

"Let loose in the unthinkable unspeakable": Waiting and Alterity in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the interrelated roles of waiting and alterity in Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. The conventional understanding of waiting is as an intentional relationship between a waiting subject and an awaited object. This kind of waiting is end-directed, and, in order for it to be worthwhile, the awaited must, at some point, *arrive*. In the trilogy, however, the awaited never does arrive, and it is my contention that the novels are concerned with an unconventional kind of waiting, which, being without object or end, takes the form of a non-intentional relationship between waiter and awaited. Significantly, through the non-intentional wait, the subject awaits the unawaited. She or he thereby encounters the radically other, or that which cannot be rendered familiar or assimilated in any way – an unthinkable, unspeakable, ungraspable excess that overflows the limits of thought and language. The texts foreground the vexed question of response to such alterity: how can one approach the ungraspable *as* ungraspable, when it is in the nature of any approach to attempt to grasp? I argue that the texts explore a paradoxical form of "incurious seeking" as an avenue to accommodate the absolutely other.

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## Introduction

From its earliest reception, Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels – *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* – has existed on the fringe of literature, positioned, as Angela Moorjani observes, at "the outer limits of fiction writing" (25).<sup>1</sup> Even a superficial glance at the texts reveals their extreme eccentricity. Not only are all the narrators fallible in their narration, characteristically uncertain and liable to contradict themselves, but they are also, at times, downright deceitful, sometimes for no reason other than the sake of convenience. Their radical unreliability makes any discernible plot irrecoverable, and renders the content of each text indeterminate. The trilogy also features a mystifying *mise en abyme* architecture, in which each narrator has seemingly impossible knowledge of narratives other than his own, referring to, and even claiming authorship of, characters in preceding texts. Moreover, identity itself appears in constant flux, as characters morph into other characters, or have their names inexplicably changed. The reader's understandable perplexity is compounded by the trilogy's highly irregular form, with sentences that extend for pages and hardly a paragraph division in sight. Beckett's three novels are irreducibly peculiar and even in retrospect, from a contemporary perspective, resist incorporation within any given literary or philosophical tradition.

Attempts have, of course, been made to approach Beckett's writings from the perspective of existing theoretical frameworks, including Cartesianism, existentialism and poststructuralism. Hugh Kenner, in an early and influential study, presents the Beckettian subject as a "Cartesian centaur," and argues that Beckett "come[s] closer to the Cartesian spirit than Descartes himself" (116, 120). 'Cartesian Beckett' is a philosophical dualist who conceives of the mind and the body as essentially different substances, and the self as fundamentally divided between the two. More accurately, he identifies the self with the mind, and posits its connection with the body as mysterious. So, for instance, J. M. Coetzee maintains that the "everyday experience" motivating Beckett in his writing is the unshakeable sense that "he is a being that thinks, linked somehow to an insentient carcass"

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<sup>1</sup> The novels were initially published in French, *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* in 1951, and *The Unnamable* in 1953. English translations, undertaken by Beckett (in collaboration with Patrick Bowles for *Molloy*), appeared in 1955, 1956 and 1958, respectively.

(20).<sup>2</sup> As this claim implies, the Cartesian subject encounters itself first and foremost as a thinking being, and is convinced of its existence as such.

Viewing Beckett through the lens of existential humanism has been another dominant critical paradigm. Martin Esslin, a pioneer of the approach, praises Beckett's work as "the culmination of existential thought" (qtd. in Watson 18), most notably in its privileging of the individual subject who, in the midst of a bewildering and fiercely inhospitable universe, must battle to achieve self-actualisation. Such readings, in emphasising the subject's quest for its authentic self, tend to take the notion of authentic being for granted. Although interest in Beckett and existential phenomenology has persisted,<sup>3</sup> there has been a move beyond viewing him as an existentialist per se, due not only to a heightened awareness that his works adhere to no one school of thought, but also to the now familiar argument that he, in fact, altogether abandons the existentialist subject and its potential for freedom and autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

Questioning the status of the subject is characteristic of the poststructuralist approach to Beckett's works, popularised by critics such as Leslie Hill, Thomas Trezise, Steven Connor and Richard Begam. Central to this tradition is the idea that Beckett presents the authentic, autonomous self as an impossible fiction. The postmodern 'linguistic turn' has also led to increased attention to his use of language. Simon Critchley, for instance, argues that Beckett's writings are characterised by "an endlessly proliferating and self-undoing series of sayings and unsayings" which he names a "syntax of weakness" (198). In the poststructuralist paradigm, the subject is an inescapably linguistic construct, and is, to a certain extent at least, dispersed or effaced by its position in language. The Beckettian subject has been similarly conceived, for example, by Sarah Gendron, who describes it as a "dissolved self" (49).

A challenge to Enlightenment and Romantic models of subjectivity is not the only feature of Beckett's work that has encouraged commentators to identify it as a precursor of the postmodern. As Moorjani notes, Beckett experiments with numerous non-

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<sup>2</sup> Another contemporary example is Michael Bennett, who argues that Beckett's thought is a version of Cartesian Rationalism.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the 2009 collection on *Beckett and Phenomenology*, edited by Matthew Feldman and Ulrika Maude.

<sup>4</sup> Already in 1961, in his essay on *Endgame*, Theodor Adorno argued for irreconcilable differences between existentialist and Beckettian conceptions of subjectivity.

representational techniques, some of which have become conventional in postmodern fiction. These include "confounding author, narrator, and character; self-cancelling fictions chronicling their own writing and unwriting; bewildering textual mirrors; [. . .] multiple meanings tendered and withdrawn; multiplication of voices; desubjectifying self-writing; misdirection, blockage, gaps, uncertainty, and aporia" (25). In a similar vein, Laura Cerrato defines the postmodern by the phenomena of "de-temporalization, de-totalization, and de-signification" which are represented in texts by features such as "discontinuity, fragmentation, randomness, contradiction, permutation, excess, and short circuit," all of which, she observes, "were present in Beckett's works before the term 'postmodern' was ever heard" (27).

In establishing my own approach to the trilogy, I take cognisance of those that have come before. That Beckett's writings foreshadow many postmodern techniques and concerns is undeniable, and my approach involves attending to these features, especially the trilogy's critical stance towards the subject – its deconstruction and reimagining of it – and its preoccupation with language and what exceeds it. Postmodern literary theory, however, cannot, on its own, adequately account for the texts, as Helga Schwalm argues (189). Cerrato is of the same mind, maintaining that, in Beckett's works, "postmodernism transcends itself" (27). Ultimately, no literary theory or hermeneutic tradition can encompass the trilogy, which always overflows established modes of thinking. While some may, selectively, aid interpretation, none is sufficient to exhaust Beckett's ineluctable eccentricity.

Accordingly, my approach is to treat Beckett's writings neither as 'existentialist' nor 'Cartesian,' the trilogy, in my view, showing the inadequacies of both philosophies. I argue that while the texts *are* concerned with a quest for self – in line with the existentialist approach – the self which is sought is, by the end of the trilogy, incomprehensible and unlocatable, making it inherently unattainable, and thereby rendering the search interminable and purgatorial. Furthermore, a peculiar kind of seeking is required in order to approach the incomprehensible, which the narrators all encounter in more ways than one. Because the incomprehensible is precisely that at which thought cannot aim, the search must be, paradoxically, aimless: a quest that is also a non-quest. The trilogy's aimless seeking reveals the importance for Beckett of non-intentional consciousness, and hence his rejection of a fundamental tenet of existential

phenomenology, namely, that *all* consciousness is intentional. Thus, while influenced by existentialism, Beckett's work finally transcends it. And the same applies to Cartesianism: the trilogy evokes the Cartesian subject only to effect a radical critique of its certainty in itself. The self *is* figured as divided, but the pivotal division is not as much between the mind and the body as between the mind and itself, in a portrait of a subject dispossessed of itself.

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The broad concern of this thesis is the trilogy's treatment of waiting and alterity. Beckett's fixation with the idea of waiting extends beyond the trilogy, in which each narrator waits and describes himself as waiting. In *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, two tramps spend the entire play waiting for one 'Godot' to arrive.<sup>5</sup> The form of their wait, however, is very strange – without object (when they forget what they are waiting for) and without end (since Godot never appears). Such an endless waiting for nothing reverses the conventional understanding of the wait, replacing it with a form of waiting that is non-intentional, in which the awaited is not the *noema* of a *noesis*, but is rather, to use Critchley's term, "meta-phenomenological" (87). Non-intentional waiting, which is also central to the trilogy, is important because it offers a way to await the unawaited, to establish relationship with that which cannot be an object for consciousness and thus exceeds the subject's capacity to grasp and comprehend.

