity and, as above, a way of reading that purposefully evades and deconstructs any notion of stable sexuality. Due to its relationship to Sade's structural paradigm, the logic of *How It Is* plays queerly, finding at once materiality and amorphousness.

Part Two

Little attention has been paid to the instability of the 'two little old men' in *How It Is*, considering that the phrase is followed immediately by 'something wrong there'.¹³⁴ Where many studies carefully avoid coming down on either side in terms of whether or not an 'other' exists in Beckett's work, despite constant references to one, gender appears to be more steadfast in the face of its repeated naming and denying. This reliance upon pronouns is later also questioned in *Not I* through the repetition of 'what?.. who?.. no!.. she!'¹³⁵ The insistence of the voice of *Not I* upon 'she' would not have been necessary had it been readily apparent, and easily readable. This is all the more significant in the play, because Mouth is generally played by a woman, and generally wearing lipstick. Nothing in the stage directions necessitates this, and perhaps the lipstick serves primarily to make Mouth stand out, small and barely visible as it is on an enormous stage. Nonetheless, this heightened visibility also makes Mouth pass easily as a woman, belying the trouble that it has in speaking a female

¹³³ Heather Love, 'Queer Critique, Queer Refusal' in *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*, ed. Andrew T. Lamas (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017), p. 122.

¹³⁴ *How It Is*, p. 46.

¹³⁵ Samuel Beckett, 'Not I' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) p. 377.

pronoun. This vexing of gender in the early 1970s is anticipated by the placeholder genders in the 1960s prose.

Beckett's penchant for categorisation creeps into the arcane medical terminology that surrounds embodiment in *How It Is*, not to further elucidate the body's workings but instead to give them further semi-opaque signifying possibilities: another form of placeholder, or perhaps as it might be referred to with regards to the body, prosthetising. This use of prosthesis further underlines the significance of using queer theory to examine the ways in which sexuality operates, as Paul B. Preciado's approach to bodily hierarchies — via amusingly minimal suggested practices — can also reinsert a form of resistance into this subversion. Preciado's bodies are not pleasurable rhizomes, horizontal and no longer subject to hierarchical intervention. Rather, they resist both this limit case and the limit case of 'normality'. Through performance and contract, Preciado demonstrates that the combination of whimsy and deadly seriousness in prosthesis is crucial: whimsical because of an as yet untheorised correlation and simultaneously, because of its relation to teleology, entirely serious. Ulrika Maude demonstrates this through an examination of technologies and the body in Beckett, highlighting a moment in *Proust* at which Beckett quotes the eponymous author in outlining the importance of time and space to desire, above embodiment,

The fact that we are temporal and spatial beings constitutes part of our identity. However, in emphasizing the centrality of the body and its surroundings to the construction of identity, Beckett also comes to the realization that the spatial, temporal and corporeal shifts we experience

inevitably translate into a dissolution of identity. The subject is dispersed by the spaces it occupies. The body's own uninterrupted flux only adds to the plight of dissolution.¹³⁶

If, after Zupančič, the focus is shifted from a composite idea of identity to the notion of difference — and in particular, sexual difference — this is complicated. Zupančič notes that, for example, '(emancipatory) politics begins with "loss of identity," and there is nothing deplorable in this loss.'¹³⁷ If it is possible to read, instead, that Beckett emphasizes the centrality of the body in relation to sexual difference but, as elaborated above, the body is no longer the basis of an essentialist reading of sexual difference, what kind of dissolution might this be? This fragmentation of identity can be taken even further. Yoshiki Tajiri suggests that the prosthetic bodies that appear in Beckett's later works are 'desexualised and generalized', characterised by 'indeterminate gender configurations'.¹³⁸ However, the preoccupation with gender, not as indeterminate or generalized but present and opaque, in *How It Is* has been made clear, and the continuing preoccupation in the later prose works will be evinced in the next three chapters. Tajiri suggests that 'In Beckett's later work, in which the mechanized body is no longer linked to the gender dichotomy, the latter aspect of the prosthetic body comes to the fore.'¹³⁹ Tajiri is referring here to the body as an 'alien, uncontrollable nuisance.'¹⁴⁰ By contrast, Preciado's dildotechtonics might offer a

¹³⁶ Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 69.

¹³⁷ *What Is Sex?*, p. 36.

¹³⁸ Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 36, p. 38.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

different reading that can account for this move towards a prosthetic body that is very pronounced in the later work without needing to suggest, at the same time, that that body is alien, unsexable, ungenderable, or in particular, not human. It seems to be this reconfiguration of the sexual relation in the prose works that has inspired this reading of them as asexual, or as Gontarski puts it, in reference to the texts as a whole, ‘literary hermaphrodites’.¹⁴¹ Instead of reading the repeated deferral, replacement or swapping of gender in the late prose as amounting to a fluidity or lack of it, here a prosthetic reading would suggest that the mechanized body has replaced a body that might be considered inherently sexual. The act of placeholdering, instead, forces a reading of sexuality that does not rely on its inherence within the body. It is this move that the late prose makes — and not necessarily the conceptual fragmentation which instead speaks to embodiment more broadly — that speaks to queerness.

As Lacan suggests, ‘man cannot aim at being whole (...) once the play of displacement and condensation, to which he is committed in the exercise of his functions, marks his relation as subject to the signifier.’¹⁴² The displacement and condensation which marks our relationship to the signifier can be isolated as a prosthetic function. Preciado, in delineating dildotechtonics and the work of prosthesis, notes that a dildo ‘threatens the supposition that the organic body is sexuality’s proper context.’¹⁴³ Dildotechtonics uses the idea of a dildo not as a fetish, but as a prosthesis. Preciado finds that ‘Within the framework of the heterocentric, capitalist system, the body functions as a total prosthesis in the service of sexual

¹⁴¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. xxx.

¹⁴² Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, ed., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York, NY: Norton, 1985), pp. 81-82.

¹⁴³ Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 72.

reproduction and genital-pleasure production.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the dildo is itself already adjacent to a body that is prosthetic. This move is strikingly similar to Lacan’s: the dildo or prosthesis which marks the body’s relation to a signifying order also reveals the entirety of the body itself as functioning prosthetically. In this context, sex and gender are no longer illegible or irrevocably blurred, but instead part of this logic of supplementarity that the prosthesis marks out. As such, sex and gender are part of this placeholder order. This positions sex and gender as, instead of an unknowable, unspeakable real — in Lacan’s terms — an *Objet petit a*. Functioning as sublime objects that signify their own lack while simultaneously pointing to the contingent foundation of the subject, Pim and Bom mark the beginning of a series of Beckettian bodies that signal this instability.

The body in *How It Is* is further disrupted by the use of medical terminology. The phrase ‘the anatomy’ is repeated four times across the two pages in which the narrator attempts to understand their gender and that of Pim. In one instance there is another reference to hair: ‘the hand approaches under the mud comes up at a venture the index encounters the mouth it’s vague it’s well judged the thumb the cheek somewhere something wrong there dimply malar the anatomy all astir lips hairs buccinators it’s as I thought he’s singing that clinches it.’¹⁴⁵ The use of the definite article before ‘anatomy’ here creates the impression of an exclamation, a revelling in a simultaneous vagary and materiality — this is also, at other points, joined by the exclamation ‘the geometry’ in a repetition that further suggests its exclamatory tone.¹⁴⁶ There is a use of medical terminology: buccinators, which are cheek muscles, and

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 48.

¹⁴⁵ *How It Is*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

malar which is the bone structure of the cheek. Beckett's library shows that he had some interest in scientific works; notably, he owned *The Nurse's Dictionary of Medical Terms and Nursing Treatment* amongst a number of other reference works, which it seems he plumbed with an eye for interesting new vocabulary, as Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon note, 'Beckett surprisingly often turned to dictionaries for their 'authority', and that of his literary precursors, to legitimize the use of particular words and expressions.'¹⁴⁷ Beckett also owned Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in which Van Hulle and Nixon note that he has underlined the following phrase: 'Some instances of correlation are quite whimsical; thus cats with blue eyes are invariably deaf; colour and constitutional peculiarities go together,' which might owe to a certain personal interest — he himself had blue eyes — but which seems more likely to relate to the logic of his works: whimsical correlation.¹⁴⁸ This use of a medical 'authority' here ironically undercuts the position of the body as an a priori, as being inherently tied to frameworks such as reproduction, through the notion of correlation as whimsical.¹⁴⁹

The blue leitmotif begins with the description of Celia in *Murphy*, extending through *Watt* when the eponymous protagonist observes a picture in Erskine's room; '[i]n the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white.'¹⁵⁰ Blue seems to represent here a different kind of seeing or elucidation, perhaps an ironic nod towards Beckett's own blue eyes. 'Blue' is mentioned twenty six times in *How It Is*, with one reference to

¹⁴⁷ *Samuel Beckett's Library*, p. 194.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 200.

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter Three for a comparative analysis of Belacqua's relationship to the Smeraldina's fetishised beret: a struggle to relate the material to the affective, reconfigured in *Imagination Dead Imagine*.

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, ed. Christopher John Acklerley (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 109.

‘azure’ and several references also to green or jade.¹⁵¹ Blue is often in reference to eyes, once explicitly to blindness, ‘can he be blind he must the great blue eyes he opens sometimes and of a companion I see none in his head the dark friend’.¹⁵² There is also reference to blue as ‘the violent shade’, suggesting a link between blindness and violence — which plays out in Pim and Bom’s attempt to know one another without visual cues.¹⁵³ The second most pervasive use of blue after eyes, however, is in repeated reference to the sky, day or night.¹⁵⁴ This reference to what is also described in *How It Is* as ‘celestial’ is undercut by one particularly striking use of blue that informs this overdetermined leitmotif: eyes, skies, blindness.¹⁵⁵

In the third section, towards the end of the text, Pim parrots ‘the sack the little fables of above little scenes a little blue infernal homes’.¹⁵⁶ Although *How It Is* makes repeated reference to hell, with its Dantean structure, torturous relations and muddy eternity, this is one of few direct references to the infernal. The blueness of these ‘homes’ couches them in a violence of non-perception, but it is also implied through the slippery syntax of this sentence that the homes are in fact ‘above’, in the ‘little scenes’ that occasionally intervene earlier in the text, often describing a vexed love scene of some kind: ‘the eyes burn with severe love I offer her mine pale upcast to the sky whence cometh our help’.¹⁵⁷ The connection between the pale blue eyes, the blueness of these scenes and the blue ‘above’ seems to be an intransigence that creates violence and suffering. The ‘little blue infernal homes’ are located in the ‘above’, the

¹⁵¹ *How It Is*, p. 5, 23, 37, 45, 53, 60, 61, 63, 65, 66, 71, 72, 74, 80, 91, 92, 110, 112, 115, 127.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p. 71.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 23, 37, 63, 65 – arguably, at least in close relation to skies here, 74 as azure, 80, 127.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 112.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 10.

location of various domestic scenes and seemingly the origin of the voice that the narrator hears and repeats throughout the text. On the one hand, the narrator cannot speak in relation to the great blue above, except to repeat these ‘mute maledictions’ — another reference to violence or ill intent tied to the loss of a communicative function — and on the other, Pim cannot see with his pale eyes his companion and therefore, unable to speak of his own volition, his communication must be carved into his skin.¹⁵⁸ Whereas in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, ‘Repetition reduces the strain of invention’, this repetition introduces a new kind of tension that finds interrelation predicated on torture.¹⁵⁹

Alongside the oscillation between up and down, dark and light, it is worth briefly noting that Beckett’s focus on East and West — or, sometimes, deasil and widdershins — also occurs in *How It Is* and then increases in frequency through the rotunda texts. This may be a reference to the way in which the day advances, or the eventual possibility of an ending since the sun sets in the West. However, the bodies in *How It Is* do not travel in that direction, nor do they admit of a three-dimensional geography. Many physical aspects of *How It Is* can change or are stated to be either one thing or its opposite, but the direction of the movement is never in any doubt, describing ‘the straight line eastward strange and death in the west as a rule’.¹⁶⁰ The ‘line’ of bodies ‘wends as we have seen from left to right or if you prefer from west to east’.¹⁶¹ In fact, this direction informs the relationship of the bodies to one another, as very close to the end of the text the narration asks,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 109.

¹⁵⁹ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 33.

¹⁶⁰ *How It Is*, p. 107.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

sudden question if in spite of this conglomeration of all our bodies we
are not still the object of a slow translation from west to east one is
tempted

if it will kindly be considered that while it is in our interest as
tormentors to remain where we are as victims our urge is to move on¹⁶²

Whereas the blue-eyed, deaf cat may have been a curious coincidence or alignment, here the concatenation of the text suggests that this motion has a connection that incorporates, or is even predicated on, loss: a translation rather than a disconnected logical chain. It might be concluded that the torment occurring here is therefore undergirded not only by the structural nature of its bindings — that is, by Sadean numerical structures — but also by a problem of vectors: of direction as well as quantity and arrangement. In moving against the day, or sun — the nothing new, as Murphy would have it — the bodies involved are bound to the torturous, eternal contract. Freud's work on narcissism, which Juliet Mitchell further illuminates with a focus on the character of Echo who can only speak in echoes of the person to whom she speaks, illuminates this problem of directionality and returning. The problem of otherness is absorbed by this internecine structure. This is also the framework of *How It Is*. Mitchell states that this study demonstrates that 'the self is always like another, in other words, this self is constructed of necessity in a state of alienation: the person first sees himself in another, mother or mirror.'¹⁶³ This *likeness*, the quality of being

¹⁶² Ibid, pp. 124-125.

¹⁶³ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), p. 40.

alike, is part of both Freud's diagnosis of homosexuality, and Peter Boxall's imagining of queer spatial relations in *Molloy*. Boxall suggests that 'the body in which the narrative voice is lodged becomes, itself, part of the scenery to which the narrator feels drawn, and from which he feels himself divorced.'¹⁶⁴ Queer relations can be characterised as horizontal because they avoid vertical modes of bodily categorization, as Preciado delineates through dildotechtonics. In other words, genitalia are not inherently sexual, they have been made sexual by the prosthetic action of desire: any mucous membrane will do. To invoke Freud's notion of bisexuality as a constituent of the definition of perversion: there is a continuum between homosexuality and bisexuality that deconstructs heterosexuality as being at one particular end of a spectrum. The nature of placeholding defies this spatial metaphor: any *place* will do. Similarly, queer relations are also seen not only to reach horizontally, but to identify horizontally, that is, towards sameness: from Ray Blanchard's autogynephilia at one transphobic extreme, to José Muñoz' disidentifications at the other.¹⁶⁵ *How It Is* seems to shed light on this mode in that it makes clear that there is a problem happening in terms of desire *prior* to this comparison between horizontal and vertical, in the spatial mode itself.

Spatialising desire means invoking it in a mode where it precisely has no shift. Therefore, for desire, the spatial aspect of placeholding is irrelevant: horizontality and

¹⁶⁴ Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 122.

¹⁶⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). An excellent explanation of the contemporary impact of Blanchard's thought: Stephanie Hsu, 'Fanon and the New Paraphilias: Towards a Trans of Color Critique of the DSM-V', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 40.1 (2019), pp. 53–68. e.g. 'Blanchard's theory of erotic motivation suggests a continuum of non-normative self-fashioning practices that resembles the spectrum-based models of gender identity and expression currently in use in LGBTQ grassroots discourse but for one glaring difference: the "desired object" in his theory is always determined by a heterosexual orientation.' (p. 56)

verticality do not affect it. Desire — that is, the domain of sexuality but not solely the sexual — works as the limit on Beckett's mathematical bodies, rather than sexuality and gender per se. It continues to land, and in failing, carries on along the ground it finds. Lacan would suggest that this landing is predicated upon being able to be expressed in mathematical terms, 'What emerges from this attempt is a topology in the mathematical sense of the term, without which, as soon becomes clear, it is impossible even to register the structure of a symptom in the analytic sense of the term.'¹⁶⁶ This evokes the analogy of the threshold, but also underscores this importance of space, topology and mathematics to the theorisation of desire. It is no coincidence that Beckett's work, as the 1960s progressed, took on more and more of a diagrammatic bent, from the carvings into Pim's back to the latter section of *All Strange Away* which is entitled 'Diagram' and the doodles that encircle Beckett's drafts and letters from this period. There were also illustrated editions of various late prose pieces published during the 1960s, which emerged a decade later, including *Imagination Dead Imagine* illustrated by Sorel Etrog and *All Strange Away* illustrated by Edward Gorey.¹⁶⁷ Although this diagrammatic quality might seem to aim at a better explanation of the situation — in other words, it might seem like an aid to language — in fact the use of spatial and diagrammatic terms only shifts further away from an understanding of desire. The work of these diagrams is not to elucidate but instead to show that the correlation is always a whimsical one: the cat with blue eyes is always blind; 'colorless green ideas sleep furiously'.¹⁶⁸ Drawing connections, in other words, is

¹⁶⁶ *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, p. 79.

¹⁶⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, illus. Sorel Etrog (London: John Calder, 1979). Samuel Beckett, *All Strange Away*, illus. Edward Gorey (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1976).

¹⁶⁸ Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 15.

not the same as creating a teleological link.

Whimsical correlation ties into the logic of gendering in *How It Is*, and also into how sadism plays out. Judith Roof suggests that, referring to *The Unnamable* and *Not I*, '[w]hat these texts enact is the disintegration of gender, sexuality, family, and narrative as they are in the process of producing both a new kind of subject and a new kind of narrative.'¹⁶⁹ Roof ties gendering to the very notion of seeking an origin, which creates a narrative by necessarily creating binary distinctions. Through Freud, and Beckett's reading of Freud, it is possible to see how and why, in Beckett, gender does not disintegrate — although it does change. Beckett began reading Freud's work as early as 1934, when he notes in a letter to Con Leventhal, "There's a great article in Freud called "displacement upward", a neurotic device of great popularity."¹⁷⁰ Beckett was also reading Ernest Jones's *Papers on Psychoanalysis*, who mentions Freud's suggestion that 'stammering could be caused by a displacement upwards of conflicts over excremental functions.'¹⁷¹ This parallel between the bowel and the mouth is carried over explicitly into *How It Is*, as the excremental mud, or muddy excrement, surrounds the characters and often makes its way into their mouths, as 'the tongue gets clogged with mud that can happen too only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit it out it's one or the other'.¹⁷² Salisbury reads Beckett reading Jones and identifies this gagging in Beckett's post-war 'trilogy',

¹⁶⁹ Judith Roof, 'Is There Sex after Gender? Ungendering/"The Unnameable"', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 35.1 (2002), p. 60.

¹⁷⁰ Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 41. See also: John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 46.

¹⁷¹ Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work. Years of Maturity 1901-1919* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 206.

¹⁷² *How It Is*, p. 22.

linguistic matter is retarded and accumulated as the text seems to gag on itself, momentarily reversing the peristaltic motion that seems as though it ought to be moving the subject matter of the text forwards through time towards the fundament or a narrative denouement.¹⁷³

This peristaltic imagery is another way of theorizing how agglutination of meaning in this text works — here, instead of a negative accumulation, the direction is reversed to represent the way in which the materiality of the text interferes with hermeneutics. Crucially, nothing here stalls or breaks down; in the same way, gender does not disappear in a puff of smoke, but instead is defined differently.

Building on Salisbury's analysis of Beckett's Freudian readings, it is possible to find further instances in Jones' biography that elucidate the Freudian basis of *How It Is*, where 'Freud spoke of a secondary repression being brought about both by the action of the ego and by the attraction of unconscious matter associated with the idea in question: thus a push and a pull.'¹⁷⁴ It is worth quoting Jones' interpretation of this at length,

The attraction of previous, primitive unconscious material involves the newer associated material in the same orbit of feeling as itself, thus investing it with this feeling and causing it in consequence to be subjected to the same forces of repression as the older material. In other words, the latter involves the newer material in its own fate, i.e.

¹⁷³ Samuel Beckett: *Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, p. 87.

¹⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud: *Life and Work. Years of Maturity 1901-1919*, p. 207.

repression, but in both cases the actual repressing force acts from above, from the “higher” agencies (though, of course, not necessarily from conscious ones).¹⁷⁵

Freud confirms that Jones’ interpretation is as he sees it, and indeed ‘more precise’.¹⁷⁶ The position of ‘above in the light’ in *How It Is* might be read in this sense, especially considering that *Comment C’est* may almost have been titled ‘Pousse Tire’: this phrase is used twenty-nine times throughout the text. Beckett suggests this title to Barbara Bray in August 1960, and it is never again considered.¹⁷⁷ However, the confluence of the push and pull, the bowel and mouth parallels and the repression from above all suggest that Freud had a significant influence on *How It Is*. Salisbury notes that ‘the *Trilogy* refuses to accede to what it experiences as the violence of a social world which always believes that matter is awaiting transformation and circulation.’¹⁷⁸ It is in this sense that reproduction begins to be hacked away at, not in an entirely literal sense, but as a central force that informs sexuality and, by association, narrative. When heterosexual signifiers of sexuality are redefined and redesignated — given new or different roles or flattened into one as a ‘mucous membrane’ — the viability of reproductive sexuality and its counterpart teleological meaning is lessened.¹⁷⁹

As a result of this reversal, the mouth can even act as an anus; ‘I strain with open mouth so as not to lose a second a fart fraught with meaning issuing through the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 207.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 2nd August 1960, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 348.

¹⁷⁸ *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, p. 104.

¹⁷⁹ Samuel Beckett, ‘Enough’ in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. 187; Sigmund Freud, *The Psychology of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 128.

mouth no sound in the mud'.¹⁸⁰ This connection between farting and meaning is certainly a whimsical correlation, but the line between excretion and explanation is more thickly drawn than this in Beckett's work. In *Molloy*, the eponymous narrator describes wrapping himself in newspaper under his great coat, 'The Times Literary Supplement was admirably adapted to this purpose, of a never-failing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it.'¹⁸¹ Frequently, in the earlier and post-war texts, farts and excrement serve as a joke at the expense of intellectualism. There are also frequent uses of toilet humour in relation to sexual relationships and desire, with a similarly dismissive and mocking tone. For example, in *First Love* a derisory joke is made, 'Would I have been tracing her name in old cowshit if my love had been pure and disinterested?'¹⁸² Here, faeces is the antithesis of intimacy and romance, which undergirds the humour. From *How It Is* onwards, however, something different is happening: farts and excrement are no longer solely for comic value — although humour often remains — they instead hark back to this 'displacement upward' of excremental conflict. In other words, they become more seriously inscribed in communication and relation. By the final section, for example, farts are part of a continuum in which the humour is so obtuse it is barely humour any more,

one notebook for the body inodorous farts stools idem pure mud
 suckings shudders little spasms of left hand in sack quiverings of the
 lower without sound movements of the head calm unhurried face raised

¹⁸⁰ *How It Is*, p. 20.

¹⁸¹ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 27.

¹⁸² Samuel Beckett, 'First Love' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, p. 34.

from the mud¹⁸³

The use of 'idem' is notable here as this is a term once used in academic citations to indicate the repetition of an author that has just been cited in a previous reference. It indicates repetition, therefore, but in its usual context it also indicates authorship. Perhaps in this case it is referring to the character who has excreted, but the fact that this combination of excrement and writing is no longer humorous — unless one really squints — speaks to the working through of the problem that was begun in Beckett's earlier works. Farting on *The Times Literary Supplement* is all well and good, but the relationship between farting and authorship when taken to its logical conclusion reveals that both are part of a repetitive function that pertains to the unconscious. Therefore, by the end of *How It Is*, farts are quite serious.¹⁸⁴ Salisbury also notes the fizzling out of humour in the late prose, finding instead a 'structural and affective reverberation that gives form to something that no longer seeks to appear clearly.'¹⁸⁵ A fart might fit this description rather well.

Beckett's Freudian book-buying then tailed off after the 1930s, until 1960 when he begins to read biographical works on Freud. This return to Freud marks a turn in Beckett's writing on sexuality. As Mitchell notes in an observation on Freud's 'Wolf Man' case study, '[i]f this illustration shows Freud struggling to reveal how passivity becomes connected with femininity and activity with masculinity, it also shows how neither are connected with the biological gender, but with the *situation* of the

¹⁸³ *How It Is*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁴ This is reinforced by Beckett's letters, as he writes, 'My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended)'. Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider, 29th December 1957, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 82.

¹⁸⁵ *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, p. 149.

subject.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, she notes that Freud sees the distinction of ‘masculine/ feminine merely conventional.’¹⁸⁷ This treatment of gender as a convention, as a placeholder for something that must be observed in isolation with a caveat that it relies on interrelation, can also be read in the very possibility of there being another person present in *How It Is*, which is frequently cast into doubt. Likewise, femininity in Beckett’s 1960s prose is perhaps, as Boxall suggests of homoeroticism throughout the oeuvre, ‘such an important connecting and networking element in the Beckettian psychosexual complex, that it can become invisible’.¹⁸⁸ The overbearing presence of gender as a situation of the subject rather than, as in works during and prior to the 1950s, a physical, biological or social determinant, opens these works towards a queer reading. Indeed, reading these bodies as queer sheds light on the economies of meaning that appear in *How It Is*. Thus, gender — as with anything in Beckett — can’t disintegrate, but it can illuminate the ‘nothing new.’¹⁸⁹

Part Three

Returning to the notion of narcissism as a closed feedback loop, it is notable that Mitchell suggests, ‘[s]adism is turned back against the self when aggression has no outlet.’¹⁹⁰ In the final pages of *How It Is*, the entire structure of the diegetic is reflected on and the possibility of a change in relationships between Pim and Bom is suggested, and a final fourth section in which there will be a change is forecast. After this

¹⁸⁶ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis*, p. 68.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁸⁸ ‘Beckett and Homoeroticism’, p. 115.

¹⁸⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, (Montreuil: Calder Publications, 2003), p. 5.

¹⁹⁰ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p. 115.

suggestion, as Bom is described arriving, the following paragraph jolts like a non-sequitur, quoted at length for clarity,

or emotions sensations take a sudden interest in them and even then
what the fuck I quote does it matter who suffers faint waver here faint
tremor

the fuck who suffers who makes to suffer who cries who to be left in
peace in the dark the mud gibbers ten seconds fifteen seconds of sun
clouds earth sea patches of blue clear nights and of a creature if not still
standing still capable of standing always the same imagination spent
looking for a hole that he may be seen no more in the middle of this
faery who drinks that drop of piss of being and who with his last gasp
pisses it to drink the moment it's someone each in his turn as our justice
wills and never any end it will that too all dead or none¹⁹¹

This sudden lurch to 'emotions sensations' is an abrupt change from the geometrical descriptions and ontological uncertainties that preceded it. The use of 'fuck' along with the 'faint waver' and 'faint tremor' seem to indicate an emotional response or distress due to the stark change in register, even though we are simultaneously reminded that the text is verbatim, with 'I quote'. The waver or tremor does suggest, however, that somewhere along this chain, something is felt; something steadfast is

¹⁹¹ *How It Is*, p. 115.

destabilized. The use of blue here, as in the prose texts that will follow, comes to represent clarity of memory at the expense of another kind of sensory knowledge: this oasis vision also occurs at the beginning of *Imagination Dead Imagine* and remnants of the blue appear in *Ping*, *Lessness* and other prose texts written in the 1960s, and are then instantly and purposefully erased. This directness regarding the orifice, the ‘hole that may be seen no more’ is a rare instance in which the text admits its own problem: where in other places, the absence of genital specificity is chalked up to being unable to feel for them, here we cannot see the hole. This lack of vision — often related to the colour blue and its relationship to memory — might be attributable to the scale that is inculcated in the previous section. That is, that it begins not to matter who suffers because of the sheer impossibility of numbering. There are either so many, or so few, that it is impossible to empathise. Here, the immensity of the limit adopts the Sadean loneliness that is created by mastery. Just as the sadist-victim relationship is about to shift, doubt is created about the other, who the other is, if they are there, and who is really suffering.

Just as this change and doubt is occurring, a ‘faery’ who both urinates and drinks said urine appears; at a relational crux in the text, a derogatory gay epithet and sexual acts are employed. Just as with the use of ‘faggot’, examined later in this chapter, heterosexuality is not capable of maintaining the vicious, explicitly queer urges of Pim and Bom. The limit is not homosexuality instead — although it is evoked here — but rather, nothing. Nothing is not uninflected, however. If, as Edelman suggests, queerness ‘*incises* that nothing in reality with acid’s caustic bite’, then this nothing is not nothing, but instead nothingness is made to act just like gender: a

placeholder where indeed nothing else will fit.¹⁹² Edelman is comparing, here, queerness as a phenomenon with futurity — futurity is an ‘empty placeholder of totalization’, which queer theory works against.¹⁹³ The invocation of queer terminology at the very point of doubt regarding the other is significant. Sexuality is, here, irrevocably linked to the aesthetic and therefore philosophical implications thereof. Queerness acts on the nothing and the minimal and makes it something else: not just a direct attempt to replace a central lack, but an acknowledgement of that lack. Although this sentiment is particularly relevant to the following chapters, it makes sense here to refer to Jennifer Doyle’s anecdote, ‘I was talking to Ron Athey the other week, and he described that minimalist aesthetic as “bitchy” — he said this with a real appreciation for it.’¹⁹⁴ Bitchiness, in other words, incises the possibility of hoping that minimalism will appear universal. Drawing attention to homosexuality at precisely the point at which the other is doubted and vexed is a reminder that reduction is also a stance: Marcel Duchamp was just heading for another genre, rather than a revolution.¹⁹⁵

Commenting on Michel Delon’s observation that in *Sodom*, the preference is always for the rear of the figure, Baroghel finds the same in *How It Is*, suggesting that ‘[i]n Sade and Beckett, this obsession with the anal side of things (and people) embodies the impossibility of reciprocity and communication between two beings, a sombre thought that already haunted Beckett in the early 1930s as a young Proust

¹⁹² Lee Edelman, ‘Learning Nothing: Bad Education’, *Differences*, 28.1 (2017), p. 125.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁹⁴ Jennifer Doyle and David J. Getsy, ‘Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation’, *Art Journal* (New York, NY), 72.4 (2013), p. 62.

¹⁹⁵ Herschel B. Chipp, Peter Howard Selz, and Joshua C. Taylor, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), p. 393.

reader.¹⁹⁶ This echoes the words of Leo Bersani in 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' who finds, albeit from a very different perspective, 'the inestimable value of sex as — at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects — anticomunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving.'¹⁹⁷ However, the association of the rectum with sex that is non-reproductive may not be the only possibility of meaning for what, to Beckett, would also have qualified as a mucous membrane. Perhaps it is instructive when, in *Proust*, he suggests, '[a]ll that is active, all that is enveloped in time and space, is endowed with what might be described as an abstract, ideal and absolute impermeability.'¹⁹⁸ This impermeability might be complicated by the mucous membranes of mouth and anus — such that the laconic Proustian Beckett who might say, offhand, 'we are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known', might instead view anal sexuality as a mode of reciprocity that does not admit of the process of bringing-into-existence, but instead the kind of repetitive processes that occur in *How It Is* and indeed the short prose that is to follow in the 1960s.¹⁹⁹

Paul Stewart's important analysis of anal sadism in *How It Is* differs from my own in one central way: Stewart gives reproduction a central position in the definition of sexuality, 'In these cases, [*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*] the *telos* of sexual relations, reproduction, has been removed, allowing Beckett to focus on the grotesque nature of sexual congress and the absurdity of notions of romantic love as a form of ideological justification for the creation of further suffering beings.'²⁰⁰ While this absurdity is present, the figure of the child is no longer — at least by the time *How It Is* was

¹⁹⁶ Beckett, *with Sade: Sadean intertext and aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's works*, pp. 223-224.

¹⁹⁷ Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', *October*, 43 (1987), p. 160.

¹⁹⁸ Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust* (London: Calder, 1999), pp. 57-58.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 66.

²⁰⁰ *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work*, p. 13.

written in the 1960s. Whereas the child does indeed occupy a position of anxiety in Beckett's works, where there is no child present and indeed no mention of gestation, the concept of reproduction and fertility seems no longer to loom over sexuality as it does have the ability to in earlier works.²⁰¹ In fact, geriatric sexuality is closer to the 1960s representations, where reproduction is a matter of the past and of memory. I take firm issue with the notion that, without the possibility of reproduction, 'the *telos* of sex is removed and sex is denied a significance beyond its own actions.'²⁰²

Contrastingly, in the novels, there is an anxiety about reproduction and its import, as *Molloy* notes of his mother, 'if ever I'm reduced to looking for a meaning to my life, you never can tell, it's in that old mess I'll stick my nose to begin with, the mess of that poor old uniparous whore and myself the last of my foul brood, neither man nor beast.'²⁰³ Although the notion of meaning is something that Molloy may find himself 'reduced' to, aptly, it is still the mother to whom he returns. Similarly, in *Watt*, reproduction and familial ties, incestuous and otherwise, are present. From sex follows reproduction as the narrator guesses at Mary's fancies, 'Erotic cravings? Recollections of childhood? Menopausal discomfort? Grief for a loved one defunct or departed for an unknown destination?'²⁰⁴ However, even here there are beginnings of the narrative's

²⁰¹ Daniela Caselli, "Introduction to: 'The Child in Beckett's Work.'" *Samuel Beckett today/aujourd'hui* 15 (2005): pp. 257–260; Daniela Caselli, "Tiny Little Things in Beckett's Company", *Samuel Beckett Today Aujourd'hui*, vol. 15, no. 1, Rodopi (2005) pp. 271–80; Catherine Crimp, *Childhood as Memory, Myth and Metaphor: Proust, Beckett, and Bourgeois*, (London: Maney Publishing, 2013); Catherine Crimp, "'Germ of All': Minimalist Children in Samuel Beckett and Louise Bourgeois." *Etudes Anglaises*, 65.4 (2012), pp. 437–450; Philip Robins, 'Beckett's Family Values', (PhD thesis, University College London, 1996); Paul Lawley, 'The Excluded Child: Brian Friel's Faith Healer and Beckett's Endgame', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 21, (2009), pp. 151–163; Angela Moorjani, 'Genesis, Child's Play, and the Gaze of Silence: Samuel Beckett and Paul Klee.' *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, vol. 19 (2008) pp. 183–97; Stephen Thomson, "'It's Not My Fault Sir': The Child, Presence and Stage Space in Beckett's Theatre." *Samuel Beckett today/ Aujourd'hui* 15.1 (2005): pp. 261–270. Paul Stewart, 'Samuel Beckett's Misopedia.' *Irish University Review* 41.2 (2011), pp. 59–73.

²⁰² *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work*, p. 90.

²⁰³ *Molloy*, p. 15.

²⁰⁴ *Watt*, p. 43.

resistance to rigid gender, as a footnote states, 'Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work.'²⁰⁵ In Chapters Two and Three, the significance of sexuality beyond both its own actions and reproduction will be made clear: its interference with the very process of hermeneutics itself.

In his chapter on *How It Is*, Stewart describes one passage from the text as 'a progressive turning away from heteronormative, procreative sex'.²⁰⁶ It is as follows:

Pam Prim we made love every day then every third day then the
Saturday then just the odd time to get rid of it tried to revive it through
the arse too late she fell from the window or jumped broken column²⁰⁷

The list is strictly structured as a crescendo and as such it is the numbering rather than the increasing of intensity that undergirds the possibility of sexual pleasure. This passage reels off the intervals between sexual congress in a manner redolent of Stewart's earlier use of Bersani to muddle the 'dyad' of heterosexuality and homosexuality: the gradual slowing, the juxtaposing of 'made love' and 'get rid of it': these could fit into the antisocial thesis as snugly as they can into the drab narrative of compulsory heterosexuality. The 'broken column' reads initially as a broken spine, but mindful of Stewart's early use of Freud, it is difficult not to consider Beckett's own reading of Freud and therefore this particular word choice in relation to Freud's description of 'the column of faeces'.²⁰⁸ Perhaps this, combined with the Freudian

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 86.

²⁰⁶ *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work*, p. 118.

²⁰⁷ *How It Is*, p. 66.

²⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories II*, *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 9, ed. and trans. James Strachey and Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 322.

reference, is also a play on 'colon'. Another avenue of pleasure closed off by the death drive. This play on colonic structure is repeated throughout, demonstrating, as Caselli has noted, the 'digestive circularity of the text'.²⁰⁹ Caselli's observation is followed by Salisbury who notices the non-productive bodily pleasure in the trilogy, with characters whose 'imperfectly controlled gagging and shitting is held and repossessed according to pleasures that remain comically perverse, and perhaps perversely comic, rather than more straightforwardly productive.'²¹⁰ The shit/vomit economy bypasses the wombtomb. This is also not necessarily a suicide: Pam/Prim's name, sex and death are all immaterial, quite literally. If we are to read the column as the colon, then true love can be neither in the rectum or the vagina; here it is nowhere, there is only excretion without ingress. Or rather, the life above in the light is nowhere. Pam/ Prim may be alive or dead: it is immaterial. Sexuality does not progress or decompose in terms of its expression, but rather its claim to 'truth' in the sense of Badiou's 'trou', or hole. The focus on anal sexuality in Beckett, therefore, must be read not as a turn towards a specifically male homosexuality, but instead queer sexuality.

The use of sections, or 'brief packets', in *How It Is* allows for the different scenarios to take place without any concrete clue as to their concatenation.²¹¹ We are in a colon and the text itself is shit, moved along with the peristaltic squeeze of white

²⁰⁹ Beckett's *Dantes*, p. 169.

²¹⁰ *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, p. 98.

²¹¹ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 29th January 1960, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 285.

space.²¹² The text moves to complicate temporality through the body itself,

my wife above Pam Prim can't remember can't see her she shaved her
mound never saw that I talk like him I do we're talking of me like him
little blurts midget grammar past that then plof down the hole²¹³

The text moves from the invisible body of the wife — the pubic mound, no less — to the discussion of how the 'narration' is constructed, or where it originates. There are echoes of *Happy Days* here, where the mound is a literal obstacle to sexuality for Winnie and Willie, as a rather unfriendly bystander questions 'what good is she to him like that?'²¹⁴ The text here plays with whether or not Pim actually saw Pam/Prim's 'mound', giving her a curious suspended presence as a possibility. Her name also draws her into a tantalising proximity to Pim: either the central vowel is changed, or another consonant is added. In either case, the most minor of adjustments is made: a replacement or an addition, but not a subtraction. Pam/Prim participates in the same economy of agglutinative sameness as Bom, if only in name. This happens in a curious kind of reversal in *Molloy*, as Molloy states that 'And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on

²¹² Peristaltic flow has already been theorized in Beckett's earlier texts. Adam Michael Winstanley, 'First dirty, then make clean: Samuel Beckett's Peristaltic Modernism, 1932-1958', (PhD thesis. The University of York, 2013). Peristalsis is also appropriate here because it signals the moment of ingress or excretion that undergirds a problematic movement – often characterised as a leap – between the somatic and psychic body. Examples of work on peristalsis and its relationship to modernity include: Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Jean Walton, 'Modernity and the Peristaltic Subject' in *Neurology and Modernity: A Cultural History of Nervous Systems, 1800-1950*, ed. Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 245-266.

²¹³ *How It Is*, p. 66.

²¹⁴ Samuel Beckett, 'Happy Days' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 157.

it, better than any other letter would have done.²¹⁵ Letters, when added, can subtract and, when subtracted, seem to add. The discussion of this name, and its precedence as ‘ma’ tumbles first into ‘da’, and then into Molloy’s usual claim that it doesn’t matter, and he could instead refer to her as ‘Countess Caca’ on account of her incontinence.²¹⁶ The relationship between shit and text is well documented, but in Beckett this anal-tropic move amounts to an amusing avoidance of the problem of gender. Man or woman, his protagonists seem to wonder, what does it matter? Their anus and its propensities seem to be the bigger semiotic issue.

The juxtaposition of this sexual imagery with the concern with speech seems to suggest a sexual formation of language that is happening here. One could interpret the ‘never saw’ as the narrator never seeing his wife’s mound, or one could interpret it as the wife never seeing how he speaks. If the latter, there is quite a distinct queer reading here: she ‘never saw that I talk like him’, implying a homosexual attraction, not only as Leo Bersani would suggest through sameness but on a less theoretical level, through a gay accent or dialect, like polari. Queerness is associated with its own code or speech, and although it is not decided that it is specifically being evoked here, there is certainly another type of speech being described in ‘little blurts midget grammar’. Although the ableist term ‘midget’ suggests a denigrating tone, there is also a gesture towards the queer as in pathologised outsider here, as a form of embodiment that impinges on signification. A ‘blurt’ is also not usually a considered act of speech, so there is an implication of a slip of the tongue, which might suggest that the homosexuality implied was implied by accident, or perhaps simply emphasising the

²¹⁵ *Molloy*, p. 14.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

lack of control that Pim has over his utterances. Where exactly is the ‘midget grammar’ here? Is this referring to the lack of punctuation in the text itself? The following ‘plop down the hole’ echoes the use of Pim’s anus as the letter ‘o’ later on, further confusing language and matter, or lack thereof. As Caselli suggests, ‘the main fiction of *How It Is/Comment c’est* is that of constructing itself as a voice (communication in progress) while being a written text’.²¹⁷ It is during the fraught construction of a relationship between voice and text that the relationality of Pim and Bom seems to struggle with numbers, or the operation of difference and repetition.