When waiting for nothing, the subject is in relation to the ungraspable. This is a relation to the radically other – what the Unnamable calls "the unthinkable unspeakable" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 328). Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida describe this kind of otherness as 'absolute,' because the self is unable to assimilate it, making it ineliminable. Each of the trilogy's narrators enters into a relationship with absolute alterity, and one of my concerns in this study is to explore the nature of this relationship, while addressing the obvious issue of how it is even possible to stand in relation to that which exceeds thought and language. Underpinning my concern with radical alterity is a question of response. How can the ungraspable be responded to *as* ungraspable? Any approach, by nature,

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<sup>5</sup> *Waiting for Godot* was composed in French in 1948 (in between *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*), published in 1952, first performed in 1953, and translated by Beckett into English a year later.



attempts to grasp, thereby necessitating, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, a paradoxical "approach without approach" ("Waiting" 275).

This points towards the challenges involved in writing about the trilogy, for *it* seems to defy comprehension, not only through its non-representational narrative techniques, but also through a tendency to invite a particular interpretation only to establish its inapplicability. Philosophical readings, for example, are both facilitated and denied, as Critchley notes:

[Beckett's] texts continually seem to pull the rug from under the feet of the philosopher by showing themselves to be conscious of the possibility of such interpretations; or, better, such interpretations seem to lag behind the text which they are trying to interpret; or, better still, such interpretations seem to lag behind their object by saying too much: something *essential* to Beckett's language is lost by overshooting the text and ascending into the stratosphere of metalanguage.

(165–66)

Any critical metalanguage, then, occludes as much as it reveals. Furthermore, the trilogy's self-cancelling language means that interpretative certainty is indefinitely withheld. This issues, not in meaninglessness, but in a dynamic process whereby meanings, each incomplete in itself, proliferate, almost always offering multiple possibilities for interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The reader is unable to firmly lay hold of or grasp the texts, rendering each interpretation essentially partial and provisional.

However inadequate or obfuscatory, critical metalanguage is unavoidable. Derrida provides a metaphor for his interpretative practice which is helpful in intimating the relation between a text in itself and any particular reading of it. He compares his method of reading to a "dredging machine" that scrapes the ocean bed with its "toothed matrix," returning with a collection of sand, silt and moss, while letting the water drain back into the sea (*Glas* 204). The interpretative apparatus plunged into the text is "toothed" because it is selective, shaped by a particular reader's inclinations and concerns, and by the metalanguage she or he inevitably brings to the text. What remains after the water has drained away is not the sea itself, but a heavily compromised, fragmentary representation of the sea, just one rendering or reading of it. And so the machine must release its load and dredge the depths again. My methodology is informed by an awareness of the

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<sup>6</sup> Here I differ from those commentators who understand Beckett's writings to be nihilistic. Perceived nihilism underpins the classification of Beckett as an absurdist, for example, by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* and David Hesla in *The Shape of Chaos*.

selective and ever-incomplete nature of textual interpretation, and of the fact that a text 'in itself' is inaccessible. Accordingly, the close readings I attempt of the three novels do not aspire to be totalising, and my aim is also to place Beckett in conversation with other thinkers on waiting and alterity, most notably, Levinas, Derrida and Blanchot.

This thesis consists of two sections, a structural division that reflects my dual concern with waiting and alterity. Each section takes the form of a chapter, and each chapter is further divided into subsections which focus on the three novels in turn, following a substantial introduction which outlines the relevant topic and provides conceptual material to facilitate my readings of the texts.

## Chapter 1: Waiting

### Introduction

All the time we wait for things to happen: for the light to change from red to green, for the kettle to boil, for a show to start, for a birthday to arrive. We submit to 'waiting periods' in various contexts and have our names placed on 'waiting lists.' Often we wait in designated areas, in queues and special 'waiting rooms.' There is proverbial value to waiting as a means to an end ('All things come to those who wait') and proverbial wisdom about how one should go about waiting, usually patiently ('A watched pot never boils').

The wait we know has multiple forms. While waiting, we might preoccupy ourselves with something else to pass the time, or merely remain idle. We may wait patiently or impatiently, become frustrated as time progresses or remain calm and untroubled. Perhaps we wait eagerly, with excitement, or perhaps with anxiety, even dread. The object or anticipated outcome of waiting may delight us or frighten us, concern us deeply or render us neutral – although hardly ever indifferent to the occurrence of *an* outcome.

The object of waiting seems always there, present in an anticipated form: we wait *for* things, people, events. This understanding of waiting presupposes a waiting subject who consciously performs the waiting-for in relation to an object. The directedness of the subject towards the object of waiting recalls the intentional structure of consciousness central to phenomenology, in which "every consciousness is a consciousness of something" and "every intending consists of an articulated but indissoluble whole, of which an apprehending act and an apprehended object comprise abstract parts" (Turetzky 160). Levinas calls intentionality an "aiming of thought" in which the *noesis* or intending is directed towards its *noema* or intended object ("Diachrony" 97). The self both escapes from itself by aiming beyond itself, and returns back to itself as the intended object is "made the property of the ego" (99).

Phenomenology characterises all experience as unavoidably and essentially intentional, regardless of whether the intended object in fact exists: "even a hallucinatory perceiving is intrinsically intentional, directed toward something hallucinated in the perceiving" (Turetzky 160). Whether or not this is the case, intentionality appears to

coincide neatly with the experience of waiting-for as a conscious, directional attitude. When I wait, I wait for something, and so stand in relation to that something, the object of waiting. Moreover, I am aware of this object as the intended outcome and end of my wait. I am 'aimed' towards the object, reaching beyond myself, but also returning to myself as I render the awaited familiar by anticipating it. It would seem that expectation is vital for waiting so that without a belief that the awaited will arrive, even a weak belief, the wait strikes us as misguided.

A relation of direction is also, by definition, one of distance, and the directedness of the wait thus means a relation of distance between the waiting subject and the object of waiting. Ideally, as the wait unfolds, this distance should diminish progressively, the object of waiting coming closer and closer. More precisely, the awaited must *arrive*, at some point. If it does not, then the wait is in vain and time has been spoilt, for in the end the object must arrive if the wait is to be worthwhile.

Without this horizon of the end to come, waiting is pointless. The question 'What are you waiting for?' must illicit a determinate response if the wait is not to appear very odd. 'I'm not waiting for anything, just waiting' would be an intriguing reply, out of place, out of joint, incongruous. We would wonder if the person was really waiting. As Wolfgang Iser notes, commenting on *Waiting for Godot*, "[w]aiting that loses sight of its purpose begins like a mystery but develops into mere mystification" ("The End" 46). We must know what we are waiting for and why. In other words, waiting must have a purpose, an objective, and always keep this in mind, or else it appears no longer to be waiting but some other strange state. (Later, we shall return to the idea of 'just' waiting.)

Waiting is therefore by nature future-directed and a fundamentally temporal phenomenon. It is defined by *delay*, by postponement or deferral *until* such time as the awaited arrives, even if it refuses to draw near. Intrinsic to the wait is a disjunction between present time, inadequate or empty because lacking the presence of the awaited, and a later time, full and unified, when the future present becomes an actual, lived presence, when subject and object coincide.<sup>7</sup> Waiting is thus a kind of prelude, a process that occurs before something else, before the coming of the right time, a process that depends on that later coming in order to be what it is. The right time is also the last time

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<sup>7</sup> I follow Derrida here in seeing time as "the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: 'now,' future present)" (*Specters* xx).

as arrival marks the end of the process itself. Waiting, from the beginning, desires and intends its own end: it is 'terminal.'

To be comprehensive, one might ask what role the past plays in waiting. The persistent absence of the awaited gives the time of waiting some consistency, and a collection of similar past presents accumulate during the wait. There is repetitiveness and monotony, even if one is distracted, perhaps even a sense of being stuck in a present that repeats itself, duplicating the past while withholding the future. Yet past time also conditions the production of expectations of the future, projection of what is still to come (the arrival of the awaited) being an inseparable extension of the retention of what has gone before. Consequently, the expected future present so central to the wait is not divorced from a remembered history. Rather, past time enables anticipation of future fulfilment in a lived present, a movement which looks both forwards and backwards.

Thus far I have viewed waiting in terms of intentionality and temporality, while focussing on the notions of an awaited object and an end to waiting. I will now introduce the idea of waiting in Beckett (which offers an undermining or reversal of much of the conventional understanding), before turning to three key thinkers on waiting, namely, Blanchot, Levinas and Derrida, in preparation for navigating the murky waters of the trilogy.

In *Waiting for Godot*, famously, Godot never arrives, although two tramps spend the entire play waiting for him. Their waiting is endless; it persists interminably. Vladimir and Estragon are separated from Godot, the awaited, not only by an ever-extending stretch of empty, monotonous time (since Godot does not draw near as the wait unfolds), but also, as Iser points out, by the fact that their "apparently decisive waiting [. . .] gradually becomes more and more aimless as the 'action' proceeds" and so is cut loose from its purpose ("The End" 46). The tramps at times cannot even remember for whom or what they are waiting, never mind their reasons. Iser identifies this aimlessness as part of a movement of "expanding indeterminacy" in which the text "refuse[s] to divulge who Godot is and what is the meaning of the waiting" (46, 47).

Aimless waiting that never ends is an interesting concept. As already discussed, the intentionality of waiting entails that it is always directed or aimed at an anticipated, intended object. It was also noted that waiting is oriented towards its own end, and that the attainment of this end is the criterion for the wait's success. In sharp contrast to the

end-directed intentional wait is the notion of an interminable waiting without object, such as we find in *Waiting for Godot*.

Waiting without an awaited object would be a non-intentional form of consciousness. Without an object, the phenomenological structure of *noesis-noema* collapses, and waiting is no longer a matter of conscious apprehension or intention. It becomes a case of waiting for nothing, in which 'nothing' signifies the absence of any intended object. Phenomenology would have this be impossible ('*all* consciousness is consciousness of something'), but not Beckett, who insists on a non-intentional kind of consciousness in the form of endless, objectless waiting.

The Unnamable imagines himself caught in a vicious circle of awaiting access to a waiting room, and, in the process, invokes the endless wait: "I wait for my turn, my turn to go there, [. . .] my turn to wait there for my turn to go, to be as gone, it's unending" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 403). He goes so far as to deny the necessity of a definitive end to waiting, asserting that "[t]he essential is never to arrive anywhere" but "to go on squirming for ever at the end of the line" (332). This is reminiscent of Watt, in the novel preceding the trilogy, whose journey on the written page ends in a train station waiting room, where he waits to travel to "the end of line" (Beckett, *Watt* 212). Although this incident is not the end of narrated time (Watt ends up in an asylum), it does end the novel and, as a final portrait, comes to symbolise a permanent state: Watt will wait forever. Similarly, Molloy's narrative concludes with him in a ditch, leaving him just "where he happened to be" (Beckett, *Molloy* 85), which means that his story resists closure or finality and leaves the reader waiting for a real ending. But what arrives is Moran's narrative, in which the end circles back and completely undoes the beginning and itself, delaying closure even further. In the second novel of the trilogy, Malone is acutely aware of the interminability of his wait for death, apprehending its seemingly infinite delay in the experience of being "riveted to existence without an exit" (Critchley 70). Furthermore, the end he does manage to make is uncertain; as Christopher Ricks observes, "*Malone Dies*: does he?" (115).

As this brief glance at the trilogy reveals, the representation of interminable waiting lends itself to images of circularity. In this regard, Hill's discussion of the rhetoric of Beckett's early writings is informative. Concentrating on his 1929 essay entitled "Dante. . . Bruno. Vico. . . Joyce" and his 1931 monologue on Marcel Proust, Hill discovers

an "emphasis on the Janal dynamic of writing and its logic of circularity and reversal" (7). In Beckett's reading of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Janus, "who always faces both ways and extracts from apparent unity the divisiveness of perpetual reversal," works as a symbol of a text's "inner reversibility," an activity of language in which "the foundations of meaning are attacked by the uncontrollable, self-inverting character of meaning itself" (Hill 5, 6).

Linked to the text's "Janal dynamic," its movement of circular reversal, is "a purgatorial structure which knows no end other than its own infinite circularity and sluggishness" (Hill 6). Indeed, in his reading of Joyce, Beckett stresses a "purgatorial process":

In what sense, then, is Mr Joyce's work purgatorial? In the absolute absence of the Absolute. Hell is the static lifelessness of unrelieved viciousness. Paradise the static lifelessness of unrelieved immaculation. Purgatory a flood of movement and vitality released by the conjunction of these two elements. There is a continual purgatorial process at work, in the sense that the vicious circle of humanity is being achieved, and this achievement depends on the recurrent predomination of one of two broad qualities. ("Dante," qtd. in Hill 7)

Beckett uses the example of "Vice and Virtue" to illustrate this purgatorial process of "recurrent predomination" (although he says that the principle holds true for "any pair of large contrary human factors" [7]). One element sets into a "dominant crust" and *because* of the "resistance" so provided there proceeds inevitably an "explosion" or "eruption" which reorients the two elements in relation to each other in a reversal of dominance (7). This process, Beckett says, is like a "machine" that doggedly goes on in a perpetual movement of reversal and repetition, mindlessly, like a "kitten" trying to "catch its tail" (7). Here, according to Hill, "the literary text knows no closure nor structure of redemption, no transcendence or term. In its mingling of contraries, its dissolving of unities, what the text embodies is not the world either as paradise or as inferno: it is the world as purgatory" (7).

A circular, purgatorial logic is at work in the trilogy's concern with waiting, but before exploring this further it is worth noting that reversal brings division into the circle as a relation of two interrupts what was a single whole. In a sense, then, the circle breaks. This idea recalls Watt's musings on a picture he finds hanging on the wall of Erskine's room:

A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white. How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained. By what means the illusion of movement in space, and it almost seemed in time, was given, Watt could not say. But it was given. (Beckett, *Watt* 109)

Watt is baffled by the picture and by the assumptions he makes about it (he concedes, for example, that the circle may well be in the background and the point in the foreground). He considers many possible relations between the circle without centre and the centre without circumference, hinging on the various permutations of them belonging to each other, or one to the other, or not at all. Each permutation, however, relies on the notion of seeking. One of the possibilities stands out, bringing Watt to tears: "a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time" (110). Here we have a circle searching for a centre, any centre, but a centre searching not for any circle, but for *its* circle. Thus although the two searches would seem to coincide at first, the circle and centre being meant for each other, leaving the possibility open of "the point slipping in from below at last, when it came home at last, or to its new home," Watt suspects that they are in fact hopelessly divergent, destined to pass "like ships in the night" and "the breach open below perhaps for ever in vain" (110, 111). This is an unstable circularity in search of firm footing, of a static centre to fulfil it and make it whole. But the centre is distant and unattainable, withdrawing infinitely like the receding decimal point. As Richard Coe writes, "one may make ever-decreasing circles round the centre, but the centre itself, being by definition dimensionless, can *never* be reached" (48).

The Beckettian wait's logic of circularity and reversal is evident firstly in the fact that the notion of an interminable wait without object reverses two features of conventional waiting-for, namely, the necessity of an object and an end. In addition, the wait is figured in terms of a purgatorial aesthetic – that is, in terms of a circular *movement* of shifting or alternating oppositions that never reaches a conclusion. This movement is apparent, for example, in the Unnamable's alternation between speaking of the creature he is and of the creature he is not, never achieving finality either way, or in Malone's becoming other through writing fiction, always returning to himself only to depart again, in an endless rotation of ego-centred identity and self-transcendence.



Both Molloy and Malone wait for death, and the Unnamable waits for the silence to end all speech, suggesting that the object of waiting does not disappear entirely. Sometimes it clearly does, for a spell at least, like Godot (when the tramps forget they are waiting for him), but other times it appears to remain active, although infinitely deferred beyond presence and comprehension. The narrators still wait-for, but the object of waiting is transformed into something intrinsically absent and unavailable, in the process altering the nature of the wait, which becomes a waiting for that which cannot be awaited. Yet the transformation of the object of waiting into the incomprehensible and intrinsically absent means that the object is no longer an object, but something that cannot be present for consciousness. So while the narrators attempt to wait-for, to aim their waiting at an object, they are unsuccessful because the 'object' in question can only be approached aimlessly, resulting in an oscillation between intentionality and non-intentionality, between conscious aiming towards the awaited and a non-directed aimlessness.