Although, as Stewart rightly notes, ‘the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual, male and female, may not be sufficiently well-defined to allow a simple crossing of borders and reallocation of established sexual identities, and, indeed, may call into question such allocations’, there is something amusing about the frequency with which *How It Is* gets incredibly close to genitalia but doesn’t quite get there.²¹⁸ If Beckett is simply enacting erasure of gender and sexuality or the prospect of a fluidity that so frequently appears in mainstream literature, film and media, then why is the presence of sexuality in his work so glaring and so recalcitrant to heterosexuality?²¹⁹ Perhaps this is primarily because — like and often tied to modes of whiteness, as will be adumbrated in the following chapters — heterosexuality relies on the unstable categories of normativity, universality and invisibility in order to produce and reproduce itself: Beckett’s work, in viciously undercutting the ‘fluid’ facets of mastery

²¹⁷ Beckett’s *Dantes*, p. 148.

²¹⁸ *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*, p. 102.

²¹⁹ An excellent example of this is Rosanna McLaughlin’s essay on erasure of lesbians via sameness, which might equally apply to Beckett’s work were it not for the contestation of the very concept of sameness and difference and its relation to desire: Rosanna McLaughlin, ‘Ariana Grande and the Lesbian Narcissus’, *The White Review*, <<http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/ariana-lesbian-narcissus/>> [Accessed 5 April 2022]

that allow it to act, does not necessarily undo that mastery as much as give it a specificity that it then is only able to disavow. As Sedgwick suggests in *Between Men*, homosociality — far from a fluid shade of intimacy — shores up homophobic institutional practices. This is an example of ways in which fluidity — of the kind that might not allow for identities, boundaries and definitions at all — does not always, or perhaps ever, mean queer.

Earlier in the text, Pim finds ‘what seems to me a testicle or two the anatomy I had’.²²⁰ Beckett’s works are littered with ambiguous balls and mounds.²²¹ *How It Is* is no exception: ‘she grew good God calling her home the blue mound strange idea not bad she must have been dark on the deathbed it grew again’,²²² tending to favour these over sparser mentions of genitalia ‘proper’.²²³ Towards the end of *How It Is*, in one of the final disavowals of the content of the text, the narrator states, ‘little scenes yes all balls yes the women yes the dog yes the prayers yes the homes yes all balls yes’.²²⁴ Although colloquially this of course is another attempt to erase what is almost impossible to erase, the use of testicles to denote this is not insignificant: body parts previously playing a role in reproduction are instead used to obliterate the possibility of teleological meaning. The significance of this is its reaching towards, but not

²²⁰ *How It Is*, p. 46.

²²¹ One might think of *Happy Days* and *Breath* as two examples of literal mounds, but also the rotunda in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, as well as ‘Emma’s motte’, an arcane term for a historical site of a castle or camp applied to the pubic mound. (*All Strange Away*, p. 172) The ‘little body little block genitals’ are another example of ambiguous genitalia. (*Lessness*, p. 198) Perhaps most famously, *Molloy* offers ambiguous testicles, ‘Perhaps she too was a man, yet another of them. But in that case surely our testicles would have collided, while we writhed. Perhaps she held hers tight in her hand, on purpose to avoid it.’ (*Molloy*, p. 56).

²²² *How It Is*, p. 66.

²²³ ‘My so-called virile member’ *Molloy*, p. 56. ‘The penis, he said, you know what the penis is, there between the legs. Ah that! I said.’ *The Calmative*, p. 73. ‘When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so.’ *Enough*, p. 186.

²²⁴ *How It Is*, p. 127.

finding, its object. Remaining in the realm of mathematics means remaining in the possibility of negotiating between identity, sexuality and definition: although these might be unstable, to render them fluid would be to subscribe to the logic of mastery.

Beckett's letters may give an insight into the mathematical problem that this anticomunal sexuality ultimately poses in *How It Is*. Whereas in the letters, Beckett hasn't perhaps the motive to short circuit his emotions — nor indeed should anyone in a personal missive — in *How It Is* the most flagrant reference to Sade is also the key to this problem. When Bom is imagining what Pim is thinking while teaching him, violently, to respond, he imagines that Pim thinks, 'not that I should cry that is evident since when I do I am punished instanter | sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry'.²²⁵ Thus, Bom recognises a fundamental component of sadism, which is the response of the victim: the feedback loop. Pim cannot cry because he is only repeating what is being spoken to him. Therefore, no reaction is possible outside of the reportedly dictated narrative. This is the narcissistic impossibility of relations as described by Freud: while we see echoes of narcissism on Beckett's part, in *How It Is* this is taken to its logical conclusion.

Beckett's usual performative, humorous misery in fiction occasionally nosedives into a banality of sentiment in the letters that is all the more awful for its clarity and familiarity. He delineates the most taxing aspects of his schedule to Barbara Bray: 'I have to go to Paris tomorrow for three or four days. Relief to fly from this Pim hell and I won't have driven ten miles before I'll be fidgeting to get back to it.'²²⁶ This classic relationship of simultaneous love and hatred for one's work is recognisable, but as the

²²⁵ Ibid, p. 54.

²²⁶ Ibid, p. 260.

letters continue, the pithy self-pity meanders down a spiralling staircase of outright moaning: 'Quite lost in Pim. Shall either | 1 bungle it | 2 give it up | 3 keep writing it for years | no doubt as always the first'.²²⁷ These two quotations represent *How It Is* as a minotaur's labyrinth: hellish, difficult, capacious, oddly rewarding and yet most certainly a trap. This relationship to existence can be found within the text itself, as Pim in Part One hopes, 'it can't be far a bare yard it feels far' and by the end of the paragraph states 'so with little horizontal hoists it moves away it's a help to go like that piecemeal it helps me'.²²⁸ The impression of vast space in *How It Is* is repeatedly returned to, conjuring in comparison to the 'little horizontal hoists' a vision of extreme difficulty and a severely restricted mobility. The 'piecemeal' way in which Pim moves is an ironic counterpart to the short sections into which the text itself is divided, which far from helping the reader in fact creates difficulty, with no seeming parallel between the blank spaces and division of clauses. The lack of boundaries in Pim's mud corresponds to the absence of the full stop in our own. Whereas in the letters, Beckett's 'no doubt as always the first' returns bathetically to the prospect of failure and the number one — no doubt because of how much more pleasant it makes his relationship with the recipient — *How It Is* retains its focus on the struggle and discomfort at hand, in terms of literal and figurative space. Despite this quotation's similar structure to the text, in terms of numbered sections, Beckett is acting more Sade than Beckett, simply because his humour and the ensuing relief returns him to a certainty — ontologically and emotionally — that is not afforded in his fiction. Where the letters and *How It Is* become most jarring or uncanny is precisely where a

²²⁷ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 8th December 1959, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 262.

²²⁸ *How It Is*, p. 22.

possibility for reciprocity or communication appears unbidden; where the prescribed sadist continuum of interaction between victim and torturer is momentarily broken, and it is possible to imagine a relation, of sorts.

The process of forming the structure of *How It Is* is revealed in the letters as a subtraction, 'trying to break up into short units the continuum contrived with such difficulty.'²²⁹ Beckett's elaborations on this process only seem to further complicate the text itself, as he instructs, 'break it all up into brief packets, anything from seven lines to one, with space between them, not easy because of all the conjunctival elements to be got rid of.'²³⁰ If there were one term that did not seem to encapsulate the sections of *How It Is* it would be 'packet', with its implications of neat self-containment. Beckett finishes the very same letter with the entreaty, '[y]ou speak of the happiness one gives and gets. The situation I see is one where no matter what I do pain will ensue somewhere for someone.'²³¹ While Beckett's glib and sarcastic gallows humour is often called up for vox pops and epigraphs, this particular sentiment is hard to redirect into the same humorous economy as his texts. The letter, here, appears to indulge in something that the text always manages to avoid: self-pity. There is something remote about the action of self-pity in the letters that cannot be scooped up again by the cycles of violence in the prose. As Beckett suggests, the lack of the ability to cry about sadism occurring and instead the projection of a sadistic relationship as being on a much larger scale, with the entire world, and a matter of inevitability, makes sadism not quite itself. As Beauvoir suggests in 'Must We Burn Sade?',

²²⁹ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 22nd January 1960, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume III: 1957-1965*, p. 282.

²³⁰ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 29th January 1960, in *ibid*, p. 285.

²³¹ *Ibid*.

To inflict enjoyment — Sade understood this 150 years before the psychoanalysts, and his works abound in victims submitted to pleasure before being tortured — can be a tyrannical violence; and the torturer disguised as lover delights to see the credulous lover, swooning with voluptuousness and gratitude, mistake cruelty for tenderness.²³²

Likewise, in the letters a kind of tenderness could be mistaken for cruelty — perhaps jouissance — having read enough of Beckett's wooing and complaining, were it not for this overarching pessimism.

Cruelty in *How It Is* takes on a structure more complex than simply victim and torturer, or even the taking up of active and passive roles. A convenient framework for understanding how sadism in Beckett differs from Sade's sadism — other than in its numerical relationship to otherness — might be through a psychoanalytic understanding of the formation and degradation of pairs. It is worth quoting Freud at length to draw out this difference,

It is also illuminating that the existence of the pair of opposites, sadism and masochism, cannot simply be deduced by the presence of aggression. On the other hand, one might be tempted to connect such simultaneously existing opposites with the opposites of male and female united in bisexuality, for which active and passive can often be used in psychoanalysis.²³³

²³² Simone de Beauvoir, 'Must We Burn Sade?' in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom and Other Writings* (London: Arrow, 1991), p. 11.

²³³ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychology of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 136.

Freud does not attribute aggression to the sadistic party and lack thereof to the masochistic party. This is how gender in Freud is provisionally structured: male as active and female as passive. Freud notes at various points that the designation is woefully inadequate, despite continuing to draw on it. This is akin to gender in *How It Is*, accompanied by the uncertain ensuing repetition of ‘something wrong there’.²³⁴ However, here Freud notes that both sadism and masochism tend to be observed happening in the same individual, and therefore bisexuality is evoked by this comparison. The continuum that Freud suggests here is critical because it informs debates that have been raging in sexuality studies regarding binary positioning within gender and sexuality. Judith Roof suggests that this is ultimately the downfall of contemporary studies; however, Freud here offers an alternative structure.²³⁵ As Shanna T. Carlson notes, Freud’s drawing together of ‘bisexuality as related to psychical hermaphroditism and/or physical hermaphroditism, as well as bisexuality as homo- plus heterosexuality’, is generative for the confluence of psychoanalysis and gender studies.²³⁶ Freud uses ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ almost as placeholders here, noting that ‘active’ and ‘passive’ are used in their place. Zupančič takes this further, noting that in Lacan, ‘sexual difference [...] is the consequence — not simply of the signifying order but of *the fact that something is lacking in it* (and that, at the same time, there is something excessive in it — surplus-enjoyment).’²³⁷ Zupančič’s Lacan here explains the persistence of the usage of the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in Freud even while they are dismissed as inaccurate; they appear to be echoes of the

²³⁴ *How It Is*, p. 46.

²³⁵ ‘Is There Sex after Gender? Ungendering/“The Unnameable”’.

²³⁶ Shanna T. Carlson, ‘Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference’, *Differences*, 21.2 (2010), p. 48.

²³⁷ *What is Sex?*, pp. 60-61.

spatio-mathematical nature of the problem of gender. As Carlson notes, in Lacan these two terms denote a range of phenomena, 'two different logics, (...) modes of existence in the symbolic, (...) approaches to the Other, (...) stance with respect to desire,' to name a few, but nothing to do with any conventional definition of gender.²³⁸ Even here, terminology such as 'stance' and 'approaches' point towards the spatial inscription of this problem.

Beckett's almost ekphrastic reinterpretation of the diagrammatic relationship in *How It Is* illustrates the pertinence of this theory to the work. Aggression and violence in Beckett's works are rarely a serious matter: pain and beatings take on a *Punch and Judy* form of suspended belief. That is, even in cases where violence is grievous, comedy or absurdity often counterbalance it. Even on a macro level, there is a form of balance. This brings us to the examples of masculinity and femininity that exist in *How It Is*. The first section of the text is a barrage of women: specifically, a woman, a mother, a 'mamma' and a girl. Categories of people function very similarly to categories of space and time in that they do not work towards the characterisation or establishment of a setting, and rather act not precisely as placeholders, but rather place is foregrounded as their mode of existence. The uncertainty of 'holding' a 'place' wanes into the naming necessary to act out that holding, finding itself already mistaken for the intended occupant. Rather than framing sexuality as something that reaches towards this absent place, *How It Is* asks not what should be there, but rather, what the implications would be of broadening that space. This is not a redemptive process; this text does not create space for a plethora of multiplying genders ad

²³⁸ 'Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference', p. 64.

infinitum. The space is opened up here *as* space, rather than in an epistemological sense as simply 'room'. Room is not made for meaning, it is made for the signifiers that are already present to crawl around in. What does it mean to give something like gender a mode of expansion that admits, still, only of this quality as a placeholder?

While Peter Boxall notes that in *Molloy* there is an extension of the hand into the horizon in what amounts to a queer production of space, or desire as self-extension, desire in *How It Is* seems to hinge instead on scale. That is, not space as material, but space as relational. The use of space is different from the white rotunda texts not only in terms of size, but in terms of how that size is calculated. Here it deviates from Sade too, in whom one can read the rotunda quite flagrantly and is therefore worth quoting at some length,

it was in the shape of a semicircle; in the curved part of the room were four alcoves lined with vast mirrors and each adorned with a splendid ottoman; these four alcoves were built directly facing the diameter, cutting the circle in half; a throne raised four feet high was set against the wall forming the diameter – this was for the storyteller, a position which not only meant she was facing the four alcoves intended for her listeners but also, as the circle was small, ensured she was not too far from them, and indeed that they would not miss a word of her narration,²³⁹

²³⁹ *The 120 Days of Sodom or, The School of Libertinage*, p. 45.

This intense attention to geometric detail will be read back through *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *All Strange Away* in Chapters Two and Three, but finds its genesis in Beckett's work in the numerical repetitions of *How It Is*. Where repetition and amusingly superfluous measurements and geometry can be found in works from the 1950s and earlier, *How It Is* synthesises these into a world view. The repetition of the value 'four' here, to number the niches as well as the height of the throne in feet, the noting of curvature, direction, and the focus on relationality in particular all render this text close to indistinguishable from the 1960s prose. It is the curious opacity of geometry ekphrastically rendered into words that draws attention to not only the setting here but also the potential exhaustion inherent in the geometrical or numerical. That is, not only is a woman narrating a story to the chateau's occupants, but time must be spent elucidating the position in which she does so: the walls, the plinth, the seating arrangements, and so on. The vantage point of the narrator here means that the listeners will both hear her story and be able to see her as she tells it, but the semi-circular shape denotes the breakage in this loop.

With *How It Is*, there is a clear formal turn towards a rhythmic, mathematical mode that was inchoate and even realised in earlier texts, but never quite with the promised job of manhandling necessary to parse the 'brief packets', which in fact do not behave very much like packets at all. In fact, one thing that it seems is rarely admitted about *How It Is* is the difficulty of reading it, if not in terms of comprehension, then at the very least in terms of the torturous subject matter itself. Critics often liken the process of reading it to a physical act: grappling or feeling one's way, sensing distance and proximity to meaning. V. S. Pritchett, on the book's release in English, suggested that '[t]he (...) book, which is incomprehensible until one catches

the tune and reads it aloud – but strictly to oneself – is basically to be heard, not read.²⁴⁰ This perhaps illustrates the text’s difficulty: Pritchett posits a mode of reading that is suggested *within* the text itself; the characters repeat ‘I say it as I hear it’.²⁴¹ While reading the text out loud to oneself certainly does draw out the refrains, it also does not necessarily establish rhythm. After all, any possible marker of rhythm has been removed, and emphasis is very much a matter of experimentation: of re-reading. However, Pritchett is not alone in this suggestion. Paul Kintzele suggests that, ‘the lack of punctuation leads one to read the novel as an *oral* performance. As Ursula K. Heise observes, “*How It Is* does everything to discourage the reader from thinking of it as a written narrative.”’²⁴² Why does Kintzele view punctuation in particular as a way of associating written language with ‘text on the page’ rather than spoken language? In a recent staged version of *How It Is*, Gare St Lazare chose to seat the audience on the stage, with the actors moving around the auditorium: sometimes in the seating area, sometimes on the stage, sometimes unseen in the dark. It is a testament to the sheer power of the prescriptive tone in the text, as well as the difficulty of reading any text without punctuation, that responses to it have chosen to purposefully subvert what some critics have in the same breath — or should I say, sentence — referred to as a novel. Aurality is certainly a focus, as is clear at the beginning of Part Two,

flat assuredly but slightly arched none the less modesty perhaps the
innate kind it can’t have been acquired and so a little hog-backed

²⁴⁰ V. S. Pritchett, ‘No Quaqua’, *New Statesman*, 1st May 1964. Sourced in: The Beckett Collection, University of Reading (BC MS 4299).

²⁴¹ *How It Is*, p. 3.

²⁴² Paul Kintzele, ‘Pim’s Progress: The Trouble with Language in Beckett’s “How It Is”’, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui*, 12 (2002), pp. 305-306.

straddling the slit whence contact with the right cheek less pads than
nails second cry of fright assuredly but in which I seemed to catch
orchestra-drowned a faint flageolet of pleasure already fatuity on my
part it's possible²⁴³

The genital ambiguity here must be pointed out: 'straddling the slit' could refer to the slit or crack of the arse, but more conventionally 'slit' refers to a vulva; this is confirmed in *Molloy* when infantile anal sexuality is referred to, 'oh not the bung hole I had always imagined, but a slit'.²⁴⁴ Thus, along with testicles, there appears to be a vulva. As Pim begins his steady sadistic campaign of impossible scratching into Bom's back, Bom's first cry seems to be orchestral — or otherwise, that other noise is orchestral — in any case, the orchestra in question is obscuring a vague and uncertain pleasure that Pim might have experienced. The 'flageolet' is a small member of the fipple flute family, which explains its usage here, but also a type of bean, suggesting that — possibly — Pim has farted. Here is another instance of humour that is gradually siphoned into something else entirely: these two possibilities illustrate the problem of *jouissance* in *How It Is*. Is pleasure part of a pure, Modernist aesthetic, or is it not aesthetically pleasing at all?

How It Is presents interplay between musicality and noise. In Part Three, there are several moments when a series of five- or six-digit numbers are cycled through in rapid succession. This is first introduced with,

²⁴³ *How It Is*, p. 44.

²⁴⁴ *Molloy*, p. 56.

as for example our course a closed curve and let us be numbered 1 to 1000000 then number 1000000 on leaving his tormentor number 999999 instead of launching forth into the wilderness towards an inexistent victim proceeds towards number 1

Then, a few paragraphs later, 'it's preferable clearer picture if only four of us and so numbered only 1 to 4'.²⁴⁵ However, turn over the page and the recalcitrant six figures return again,

for when number 814336 describes number 814337 to number 814335 and number 814335 to number 814337 for example he is merely in fact describing himself to two lifelong acquaintances'²⁴⁶

One can only speculate how Pritchett found the 'rhythm' in these passages. The eye skips over the numbers more easily than the tongue, but they remain a sticking point, their size and difficulty expressing vividly the trouble of thinking numerically. The image is played with, beginning with the full scale (1-1000000), shrinking for clarity, modelling the structure (1-4), and finally choosing seemingly random numbers (814337 etc). This foregrounding of scale as a mode of hermeneutics is akin to that described in *Imagination Dead Imagine* in Chapter Three, hinging on a relationship to scale that allows the text to exist in an 'as if' space — quite literally a space — as there is no possibility of falling into language or code here. The expansiveness of the numbers

²⁴⁵ *How It Is*, p. 102.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 105.

creates a cognitive dissonance, a reminder of the ‘closed curve’ that continues to threaten to break due to its sheer volume, or conversely, its sheer impossibility. What this means in terms of ontology is that *everything* is scaled. This might also be read as an example of visual or cognitive ‘noise’; the problem with scale is also the problem of too much sound, too many numbers: the sensory overload aspect of boredom. This is elaborated on in Chapter Three. To return to Detournay’s analysis: a conception of difference as quantifiable is what undergirds essentialist gender politics. What can be read in *How It Is*, therefore, is a new way to approach gender.

This mode of difference is played out on the level of embodiment. Beckett’s preoccupation with the emotive quality of hands is present, as it is in other 1960s prose works, in *How It Is*.²⁴⁷ The hand, as perhaps the entire body in this text, is brought into a metonymic sexual relation that simultaneously gestures towards and away from intercourse, ‘better a big ordinary watch complete with heavy chain he holds it tight in his fist my index worms through the clenched fingers and says a big ordinary watch complete with heavy chain’.²⁴⁸ This instance of parallelism within a single paragraph makes the clause that begins ‘he holds’ and ends ‘and says’ distinctly clearer than the other more amorphous clauses the text presents. The image of the hand is especially clear, with the fingers of the protagonist working their way through Pim’s clenched hand, which has formed an orifice for it to invade. This image is indisputably sexual, miming an act of penetration and performing it at the same time.

The introduction of Krim and Kram in part three sees this gestural mode of sexuality further sustained,

²⁴⁷ For further analysis of hands in the œuvre, see Chapter Two.

²⁴⁸ *How It Is*, p. 50.

forbidden to touch him we might relieve him Krim is all for it and be
damned clean his buttocks at least wipe his face what do we risk no one
will know you never know safer not

dreamt of the great Kram the Ninth the greatest of us all up to date
never met him more's the pity grandpa remembered him raving mad
before the limit brought up by force trussed like a faggot Krim vanished
never seen again²⁴⁹

It is notable that this, perhaps the first reference to anal sex between men, comes two pages before Pam re-enters the narrative, with 'efforts to resuscitate through the arse' and 'lies about mistletoe'.²⁵⁰ Sex between a man and a woman is dropped in favour of this secretive homosexual liaison and followed by a homophobic slur. The slur is particularly interesting because it is both a vulnerable moment of reveal and an example of the pivotal role of cruelty in intimacy in *How It Is*: where the homophobic speaker instantly reveals that the opposite is also true, that is, that he has repressed homosexual feelings that emerge as anger or aggression; in *How It Is*, anger is no longer recognisable as different from desire. All intensities are bisexual, to return to the Freud that was mentioned previously.²⁵¹ The hostility in *How It Is*, therefore, is part of a scale of activity and passivity that also encompasses sexual difference. Since the relations in *How It Is* are set up like a vicious relay race, so too the relationship between activity and passivity, and sexual difference, become only ever placeholding

²⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 71.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 73.

²⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychology of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 136.

positions. The language of desire at the end of the text is particularly telling of this, ‘Krim is all for it and be damned’ suggesting there is a desire for touch that contravenes something unspoken — the cliché being ‘X be damned!’ — then followed by ‘no one will know you never know safer not’. The prohibition of touching with the suggestion of danger as a result thereof directly before a homophobic slur gives the impression of illicit homosexual desire.

Copjec might as well be quoting *Disjecta* once removed when she says, ‘the point is that sex is the structural incompleteness of language, not that sex itself is incomplete.’²⁵² Zupančič unpacks this with an analysis of Deleuze and Lacan on the death drive, who find that it ‘cannot be thought of in terms of the simple opposition between life and death, because it is precisely what belies this opposition and (re)configures it in the first place.’²⁵³ Repetition itself ‘does not only repeat something (an “object”), it also repeats difference as such.’²⁵⁴ Zupančič continues, ‘Pure difference repeats itself with every individual difference, and it is only through and in relation to this repetition as pure difference that the things exist which we can describe as different, similar, or the same.’²⁵⁵ This proximity of difference and repetition, as theorised by Deleuze and taken further here by Zupančič, can be applied to the way that sex is presented in *How It Is*. The emphasis here is on the *structural* incompleteness that sex posits: if, as Lisa Palac notes, ‘sex is eroticised repetition’, then when Butler notes that, “Agency” would then be the double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where “to be constituted” means “to be compelled to

²⁵² Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 206.

²⁵³ *What is Sex?*, p. 112.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

cite or repeat or mime” the signifier itself’, then sexuality is a fundamental component of constitution by a signifier.²⁵⁶ What Beckett enacts is a revelation that this sexuality *must* be queer by dint of its inexhaustible ties to reiteration in order to exist: the making-explicit of this process, precisely, is what makes it queer, because this framework no longer supports the compulsory heterosexual readings that this text has long suffered from. Through the lens of *Sodom*, *How It Is* begins to reckon with these ideas of limitation, quantification and communication in the context of signification itself and in particular in relation to sexuality: it is possible to see the beginning of a mode of placeholder that resists and undermines heterosexual frameworks.

²⁵⁶ *Pornography and Sexual Representation: A Reference Guide*, p. 723; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, Routledge Classics (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 167.

‘Details later’: minimalism, gender and sexuality in *All Strange Away*

*Fucking leaves everything as it is. Fucking may in no way interfere with the actual use of language. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.*²⁵⁷

Sex in *All Strange Away* is explicit and succinct, constricted but coarse. The formal elements of Beckett’s writing — its techniques and movements which coincide with but, as will be shown, do not necessarily fall under the remit of postmodern movements in literature and art — constitute a radical intervention in the unfolding and juxtaposition of sex and embodiment. These two modes that might seem different at first — sex and embodiment — are reconstituted within Beckett’s œuvre, and especially during the period of so-called minimalism or ‘rotunda texts’ that was the 1960s.

If Freud’s dialectic of pairs can help to demystify the relationship between gender, torture, and geometry in *How It Is*, then as the 1960s progress Beckett’s relationship with numbers only proceeds further towards a reckoning with zero. Beckett’s writing has been frequently characterised by critics across disciplines and eras as a part of the minimalist genre, with particular relevance to the visual arts and music.²⁵⁸ His involvement and collaboration with Philip Glass, Sol Le Witt, Jasper Johns and Morton Feldman has informed the development of minimalism, notably in

²⁵⁷ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2009), p. 8.

²⁵⁸ Brater, 1987; Bersani, 1993; Cunningham, 2005; Bell, 2011; Chesney, 2012; Walls, 2015.

regard to its attitudes towards structural convention. Beckett's writing itself does not fit easily within the boundaries of minimalism in the sense that it is aesthetically sparse; instead it participates in a minimalist action or drive. It is perhaps for this reason that so many readings of Beckett describe a fragmented quality. It is fissures in comprehension and relation that are made most prominent and, though content persists, narrators profess to seek perpetually to negate or erase it, failing repeatedly in their task. Hermeneutics in Beckett is forced through an enjambment of conjured imaginings. An imbrication of first, second, third and 'last person' — or talking to oneself in the first person — accumulates perspectives through which the text then participates in its own conceptual purging, or lessening, to the point of resisting reception.²⁵⁹ Using Lacanian psychoanalysis alongside gender studies and under the broader umbrella of queer theory — a field well used to the idea of breakage or ill-fitting-ness — to address this problem can answer not what the condition of Beckett's fragments is, since they may not after all be fragmented themselves, but what is fragmenting about his writing or why the fragment is the place where so many criticisms are forced to stop in their understanding of these texts.

The action of curiously counterintuitive accumulative negation is clear from the opening lines of *All Strange Away*. The start of the text seems conscious of its clichéd position as beginning and uncomfortable with the temporal certitude implied; by only the third sentence the narrator deplores 'no, not that again.'²⁶⁰ The narration is, hilariously, already bored. These three words might be the best way to approach an understanding of what Beckett's late works do with hermeneutics: hilariously, already,

²⁵⁹ Samuel Beckett, 'All Strange Away', in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 169.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

bored. What is perceived as minimal in Beckett's late prose is in fact a result of the temporal dynamics of the text, which are altered from a teleological progression through the use of spatial accumulation, both in the sense of what is being described in the text and similarly the text itself as physical entity. The sexual explicitness that persists through and as a component of this lessening reconstitutes how the sexual can be read: a concomitant use of queerness can circumvent the possibility of falling into definitional problems of sexuality.

Queer Accumulations

In an essay on gender in Beckett's dramas, scholar of feminist theory and Modernist literature Shari Benstock wonders how, as some of Beckett's characters are not pronounced male or female, these subjects came into being, asking 'Were they produced by some extra-sexual force?'²⁶¹ Surprisingly, this remark reveals something about sexuality in Beckett. Benstock assumes that if a body is not gendered either male or female, it is not strictly human. Clearly, a subject that cannot be assigned male or female was not produced differently, biologically speaking. However, the sexualities made possible by the simultaneous reification and indifference toward gender may appear 'extra-sexual' to a reading that assumes a strict and readable gender binary. Combining this with the on-occasion violent intimacies that Beckett offers, Benstock's approach cannot help but create a paradox. It is necessary, as in Chapter One, to carefully differentiate here between sex, sexuality and gender. In the face of this

²⁶¹ Shari Benstock, 'The Transformational Grammar of Gender in Beckett's Dramas', in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 173.

immovable gender and unstoppable sexuality, alternative hermeneutic manoeuvres are necessary.

In *All Strange Away*, it appears that the professed rendering of these bodies as primarily spatial is attempted by the narration in relation to the sexual in an effort to exert distance or mastery over desire. It is true that the text is both spatially and temporally hermetic to the point of avoiding a reproductive angle on sexuality, but this does not preclude the dominance of sexuality as such. What is perceived as ‘authentically’ sexual — take genitalia, for example — is not erased but instead levelled. As Freeman suggests, queer time ‘would refuse to write the lost object into the present, but try to encounter it already in the present, by encountering the present itself as hybrid.’²⁶² Freeman here outlines the ways in which a collective and individual past might be hybridised in a queer subject, whereby a ‘part-whole relation’ is recreated through hybridity rather than through a process of, for example, nostalgia.²⁶³ Likewise the ‘extra-sexual’, itself constituted by the text’s temporal waxing and waning, remains in the present, already encountered in hybridity. It is this queer temporo-spatial relation that informs the ways in which intimacy is drawn. *All Strange Away*, by refusing to draw a clear line between Emma and Emmo, locates this hybridity in both subjectivity and sexuality, focussing on the motion of sexual intercourse outside of gender, and then returning to it as a diaphanous attribute of body parts that are traditionally not relied upon for the signification of gender.

²⁶² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 14.

²⁶³ Ibid. This recalls Beckett’s conceptualisation of ‘total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object’, which will be addressed later in the chapter. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: J. Calder, 1983), p. 138.

Relationality is the aspect of Beckett's late prose that aligns so neatly with a queer reading: a questioning of limit that spreads itself, not without antagonism, into a desire that moves through gender and by vexing its borders. This is in part made possible by the use of pornography. José Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, speaks of an anti-anti-relationality in response to Lee Edelman and prior to this, Bersani's theorisation of the queer anti-relational turn. Both of these strands of queer theory consider the notion of a limit, or the possible absence of one, which is also a central concern in pornography studies. *All Strange Away* has been described unflinchingly as pornographic due to the explicit sexual acts that it describes, but it is also the cultural contingency of what is considered pornographic — and indeed its play with the idea of the limit — which makes it central to this text.²⁶⁴ Pornography fundamentally disrupts the assertion of difference or the 'limit' in relation to itself, but also literally by extension, in relation to what comes under its umbrella. This selectively permeable boundary informs the ways in which limit can operate. Boxall suggests that, in *The Calmative*,

the body in which the narrative voice is lodged becomes, itself, part of the scenery to which the narrator feels drawn, and from which he feels himself divorced²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Pornography functions as Sedgwick suggests sexuality does: 'Sexuality, like ideology, depends on the mutual redefinition and occlusion of synchronic and diachronic formulations.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Gender and Culture (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 15.

²⁶⁵ Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 122.

In the late prose, these embodied landscapes shrink further and further, as does the imaginative possibility of creating space between them both literally and figuratively, until the figures themselves constitute the walls of the space. The narration itself is in an impossible limbo with access to an impermeable space that cannot contain it, tenuously inhabiting the body in question or else irretrievably elsewhere, folding in on itself in the quest for form,

Murmuring, no sound, though say lips move with faint stir of hair,
whether none emitted or air too rare, Fancy is her only hope, or, She's
not here, or Fancy dead, suggesting moments of discouragement,
imagine other murmurs.²⁶⁶

Here the narration is imagined both to be emanating from above and from the mouth of the protagonist, similarly to other prose works of this era.²⁶⁷ It is perhaps significant that the voice is positioned thus, as it suggests a certain hierarchy or privileging, deconstructing within the diegetic landscape Jacques Derrida's privileging of parole over text. However, primarily the narration does not happen at all — it is not that no sound is made, or none is heard, but that none can be decided upon. The beginning of the sentence might always be contradicted. It seems that the narrator is limiting what is available. However, the conditions that follow suggest that the narrator is imagining possible things for the protagonist to say, even though she cannot say them. Even the air is thin, or 'rare', which seems to rhyme in a manner contrary to the register

²⁶⁶ *All Strange Away*, p. 174.

²⁶⁷ Such as *How It Is*, *Company*, *Texts for Nothing*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Ping*.

employed. The rhyming, though jovial, also seems to suggest the comfort of singing or chanting in traumatic situations, or perhaps in a hypnotic state — music as a mathematical function, as counting to counteract more complex cognition, or more intense sensation as in the act of counting sheep.

Although the scenario is bereft, the drive behind it is almost adorably naïve. This dissonance occurs, also, in *How It Is*, as mentioned in Chapter One in reference to the use of ‘pretty’.²⁶⁸ A particular kind of cuteness, camp or gothic — sometimes one and the same — seems to appear around moments of deathliness or overwrought geometrical precision in Beckett: a sarcastic or stylised casting of hope or vitality. This is the quality of the drive. However, its optimism is not oriented towards life. In fact, here quite clearly — if directed by ungrammatical capitalised words as designating shifts in tone or voice — the consciousness is wishing for the absence or death of Emma. I posit that this is an ‘homoerotic straining towards connectedness’.²⁶⁹ There is clearly no opportunity for any kind of reasonable life in this diegetic. The straining of the narrator doesn’t appear to desire something physical, just a connection in the form of narrative, or perhaps in the form of sex, or of mathematical proof. One may just as well be the other: the form of yearning does not take that of yearning for a futurity enclosed by heterosexuality but instead a communal and satisfying nothingness. Boxall suggests that desire and relationality in Beckett ‘might be grounded not in lack, but in self-extension’.²⁷⁰ What might appear as lack due to its aesthetic adherence to minimalist criteria appears to be a different extension, made possible by the spatio-temporal disruption of being itself.

²⁶⁸ Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, ed. Edouard Magessa O’Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 47.

²⁶⁹ ‘Beckett and Homoeroticism’, p. 125.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 119.

Spatio-temporal disruption in *All Strange Away* happens through Beckett's use of permutation and is present throughout the text like a refrain. The first instance of these permutations is much like the last, reeling through

Sitting, standing, walking, kneeling, crawling, lying, creeping, in the dark and in the light, try all. Imagine light. Imagine light.²⁷¹

Inculcated immediately, this process of listing becomes a familiar trope in *All Strange Away*. It creates a constriction, as each verb in its potentiality and variety of motion is locked into abstraction by being listed as a category. It is as if each were being ticked off as an option or eliminated in the search of something better. The use of the present tense and imperative creates immanence that is never given a subject, addressed possibly to an interlocutor or a character not yet revealed. Uncertainty at every level in *All Strange Away* is met with permutation. This use of permutation immediately, followed by the desperate 'try all', seeks to exhaust the possibilities of the text before the text is completed. The frequent negations — as the use of 'that again' might be described, an attempt to force a certain lack of authenticity into the concept of 'place', thereby in some sense negating it, similarly to the final lines of *The Unnamable* — are not the only force to be reckoned with when trying to eke sense out of *All Strange Away*. The narrator's repeated contradicting and correcting of themselves goes some way towards a destabilising of the fictional world, but does not dislodge it from its

²⁷¹ *All Strange Away*, p. 169.

status *as* world. However, in addition, there is a certain hysterical nervousness to the text that betrays its problem: it is late. Rather, it had already arrived.

Part Objects, Object Parts

Deleuze, describing exhaustion in Beckett's work, states of props in the play *Ghost Trio*, '[t]hese objects in the space are strictly identical to parts of space.'²⁷² One could equally say that these objects are permutations of the space. This brings the possibility of distinct perspectives into question. It is this use of permutation that confuses temporality in *All Strange Away*, and without a certain temporality, it is difficult to describe something as minimal. By necessity minimalism ought to be, either in a synchronic or diachronic sense, lessened — but if time can expand or contract unbidden by linearity, then what is possible must also open up, repeatedly defying its lessening drive. Queer hybridity can persist within the minimal, using the concept of hybridity as a way of preventing multiplication and instead allowing this vexed accretion to persist.

This defiance of lessening occurs at the level of the text's very materiality. Later in the work, after an exhaustive description of the positioning of Emma using letters algebraically to denote each corner of the space, the narrator laments, 'though neither [arse and knees] at either because too short and waste space here too some reason yet to be imagined.'²⁷³ The exhaustion described in the characters spills over into concern about the form of the words themselves, which 'waste space', suggesting that the

²⁷² Gilles Deleuze and Anthony Uhlmann, 'The Exhausted', *SubStance*, 24.3 (1995), p. 14.

²⁷³ *All Strange Away*, p. 173.

processes of minimising are anathema to producing a work that appears minimalist at first reception. This struggle between economy and chaos is perpetual. Deleuze's 'exhausted' is described as an 'amnesiac witness', in the sense that its exhausting has not happened as part of a sequence of time but rather — due to the nigh impossibility of its realisation — its limit, outside of the sequence of time, is 'already reached well before you know that the series is exhausted'.²⁷⁴ The witness has seen all but has forgotten and unknowingly resists the insidious concatenations of knowledge. Exhaustion necessitates permutations because it necessitates having exhausted the sequence, and therefore the permutations and the dwelling thereon in *All Strange Away* signal the impossibility of interpreting this text as a progression, which as Deleuze might suggest would denote tiredness, or the ability to continue to possibilite.

The work of lessening here produces text, as the use of 'here too' suggests a focus on the words themselves as forms on the page as opposed to the conjured diegetic world. For example, works by artists such as Agnes Martin and Li Yuan-chia, presented in an art museum, remain in a context whereby viewing them takes up time without resorting to the specificities of spatial demarcations. The possibility of interpreting or thinking around the artwork results from its impoverished form, but invites — or at the very least, does nothing to inhibit — imagining: something that the narrator of *All Strange Away* desperately attempts to shut down in the first three words, '[i]magination dead imagine'.²⁷⁵ If the imagination is indeed dead, how can one continue to respond to a minimal aesthetic? The next prose work that Beckett writes is

²⁷⁴ 'The Exhausted', p. 6, 8.

²⁷⁵ *All Strange Away*, p. 169.

entitled *Imagination Dead Imagine*, in an ironic continuation. The repetition of 'imagine light' at the beginning of the text speaks to Beckett's particular aesthetic, which not only abstracts but simultaneously accumulates, thereby rendering the abstract less a blank slate and more a palimpsest, upon which the previous erasures have been particularly vigorous. It is because it is juxtaposed to the list of verbs that 'imagine light' gains a certain absence. It might not have had this effect either as a lone couplet in a poem or as part of a description. The text invites reflection on and simultaneously tries to purge the questions: where? Onto what? These questions cannot be decided upon because the narrator is quite clear that none of these decisions will be correct or permanent, the two coming to mean the same. The light must remain light until the narrator decrees that it is not light and possibly never was. It was always already irrelevant — and so, therefore, is futurity. The child is evacuated from the room with Edelmanic precision: it is not meaninglessly that Edelman uses light as a metaphor in suggesting that homosexuality is 'the shadow of death that would put out the light of heterosexual reproduction,' which paradoxically sustains the possibility of the ideology of the family through its apparent opposition to it.²⁷⁶ While the shadow in *All Strange Away* has already arrived so too does the light repeatedly return, illuminating the fact that there were only ever perverts here in the first place, in the Freudian sense of the term.

L. A. J. Bell suggests that Beckett's work produces 'a partial version of an absent whole'.²⁷⁷ However, this ironically reductive understanding of minimalist practice

²⁷⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 114.

²⁷⁷ L. A. J. Bell, 'Between Ethics and Aesthetics: The Residual in Samuel Beckett's Minimalism', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 20.1 (2011), p. 36.

disregards one of the only instructive texts that Beckett provides us with on this topic. In *Three Dialogues*, Beckett states admiringly that Tal Coat's artwork is 'total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object'.²⁷⁸ Bell introduces an exteriority into this hermeneutic process that posits the existence of separate but relational realms: meaning as an external referent, something implied by the narrative and symbolic coherence of the 'internal' text. In Bell's imagined structure the text is an incomplete reiteration of a transcendental concept of wholeness — a further exteriority — that can never be achieved but instead closed in upon. This dialectic perhaps arises from Bell's juxtaposition of minimalism and miniaturism; thereby creating the assumption that minimalism takes something as its subject in the same way that a miniaturist might take a figure or image. However, as I will go on to show, minimalism does not always operate through, or cannot easily be characterised by a dualist structure of referencing wherein the transcendent and material are on separate planes that communicate without difficulty in a binary of high and low. This is the way in which Beckett's language can support the inherent 'absence' for which it has been so interrogated: it will not be obliterated by a diachronic binary that privileges understanding.

The infamous 'remainder' in Beckett's work is not only theoretical and conceptual but also specific and contingent. Critics of Beckett's work have interrogated this evincing of the text as fragment. Duncan McColl Chesney suggests that any attempt at interpreting Beckett 'fills in the gaps with unwarranted external

²⁷⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: J. Calder, 1983), p. 138.

material'.²⁷⁹ This approach to minimalism assumes that the artwork is created in a vacuum, separate from the complexity of a mundanity below aesthetics. David Cunningham, presenting an argument that goes against Chesney's characterisation of Beckett as a late Modernist, suggests instead that this strictly linear, temporal view of genre obfuscates the labour inherent in Beckett's minimal work — its definite or uncertain categorisation as minimalist notwithstanding — highlighting Beckett's 'ongoing resistance to the 'finalisation' of *any* aesthetic programme'.²⁸⁰ Cunningham instead refers to Beckett as performing an 'abstraction of social relations'.²⁸¹ It may be this that makes his writing so difficult to reconcile with a hermeneutics that would separate out the abstract from the social by naming it minimalist.

Minimalism via MoMA

There is reason to believe that Beckett may have had minimalism as a movement in the visual arts on his mind when writing *All Strange Away*. On August 4th 1964, just under two weeks before he began writing, Beckett went to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Amongst the exhibitions that he could have seen was one entitled 'American Painters as New Lithographers', featuring works by artists such as Lee Bontecou's *Third Stone* and *Fourth Stone*, which MoMA suggests 'echo[es] the *Prison* series of sculptures Bontecou was making at the time, in which menacing-looking objects, often mechanical parts and other leftovers the artist picked up on the street,

²⁷⁹ Duncan McColl Chesney, 'Beckett, Minimalism, and the Question of Postmodernism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 19.4 (2012), p. 644.

²⁸⁰ David Cunningham, 'Asceticism against Colour, or Modernism, Abstraction and the Lateness of Beckett', *New Formations*, 55.55 (2005), p. 114.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

are trapped behind striated bands of metal.²⁸² The lithographs — made using a process based on the immiscibility of oil and water, creating images through contrast almost as a medium in itself — centre around gaping absences, reminiscent of the later Edward Gorey illustrations accompanying the first publication of *All Strange Away*.²⁸³ Surrounding the text on both sides are inky expressions of terrorising blankness. In addition to works that veered towards abstract expressionism and more transcendental notions of representation, there were also works such as Helen Frankenthaler's *Brown Moons* and *May 26 Backwards* which, having a 'strong calligraphic quality', must have combined with Robert Motherwell's *Poet II* to draw language into the minimalist paradigm.²⁸⁴ It is of course possible that Beckett didn't go to this particular section of the museum, but it is worth noting that these works were produced contemporaneously, responding to the cultural atmosphere at the beginning of the 1960s in the USA, where Beckett had just spent a month. Just before his departure, he had also visited the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow, a celebration of all things futuristic and technological.²⁸⁵ Complementing the MoMA exhibition, here Beckett may have seen 'Two Design Programs: The Braun Company, Germany; The Chemex Corporation, USA'. This was full of the motifs of late twentieth-century notions of futurity: the curves and harsh lines of Art Deco stripped of their ornamentality. While *All Strange Away* admits of no horizon, never mind a future to

²⁸² 'Lee Bontecou. Fourth Stone. 1963 | MoMA', *The Museum of Modern Art* <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/70094>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

²⁸³ Samuel Beckett, *All Strange Away*, illus. Edward Gorey (New York, NY: Gotham Book Mart, 1976).

²⁸⁴ The Museum of Modern Art, New York, *American Painters as New Lithographers*, [press release] no. 21, May 27th 1964.

<https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3403/releases/MOMA_1964_Reopening_0029_1964-05-27.pdf> [Accessed 5th April 2022].

²⁸⁵ John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 166.

speak of, this sense of a generic aesthetic futurity, one that does not promise progression but something tangential to it, can be recognised in its internal logic. This becomes something like an eternal form that will make do instead of time: a monolithic idea of futurity that calls to a halt the very mechanism that enacts its production. There are aspects of this monolith that can be re-used and re-purposed to call into question its own internecine mechanisms.

Although Beckett's work portrays minimalist qualities rather than reaching for a pure or reduced core of meaning, it participates in the temporal dynamic of lessening and reducing. This quality of 'movement' that for Cunningham places Beckett outside of minimalism leads Leo Bersani to suggest that reading Beckett is 'a function of mobility rather than of understanding'.²⁸⁶ In Bersani, the labour imagined by Cunningham on the part of Beckett and in the political imagination of its reception has been transferred to its very exegesis. Bersani elaborates on this by suggesting that 'the aesthetic object has become a displaced subject', thereby divesting the work of authority and levelling it with its audience.²⁸⁷ Enoch Brater, in *Beyond Minimalism*, places Beckett outside of the genre for this social aspect.²⁸⁸ Cunningham refers to the 'lateness' of Beckett as characterised by 'a *resistance* to the 'concretisation' or aestheticisation of abstraction';²⁸⁹ but I would go further and suggest that it also characterises the anxious tone of the narration, in *All Strange Away* and in other works

²⁸⁶ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 4.

²⁸⁷ *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 37.

²⁸⁸ Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²⁸⁹ *Asceticism against Colour, or Modernism, Abstraction and the Lateness of Beckett*, p. 110.

written after 1960 or even 1955.²⁹⁰ To take one example, the obliteration of certain formal conventions, such as punctuation and paragraphs, becomes more prevalent. Although this is indeed an ‘obliteration’, what Cunningham seems to take quite literally is the narrator’s repeatedly professed drive to reduce: what occurs in the text is not a reduction but a permutation. ‘Short prose’ though they may be, these texts are not haikus; they remain doggedly short prose, lamenting their ‘waste [of] space’ even as they fill it. The reduction is not a literal diminishing, but a description of a drive to do so. Even *Breath*, lasting less than a minute, presents an audience with an enormous pile of rubbish, intimidating to tackle.

Perhaps the most useful conception of Beckett’s work as minimalist, therefore, is that which evokes this problem of the paradox or levelling which can never be reconciled either with the transcendental or the materialist. Bell, aptly, arrives at a tangent to this notion, suggesting that ‘minimalism (...) is intrinsically ‘beyond minimalism’’.²⁹¹ Rather than suggesting that there is indeed a beyond, this thesis allows interrogation of the spatial metaphor, both as it is used in and about Beckett. As Chapter One finds, Beckett’s interest in and contemporary reading about Sade informs the particular form of minimalism that begins in *How It Is*: an agglutinative one. Space and scale become both the medium and the stumbling block for expressions of desire, revealing a queer propensity to move away from a rigid theorisation of that space. Daniela Caselli, in the introduction to *Beckett and Nothing*, refers to the ‘promise and rebuff’ of materialism.²⁹² Where Bell suggests that Beckett

²⁹⁰ Ibid. I refer here to works such as *How It Is*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Enough*, *Ping*, *Lessness*, and *Fizzles*.

²⁹¹ *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: The Residual in Samuel Beckett’s Minimalism*, p. 50.

²⁹² Daniela Caselli, *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 12.

can ‘formalise the formless’, in fact it presents a ‘longing for form’ or a continual movement that can incorporate both hope and rejection: ‘a paradoxically impossible space, not immune, however, from dialectic movement’.²⁹³ This paradoxical motion informs Beckett’s minimalism, and is central to queer logic in *All Strange Away*: a relationship to paradox that does not attempt to define but instead locates lack as a crucial component. It participates in the kind of preterition that Eve Sedgwick describes regarding homosexuality, ‘the compilation of whose history requires acculturation in a rhetoric of the most pointed preterition’.²⁹⁴ It is a kind of flagrant omission of this sort that occurs in *All Strange Away*.

Beckett’s work, rather than pointing to this absent completeness, instead situates lack more clearly as a necessary and unavoidable component of comprehension. This causes the previously discussed effect of fragmentation and divestiture of authority, or indeed stability of understanding at any level — most notably of the concept of lack itself. It is this closeness of absence that prompts Boxall to note that ‘the erotics of contact and of proximity give way to a kind of failure,’ which ultimately folds back upon emptiness — instilled within closeness is nothingness, in Beckett’s embodiments and in the critical manoeuvres that have come about in response to his work.²⁹⁵ Nothing is, therefore, bound by the concrete. Concretion binds the ‘nothing’: the two rely on one another.²⁹⁶ Although, as Susan Sontag does in ‘Against Interpretation’, it is possible to dislocate erotics away from the

²⁹³ *Time Binds*, p. xiii; *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett*, p. 14.

²⁹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl’, *Critical Inquiry*, 17.4 (1991), p. 820.

²⁹⁵ Peter Boxall, ‘Nothing of value: reading Beckett’s negativity’ in *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett*, ed. Daniela Caselli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 37.

²⁹⁶ It might be noted that this type of relation is similar to Lacan’s notions of absence as being at the centre of love: giving something that one does not have. Jacques Lacan, *Transference*, Book VIII, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015), p. 34.

sexual, rendering it more polymorphous, there is something about the sexual that makes this slippage possible. This is made clear by the ways in which criticism of Beckett's late works tend to disavow it.

Erotics, Hermeneutics, Arithmetics

What is useful about Sontag's statement that '[i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' is not necessarily the staged opposition between a cerebral interpretation and a so-called surface reading.²⁹⁷ Earlier in this essay, Sontag refers to Beckett's work as 'pared down to essentials', without any interrogation of what is 'essential': it is precisely this risk that accompanies the splitting off of the sexual and the cerebral.²⁹⁸ Written in 1964, Sontag's essay gets to the heart of a cultural interest in sexuality that was brewing in the lead up to, for example, the Summer of Love in 1967 and the student uprisings of 1968. Rónán Macdonald addresses this, suggesting that *All Strange Away* creates literary valuations that 'are affective and erotic, rather than analytical and interpretive'.²⁹⁹ This presents a misleading pitting of the erotic against the interpretive. However, the sexual is the fundamental slipping point between lack and concretion; a reading that would attempt to separate erotics from hermeneutics is splitting what is already effectively a split, producing an interpretation that can only erase the sexual aspects of the text.

²⁹⁷ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 19.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

²⁹⁹ Rónán McDonald, "'Lovely beyond Words": Beckett, Value, Critique', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 26.1 (2017), p. 131.

Using this configuration of lack, Beckett's divestiture of textual authority might point towards this possibility of a more literal surface reading, '[f]aces now naked bodies, eye level, two per wall, eight in all, all right, details later'.³⁰⁰ These 'details' in *All Strange Away* are constantly deferred, implying the insignificance of the bodies' specific appearance. The anxious asyndeton and plethora of commas creates the impression of a hasty, utilitarian narrator, driven to lay out these basic points as simply as possible almost in order to exorcise them. The bodies themselves, therefore, are not dwelt upon as subjects, which is emphasised by references to further detail that never materialises, perhaps mirroring the amusing and superfluous details given about Celia in *Murphy*.³⁰¹

The repeated use of numbering, as well as letters to refer to points in space at other moments in the text, places these bodies in a cold, but not stoic, economy of geometry, the drive of which is accumulative. The numerical or quantitative aspect of the figures is put onto an equal footing with their subjective or physical aspects. The narrator barely allows the reader time to imagine what sort of bodies these might be, moving quickly onto the next feasible arrangement. This creates an eroticism of the surface; an eroticism that perhaps similarly to Sontag's can interpellate its subjects differently and can participate in a dispersal of meaning that conversely also affects the way sexuality can be perceived. This is not because sexuality is part of the erotic, but because the erotic shares a structure with sexuality. Sustained uncertainty forces a different form of contact with these bodies that does not use language just as a naming tool but instead as an extension of these very hermeneutic processes: a self-extension

³⁰⁰ *All Strange Away*, p. 171.

³⁰¹ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (Montreuil: Calder Publications, 2003), p. 10.

that corresponds with a desiring drive akin to queer desire as described by Boxall and Bersani. Perhaps these desires reach in a horizontal mode because the spatial metaphor of teleological meaning does not suit it. As Edelman suggests, 'Queerness (...) refers to what never accedes to representation in itself.'³⁰² The geometric economy quite literally makes space for queer ways of reading: ways that incorporate the absence at the heart of sexuality, and ways that grapple with a difficult proximity between matter or surface and language itself.

As a result of its stylistic expression, sexuality in *All Strange Away* is tied to the numerical. William Davies suggests that the use of numbering in *The Way* is a tool for the solidification of memory, introducing 'the possibilities (or impossibilities) of repeatability and retracing, two elements that perhaps substitute for memory in the process of preoccupying the mind with mathematics when memory will not arise.'³⁰³ There might be a more melancholy interpretation available for these bodies, which have been accused of being 'quasi-human': the narrator is in fact trying to make them more permanent, more cohesive or more memorable, their physical insignificance the result of a failing memory.³⁰⁴ Sexuality is evoked as a tool for remembering: an affective hypertrophy that might pick out a past body, better formed. These better formed bodies of memory, however, never manage to emerge and are repeatedly undercut, remaining squarely designated as nebulous memories rather than subjects that might restructure the bodies described as being immediately present. It is this process that Davies refers to as 'substitution' that is instructive about embodiment in

³⁰² Lee Edelman, 'Learning Nothing: Bad Education', *Differences*, 28.1 (2017), p. 157.

³⁰³ William Davies, "Could but those seconds have been numbered": Mathematics and Memory in Beckett's *The Way*, unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Mathematics + Modern Literature' (University of Manchester, 3rd – 4th May 2018), p. 5.

³⁰⁴ *Lovely Beyond Words: Beckett, Value, Critique*, p. 130.

Beckett — the use of repetition and permutation reminding us that there is a fundamental absence that predicates the assignation of structure to the body.

In *All Strange Away* the repeated diagramming and obsession with position, length, fit, and the tendency to designate letters to sections of the space which function as a mathematical code rather than a description of landscape creates a stoic embodiment which is worth quoting at length to observe the effect of this style,

she might be mathematically speaking more than seven foot long and merely a question of refolding in such a way that if head on left cheek at new a and feet at new c then arse no longer at new d but somewhere between it and new c and knees no longer at new b but somewhere between it and new a with segments angled more acutely that is head almost touching knees and feet almost touching arse, all that most clear³⁰⁵

Once again the entire tract is destabilised by what goes before and what comes after, in this case the phrase ‘mathematically speaking’, which suggests that there might be other ways of speaking about this body that do not encompass its geometrical positioning and size, although the text goes on to almost entirely ignore that possibility. It is not made clear what exactly is ‘merely a question’, or what the narrator is driving at with the obsessive repositioning. Is the body struggling to fit? If so, where are the limits that it approaches? At this point almost two thirds of the way through

³⁰⁵ *All Strange Away*, pp. 176-177.

the short text, having already repeated several of these protracted, anxious, algebraic outpourings, it seems likely that the aim is either simply realised in its enactment, or that it can never be realised — realisation is a purely conceptual notion that exists to encourage movement. The limit is simultaneously evoked and made nebulous. The repeated refrain of ‘all most clear’ becomes ironic and amusing, a leitmotif that accumulates significance in the most Beckettian mode possible: through divestiture of meaning, rather than reassertion in new contexts. This prevailing use of code and mathematical terminology has a similar effect to that of a minimalist art piece: it asserts shape, scale and space as primary.

Minimal Form, Minimal Porn

Signification in Beckett seems to be, rather than mimetically reaching towards a referent, reaching elsewhere. Vexing the process of mimesis creates a focus on form, giving the impression of shallowness. The deferral of meaning is perhaps not onto more and more words, but ultimately more and more forms, or codes. Thus, differentiating form becomes a hermeneutic process; understanding becomes physical. This is not the same as a negation. Minimalism that refuses to admit a boundary between artwork and reality is manifest in the work of Fred Sandback, who says of his work, ‘[it] is not illusionistic in the normal sense of the word. It doesn’t refer away from itself to something that isn’t present. Its illusions are simply present aspects of it.’³⁰⁶ Sandback was a minimalist sculptor working with thread, active from the late

³⁰⁶ Fred Sandback, ‘1975 Notes’ first published in *Fred Sandback*, (Munich: Kunstraum, 1975), pp. 11-12. <<https://www.fredsandbackarchive.org/texts-1975-notes>> [accessed 5th April 2022].

60s until his death in 2003. His work coincides with Beckett's not only in time but also in its professions to cohesion, use of colour and minimising tendencies.

With a physical artwork the problem of language is at best secondary; however, in *All Strange Away*, this form-like immanence is created in language, hence Leo Bersani's comment that difficulty in reading Beckett is 'a function of mobility rather than of understanding'.³⁰⁷ What does this mean in relation to a text, on a page, in a book? The process of reading becomes focussed on moving through the text as one moves through a minimalist installation, without seeking to associate or escape the story world into a hermeneutics of suspicion, but rather towards a hermeneutics of susceptibility.³⁰⁸ The effect is similar to the process of remembering: the certainty that something is present but cannot be evoked in full.

This mobility is echoed by the sexual aspects of the text, as Graham Fraser notes that, 'abandonment of the sexual is not an abandonment of the pornographic — the narrator's real obsession is not erotic, but with the manipulation of the human forms in space'.³⁰⁹ Fraser's evocation of pornography, as opposed to eroticism, in order to refer to sex that is not suitably titillating, intimate or heterosexual creates a false dichotomy here. Beckett himself had trouble deciding on what was or was not pornographic — and it seems certain he had an interest in the genre, having read both Sade and Aretino.³¹⁰ As noted in Chapter One, in a letter to George Reavey in February 1938, Beckett writes of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, '[t]he surface is of an unheard of obscenity & not 1 in 100 will find literature in the pornography, or beneath the

³⁰⁷ *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 4.

³⁰⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng, 'Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility', *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), pp. 98–119.

³⁰⁹ Graham Fraser, 'The Pornographic Imagination in *All Strange Away*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41.3–4 (1995), p. 522.

³¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, 'Serena I', in *Collected Poems in English and French* (London: Calder, 1977), p. 21.

pornography'.³¹¹ However, the following day to Thomas McGreevy, he writes of the same, '[n]othing could be less pornographical. It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy.'³¹² Fervid though both of these remarks are, they do betray a certain misunderstanding or perhaps ambivalence towards what constitutes the pornographic. Since Beckett had already experienced the farce of an Irish obscenity trial, it is likely that the latter is true. What is curious about these comments is that the pornographic aspect of Sade is repeatedly figured as an outer layer or surface, underneath which the 'literature' resides.

Regardless of whether he believed it to be pornographic or not, Beckett's comments on Sade already betray an interest in the limit. To evoke the erotic is to evoke a convention that harbours historical nuances and developments, whereas pornography as a genre represents the juridical or social limit of those expressions. The suggestion that Beckett's work is not erotic indicates that these elements, which taken on their own merit can be constitutive of the erotic, in this context do not fit the culturally accepted definition of the erotic and its gendered, normative trimmings — trimmings that rely on narrative teleology. However, *All Strange Away* troubles this distinction by also troubling the possibility of separating the erotic and the pornographic,

³¹¹ Samuel Beckett to George Reavey, 20th February 1938, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume I: 1929-1940*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 604.

³¹² Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 21st February 1938, in *ibid*, p. 607.

Fancy her being all kissed, licked, sucked, fucked and so on by all that,
no sound, hands on knees to hold herself together. Till halt and up, no,
no image, down, for her down, to sit or kneel,³¹³

This move is a familiar one even by this early stage of *All Strange Away*. The capitalisation of 'Fancy' follows a comma rather than a full stop, suggesting a separate aspect of the voice or even a separate voice altogether. This isolates the activity following: an implied narrativity within the narration itself. Here is given a direct imperative, one might say a flagrantly pornographic move, the narrator imploring the imagination to envisage sex acts. Following this, however, the acts are broken down. First of all, they are described as soundless. Secondly, a repetition of a previous physical adjustment that Emma has undertaken, which makes nearly physically impossible some of the acts described. Then once again the narrator attempts to erase the 'image' that has apparently been created, a technique that does not, of course, erase what has gone before but instead compartmentalises it. Emma then returns to permutations of sitting and lying down. In fact, the next instance of mid-sentence capitalisation states, 'Fancy dead.'³¹⁴ It is possible that this is a wry nod towards an orgasm, but it is also possible that Emma is exhausted almost to nothingness. As a result of the summoning of a series of imbricated fictional voices, the pornographic cannot be entirely siphoned off. Since, as Bersani and Dutoit would suggest, the narrative voice is itself impoverished, the erotic too must be brought down from any transcendence that would fallaciously separate it from pornography. The use of the

³¹³ *All Strange Away*, pp. 172-173.

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 173.

imperative is just one of a series of desperate attempts to test the narrative voice for traces of coherence. Due to the spatial and temporal immanence of these bodies, the erotic in Beckett participates not in a romantic or narrative-driven schema but instead posits itself as a practice based on movement amongst form or even, as previously suggested, a method of reading. To view it as pornographic might open up questions of its focus on movement as hermeneutics.

As John Pilling suggests, this use of ‘Fancy’ may have been informed by Beckett’s somewhat reluctant engagement with Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* at the time of writing.³¹⁵ An examination of Coleridge’s text may assist with the explication of the kind of hermeneutics that this text makes available. Coleridge juxtaposes his Romantic notions of the imagination versus fancy, the imagination described ‘as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.’³¹⁶ While a reader of Beckett might be all too familiar with the notion of ‘repetition in the finite mind’, the ‘eternal act of creation’ and ‘the infinite I AM’ propose a form of creation and being that is not altogether supported by the text. Towards the end of the first section of *All Strange Away*, transcendental matters seep in — namely, God. One is instructed,

Imagine other murmurs, Mother mother, Mother in heaven, Mother of
God, God in heaven, combinations with Christ and Jesus, other proper

³¹⁵ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 35.

³¹⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 205.

names in great numbers say of loved ones for the most part and
cherished haunts, imagine as needed,³¹⁷

Here the three figures of Mother, God and Christ — perhaps introduced in descending order of significance — are repeated in the same manner that the body of Emma/Emmo is subjected to permutations. Importantly, this is described as the function of the imagination. Clearly this shows an instance of repetition of the finite mind, with the various possibilities for a higher power combined in what can be read as an incantation, an invocation or a curse.³¹⁸ The reference to these as ‘proper names’ somewhat degrades the hypertrophy of symbol involved in a word such as God, which is perhaps the most famously subjected to etymological inquiry. The imagination, in evoking the familial relation, immediately translates into the religious, which is then subjugated by the description ‘great numbers’. It is as if the numerical here overtakes the idea of god, with ‘imagine as needed’ suggesting that this is a finite pool on which the mind is drawing as one takes medicine from a bottle. This also undercuts an idea of eternal creation by permutating, rather than creating new names or new ideas of progression under the remit of a deity.

To seek the relation to the ‘I AM’, one must continue reading,

She is not here, the exception, imagine others, This is not possible, there
is one, and here another of exceptional length, In a hammock in the
sun³¹⁹

³¹⁷ *All Strange Away*, p. 175.

³¹⁸ *How It Is*, p. 3.

³¹⁹ *All Strange Away*, p. 175.

It is notable that this capitalised 'She' is also after a comma, rather than a full stop. This interrupts the diatribe that was developing on the subject of Greek philosophers — derived from the above discussion of god — positioning Emma as a proper name akin to Mother, God, Christ. Not being 'here', Emma is marked out and the impossibility of imagining other beings is also given privileged status as a capitalised word, perhaps a proper name. Perhaps 'This' might even be those others, their capitalisation previously so grammatical now reduced to an error in the absence of memory. In characteristic style the text then contradicts itself finding 'here another', although it is clear that this is a digression into what could be described as the text's 'Fancy', as the setting is different from the white rotunda and therefore might be assumed to be in the province of memory once more. Cycling between memory — which relies upon a form of mathematical certainty, as it is not really a fully formed memory but instead a process of remembering — and failed imagination accumulates a series of embodiments. The grand 'I AM' of Coleridge's imagining being is here closed off, usurped seemingly by itself: by too much information. Barely present except in elongated memories, the text repeats that 'Fancy is her only hope,' suggesting a return to memory as a mode of survival.³²⁰ This would align with Davies' conception of memory in *The Way*, and also with Boxall's notion of self-extension as an important component of desire and relationality in Beckett's work.

To understand the role of imagination in relation to fancy here, Coleridge's definition of the latter is informative,

³²⁰ Ibid.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.³²¹

Here is Coleridge's thesis on the functioning and possibilities afforded the human mind. Whereas 'fancy' denotes a certain materialism, 'imagination' covers the transcendental, the possibility that the mind might reach beyond its own means and overcome the 'fixities and definites', which in turn allows it to be established as a self. The fundamental basis of the self here is predicated on this transcendental aspect. Beckett, taking from Proust a conception of memory that vexes this rigidity, refuses to admit of this hierarchy. Memory does not enrich the self but is instead part of its formation and undoing. *All Strange Away* appears to present a struggle of differentiation created by the minimal, staging this internecine battle within the bifurcated mind that Coleridge describes. Coleridge's memory is interesting both because of its capitalisation, which perhaps Beckett has pilfered, but also because of its function as a strange mode of forgetting. Memory without particular time and space can barely be described usefully as memory, except in this metaphysical sense. Rather than memory, this function is an indication that the mind is only what it can absorb and repurpose, using the tools of will and association. The information of the world is

³²¹ *Biographia Literaria*, p. 206.

presented as so many bricks, repurposed by fancy into a house that Deleuze would describe as exhausted. It is possible that the reason for the text's persistent erasure of its own subject matter is this very definition of 'fancy'. If the imagination is dead, as suggested at the beginning, then everything that occurs cannot exist because it did not already exist: the problem of creation is limited to the imagination, but if it is dead, then fancy can have nothing to work with. The very persistence of the text itself is through mere 'association', which appears to erase its own subject matter but only does so in an attempt to focus on fancy — memory, and the realm of the material — instead of imagination.

Reading Pornography

If, concerning Beckett, reading is more 'a function of mobility than of understanding', as previously addressed, and pornography is the distillation of a certain attitude towards the spatial in terms of meaning, how can it inform a hermeneutic approach to *All Strange Away*?³²² Early definitions of pornography, especially as opposed to erotica, have been hotly debated — Justice Potter Stewart famously states in the *Jacobellis vs. Ohio* case that 'I know it when I see it'.³²³ Likewise, Kenneth Clark suggested that 'The moment art becomes an incentive to action it loses its true character.'³²⁴ Roland Barthes, in *Image Music Text*, separated literature from intentionality by killing the author, reframing the status of pornography as potentially art or literature — however,

³²² *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 4.

³²³ Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 41.

³²⁴ *Pornography - the Longford Report*, ed. Longford Committee Investigating Pornography and Frank Pakenham Longford (London: Coronet, 1972), p. 100.

art continues and continued even in the 1970s to be classified as pornography both in terms of authorial intention and in terms of a certain mobilising of the artwork itself: as Clark intimates, it is the artwork itself that mobilises, not just the artist. In a remarkable proclamation, he states,

There remains the extraordinary example of Rembrandt's etching of a couple on a bed, where I do not find the subject at all disturbing because it is seen entirely in human terms and is not intended to promote action. But it is, I believe, unique, and only Rembrandt could have done it.³²⁵

Clark here betrays a mode of viewing sex — whatever form it may take — as fundamentally objectification or fetishization. The use of 'entirely in human terms' suggests that when Clark sees a pornographic image, what he sees is not in the first instance human beings, but forms in space, acting, suggesting and so on. This corroborates Fraser's definition, which foregrounds the spatial as opposed to the 'erotic', this implying a dehumanisation of sorts. Most remarkable is the assignation of mastery to the artist who, through his — and it inevitably is 'his' — craft can magically remove the sexual from sex, returning the two forms to their previous fornication-free, de-depucelated humanity. Naturally, this view, which separates what is human from what is sexual, is even by the most primitive standards preposterous. The move to separate out the pornographic from the sexual necessitates this objectification in order for the subject to have mastery over it.

³²⁵ Ibid.

Beckett's work, in evoking sexuality, uses the pornographic as a way of accessing the cognitive dissonance that the sexual can evoke in its literary form, as well as performing a constant undermining of attempted mastery. This is likely one of the reasons for the difficulty of reading Beckett's late prose. Macdonald suggests of *All Strange Away* that 'the narrative voice conjures up images and shapes, but it is in the mind of the reader where the systole and diastole of images, expanded and deflated, take place'.³²⁶ This splitting and delegating of imaginative processes seems to be the result of taking too literally the text's frequent refusal of certainty coupled with an anxiety and hidden agenda of what might be 'wrong'.³²⁷ An impression is created of an objectivity that exists spatially and a subjectivity that operates by erasing and correcting. As a result of its negations there is a decision as to what is or is not true — which beliefs are or are not suspended — in order to make sense of the text.

Although the narrator seems on the face of things to be desperately rational and attempting to avoid subjective sentimentality, the result of this longing for form over the erotic is the reverse. In other words, although the geometric economy created is cold, this does not mean that the bodies involved are dehumanised. It is the narrative voice that betrays itself in seeking distance, describing,

this body hinged and crooked as only the human man or woman living
or not when light at full without all this poking and prying about for
cracks holes and appendages.³²⁸

³²⁶ *Lovely Beyond Words: Beckett, Value, Critique*, p. 129.

³²⁷ *All Strange Away*, p. 173.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 178.

The use of the qualifier 'human' suggests that the narrator finds this sufficiently non-normative to mention. This also betrays a certain desire that the bodies relinquish their humanity, as the previous text has focussed on attaining geometric balance or certitude, but these human bodies are 'hinged and crooked', not fitting perfectly into the designated polygons. This plays with the generic definition of pornography. The move to avoid 'poking and prying' comes immediately following description of Emma's body that moves 'down to other meat' before curtailing itself, decrying its 'prying pointless'.³²⁹ This suggests that perhaps genitalia and normatively eroticised parts of the body do not hold any sort of meaningful key to understanding. As it is later discovered that 'sex not seen', this text does the queer work of forcing sexuality into a scenario that refuses to settle upon gender.³³⁰ The body is resolutely human and sexualised, even pornographic, without recourse to certainty regarding its gender or physicality. In actively avoiding categorisation, the minimalist drive can access a queer space that considers the body beside its role in certain social structures.

The lessening labour of minimalism does some work towards creating a non-monolith, or towards a queer mode of representation. Gordon Hall adumbrates the focus on possibility and resistance that is staked in a positing of impoverished difference — which he refers to as the normative — and identifies the potential that '[m]inimalist sculptures [can] teach us how to see bodies without demanding explanations of them'.³³¹ Minimalism, then, prioritises the process of being with an artwork — it expects engagement on the same level as a Renaissance painting, and can

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid, p. 172.

³³¹ Gordon Hall, 'Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture', *Art Journal*, 72.4 (2013), p. 51. For an interrogation of the concept of normativity, see Chapter Four.

offer none of the depth of visual intrigue. Therefore, the viewer is left in the same position with less to contemplate, and crucially, no further details to request. The result might be in some instances described as boredom. Famously, *Waiting for Godot* was described as a play in which ‘nothing happens, twice.’³³² This also might be described as boredom — however, this is by no means an invitation to theoretical doldrums. Boredom as a phenomenon is curiously difficult to pin down and clarify, similarly perhaps to the erotic. In different instances, boredom can be due to a severe lack of stimulation or a complete saturation by it. To be bored, in this instance, is to remain in a certain structure but to act and respond differently. Attention to a bit more of the above quotation might then be revealing, as Mercier stated, ‘since the second act is a subtly different *reprise* of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, *twice*.’³³³ Figured as devoid of content, *Waiting for Godot* is here structured by the limits of the play format. This numerical repetition mirrors the action of memory. The inanity is therefore the structure itself, and its resistance, be that through its literal diminution or through the diminution of the referential, as with Beckett. In terms of queer theory, this stages a useful divestiture of certainty regarding ways of reading ‘into’, or a hermeneutics of suspicion.

The susceptibility of the subject plays a primary role in defining the way that the artwork is perceived; or rather, the fact that this is true with any artwork is newly emphasised. This speaks to queer embodiment in Beckett, not only because of the active avoidance of categorisation, but precisely because in creating uncertainty, the painful ‘resistance’ of our drive to define is presented. Jacqueline Rose states of

³³² Vivian Mercier, ‘The Uneventful Event’, *The Irish Times*, 18 February 1956, p. 6.

³³³ Ibid.

psychoanalysis that there is ‘something in its way of thinking which is recalcitrant to the world of knowledge.’³³⁴ It is precisely in boredom that a certain resistance to knowledge is staged and, as Rose suggests, this has frequently been overlooked in terms of the suffering that it implies. The agonising resistance of boredom is neatly expressed in *All Strange Away* by a quick nod to a cliché,

Sleep stirring now some time add now with nightmares unimaginable
making waking sweet and lying waking till longing for sleep again with
dread of demons, perhaps some glimpse of demons later.³³⁵

The phrase ‘demons later’ harks back to the repetition of ‘details later’, ‘imagine later’, ‘clearer later’, ‘come back to that later’, and ‘look closer later’.³³⁶ Due to this leitmotif, whenever the text approaches a specific anatomical description of Emma/o, it evokes the idiom, ‘the devil is in the detail’. Curiously, this phrase is also entangled with its counterpart ‘god is in the detail’.³³⁷ Since the latter has been associated with both Gustave Flaubert and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, it is somewhat likely that Beckett could have been aware of both versions of the idiom. Towards the end of the text, we encounter ‘cacodemons’.³³⁸ This could be a reference to the French ‘caca’, meaning ‘shit’ — something not above a writer who not long after *All Strange Away* wrote

³³⁴ Jacqueline Rose, ‘Something Amiss’, in *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson (New York, NY: Punctum Books, 2017), p. 392.

³³⁵ *All Strange Away*, p. 179.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 172, 173, 174, 175, 176.

³³⁷ William Safire, ‘On Language; Who’s in Those Details?’, *The New York Times*, 30 July 1989, section Magazine <<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/30/magazine/on-language-who-s-in-those-details.html>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

³³⁸ *All Strange Away*, p. 180.

Foirades, one translation of which would be ‘wet farts’, but what is more commonly known to the Anglophone world as *Fizzles*. It may also be a version of ‘cacographie’, meaning poor spelling or handwriting. Poorly spelled or written details, promised for the future, prevent the protagonist from getting a good night’s sleep. Significantly, the reference to details — in this text, details that might contextualise and humanise the figure of Emma/o — is conflated with suffering, specifically suffering that hinges on stretches of time. The use of ‘add now’ reinforces the impression of Emma as a narratorial puppet at the mercy of whim, a build-up of immediacies that simultaneously and almost paradoxically cannot alter the fierce cyclical drive of what is already exhausted. The use of rhyme and alliteration, ‘making waking’ and ‘sleep stirring’ creates a rhythmic tonality that gives the sentence a difficult cohesiveness — both waking and sleeping are longed for and dreaded equally, the rhythm implying an almost sadistic inevitability. Emma shifts between nightmares that make her desire consciousness to an exhaustion that makes her wish for this blighted rest. Once again this introduces a certain kind of boredom: an exhaustion of all options, the imposition of a structure quite ordinary, but elongated and re-rehearsed to the point of suffering. The relationship of this state to the slippage of category implies this ‘resistance’ to knowledge of which Rose speaks. Muñoz describes the queer utopian aspect of a negating approach both in terms of aesthetics and psychoanalysis, stating that ‘[a] nothing (...) is both a critique and an additive or reparative gesture.’³³⁹ Muñoz is referring to the artist Ray Johnson, whose ‘Nothings’ juxtaposed the more affect-oriented, communal ‘Happenings’ of the 1960s. However, this might equally apply to

³³⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), p. 118.

All Strange Away. A hypertrophy of binaries as fundamentally constitutive of the process of lessening, or the minimal, is made clear. The necessity of exhaustion also necessitates content.

Doing Funny Things with Difference

Central to both queer theory and minimalism is a question of difference. Beckett's late prose also centres upon this question, repeatedly and desperately returning to it. Preciado's work on dildotechtonics, which makes whimsical the permeability of gender boundaries both conceptual and embodied, and Bersani on the situation of lack in relation to the desiring subject can re-examine the significance of minimalism to sexuality in the texts. Both of these approaches conceptually resituate absence in relation not only to the hermeneutic process, but also to sexuality and embodiment. These approaches to minimalism and queer theory provide germane ways to read the notoriously negligible. For example, in *All Strange Away*,

Quite audible then now for her and if other ears there with her in the
dark for them and if ears low down in the wall at a for them a voice
without meaning, hear that. Then further quite expressionless, ohs and
ahs copulate cold and no more feeling apparently in hammock than in
Jesus Christ Almighty.³⁴⁰

³⁴⁰ *All Strange Away*, p. 175.

There appears to be a shift in focus during this part of the text between the words that are at times ‘soundless’, ‘speechless’ but accompanied by ‘imagine sound’; a description of Emma ‘[i]n a hammock in the sun’ and Emma still in the rotunda, with her ear ‘low down in the wall’. These words, or ‘murmurs’ are religious and implied to be somewhat blasphemous or in the very least cathartic: ‘Mother mother, Mother in heaven, Mother of God, God in heaven’, and in fact, if one assumes that the use of ungrammatical capitalisation designates sound or imagined sound, the image of Emma in a hammock is also spoken — or imagined as spoken. The sentence beginning ‘[t]hen further’ is grammatically capitalised, so it is possible to assume that the narrator refers back to the rotunda. This might be reaffirmed by the ‘expressionless’ descriptor, as so far all facial expression in the text has remained purely the domain of movement: lips moving, eyes blinking, and so on. The ‘ohs and ahs’ might refer to the changing suffix of Emma and Emmo, although initially onomatopoeia is the clearest explanation. These two meanings imbricate: name and pleasure. Even the names themselves suggest speech: in contrast to many of Beckett’s characters whose names begin with ‘m’, such as Murphy, Molloy or Malone, these characters begin with the phonetic sound of ‘m’ — ‘em’ — but not the letter itself. This undercutting of letters with sound and materiality has also been observed with Bom in Chapter One.³⁴¹ Their ‘cold copulations’ suggest the ‘licking, sucking, fucking and bugging’ quoted above.³⁴² However, the ‘no more feeling’ then described is located ‘in the hammock’. The sexuality described here is as distinctly cerebral as the imaginative distancing that

³⁴¹ See also: Eleanor Green, ‘Torture and queer desire: new ghosts in *How It Is*’, unpublished paper delivered at the conference ‘Samuel Beckett Society: Beckett Beyond the Normal’, (St Mary’s University, Halifax, July 2017), p. 5; *How It Is*, p. 52.

³⁴² *All Strange Away*, p. 171.

caused MacDonald to suggest that the shapes' movement actually occurs in the mind of the 'reader'. The copulation seems to be supposed to evoke a connection or transference between the hammock and the rotunda, but it does not. The finalisation of the sentence, bringing in the blasphemous 'sound' of further up the page as a humorous, hysterical and exasperated finale uses comedy as a way of expressing the disappointment of failed connection. This occurs similarly when mathematical arrangements fail. The use of 'Jesus Christ Almighty' enacts a very literal bathetic jolt from transcendence to failure. This failure is predicated on the lack of connection, but it also has the power to maintain relations. This could also be read as the narrator suddenly expressing emotion, ironically having just described its absence. It is the emergence of intensity seemingly out of nowhere that often constitutes humour which, similarly to sexuality, hinges on a refusal of knowledge when pressed to the utmost degree.

Laura Salisbury notes that instances of humour in the late prose, despite their incongruity or nonsensical nature, are humorous precisely because they offer a 'certain, temporary resolution.'³⁴³ Although here there is no logical resolution, the resolution might be viewed as an erotic one. In the place of meaning, there is an intensity or jolt that holds the place of resolution until it is possible to cling to another logical thread, the enjoyment of the joke placeholder for the enjoyment of the resolution proper. In Preciado's work, it is possible to see how queer theory might develop such a reading: dildotechtonics, while simultaneously offering a version of placeholder that goes further than replacement and into prosthesis, is also

³⁴³ Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 152.

sometimes necessarily whimsical in the practices that it prescribes, and in the childlike quality of its diagrams, such as the ‘dildo-head’, or the inclusion of overwrought administrative tools such as the contract in order to enter into the practice of ‘counter-sexuality’.³⁴⁴ The humour here amounts to the emphatic quality attached to these rituals, which in itself can only be temporary, as are the rituals themselves. By revering this place-holding practice, Preciado’s queer theory points towards a way of reading sexuality that does not create a false dichotomy between erotics and hermeneutics.