Mike Marais identifies a form of non-intentional waiting in *Murphy*. The novel follows its eponym's quest for the self he loves, whom he believes is to be found, not in the world, in work and in relation to others, but within the confines of his own mind. Tied to his rocking chair, bound in body but free in mind, Murphy enters the "third zone" of his mind, which contains "nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming," and where he is, ironically, "not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom" (Beckett, *Murphy* 72). Marais argues that in this state, what Beckett calls "the will-lessness," Murphy's very subjectivity is annulled as intentionality collapses, and so his "search, in losing the subject that seeks, and therefore its object and *telos*, lapses into a form of non-intentional waiting" ("Incurious" 11). Drawing on Blanchot's notion of attentional consciousness, Marais sees in Murphy's vigil a peculiar kind of waiting in which the subject waits without expectation, precisely because he or she is not present as an intending subject to begin with.

Having conducted an initial survey of the Beckettian wait, I shall now pursue the idea further by calling on three thinkers who address waiting in their work. First, Blanchot, who in 1959 wrote an essay entitled "Waiting" which invites close attention in this study. Like Beckett, Blanchot explores a form of waiting without object or end: "Waiting begins when there is nothing more to wait for, not even the end to this waiting. Waiting is unaware of and abandons what it is waiting for. Waiting is waiting for

nothing" ("Waiting" 272). In the course of the essay, Blanchot makes many statements like this about what waiting "is," suggesting that he is concerned with, not a different kind of waiting, but, rather, the deep structure of the waiting we know. Yet what he has to say about the wait radically contradicts much of our common experience. A likely response would be along the lines of, 'In fact, waiting begins when there *is* something to wait for, most especially the end to waiting. Waiting concerns itself with what it is waiting for. Waiting is waiting for something.'

Of the possibility of a different kind of waiting, Blanchot writes: "Waiting is always a waiting for waiting, resuming the beginning, suspending the end and, inside this interval, opening the interval of another waiting" (272). He insists, however, that waiting *always* takes itself for its own object – with its end held in suspension, always still to come, and its beginning resumed, repeated, never a true origin – and names this inevitable time of waiting an "interval," while positing another interval within it, that of "another waiting." I would suggest, in contrast, that this other waiting does not always emerge because the end to waiting is not always suspended. It cannot be denied that sometimes intentional waiting-for concludes with the arrival of the awaited. This leads me to understand waiting for nothing, as we find here in Blanchot, to be a unique form of the wait, distinctly unfamiliar and unconventional.

Blanchot's wait abandons its object and conclusion in order to make room for "the unawaited" which is also "the unrealizable" (274). Significantly, it is through "attention" that the subject who waits for nothing adopts an "approach without approach" which "let[s] move aside, through waiting alone, everything that is realizable, so as to approach the unrealizable" (274, 275). This attention is not static, nor is it directed towards the waiting self or particular things, but is, rather, "carried by the infinity of waiting to the furthest limit, which cannot be attained" (274). Because an outer limit is unattainable, the attentive movement towards it is ceaseless and infinite, open to the future, not just to an expected object. Not only is the circumference of attention ever-receding, but its centre has also disappeared. This is because "mystery," which one might have mistaken for the object of attention, is actually its centre, and as such, as mystery, "the absence of all centre" (275). Although the "essence" of mystery "is always to fall short of attention" – that is what defines it as mystery – attention is able to "preserve, in and through itself" that

which escapes it (275) – the same movement of accommodation and opening that allows the subject who waits to approach the awaited.

Levinas describes the relationship between the self and the other as "a relationship without terms, an awaiting without an awaited, an insatiable aspiration" (*Time* 32). As in Blanchot, waiting loses its object and becomes non-intentional, a ceaseless search for "bearings, in relation to that which is without relation" ("Waiting" 274). To begin to appreciate Levinas's notion of the endless wait without awaited, one must first attend to his analysis of time and his critique of intentionality.

Time for Levinas is not the abstract, universal time of tradition, independent of subjective experience, the same for all, generating 'time-lines' and 'time-frames' into which individual moments are arbitrarily inserted. The notion of subject-independent, universal time is only one possible way of understanding time, as Russell West-Pavlov argues, an historically contingent understanding that over the centuries has become hegemonic (*Temporalities*). According to Richard Cohen, Levinas retains the classical focus on the "monadic, atomic instant" but views it through an existential lens, linking it inextricably to a moment of "originary self-sensing" characterised by the dual structure of "conquest" and "fatigue": conquest or mastery over the anonymity of existence, and fatigue from the inescapable burden or weight of being a conscious, material existent (5). There is no time but subjective time, and the original time of solitary, emergent subjectivity is one of paradoxical self-relationship in which "the sensing and the sensed are one and the same, yet are nonetheless, paradoxically, noncoincident" (Cohen 5). This, however, is not the whole story, as Levinas goes on to argue that prior even to the 'original' time of subjectivity, is another time inextricably bound to alterity, more specifically, to the subject's responsibility for the other person: "*for-the-other*," as he puts it, is "older than *consciousness of*" ("Diachrony" 106).

Levinas's critique of intentionality is part of an attempt to accommodate alterity in a way that "egological" accounts of intentional consciousness cannot (100). Intentionality is "egological" because when the ego aims itself at an intended object, directs itself outwards in a seeming attempt to go beyond itself, what it actually does is "assemble" that object into a synchronous representation (98), assimilating it into the economy of the same and thereby compromising its alterity. Levinas calls this "the gathering of alterity into the unity of presence by the *ego* of the intentional *I think*" (101). By contrast, he pursues a

form of consciousness that relates to the other *as* other, as "absolutely" or "wholly" other, not as a reduction to the known and familiar (*Time* 32, 33). Knowledge is inept, inadequate, when it comes to the absolutely other which is "unassimilable" (32). There is an "impossibility of coinciding" and "the *phenomenon* of noncoincidence [is] *given* in the dia-chrony of time" (32). So the problem of relating to absolute alterity is inscribed, for Levinas, in the very experience of time. And theories of intentionality simply cannot account for this experience, nor for our potential to relate to the ungraspable.

"Diachrony" admits distinction and division into time, unhinging the synchronicity of the subject with itself, signifying the "*always* of noncoincidence, but also the *always* of the *relationship*, an aspiration and an awaiting" (32). As a relation to the "Infinite," this diachronic waiting is without object, "neither reducing to anticipation [. . .], nor concealing a *representation* of the awaited or the desired" (33). It is, in other words, a wait without awaited. It is also without term: the subject "always" fails to coincide with itself and with the other, yet is, equally, "always" related, and so the process of relating is endless, insatiable. And this must be so, otherwise "awaiting and aspiration would be a finality, not a relationship to the Infinite" (33).

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida, like Levinas, is concerned with the self's relation to what is wholly other, and, also like Levinas, posits this relation as prior to that of the self to itself. However, Derrida's focus is on the future, on "the movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to its waiting for the other and for the event" (*Specters* 90). This waiting has an eschatological dimension which Derrida names the "messianic," in distinction to the biblical forms of "messianism," in order "to designate a structure of experience rather than a religion" (167, 168). The messianic hope is for the future to come, for the coming of the other, "absolute" and "unpredictable" (28). For this to be possible, the wait must happen "without horizon" of expectation and exhibit "hospitality without reserve," which can be achieved if the wait takes the form of "*just* opening which renounces any right to property, any right in general, messianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited as such, or recognized in advance" (65, my emphasis). The messianic opening to the future is "just," for Derrida, because its relation to the other does not foreclose on alterity, does not recognise or name in advance of the coming. It is also "just opening," only

opening, not directed or aimed at any particular object, recalling the notions of 'just' waiting and waiting without an awaited.

In place of diachrony, Derrida invokes "anachrony," a "radical untimeliness" shown in the "disjointure in the very presence of the present" and the "non-contemporaneity of present time with itself" (25). The moment or instant does not coincide with itself because it is the point of disjunction between "what absents itself" ("what is no longer and what is not yet") and "what presents itself," lingering "*between* what *goes* and what *comes*, in the middle of what leaves and what arrives" (25). Always in the middle, the instant is never fully present, always off-kilter, and thus time for Derrida is essentially "deranged, off its hinges, out of joint" (25). But this disjointure of the present is necessary, for without it thought "loses the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal, [. . .] of this desert-like messianism (without content and without identifiable messiah)" (28). So 'just' opening to the future relies on a permanent condition of temporal disarticulation. Waiting therefore involves at least two levels of disjunction, between present and future present, now and later, and also within the present itself.