In *All Strange Away*, rather than seeking to obfuscate the fictional process as the minimalist compositions by Donald Judd and Frank Stella state that their work seeks to do, fictionality becomes an explicit element of the text itself.³⁴⁵ ‘Imagination dead imagine’ is a phrase that creates a great deal of fictional scale: the narrator suggests to us that imagination is dead, and yet immediately impels the act of imagining to occur.³⁴⁶ At once, the hypothetical — and not as MacDonald suggests, the reader’s — ‘mind’ is split in two: one imagining or able to imagine and one not imagining, unable to do so. The lack of punctuation here highlights the impression of words as ‘things’, in the sense that by removing conventional hermeneutic practice and introducing uncertainty other ways to infer meaning which have to do with space are foregrounded, both in terms of the words themselves in relation to one another and in terms of the spaces they conjure. It seems that the imaginings that will follow must be stripped back to the thoughts that would only occur without further

³⁴⁴ Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 52.

³⁴⁵ Editors of ARTnews, ‘What You See Is What You See: Donald Judd and Frank Stella on the End of Painting, in 1966’, *ARTnews*, 2015 <<http://www.artnews.com/2015/07/10/what-you-see-is-what-you-see-donald-judd-and-frank-stella-on-the-end-of-painting-in-1966/3/>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

³⁴⁶ *All Strange Away*, p. 169.

invention. Hence, although the following text consists of a great deal, meta-fictionally the narrator has already classified it as ‘not fiction’ — but neither is it implied that fact is to be expected.

Scales of the Erotic

Returning to minimalism and its place in history, Benjamin Halligan refers to Beckett’s writing as ‘the end of modernity’, describing it as ‘autopoeitic’, or self-sufficient in its commitment to futurity at the cost of noise.³⁴⁷ Beckett’s late work is often treated in the same gothic tone that his narrators treat being itself, as Halligan perceives ‘increasingly ‘post-dramatic’ garbling (as with *Not I*), or merely breathing (as with *Breath*)’.³⁴⁸ However, it is important not to reduce works that present difficulty in their noisy presentation to pure noise. Though *Not I* may be garbled, it is not simply garbling. Although Beckett’s work includes dissonance, it is also significantly musical. Since *Not I* moves so quickly when performed, often a different refrain will be more resonant with each new reception. Although *Breath* is perhaps the most reduced of Beckett’s plays, it is important to consider it in the context in which it was written. Although there is evidence that Beckett talked about the play as early as 1966, it finally came into print as the opening act of Kenneth Tynan’s disastrous erotic revue, *Oh! Calcutta* — a pun on the French ‘quel cou t’as’, which one senses Beckett may have

³⁴⁷ Benjamin Halligan, ‘“As if from the sky”: divine and secular dramaturgies of noise’ in *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, ed. Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Paul Hegarty (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 120.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

approved of.³⁴⁹ Appropriately, Beckett writes to Alan Schneider, ‘As a garbled account of this had been circulated I wrote it down for the first time.’³⁵⁰ *Breath*, though shockingly brief and unforgiving, is clearly not ‘merely breathing’ — this is another example of the ways in which sexuality in Beckett’s work is erased in the name of abstraction and universality.³⁵¹ Its critical interest lies in its combined farcical nature and its response to being called up into ‘the erotic’ as an identifier. John Pilling and James Knowlson suggest that ‘*Breath* is neatly self-sufficient. Yet it is surely only memorable because of its succès de scandale.’³⁵² Self-sufficient in some senses though it may be, when considered as an erotic amuse-bouche, it takes on a different thrust entirely. On discovering that Tynan had changed the stage directions to state ‘including naked people’ in the debris littering the stage, Beckett became infuriated.³⁵³ Knowlson comments, ‘it was certainly one of the few occasions when he allowed his anger to become public.’³⁵⁴ Clearly, nudity was not supposed to be included in this allegedly erotic play. What we are presented with is inhalation, exhalation, a baby’s cries, a variation in light intensity and a pile of waste matter. Although on one level the play is certainly meant to be humorous — it is not directly erotic in any appreciable way, and it contains abject materials that might even conjure disgust — the use of and focus on breath and waste are also fundamental aspects of eroticism. In an unabashedly scathing review of the entire show, Clive Barnes states, ‘It is curious

³⁴⁹ Samuel Beckett to Barbara Bray, 2nd October 1966, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume IV: 1966-1989*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 47.

³⁵⁰ Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider, 3rd October 1968, *ibid*, p. 134.

³⁵¹ ‘*As if from the sky*’: *divine and secular dramaturgies of noise*, p. 120.

³⁵² James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder, 1979), p. 127.

³⁵³ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 566.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

how anti-erotic public nudity, as opposed to private nudity, is.³⁵⁵ In this sense then, Beckett's play is ironically the most erotic of the entire revue, presenting a form of oscillation that recalls Salisbury's analysis of humour as shuddering in the late prose. The eroticism in *Breath* is not situated in its visual summoning of sexual matter, but rather its address of tangentially erotic subject matter and ephemeral examination thereof. The brevity, especially, might be both humorous and as a means of presenting the instability of any definition of the erotic. This echoes the earlier refusal of specificity in *All Strange Away* and 'details later'; evidently the erotic in Beckett does not involve visceral description but rather something more similar to a verb than an adjective.³⁵⁶

The creation of Beckett's meta-fictional problem of abundance relies on a sense of scale.³⁵⁷ Botha defines scale in an artwork as, 'the quantity proper to an artwork in order for it to persist at a singular intensity'.³⁵⁸ Botha may be referring here to a Deleuzian notion of intensity, which 'is difference, but this difference tends to deny or cancel itself out in extensity and underneath quality'.³⁵⁹ This intensity is, therefore, naturally relational — as it is by definition slippery, dodging any qualities and existing impermanently, it is essentially 'between': 'in' or 'underneath' something. Scale in its relationality, therefore, also has the potential to express a certain singularity as difference — in the same way as we might attempt to conceive of a difference without

³⁵⁵ Clive Barnes, 'Theater: 'Oh, Calcutta!' a Most Innocent Dirty Show', *The New York Times*, 18th June 1969, p. 33.

³⁵⁶ *All Strange Away*, p. 172.

³⁵⁷ cf: *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie (London: Longman, 1995).

³⁵⁸ Marc Botha, 'Why Minimalism Matters: Radical Quantity and the Representation of Immanence', *Textual Practice*, 29.4 (2015), p. 755.

³⁵⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 295.

concept, as will be explored in the next section of this chapter.³⁶⁰ In *All Strange Away*, the scene continually shifts in scale until we are aware that the surroundings are as small as possible to accommodate the body within them. This continual shifting is related to the initial announcement of the death of the imagination, such that relationality becomes difficult, as things are divested of their fictional reliability.

Scale in *All Strange Away* is tangential — touching on plasticity, but at the same time constantly adjusting and altering its quantity. Different elements of narrative are introduced and presented as immutable yet incorrect, repeatedly,

A place, that again. Never another question. A place, then someone in it,
that again.³⁶¹

The narratorial tone is exhausted, ‘that again’ repeated as if the narrator is sick of the most basic marker of ontology, humorous in its ironically overwrought response. hilariously, already bored. The place is then built upon, this time a character involved, and the humorous refrain repeated. The beginning of *All Strange Away*, far from staging a fragmenting subtraction, builds itself up, albeit negatively. These elements suggest the onset of narrative. However, this expectation is thwarted, adhering to the opening sentence’s suggestion. The reader becomes accustomed to expecting cyclical adjustments rather than linear progression — indeed, these adjustments in and of

³⁶⁰ It is worth noting that a Mabou Mines production of *The Lost Ones* for stage in 1975 reproduces this concern with scale; the audience are situated in a larger version of a small section of the cylindrical diegetic space that is presented before them—with actions in the ‘micro-environment’ even corresponding at certain points in the play to the ‘macro-environment’. Anna McMullan, *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 135.

³⁶¹ *All Strange Away*, p. 169.

themselves become as much a constituent of the text as place, character, action and so on. It is this focus on differentiation that creates, rather than scale that might always be relational, a sense of distance.

As Adorno states in 'Trying to Understand Endgame', 'differentiation cannot absolutely or automatically be recorded as positive.'³⁶² In Beckett, the impression of entropy is created, although not as an effect sustained, by the differentiation of forms that, instead of reinforcing its objects as concrete, divests them of authority. This divestiture is often played out as boredom or exhaustion — as Deleuze suggests, '[y]ou were tired by something, but exhausted by nothing.'³⁶³ This exhaustion requires the processes of numbering, or quantity, both as an antithesis to its own place outside of it, but also as something that must have happened to enable it. Whenever something alters in the text, it is both flexible and was always the case, 'Ceiling wrong now, down two foot, perfect cube now, three foot every way, always was, light as before'.³⁶⁴ Within the same list-like sentence, the ceiling is adjusted, then the shape is declared to have been the same, 'always', then the light is declared to be the same 'as before', a time at which everything was supposedly the same as the current moment! Thus, the text in extensity displays a Deleuzian intensity in the sense that it denies and cancels itself out; quality does exist on some level but it is clear that the text — in its minimal drive to lessen — might easily be below that, in a fictive place that can be judged distantly as 'wrong' and altered, but which maintains its status as space. This demonstrates the accommodation of antagonism that defines queer.

³⁶² Theodor W. Adorno and Michael T. Jones, 'Trying to Understand Endgame', *New German Critique*, 1982, p. 125.

³⁶³ *The Exhausted*, p. 4.

³⁶⁴ *All Strange Away*, p. 173.

Stuplimity: Parts and Wholes

In her essay 'Stuplimity', a word defined as a state of simultaneous boredom and astonishment often evoked by minimalism, Sianne Ngai addresses the stupefying effect of language that obstructs or refuses to elicit a response, as it

raises the significant question of how we might respond to what we recognize as "the different" *prior* to its qualification or categorization (...), precisely by pointing to the limits of our ability to do so.³⁶⁵

In her book *Ugly Feelings*, published five years later, this has been reworded:

raises the significant question of how we might respond to what we recognise as "the different" before a value has been assigned to it or before it becomes qualified.³⁶⁶

It is this 'prior', found in the *Postmodern Culture* article, and likewise the 'before' found in *Ugly Feelings*, which is particularly interesting about Ngai's theory of stuplimity. This corresponds with the 'anti-absorptive' modes of minimalism laid out by Mark Botha in relation to a minimalist work's ability to represent both spatial and temporal scale.³⁶⁷ In creating a negative differentiation through distance, the reader

³⁶⁵ Sianne Ngai, 'Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics', *Postmodern Culture*, 10.2 (2000), (para 4 of 36).

³⁶⁶ Sianne Ngai, 'Stuplimity', in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 252.

³⁶⁷ *Why Minimalism Matters*, p. 756.

sees both time and space as obstacles to essentialist definition. Perhaps Ngai chose to use ‘before’, rather than ‘prior’, to avoid evoking an ‘a priori’; ‘before’ more clearly denotes the temporal aspect of the claim. This definition of difference is stark in *All Strange Away* and recalls Boxall’s description of a queer longing for form — or a stable topography — in Beckett’s work. The previously discussed negative build-up of form in *All Strange Away* destabilises not only form itself, but also our conception of difference.

Stuplimity might assist with re-reading aspects of Beckett that have foregrounded and assumed the masculine, somewhat in the same way that *All Strange Away* first of all performs and then undercuts. When Emmo becomes Emma, it is this stuplime differentiation at work,

No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt.
Or hers since sex not seen so far, say Emma standing, turning, sitting,
kneeling, lying, in dark and light,³⁶⁸

Just prior to when the change in gender assumption is made, the scene is once again subtracted from repeatedly: the fixation on the speck is figuratively erased — and Emmo’s life is instead compared to the speck, reducing and dehumanising him. The re-gendering of Emmo/a, though based on biological sex, epitomises the centrality of queer analysis to this minimalist expression. It is not that biological sex is revealed: it is unseen. Gordon Hall muses, ‘What would it be to allow a body to be silent, fully

³⁶⁸ *All Strange Away*, p. 172.

present without telling us anything?³⁶⁹ This blankness — alongside a clear adumbration of the tendency to assume the masculine first, or as gender neutral where no gender is volunteered — can be linked to the usually almost inexplicable drive onwards in Beckett's work. Genitalia are always promised by the text by the repetition of 'details later' but are never shown — another significant blankness and in particular devaluation of the body as signifier of gender.³⁷⁰ Differentiation must exist in the text, but the assignation of value or quality is deferred as far as possible. The drive becomes not a desire to see or to sex, but a desire to find something like a complete form which, as the spatial dynamics of the text make clear, is never quite possible.

Following Alain Badiou, Botha examines the importance of minimalism in contemporary art, literary and music practice by recalling set theoretical mathematics, wherein rather than a linear conception of infinity, infinity is an infinite number of sets, each defined by their difference from that which groups them: namely, a non-qualitative void. This theory introduces a void into fragmentation that is both more strikingly exterior and more strikingly integral to its object. Whereas linear infinity is defined by abundance, set theory infinity relies on absence, ontologically. Botha states, therefore, that 'what minimalism in fact generates is an aesthetic field in which radical quantity and radical quality are coextensive.'³⁷¹ What this might mean for an artwork is the experience of immanence, which refers both to the physical and hermeneutic aspects of an artwork. Both the physicality and the conceptual and technical structures through which meaning is created are co-extensive and demystified. This is

³⁶⁹ *Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture*, p. 51.

³⁷⁰ *All Strange Away*, p. 172.

³⁷¹ *Why Minimalism Matters*, p. 749.

the sense in which Beckett evokes the complete but partial object without creating paradox — as again Botha states ‘all entities exist with a *singular* intensity, while their being remains *multiple*’.³⁷² This interiority of the void and combination of singular and multiple will have implications for the way that difference functions in Beckett’s texts. Fragments in the text are not isolated postmodern cargo, jettisoned from a greater narrative of redemptive meaning; by imagining the void that surrounds them in the context of set theoretical mathematics, it is impossible to ignore the ‘missing parts’ of the incomplete whole. In making clear the process of differentiation, Beckett’s work breaks with a conception of meaning-making that would aim for wholeness or define wholeness as meaning. Instead, Beckett’s obfuscations, far from seeking a sublime, objectless transcendence, in purporting to do so and evincing the restrictions encountered force the definition of meaning to alter in quantity and in quality: in time and in situation.

This conception of wholeness is often self-evident in Beckett’s prose. The initial offerings of *All Strange Away*’s dead imagination are almost hysterical in their cynicism for existence: ‘Crawl out of the frowsy deathbed and drag it to a place to die in.’³⁷³ One might question, what was wrong with the original position of the deathbed? ‘Frowsy’, a decadent word that stands out dissonantly, seems to revel in its own squalor. The attempts to kill imagination, or linear narrative, have failed. The deathbed won’t kill it; it just gets dirtier. In fact, the temptation is so great that the narrator continues, ‘Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no not that again.’³⁷⁴ Here it seems that the narrator is compelled to

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ *All Strange Away*, p. 169.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

begin telling a story but prevents themselves. Likewise, the laconic, object-driven description of place in *All Strange Away* utilizes the formal structure of stage directions, inviting the expectation of the precision and physicality of a *mise-en-scène*. As Caselli suggests that *How It Is/ Comment C'est* 'is remarkable for its intractability rather than for its geometrical clarity. Transparency is not what this muddy text is about.'³⁷⁵ This might apply further to all of Beckett's late prose works, including *All Strange Away*. The foregrounding of structure only intensifies its opacity. References within the text to other works, which occur also throughout the *œuvre*, build up a red herring of diegetic coherence. This is repeatedly flouted, forcing a hermeneutic move that cannot accommodate narrative without a constant reliance on scale as opposed to naming, or rather, naming that functions as scale: a rule that can be applied in context rather than a stiff definition. As simple names, simple objects and simple places are divested of their constancy through either quantity or quality, it is the movement of these aspects and their fluctuation or negation that defines the progression of the text. In describing ephemerality through language that cannot allow deletion as such, debris accumulates.

Beckett's description builds repetitively, and subtracts bathetically — or rather, professes to subtract. This subtraction is not absolute but rather a devaluing that subtracts only on a meta-fictional level. Critics often describe the resulting image as abstract, but in fact its abstraction ironically rests on repetitions of the specific, which ground and inform any impression of ineffability. It is possible to view these tendencies as both at odds to and complementary to one another — as Peter Boxall

³⁷⁵ Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 148.

might describe it, 'a kind of identity, a kind of slack unity'.³⁷⁶ Despite its slackness, the definition of unity is maintained; its quality alters. The heap is both an entity in itself, a sum of its parts and the sum of its absences. It is a pervasive image in Beckett's work — from Winnie's mound in *Happy Days*, to Clov's atonal 'Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap' in *Endgame*, to the mound of rubbish previously discussed in *Breath*.³⁷⁷ This anxious heaping prefigures humour, in the sense that it is a relief from a build up of anxiety. This 'kind of identity', then, might be able to account for the kinds of failures and resistances that Elin Diamond reads in Butler as the 'volatile logic of iterability', or in other words the way in which 'in citing/identifying with the ideal we necessarily fail to reproduce it completely'.³⁷⁸ Diamond's reading of Butler rings strikingly similar to Beckett's own comments in *Disjecta*, stating that the work of art as 'total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object'.³⁷⁹ It is this sustained absence as part of identity, which both vexes and undoes it, that makes queer sexuality possible in Beckett's work.

White Monuments, White Hands

What can be done with the whiteness of the bodies in *All Strange Away*? A hermeneutics of suspicion might address the white skin that merges with the white, cranial landscape of the skull, and the blackness of the eye as referring to a depth and

³⁷⁶ Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 2.

³⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett, 'Endgame', in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 93.

³⁷⁸ *Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett, and the Politics of Seeming*, p. 35.

³⁷⁹ *Disjecta*, p. 138.

proximity to the self that indicates a racist primitivism on Beckett's part. However, perhaps the endurance of surface that Anne Cheng observes in photographs of Josephine Baker can be applied to this text. The 'bleached dirt', so often repeated, suggests that the dirt had previously been a different shade and is now interpolated by a chemical blankness. Similarly, the body that is left by the time 'Diagram' approaches is depilated, both of its 'long black hair' and 'long black eyelashes'.³⁸⁰ The skin described is 'bone white', which read literally might also suggest a process of removal or bleaching. It evokes an image of the body as a lithopaedion: a calcified, preserved embryonic body. In an act of preservation or monumentalisation, in the nervous rush of the narrator to reach this unknown 'correctness', this ossification/ calcification highlights the deadly and simultaneously humanising result of the monumental. It seems as if in trying to strip the body of sex and race, the narrator hits against an impossible wall, perhaps as a result of the paradoxical accumulation of this stripping. Frantz Fanon describes the image of his body as 'solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty'.³⁸¹ However, the racialised body is 'no longer in the third person but in triple'.³⁸² Emma/o is not racialised in the same sense that Fanon describes, but it is possible to see a similar process of violent categorisation and splitting as a result of the desperation for a racial blankness. Although Beckett has rarely been seen as explicitly or didactically political — in fact often he is seen as 'apparently non-political' — he did address issues of race and politics in aspects of his work.³⁸³ More recently, Beckett Studies has

³⁸⁰ *All Strange Away*, p. 177.

³⁸¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), p. 90.

³⁸² *Ibid*, p. 92.

³⁸³ Terry Eagleton, 'Political Beckett?', *New Left Review*, II, 40, 2006, p. 67.

addressed the political aspects of Beckett's work, especially in relation to World War II.³⁸⁴ For example, he translated the entirety of Nancy Cunard's *Negro Anthology*, the longest work he ever produced. Allan Warren Friedman describes Beckett's prose after Cunard's death in 1965 a 'Beckettian homage to Cunard'.³⁸⁵ Although Nancy Cunard's racial politics were appropriative and lacked nuance, there is evidence that Beckett shared her desire to rid the world of racial prejudice, despite perhaps not articulating any good ideas on how to do so.

Hence it has been established that minimalism, in defining quality and quantity as coextensive, can realise a new conception of how difference can work. This can be both radical and dangerous. Derek Jarman, who was stage designer for a 1991 production of *Waiting for Godot* alongside his career as filmmaker,³⁸⁶ notes,

Monumentalism is always erotic: look at the Albert Memorial.

Monumental sculptures search for the first Adam, the original, the ideal before the fall; they are pre-conscious. Because nothing can be wrong with them, they're dangerous.³⁸⁷

This links clearly with the minimalism defined previously: the pre-conscious in line with the a priori establishment of difference without a concept; the concept of the

³⁸⁴ Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018); *Beckett and Politics*, ed. William Davies and Helen Bailey, 2021.

³⁸⁵ Samuel Beckett, Alan Warren Friedman, and Nancy Cunard, *Beckett in Black and Red: The Translations for Nancy Cunard's Negro* (1934) (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), p. xxiii.

³⁸⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, dir. Les Blair (London: Queen's Theatre, 1991-1992). See also: Derek Jarman (dir), *Waiting for Waiting for Godot* (1983).

³⁸⁷ Derek Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1997), p. 104.

implied masculine ‘original’ or ‘ideal’ as evinced by interviews with Frank Stella and Donald Judd. However, the issue of eroticism is not often associated with the minimal; at best, we might find criticism of monumental works as phallic. The danger that Jarman refers to here might be a reflection of the potential for essentialism in relation to the minimal. Although Jarman is speaking about a concept as abstract as Borges’ aleph, it is referred to as the ‘first Adam’, compared to the ‘Albert memorial’: by default masculine. Kazimir Malevich and the Suprematist movement are one such example of the dangers of assigning a concept such as masculinity or whiteness to monumentalism, and responses to these works by artists Reynerio Tamayo and Felix Gonzalez-Torres highlight racial, sexual and economic problems with these kinds of representations. Reynerio Tamayo uses Malevich’s *Black Square* juxtaposed with stereotyped images of people of colour to highlight the ‘dangerous’ aspect of monumentalism and more specifically suprematism, which is clear from its very name. This painting was displayed at the exhibition ‘Without Masks: Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art’ at the Museo Nacional das Bellas Artes in Havana in 2017, marking a contemporary response to canonised racist suprematism — which, for example, had an entire room dedicated to it at the Royal Academy of the Arts in London, 2017, as a part of ‘Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932’. Acknowledging the dangers of this coextension of quantity and quality — although framing this instead as a coextension of surfaces — Cheng describes the ‘mutual pedagogy of erotics’ constituted by the Modernist’s absorption by and with Primitivism.³⁸⁸ Cheng attends to the ways in which dangerous monumentalism also deconstructs itself through its frequent

³⁸⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng, ‘Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility’, *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), p. 102.

foregrounding of surface. In a sense here Jarman too hints at this notion merely through the mention of the erotic in juxtaposition with the ideal: what is erotic is necessarily what is undercut, what cannot be serious enough to sustain the ideal. Is this, then, what a femme monumental might look like? It is this slippage that can be read in Beckett's late prose.

'Diagram', the final, second and only designated section of *All Strange Away* stages an unreliable monumentalism that delegitimises the absolute. It is worth quoting at length,

Glare now on hands most womanly clear and womanly especially right
still loosely clenched as before but no longer on ground since corrected
pose but now on outer of right knee just where it swells to ball as before.
All that most clear.³⁸⁹

The repetition of 'clear' prior to 'womanly' and its repetition in the refrain that occurs throughout the text, 'all that most clear', along with the assignation of this text under its title 'Diagram' suggest an imperative for which the text strives but which is, as with all isomorphic specificity in Beckett's work, undercut. The use of mathematics in relation to the body in Beckett's late works has been read as a move away from the emotive. However, it is both the minimal and the mathematical that inform the emotive aspects of the work. What is inescapable here is the designation of the bodies in *All Strange Away* as bodies. The use of gender here creates a mediator for this

³⁸⁹ *All Strange Away*, pp. 177-78.

slippage: what can be said to be womanly about these hands? Prior to this there has been the reference to female gendered bodies — or sections thereof — as ‘lovely beyond words’.³⁹⁰ This humorous presentation of an inability, but what in fact amounts to a refusal, to describe and furnish the gendered body returns it to a level of abstraction that is at once tied to the body irretrievably and is nonsensically multiplicitous. This is akin to the emptiness of ‘lovely’: loveliness is never elaborated or described, and therefore these descriptors become placeholders. They correspond to Ngai’s stuplime differences without concept. It is possible to imagine a plethora of interpretations for what a ‘womanly’ hand might look like, but the inclusion of this as a descriptor in this mathematical economy makes it into a familiarising tool. This familiar categorisation reminds us to treat these bodies as bodies, not because they have an intrinsic transcendent humanity but because language refuses to allow them not to be bodies, although they may be disabled, ambiguous, suffering bodies. Gender becomes a difference without a concept or begins to be located as such.

Frequently in Beckett’s prose works, transcendence is undercut in humorous ways — in a previous section for example, the use of ‘Jesus Christ Almighty!’ confers a bathetic relief on the algebraic dirge. Progressing through *All Strange Away*, however, the undercutting of transcendence arises as something additionally quite malicious — particularly in ‘Diagram’. Ultimately, the humour that arises from the juxtaposition of ‘lovely’ with words like ‘fucking’ forms a structure of rationalisation around the body of Emma, which is first of all forced into smaller and smaller contorted shapes, then completely depilated, forced to stare into the bright light and squeeze on a grey

³⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 171.

rubber ball. The scene, robbed of the much-reduced charisma of the earlier narration that no longer relieves with blasphemy, might have been lifted from a horror film. Emmo/a's body seems to be in near-constant peril and threat from the narration, which whimsically ignores any pain or desperation in its quest for the 'quite complete quite clear'.³⁹¹ This justification, which is never explained, allows the continuation of 'immeasurable' or 'unappeasable turmoil': certainly the zenith of suffering in the short text.³⁹²

The preoccupation with hands as markers of the 'womanly' in *All Strange Away* is not unprecedented. In a text that simultaneously delegitimises its own authorial authority and the agency of its characters, the hands play an anomalous role. Although they do not escape the neurotic controls of the narrating voice, they do represent a moment of action for the body, as opposed to its simply existing as a living mannequin. Steven Connor suggests,

Beckett pays precise attention to posture, gesture, gait and modes of locomotion, not because this reduces the body to an object of calculation or contemplation, but because it places the body in a field of action and reaction.³⁹³

Beckett's interest in 'womanly' hands is not limited to this text: this passage is reminiscent of *Murphy*, a much earlier prose work which creates perhaps the most

³⁹¹ Ibid, p. 179.

³⁹² Ibid, p. 180, 181.

³⁹³ Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 20.

emotive moment in the entire text. As Celia leaves the room after Miss Carridge has told her a white lie about Murphy's whereabouts,

The turn of the stair took the body out of sight, but Miss Carridge could still see the hand on the banister, gripping, then sliding a little, gripping again, then sliding a little more.³⁹⁴

Even in this early text, it is possible to see the beginnings of the repetitive refrains that would become the primary focus of later prose works and plays. It is also possible to see how the work of Deleuze, Botha and Ngai can inform an interrogation of gender and sexuality in texts that use 'womanly' and the movement of 'hands', not to mention uncertainties and indifferences in relation to gender and therefore sexuality that play out in texts such as *Mercier and Camier*, *Molloy* and *Enough*. However, this scene is not only repetitive; it is also emotive. In a moment when we are aware that Celia must be feeling sad, we are offered nothing more than her hand gripping the banister, sliding and gripping. It is not only the banality of the act that is evocative of grief: it is also the repetition. Boxall also comments on hands as extending into the landscape in his analysis of *The Calmative*, noting,

[t]he trembling of the hand is registered, like that of the stars, through a kind of highly tuned narrative sensibility, rather than through any sense that the hand belongs to the narrator,³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, (Montreuil: Calder Publications, 2003), p. 89.

³⁹⁵ *Beckett and Homoeroticism*, p. 122.

Thus, hands have come to operate in this ‘economy of repetition’, which Boxall suggests ‘moves beyond the grasp of narrative’.³⁹⁶ In moving beyond the narrative, the hands are able both to mediate this textual/ sexual materiality. It is the repetition of their movement that achieves this; through the repetition of ‘womanly’ in *All Strange Away*, to the gripping and sliding in *Murphy*, the hands become centres of a persistence that in its aping of the accumulative lessening drive of the minimal, is able to access a space outside of categorisation that in turn offers an extensive difference — a difference that offers a perspective on gender, in this case feminine, that does not seek categorical definition.

The conceptualisation of the minimal in *All Strange Away* might point towards a less essentialist, queer conception of difference that allows for sexuality that, in the first instance, fictionalises desire rendering it inauthentic and insatiable — and therefore, in some instances, abjectly dull. The issue of boredom and desire will be continued in Chapter Three. In ‘Sociality and Sexuality’, Leo Bersani presents desire in the same way that Mark Botha describes set theory infinity – figuring ‘sets’ as people and the void as desire. This void is, however, not inactive: it becomes a space for radical movement that figures desire as self-extension rather than lack, difference as co-extensive with sameness, and quality as equal to quantity. Chapter Three will explore the significance of boredom to this economy predicated on spatio-temporal absences that cannot be described as lack.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 123.

‘All the greys (...) feverish greys’: boredom and desire in *Imagination Dead Imagine*

‘It is anything but boring, it instead extracts from the *idea* of boredom the most genuine pathos and
enchancing comedy.’³⁹⁷

‘there is that word white again.’³⁹⁸

Beckett’s work throughout the 1960s returned incessantly to issues of space and presence. He worked with a broader and broader variety of literary forms, using spatial modes that exceeded conventional generic boundaries to address problems of subjectivity: *Happy Days*, a play in the mound; *Words and Music*, a not-opera; and *All Strange Away* falling in the midst, in 1964, a lone prose text surrounded by innovative failures of sound and vision. The following year, from the remains of an abandoned earlier draft of what would become *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine* came together. A shorter text than its predecessor, the bodies therein are less dynamic, and instead stand — or in this case, lie all but motionless — in contrast to the movement of light. The beginning of the text introduces its spatial impossibilities, ‘all white in the whiteness rotunda. No way in, go in, measure.’³⁹⁹ Hermeneutics is severely restricted by the almost total absence of difference, or so it is described: whiteness bordering almost imperceptibly on whiteness, but also the sheer lack of grammatical guides to

³⁹⁷ G. S. Fraser, ‘They Also Serve’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 February 1956, p. 84. Qtd. in the inside cover of: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1965).

³⁹⁸ Samuel Beckett, ‘From an Abandoned Work’, in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 161.

³⁹⁹ Samuel Beckett, ‘Imagination Dead Imagine’, in *ibid*, p. 182.

teleology; a ‘riot of caesuras’ as Enoch Brater suggests.⁴⁰⁰ There is no way to enter the rotunda and yet the imperative ‘go in’ insists, invoking a mythical diegetic arena. As if that weren’t *Enough* — another text for another chapter — there is the imperative to define the space empirically by measuring it. This obstruction heralds both the hybridity addressed in *All Strange Away* and importantly invokes another affect: boredom. Beyond the boredom that provoked an audience member to stand during the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* and shout ‘this is why we lost the colonies!’ the late prose no longer offers the rabbiting music hall wit of the charmingly grotesque pseudocouples.⁴⁰¹ Boredom is not relieved by a joke or interruption; instead, its intrinsic oscillations are dwelt upon. Following Chapter Two’s discussion of Beckett’s relationship to the minimalist movement, this chapter will consider this in the context of queerness and deconstruction. It will continue to examine the way in which contemporaneous art practice relates to Beckett’s unique hermeneutic modes and tease out how boredom relates to subjectivity and sexual desire through issues of space and presence in the late prose.

Boredom: Defining it, or Dying Trying

Boredom is notoriously difficult to define, as it can relate to a proprioceptive response that is either under or over-stimulated, energetic or dulled, clear or vague: an affective, emotional response that can be as fleeting as it feels eternal. Its tendency to manifest as restlessness as well as lethargy or fatigue means that scientific studies have not been

⁴⁰⁰ Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text: Beckett’s Late Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 85.

⁴⁰¹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 415.

able to classify it as a 'prototypical' emotion; that is, it has no fixed attendant facial expression.⁴⁰² The difficulties that boredom poses to any scientific discourse's attempt to achieve mastery over its visual aspect may have something to do with its usefulness as a mode, rather than a specific expression, in visual practices.

As Peter Tooley, along with Thomas Goetz and his colleagues, observes, boredom does have attendant stances, multiple facial expressions, and physical tics that are observable as boredom — and studies have found numerous ways to 'detect' boredom that range from 'eye gaze' to electrical activity in the brain observable as boredom.⁴⁰³ As an affect, boredom straddles post-war literature with the quality of sleep paralysis, and Beckett and boredom are relatively common frowsy bedfellows. Elizabeth S. Goodstein, in her comprehensive exploration of the subject, approaches boredom as an *Experience Without Qualities*, posing it as a problematic that maps onto the problematic of modernity, using Georg Simmel to link the prerequisite of a blasé attitude to live the fragmented, dissonant aspects of modern urban life to Martin Heidegger's 'existential grammar of mood'.⁴⁰⁴ Goodstein delineates the difficulties of Simmel's return to the social and Heidegger's ahistoricity by returning to boredom's constant vexing of temporality itself in that it 'conceals its own historicity'.⁴⁰⁵ For Goodstein, boredom is sometimes coextensive with presentism, and it is figured as the failed response to, or a failure to cope with, modernity: in other words, a turn away

⁴⁰² Thomas Goetz et al., 'Types of Boredom: An Experience Sampling Approach', *Motivation and Emotion*, 38.3 (2014), p. 402.

⁴⁰³ Joochan Kim, Jungryul Seo, and Teemu H. Laine, 'Detecting Boredom from Eye Gaze and EEG', *Biomedical Signal Processing and Control*, 46 (2018), pp. 302–13.

⁴⁰⁴ Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 282.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 419.

from historicity and towards subjectivity, a modern affect.⁴⁰⁶ Peter Toohey looks at boredom across art history and culture, with particular focus on philosophising and pathologising discourses. He concludes that existential boredom, as opposed to less intellectualised forms of quotidian boredom, shades into depression, and this, along with its internecine nature, is what makes its identification fraught.

Joe Brooker sees tedium as the very source of Beckett's work, whereas James Phillips argues for the purposefulness of boredom in the œuvre, suggesting that 'Beckett courts the boring'.⁴⁰⁷ He says of Beckett's work that 'in the face of spirit's procedures of abstraction and interpretation it simply bores. The task of metaphysics is to think this boredom, to succumb to it without ceasing to be thought. Admittedly, the odds for this are not very good.'⁴⁰⁸ This failure is precisely what Toohey drives at in a more general way, and it is the reason that Beckett's late prose can be read as anti-essentialist, or against an isolated notion of subjectivity. It is because it 'courts the boring' that it cannot simultaneously court the precise or dogmatic: it holds abstraction and interpretation tensely in tandem, as boredom forces a movement between object and subject. As Heidegger suggests, 'The characteristic of "boring" thus belongs to the object and is at the same time related to the subject.'⁴⁰⁹ Although it is often used as if it were an objective quality, it is fundamentally also relational and

⁴⁰⁶ There is no space here to go into Simmel and Heidegger's arguments in more depth, but the primary reference texts are as follows: Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' [1903], in *On Individual and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971) pp. 324-339.

⁴⁰⁷ James Phillips, 'Beckett's Boredom and the Spirit of Adorno', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004), p. 252.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 258.

⁴⁰⁹ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, p. 84.

temporal, not simply holding these three at once but moving between them. It cannot rest upon precision, and this is where Beckett's work makes use of it.⁴¹⁰

Mark Pedretti, drawing on Phillips and Goodstein, sees boredom in relation to and as constitutive of late modernism, or 'a way of marking a difference without positing *either* a break or a continuity with the Modernist legacy.'⁴¹¹ Sara Crangle, similarly, finds that Beckett's late prose does not seek a kind of progression from modernism but instead a fixation on its banalities. As a result of this fixation on the banal, an important and inescapable conception of otherness is created, a 'longing generated by unknowability'.⁴¹² Crucially, this longing links boredom to desire: something with which it is in constant dialogue. Although Crangle purposefully avoids attending to sexual desire, focusing instead on the titular prosaic desires, it is possible in Beckett to reinsert the sexual alongside the banal. Roland Barthes suggests in *The Pleasure of the Text* that 'Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure'.⁴¹³ This latter statement creates a hierarchical structure of transcendental sensation that is not available in Beckett's embodied economies. However, it speaks to the relationship between boredom and the limit, in that since it enacts a particularly volatile amorphousness, it necessarily pushes against distant concepts, such as bliss, even temporarily.

⁴¹⁰ Beckett himself earned the nickname 'Oblomov' from Peggy Guggenheim: 'I called Beckett Oblomov from the book by Goncharov that Djuna Barnes had given me to read (...). When I met him I was surprised to find a living Oblomov. I made him read the book and of course he immediately saw the resemblance between himself and the strange inactive hero who finally did not even have the willpower to get out of bed.' Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict Peggy Guggenheim* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2018), pp. 166-167.

⁴¹¹ Mark Pedretti, 'Late Modern Rigmarole: Boredom as Form in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy', *Studies in the Novel*, 45.4 (2013), p. 586. (Emphasis in text)

⁴¹² Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 179.

⁴¹³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 26.

How, then, to understand this threshold? In an essay on the queer coming-of-age film *My Summer of Love*, Whitney Monaghan argues that the film ‘adopts an aesthetic of boredom (...) as a means of accessing the queer potential of boredom’s threshold.’⁴⁴⁴ Queerness in Beckett arises not unproblematically, but inseparably from aesthetics and therefore from the banality and boredom that can be found therein. This queer potential of boredom, for Monaghan, is linked to productivity, ‘because boredom and queerness are seen as unproductive, they must always be overcome by a return to normative productivity.’⁴⁴⁵ This is aligned with Lee Edelman’s version of queer; that is, a queerness that is produced by phobia as ‘the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void’, or, in other words, ‘the gap or wound of the Real that inhabits the Symbolic’s very core.’⁴⁴⁶ Taking up the mantle of this gap, for Edelman, necessitates an embrace of negativity — of non-productivity.

Queerness also aligns with boredom in its use of repetition. Goodstein notes that boredom prevails as a preoccupation of modern literature because ‘without a language of reflection capable of illuminating the experience of modernity, the sense of being inescapably caught in cycles of meaningless repetition grows ever more pervasive.’⁴⁴⁷ This posits a certain relationship to a limit, this time of language itself, which can also be found in Beckett. Since repetition is, in itself, a repetition of difference, it is in the repetition of Beckett’s late boredoms that it is possible to read

⁴⁴⁴ Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not ‘Just a Phase’* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 102.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 111.

⁴⁴⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 22.

⁴⁴⁷ *Experience without Qualities*, p. 420.

the limit that signifies this queer reach towards desire that exceeds or circumvents structures of reproductive futurity especially, and futurity in and of itself. Steven Connor notes, after Deleuze, that ‘repetition shows the fact of difference without our being able to say in what the difference consists’, finding that it is ‘a principle which can force identity apart.’⁴¹⁸ The link between repetition and queerness is not as obscure as it might appear: Connor goes on to explain the link between this form of repetition and the death drive as described by Freud, mired in the illogic of repetition. This is central to Edelman’s notion of queer as necessarily anti-futurity, finding that repetition is an ‘ethical burden’ it must carry, in order to ‘inhabit the place of meaninglessness’ that would shore up the possibility of its existing outside of a binary relationship with heterosexuality.⁴¹⁹ The limits of this framework will be expanded on in more detail in Chapter Four through Sedgwick’s use, or disuse, of deconstruction. For the time being, however, it is possible to draw a link between queer — even if only to this ethical burden of queer — and boring repetition.

If, in addition to these two perspectives, we also follow Adam Phillips in imagining that boredom is a wish to have a desire — a state of desirelessness — then this can be observed at the beginning of the 1960s in *Texts for Nothing*, the first English translation of which appeared in the *Evergreen Review* in summer 1959. The narrator asks,

And can I desire them? Who says I desire them, the voice, and that I
can’t desire anything, that looks like a contradiction, it may be for all I

⁴¹⁸ Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2007), p. 7.

⁴¹⁹ *No Future*, p. 47.

know. Me, here, if I could open, those little words, open and swallow me up, perhaps that is what has happened.⁴²⁰

Here, after the attention to boredom in *Disjecta*, for example, the 1960s heralds a turn towards the role of desire in boredom. As becomes the case in *How It Is*, punctuation offers different possibilities for interpretation. The narrator may or may not desire, but being in a position of not knowing, it is not possible to surmise whether or not desire is really there since, as the narration seems to suggest, desiring and not desiring is not necessarily a contradiction in terms: it could be, but it could not. The problem of who is speaking, a regular issue in the late prose, is decentred somewhat by this potential contradiction. This is a demonstration of the queer possibilities of the agglutinative minimalism in the late prose: subjectivity overshadowed by the internecine logic of extinguishment. Even before it is possible to discern what desire really constitutes, it is not possible to locate it because the passive voice of the narrator dislocates any wishing, wanting, yearning and so on from the characters therein. What does it mean for 'queer', then, as constituted by deconstruction, to be unavailable for desiring and yet still very much in a sexual paradigm?

'Hilariously already bored': Beckett was Always Already Tired of Thinking of Titles

If, as suggested in Chapter Two, the narrator of *All Strange Away* is 'hilariously already bored' then the narrator of *Imagination Dead Imagine* seems to have mastered the

⁴²⁰ Samuel Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), 132.

state of boredom. Even the title itself might be described as boring: we have already read it in the first sentence of *All Strange Away*, and it will be repeated again before we know it, ‘No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine.’⁴²¹ I have used ‘before we know it’ colloquially, but in a sense I do mean that the repetition happens before it can be made sense of: the phrase ‘no trace anywhere of life’ evokes the imaginative although the title has announced its death. Sianne Ngai’s stuplimity is helpful here, as is explored in more detail in Chapter Two, working to show the delayed temporality of reduction and making hybrid the processes of minimising, labouring to create an epistemological refusal that turns back on itself and on sameness — rather than progressing onwards — in order to continue. This refusal amounts to an impression of minimalism in the very slowness and repetitiveness of the counterintuitive accumulation of text: in this case, the title. It is not enough to say the imagination is dead; we must imagine this death, too. This additional imperative is jarring in its internecine logic, but also introduces a tone of shock. Usually, a sentence ending in ‘imagine’ suggests a kind of impossibility, as in: ‘Heteronormative sexuality in Beckett’s work – imagine!’ However, here the very language used to express surprise is the surprise in itself. In attempting to ‘complete’ the proposal of minimalism, a stuplimic affect arises whereby the material created by its working through stultifies and simultaneously shocks in its sheer multitudinous hybridity. This is the effect of something being ‘too much’, but too much of something meagre or minimal, where one cannot approach the object as something complex to be untangled: the problem is

⁴²¹ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 182.

of scale or space, as well as of a lessening that defies rationale or logic. A new kind of labour is necessary. David Cunningham's notion of the minimal as a labour of social abstraction — that is, the minimal as existing only as the result of a clear expenditure of difficulty in forcing what is specific into general terms — can be observed in *All Strange Away* as having a trajectory, albeit an entropic one as the space closes in around the bodies and they become one body, ceasing to move and act on one another.⁴²²

Imagination Dead Imagine seems to flatten out this possibility of spatial evolution by invoking an exhausted mastery that cannot project since it must know its own conclusion. For example, the narrator states that the bodies involved 'seem to want nothing essential.'⁴²³ The narrator appears to know more clearly what their undisclosed desire really is although what is indeed 'essential' is not expanded upon — this constitutes the form of boredom that is desireless but reaches for desire. The shutting down — or perhaps more accurately, aporia — of possibilities and temporalities in *Imagination Dead Imagine* demonstrates Deleuze's notion of exhaustion in Beckett's work, which is compared to tiredness in that '[t]he tired can no longer realise, but the exhausted can no longer possibilitate.'⁴²⁴ Exhaustion is not related to concatenation: it has always-already happened. Therefore, '[y]ou were tired by something, but exhausted by nothing.'⁴²⁵ It is this exhaustion that directs the ironically masterful tone of the text.

⁴²² David Cunningham, 'Asceticism against Colour, or Modernism, Abstraction and the Lateness of Beckett', *New Formations*, 55.55 (2005).

⁴²³ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

⁴²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Anthony Uhlmann, 'The Exhausted', *SubStance*, 24.3 (1995), p. 3.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

To be a master in this text is also, quite literally, to be nothing. Beckett's literary career at this stage seems in line with this idea, as he writes to Avigdor Arikha and Anne Atik in July 1964, 'I think it will be called just *FILM*. No point in tiring oneself pointlessly.'⁴²⁶ Though tongue-in-cheek, Beckett in the 1960s clearly had a notion of what it meant to labour over language expansively — any surplus expenditure of energy over a writing process that sought breadth was not only unnecessary, but the eschewal of such a motive was the very core of his aesthetic. Having already begun work on texts such as *Play*, in 1962, and *Words and Music*, in 1961, perhaps the medium-as-title was having a renaissance. As Honor Gavin notes in an examination of *Film*, Beckett's work 'between 1936 and 1965 was (...) of an increasingly unnameable kind.'⁴²⁷ Beckett had ventured into this a couple of times in the early 1930s, with *Text*, a prose poem written in 1932, and *Draff*, written in August 1933. Although *Draff* will not quite be 'draft', the obvious refusal to name it such brings its allusive error into a mocking relief that denies an outright refusal of it. Draft seeps into *Draff* as god will always seep unwelcome into *Godot*.

Perhaps something of the 1960s' curious blinkered futurity that Beckett was encountering brought about a cyclical notion of time, a resistance to a future that was not technological, shiny and clean. Or perhaps it was simply that Beckett, now a famous, Nobel Prize-winning author, did not need to labour to be seen as innovative any longer, or even to be seen. The French original of his letter even mimics the construction of the title of *Imagination Dead Imagine*: 'Inutile de se fatiguer

⁴²⁶ Samuel Beckett to Avigdor Arikha and Anne Atik, 31st July 1964, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III: 1957-1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 614.

⁴²⁷ Honor Gavin, *Literature and Film, Dispositioned: Thought, Location, World* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 124.

inutilement.⁴²⁸ The amusing tautology of this phrase can be seen echoed in the works of this period, and might be compared to Beckett's profession of difficulty regarding the writing of the work. In January 1965, he wrote to Lawrence Harvey 'started again for the 20th time, this time in French again, on what will not be written. Imagination morte imaginez.'⁴²⁹ The combination of a seemingly laissez-faire attitude to the text combined with Beckett's obvious difficulty with writing suggests that the labour involved was a stuplime labour; one that might resituate mastery and, in doing so, present a mode of boredom that relies on a queer desiring impulse. That is, a desire that reveals its metonymic potential while shouldering the ethical burden of constituting nothingness. As Edelman notes, "The effect of exposing desire as mere metonymy has the effect of seeming to undo it."⁴³⁰ The crucial term here is seeming — this seeming undoing is also at work in the stuplimity of Beckett's minimalisms.

How Mastery Interpolates Space and Gender

By the end of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, there is a clearer invocation of 'elsewhere' than in its predecessor, with the end of the text gesturing away from the confinement that so palpably spiralled inwards in *All Strange Away*. The characters, instead of being cramped only into the rotunda, are lost in a vast whiteness. This later text ends with a bold surety that, though in many ways still impoverished of the specific certainty that would prevent the work from being characterised as abstract, at the very least gives an impression of mastery with the somewhat impatient phrase 'and if not what they are

⁴²⁸ Samuel Beckett to Avigdor Arikha and Anne Atik, 31st July 1964, p. 613.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, p. 651.

⁴³⁰ *No Future*, p. 162.

doing.⁴³¹ The way that abstraction is made to defend the position of mastery mocks the possibility of an empirical or logical analysis of the space — indeed, such empiricism would be open to mockery as insignificant.⁴³² The voice seems rushed, repeatedly noting that ‘experience shows’ the way that the conditions in the rotunda change, and when thinking of a temperature gives its own example of ‘say freezing point’.⁴³³ Despite the stark empiricism on the one hand, the mere status of mastery has created this gloss — both ebullient and glib. The politics of the shining surface are acted out here. Having gone through permutations of possibilities, the final sentence of the text opens up possibilities again, only to end without expanding on what these might be. The ‘what’ of ‘what they are doing’ is curiously recalcitrant and exhausted: not questioning but leaving open what represents — after pages of describing simplistic adjustments and permutations of light and heat — the most minor of possibilities. What is being asked in the opening sentence of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, far from John Lennon’s era-defining albeit schmaltzy hit of just six years later, *Imagine*, is the death of a fundamental aspect of the process of hermeneutics under the instruction of exhaustion — a complete surrender.⁴³⁴ The incestuous

⁴³¹ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 185.

⁴³² Baroghel notes that this mockery is linked to Beckett’s Sadean influence, ‘As the epitome of Enlightenment rationalism gone ‘mad’, Sade’s thought and language are inherently paradoxical, which in turn resonates with Beckett’s own poetics of aporia.’ Elsa Baroghel, *Beckett, with Sade: Sadean intertext and aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s works*, (PhD thesis, University of Oxford: 2018) pp. 12-13.

⁴³³ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 182, 183.

⁴³⁴ When I initially made this comparison, I was unaware that this song was used in a staged performance of *Imagination Dead Imagine* by Mabou Mines twenty years later, as John Howell describes: ‘Then, just when you begin to wonder whether this static scene is going to go somewhere in its added dimension of time, Lennon’s song comes up full volume as a finale. As an obvious cliché, but an extremely affecting one, this is a typical Mabou Mines ploy, a counterpointing of Beckett’s bleak vision and Lennon’s idealism. That juxtaposition is supposed to create a third possibility, and it does: a magical meditation on the mystery of existence. *Imagination Dead Imagine* indeed.’ John Howell, ‘Mabou Mines, “Imagination Dead Imagine”’, *Artforum*, September 1984 <<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/198407/mabou-mines-imagination-dead-imagine-64062>> [accessed 5 April 2022]. This contrast has clearly been used to great effect!

intratextuality, rather than suggesting forward progression, only furthers the linguistic impression of a hermetically sealed space that one can nonetheless move in and out of. The near-impossibility of motion is linked to the affective state of boredom itself, which spreads rhizomatically across affective boundaries, manifesting in numerous modes and, importantly, addressing the notions of both confinement and motivation.

Similarly to *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine* creates a husk of mastery, the framework of which is simultaneously presented as blank and made impossible to fill. Each choice given the reader is shown to be immaterial, suspended as if instructions for another, new text: 'the temperature goes down, to reach its minimum, say freezing point'.⁴³⁵ The use of 'say' is not only vague but gives the prose the quality of stage directions, suggesting that the text is perhaps not a self-contained piece — as is further implied by the intratextual title — but that it gestures forward towards a new performance, a new reading or a new imagining. It may even suggest a crossing of the generic boundary between prose and stage. Beckett was making a series of decisions regarding prose and stage boundaries in the mid-60s. He had, just prior to writing the manuscript version of *Imagination morte imaginez* in January 1965, given Siobhaun O'Casey permission for a staged reading of *From an Abandoned Work*; however, in November 1964 he had forbidden Judith Schmidt from adapting *Cascando* for the stage.⁴³⁶ It seems that Beckett was forming an idea of what it meant to adapt and translate through forms, mediums and languages. Whichever extension this 'say'

⁴³⁵ Ibid, p. 182.

⁴³⁶ John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 166-167. Beckett would also later give permission for Mabou Mines to stage *Imagination Dead Imagine*, as described above.

foreshadows, it seems to be quite the opposite of the death it is apparently reaching for, according to the title.

The intratextual reaching in Beckett's late works has been described by Albert Ouimet as 'the androgynous quality [...] which focuses on the primacy of the image as its key feature'.⁴³⁷ Although Ouimet is here using 'androgynous' purely as metaphor for liminality between different literary forms — perhaps more forgivable in the French as gender and genre can be referred to with the same word — the choice to use a term that normally only refers to gender might suggest an investigation of how gender itself is dealt with. In *Imagination Dead Imagine*, one character is a man and one a woman, but following the description of their forms it is stated that 'the contrast is striking, in the beginning, for one who still remembers having been struck by the contrary'.⁴³⁸ This sentence suggests the breakdown of difference has been occurring in the text's own timeline — quite separate from that suggested by the performative nod of 'say freezing point'. It is as if the sheer stretch of time has made these nuances unimportant.

The idea of gender difference as being based primarily on a socially contingent precedent and subjective perception was addressed by Monique Wittig, whose first novel was also published on Éditions de Minuit just a year before *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Although it is unlikely that her work would have informed the prose works of the 1960s, there was a continuation between the literature that was emerging in Paris and the theory that followed it. Gender in this text seems linked to memory: being a

⁴³⁷ Albert Ouimet, 'Textual androgyny in Beckett's later work: prose for performance' in *Beckett in the 1990: Selected Papers from the 2. International Beckett Symposium, Held in The Hague, 8-12 April, 1992*, ed. Marius Buning and International Beckett Symposium (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), p. 142.

⁴³⁸ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, pp. 184-185.

marker of difference it has been relegated to a remembrance of 'being struck by the contrary', seemingly a kind of cultural echo. The idea of how mastery functions through the recognition or designation of difference also arose repeatedly during this decade: in Beckett, this was navigated through the slowing lens of boredom. In *Prosaic Desires*, Sara Crangle describes boredom as one of the prototypical Modernist 'banal, desirous states' that Beckett then undercuts; '[r]ather than treating desire as a forward-looking, abundant passion, Beckett distils it and focuses on its past manifestations.'⁴³⁹ Gender is, therefore, folded into the experience of boredom as a mode of atemporality in *Imagination Dead Imagine*.

Gendered Boredom; Embodied Boredom: Fetishism Aslant

Kept on relative tenterhooks with regards to the bodies in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, they emerge after a good deal of algebraic dallying. There first appears a tantalising sliver of fabric, the 'trace' of the first sentence,

Externally all is as before and the sighting of the little fabric quite as much a matter of chance, its whiteness merging in the surrounding whiteness.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ *Prosaic Desires*, p. 176.

⁴⁴⁰ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

This intimation of twee that creeps in with ‘little’, often counterpart to shades of the gothic in Beckett’s work, prefigures the presence of a human being.⁴⁴¹ Despite the fact that critics often recall Beckett’s work during this period as comprising extreme — allegedly, genderless — abstraction, there is here a fragment of clothing, albeit one reminiscent of the slashed canvases of Lucio Fontana and the *Sacchi* (sacks) and *Bianchi* (whites) of Alberto Burri, who had risen to international fame during the 1950s. It is particularly evocative of these pieces because the drawing of attention to a piece of fabric, more so than an immediate embodiment, foregrounds surface — and more specifically, a torn surface. Fabric and clothing are briefly enacting a fetishistic relation to the body itself. The fetish here is not strictly Freudian, but it is also not entirely synecdochic in its referentiality.⁴⁴² Homi Bhabha notes that ‘Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorises them.’⁴⁴³ The fetish is the relationship that the part has to the whole by the 1960s: the turn towards sexuality heralds a different kind of ‘Total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object.’⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Hannah Simpson, ‘“Strange Laughter”: Post-Gothic Questions of Laughter and the Human in Samuel Beckett’s Work’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 40.4 (2017), pp. 1-19.

⁴⁴² Beckett professed to remember his own birth, so it is possible that he may not have agreed with Freud when he suggested: ‘Investigations into fetishism are to be recommended to all who still doubt the existence of the castration complex of who can still believe that the horror of the female genitals has some other foundation: for instance, that it derives from a supposed memory of the trauma of birth.’ Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’, *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 9 (1928), 164.

⁴⁴³ Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man’ in *Tensions of Empire*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 158.

⁴⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: J. Calder, 1983), p. 138.

Beckett plays with the concept of fetish in *More Pricks Than Kicks*. The narrator refers to Smeraldina and ‘the fetish of her waving the béret’, which for Belacqua induces tears, that is until it no longer works.⁴⁴⁵ Although the tone here is far removed from the 1960s prose, this struggle to turn material an affective experience — to give it form, so that it can then be, in the case of *Dream*, roundly mocked and alienated — finds itself here in a new but similarly material economy. The small gesture of the beret, akin to the small gesture of the fabric here, is overinvested to compensate for an absence: a part-object that acts like a whole. That is, until its affective possibilities are exhausted. It is at this turn in the text that this space of slippage begins to form. In fact, the imbricated whitenesses enact this slippage with their oscillation between visibility and invisibility, evoking sight itself as already a mode of automatic differentiating, and therefore already somewhat fetishistic. What the fetish marks fundamentally is difference, which is why it is a useful concept in Beckett’s most minimised spaces, because the space between difference and sameness is reduced to a deconstructive level, where it becomes clear that sameness is only a repetition of difference itself. It is not for nothing that the fetishistic fabric is followed by whitenesses almost invisibly coalescing.

To return to Edelman’s observation that ‘the exposure of desire as *mere* metonymy has the effect of seeming to undo it’, here since ‘mere’ness is the order of the day, desire only appears undone to the extent that everything else in the text is too.⁴⁴⁶ The word ‘sighting’ rings scopophilic, evoking not only a voyeur but also the notion that the voyeur has been waiting for a long time. A ‘sighting’ is usually related

⁴⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. Eoin O’Brien and Edith Fournier (New York, NY: Riverrun Press, 2006), p. 5.

⁴⁴⁶ *No Future*, p. 162.

to something that is not often seen and suggests therefore the mythic or rare. Discovering that this is a matter of ‘chance’ supports this notion that the voyeur has been waiting or could have continued to wait; this is one instance in many other instances of which it is possible that there is no limit. This deep narrativisation through minimalism discredits any move towards interpretation, instead operating through fetishistic logic.

The White Body of a Woman, Finally

Imagination Dead Imagine, unlike *All Strange Away*, declares its strangeness and in doing so allows a different affective relationship to emerge, particularly in relation to gender,

Still on the ground (...) merging in the white ground were it not for the long hair of strangely imperfect whiteness, the white body of a woman finally.⁴⁴⁷

The ambiguous use of ‘still’, harking towards the notion of an Irish ‘bull’, or contradiction, as exhaustively explored by Christopher Ricks, could be referring to either space or time, once again suggesting a motionless quasi-eternal space.⁴⁴⁸ The image conjured is uncanny. Usually when using ‘white’ as shorthand or metonym for skin colour, beige, pink or a variant thereof is the intended meaning. White hair,

⁴⁴⁷ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

⁴⁴⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

however, one can describe as white. Here, the woman's hair is 'strangely imperfect'. This evokes the metonymic slippage of language around race by making it unclear whether the white skin is whiter than the white hair. The strangeness is perhaps not just due to this juxtaposition of the skin and hair, but also the way in which the woman's hair is related to her body. In *All Strange Away*, the hair is described as 'long black', and the skin 'ivory flesh', a familiar combination and indeed one canonised in Western fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White*.⁴⁴⁹ Instead, the bodies here even in their colouring are more unnerving, as the eyes 'gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible'.⁴⁵⁰ Are these part-dead? After a further description this seems possible, since '[p]iercing pale blue the effect is striking, in the beginning'.⁴⁵¹ This phrase mirrors the previous phrase on gender difference: both colour and gender are apparently dulled here. The paleness of the eyes suggests that they might have cataracts, or even that they are no longer alive. In a lesser-known extension of these two signifying states, the vitreous humour is used in predicting the time of death due to chemical fluctuations. In this way, the eyes here reflect — to use an inappropriate metaphor — the temporal and spatial uncertainties of the rotunda.⁴⁵² Beckett himself was also known for his pale blue eyes, as Deirdre Bair notes at the beginning of her biography, 'the same "gull's eyes" that he gave to a number of his fictional creations'.⁴⁵³

⁴⁴⁹ *All Strange Away*, p. 174.

⁴⁵⁰ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² See Chapter One for discussion of blue eyes. Beckett was known to have owned *The Nurse's Dictionary of Medical Terms and Nursing Treatment*, which may have given him some insight into these conditions. Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 199.

⁴⁵³ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1990), p. ix.

The violent and unsettling paleness of these bodies is in sharp contrast to the dark depths of the eyes and hair in *All Strange Away*. Whereas in *All Strange Away* there is a great deal of differentiation between the interacting bodies, although they are themselves in flux, in *Imagination Dead Imagine* difference can almost no longer be detected between bodies by colour — long hair is the only indicator of difference. The very strangeness that was evacuated in *All Strange Away* through sex is reinstated in *Imagination Dead Imagine*: the presence of bodies in processes of death perhaps the most simplistic definitional form of the uncanny.⁴⁵⁴

The bodies in *Imagination Dead Imagine* barely move and certainly can't have sex, but the signs of life on display are nonetheless sexually evocative forms of motion. The narrator states, 'Hold a mirror to their lips, it mists. (...) Sweat and mirror notwithstanding they might well pass for inanimate'.⁴⁵⁵ This imperative framing, doing 'funny things' to our hermeneutics of suspicion, introduces a phantom body that can perform the role of holding the mirror.⁴⁵⁶ Far from embodying a narrator, this further inculcates the simultaneous permeability and impermeability of the rotunda, the curious way in which the space is shrunk further and further and yet access to it is extremely free and therefore extremely invasive. The mirror and the mist, too, participate in the space's visual economy. The bodies obfuscate attempts at mimesis merely as evidence of their existence, and this is simultaneously relational: they can 'pass' for inanimate based on the perception of the viewer, and their bodies — as the bodies in *All Strange Away* doubtless did — emit fluids in response to this impossible

⁴⁵⁴ See: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003)

⁴⁵⁵ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

⁴⁵⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 125. See introduction for more on this.

reaching through space, an impossible relation. Paronomasia could be read in 'notwithstanding', since it is in their very horizontal, foetal positions that they are perceived as more dead than alive. As ever, however, this perception is not quite complete. The misting mirror becomes a surrogate for how desire is forced to function in the rotunda.

Imagination Dead Imagine is an uncanny sentence not only in its repetitive impossibility but also in its evocation of sameness as a desperate lunge for the seemingly most radical difference of nothingness or death; gender here is presented as similar or equal to imagination. The use of 'finally' suggests that the woman's emergence is a relief, that this is what was desired, although the comfort derived from designation is fleeting. What can be done with the bleached out yet staunchly persistent gendering of the late prose?

Women and sameness

The majority of criticism surrounding the representation of women in Beckett's work during this period centres on the plays, with Linda Ben-Zvi locating misogyny and erasure in gender ambiguity and Jennifer M. Jeffers asking why Beckett's female characters are so immobile and tortured — overlooking male and genderless characters — and referring to their appearance as 'withered, beyond-their-prime drag queens'.⁴⁵⁷ Apart from the perturbing fact that this is intended as an insult and some sort of failure to abide by a feminist credo, Jeffers does hit upon the difficulty of

⁴⁵⁷ Jennifer M. Jeffers, *Beckett's Masculinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 139.

‘passing’ as any gender in Beckett’s later work. All characters in the late prose may be to some degree described as in drag — and much as the narration is seeking a spatial form of perfection, it does not seek a stable gender. In *Imagination Dead Imagine* in particular, the sameness between two figures with opposing pronouns is emphasised and the accoutrements of gendered ‘passing’ that Jeffers relegates to the ‘hyperfeminine’ are gone. Both bodies in ‘fairly good condition’ invoke a norm and simultaneously undercut it; what is a ‘fairly good condition’ in the rotunda?⁴⁵⁸

The similarity between the figures, despite their being of different genders, is worth remarking upon. They are described idiomatically, ‘The faces too, assuming the two sides of a piece, seem to want nothing essential.’⁴⁵⁹ This evokes a circular shape, as in the saying ‘two sides of the same coin’. However, the shape of the space is not necessarily circular. This replacement of coin with ‘piece’ might at first sound archaic, as in ‘pieces of eight’, evoking a history of metaphor that jars with the experiential hermeneutic manoeuvres this text invokes. However, the word ‘piece’ also suggests that the bodies make up a part of a larger whole, suggesting a paradigm wherein gender is not figured as a simple either/or, but something that might extend in a continuous space. This form of embodiment that suggests a relation that is both between two figures but which also extends itself into a chain is a common one, found in *The Unnamable*, and most explicitly perhaps in *How It Is*.⁴⁶⁰ Peter Boxall, in ‘Beckett and Homoeroticism’, begins to focus on the landscape as ‘composed as much of an

⁴⁵⁸ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ ‘it’s always he who speaks, Mercier never spoke, Moran never spoke, I never spoke, I seem to speak, that’s because he says I as if he were I, I nearly believed him, do you hear him, as if he were I, I who am far, who can’t move, can’t be found, but neither can he’. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 122. For *How It Is* see Chapter One.

obscured semi-autobiographical geography as it is of a kind of network of sexual and aesthetic drives.⁴⁶¹ He comments on the continuation between embodiment and landscape in *Molloy*, worth quoting at length for clarity,

This shifting of the narrator's gaze, from the strangers and the landscape to his own hand, immediately throws into confusion the romantic mode in which the passage has up to now been working. We are no longer dealing here with a self-identical subject who looks longingly upon a landscape which remains separate from him. Rather, the body in which the narrative voice is lodged becomes, itself, part of the scenery to which the narrator feels drawn, and from which he feels himself divorced.⁴⁶²

Rather than a nebulous late modern blurring, this importantly divests the narrator of authority over the landscape, erasing some of the narrator's difference and therefore, as Boxall goes on to suggest, 'it is difficult to imagine how far the narrator's knee (...) can be regarded as *his* knee.'⁴⁶³ This divesting of narratorial authority in 1951 becomes pivotal by the 1960s, with the 'two sides of the same coin' almost indistinguishable from their white backdrop. The implications of a post-Enlightenment stance become clearer in terms not only of the ability to know, but also the ability to claim knowledge. This heightened sameness reconfigures how desire is enacted in the rotunda texts and how language can shape that desire.

⁴⁶¹ Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 113.

⁴⁶² Ibid, p. 122.

⁴⁶³ Ibid, pp. 122-123.

Desire in *Imagination Dead Imagine* is, allegedly, for death. The generous use of comma in the opening sentence is instructive: during the 1960s while also writing *How It Is*, Beckett was experimenting with punctuation and negative space as they relate to concatenation and construction of meaning. The eschewal of punctuation forces a process of rhythmic guesswork in place of a more fluent understanding, undercutting the possibility of a single synthesis.⁴⁶⁴ What *Imagination Dead Imagine* opens with, despite the title pining for the abstraction of death, is an extremely colloquial tone and conversational timbre rife with parenthetical commas signalling hesitation and pause. Although ‘pah’ has echoes of the later — not much later, that is — *Ping*, it doesn’t serve quite the same purpose. Whereas the repetition of ‘ping’ becomes almost a form of punctuation, turning point or noise, ‘pah’ convincingly evokes voice and tone, even exhalation. It is close to an onomatopoeic joke: ‘you say, pah,’ suggests a kind of refusal, a sigh, or even an acting out of the removal of this ‘trace of life’. Not inappropriate that a sound that might be interpreted as a death rattle is also used to express disgust and contempt.

Breath in Beckett’s work is often linked to sexuality and the life cycle without the intermediary of reproduction itself; *Breath*, a tableau of a pile of rubbish scored by breathing and vagitus, was written for an erotic revue, for example. Perhaps, then, in the first line, the narrator states that dying is not difficult — indeed, there is a chance that it has already happened. Beckett elsewhere treats death as something that might occur incrementally, as Mrs W. in *Human Wishes* declares, ‘I am dead enough myself, I hope, not to feel any great respect for those that are so entirely.’⁴⁶⁵ Thus, the

⁴⁶⁴ See Chapter One for more on the peristaltic rhythms of Beckett’s prose.

⁴⁶⁵ *Disjecta*, p. 162.

imagination here might be the last to go down its own destructive cycle. The use of parenthetical commas creates what those familiar with constructive criticism might call the sandwich method: positive-negative-positive. Couched in 'yes', and 'good', 'dead' is presented as something quite urgently needed; needed to the degree that conjunctions have been done away with, pushing the laconic, staccato sentence to its concluding repetition. To round off the opening sentence we are presented again with the title, emphasising perhaps that the difficulty is not in death, couched in positives and imagination, but with the imagination, and therefore the positives themselves. It is the difficulty with the imagination that formulates and vexes the epistemic relationship between narrator and narration.

In *Assez*, the process of reaching boredom through mastery is more pronounced, as the phrase 'no difficulty there' has been replaced by 'la belle affaire'.⁴⁶⁶ Rather than suggesting that the process will be easy, *Imagination morte imaginez* uses hyperbole to mock how insignificant the situation described is, placing itself squarely as a judge and dismissing the subject matter even as it builds, suffocates and exhausts. This colloquial interjection extends the vocality inculcated by 'pah' in the English translation, as its idiomatic nature links it more explicitly to a specifically French voice. Elizabeth Barry identifies that this idiomatic quality in the œuvre contributes to the way in which Beckett avoids the problem of mastery by creating a voice 'both knowing and innocent', mocking cliché while claiming a similar level of repetitive idiocy.⁴⁶⁷ This idiomatic vocality continues in the French list of imagery omitted in the

⁴⁶⁶ Samuel Beckett, 'imagination morte imaginez' in *Têtes-mortes: d'un ouvrage abandonné - assez imagination morte imaginez bing - sans* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000), p. 51.

⁴⁶⁷ Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 207.

English, ‘Îles, eaux, azur, verdure, fixez, pff, muscade, une éternité, taisez.’⁴⁶⁸ Rather than evoking a paradisiacal location and quickly erasing it as in translation: ‘Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit’, in the French it is almost as if there is another attempt at the image.⁴⁶⁹ Its cohesiveness is improved by the rhyming regularity of the sentence, the eighteen syllables an appended version of the Alexandrine, a form taken from medieval literature that was popular with poets such as Molière and Racine, whom Beckett had read at University College Dublin. This would usually consist of two hemistiches of six syllables separated by a caesura; here there are three hemistiches, with one break appropriately falling between ‘une’ and ‘éternité’. The image described unfolds first with the imperative ‘fixez’ to get rid of the island; ‘pff’, another plosive sound followed by sibilance suggesting breath; then ‘muscade’. Rather than a distant, scenic image that is available primarily to the ‘glimpse’, the small, pungent nutmeg draws the horizon afferently towards a single, diminutive object. This introduces a sensuous and perhaps domestic aspect to the text, especially when followed with ‘une éternité’, it could refer to the cliché ‘in a nutshell’, although this does not translate into French.

As John Pilling notes, *Imagination morte imaginez* is a ‘French reduction’ of an earlier draft entitled ‘Fancy Dead Dying’, out of which *All Strange Away* also sprang — or crawled.⁴⁷⁰ It is significant that what seems to have been reduced is difference itself. While the juxtaposition of nutmeg and eternity in French does have a chiaroscuro-resonance of stark contrast between tiny and enormous, limited and unlimited, its existence in another language as an idiom creates a form of hermeneutics that is

⁴⁶⁸ *Imagination morte imaginez*, p. 51.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ *A Samuel Beckett Chronology*, p. 166.

purposefully recalcitrant, even to a reader that does have access to the text in both languages. When an alignment straddles boundaries of reasonable comprehension or even flaunts its own insignificance as the reason for it hiding between languages, registers or literatures, how can criticism be enacted upon it? As Daniela Caselli suggests in examining *Mercier et/and Camier*, rather than invoking a chronological, Bloomian hierarchy of anxiety-inducing patriarchs signified by the act of quotation, Beckett undermines this process and creates an internecine, flawed and yet overt mastery, such that ‘the text constructs a very visible authority while denying it the status of quotation’.⁴⁷¹ The notion of a reference is therefore undercut and subsumed, which seems to also happen here, except instead of Dante, it is the use of a different language. It is the use of the antecedent œuvre that ‘foregrounds the act of telling the story, and undermines the notion of originality.’⁴⁷² The mastery that is implied by the use of quotation or reference is not negated by the lack of citation; rather, the mastery is subsumed illegitimately into the narrator, who seems uncannily to know both more and less than we do, as Barry also attests to. As is the case with the late prose, mastery has been subsumed further as the now-famous Beckett practices this process through both his own works and other literature. Even in the process of translation, which is perhaps of the hermeneutic modes the most flagrantly political, mastery is foiled.

⁴⁷¹ Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 114.

⁴⁷² Ibid, p. 116.

Beckett and the Nouveau Romanians

The undermining of mastery in the late prose seems to occur through a different mode of desiring that, in its lack of a vector, can incorporate boredom as a chaotic constituent that undermines its work. Boredom, as above, has been characterised as the domain of modernity: a result of industrialisation and the development of capitalism. Émile Durkheim's investigation of 'anomie' situates boredom as a phenomenon precisely caused by the unmooring of identity and desire through late capitalism's dissolving of traditional or regulated roles in society: a lack of relationality. Boredom seeps into early modernism through Flaubert, Baudelaire, Benjamin and Proust. The canonical story seems to go that Modernism's drive to 'make it new', energetic as it may have been, was undercut by the exhaustion of the postmodern. However, this kind of concatenation is flawed, as it is possible to see through Beckett's constant self-contaminations and return to 'early' styles and registers. Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in the late prose, where different texts grow from the same first draft, and permutations of the same situation pop up again and again. Whereas a progression can be drawn across Beckett's earlier 'trilogy' from a character who walks upright and clings to a name, to *The Unnamable* torso in a jar, fighting for mere subjectivity — as Alain Robbe-Grillet notices as early as 1963, for example — in the late prose, there is a recycling and rehashing of the same bodies.⁴⁷³ Objects function like prostheses; bodies become less and less significant in terms of their description. Overall, any kind of narrative of progression is forced to

⁴⁷³ Alain Robbe-Grillet, "New Novel, New Man," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p. 136. Originally published as *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1963).

grind to a halt in the white doldrums of the ossuary-like enclosure that pervades so many of the short prose works. The desire for newness has become a paradoxical desire for finality.

Placing Beckett's late prose work in the context of early 1960s France might throw light on — and off — the tools of literary mastery that were being explored at the time, in particular: the chiaroscuro of light and dark, heat and cold and the fixation on surface as a place of embodiment. The fluctuating levels of illumination that characterise these texts are also present in works at the altar of the broad church of nouveau roman, a loose category of avant-garde texts that arose in the 1950s, often characterised as a late echo of pre-war modernism 'proper'. Beckett's publisher, Éditions de Minuit, also published texts written by the nouveau roman's core proponents: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget and, in the mid-60s, Monique Wittig. Beckett had a close relationship with Robert Pinget, whose text *La Manivelle* he adapted in 1959 into his final radio play, *That Old Tune*. Although John Calder suggests of the nouveau roman writers that 'such disparate individuals have never constituted a 'school' or even a close band of friends as the surrealists did,' there were clearly some fraternisations that were of greater import than others.⁴⁷⁴ Though not quite as convivial as his relationship with Pinget, Beckett's intersections with Nathalie Sarraute merit attention. Although, perhaps due to her gender, Sarraute's work is often characterised as primarily concerned with the social or emotional observations rather than abstraction, it has striking parallels with Beckett's work of the same period. The two crossed perhaps not the most hygienic of

⁴⁷⁴ *The Nouveau Roman Reader*, ed. John Fletcher and John Calder (London: Riverrun Press, 1986), p. 15.

paths during the war when Beckett and Suzanne stayed at the Sarraute's for six weeks while in hiding. Beckett alarmed Nathalie Sarraute's mother by sleeping until the afternoon and walking through the kitchen 'with a chamber pot in his hand just as the others were sitting down to lunch.'⁴⁷⁵ For his part, Knowlson notes that Beckett found Sarraute 'sharp and bitchy', an uncharacteristically harsh, not to mention misogynist, turn of phrase indicating a possible strength of sentiment on Beckett's part.⁴⁷⁶ Not a known feminist, Beckett seems to have 'dismissed [Sarraute's] own literary talent too airily.'⁴⁷⁷ Perhaps, however, the pair's shared experience, cultural milieu and Beckett's inevitable awareness of her work explains their transversal relationship in writing.

Sarraute's *Tropisms* was first published in France in 1939, with a revised edition containing works written between 1939 and 1941 published in 1957 and again in 1963. In the 1963 edition, Sarraute states in a foreword that the work has been considered a 'collection of prose poems', suggesting that it contains 'all the raw material that [she has] continued to develop in [her] later works.'⁴⁷⁸ Although Beckett would likely balk at the idea of such capitulation on the part of an author, this return to a style that cannot be classified as a novel or even necessarily a novella that also plunders heavily from other parts of the œuvre has a striking resonance with the 'Fancy Dead Dying' texts. Sarraute similarly addresses minimalism through whiteness, reflecting its contemporary resonances in French domestic life through her unnamed protagonists,

⁴⁷⁵ *Damned to Fame*, p. 316.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 317.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷⁸ Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 15, 9.

They looked closely at the piles of linen in the White Sale display, clever imitations of snow-covered mountains, or at a doll with teeth and eyes that, at regular intervals, lighted up, went out, lighted up, went out, lighted up, went out, each time at the same interval, lighted up again and went out.⁴⁷⁹

This juxtaposition of light and dark is echoed across the genre, even reaching into New Wave cinema — a contemporaneous and aesthetically similar movement — with *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, a film directed by Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet featuring, to compound the Beckettian tropes, chiaroscuro, games of chess and hinging on various trompes d'oeil and mises en abyme. Beckett saw this film on its release in 1962. This clear fixation on precisions of light and duration might presage the compounding during the 1950s of the nouveau roman and the nouvelle vague in cinema. Marie Smart observes via Dorota Ostrowska that 'New Wave filmmakers defined their works through literary terminology.'⁴⁸⁰ Thus, alignment between filmic and literary domains seems to have been a convergence that grew in both directions, exceeding boundaries on either side. Even as early as 1939, the listing used by Sarraute — echoed by Beckett — allows for this curiously spatial aspect to enter literature both physically and hermeneutically, as the language literally takes up space on the page through repetition. The flashing eyes of the doll — with its teeth placing it well and truly in the bell curve of the uncanny valley where humanoid creatures become unsettling rather than cute — seem to do anything but illuminate. The shoppers who

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 15.

⁴⁸⁰ Marie Smart, 'New Novel, Old Tune: Beckett and Pinget in Postwar France', *Modernism/Modernity*, 21.2 (2014), p. 530.

watch it are held by its rhythm, ‘postponing till the next interval the moment of leaving.’⁴⁸¹ Like Beckett’s characters, the crowd seems to be held still merely by the fluctuation of light, contrasting with the bright consumerist heaps in their ‘long, dark clusters’, forming ‘eddies’ or ‘cloggings’ with their asynchronous movements.⁴⁸² Fin-de-siècle theories of the crowd by 1939 have garnered a curiously supernatural quality: rather than a collective primitive, which would imply a kind of fundamental humanity, the crowd here fluctuates in density like a cosmic force, or iron filings on a magnet.⁴⁸³ This variance is one way in which boredom is used as a form of resistance to urban modernity: to technological advancements and capitalistic excess. Beckett’s late prose works in these same paradigms, undermining an abstract notion of progression.

Nouveau Roman, Nouvelle Vague: Nouveau Blanc

The unseeing yet illuminated flashing eyes of Sarraute’s doll perfectly mirror the undermining of visual authority. This flashing attempt at human mimesis might be the spectre of exuberant Modernist attempts at communication and representation — or perhaps merely writing of any kind. The doll relocates the origination of the nonsensical Morse code into a transitional object: D. W. Winnicott’s notion that toys

⁴⁸¹ *Tropisms*, p. 15.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Gustave Le Bon, *Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Kitchener, Canada: Hakluyt Society, 2000); William McDougall, *The Group Mind : a Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology, with Some Attempt to Apply Them to the Interpretation of National Life and Character* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1927); Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: Norton, 1975); Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ in *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 324-339; David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

are the basis of the development of subjectivity as they represent a mid-point between subject and object on which a child builds its own subjectivity.⁴⁸⁴

Addressing a binary symbolism archetypal of colonial countries that simultaneously explains and reflects the suffering inflicted by fascism in World War II, the vexing of whiteness as good and darkness as bad enacts the resistance of signifying orders and regimes that cannot be shaken off easily or through participation in a similar linguistic order, as Sarraute writes ominously of 'blinding light that did away with everything, did away with all shadows and asperities.'⁴⁸⁵ There is a conflation here of darkness and difficulty. However, whiteness creates blindness, something mirrored in *Imagination Dead Imagine* by 'light that makes all so white no visible source, all shines with the same white shine'.⁴⁸⁶ Whiteness here is not only blindness but also a sameness that creates a relative blindness — indeed a kind of sameness that resituates blindness or the ability to see as a secondary sense, second to touch, and when used only used in a vague, broad sense, neglecting detail. Using whiteness as this indifference to heterogeneity plays on whiteness as invisible and therefore powerful, as Richard Dyer notes,

Looking and being looked at reproduce racial power relations. Jean-Paul Sartre comments in the Introduction to an anthology of *négritude* poetry on the shock of finding himself, as a white man, being seen;⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁴ Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁸⁵ *Tropisms*, p. 47.

⁴⁸⁶ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 182.

⁴⁸⁷ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 45.

Sartre's essay is curiously tangential to Beckett's own work, as it forms the introduction to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, originally published in 1948; not distant in kind from the *Negro Anthology* that Beckett agreed to edit for his friend, the writer and political activist Nancy Cunard over a decade earlier in 1934.⁴⁸⁸ This shock that Dyer and Sartre refer to is replayed in *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Caselli suggests that Beckett's narrative in *Company* enables us to see the eye seeing.⁴⁸⁹ I argue that this extends in particular to the late prose wherever it deals with whiteness, as this shock is replayed through a remove. This remove might be characterised as boredom precisely because of its indifference to heterogeneity, which in flattening whiteness to near invisibility enacts a kind of hermetic homogenisation.