In the broader context, it is in Marxism's "questioning stance" and procedure of "*radical* critique" that Derrida finds a messianic affirmation (89, 88). Nonetheless, Marxism aside, his account of waiting without expectation dovetails with those provided by Blanchot and Levinas of non-intentional waiting, and is equally relevant to appreciating the Beckettian obsession with waiting for nothing.

Having contextualised my concern with waiting and introduced a number of guiding concepts, I shall now turn to close readings of the three novels of the trilogy, beginning with *Molloy*.

### **1.1 *Molloy*: Narrative Time and the Non-Quest**

The trilogy's opening text is ostensibly about two quests. In the first part of the novel, Molloy, a rootless wanderer or vagrant, journeys towards his bedridden mother, hoping to establish their relationship on "a less precarious footing" (Beckett, *Molloy* 81), and in the second part, Moran, a detective of sorts, is tasked with locating Molloy and to that purpose travels to and from "the Molloy country" (126). Both expeditions take the form of a

search as Molloy searches for his mother and Moran searches for Molloy. Each devolves, in its own way, into a non-quest and a form of waiting, a process which may be traced through attention to temporality in the novel.

The outcome of Molloy's quest is given at the very start of the text, which also sets the time of narration.<sup>8</sup>

I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone. There's this man who comes every week. Perhaps I got here thanks to him. He says not. He gives me money and takes away the pages. (3)

Beginning at the end, this opening follows a huge gap in narrated time, between Molloy in the ditch where we leave him at the end of Part I, and Molloy writing in his mother's room – a gap he himself is unable to fill. A retrospective reading emphasises disjunction within the time of narration, but even reading the passage for the first time such disjunction is pronounced because of the narrator's failure to comprehend the succession of events in his narrated world. From the very start the time of the novel is out of joint. The time of narration is also inscribed with delay, as it happens that Molloy does not actually want to write what he has been writing, but, rather, would like "to speak of the things that are left, say [his] goodbyes, finish dying" (3). But he is not allowed to finish, not yet. He must wait, his end postponed: "You'll do that later," says the unidentified man, to whom Molloy submits in a state of near will-lessness (3).

The first paragraph acts as a frame, written after the narrative proper which Molloy presents as already finished. "Here it is," he writes, offering us his story over which he has taken "a lot of trouble" (4). There are then, in a sense, two narrators, the first older, the second younger, and two beginnings, the first which is actually the end, and the second which Molloy presents as the genuine one. The first beginning establishes the second as being already in the past. As he notes: "It was the beginning [. . .]. Whereas now it's nearly the end" (3). A retrospective mode is thus established, a looking back from the "now" of narration to a past beginning and a consequent expectation of progression through the middle to the end, the question being not where Molloy will end up, but *how*

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<sup>8</sup> The time of narration is to be distinguished from narrated time, the former being the time of telling, the time of the total discourse in which the narrated is embedded, the *how* and *why* of narration, and the latter being the time of what is told, the story, the *what* of narration. Critchley makes the same distinction using different terms, namely, "time of narrative" or "story time" in place of narrated time and "time of the narrative voice" in place of the time of narration (189).

he ends up where he does. Of course, he himself does not know the answer to this question, undermining the reader's expectations of clarification and leaving her or him in the unsettling position of searching for bearings.

The opening of the second (and final) paragraph is offered almost passionately by Molloy as the true beginning, the real origin from which his story emerges. It is a strange point of departure:

This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one. All grows dim. A little more and you'll go blind. It's in the head. It doesn't work any more, it says, I don't work any more. You go dumb as well and sounds fade. The threshold scarcely crossed that's how it is. It's the head. It must have had enough. (4)

Kenner takes the first two sentences to refer to the three novels of the trilogy, to the number of tellings to come. He argues that because in the French *Molloy* the lines imply only two tellings and were altered in the English version to suggest three, Beckett was initially unsure "whether the three books made a trilogy, though he had long known that the first two made a duet" (qtd. in Gray 172). I would contest this conclusion on two points. Firstly, it does not account for the fourth narrator in the trilogy, Moran, and the fact that there are three narratives to come after Molloy's. Secondly, I believe that the sentences are more rewardingly interpreted as gesturing towards a structural endlessness, an end to writing that is invoked but always deferred and beyond reach. Even after the final time – "once more" – there remains a "last time." Molloy uses a similar formulation another three times: once to describe his "unreal journey" to his mother as "the second last but one of a form fading among fading forms" (Beckett, *Molloy* 13), then in relation to his "crying out [. . .] this time, then another time perhaps, then perhaps a last time" (21), and lastly to describe his stay by the sea. It is this final instance that is revealing, as he says of his stay that it "will be my last, my last but one, or two, there is never a last" (69), which amounts to an acknowledgement of an end perpetually delayed.

What Molloy means by "that world" is unclear, but may refer to the world he creates through his writing as opposed to the world of his flesh-and-blood existence. His beginning is framed by an anticipated end, an horizon of expectation, although hesitant and doubtful ("I think it'll be over"). This horizon is the prospect of death, which would put an end to both worlds. But the very way this end is figured, as permanently delayed

both by external agency and by the intrinsic nature of self-narration, means that it functions more as an openness, an indeterminate futurity. Molloy begins his story with a concern for the end, which he presents as an originary horizon or enabling framework for his narrative, yet it is, ironically, the furthest thing from his grasp, uncertain and elusive.

The beginning of Molloy's narrative is marked not only by the end, but also by the crossing of a "threshold" in a state of blankness or mental vacancy. He experiences sensory annulment, a "fading" away or dulling of the senses, and also a sense of self-effacement as the "head," the ego, the I, ceases to "work." Once this non-egological state has set in, once the head has stopped working, what is left is "attention" (4), necessarily passive because the active intending ego is no longer in control. Molloy distinguishes his attentive receptiveness from intentional thinking when he notes that he has nothing to think *with* (4). Accordingly, instead of being consciously summoned and purposefully designed, elements of his story "pass" before him at intervals (which recalls the revolutions of Malone and others before the Unnamable) (4). In this sense, he waits for his story to arrive. Significantly, out of the materials of story-telling which come to him, namely, "things," "other days" and "people," it is the latter that most interests him, a preference leading directly to the narration of the A and C episode (4). Molloy's state of non-intentional attention, out of which his narrative emerges, will recur a number of times in the course of Part I.

Returning to the novel's treatment of time, from the outset, through its disjunctive and interminable temporality, *Molloy* provokes an endless waiting for coherence and closure, a waiting that is intensified as the narrative proceeds and the time of the novel becomes increasingly out of joint. I shall examine two instances of temporal disarticulation created by the time of narration's disruption of narrated time: the A and C episode and Molloy's musings on the moon during his stay with Lousse.

Molloy begins his story with a detailed depiction of a scene not strictly relevant to his quest. He remembers once seeing, from his position on a hill where he crouches in the shade of a rock, two travellers, named only "A" and "C," at first moving towards each other, then meeting, then continuing away from each other (6). Molloy describes the country scene minutely, down to the "neck muscle" that stirs on a cow as it chews and swallows its cud, while making the following admission: "Perhaps I'm inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on the whole that's the way it was" (4–5). Although admitting



some doubt, this confession encourages confidence in the general veracity of his account. However, he makes a further admission that has the opposite effect:

I am perhaps confusing several different occasions, and different times [. . .]. And perhaps it was A one day at one place, then C another at another, then a third the rock and I, and so on for the other components, the cows, the sky, the sea, the mountains. I can't believe it. No, I will not lie, I can easily conceive it. No matter, no matter, let us go on, as if all arose from one and the same weariness, on and on heaping up and up, until there is no room, no light, for any more. (10)

As Molloy declares that he may be remembering all wrong, piecing together a false narrative out of fragments of memories, the time of narration intrudes upon narrated time to posit a fragmented temporality, a collection of "different times" merged into one. Crucially, he is not too concerned with getting his story straight, and what ought to be disabling uncertainty is trumped in his mind by the need to "go on," to keep telling the story regardless of temporal anomalies. Betraying a deep-seated disregard for chronological accuracy, this attitude has a permanently destabilising effect on narrated time. The reader must abandon any expectations of definitive meaning and endure a potentially endless wait for clarification.