Tessellation Problems

A skim of *Imagination Dead Imagine* for its physical exactitude might produce the impression that the figures described are in a position something like Figure 1.

⁴⁸⁸ Published by Wishart in 1934, the *Negro Anthology* merits much more attention than there is space for in this thesis. It is worth noting that both anthologies were published just before and just after the rise of fascism in Europe, and in the case of *Negro*, by a communist publishing house. Among others, Beckett translated the work of Raymond Michelet, which outlines a powerfully anti-racist message. This translation was Beckett's longest published work, and it also coincides with a gap in Beckett's published letters: a blank space due to his involvement in the Resistance. This was a significant moment in Beckett's political life.

⁴⁸⁹ Daniela Caselli, *The Modernist Child*, Inaugural Lecture, (Samuel Alexander Building, University of Manchester, UK: March 14th 2019)

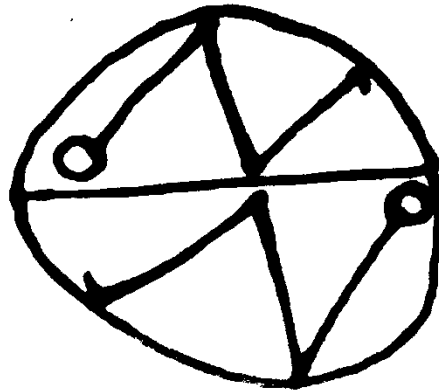


Figure 1

One might be forgiven for this oversight, if it could even be described as such, because Beckett repeatedly refers to the space as a 'rotunda'. In its common architectural use this describes a building with a circular floor plan, often covered with a dome. This seemed to describe the space in *All Strange Away*: either providing a surface to display the bodies or efficiently conforming to their shape. However, in geometrical terms, a rotunda is a dihedral-symmetric polyhedron: a dome made up of alternating pentagons and triangles, forming a dome-like shape but without a perfectly circular base. This allows for a different arrangement of bodies and suggests that there is more space surrounding them in this text. In order for the figures to be 'on their right sides, therefore both back to back and head to arse', they must be arranged as shown in Figure 2.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁹⁰*Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

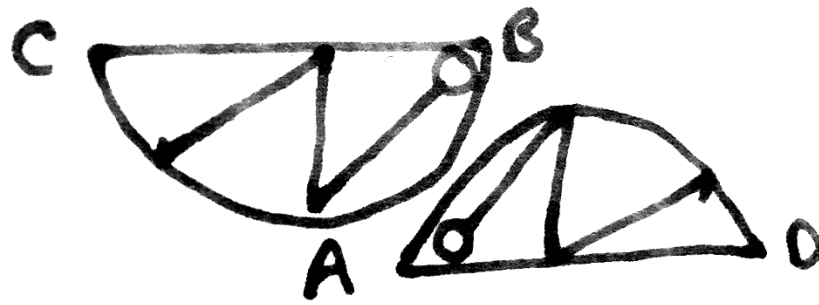


Figure 2

This creates an oddly impossible space. While the figures in *All Strange Away* filled the space to the edges and the space shrank to fit them, in *Imagination Dead Imagine* the characters are inscribed in new tangential semicircles that don't fit comfortably into a larger rotunda. Perhaps this hints towards the death of the imagination, an abandonment of logic in favour of language, or a different relationality than that of figures comfortably mirroring one another. If one redraws the two into a circle, harmony is restored.

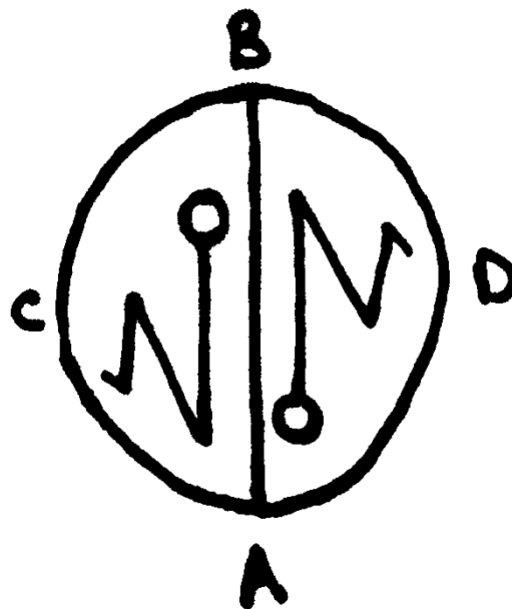


Figure 3

The only problem with this, more sensible, image is that the body parts of the figures inscribed no longer fit in a way that makes sense anatomically. The knees won't reach the wall between C and B, and yet the text states 'knees against the wall between B and C'; for this to be true, the knees would need to be so proximate to the head that the thighs would be of a considerable length!⁴⁹¹ Then again, Beckett does allow for an extension of what is considered human in this diegetic, with the eyes being kept open 'long beyond what is humanly possible.'⁴⁹² It is equally possible either that the bodies belong in an awkward shape, as in Figure 2, where the longest, straightest bit of the body is in fact against a curve; or that the bodies themselves are shaped awkwardly, as in Figure 3, where the thighs ought to be as long as the torso or longer. Shape and space were clearly not empirical modes for Beckett: instead, here they take on the vexed, performative uncertainty of language.

Reading Whiteness: the USA in the 1960s

As noted in Chapter Two, just two weeks before beginning work on *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* in Ussy, Beckett visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He had been in the United States for a month shooting *Film* with Alan Schneider — another piece of cinema in black and white. The catalogue for the museum on this date shows multiple exhibitions, most under the main title 'Art in a Changing World'. As well as several black and white photography exhibitions, a range of minimalist pieces were on display, such as Mohan B. Samant's *Green Square*,

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

Rudolfo Abularach's *Untitled* (May 1960), Lee Bontecou's *Untitled* (1960), and Georgia O'Keefe's *Banana Flower*. While there were thousands of pieces on display and it is impossible to be certain of which Beckett saw, the catalogues certainly present a broad abstract and minimalist tendency, as these examples show.

After the MoMA visit, Beckett stated in letters that he found it a 'tremendous collection', describing the hour spent there as 'not enough'.⁴⁹³ Perhaps Beckett may even have noticed 'Children's Carnival'; rather alarming by today's safety standards, the space boasted that 'the Carnival is open to any child between the ages of four and ten. Adults are not permitted into the Carnival during the hour-long sessions, but parents may watch their children through portholes in the walls.' The idea was to engage the children in play with pieces of art in the room. The press release concludes, 'The toy gallery is painted a dark green and deep blue, creating a forest-like atmosphere, thus attracting the children to the brightly lit toys.'⁴⁹⁴ It is hard not to imagine an inchoate *Le Dépeupleur*, replete with chiaroscuro and chaos unbridled by the author-parent's authority.

What is pressing about the MoMA visit is not only what Beckett took away but also how this experience may be imbricated with the work he was producing in the 1960s in terms of racial politics. Anthony O'Brien in a reflection on whiteness in *Catastrophe* suggests that 'in a postcolonial world the subtlety and profundity of its meditation on power are undercut by its normative unconcern with its own racial

⁴⁹³ Samuel Beckett to Robert Pinget, 14th August 1964, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III: 1957-1965*, pp. 615-616.

⁴⁹⁴ MoMA press release, Tuesday June 23rd 1964
<https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3276/releases/MOMA_1964_0063_1964-06-23_30.pdf> [accessed 5 April 2022]

premises.⁴⁹⁵ My question is not whether Beckett himself was concerned with racial politics or whether he was subject to the snowblindness that O'Brien outlines; these problems are clear in his writing and translation work and are addressed in a nuanced way by O'Brien. The prose works of the 1960s provide a different way of thinking whiteness, in terms of abstraction but also in terms of race. While acknowledging the contextual differences between decades, it is also important to undercut the notion that Beckett's writing develops into an anti-essentialist stance and maintains it. In other words: this chapter does not aim to demonstrate a teleological or indeed logical progression, but rather the change that came about in the 1960s.

At MoMA there were also two exhibitions about engineering and one focused entirely on the architectural aspects of Pennsylvania Avenue, the street that leads from the White House to the Capitol in Washington, DC. A scan of the catalogue reveals straplines at the top of selected pages showing neat architectural plans and black and white illustrations of the governmental buildings evincing geometric balance and harmony, the first declaring 'The Avenue would become a clear shaft of space between the White House and the Capitol', and the latter 'How can the shining vision be made reality? The authors propose a single agency to see it through'.⁴⁹⁶ There is a clear link made here between politics and the architecture of black and white, blank space and freedom, what 'shines' and what succeeds in North American democratic society. *Imagination Dead Imagine* seems to pose the opposite question: how can the shining vision be erased from reality? The 'clear shaft of space' evokes the cylinder of *The Lost Ones*. Although it is a little too clumsy to encumber these recalcitrant texts with

⁴⁹⁵ Anthony O'Brien, 'Staging Whiteness: Beckett, Havel, Maponya', *Theatre Journal*, 46.1 (1994), p. 50.

⁴⁹⁶ 'Pennsylvania Avenue', *Architectural Forum* (US: Time, Inc, July 1964), p. 66, 75. Reprinted by MoMA for the exhibition.

presentist politics, this does seem to orientate their torture towards a specifically disastrous version of harmony; that is to say, a version of harmony pregnant with disaster, blinded to its parturiency by the glaring whites of building surfaces and unsullied vistas. John F. Kennedy had created these plans a year before his assassination and they ring somewhat dour: the upkeep of a fantasy of perfect democracy in the face of murder, conspiracy and distrust. Whiteness in this context stands, undoubtedly, for power. As Kristin Ross observes, this whiteness had been in trend since the mid-1950s, with *Marie-Claire* declaring ‘the age of light, airy houses, of healthy children, of the refrigerator, pasteurized milk,’ whereas *Elle* states its interests more plainly, ‘Beau BLANC, BLANC bébé, boire BLANC’.⁴⁹⁷ The kind of vision that was being peddled to French housewives at this moment was also of the Great White America, tied into imported machinic technologies of hygiene and ease. Whiteness in the 1950s, too, was concerned with the kind of power that grabs:

[t]he narcissistic satisfaction offered is one of possession and self-possession: clean surfaces and sharp angles. The completion of a household task completes the woman —⁴⁹⁸

Conversely, the whiteness of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, though clean and sharp, fails to satisfy anyone with the misfortune of becoming ensconced in it, much less allow them to possess themselves or anything else. The resurgence of black and white continued in both new wave cinema and the nouveau roman well into the 1960s, along

⁴⁹⁷ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 84.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 84-86.

with Beckett's *Film* in 1964, when colour television sets were becoming more and more popular, while in France television was still something of a rarity even in black and white.⁴⁹⁹ This whiteness was also associated with Americanization, as Ross goes on to elaborate.⁵⁰⁰ Perhaps this Americanization that was so tied to the domestic sphere, touted by society as a woman's place, is the reason that Sarraute, over and above her male companions, was able to reflect the monochrome politics that came to its peak during the 1960s so clearly.

The surfaces in *Imagination Dead Imagine* are, problematically for its historical moment, not shiny or clean. Much attention is paid to walls and fabric — perhaps domestic surfaces — as well as skin and bodily surfaces. We also encounter a mirror, not to display an image but instead to show condensation as evidence of breath: the imagination too dead for ekphrastic narration. Life here is fluid in more than one sense of the word. To begin with, the walls are compared to bone, 'rap, solid throughout, a ring as in the imagination the ring of bone.'⁵⁰¹ This surface is not described as real bone, although it is easy to imagine the 'rotunda' as a skull, one might imagine that Beckett's response to the idea of the rotunda being a skull would be the same as his response to accusations that Godot is, actually, God. Thus, the space sounds like bone, but it is not: it seems like an interior, but it is not. This contradiction is made all the more painful by the minimalist lack of perspective, as we see the rotunda 'from this point of view, but there is no other.'⁵⁰² It is as a result of this

⁴⁹⁹ James J. Nagle, 'R.C.A. CUTS PRICE OF COLOR TV SETS', *The New York Times*, 14 May 1964, Section Archives <<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/05/14/rca-cuts-price-of-color-tv-sets.html>> [accessed 5 April 2022]; *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 140.

⁵⁰⁰ *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 89.

⁵⁰¹ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 182.

⁵⁰² *Ibid*, p. 184.

blinker vision that the narrator must 'judge by the surfaces exposed to view.'⁵⁰³ The logical paradigm of the surface does not also refuse interpretation, however, since the 'world [is] still proof against enduring tumult'.⁵⁰⁴ 'Proof' in this sentence begins to behave peculiarly, just as a hermeneutics of suspicion might do 'funny things' to an imperative, or in this case a form of permanence or objectivity.

Having visited MoMA, Beckett went on to see the World's Fair. Here he would experience at least some of the following wonders: colour television, a picturephone (Skype, but not quite), the computer (definite article still necessary), thermonuclear fusion, rockets that had been to the moon, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Michelangelo's *Pietà*, a robotic Abraham Lincoln and the American debut of the Belgian waffle. Despite the remarkable array of modernity on offer, the fair has gone down in history as a failure. As Lawrence R. Samuels observes, 'the intellectual and creative elite, then and now, labeled the Fair's Eisenhower-style aura passé and stifling'.⁵⁰⁵ Samuel argues that the fair did indeed offer many wonders, 'bypassing the uninviting near future for a more palatable far-distant one'.⁵⁰⁶ Although Beckett doesn't comment at length on his visit to the World's Fair in his published letters, his stuplime minimalism offers a recalcitrance to futurity that mirrors the idealism of the fair: an abstract futurity that does not rely on the politics of the present. Beckett's late prose might demonstrate the outcome of such a view.

To further disentangle the relationship of boredom and desire in Beckett, a film shot by Andy Warhol in 1963 entitled *Blow Job* is of use. Contemporaneous with both

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Lawrence R. Samuels, *The End of the Innocence: The 1964-1965 New York World's Fair* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), p. xv.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, p. xvii.

Beckett's time in the USA and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, the thirty-minute film is shot entirely in black and white and depicts the head and shoulders of an anonymous, uncredited man who, the title suggests, is receiving oral sex. This absence of visible genitalia invokes the same enforced ignorance that Beckett instantiates both in terms of genitalia and concatenated narrative in general. Ara Osterweil notes that, in the film, 'movement itself has lost its abrogated function as a transparent sign.'⁵⁰⁷ This lack of directness is, for Osterweil, what constitutes the avant-garde boredom of the piece and simultaneously the pornographic aspect, as spectators watching the film are made aware, indeterminately, of their own corporeality, 'the turgidity of our thighs, the heaviness of our eyelids, and the full but unbearable pulsing of genitals.'⁵⁰⁸ This pulsation that is at once extremely intimate and inescapable is also a morphology: a constantly adjusting shape that does so in response to boredom. When nothing is happening around us, the pulse of the body becomes more painfully visceral: this is exaggerated through an embodiment that vexes the idea of interiority in *Imagination Dead Imagine*.

It is Not All Black and White: Good Vibrations in the Prose

The use of oppositions such as black and white does not necessarily represent an impasse between a binary in the late prose, but instead a mode of examining that corresponds with the way in which Beckett uses a minimising drive to create a hermeneutics of boredom. This might suggest new ways of approaching Beckett's

⁵⁰⁷ Ara Osterweil, 'Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*', in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 436.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 452.

couching firmly in between Modernism and postmodernism, stretching the former to its end and pulling the latter into its nascence. In an examination of boredom in the 'trilogy', Mark Pedretti describes the debate between the two as 'irresolvable', describing the experience of reading Beckett as 'the frustrated desire of boredom'.⁵⁰⁹ Pedretti situates Beckett's boredom as particular to the ironic achronicity of late modernism, describing the 'novelty and rupture' that undergird the affective state that bleeds into other similarly described texts.⁵¹⁰ Pedretti's word choice is aptly tangential to sexual terminology, suggesting that the sexual is the apogee of a scale inducted by boredom. Following Crangle, I suggest that this model is not suited to the way that boredom plays out in the texts as a mediator between extremes or doldrums of greyscale. Rather than a reaching towards a finality, there is instead a stasis that induces the kind of minimising labour that creates the tiny multiplicities within the limits of just two extremes or oppositions: black and white, or heat and dark. Sexuality is a spectre in *Imagination Dead Imagine*: vibration features in a cultural moment where the vibrator is becoming a purpose-made commodity as opposed to a misused massager,

The extremes alone are stable as is stressed by the vibration to be observed when a pause occurs at some intermediate stage, no matter what its level and duration. Then all vibrates, ground, wall, vault, bodies, ashen or leaden or between the two, as may be.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁹ Mark Pedretti, 'Late modern rigmarole: boredom as form in Samuel Beckett's trilogy', *Studies in the Novel*, 45.4 (2013), p. 584.

⁵¹⁰ 'Late modern rigmarole: boredom as form in Samuel Beckett's trilogy', p. 586.

⁵¹¹ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 183.

Something appears to go awry when the movement here stops — the movement, that is, which goes back and forth, repetitively. To take Lisa Palac at her word, ‘Sex is eroticised repetition. Of course, doing the same thing over and over can lead to libido failure, but it’s also a key ingredient for sexual arousal.’⁵¹² Teamed with the vibration, this kind of intimate, pervasive pulsating that *Blow Job* evokes is occurring again, albeit not in the context of intercourse. In the French, the word used is ‘pulsation’, closer to a bodily motion than the English. Bodies have the option to be ashen or leaden: although at first these both seem dire options, they mimic once again the hot or cold and the light or dark respectively: white, hot ash; black, cold lead. In addition to this, ash is light and lead is heavy. Ash suggests the aftermath of death, whereas lead would, no visual pun intended, lead to it through poisoning.

This vibration accumulates at the very end of the text, when the bodies are described to,

Only murmur ah, no more, in this silence, and at the same instant for the eye of prey the infinitesimal shudder instantaneously suppressed.⁵¹³

The combination of ‘infinitesimal’ and ‘instantaneously’ here combines to create a visceral intensity: for the shudder to be so small, it must have been repressed rather forcefully. The image is that of a submitting body, immediately tensing itself against an automatic physical reaction. Susan Brienza suggests that the ‘eye of prey’ is that of

⁵¹² Joseph W. Slade, *Pornography and Sexual Representation: A Reference Guide*, Volume II, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 723.

⁵¹³ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 185.

the observer; 'the reader's imagination.'⁵¹⁴ However, the 'eye of prey' also prefigures the 'eye of flesh' in *The Lost Ones*, begun shortly after *Imagination Dead Imagine* in October 1965. In the text, 'They [the vanquished] may stray unseeing through the throng indistinguishable to the eye of flesh from the still unrelenting.'⁵¹⁵ The 'eye of flesh' here seems related to the 'eye of prey', in that the characters in *The Lost Ones* who are not 'vanquished' are described as having 'passion preying on them still'.⁵¹⁶ Further to this, once the vanquished are stationary, they sit in their tunnels 'devouring with their eyes in heads dead still each body as it passes by.'⁵¹⁷ Thus the eye of flesh seems to be part of a sadistic economy, rather than a simple metaphor for the reader. If in *The Lost Ones*, passion is a predator that preys on the characters within the cylinder, then the eye of prey here might be the very desire that would create the possibility of playing these out through perception, or indeed the possibility for sexuality, or the possibility that it is part of perception here. What better reason to suppress a — perhaps orgasmic, perhaps repulsed, perhaps frozen — shudder, than to avoid becoming the victim of passion in such an inhospitable environment? If the characters are exhausted of all possibility, in what sense is passion a predator? According to Herbert Blau, Beckett was using this phrase years before he wrote it in *The Lost Ones*.⁵¹⁸ The transformation of the eye of flesh to the eye of prey shifts the focus of desire from the body to the act of perceiving.

⁵¹⁴ Susan Brienza, 'Clods, Whores and Bitches' in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 102.

⁵¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, 'The Lost Ones', in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 211.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵¹⁸ Herbert Blau, 'The Bloody Show and The Eye of Prey: Beckett and Deconstruction', *Theatre Journal*, 39.1 (1987).

Performing and Cinematic Bodies

The use of filmic tropes in *Imagination Dead Imagine* informs how interiority is framed with regards to embodiment, as the bodies therein,

might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible.⁵¹⁹

It is perhaps not coincidental that the language used here is somewhat filmic. It is possible to read here a clear evocation of the atemporal, indeterminate aspects of boredom in the 'incalculable intervals', incalculable because the body has been reduced, in this moment, to its own somatics, and mathematics relies on interrelation. The 'unblinking exposure' evokes a camera eye, not only in its absence of blinking but in the 'exposure' used to calibrate the light levels in photography, along with the fact that this is 'long beyond what is humanly possible.' Although the eye is not a camera, here it acts like one in a torturous gaze through which nothing seems to be seen: described as 'pale blue', it is implied that the eyes are blind and, even if they were not, without blinking anything that was seen would begin to blur. The camera-eye is not a surprising leap to find in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, as Beckett had recently completed work on *Film*, which adopts similar methods. We see the eye itself seeing here: a process that is torturous both in terms of the stretch of time and physical

⁵¹⁹ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

possibilities as well as the boredom of the indeterminacy. The extremity of the movement is further emphasised by the eyes opening ‘wide’: a pornographic gaping teamed with a refusal to give the gaze an object. This boredom, following Osterweil’s essay, continues in the vein of Beckettian desiring modes by labouring for the minimal in order to reduce the body to its seeing self. Importantly, what is seen is not there, the body is evoked as seeing, and the process of its being seen is on the brink of invisibility.

Along with Osterweil, Jennifer Doyle examines another failed blow job of sorts — though rather unlike Warhol, the audience saw the event full frontally. Vaginal Davis’ performance piece *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Care*, performed in April 2000, was meant to end with ejaculation into the crowd but instead ended with a blow job that failed to elicit an erection or ejaculation. Doyle, describing her ultimate boredom in front of the spectacle, suggests,

It is hard to argue with someone’s boredom, in much the same way that it is hard to argue with someone’s arousal – both are stubborn and unpredictable. (...) an openness to boredom (...) would allow us, in criticism, to replace the “detached observer” with a body that is both less committal (always ready to walk away) and more promiscuous (or go straight to bed).⁵²⁰

⁵²⁰ Jennifer Doyle, ‘The Trouble with Men, or, Sex, Boredom, and the Work of Vaginal Davis’, in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 88.

Doyle's boredom seems to replace an anxiety for an ejaculation or conclusion, or the anxiety of the 'reveal' — the money shot and the exposure both transporting the signification of gender back to its less abrogated territories. This anxiety is the same static or 'bored' desire that occurs in both *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Blow Job*. If we are open to boredom in these works, we are open to a morphology in the face of desire that doesn't permit concepts such as 'passing': its queer time undoes transparency by putting the veil back on, by being too-literal, gothic, twee and simultaneously abstract. Whiteness or blank surfaces become terrifying and gothic because they represent the trap of seeing the eye seeing: a torn veil that only reveals the role of the veil itself. Boredom allows us to sit with the terror of this revelation, beckoned in by the whiteness that, as Dyer notes, is also terrified of its own emptiness.⁵²¹

As early as his essay *Proust*, written in 1930 and agonised over for at least another year, Beckett expounds on boredom as it relates to embodied suffering,

Boredom — with its host of tophatted and hygienic ministers,
Boredom that must be considered as the most tolerable because
the most durable of human evils.⁵²²

The adjectives 'tophatted' and 'hygienic' evoke aspects of the social — class and cleanliness, the latter a frequent metonym for the former — that are used to differentiate within the category of 'white', as Dyer notes that 'the relative fluidity of white as a skin colour functions in relation to the notion of whiteness as a coalition,

⁵²¹ 'It is this sense of absence that also proves white people's greatest weakness, for in it lies the desolate suspicion of non-existence.' *White*, p. 45.

⁵²² Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust* (London: Calder, 1999), pp. 28-29.

with a border and an internal hierarchy'.⁵²³ The way that difference functions in the late prose is eerily similar to the way that Dyer describes whiteness' confined, selective fluidity. In other words, similarly to boredom, it makes itself bearable through its morphology. Its confinement is suffering, but in permutating and shifting back and forth it endures either the absence of difference or the sheer multiplicity thereof, which is always represented through affect.

This shifting affect can be seen through the only enduring presence of an object that occurs in *All Strange Away*, the 'grey rubber sprayer bulb or grey punctured rubber ball'.⁵²⁴ Similarly, in Sarraute's *Tropisms* a 'pellet' is described as emanating from a conversation between two women,

continually rolling between their fingers this unsatisfactory, mean substance that they had extracted from their lives (what they called 'life', their domain), kneading it, pulling it, rolling it until it ceased to form anything between their fingers but a little pile, a little grey pellet.⁵²⁵

Grey, in both Sarraute and Beckett, performs minimalism as a rebuke to essentialism. Both grey, mutable forms are manually malleable. The shift of the stuff of meaning, in the case of Sarraute, and the shift of any kind of prop in the case of Beckett, to the hands is significant. Manual manipulation implies a certain kind of labour. In Sarraute, the kneading and pulling nods towards dough, whereas in Beckett the grey ball or sprayer bulb might denote different activities classically defined by gender:

⁵²³ *White*, p. 51.

⁵²⁴ *All Strange Away*, p. 179.

⁵²⁵ *Tropisms*, p. 33.

sport and perfume. The bulb/ball has a certain kind of tension that is defined by its very emptiness — it lets out a hiss when squeezed, a mechanical alternative of a human sigh. The deflation and inflation of the ball/bulb mirrors the oscillations of light and temperature in the room, permutating through the labour of the near-comatose figure. In Sarraute, the grey pellet is made up of the stuff of life itself, suggesting an essential quality. However, this essential quality, for Sarraute's characters, amounts to dissatisfaction, and manipulation is necessary to make it bearable, or to use it for interaction.

Skin and Screams

Beckett's late works take a particular interest in the skin not as a boundary or characteristic, but as a site of affect and flux. This troubles the narrative that has been previously drawn, as Paul Stewart elucidates, 'which often views matters of sexuality as an early concern that is rigorously excised from the novels and plays as Beckett succeeds in focusing on the more universal, less temporal themes with which his work has been associated.'⁵²⁶ In *A Piece of Monologue*, written in 1979 for David Warrilow, otherness and interrelation sit on the skin with the line, 'Birth the death of him. That nevoid smile.'⁵²⁷ There is a familiar uncanny quality to this drawing together of areas of the skin – the lips and a facial mole or 'melanocytic nevus'.⁵²⁸ This comparison gives the smile a strange stillness and permanence, suggesting it was inborn perhaps. The

⁵²⁶ *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work*, p. 1.

⁵²⁷ Samuel Beckett, 'A Piece of Monologue', in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 427.

⁵²⁸ As noted in Chapter One, Beckett had a series of dictionaries that he would read and refer to, including a Nurse's Dictionary.

juxtaposition with '[b]irth the death of him', then, gives the smile a morbid quality, along with the pathologising tone of 'nevoid', suggesting that although the smile is inherent, it might be viewed as a blemish. This imbrication of skin or confusion of surface is played out, also, in the late prose, and can even be found in a character description in Sarraute's *Tropisms*,

so feminine, so unobtrusive ('don't mind me, I'm quite alright like this, I don't want anything for myself'), they constantly sensed, as though in a tender spot on their own flesh, her presence.⁵²⁹

What *Tropisms* draws upon in this bringing-to-surface of affect is the intimacy of the skin, not simply in terms of an affectionate closeness but in terms of a closeness that does not allow for what might be termed an objective reflection. In other words, this kind of otherness that would imbue itself on the skin evades boredom's tendency towards self-reflection. Although skin in both Beckett and Sarraute's work is figured as a surface, it is not a metaphorical surface that can be interpreted in the same way as language; embodiment therefore becomes a germane spatial ground for the playing out of desire.

Desire in *Imagination Dead Imagine* often takes on the impression of noise, an agglutinated careening that uses boredom affectively,

⁵²⁹ *Tropisms*, p. 40.

It is possible too, experience shows, for rise and fall to stop short at any point and mark a pause, more or less long, before resuming, or reversing, the rise now fall, the fall rise, these in their turn to be completed, or to stop short and mark a pause, more or less long, before resuming, or again reversing, and so on, till finally one or the other extreme is reached.⁵³⁰

This passage can be irritating to read. It reverses and accelerates, repeating itself with not just Brater's 'riot of caesuras' but a veritable putsch, biting at the faculties with its impertinently exhaustive possibilitating.⁵³¹ It annoys in the same sense that, infamously, 'noise annoys': through its invasive nebulousness and its unwillingness to settle. The sentence is unreasonable, quite literally. Its insistent and repetitive rabbiting is juxtaposed with patronising implications of mastery such as 'experience shows', the voice continuing to elucidate the unelucidatable while underlining its own time-worn knowledge that despite its position persists in ignorance of all but the most basic fluctuations in the environment. This could be read as a mockery of the idea of boredom as a modern disease: in this economy, modernity cannot exist. The length of the sentence reflects in itself the distance of the boundaries and the time the bodies spend waiting to reach these extremes, so progression is precluded. This sentence conveys the suffering of the bodies by forcing a modicum of their torture through the faculties of the person who would dare to read it. It suggests a kind of Freudian sadism in its minimalism. Opposition and reversal emerge as the primary movers of sheer

⁵³⁰ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 183.

⁵³¹ Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text: Beckett's Late Fiction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 85.

nothingness; it is the structure of the text that instantiates this affect. Herbert Marcuse once gave an account to Reinhard Lettau of a conversation he'd had with Beckett on structure, 'Beckett had once been asked by a critic what the structure of his writing was. 'I can explain to you the structure of my writing,' he answered. 'I once was hospitalized and in the room next door to a dying woman who screamed all night long. This screaming is the structure of my writing.'⁵³² Here is the playing out of the impossible structure of noise.

This section describes the respective extremes of light and heat and cold and dark that the diegetic space moves through. Here we can see working the spatial and temporal intensities of *All Strange Away* investigated in the previous chapter. The number of syllables in each clause of this protracted sentence settles between four and six going by the mode: repetitive and monotonous, like the shipping forecast.⁵³³ The words are monosyllabic and common, an excess of parallelism and repetition lulling the attention not precisely elsewhere, but into the impression that it already knows what will come next and does not need to pay full attention. The phrase 'experience shows' might even perhaps mockingly suggest that the narrator is already familiar

⁵³² Reinhard Lettau, "Zu Herbert Marcuses Tod," in *Zerstreutes Hinausschaun: Vom Schreiben über Vorgänge in direkter Nähe oder in der Entfernung von Schreibtischen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982), pp. 203-205. Qtd in Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 156-157.

⁵³³ The shipping forecast, incidentally, has itself inspired experimental artworks. Vicki Bennett, a sound artist working primarily with sampling, hosted a programme called Radio Boredcast on freeform radio station WFMU, as Kenneth Goldsmith describes 'In 2012, she organized Radio Boredcast, a 744-hour experimental online radio project that included everything from BBC maritime shipping forecasts to punk-rock cover versions of Balinese kecak chants.' (Kenneth Goldsmith, *Duchamp Is My Lawyer: The Polemics, Pragmatics, and Poetics of UbuWeb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 186.) Here, the shipping forecast is the under-stimulated, as opposed to over-stimulated, end of the spectrum of 'boring': the least stimulating in comparison to the chaotic and hair-raising kecak chants. Incidentally, this line of investigation comes full circle, as Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, section eight, is the main feature of the show on March 2nd, 2012. (Radio Boredcast: Playlist from March 2, 2012, WFMU, <<https://wfmuplaylists.org/shows/45879>> [Accessed 5 April 2022].) Radio Boredcast is also available as a 24 hour unbroken stream, its project, in reckoning with boredom, also reckoning with time.

with this world: an academic who has been staring at the text for too long. Beckett famously mocks both close attention and waning engagement as in *Murphy*, '[t]ry it sometime, gentle skimmer.'⁵³⁴ This line, in a paragraph all its own, creates paronomasia through the implication not only that the reader might attempt to defraud a café, but also via the reference to skimmed milk: an absurdly amusing juxtaposition. It comes following a particularly specific reference to how *Murphy* managed to drink more tea than he paid for, in fact, '1.83 cups approximately.'⁵³⁵ Whereas in 1938 Beckett plays with these facts and figures as extraneous and irrelevant and then audaciously mocks the reader for their inattention, by 1965 boredom is part of the deadpan linguistic economy, even a mode of expression.

This chapter has argued that *Imagination Dead Imagine* might be seen as coterminous with a lineage of art practice that uses minimalism to deconstruct essentialist thought, so that the result of loss is a kind of gain, or as it is written in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, 'a thousand little sighs too long to imagine'.⁵³⁶ It participates in the same aesthetic as *Blow Job's* cigarette, or Vaginal Davis' absent cum shot — a blankness, or minimalism, that draws on boredom as a mode of changing desire in the face of aesthetics so that rather than space disappearing, it opens up differently — queerly — mocking the certainty of hermeneutics. Even categories that stake their power on their own internal fluidity, such as whiteness, in being named and made visible, lose the currency of abstraction and claim to universality. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, 'what makes queer theory queer as opposed to simply deconstructionist is also its insistence on risking a certain vulgar referentiality, its

⁵³⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (Montreuil: Calder Publications, 2003), p. 51.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 185.

understanding of the sexual encounter as precisely the body and ego's undoing.⁵³⁷

Surface, in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, is all that is available, and although the 'world [is] still proof against enduring tumult', these surfaces shift constantly from black to white, hot to cold, and refuse to remain monolithic, spacious or Suprematist: 'great whiteness unchanging' is just one unreliable possibility.⁵³⁸ In situating boredom back in embodiment and forcing it to stay there, Beckett's late prose can be read as part of a queer aesthetic process that draws on and departs from late Modernist aesthetics.

⁵³⁷ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 11.

⁵³⁸ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 185.

‘When he was silent he must have been like me’: desire for gender in *Enough*

‘When the whole is at stake, there is no crime except that of rejecting the whole, or not defending it.’⁵³⁹

‘The part is not the whole, as they say, though usually without thinking. For it should be emphasized that the part has nothing to do with the whole.’⁵⁴⁰

Enough is a temporally difficult text in more ways than one. Written between *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Ping* — along with *Dans le Cylindre* and *L’Issue*, both of which would eventually become *Le Dépeupleur* — it divides up these two similar ‘rotunda’ texts along with *Imagination Dead Imagine*’s precursor, *All Strange Away*, breaking, at the very least chronologically, the ever-tempting possibility of another trilogy.⁵⁴¹ At the latter end of the 1960s, Beckett rearranged the order of these short prose pieces for the collection *Têtes-mortes*, admitting that the chronological order in which these were written was, in fact, ‘1. Imagination.. 2. Assez 3. Dans le Cylindre – L’Issue 4. Bing 5. Sans.’⁵⁴² *Enough*, it seems, was tossed around the timelines and caused some confusion for Beckett himself, ‘They [Editions de Minuit] & I think 6 or 7 other such (...) may be regarded as leading up to Bing though there is a jump from

⁵³⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 86.

⁵⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: Norton, 2006), p. 715.

⁵⁴¹ A letter Beckett wrote to Mary Hutchison in 1968 confirms this timeline: John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 179.

⁵⁴² Samuel Beckett to John Fletcher, 4th December 1969, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume IV: 1966-1989*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 205.

them to it which I mercifully forget. *Assez* is out of place in the series and I don't [know] what came over me. That is why I took it out of its chronological place in *Têtes-mortes*.⁵⁴³ This chapter will return it, in one particular sense, to its place — that is, just before *Le Dépeupleur*. Written in French in the winter of 1965, the English translation of *Assez* followed in 1966 at the behest of publishers desiring fodder, leaving little trace in Beckett's correspondences. A couple of decades later, and despite Beckett's doubts, in 1981 it was adapted into a stage text by Alan Schneider and was described by Mel Gussow as a 'narrative fragment'.⁵⁴⁴ This spatial mode of expressing lack seems, in part, to attempt to account for this out-of-time, out-of-sequence text, which then implies it is seemingly 'broken' or 'incomplete', in a certain sense. This chapter examines why Beckett's prose works continue to be described as over-spilling or under-filling their vessels.

Enough is perhaps one of the closest short prose pieces written during the 1960s to what might be designated a short story or novella. Its narrator is not a *mise en abyme* of repeated voices but instead a character who speaks: their narration is tied to a body and the text focuses on two main characters, even concluding with what has been read as a reveal or a twist. It could be accused of having a narrative. These are all tropes that might be expected of a short story: a far cry from the 'rotunda' texts. The narrator begins as, we assume, a man — not only because Beckett's narrators are so frequently men, but because of the evocation of sameness with the other male character. Gendered pronouns are avoided. The narrator is then imagined as a child

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Mel Gussow, 'How Billie Whitelaw Interprets Beckett', *The New York Times*, 14 February 1984, section Theater <<https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/14/theater/how-billie-whitelaw-interprets-beckett.html>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

and an adult before finally, at the end of the short story, it is revealed that they have breasts. This is often treated as a surprising, and perhaps cute, revelation: the story follows a pattern of opacity, fluidity and finally — it has been suggested — conclusion. I posit that this is a critical misreading and that, by re-reading this ‘reveal’ through queer theory as instead a part of Beckett’s prosthetic and placeholding approach to embodiment and desire, the queer sexualities that permeate the 1960s prose can be evinced.

Symbolic Cracks: Queerness in *Enough*

In order to read this queerness that is in the text through a queer lens, it is necessary to read the way in which Beckett’s 1960s prose presents the symbolic as lacking. It is this placeholding quality of the signifying order that marks sex itself, regardless of how it is made intelligible. Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a mode of resisting intelligibility in itself, is particularly apt to tackle this same quality in Beckett’s work. Furthermore, a particular resistance to intelligibility is what renders the sexuality that emerges through it queer. This is because there is not only a fundamental unintelligibility revealed where we might look for a reading of gender — hence Gontarski’s ‘literary hermaphrodites’ — but this unintelligibility is neither an exclusively general nor exclusively specific form of slippage.⁵⁴⁵ In other words: reading this text through a particular psychoanalytic lens does not make it queer by default, something else is happening. For Lee Edelman, queerness ‘effects a counterpedagogy, refuting, by its

⁵⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. xxx.

mere appearance, the reality that offers it no place'.⁵⁴⁶ In this sense, queerness mirrors the work of sex itself, enacting a slippage at the site of knowledge by taking the place of the rift in understanding.

The alignment between queer and sex in general is in this central absence, and the difference is in the reading. As Edelman notes again, 'Queerness [...] though always fleshed out in catachrestic figures, refers to what never accedes to representation in itself.'⁵⁴⁷ In *Enough*, as well as the way in which gendering takes place, there are also spatial and temporal aspects that work towards an undoing that can be read, through the work of Alenka Zupančič, as a queer mode of resistance to both a tyrannical specificity and, conversely, a tyrannical abstraction. Queer, in this context, refers not only to the undoing or absence of a heterosexual matrix, but a resistance to the logics of that matrix; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it, to 'render [homosexuality] less destructively presumable'.⁵⁴⁸ Reading queerly here means reading what queer is made to hold, or place-hold. In other words, desire in the late prose is not only 'not straight': it undermines the possibility of comfortably aligning sexuality and reading.

As Zupančič notes, 'culture is not simply a mask/veil of the sexual, it is the mask or, rather, a stand-in for something in the sexual which "is not"'.⁵⁴⁹ *Enough* is the repository for a number of repeated Beckettian mises-en-scène that will be familiar to readers of previous works: the father and child, the male pseudo-couple, the sexually dysfunctional heterosexual couple, the walking journey, the mound, the sea. Indeed, whereas many of the rotunda texts are stripped back to the degree that difficulty arises

⁵⁴⁶ Lee Edelman, 'Learning Nothing: Bad Education', *Differences*, 28.1 (2017), p. 125.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 157.

⁵⁴⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 48.

⁵⁴⁹ Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 23.

from their abstraction, or lack of specific, physical references, *Enough* poses the opposite problem: these more recognisably ‘cultural’ touchstones for sexuality abound. Here, motifs from previous texts are imbricated. This mode of ranging across motifs or specificities, displacing in order to rebuild, makes especially clear how this ‘mask’ is not, as Zupančič suggests, a simple covering over, but rather a ‘stand-in’ or placeholder where the central absence of sexuality resides.