Awaking in Lousse's house, Molloy watches the full moon travel past the bedroom window. He ponders it awhile before coming to a shocking realisation, "that this moon which had just sailed gallant and full past [his] window had appeared to [him] the night before, or the night before that, yes, more likely, all young and slender, on her back, a shaving" (36). Consequently, there appears another gap in narrated time, one of roughly fourteen days, for which Molloy is unable to account. He thinks such a blank in his memory to be unlikely, and would rather suppose that the 'new' moon was actually almost full, or that the 'full' moon was actually only in its first quarter, or even that he is dealing with two different moons (37). None of these explanations is satisfactory, but the one on which he ultimately settles is the least so, namely, that because his nights are in fact "moonless," he never saw either moon, any moon (37). The time of narration interrupts narrated time once more:

I had forgotten who I was (excusably) and spoken of myself as I would have of another, if I had been compelled to speak of another. Yes it sometimes happens and will sometimes happen again that I forget who I am and strut before my eyes, like a stranger. Then I see the sky different from what it is and the earth too takes

on false colours. It looks like rest, it is not, I vanish happy in that alien light [. . .].  
(37)

Again Molloy enters a non-egological state in which the self's identity is "forgotten" or effaced and the I "vanish[es]." This state intrudes upon the narrative, inserting an alterity into the heart of the present and upsetting the text's chronology.

Chronology in Molloy's narrative is undone to such an extent that the reader is invited to consider alternative conceptions of temporality. Brian Duffy argues astutely in favour of an "achronic" narrative form in which "[t]he inability of Molloy's account to deal properly with time, specifically with the chronology of events, undermines its ostensible status as one recounting of a single journey" (180). Molloy's failure to link elements of his story in a way that makes chronological sense and his acceptance of temporal contradiction lead Duffy to identify a principle of "composite narrativisation" in which elements of different stories are woven together (179), and instead of recounting a single journey he sees the narrative as a complex reflection on Molloy's lifetime of wandering or "permanent condition of journeying" (177). The narrated time is "achronic" because it consists of components not temporally connected to one another, as would be the case in a chronological narration.<sup>9</sup> As James Robinson notes, the "narrative disintegrates in disconnected episodes, even as Molloy's body decomposes" (215). Because narrated time is so off-kilter, the plot crumbles, along with the teleological drive usually generated by it.<sup>10</sup> "Whatever Molloy's hopes or intentions are when he begins his account," observes Duffy, "the narrative that unfolds displays none of the unity, coherence and direction of a story that aims at and moves towards a set destination" (189). Molloy's quest thus loses its *telos*, detaches from its end and becomes, paradoxically, aimless: a non-quest.

A quest without an object, characterised by infinite delay and indeterminacy, becomes a form of non-intentional waiting – a waiting that, following Blanchot, "begins when there is nothing more to wait for," that abandons its object in order to await the unawaited ("Waiting" 272). In Derridean terms, it is a wait without horizon of expectation, 'just' waiting which does not appropriate the awaited through preconception,

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the possibility of a fully achronic narration is debatable. Paul Ricoeur and Meir Sternberg, for instance, argue that chronology cannot be completely abandoned if there is still to be a narrative, and that achronology, to a certain extent, implies chronology.

<sup>10</sup> Both Duffy and Brian Richardson are of the view that the plot of Molloy's narrative is irrecoverable, and that, in this sense, there is no plot at all, only the total discourse.

but leaves it open and undefined. Molloy is an "incurious seeker" (Beckett, *Molloy* 59), content to let the object of his search dwell in mystery.<sup>11</sup> More than once he completely forgets his destination, or his reasons for wanting to go there (17, 23). Even more intriguingly, he intermittently forgets himself: "Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be" (44). For example, when he wanders through the "ruins" of his inner world, which is "not the kind of place where you go, but where you find yourself, sometimes, not knowing how, and which you cannot leave at will," he ceases to be himself, to be a self (35). "I too am at an end, when I am there," he writes, "my eyes close, my sufferings cease and I end" (36). Molloy's quest repeatedly lapses into such a state which is by definition non-intentional, lacking an intending consciousness.

The devolution of Molloy's quest into a non-quest is figured by the circular movement which constitutes the final phase of his journey in narrated time. Believing that "when a man in a forest thinks he is going forward in a straight line, in reality he is going in a circle," he reasons in reverse and does his best "to go in a circle, hoping in this way to go in a straight line" (79). By continually turning every few feet he manages to describe, if not a perfect circle, "at least a great polygon" (84). Hence, as Duffy emphasises, one finds "a strikingly symbolic anti-teleological image at the very stage of the narrative when the plot should be bearing down upon its goal" (189). A circle has no beginning or end, is in this sense interminable, and there is a purgatorial logic of endless waiting at work here. Not only does Molloy fail to achieve the object of his quest, he never even comes close to coinciding with it, bound in a process of permanent delay. The reader waiting for closure and coincidence must also wait forever, as the narrative "simply stops, with no effort whatsoever made to conclude" (Duffy 189). Narrated time does not catch up to the time of narration and instead of closure what remains is a gap, a void, an irrevocable question mark, leaving the reader to consider with hesitancy the possibility of Part II offering any solution.

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In both parts of *Molloy* the time of narration is a time of exigency. Neither Molloy nor Moran particularly wants to write, but each finds himself compelled to narrate a story

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<sup>11</sup> In Chapter 2, I examine the notion of incurious seeking in detail.

about journeying, and each narration is prompted by both external authority and an inner voice. Although it is always the same unidentified man who comes to collect his writing, Molloy suspects that "there is more than one" and that it is "[t]hey" who want him to compose his narrative (Beckett, *Molloy* 3). Moran believes himself to be a secret agent in a "vast organization" (102), subservient to a "chief" (Youdi) who conveys his instructions through a "go-between" (Gaber) (89). It is from Youdi, via Gaber, that Moran receives the puzzling "order to see about Molloy" and the consequent order to write a report on the assignment (87). Gaber bears a striking resemblance to the man who visits Molloy in that both represent an agency with apparently vested interests in the narrators' writing, only appear on Sundays and are "always thirsty" (4). Critchley, for one, maintains that "both [narrators] seem to be writing for the agent Gaber" (191), a correlation which creates an uneasy overlap between the two parts of the novel.

Although initially motivated by an external command, something changes in the course of Moran's journey and he comes to disregard the authority of his chief in favour of an internal imperative. Just as Molloy speaks of the promptings of an inner voice (Beckett, *Molloy* 35, 81), so too Moran describes a voice giving him orders, central among these being the exhortation to continue in his role as seeker, to at least attempt to conclude his engagement with Molloy by writing the report (Beckett, *Malone* 126, 164, 169). The voice tells him that "the memory of this work brought scrupulously to a close will help [him] to endure the long anguish of vagrancy and freedom" which is the outcome of his quest (127).

As with Molloy's narrative, Part II opens with a frame that establishes the time of narration: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I am calm. All is sleeping. Nevertheless I get up and go to my desk. I can't sleep. My lamp sheds a soft and steady light. [. . .] My report will be long. Perhaps I shall not finish it" (87). This too will be a retrospective narration, a looking back, a reporting of or reflection on past events, and the perspective is once more from a point nearing the end, Moran asserting that he is "done for" (87). The time of narration is one of near vagrancy, as the text will progressively reveal, a time in which Moran's identity has been fundamentally altered. It is important to note that, at the time of writing, he has already undergone his "disintegrations" (151), has already undertaken his quest and returned a changed man. Yet he begins his narrative in a very measured and calculated manner, and is able to reproduce through his writing his

manner of being before his transformation. Narrated time dominates from the moment he initiates his recollections, a past time which he lives through again, as if for the first time:

For it is one of the features of this penance that I may not pass over what is over and straightaway come to the heart of the matter. But that must again be unknown to me which is no longer so and that again fondly believed which then I fondly believed, at my setting out. And if I occasionally break this rule, it is only over details of little importance. And in the main I observe it. And with such zeal that I am far more he who finds than he who tells what he has found, now as then, most of the time, I do not exaggerate. (127)

Hence the narrative describes Moran's transformation through subject *and* form, mirroring his progressive deterioration as he relives this experience through writing.

Narrated time is more continuous than in the first part of the novel, less frequently disrupted by the time of narration, until the two temporalities ultimately coincide, but with disastrous consequences: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (170). The final two sentences of the narrative directly contradict the first two, and since it cannot be the case that both sets of statements are true, Moran must be lying in at least one instance. His suggestion is that he was lying when he began his story, setting a false time of narration, but he does not indicate to what extent this assertion applies and there is no way of ascertaining just how much he has falsified. The ending not only undoes the beginning, but introduces a temporal and epistemological instability into the whole narrative which has an intensely disorientating effect on the reader.