Enough straddles the abstraction of the rotunda texts and highlights uniquely why criticisms of Beckett’s œuvre have been so occupied with fragmentation, and in doing so, why queer sexuality is central to a reading of it. This text is a neat demonstration of the way in which Beckett’s works lay open human sexuality as, in Zupančič’s words, ‘the placeholder of the missing signifier’.⁵⁵⁰ In mimicking this placeholder operation through other means, it can no longer squeeze into a heterosexual paradigm. Zupančič is expressing here the central problem of sexuality: that is, it is not something that contains a rupture, but something that *is* that rupture. She notes, ‘the “sexual” refers to the “crack” shared (and repeated) by different drives. Taken at this level, sexuality is indeed synonymous with the death drive, not opposed to it’.⁵⁵¹ Sexuality, Zupančič argues, is not something that we can define and explain, but rather that which all other drives are opposed to or seek to cover over. Sexuality, in other words, is the name for the problem, writ large. The reason that Justice Potter Stewart in 1964 knew pornography only when he saw it, rather than offering a concrete and juridical definition, is because knowledge of sexuality is unstable: not

⁵⁵⁰ *What is Sex?*, p. 42.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 116.

entirely abstract, but ineluctably particular.⁵⁵² This means that sexuality in Beckett — and desiring drives in general — cannot be subsumed under the notion of fragmentation, even at the level of form, because they do not express fragmentation but rather act in relation to it or at most, *are* it. That is, they are the crack themselves, rather than being cracked. The necessity of queer theory is crucial at moments such as this: ‘it would be wrong to think that the crack that in-forms human sexuality could simply disappear if we accepted the idea that there is a colorful multiplicity of sexual identities.’⁵⁵³ This is because the sexual is not something hidden and repressed, but rather something that *is* incomplete: it stands in for incompleteness and, in order to perform this role, must be seen, too, as incomplete.

Reading sexuality as an incompleteness, rather than attempting to posit that the text is in some way stunted or fragmented, opens the *œuvre* to an exploration that goes beyond previous debates surrounding nihilism or existentialism, materiality or transcendence, or even misogyny, misopaedia or progressive sexual politics: the possibility of queerness. By queerness here, I designate a theory of sexuality that refuses the cultural normativity of colourful, varied sexuality, while simultaneously resisting the very concept of a norm. Queerness allows a mode of reading that accounts for prosthesis and self-extension: a radical destabilising not only of identity but of the critical moves that make identity construction possible. This is something that undergirds Beckett’s work, and to ignore it is to fall back into the dichotomies that language insidiously invites. The clearest parallel here is in Beckett’s approach to

⁵⁵² Justice Potter Stewart used this famous expression to describe his threshold test for obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* in 1964. Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex. Pornography and Postmodern Culture*, (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 41.

⁵⁵³ *What is Sex?*, p. 116.

literature as the 'total object, complete with missing parts'; this is a model of sexuality and of language that admits queerness as its logical basis for existence.⁵⁵⁴

In *Enough*, the signifier is permanently rewritten, such that — whereas in the other so-called 'rotunda' works such as *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *All Strange Away* nature and essentialism are undercut — the very idea of what nature means is here upturned. Nature is introduced into the texts' spatial economy as a part of sexuality, rather than a transcendental force or 'other'. Rather than creating a space that does not, or barely admits of, nature, *Enough* brings these things into a full frontal relationship with the same geometric concerns that are focussed on in the other rotunda works. Whereas in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *All Strange Away*, the constant shifting and ambivalence regarding values such as heat, cold, length, width, gender and embodiment repeatedly undercut one another and negatively agglutinate into a form of paradoxical minimalist accretion, in *Enough* there is a diegetic space in which some qualities are permitted to persist, and in this persistence, they participate in the sexual problems that also concern the characters.⁵⁵⁵ Similarly to the way in which Peter Boxall observes the body extending into the landscape in *Molloy*, here flora in particular models a sexual problem that hinges on the way in which nature comes into dialogue with prosthesis. The natural world, rather than being undercut entirely, is rewritten.

⁵⁵⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: J. Calder, 1983), p. 138.

⁵⁵⁵ This term 'agglutinate' is lifted from *How It Is* in Chapter One to demonstrate a particular mode of minimalism. Agglutination refers to the clumping up of elements such as blood cells, or phonemes. Agglutination describes Beckett's minimalism not only because it is used to describe the relationship between many potential millions of iterative Pims, but because in building themselves up, these elements counterintuitively become negated. Minimalism is achieved not by winnowing away, but a counterintuitively negative building: agglutinative negativity.

Marcuse and the Obstinacy of Minimalism

The re-evaluation of what is deemed natural was also occupying Herbert Marcuse a year earlier, in 1964. Although Beckett and Marcuse were not to have a dialogue until the late 1970s, when Beckett dedicated a poem to him for his eightieth birthday, Marcuse's interest in Beckett was made clear in *One-Dimensional Man*, and indeed by his rather gleeful response to Beckett's dedication.⁵⁵⁶ The poem might be an appropriate opening towards an investigation into the relationship between Beckett and Marcuse, 'pas à pas | nulle part | nul seul | ne sait comment | petits pas | nulle part | obstinément'.⁵⁵⁷ This piece is characteristic of Beckett's very late work; cumulative negation similar to that of the 1960s, but pared down to just one or three words per line. The minimalism of the 1970s and 1980s is not just that of the kind of unwriting, or agglutinative negativity, that occurs in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *All Strange Away*, or even in *How It Is*, but an already-erased mode of lateness. The rhythm of this short poem rises and breaks like a fading wave pattern, evoking the same fraught onward motion that occurs in many of Beckett's works: walks to no end, the impossibility of continuing frequently undercut. However, it is the final line that

⁵⁵⁶ Marcuse's response to Beckett's dedication was as follows, written December 13th 1978: 'Dear Samuel Beckett: I have hesitated endlessly until [I] decided that I must write to you. I am afraid my letter would just be another fan letter but I can't help it. The poem which you published, for my 80th birthday, in *Akzente* was for me more than I could describe. I felt the admiration I had for your work had somehow reached you. I have always felt that in the hopeless suffering of your men and women, the point of no return has been reached. The world has been recognized as what it is, called by its true name. Hope is beyond our power to express it. But only under the *Prinzip Hoffnung* could a human being write what you have written. In great gratitude'. Herbert Marcuse, *Art and Liberation*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 201.

⁵⁵⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Sean Lawlor and John Pilling (Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 216. English translation by Edith Fourier, in *Art and Liberation*, p. 200: 'step by step | nowhere | not a single one | knows how | tiny steps | nowhere | stubbornly'.

characterises what had been developing in Beckett's work over the previous decade: 'obstinément', or 'obstinately'.

It is this specific form of persistence marked by stubbornness that differentiates the minimising of the 1960s from this later, more minimal steadiness. *Ostinato*, or 'obstinate' in Italian, is also a musical term referring to the repetition and occasionally slight permutation of a short melodic phrase throughout a piece. Beckett's intimate knowledge of music and musical notation, especially with regard to Schubert and Beethoven, is here employed similarly to the geometrical mode of the 1960s prose. This subsuming of meanings within the term 'obstinément', which not only evokes this plethora of meaning but also, contrastingly, the sheer stubborn laconicism that this poem presents, is a very neat representation of the way in which Beckett's minimalism developed in the 1970s and 80s. The use of 'nul seul', or as Edith Fourier translates it 'not a single one' might be a nod towards Marcuse's shared resistance of the idea of the whole in his theoretical writings; its rhyme with 'nul' providing a convenient albeit purely sonic and visual elision between the zero and the one. Rather than reducing in a straightforward or essentialist way, this poem dedicated to Marcuse typifies the resistance to monadic conclusion that characterises Beckett's minimalism.

Masturbation: Supplemental or Elemental?

The 1960s saw theorists tackling this idea of essentialism in or as nature in various ways: Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* was originally published by one of Beckett's publishers, Éditions de Minuit, in 1967. Derrida, famously, never offered a reading of

Beckett in an albeit disappointing display of love and reverence.⁵⁵⁸ Derrida not only posits that ‘the absolute present, nature, that which words like “real mother” name, are always already hidden, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language [language] is that writing as the disappearance of natural presence.’⁵⁵⁹ Beckett’s work plays with exactly this juxtaposition between presence and absence, but what is particularly interesting about this moment in Derrida is the locus of sexuality and mastery that it circumscribes. In order to describe language as ‘that dangerous supplement’, Derrida addresses a moment in Rousseau that deals with sexuality, placing sexuality at the centre of a deconstructive moment that would have consequences for the future of queer theory. Curiously, Beckett also addressed Rousseau’s relationship with nature in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, when Belacqua is refuting Cartesian dualisms, as usual: “I must be getting old and tired’ he said ‘when I find the nature outside me compensating for the nature inside me, like Jean-Jacques sprawling on a bed of saxifrages.”⁵⁶⁰ This is potentially a pun on the Latin derivative of ‘saxifrage’, which literally means ‘rock breaker’, a reference not only to it growing on rocky outcrops, but also to its medicinal use as a cure for kidney stones. There is also humour here; Belacqua is refuting the suggestion of a connection between the body and the mind, following it with a reference to Rousseau’s approach to nature as a place from which to contemplate society. As Levi-Strauss notes, he would ‘seek out the order of nature in order to meditate on the nature of society.’⁵⁶¹ Thinking of nature in

⁵⁵⁸ Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 2.

⁵⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 173.

⁵⁶⁰ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 22.

⁵⁶¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology II*, trans. M. Layton (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1983), p. 39.

terms of compensation rather than a return to an originary nature turns a mind-body relationship into a prosthesis.

Rousseau also reflects on masturbation as a 'dangerous supplement', something unnatural which, as Derrida notes, carries with it the threat of castration. In transposing this relationship with 'nature', in both senses, onto the question of interiority and exteriority, Belacqua amusingly posits this obstinacy of sexuality in the question of presence. Sedgwick elaborates on the erasure of homosexuality through the erasure of a more repetitive form of sexuality,

the dropping out of sight of the autoerotic term is also part of what falsely naturalizes the heterosexist imposition of these [classic] books, disguising both the rich, conflictual erotic complication of a homoerotic matrix not yet crystallized in terms of "sexual identity," and the violence of heterosexist definition finally carved out of these plots.⁵⁶²

Although Sedgwick refers to Austen and the canon more broadly, it is possible to see in Beckett Studies how a refusal to confer on onanism the significance afforded to homosexuality and heterosexuality has rendered the former unreadable. This is not only in such direct cases as Mercier and Camier masturbating beside one another, but also in the case of the late prose, where sex might be imagined between a figure and an image on a surface as in *All Strange Away*, or where copulation becomes 'unmakeable' as in *The Lost Ones*.⁵⁶³ The inscription of repetition in the definition of

⁵⁶² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.4 (1991), p. 826.

⁵⁶³ Samuel Beckett, 'The Lost Ones' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 214.

sexual intercourse is part of what renders it subject to the economies of space that occupy these late prose texts: the reorganisation of onanistic sexuality as sexuality in itself enables these moments to be read together, and explains finally why this act becomes ‘unmakeable’: the absence of substance, and of making, is indeed the point.

Laura Salisbury links Beckett’s mention of masturbation to the relationship between materiality and nothingness in his work, noting that, ‘the abscess is associated with masturbation; it is ‘frigged up’, emerging as a strangely embodied form of intentionality bound to a frothed self-involvement.’⁵⁶⁴ Salisbury notes that Beckett describes his work as ‘of the abscess’, as well as comparing it to a hernia, while simultaneously inflecting it with this onanistic quality. She notes that etymologically, an abscess signifies ‘an embodied process of holding things apart’, suggesting that this aligns with onanism as a refusal to meet with otherness.⁵⁶⁵ However, could a refusal to meet with otherness be read instead as an agglutinative refusal to meet with a heterosexual matrix that would render unreadable its own repetitions in service of diagnosing categories of sexuality? As Sedgwick famously noted, ‘[d]econstruction, founded as a very science of *differ(e/a)n*ce, has both so fetishized the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences.’⁵⁶⁶ It is Sedgwick’s problem with deconstruction that might explain both

⁵⁶⁴ Laura Salisbury, ‘Something or nothing’: Beckett and the matter of language’ in *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett* ed. Daniela Caselli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 227.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 23.

why Derrida was never able to write on Beckett and, secondly, how supplementarity can inform the antisocial thesis in queer theory.

Scale, Scales

Marcuse's work at this time was also addressing issues of the specific and the general, in particular with *One-Dimensional Man*, in which he posits that 'universal quantifiability is a prerequisite for the *domination* of nature.'⁵⁶⁷ This is posited in order to elucidate the ways in which scientific thought placed nature within its one-dimensional remit: as something that *could* be objectively dominated, or something that could be observed from the outside. This notion of quantifiability that Marcuse puts forward identifies mathematics as a consolidating principle that, in focusing on quantity, precludes the possibility of qualitative change in terms of relations: to nature and to one another. Zupančič addresses a similar issue of formalisation in Lacan: the reduction of philosophy to either equivocity — that is, indeterminacy, amorphousness — or formalisation — mathematics as Marcuse might have it. However, Zupančič moves this one step further, locating the impasse not *between* these terms but rather *in* them, 'The Real is not some realm or substance to be talked about, it is the inherent contradiction of speech, twisting its tongue, so to speak. And this is precisely *why there is truth*, and why, at the same time, it is not possible to say it all.'⁵⁶⁸ This describes both the maintenance of a distancing from mastery that Marcuse seeks in relation to nature, and also Beckett's oft-cited impasse towards literature itself, 'I can't

⁵⁶⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 168.

⁵⁶⁸ *What is Sex?*, p. 69.

go on, I'll go on.'⁵⁶⁹ The use of mathematics in service of this equivocity applies it not just in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality: through scale. Marc Botha notes that scale is uniquely placed to express both quantity and quality co-extensively because it is relational.⁵⁷⁰ In fact, scale might be a useful way of describing Zupančič's approach to truth, that is, as an approach to specificity or particularity that acknowledges, in saying itself, that it is unsayable. As Salisbury notes, in reference to Beckett's 'literature of the unword', 'the 'un' adds rather than subtracts; it adds action and *quality*, and takes something of the 'ground' of the material noise and redundancy that should be excluded if the word is to function in a clearly intentional, singular fashion, back into the distorted shape of the figure.'⁵⁷¹ This impossibility is held by language through the co-extension of quantity and quality, something that Marcuse would have seen as moving away from characterising what is 'natural' as a mutable, appropriable domain.

Re-reading the Revelation 1: Signification

One reading of *Enough* might assume that the narrator, as is the case with the majority of Beckett's narrators, is entirely male, and that the final sentence reveals that the narrator was — blasphemy — a woman all along: 'Enough my old breasts feel his old hand.'⁵⁷² However, the nature of temporality in this text suggests that the narrator

⁵⁶⁹ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 134.

⁵⁷⁰ For more on this and Beckett's relationship to minimalism, see Chapter Two.

⁵⁷¹ Laura Salisbury, "Something or nothing": Beckett and the matter of language' in *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett* ed. Daniela Caselli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 232. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁷² Samuel Beckett, 'Enough' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 192.

simply did not have a gender until the breasts were appended in the final sentence; and indeed, perhaps still doesn't. This is crucial to the way in which gender and sexuality operate throughout Beckett's œuvre and especially to this turning point in the 1960s, when gender and sexuality are subject to visibility and simultaneously evade co-optation into identity or permanence. Central to this sentence is senescence: the repetition of 'old' harking back to the repetition of 'too much' in the first sentence. The title is repeated, too, in a manner that seems to negate the repeated 'no's and 'nothing's that have led up to this final phrase, which erases aspects of the diegetic, 'Now I'll wipe out everything but the flowers. No more rain. No more mounds. Nothing but the two of us dragging through the flowers.'⁵⁷³ This suggests that, in the text, old age or ageing as a process adds on in a prosthetic manner not only qualities but also body parts and gender. As Yoshiki Tajiri notes, prosthesis is found ubiquitously throughout Beckett's œuvre.⁵⁷⁴ From the addenda at the end of *Watt*, to the loss of limbs in *The Unnamable*, to the separation of body parts in *All Strange Away* and the use of the end itself, at which the genitals go on in *Endgame* and the breasts come off in *Enough*, the body/text in Beckett's œuvre is repeatedly built on and erased: all joints as good as perforated.

Salisbury notes this propensity for bodily extrusions, prosthetics and addenda, as mentioned above in reference to abscesses and hernias. Ulrika Maude, too, notes the variety of incomplete bodies in Beckett's work, from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to *Not I* to *Molloy* to *The Unnamable*. As Chapter Two explains, although in the 1960s there is a turn away from the removal of extremities and towards an

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

impossible shape or a fragmentation of bodies onto surfaces, a reconsideration of the hierarchical in relation to the body is still present. The handholding scene harks back to its own repetition in earlier works such as *The Way, Molloy*, and *Company*.

Critically, Maude reminds us that another body part that could be considered an extremity are the breasts, in this case in *Happy Days*, 'What arms? [*Pause.*] What breasts?'⁵⁷⁵ Likewise, in *Enough*, as if limbs, the breasts 'go(...) on at the end'.⁵⁷⁶ They are extremities both in terms of textual form and in terms of the narrator's body as the final sentence declares 'Enough my old breasts feel his old hand.'⁵⁷⁷ Maude suggests that the body, in these cases, 'functions as a signifier that is out of sync with its signified.'⁵⁷⁸ In *Enough*, the idea of a signifier in sync with its signified, or a body in sync with its ascribed meaning, is parodied. The parody creates a prosthetic body, reiterated incessantly, becoming a placeholder for itself. The gloves are an illustration of this, 'They wore cotton gloves rather tight. Far from blunting the shapes they sharpened them by simplifying. Mine was naturally too loose for years. But it didn't take me long to fill it.'⁵⁷⁹ The gloves signify, sharpening the shape of the hands, but in doing so lose both the detail or complexity of the hands and also the possibility of physical intimacy. The use of 'naturally' here, too, signifies that nature is very much complicit in this parodying of the possibility of a fitting signifier through its dissociation with accurate quantification.

⁵⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett, 'Happy Days' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 161.

⁵⁷⁶ Samuel Beckett, 'Endgame' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 111.

⁵⁷⁷ *Enough*, p. 192.

⁵⁷⁸ Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 22.

⁵⁷⁹ *Enough*, p. 187.

The image of the boy holding his father's hand on a walk appears in other works, and has been much commented upon, but this disquietingly brief continuum between the child and the sexually engaged adult is something new. The way in which time is spliced brings the image of the child holding its father's hand into an uncomfortable proximity with the sexual acts described previously. The suggestion of an ill-remembered past in the first line and the ensuing sexual exchange — '[w]hen he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so' — implying an obsequious need to please and an ignorance of how to refer to fellatio, both ring rather puerile.⁵⁸⁰ This abruptly immodest simplicity is also similar to Lousse in *Watt*, or Mrs Gorman in *Molloy*. The text continues a paragraph later, 'I cannot have been more than six when he took me by the hand. Barely emerging from childhood. But it didn't take me long to emerge altogether.'⁵⁸¹ As Karine Germoni and Pascale Sardin note, in the original French Beckett had first written this age as thirteen but revised it down to six.⁵⁸² One might read this as a postmodern disruption of linear time, but there remains a sinister echo of child grooming or even paedophilia. This kind of extremity — not a physical one here, but rather an ethical, social one — is not often associated with Beckett. Although children in Beckett's œuvre certainly cannot expect an easy life, they are never subjected to this kind of abuse.

Daniela Caselli finds that the figure of the child in literature is often evoked, capaciously, as self-evidently knowable and paradoxically mysterious, 'the child is sexually free in both the sense of being liberated from the strictures of sexual

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 186.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid, p. 187.

⁵⁸² Karine Germoni and Pascale Sardin, 'De « Assez » à « Enough » ou l'androgynie comme figure du bilinguisme beckettien', *Palimpsestes* [Online], 21, (2008), para 4 of 22. <<https://journals.openedition.org/palimpsestes/67>> [Accessed 5 April 2022]

repression and lacking sexuality altogether;’ this over-determination of the child in readings of Modernist literature oddly mirrors precisely the problem that Beckett approaches in terms of the limit of sexuality.⁵⁸³ For this reason, *Enough* does not appear to be simply a truncated Bildungsroman for gender, as Germoni and Sardin suggest: ‘Beckett préserve ainsi l’indétermination sexuelle de l’enfance. Selon Paul-Laurent Assoun en effet, «la puberté est le moment de vérité du masculin et du féminin».’⁵⁸⁴ Rather than viewing the avoidance of puberty here as a moment wherein the innocence and indeterminacy of childhood is ‘preserved’, this moment of perturbing proximity might be read in its affective discomfort and its proximity to the process of ageing. How, then, to read this process of ageing that points towards the limit of both a lack of and too much sexuality? Instead of finding in the sudden ageing process or perhaps brief analepsis a moment of maturity that solidifies or instates a particular sexuality, here there is both not enough evidence for a sexual encounter and too much: the disturbance here lying precisely in the slippage, rather than explicitness: an ironically literal form of obscenity. This is the logic that is instantiated by the glove that might seem only to obscure the ‘true’ shape of the hand: the simplified shape offers both ‘too much’ in terms of definition — it is just a hand: it represents the hand — and not enough. After all, what is the glove full of?

⁵⁸³ Daniela Caselli, ‘Introduction to “The Child in Beckett’s Work”’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 15 (2005), p. 259.

⁵⁸⁴ ‘De « Assez » à « Enough » ou l’androgynie comme figure du bilinguisme beckettien’, para 5 of 22.

Re-reading the Revelation 2: Prosthetics

The prosthetic breasts in *Enough* might be indebted to another French writer, Guillaume Apollinaire. As Stephen Thomson notes, *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* does not use its prosthetic mode to deconstruct gender, instead,

the bearded lady offers itself as a sort of narrative lever for opening up the centrifugal possibilities of the ‘hetero’: rather than a balanced system that keeps separate as it unites, marriage merges into a disconcertingly hybrid entity.⁵⁸⁵

Apollinaire introduces the play as being about a vital question, that of ‘le problème de la repopulation’, and the character of Thérèse/ Tirésias is introduced as a feminist who refuses to have children.⁵⁸⁶ Immediately following this, her breasts — which are balloons — float away and she grows a beard and moustache. The didactic quality of Thérèse/ Tirésias is not quite as clear as that of her husband, named just ‘husband’ who in his original state is feminine enough to pass for a woman when wearing a dress. His dalliance with the policeman amusingly produces forty thousand and forty-nine children, and when asked how this phenomenon occurred, he states, as if reciting Catholic catechism, ‘La volonté Monsieur elle nous mène à tout.’⁵⁸⁷ Although, unlike

⁵⁸⁵ Stephen Thomson, “La justice, c’est la femme à barbe!’: the bearded lady, displacement and recuperation in Apollinaire’s *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*’ in *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*, ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 97.

⁵⁸⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *L’Enchanteur pourrissant suivi de Les mamelles de Tirésias et de Couleur du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 94.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 143. My translation: ‘The will, sir, it leads us to everything.’

Beckett's later work, this play foregrounds gender, it has a similarly 'obstinate' approach to it; this is how it remains in the centrifuge of heterosexuality that Thomson refers to. Passing is the most crucial currency of gender in the play, where relationships are formed based on femininity and masculinity in a necessary binary of appearances. Thérèse/ Tirésias, having lost her balloon breasts at the end of the play, is presented with a basket of balls and balloons: 'Nous nous en sommes passés l'un et l'autre | Continuons'.⁵⁸⁸ Having been offered the prosthetic appendages in the final moments of the play, Thérèse/ Tirésias notes that they have both passed perfectly well without them. *Enough* makes a similar observation with a reversed gesture: the breasts are attached at the end, only underscoring their detachability.

The withholding of gender prevents the initial submissive stance of the narrator from being subsumed under a stereotyped feminine passivity. It is easy to align the narrator in *Enough* with the dependency and co-dependency of the characters in *How It Is*: reliant on one another's whims and occasionally uncannily intimate. However, in *Assez*, the text aligns more closely with *All Strange Away*, as gender inescapably reveals itself, 'Je ne me suis pas posé le question.'⁵⁸⁹ Here, 'posé' agrees with a masculine 'je', revealing that the speaker here is male. In English, this is left ambiguous, 'I never asked myself the question.'⁵⁹⁰ This changes the structure of the text in French: perhaps a gender shift ambivalently happens without need for remark, as it does in *All Strange Away*. The final sentence also reads somewhat desperately as a beard for what is, in this reading, one of Beckett's most overtly queer texts. Instead of

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 158. My translation: 'We have both done without them. Let's continue.'

⁵⁸⁹ Samuel Beckett, 'Assez', in *Têtes-mortes: d'un ouvrage abandonné - assez imagination morte imaginez bing - sans* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000), p. 34. (My translation: 'I did not ask myself the question.')

⁵⁹⁰ *Enough*, p. 186.

a person of ambiguous gender who, in the final instance and in a gesture of some sort of relief, becomes female, the French text moves from a male character to a female one almost bathetically. The text not only begins with a male narrator, but plays with the idea that both are ‘une homme’ before, in the final paragraph, introducing a negation that is not present in *Enough*: ‘Plus de mamelons. Rien que nous deux nous traînant dans les fleurs. Assez mes vieux seins sentient sa vieille main.’⁵⁹¹ This is glossed over by Germoni and Sardin as a ‘feminine’ aspect of *Assez* that is erased in the service of masculine neutrality in *Enough*. However, the presence of the ‘mamelons’ or ‘nipples’ — in fact, their immediate negation — offers the possibility for a different reading. In fact, the breasts that have led critics to interpret this text as revealing a ‘surprise’ female narrator are also subsumed under the same doubt as all sexed appendages. The erasure of nipples, a unisex although not unilaterally sexual body part, only serves to reinforce this reorientation of the possibility of gender here.

As Thomson suggests that in *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*, ‘[b]ody parts recombine in odd ways to form bodies that are surely not *viable*, but may be in some way *whole*, at least in the sense that they compose something.’⁵⁹² An obstinate act of composition, rather than cohesive character-formation, is what characterises these short prose texts. In *Assez*, this is further reinforced by the employment of ‘pains de sucre’,⁵⁹³ where in *Enough* there is simply ‘this sort of mound’.⁵⁹⁴ Pains de sucre are a traditional way to store processed sugar in missile-shaped cones: a sugar loaf. ‘Pain’ in French does not

⁵⁹¹ *Assez*, p. 47. (My translation: ‘No more nipples. Nothing but us both dragging ourselves through the flowers. Enough my old breasts feel his old hand.’)

⁵⁹² “La justice, c’est la femme à barbe!”: the bearded lady, displacement and recuperation in Apollinaire’s *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, p. 86.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁵⁹⁴ *Enough*, p. 190.

mean simply 'bread', but also a 'loaf', that is, the shape of a cohesive unit of bread, to put it geometrically. This is why, for example, 'pain de savon' means 'bar of soap'. The pain de sucre, therefore, is not only a rather extreme form of mound, harking back to *Happy Days*, but also a rather outdated form of cohesion: sugar loafs were in regular use until the end of the nineteenth century. Pain de sucre also names a type of chicory, designating this particular shape. The extremity of the shape of the original French mound makes it a bizarre comparison to the shape of a breast, and is in fact more phallic than mammary, whereas in *Enough* the mound neatly falls into the Beckettian leitmotif of the pubic/ mammary/ earthen mound. It is for this reason that it is not the process of reading that is destabilised, but the bodies themselves. Germoni and Sardin suggest that 'le sexe de l'instance locutrice s'avère plutôt changeant ou indécis. En cela, le texte de Beckett déstabilise le processus de lecture'.⁵⁹⁵ This illustrates the importance of queer theory in reading Beckett's work: the focus is taken away from the destabilising of gender and onto the destabilising of the text itself. Here, it is not the language that is unstable — it is the bodies described, in terms of physicality and in terms of age and, significantly here, gender.

Germoni and Sardin argue for the necessity of a stable, readable gender in any piece of literature. They suggest that *Assez* is the more feminine counterpart to *Enough*: that in cutting down into English Beckett neutralises the more feminine aspects of the text. This perspective risks losing the crucial ambiguity that is fostered, even by Beckett's own comments on the gender of the characters.⁵⁹⁶ It is the approach

⁵⁹⁵ 'De « Assez » à « Enough » ou l'androgynie comme figure du bilinguisme beckettien', para 13 of 22. (My translation: 'the sex of the speaker turns out to be rather changeable or indecisive. In this way, Beckett's text destabilises the process of reading.')

⁵⁹⁶ *Women in Beckett*, p. xi.

to gender that reifies it into a prerequisite, concrete component of being that comes into conflict with Beckett's unstable frameworks,

Il paraît en effet automatique de se poser la question du sexe du locuteur : comme le sexe du bébé qui vient de naître, le sexe des personnages est certainement la première information que le lecteur veut connaître. Le sexe restant incertain, le texte offre une série de pistes et de fausses pistes, d'indices contradictoires qui mettent à mal le désir, qui est aussi un « besoin », de savoir, de comprendre et de classer.⁵⁹⁷

This comment might equally have been applied to *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* perhaps, but also to the plethora of literature that is entirely avoidant of gender and entirely inclusive of desire — Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* seems the most popular choice, but Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* or even the character 'Pat' from *Saturday Night Live*, who Halberstam employs to demonstrate the absurd rigidity of conventional gender presentations.⁵⁹⁸ The vital moment that requires queer theory and indeed psychoanalysis here is the moment when Germoni and Sardin suggest that to desire is to need to know, understand and classify. Desire in Beckett's work parodies this belief, from the sadistic '[for example]' during the stringent stage directions for *Endgame*, to the 'All that most clear' of *All Strange Away*, certainty and classification

⁵⁹⁷ 'De « Assez » à « Enough » ou l'androgynie comme figure du bilinguisme beckettien', para 14 of 22. My translation: 'Indeed, it seems automatic to question the speaker's sex: like the sex of a baby that has just been born, the sex of the characters is certainly the first piece of information that the reader wants to know. The gender remaining uncertain, the text offers a series of leads and false leads, contradictory clues that undermine desire, which is also a "need", to know, to understand and to classify.'

⁵⁹⁸ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 27.

are constantly deferred.⁵⁹⁹ Desire is not locatable as a gesturing towards a blank space filled by this or that, but rather a defensive strategy against jouissance, a struggle — and failure — to bring into being this other that is being made concrete by Germoni and Sardin. Beckett's work, rather than teasing and then revealing gender, suggests a much more fundamental instability.

A Flower in the Barrel of a Gun

The structure of the ending of *Enough* is similar to the structure of the ending of *Molloy* in its failed negation, '[n]ow I'll wipe out everything but the flowers. No more rain. No more mounds. Nothing but the two of us dragging through the flowers.'⁶⁰⁰ The use of flowers might hark back as far as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, as David Kleinberg-Levin notes that,

[h]is reference to "flowers that cannot coexist" [in *Dream*] recalls Stéphane Mallarmé's observation in "Crisis in Poetry" regarding the separation of the signifying word, the name, from the thing named or signified—a separation that implies the eventual absence, death or destruction of the signified.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁹ *Endgame*, pp. 92-93; *All Strange Away*, p. 172.

⁶⁰⁰ *Enough*, p. 192.

⁶⁰¹ David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *Beckett's Words: The Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 30.

Kleinberg-Levin goes on to assert that, in *Enough*, specifically, ‘The narrator’s mood seems triumphant; he is enjoying that power, that magic, which he has mastered.’⁶⁰² Apart from rather stridently gendering the narrator, this ‘power’ is fundamentally incompatible with the separation of the signifier and signified through the way in which, aptly, gender in particular functions as a placeholder here rather than a revelation. Beckett’s relationship to Mallarmé was somewhat flippant; when asked by Hans Naumann in 1954 to explain his move to writing in French, he replied ‘[j]e vous donnerai quand même une piste: le besoin d’être mal armé.’⁶⁰³ Beckett plays on Mallarmé, replacing it with ‘mal armé’, or ‘poorly armed’ — or, idiomatically, ill prepared. Taking the pun too literally for a moment, this indicates a pressure Beckett feels to *be* Mallarmé, or to abstract writing from itself. Aptly, this sort of paronomasia is very Joycean; in fact, in the same year *The Sewanee Review*, which had also published some of Beckett’s works, published an essay by Marshall McLuhan on the style of Mallarmé and Joyce in which McLuhan notes ‘art can never be regarded as a source of knowledge but only as a moral discipline and a study of endurance. The artist is not a reader of radiant signatures on *material signata* but the signer of a forged check on our hopes and sympathies.’⁶⁰⁴ The status of the artist as forger, in a deceitful rather than metallurgic sense, aligns somewhat with Beckett’s own profession of distance from his

⁶⁰² Ibid, p. 60.

⁶⁰³ Samuel Beckett to Hans Naumann, 17th February 1954, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume II: 1941-1956*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 462.

⁶⁰⁴ Marshall McLuhan, ‘Joyce, Mallarmé, and the Press’, *The Sewanee Review*, 62.1 (1954), p. 46.

work.⁶⁰⁵ The use of flowers here, in the context of Beckett's presence in the United States, indicates the impasse created between these two discourses.

Marcuse observes the state of this relation in 1964, '[t]he spectre that has haunted the artistic consciousness since Mallarmée — the impossibility of speaking a non-reified language, of communicating the negative — has ceased to be a spectre. It has materialized.'⁶⁰⁶ This difficulty, which Mallarmé also attaches to French poetic form, seems to crystallise almost a century later. Beckett's wry attitude to Mallarmé exemplifies the interstitial position of his work in this regard. Take, for example, Mallarmé's approach to the abandonment of the alexandrine in French poetry, 'the ear, freed from a gratuitous inner counter, feels pleasure in discerning all the possible combinations and permutations of twelve beats.'⁶⁰⁷ There are echoes here of the nouveau roman, although, as Beckett suggested to MacGreevy, there is too much 'Jesuitical poetry' in Mallarmé's style surrounding the drive to permute freely.⁶⁰⁸ In practice, the difference between a Jesuit and a Protestant approach here seems to boil down not only to pleasure, but to the association made between freedom and mathematics. Whereas the transcendental notion of numerical freedom is imbued in Mallarmé's permutations, Beckett's instead are couched within the same 'gratuitous inner counter' that Mallarmé professes to escape with the breaking open of poetic form.

⁶⁰⁵ This also aligns with the final line of James Joyce's 1916 text, which refers to 'Old father, old artificer'. Joyce had a formative and central role in Beckett's emergence as a writer. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 401.

⁶⁰⁶ *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 71.

⁶⁰⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse' in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 203.

⁶⁰⁸ Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 18th October 1932, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume I: 1929-1940*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 134.

This reference to Jesuit practice might also hearken back to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, wherein Jesuit practices amount primarily to suffering. The return to a discernible plot, then, is also a return to this gratuitous inner counter, where the counting is taken to such an extreme that, rather than eschewing it in order to experience pleasure, a different kind of pleasure emerges. Caselli notes this kind of exhausting inter- and intratextuality in Beckett's relationship to Leopardi, in which Leopardi is used and re-used, parodied and punned upon and made despairingly sexual, until it becomes not a dialectical play but once again a closed space with no possibility of escape, no longer erudite but distinctly one note: an agglutinative negativity.⁶⁰⁹ Caselli maps this approach to negation that refuses negation in the absolute from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* up to *Molloy*: beyond this, the thinning comedy of the late prose is able to take up sexuality without the burden of levity. The thinning of humour is also emphasised by Salisbury, who finds that comedic moments in the late prose, due to their oscillating relationship to pleasure, 'are subject to a fizzling out; they appear only to shimmer and dissolve.'⁶¹⁰ Flowers no longer summon stamen and stigma but instead only the hollowed-out signal that there is no sexual relation, and indeed no appreciable relation, any longer.

⁶⁰⁹ Daniela Caselli, 'Beckett and Leopardi', in *The Beckett Critical Reader*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 135–51.

⁶¹⁰ Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 178.

Cutting the Stems

Beckett wrote to Jocelyn Herbert in 1966, on the subject of *Enough*, 'Seem to have got something suitably brief and outrageous all whiteness and silence and finishedness. Hardly publishable which matters not at all.'⁶¹¹ This awareness of the possibility for outrage seems to be at once sincere and extremely tongue-in-cheek. While the majority of scholarship on Beckett's rebellious streak focuses on his relationship with Irish political and religious censorship, it seems that Beckett had an awareness of his public shock value that also reached far later into his career. Notorious by the 1960s for a lack of concern for his audience's literary creature comforts, Beckett would close the decade in outrage himself at the addition of naked bodies to his play *Breath*. Having managed to avoid the accusation of being salacious, Beckett's œuvre traffics in a much more avant-garde outrage, which subsumes all forms of non-hegemonic sexuality or gender under the pall of quirk or experiment. Extraction shows that these quirks are not exceptions that prove the rule, but rather, as Peter Boxall has noted, '[h]omoeroticism is such an important connecting and networking element in the Beckettian psychosexual complex, that it can become invisible'.⁶¹² It is not just the importance of homosexuality that renders it invisible, but also an orientation towards obscenity. Crucially, reading Beckett in this way has not only erased a significant queer backbone to his writing but also forms of sexuality that are destructive, unpleasant or unspeakable. While it is not simply a case of Beckett's work being either abstract or personal, nihilist or existential — or both — these dichotomies have served to further

⁶¹¹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 542.

⁶¹² Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 115.

limit the possibility of sexuality in Beckett's work, and especially in the late prose, because it is at these very junctures that sexuality emerges.

This moment of juncture is evident in Beckett's moves between French and English. In translation, de- or re-gendering happens through imagery. In French, sisters resemble one another, 'Elle recouvre les precedents qui ont dû lui ressembler comme des sœurs.'⁶¹³ Whereas in English, blades of grass represent likeness, 'It veils those that went before and must have resembled it like blades of grass.'⁶¹⁴ The reason for this move towards floral, rather than familial, relations becomes clearer as the text progresses. The flowers having or not having stems becomes a central component of their status in the text, and despite being the main object of the character's gaze, their decorative potential is nullified midway through, 'The very flowers were stemless and flush with the ground like waterlilies. No brightening our buttonholes with these.'⁶¹⁵ 'So much for the art and craft', one might think.⁶¹⁶ The flatness of the flowers here contrasts with the impossible forest described at the end of the text:

He murmured of things that were for him no more and for me could not have been. The wind in the overground stems. The shade and shelter of the forests.⁶¹⁷

The flowers in this world, however, are unaffected by the wind and stand ironically for permanence. One might even read an echo of a castration complex, or indeed the

⁶¹³ *Assez*, p. 43. My translation: 'It covers the preceding ones which must have resembled it like sisters.'

⁶¹⁴ *Enough*, p. 190.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 191.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 186.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 192.

fulfilment of castration — possible for someone possessing a penis or ‘stem’, impossible otherwise. The stems also recall Derrida’s work on Rousseau’s masturbation in that they appear to be both natural and a supplement. This does not necessarily allude to a penis, but to the spatial basis of the castration complex: something present, something lacking. The blades of grass share this quality with the stems of the flowers in the forest — instead of female relatives, semblance is now related to a spatial parameter that implies a sameness which, simultaneously, seems to provide a form of safety or freedom. This freedom differs vastly from the spatial mode that the flowers enforce.

The castration complex has long been jettisoned by queer theory, only to be reinvigorated by Andrea Long Chu’s polemic *Females* in 2019. Ten years prior, in an exploration of Deleuze and Butler’s notion of the sexed subject, Anna Hickey-Moody and Mary Lou Rasmussen note ‘[c]ontemporary queer theory needs to think about what ‘lack’ does, to trace the trajectories in thought that lack effects and to affirmatively claim the usefulness of lack as a concept.’⁶¹⁸ In contemporary theory, the castration complex is being steadily rehabilitated from one of Freud’s most provocative theories to a useful methodological tool. Long Chu’s polemic is worth quoting at length,

the castration complex is easily mistaken for the fear that one will be castrated; in fact, it is the fear that one, having been castrated, *will like it*. Pussy envy is therefore not the mutually exclusive opposite of penis

⁶¹⁸ Anna Hickey-Moody and Mary Lou Rasmussen, ‘The Sexed Subject in-between Deleuze and Butler’, in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 41.

envy, but a universal desire atop which the latter develops a reaction formation: Everyone does their best to want power, because deep down, no one wants it at all.⁶¹⁹

This mode of thought might be especially useful in relation to Beckett's work during the 1960s. Long Chu here takes the castration complex through to its logical conclusion. That is, a renunciation that takes the form of sublimation through the very lack that sublimation generally seeks to account for: it turns in on itself. In Freud, the castration complex is rooted in a different model of sameness. Freud states that 'It is obvious to the male child to assume that everyone he knows has genitals like his own, and impossible for him to reconcile the absence of such a thing with an idea of the genitals of others.'⁶²⁰ The overbearing presence of the penis, for a child assigned male at birth, means not only that lack is something that does not occur right away but only on the discovery of the requisite vulva, and furthermore that having a penis means everyone has one. This is a curious leveller, and it is this aspect that Long Chu takes up. She notes aphoristically, '[i]sn't that the whole point of gender — letting someone else do your living for you?'⁶²¹ The aphorism is an appropriate form for a laconic kind of theory.

Whereas the castration complex has been unpopular for decades, as Juliet Mitchell notes 'one of the most difficult to accept', on account of Freud's original formulation focussing primarily on masculinity and the phallus, Long Chu has brought

⁶¹⁹ Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 25.

⁶²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychology of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 170.

⁶²¹ *Females*, p. 55.

the framework back into contemporary theoretical discourse.⁶²² It was reformulated by Lacan during his return to Freud and, as Jacqueline Rose suggests, ‘has led psychoanalysts into an ideologically loaded mistake, that is, an attempt to resolve the difficulties of Freud’s account of femininity by aiming to resolve the difficulty of femininity itself.’⁶²³ Long Chu laconically and provocatively restates the foundations of the castration complex as ‘pussy envy’. This is based on an understanding of desire that can be aligned with Lacan’s definition, after Freud: ‘desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting.’⁶²⁴ This complicates a notion of desire as purely lack, or purely a kind of self-extension.

Framing desire as a splitting — similar to the way in which Zupančič refers to sex but located more specifically here — centres the difference between appetite for satisfaction and demand for love as a crucial pivot, whereby the fact of non-correlation is the basis for desire, and desire therefore finds itself directed, in certain cases, towards lack. This kind of anti-Oedipal desire *for* castration is prefigured in the gender shift that also occurs in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, where ‘the white body of a woman finally’ emerges only towards the end of the text.⁶²⁵ This aspect of finality is what the desire for castration seems to offer, and indeed in English, *Enough* only appears to offer this bathetic relief.

⁶²² Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), p. 74.

⁶²³ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 51.

⁶²⁴ Jacques Lacan, ‘The Signification of the Phallus’ in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: Norton, 2006), p. 580.

⁶²⁵ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

If the flowers are indeed to be read as a reference to castration, then their perseverance and immunity from the negating narration at the end of the text makes sense, as previously noted the narrator states 'Now I'll wipe out everything but the flowers. (...) Nothing but the two of us dragging through the flowers.'⁶²⁶ Immediately following this is the 'revelation' of the breasts. However, as well as the prosthetic approach to bodily appendages and ageing, this preceding reference to the enduring flowers — where in other works only bodies might remain — underwrites the queer aesthetic at work: the detachability and re-attachability of body parts cannot be sustained under a heterosexual matrix that would seek to make them permanent.

Throwing the Bouquet Backwards to See Who Catches it

The flowers in *Enough* are a strangely physical aspect of the diegetic. A rare presence in Beckett's work, often replete with cowpats, mud, and trees that can barely muster a single leaf, the flora here is relatively abundant. Like a strange reversal of the Narcissus myth, the characters here stare transfixed by the flowers on the ground, bent in two in a kind of over-wrought, hyperbolic thinking stance, again like Narcissus or Rodin's *The Thinker*. Rather than these possible narcissi representing the closed feedback loop of narcissism, instead they are almost anthropomorphised, 'I see the flowers at my feet and it's the others I see. Those we trod down with equal step. It is true they are the same.'⁶²⁷ The laconicism of the first sentence here makes the flowers immediately into 'others', who should have been excluded from the feedback loop. The effect of the

⁶²⁶ *Enough*, p. 192.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 189.

walkers on the flowers is both destructive and out of time: they see the flowers that have already been crushed, rather than those directly in front of them, but acknowledge that the flowers are the same, trodden on or not. These flowers, removed from their decorative and ephemeral connotations, become a '[t]iny moving carpet', the set dressing for the plodding pseudocouple.⁶²⁸ This evokes a space that differs from the somewhat linear mud of *How It Is*, where the victim-torturer-victim trio move from one to another in a potentially infinite queue: here is a more filmic motion, the characters moving like cameras on a dolly, producing a peculiar tracking shot.

It is impossible to escape the political implications of writing about flowers in this way during the 1960s: the hippie movement was in full swing, and in a year's time the phrase 'flower power' would be coined by Allen Ginsberg as a mode of resistance to, among other things, state violence and the Vietnam War. Jackie Blackman, in an examination of Beckett's post-war writing, notes that Beckett's 'response to suffering was an individual and ethical, rather than a collective and political one.'⁶²⁹ This is often a distinction made when examining Beckett's political stance prior to the 'political turn' in Beckett Studies: first seen as apolitical and abstract, Beckett's membership of the French Resistance, writing of *Catastrophe* and studies of the relationship of his work to the Second World War all place him in a political context that, rightly, cannot be neglected any longer. Similarly, it is not possible to read the short prose from the 1960s without the context of those years.

While the nouveau roman was moving French literature further and further away from 'bodies with their inevitable outward particularities [which] stand in the

⁶²⁸ Ibid, p. 188.

⁶²⁹ Jackie Blackman, 'Post-war Beckett: Resistance, Commitment or Communist Krap?' in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 68.

way of inward and universal psychological truths', the hippie movement in the United States was drawing more and more attention towards the individual's role in politics, and specifically how embodiment relates to collectivity, not only through protest actions but also through performance art and 'happenings', which continued into the 1970s.⁶³⁰ Beckett's work, while not necessarily to be foisted as a dialogue with politics nor given an abstract and/or transcendent permission slip in the service of avoiding the matter, can be seen to deal in the particular problems of subjectivity that the 1960s grappled with: individuality, action, sovereignty, conflict. Recent works in Beckett Studies such as *Beckett and the Politics of the Aftermath*, the conference *Beckett and Politics* in Reading in 2016 and *Beckett and Politics*, published in 2020, attest to the reorientation towards Beckett as a political writer, or at the very least, available to be read through a political lens. Beckett travelled between France and the USA during the 1960s, and while a great deal of attention has been rightly paid to the influence of World War II on his writing, less attention has been paid to the state of the world when Beckett wrote what are considered his late works.

Bodily Geometries

Although *Enough* intercedes between the 'rotunda' texts as a more neatly formed novella amongst what can only be referred to as 'short prose', there are elements in common with the less syntactically lucid texts. The characters, although they traverse

⁶³⁰ Ann Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute, Fiction and Theory: Questions of Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 80.

distance over countryside in the text, are in almost the same position as the foetal characters of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *All Strange Away* and *Ping*,

In the end his trunk ran parallel with the ground. To counterbalance this anomaly he held his legs apart and sagged at the knees. (...) He gave me his hand like a tired old ape with the elbow lifted as high as it would go.⁶³¹

The stance of the three-piece bodies of the rotunda texts is here recreated, with mathematical language already creeping in. The stooped or foetal posture is not exclusive to the 'rotunda' texts and is found throughout the oeuvre.⁶³² This time, however, there is reasoning behind the positioning beyond a cramped dome or infirmity: the man here chooses to bend over, which as the narrator suggests, might be something to do with the aforementioned flowers, '[t]o what this was due I cannot say. To love of the earth and the flowers' thousand scents and hues. Or to cruder imperatives of an anatomical order.'⁶³³ What this cruder imperative might refer to is left unclear, although it might be surmised that oral sex is implied by the head being lowered to the same height as the crotch. It might also refer back to what this character stated earlier in the text, 'One day he halted and fumbling for his words explained to me that anatomy is a whole.'⁶³⁴ Perhaps the bending and folding of the body is a way of making it smaller, reducing the opportunity for its

⁶³¹ *Enough*, pp. 187-188.

⁶³² *Molloy*, *Mercier & Camier* for example.

⁶³³ *Enough*, p. 190.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 188.

compartmentalisation: lessening in the hopes of wholeness. This is what is 'crude' about the shape: both its potential for sexual activity and its move towards cohesion.

Later in the text, the characters are described in a tableau, laying down, '[a]ttitude at rest. Wedged together bent in three. Second right angle at the knees. I on the inside.'⁶³⁵ This position will be recreated in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, albeit hemmed in by a container. These sentences are immediately followed by 'We turn over as one man when he manifests the desire.'⁶³⁶ Whereas in *All Strange Away*, gender changes while these positions are adopted, here it seems that gender is subsumed into the shape. The syntax is ambiguous: the desire on the part of the male character could be simply to turn over, or it could be for the two characters to become 'one man'. Here, too, is further evidence that the breasts in the final sentences alter, rather than reveal, gender. There is a further parallel with the later rotunda texts with the use of a mirror, '[h]aving misted it with his breath and polished it on his calf he looked in it for the constellations.'⁶³⁷ Here, however, the mirror is used to look at the sky, whereas in *Imagination Dead Imagine* the mirror is used to check that the character is still breathing, '[h]old a mirror to their lips, it mists.'⁶³⁸ This shift between active and passive use of the mirror, along with other parallels, suggests a diegetic connection but also a fundamental shift. The scrolling landscape of *Enough* does not break down into the stark containment of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, nor does it suggest a temporal relation. Instead, these motifs troublingly imbricate the texts, just as the child and adult are troublingly difficult to parse.

⁶³⁵ Ibid, p. 191.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ Ibid, p. 190.

⁶³⁸ *Imagination Dead Imagine*, p. 184.

As in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Enough*, too, uses mathematics to undergird its formulation of sexuality. The second sentence of the text presents us with a joke and a formula: ‘All that goes before forget. Too much at a time is too much.’⁶³⁹ Instead of invoking the anticipated cliché, given the title, ‘enough is enough’, the same formula is used with different values applied: too much. Time is also included: too much *at a time*. This gathering of time fits the description of Lisa Baraitser’s ‘unbecoming time’, or as she puts it ‘time that pools without a rim.’⁶⁴⁰ Baraitser characterises different kinds of care as socially reproductive: while there is not space here to expand on the details of the differences between her paradigm of repetition and the one that has been laid out here, Baraitser’s reconfiguring of the repetitive time of care as a repetition that matters — in terms of import and material — finds ways in which queerness can be a potentially reproductive mode of being.

While this thesis suggests that by the 1960s, Beckett’s work no longer addresses the issue of sexuality as painfully and heterosexually tied to reproduction, the mother and the womb, Baraitser’s more capacious definition of reproduction as a production of things that matter other than or as well as children — rather than, importantly, ‘the child’ — is useful for reading the queer time that takes place in these works. ‘Too much at a time is too much’, crucially, shifts the temporal dimension of ‘enough is enough’ — implying imminent cessation — to a kind of permanence or, at the very least, endurance. ‘Too much is too much’, for example, certainly denotes excess but has no colloquial connotation of putting a stop to proceedings: by the time one has noticed that something is too much, it seems, it is too late to stop. This seems to play

⁶³⁹ *Enough*, p. 186.

⁶⁴⁰ Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 5.

on the problem in the text, which is the impossible imbrication — across ages and sex, as opposed to the physical, bodily imbrication of *How It Is* — of motifs. The repetition between these texts of, for example, juxtapositions between light and dark, hot and cold, of measuring and quantifying and handholding, impacts upon the way time is perceived across them. Ironically perhaps, the time horizon of each piece is irreparably muddled with its contemporaries.

Mental Arithmetic

The problem in *Enough* is not solely focused on physical folding and tessellating, although attention is paid to this, but also to the passing of time and, specifically, the new conveyor-belt arrangement of diegetic space. The linear movement, as opposed to the flashing, sweating and breath-misting of the rotunda texts, brings time into sharper relief,

His talk was seldom of geodesy. But we must have covered several times the equivalent of the terrestrial equator. At an average of roughly three miles per day and night. We took flight in arithmetic. What mental calculations bent double hand in hand! Whole ternary numbers we raised in this way to the third power sometimes in downpours of rain. Graving themselves in his memory as best they could the ensuing cubes

accumulated. In view of the converse operation at a later stage. When time would have done its work.⁶⁴¹

It is worth quoting an entire paragraph here to make clear the connection between geometry and time that is being fostered. The characters have a vector, and the mathematical calculations being calculated are in their heads as well as in their movements. The suggestion that talk was 'seldom of geodesy' suggests that the route that the pair are taking is not the shortest route, if 'geodesy' might be linked to 'geodesic', which relates to the shortest possible line between two points on a sphere. Rather than a performed minimising, here there is a description of abstract numerical accumulations that is followed by the action of time, which does the work of the negative agglutination that defines Beckett's minimising. Mental arithmetic seems to burgeon on the material, as 'downpours of rain' impinges on its operations, and the labour that the two characters undertake is gestured towards despite a clinical tone in 'bent double' and the 'graving' in memory. It is too convenient to suggest that the lateness of the prose is echoed in the fact of time being characterised as the agent that lessens; especially since this slightly more florid piece comes after the bleached-out diegetics of the 'rotunda' works. Perhaps in fact time's work does not affect the arithmetic: after all, the converse operation must still be done later; time will not be doing it for them. Salisbury notes that in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, a certain type of queer time emerges, 'Neither weak enough to cease and desist, nor strong enough to leave, [...] they endure and persist, not really waiting for Godot, but waiting

⁶⁴¹ *Enough*, p. 188.

with, and sometimes even on one another.’⁶⁴² Whereas the queerness of the two male pseudocouples in these inter- and post-war plays becomes a persisting togetherness, by the time we reach *Enough* the matter of persistence is a matter of mathematics and memory.

Linear time is impinged upon by other modes. Following Zupančič’s reading of Butler, this might suggest a nod towards a way to construct meaning that identifies time as pivotal. As Zupančič notes, ‘what is referred to as natural is the sedimentation of the discursive’ in Butler.⁶⁴³ The title, *Enough*, therefore suggests a kind of certainty or correctness that is immediately circumscribed by the lack of time in the first two sentences: no memory of the past that may have sedimented into meaning, too much right now to record. The text starts out, seemingly, without the possibility of nature because of the simultaneously cornucopian and corrosive effects of time.

How does this configure the ways in which sexuality is constituted? Initially, the way in which desire works between the characters seems very in line with a relation based on mirroring and sameness, ‘I did all he desired. I desired it too. For him. Whenever he desired something so did I.’⁶⁴⁴ This divestiture of authority in Beckett’s work dates back prior to Lacan’s first documented statement on this form of desire to the British Psychoanalytic Society in 1951 as does the inability to distinguish between characters. However, Lacan’s statement is of some use in identifying how sexuality operates in this text: ‘The object of man’s desire, and we are not the first to

⁶⁴² Laura Salisbury, ‘“Between-Time Stories”: Waiting, War and the Temporalities of Care’, *Medical Humanities*, 46.2 (2020), p. 100.

⁶⁴³ *What Is Sex?*, p. 40.

⁶⁴⁴ *Enough*, p. 186.

say this, is essentially an object desired by someone else.’⁶⁴⁵ However, this arrangement soon changes when Beckettian exhaustion takes hold, ‘I only had the desires he manifested. But he must have manifested them all. All his desires and needs. When he was silent he must have been like me.’⁶⁴⁶ This is both an exhaustion and a reversal that demonstrates that the initial relation — that of sedimentary discourse, and that of the possibility of a sexual relation — has broken down. The ‘he’ falls silent, and sameness creeps in. The paragraph ends with, ‘We must have had the same satisfactions. The same needs and the same satisfactions.’⁶⁴⁷ Repetition and reiteration are not in the service of nature here: repetition is not co-opted for eroticism or sedimentary meaning; but instead enacts sexuality in that it marks the point of both particularity and rupture between these characters. Rupture, notably, not in the sense that something is broken, but rather that the break constitutes it. This is evident even at a grammatical level in this sentence. The verb form shifts from past tense to past conditional, introducing uncertainty: a potential gap — and here it is possible to see the origins of Beckett’s reputation for fragmentation. It is not clear why the counterpart is silent; the narrator assumes he is exhausted. The juxtaposition between the characters is broken by silence, which instead of being viewed as a chasm in communication, the narrator views as a verification of sameness: he *must have* been like me. This is a combination of uncertainty and surety; he must have might be taken two ways, one with an emphasis on the must, one without. In either case, the break does *not* fragment, but rather consolidates the relationship between the characters.

⁶⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, ‘Some reflections on the ego’, in Andrew C Furman and Steven T Levy, ed., *Influential Papers from the 1950s: Papers from the Decades in International Journal of Psychoanalysis Key Papers Series* (London: Karnac, 2003), p. 295.

⁶⁴⁶ *Enough*, p. 186.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

These two opening paragraphs enact queer sexuality — queer in that it is both homosexual and in that it deconstructs the possibility of individual sovereignty while remaining within the discourse of power through catachresis: that is, a misnaming or misuse of words, which is found in Beckett’s parodying of an alignment between signifier and signified. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, it does the work of queerness by using ‘bodies to jam *whatever* looks like the inevitable.’⁶⁴⁸ Rather than disavowing the possibility of gender altogether, the slippage that occurs at the point of gendering constitutes a catachresis. In this parodic mode, gender is not disavowed but reoriented. As Butler notes, “agency” would then be the double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where “to be constituted” means “to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime” the signifier itself.⁶⁴⁹ This kind of queer catachresis means the elision of naming and the elision of gender not in the name of fluidity but in the name of refusal, or intransigence. Here is the fundamental misreading that accounts for the sin of misalignment: the fragment. Despite the repetition that occurs in the 1960s prose, this repetition is simultaneously always a catachresis. In being unable to accommodate desires that are heterosexual, homosexual, geriatric and underage — and significantly at that moment a desire that exceeds the boundaries of what can be subsumed under any notion of queer, redemptive, consensual, even strictly sexual — the text becomes a place not of fluidity but instead of a repetition that returns to its own status as placeholder, revealing that even if there were a centre, it would never have held. Time is central to the upholding of this ‘place’, rather than identity.

⁶⁴⁸ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 173.

⁶⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 167.

Sameness in *Enough* is reiterated, sexually, beyond a focus on the genitalia. The narrator states of the male character, when discussing holding hands with him, 'He did not like to feel against his skin the skin of another. Mucous membrane is a different matter.'⁶⁵⁰ This is a repetition of a reference to Freud that has been made elsewhere in the 1960s prose, as explored in Chapter One. The reference to an idiosyncratic Freudian epithet is significant: the hands become both an extension and simultaneously an extremity, not a permeable 'mucous membrane' such as the mouth/anus, which Beckett also evokes at different points in the *œuvre*, but something less intimate. The narration goes on, 'If the question were put to me I would say that odd hands are ill-fitted for intimacy. Mine never felt at home in his.'⁶⁵¹ Aptly, 'odd' might be read here, not as 'strange', but instead as its mathematical meaning, that is, having one left over if divided by two. In a similar vein it might also be 'odd' in the sense of an 'odd' sock, that is, two hands from different pairs. This is suggestive of the antisocial core of sexuality, the rupture that is constitutive of it; although there are two hands, there will be a remainder if they are divided. The persistence of this mathematical disharmony is also a stand-in for the incommensurability of the sexual. Odd might also mean separated from a pair, or glaring in its anomalousness: why is it that the male character dislikes the touch of skin?⁶⁵²

As previously mentioned, Beckett's preoccupation with 'bare extremities' — and hands especially — shows up elsewhere in the *œuvre*. The way in which a prosthetic mode of sexuality reconfigures the body also parallels Lacan's commentary

⁶⁵⁰ *Enough*, p. 187.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² For more on this, see the 'Skin and Screams' section of Chapter Three.

on physical manifestations of psychological illness, such as muteness or paralysis, 'It all happens as if the body-image had an autonomous existence of its own, and by autonomous I mean here independent of objective structure.'⁶⁵³ Indeed, perhaps just like Rousseau in a bed of flowers. It is not gender itself that is made to be fluid, but the body itself that is deprived of an 'objective structure'. What queer reading can allow is a deconstruction of this 'objective structure' without erasing the specific differences that continue to order the frameworks that are left over.

⁶⁵³ 'Some reflections on the ego', p. 297.

Conclusion: flat queerness

This project was begun under the auspices of a perfect certainty about two things: firstly, that in Samuel Beckett's work there is more sex than has been admitted to; and secondly, that the aforementioned sex should not be understood, in any conventionalised sense, as heterosexuality — and in the most part is in fact recalcitrant to it. The thesis began to investigate something in Beckett's work that was moving queerly, enacting queerness, or left open to a queer reading. The tricolon crescens at the end of this sentence speaks to the complications that ensued. An omnipresent question throughout has been: is Beckett's work queer in and of itself, or is bringing queer theory to bear upon it showing a new perspective on the work and solving certain on-going philosophical questions that snap persistently at the heels of Beckett Studies?

My contention was initially that the answer is both. However, what I have discovered is the necessity to distinguish and mediate between what might be available for a queer reading and what is simply recalcitrant to conventionalised heterosexual paradigms. Two concepts emerged from this: queer and, to begin with, an aesthetic that is not *not* queer, but not queer either. Something in 'queer' — despite Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant's best efforts, as we have seen and will see again below — rings continually optimistic in its radical potential. This is not because queer denotes success or positivism in any common sense, but because it denotes a form of commonality, even where it finds itself stymied, negative, failing or even dead. In Edelman's words, it constitutes, paradoxically, a side:

queer theory must always insist on its connection to the vicissitudes of the sign, to the tension between the signifier's collapse into the letter's cadaverous materiality and its participation in a system of reference wherein it generates meaning itself. As a particular story, in other words, of why storytelling fails, one that takes both value and the burden of that failure upon itself, queer theory, as I construe it, marks the "other" side of politics: the "side" where narrative realization and derealization overlap, where the energies of vitalization ceaselessly turn against themselves; the "side" outside all political sides, committed as they are, on every side, to futurism's unquestioned good.⁶⁵⁴

Edelman here engages with what Elizabeth Freeman would refer to as the 'vulgar referentiality' of the sign, which queer always maintains a connection to in order to avoid being accused of simply being deconstruction.⁶⁵⁵ The uses, respectively, of 'cadaverous' and 'vulgar' here gesture towards the commonality that 'queer' always finds itself inflected by: a shared resistance to the monolithic.⁶⁵⁶ This is the case even in the antisocial thesis in queer theory. What queer does in repeatedly resisting one-dimensionality is group and ungroup itself, at once positing a 'side' or commonality only to undermine the possibility of its existence, but not so much as to undermine the possibility of existing altogether. Beckett's geometries begin to behave like this aspect of queerness because they too play with being a side that is simultaneously not

⁶⁵⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 7.

⁶⁵⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 11.

⁶⁵⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 8.

a side, because they become spatially or conceptually impossible. Edelman slips around a geometric metaphor: queer is, but is not, a side. Beckett, too, plays literally with a certain ‘cadaverous materiality’, with the muddiness of language and with the concepts of limit and constriction. These linguistic cadavers, resistant to the structures of logic that impute heterosexuality, imprint themselves upon the process of reading, making categories of sexuality more flagrantly flimsy as a stringent mode of categorisation. More fitting might be astringent categorisation. If an astringent is a chemical that causes the contraction of skin cells, Beckett’s characters clump together, enacting a prosthetic relationship to embodiment that certainly follows the same choreography of what, at the very least, Edelman and Freeman designate ‘queer’. It is not just that ‘queer’ cannot be defined: there is a moment of paradox in the attempt to translate it spatially. Edelman posits both that it is a ‘side’ and that it is against all ‘sides’. This move is opaque, but still a move: ambivalent, abject oscillation that both seeks and completely disavows an idea of ‘beyond all this’. The spatial inflects the sexual, such that this argument is not only by analogy: these moves are part of how sexuality becomes possible, as we have seen in Beckett’s work. The possibility of sexual categories under this remit begins to disappear but desire, obstinately, does not.

The research for this thesis has come up against a range of conceptions of what ‘queer’ might look like that trouble the possibility of queer as a disruption to categorisation itself. In the introduction, I give examples of queerness that in Beckett Studies become contingent upon sexual acts, especially anal sex between men, on sexological or historical categorisations such as degeneracy and on affective dynamics. It is not that some of these may not fall within queer’s remit, but it is their reification that undermines the moves that queer makes on them. This reification can be avoided

with attention to Freud's understanding of perversion.⁶⁵⁷ Responding to these critiques, I have developed a further understanding of where queerness can reside. In continuing to read queerness as that which holds the place of the void in understanding, this thesis has sustained a critique that maintains queer's 'caustic bite', that which always precludes queer from becoming a category or 'side', as Edelman would designate it, where any side becomes assimilable into the cause of reproductive futurity.⁶⁵⁸ As the chapters explore, the concept of the placeholder becomes useful in this formulation, as gender becomes its own stand-in, something holding the place of gender in a temporary fashion. In this sense, gender is prevented from becoming reified into a 'side': the minimising drives of the rotunda foreclosing the possibility.

As this thesis has posited, queer provides a productive model for the 'total object, complete with missing parts' that Beckett describes in *Disjecta* and which is played out in proximity to sexuality in the late prose.⁶⁵⁹ What I suggest in this conclusion is the existence of a form of queerness that maintains its aesthetic relations but is contingent on spatial and mathematical paradigms, which is itself a component of sexuality but not its entire fundament. As such, it is not queer through and through. Its queerness may seem unevenly or intermittently evident. Being aesthetic, it is vulnerable to reframing, as becomes evident in *The Lost Ones*. Its reliance on shape, space and scale means that in other vectors, in other measures, it can behave differently. Using a spatial metaphor, in other words, requires that space be held, if

⁶⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychology of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 128.

⁶⁵⁸ Lee Edelman, 'Learning Nothing: Bad Education', *Differences*, 28.1 (2017), p. 125.

⁶⁵⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: J. Calder, 1983), p. 138.

only temporarily: held to mean that it be close, and that it be at least temporarily steady enough to read. We might call this 'flat queerness'.

In order to explain this term, I will first of all give a brief explanation of the absence of Beckett's short prose text *The Lost Ones* from this thesis, which demonstrates the need for 'flat' as a qualifier to queerness. This text does not operate under the same remit as *How It Is*, *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Enough*. Whereas the minimising drive in the works I examine forces sexuality into a queer aesthetic banality, *The Lost Ones* presents once again a matrix in which heterosexuality becomes one of many possible options, with remnants of the queer aesthetic logic that developed in the 1960s interfering in its structure. The world-making that goes on in this text ushers in a form of heteronormativity that comes to bat against the placeholder genders that have occupied the oeuvre since 1960. There are two main reasons why *The Lost Ones* cannot sustain the queer frameworks that are instantiated by its earlier counterparts. The first is that the viciously minimising drive is no longer present: only a remnant of the exacting narrative voice that is never content with the state of things is present. It remains in the conditional gender of one character with the phrase 'if a man'.⁶⁶⁰ Residua of the placeholder genders of the earlier prose can be read through this use of tense, but this does not comprehensively cover all of the inhabitants of the diegetic which becomes instead concerned with a larger, more Sadean elaboration of space — perhaps the only thing that Sade is happy to produce opulently and exponentially. These spatial parameters and quantifications reinstate the paradigms of reproductive sexuality in this expanded world.

⁶⁶⁰ Samuel Beckett, 'The Lost Ones' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 223.

Although the minimising in the earlier 1960s prose works to reduce the diegetic space while building itself up as a text, *The Lost Ones* is less concerned with reducing the diegetic and more concerned with ever-expanding contradictions that do not attempt to erase themselves. For example, the first line of the text establishes an ‘Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one.’⁶⁶¹ This refers to the Platonic idea — refuted by Freud — that each person was split from their corresponding ‘soulmate’ at birth and must spend their lifetime seeking them. The English title of the text aligns neatly with this, suggesting a collective of those for whom this union did not come about. However, the French title, *Le Dépeupleur*, translates to ‘the depopulator’, but more accurately perhaps to either ‘the emptier’ or even ‘the killer’. This neologism is likely a reference to a love poem written by Alphonse Lamartine.⁶⁶² The referenced section from the poem is as follows: ‘Un seul être vous manque, et tout est dépeuplé.’⁶⁶³ Just like the Platonic myth, the poem is based on a romantic ideal and enacts the requisite longing. Although *The Lost Ones* reneges on its titular promise to deliver any form of longing other than that for an escape, its dialogue with romantic love separates it fundamentally from the other texts examined here. If this thesis maps the minimising queer drives of the 1960s prose, and *The Lost Ones* offers a more expansive and conflicted relationship to those concepts, I use it here to conclude as a way to signal not only the limits of this thesis but the way in which these limits have informed its argument. This thesis posits a mode of reading

⁶⁶¹ Ibid, p. 202.

⁶⁶² Karine Germoni, ‘Le Dépeupleur: Des Éléments Absents/Présents Ou l’ambiguïté de l’antiromantisme Beckettien’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 20 (2008), p. 189.

⁶⁶³ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Méditations Poétiques, Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses*, Jocelyn, ed. M. F. Guyard (Paris: Gallimard, ‘Pléiade’, 1963), p. 3. My translation: ‘One misses a single being and all is emptied out.’

queerness that does not rely on either finding that the text itself is 'queer' and therefore appending it to an LGBT+ cannon, or the act of 'queering' as the move towards the text itself as two mutually exclusive options. Flat queerness describes the form of aesthetic queerness that imbues Beckett's late prose: but whose presence need not always perpetuate itself with the radical gusto of queer as a verb.

I employ a different methodology in order to argue for a different way to conceptualise 'queer' in relation to any text, not just Beckett. The necessity of reading queer sexuality with an approach that is itself queer — that is, the queer sexualities that are present in Beckett's work unmoored to any association with categories of sexuality, require queer theory in order to be read. Beckett's work is not just latently homosexual, nor is the homosexuality in the texts so much in front of our eyes as to be entirely invisible — or at least, this is true insofar as it is not only this mode of the visible that informs the way we are able to read sexuality.⁶⁶⁴ The homosexuality that does arise in the late prose is just as unstable as the heterosexuality: these are in an unstable relation but a relation, nonetheless. This is what allows the possibility of queerness as a structuring element. The reason that queer sexuality has been missed so frequently, since these texts have often been seen instead as avant-garde, abstract pieces, is because their queerness resides in their very structure.⁶⁶⁵ Using 'queer' as a verb acting on the works would undo the centrality of queerness as a concept to the works themselves. This way of approaching queerness also attends to the significance

⁶⁶⁴ Peter Boxall, 'Beckett and Homoeroticism', in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 115.

⁶⁶⁵ See Todd Haynes: 'Heterosexuality to me is a structure as much as content. It is an imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society. If homosexuality is the opposite or the counter-sexual activity to that, then what kind of a structure would it be?' in Justin Wyatt and Todd Haynes, 'Cinematic/Sexual Transgression: An Interview with Todd Haynes', *Film Quarterly*, 46.3 (1993), p. 8.

of specific differences as well as difference in general due to its relationship to both minimalism and abstraction but also to space and measure: quality and quantity.⁶⁶⁶ It is not that the texts *are* queer, or that queer can be applied or read into them: queer works as a structuring component.

The focus on mathematics that emerged from the influence of the newly trendy Marquis de Sade in *How It Is* undergirds the logic of minimising in the three prose texts that follow it chronologically: *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Enough*. Gender studies has recently seen a turn towards mathematics and quantification in its theorisation. Scholars such as Diane Detournay, Shanna T. Carlson and Alexander R. Galloway have brought mathematical concepts into gender, and vice versa.⁶⁶⁷ Similarly, Modernist studies have turned towards the importance of mathematics, with Zoe Gosling's thesis *Mathematics and Modernism* drawing together key texts in this field spanning back to Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* in 2005, and up to and including Nina Engelhardt's *Modernism, Fiction and Mathematics*.⁶⁶⁸ Gosling highlights the importance of space in establishing abstraction as a style, showing the arithmetical work that goes into reading these often supposedly simple or minimal texts. What is particularly notable in Beckett's minimising drive is that in employing mathematics, specificities are pushed out and then brought back in. Galloway tells us,

⁶⁶⁶ Chapter Four addresses Sedgwick's misgivings on deconstruction: '[d]econstruction, founded as a very science of *differ(e/a)n*ce, has both so fetishized the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 23.

⁶⁶⁷ Diane Detournay, 'The Racial Life of "Cisgender": Reflections on Sex, Gender and the Body', *Parallax*, 25.1 (2019), pp. 58–74; Shanna T. Carlson, 'Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference', *Differences*, 21.2 (2010), pp. 46–72; Alexander R. Galloway, 'The Gender of Math', *Differences*, 32.3 (2021), pp. 1–24.

⁶⁶⁸ Zoe Gosling, 'Mathematics and Modernism', (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2020); Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2011); Nina Engelhardt, *Modernism, Fiction and Mathematics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

for example, that there is ‘a logic of sexuation already inherent in the structure of math.’⁶⁶⁹ This, importantly, undoes the asexual perception of minimalist abstraction: the realm of numbers is also already the realm of the sexual. This thesis has argued that, rather than desiccating and disintegrating as the late prose gets later, sexuality instead becomes more prominent and more explicit with the turn towards the minimal precisely because of the reliance on shape, space and scale, which are already part of the logic of sexuality.

Flat queerness is therefore not only referring to a paring down but also to the way in which space works in relation to sexuality. This term is informed by both Marcuse’s one-dimensionality and Berlant’s flat affect. Flatness is common in the modes of lateness as it is in the avant-garde, the nouveau roman and minimalism, but Beckett’s flatness can be read specifically as flat queerness because this flatness interferes with desire. Flat queerness does not denote other forms of queerness that are fuller in terms of affect, but rather something in the way in which queerness can be made to signify — that is, its placeholder — is flattened. Jackie Stacey highlights flat affect’s stymieing of the relation, finding that,

To write of flattened affect is to capture something vital about the fullness of muted moments and about the sensation of numbness.

Played against the generic grain of feminine expressivity, flattened affect resonates not so much as repressed emotion or restrained feeling but as an unavailability within the aesthetic norms of dialogical exchange.⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁹ Alexander R. Galloway, ‘The Gender of Math’, *Differences*, 32.3 (2021), p. 14.

⁶⁷⁰ Jackie Stacey, ‘Crossing over with Tilda Swinton—the Mistress of “Flat Affect”’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28.3 (2015), p. 254.

What is useful about the flatness of affect in Berlant is twofold: a mode of understanding particularly recalcitrant modes of temporality and as a way of thinking about queer femininity in these texts. The preceding chapters have reinstated femininity in definitions of queerness in the late prose: *Enough*'s detachable breasts, Emmo/a in *All Strange Away*, even the repeated reference to the wrongness of masculinity in *How It Is*. This form of flat affect might be applied to the femininities of the late prose. Boxall's hypothesis on the invisibility of homosexuality in Beckett is as a result of the 'unavailability within the aesthetic norms of dialogic exchange.' Flat queerness creates this particular impasse. As Chapter Four demonstrates, even the reveal of a breast does not guarantee that femininity is present, and even in that case, the form of sameness that occurs in Beckett's work flattens not only heterosexuality — forming a centrifuge, as Steven Thompson would suggest — but homosexuality too. Where sameness might have previously been a crutch on which homosexual desire was theorised, in Beckett sameness is too like itself to become what Deleuze refers to as 'difference without a concept,' in his 1968 text, originally published in French, *Difference and Repetition*.⁶⁷¹ As is explored in Chapter Two, Sianne Ngai and her concept of stuplimity are used to examine the possibility of recognising difference before it is qualified or categorised. Beckett's late prose models not repetition but permutation, speaking back to the contemporary theoretical concern with numerical conceptualisations of sexuality and sociality.

Flatness is also a way to, perhaps ironically, stabilise queer for long enough to note its presence. Stacey describes flatness as 'The affect which is not one', which

⁶⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 16.

underscores that dimensionality is not necessarily the same as the count.⁶⁷² If queer is that which holds the place of nothingness, the signifier that stands in for the crack in knowledge and the possibility of annihilation, then this necessity of placeholding — in other words, that queer must be at once referring to and standing in for a void that escapes language — can allow for moments of analysis before that place is again usurped. In the introduction, I refer to flattening as a co-conspirator of lateness and whiteness: lateness as marked by a postmodern affective drought, and whiteness avoidant of any particularity or dialectical relation. In situating and examining regimes of whiteness and lateness separately and in their specificity, it is possible to reinstate the possibility of affect which is flat, but multiple. In other words, one dimension, but multiple scales. In Chapter Two, Marc Botha's examination of minimalism concludes that it presents us with a co-extension of radical quality and radical quantity.⁶⁷³ It is this that allows the possibility of queer without extending itself into a flat side. The spatial metaphor of the side implies a level of dimensionality that flatness usurps. In writing flat queerness, Beckett's queer, late prose works summon the deconstructive and Lacanian aspects of queer without at the same time robbing it of the specificities and 'vulgar referentialities' that define it.⁶⁷⁴ Beckett's particular spatial paradigms translate this tension into a spatial problem. These texts have an engagement with queering that is not only queering tout court but has a relationship with the sexual in general because of their reliance on spatiality.

⁶⁷² 'Crossing over with Tilda Swinton—the Mistress of "Flat Affect"', p. 269.

⁶⁷³ Marc Botha, 'Why Minimalism Matters: Radical Quantity and the Representation of Immanence', *Textual Practice*, 29.4 (2015), p. 749.

⁶⁷⁴ *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, p. 11.

The pitfalls of a spatial conception of queerness that does not involve placeholder are made clear by Paul B. Preciado's criticism of Deleuze. Deleuze, in working through a definition of homosexuality that would lead to his claiming of the title 'molecular homosexual', expounds, 'It is only by remaining homosexual forever, remaining and being homosexual more and more, being a better and better homosexual, that one can say "well, no one is really homosexual."' ⁶⁷⁵ Although there is no space here to unpack Deleuze's molecular homosexuality — in any case, Preciado does this at length — this section is instructive. ⁶⁷⁶ In seeking a limit case in relation to sexuality here, just as Sade did, Deleuze hits upon the inverse of Beckett's adage, from *Worstward Ho*, whose working title at its inception in 1981 was 'Better Worse': 'Fail again. Fail better.' ⁶⁷⁷ This concept of 'better and better' homosexuality ends in a form of homosexuality that, as Preciado suggests, is 'sidestepping the fecality and the toxicity of the ghetto'. ⁶⁷⁸ Preciado argues that claiming homosexuality in this abstracting, positivist sense — which is to say, imagining that one can be 'better and better' and, perhaps by implication, 'worse and worse' — only reinforces the heterosexual logic of reproductive futurity. Beckett certainly does not sidestep fecality when it comes to sexuality. If queerness represents not the opposite of heterosexual structures but the inverse, then it also usurps the possibility of this 'better and better' homosexuality, instead finding breaks and divisions that prevent homosexuality from

⁶⁷⁵ Gilles Deleuze, 'Preface to Hocquenghem's *L'Après-Mai des faunes*,' in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 284. Qtd. in Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 147.

⁶⁷⁶ I will only add here that 'molecular' might be apt, in fact, if repurposed and considered less monadic. Camille Paglia, for example, describes a moment in Sade's *Justine* as comprising 'a gigantic complex sexual molecule with a female center'. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 241.

⁶⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett, 'Worstward Ho' in *Company; Ill Seen Ill Said; Worstward Ho; Stirrings Still* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 81.

⁶⁷⁸ *Countersexual Manifesto*, p. 147.

becoming homosexuality entirely. This meets Deleuze at the same end, that is, that no-one is really homosexual, but instead of finding this through a mastering of the category of homosexuality — which might be Sade's approach too — Beckett's failings undercut the possibility of there being an upper limit to queerness. Whereas Deleuze implants homosexuality in heterosexual relations through a Freudian bisexuality, sexuality in Beckett's late prose finds that no-one is really homosexual because no-one is one for long enough.

If queer is the nothing's 'caustic bite', as Edelman would have it, then Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's suggestion that

the bite, the tang and effectual animus of that diffusion [of homosexuality as an unrepresentable narrative potential] depends unstably on the underlying potential for banal thematization; while the banal thematization itself (...) displays, even as it uncontrollably transmits, the sheer representational anxiety of its reductive compaction.⁶⁷⁹

Sedgwick explains in greater complexity the reliance of queerness on its representational, material possibility. If Edelman finds that nothingness can 'bite', then Sedgwick goes further in identifying that this bite is a response to the anxiety of reducing: of being read as 'reductive', which as she notes,

⁶⁷⁹ *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 217.

suggests a relation of part to whole, in which the part seems to claim to offer an adequate representation of the whole through simple quantitative condensation (like a reduced gravy), but which the negative inflection on the adjective then seems to adjudge biased or qualitatively different.⁶⁸⁰

This reading of the inflection on ‘reductive’ seems crucial to understanding the reason that flat queerness exists in Beckett. The minimising drive to lessen and lessen is not merely a reduction but something that plays out with a vector — as Chapter Two shows, via Marc Botha, that consideration of scale means a consideration of quantity and quality as co-extensive. The scaled reduction is the reductiveness that Sedgwick points to, and it is in enacting the mechanics of this that Beckett’s flat queerness makes it readable. It is queer because it lives with the tension, and it is flat because it performs these oscillations without presenting them as anxious suspensions. Not entirely queer, but flatly so.

Employing this methodology with canonical texts can open up the possibility of reading this queerness which is ‘unavailable within the aesthetic norms of dialogic exchange’.⁶⁸¹ What is unique about examining Beckett in this light is that both Beckett Studies and queer theory share the anxiety about reduction in different contexts. Beckett’s late prose amplifies this in its professed minimising tendencies. Flat queerness might allow us permission to read queerness into a text that might not reductively be claimed as queer, but which nonetheless allows us to read queerly.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ ‘Crossing over with Tilda Swinton—the Mistress of “Flat Affect”’, p. 254.

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