Moran's narrative is, nonetheless, less fragmented than Molloy's, in the sense that it recounts a single journey and a single transformation. Moran travels from his home, accompanied by his son, to "the Molloy country" and back again, in a journey that lasts roughly a year (126, 169). Yet his search bears a marked resemblance to that which unfolds in the first part of the novel. Like Molloy, he fails to achieve the object of his quest, never managing to locate his "quarry" (105). Furthermore, his quest also becomes a form of waiting, a devolution which may be highlighted by attending to the chronology of his journey.

The beginning of Moran's quest is characterised by delay. Usually "meticulous and calm" in his approach to assignments (109), he finds himself procrastinating, putting off the necessary deliberations and deciding to "wait till the very last moment, a little

before midnight," before setting off (101). From the outset he is not himself, but suffers from an "immense uneasiness," feeling himself "floundering" and making one "mistake" after another (107, 100). When he does first put his mind to the affair it is to consider the best method of transportation, without knowing where he is going or to what purpose. Because he is usually methodical, such an irrational approach is evidence of a kind of "madness" which involves "losing [his] head" (94).

Possible reasons for this strange beginning emerge upon consideration of the way in which Moran initially conceives of Molloy, the object of his quest. Despite never having met, Moran believes Molloy to be "no stranger," while having no inkling of how their ostensible intimacy has been cultivated (106). Lying on his bed, eyes closed, he enters a meditative state, an inner dimension "far from the world," characterised by an atmosphere of "finality without end," where "no investigation would be possible" and where both Molloy and Moran "could not be" (105, 106). This state appears to be non-intentional, without subject or object in a traditional sense, a counter-intuitive way to approach a search which is inherently intentional, oriented towards an intended and desired object. There is a different logic at work here to that of intentionality, what Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, calls the logic of "spectrality" (36). In his state of non-egological attention, Moran is visited by the figure of a man whom he names Molloy, a figure that rises up in vivid detail in an act of possession: "Then I was nothing but uproar, bulk, rage, suffocation, effort unceasing, frenzied and vain. Just the opposite of myself, in fact" (Beckett, *Molloy* 108). Tellingly, Moran describes this process as being "haunted and possessed by chimeras" and "apparitions" (109).

According to Derrida's spectral logic, the apparition of a spectre is always a "reapparition" and even the first time is a coming back (*Specters* 4). This accords with Moran's sense of having foreknowledge of Molloy, of re-encountering or remembering him. To "follow a ghost," Derrida argues, is to be "followed by it" as "what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back" (10). Indeed, what Moran sets out to pursue appears itself to pursue him, and he is so deeply unsettled by the affair because of the uncanny sense of being possessed by that which he seeks, an inexplicable and irrational experience. The outside comes in, inhabits the inside, and the self, to appropriate a phrase from Derrida, is "haunted by a foreign guest" (4). In this way, the teleological dynamic of Moran's quest is undone from the beginning by a spectral

experience, a haunting which deranges the intentional relationship of seeker to object. It is also the catalyst of his process of transformation as the spectre, to again use Derrida's description, "intensifies and condenses itself within the very inside of life," of the "singular" or "individual" life, which is thereby dispossessed of "a pure identity to itself or any assured inside" (109). Moran's encounter with the spectre ruptures the circle of his identity, admitting an otherness into the self and creating a sense of the ego falling apart, splitting or fracturing: "I could not understand what was happening to me. I found it painful at that period not to understand. I tried to pull myself together. In vain. I might have known. My life was running out, I knew not through what breach" (Beckett, *Molloy* 97).

Moran's transformation is, on the surface, also a degeneration which occurs physically, mentally and textually. The first outward sign is a stiffening of one knee which becomes a "local and painless paralysis" (134), irresistibly reminiscent of Molloy who suffers from a similar affliction, first in one leg, then in both. Significantly, Moran's method of narration changes immediately after his physical transformation begins, with the first unusually long paragraph, which continues for four pages, following the description of his stiffening leg (135–39). He comes to feel himself altered to the extent of being "unrecognizable," so that when passing his hands over his face he asserts that "the face my hands felt was not my face any more, and the hands my face felt were my hands no longer" (164). He also undergoes "great inward metamorphoses," which contribute to his growing sense of being "dispossessed of self" (157, 143).

This process of self-dispossession culminates in a wait without an awaited. After his son abandons him, Moran gives up pursuit and *just* waits, "powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more": "I knew that all was about to end, or to begin again, it little mattered which, and it little mattered how, I had only to wait" (155–56). His way of being is transformed into a state of passive receptiveness to what is to come, turning his quest into an aimless non-quest. Annihilating all hope and expectation and "survey[ing] with satisfaction the void they had polluted" (156), he relinquishes his position as seeker, or more accurately, becomes an "incurious" seeker, like Molloy, able to await the unawaited. Moran likens the experience to a loss of intentional, ego-centred being when he notes that "I shall soon lose consciousness *altogether*" (157, my emphasis). His apex of self-dispossession has a paradoxical dimension:

And as for myself, that unfailing pastime, I must say it was far now from my thoughts. But there were moments when it did not seem so far from me, when I seemed to be drawing towards it as the sands towards the wave, when it crests and whitens, though I must say this image hardly fitted my situation, which was rather that of the turd waiting for the flush. (156)

Through being distanced or displaced from himself, through relinquishing the self he knows, he feels another self approach, very different from his previous existence.

While Moran waits patiently for this self to arrive, he receives a mysterious visit from Gaber, whom he sees neither coming nor going, with instructions from Youdi to return home. This is the last external command that he obeys, without knowing why he does so (161). Whereas the conventional structure of the quest privileges movement towards the goal or destination, the deeper meaning of Moran's search is revealed on his return journey, once he has failed to achieve his object: "I forged my way [. . .] towards what I would have called my ruin if I could have conceived what I had left to be ruined. Perhaps I have conceived it since, perhaps I have not done conceiving it" (159–60). Narrated time is interrupted by the time of narration as Moran provides retrospective insight into a prior state of mind, and comes to realise that his journey back was a journey towards his own "ruin," or the downfall of his established mode of existence. This is, in fact, the point towards which his quest has tended from the beginning, from the initial spectral encounter with the object of his search which introduced an unsettling alterity into the previously closed sphere of his identity. One sign of the great change he has undergone is that he now, for the first time, hears the inner voice that will eventually tell him to write his report, and that he will come to heed over the authority of his chief.

By the end of the novel Moran is a radically changed man, physically and psychologically. Relying on crutches, like Molloy, he embraces a life of vagrancy, also like Molloy, "clearing out" and disposing of all his possessions (169).<sup>12</sup> The vagrant is an aimless wanderer, without a home to serve as the origin and ultimate destination of travel, as the fixed point that anchors the *telos* of the journey. Moran's becoming vagrant involves a shift towards a fundamental aimlessness, and the metaphor of vagrancy

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<sup>12</sup> To say that Moran "embraces a life of vagrancy" is perhaps an over-simplification. Marais observes that Moran, at the end of the novel, does not "clear out" completely, instead moving from his house into the garden. He thus remains at home, in a sense, but *less* so than before. Rather than becoming utterly homeless, then, Moran's home is rendered unfamiliar and incomplete, or "unhomely" ("Wandering" 8).



therefore works to undo the directedness inherent in the intentional model of consciousness. Hence his sense of giving up on rational, purposeful existence: "I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more. I shall never light this lamp again. I am going to blow it out and go into the garden" (169). Although Moran discards the desire for illumination or enlightenment, he has not done with seeking: "I shall learn," he repeats twice in the closing paragraph, indicating a future-directed attitude and an openness to what may come, a desire for knowledge, but not of the totalising kind. He is now content to search and yet not grasp his object, an attitude demonstrated by the "rapture" he experiences when faced with the incomprehensible "dance" of his bees: "Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand" (163). Moran truly has become an incurious seeker.

To conclude, each part of the novel traces a quest that devolves into a non-quest and a passive state of non-intentional waiting, although in Moran's case this is a broadly linear process, whereas in Molloy's case the wait intrudes intermittently throughout his search. On one level, each is simply a failed quest, in which the seeker is unable to achieve his object. On a deeper level, however, through the experience of the wait without awaited, the quest becomes something different, other to itself and yet the same, an ateleological non-quest in which the object of the search is suspended, its arrival permanently postponed and its nature always ungraspable.

## **1.2 *Malone Dies*: Both Here and Beyond**

In the broadest strokes, the second instalment of the trilogy is a novel about death and fiction. The story unfolds as Malone lies on his deathbed, alone in a small room with a single window that connects him to the outside world like an "umbilicus" (Beckett, *Malone* 217). While near paralytic, he has strength enough to obsessively fill the pages of a child's exercise book with thoughts about the course of his dying and with stories he invents. Like the window, the stories act as an outlet that connects him to something beyond himself, and this state of being beyond is a central concern of the novel. Malone waits for death and in waiting attends to the beyond, to an otherness that exceeds his identity and intention, although to what extent the self is transcended through this

attention, and with what permanency, are questions posed by the text. Malone's waiting for death is explored in complex temporal terms and is split into dual temporalities, each of which embodies a different experience of dying and a different relation to the beyond. My intention in this section of my chapter is to discuss the idea of the wait in the context of this concern with time and death, setting aside, for the moment, the significance of fiction and authorship in the novel, to which I return in the chapter to follow.

I begin with a consideration of Critchley's central argument regarding the trilogy, namely, that its "dramatic tension" is "found in the disjunction that opens up between the time of narrative, the chain of increasingly untellable and untenable stories, and the non-narratable time of the narrative voice," which he sees as "the time of dying" (189). The time of narrative, for Critchley, is the time of storytelling and representation, "the time of the possible," whereas the time of the narrative voice is an "impossible temporality," a time in which representation breaks down or opens into an experience of the unrepresentable (189). The disjunction between these disparate temporal orders becomes "increasingly acute" as the trilogy proceeds, culminating in *The Unnamable* where it occurs at the level of the sentence (Critchley 189, 197). In *Malone Dies*, "[t]he time of narrative and possibility, where the voice is able to lay hold of time and invent, continually breaks down into an unnarratable impossibility," into the time of dying which is "ungraspable" and eludes any attempt to "lay hold" of it (Critchley 193). Utilising Blanchot's concept of the double death, Critchley associates narrative in the trilogy with *la mort*, the death that is possible, and the narrative voice with *le mourir*, the dying in which death, by exceeding the subject's mastery, is paradoxically impossible (189).

Critchley's distinction between the two temporalities of narrative and narrative voice, roughly consistent with that between narrated time and the time of narration, is instructive. Yet his application of the distinction to the trilogy requires a touch more nuance in order to accommodate the fact that, in *Malone Dies*, each narrative temporality itself exhibits doubling.

The narrative structure of the novel is complex because Malone does not always speak of the same kind of thing in the same kind of way, but varies his narrative, speaking sometimes of himself and his present state and other times of fictional characters he has invented. In this way, he self-consciously divides his discourse into fiction and non-fiction, the latter encompassing the vast array of thoughts, feelings, observations,

memories, and so on, which fill the time when he is not telling stories. Of course, from the reader's perspective the entire novel is fiction, but Malone's perspective generates a distinction between the fictional world he creates and the putatively 'real' world he inhabits. Although this distinction is radically tested, it nonetheless remains a feature of the novel's structure, resulting in a narrated time that is doubled as Malone embeds his own fictional creations within the novel.

The time of narration is the time of Malone's dying, marked by his sense that "the sands are running out" (Beckett, *Malone* 177). Following Levinas, Critchley understands the time of dying as a time in which the experience of suffering binds the subject to the "irremissibility of existence" (70), a state in which death itself is remote and seemingly unattainable. This leads him to identify the narrative voice with the impossible temporality of *le mourir*, an equation which at first appears accurate, but on closer analysis is revealed to be only half the story. For death is always doubled, and the narrative voice is concerned with both deaths, not merely the other, impossible death. Blanchot explains the idea of the double death in "The Work and Death's Space":

there is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the capacity to take mortal risks; and there is its double, which is ungraspable. It is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to *me* by any relation of any sort. It is that which never comes and toward which I do not direct myself. (104)

If what is narrated concerns itself with the first death (because the second death is unnarratable), the narrative voice must also be involved with this concern, for the narrative voice is, by definition, the vehicle through which the narrated is presented. As we shall see, Malone writes much that deals with death as graspable and amenable to control. The time of narration is imbued with an ineluctable ambiguity, as he grapples with death in terms both of the possible and impossible.

The notion of an other, incomprehensible death warrants further attention. Why is it ungraspable, why is it not linked to the subject and why does the subject not direct her- or himself towards it? As the ultimate unknown, death cannot be made "an object of the will" (Blanchot, "Death's Space" 105), and so exceeds the directional structure of intentionality which is the precondition for grasping. As Critchley notes, "[d]eath is not the *noema* of a *noesis*" but is rather "meta-phenomenological" (85, 87). Levinas describes

the relation to death as a "relationship with mystery" because "death announces an event over which the subject is not master, an event in relation to which the subject is no longer a subject" (*Time* 70). At the approach of death, the subject undergoes a "reversal" of its "activity into passivity," and, "no longer *able to be able*," is stripped of its very subjectivity, which is why the other death is not linked to a subject as subject (72, 74). Both Blanchot and Levinas pursue the notion of an impossible death through a consideration of the phenomenon of suicide. Levinas calls it a "contradictory concept" because it involves the subject attempting to assume mastery where no mastery is possible (73). Blanchot likens the suicide to the artist, in that both "plan something that eludes all plans," and both attempt to exert power where the will is excluded and "the domain of goals ends" ("Death's Space" 106).

The other death puts an end to the subject's mastery, and so illuminates a way of existing in which, as Levinas puts it, "an *event* can happen to us that we no longer assume," regarding which we have not "the least project" (*Time* 74), thereby opening a unique relation with the future: in Derridean terms, a receptiveness to whatever may arrive and a waiting without expectation. If, as Critchley maintains, "the thought of the impossibility of death introduces the possibility of an encounter with some aspect of experience or some state of affairs that is not reducible to the self and which does not relate or return to self" (88), then the approach of death indicates a relation with something wholly other. It also indicates a paradoxical relation without relation, and an interminable departing of the self from itself that does not conclude in return.<sup>13</sup> The time of dying is therefore both "empty," because devoid of subjectivity, and "infinite," because constituting an endless process of self-dispossession (Blanchot, "Where Now?" 112).

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*Malone Dies* opens with a dying man's attempt to plot his remaining days:

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<sup>13</sup> For Levinas, "a departure from self and a return to self" is "the very work of identity" (*Time* 52). In contrast, the subject's relationship with death is open-ended, likened by Levinas to the relationship with the other which is a "relationship without relation, an insatiable desire, or the proximity of the Infinite" (35). This recalls Blanchot's understanding of waiting as a ceaseless search for bearings "in relation to that which is without relation" ("Waiting" 274). If the subject relates to the wholly other, the relation must be "without relation," because the absolutely anterior cannot be an object in relation to anything, in order to remain what it is. I pursue this paradox in Chapter 2.

I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all. Perhaps next month. Then it will be the month of April or of May. For the year is still young, a thousand little signs tell me so. Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps I shall survive Saint John the Baptist's Day and even the Fourteenth of July, festival of Freedom. Indeed I would not put it past me to pant on to the Transfiguration, not to speak of the Assumption. But I do not think so, I do not think that I am wrong in saying that these rejoicings will take place in my absence, this year. (Beckett, *Malone* 173)

His first impulse is to locate his death in cyclical calendar time, to fix it in relation to months of the year and annual events. Here the time of dying receives its duration from "the language of the days" (227), a language of names and consistent patterns which Malone uses in an effort to rationally circumscribe the ineffable sensation of coming to an end. He attempts to pre-emptively divide the time of his dying into manageable intervals by planning the structure of his writing, resolving to write about his present state first, then to tell three stories, and lastly to provide an inventory of his possessions (176). Yet he seems also to recognise something of the futility of attempting to adopt a position of mastery in relation to death: "I could die today, if I wished, merely by making a little effort, if I could wish, if I could make an effort. But it is just as well to let myself die, quietly, without rushing things. Something must have changed. I will not weigh upon the balance any more, one way or the other. I shall be neutral and inert" (173). The problem is that resolutions of passivity remain resolutions and so pretend to mastery, and Malone, in fact, attempts to control his own death by reducing the time of his dying to a "time-table" and by resolving to meet death in a certain way, that is, passive and "pay[ing] less heed to [him]self" (175, 173).

Like the suicide and the artist, then, Malone is deceived, and "mistake[s] one death for the other" (Blanchot, "Death's Space" 104). He cannot help but speak of the first death, possible and graspable, when it is the other, impossible death that threatens him. This, however, is a necessary deception: without laying hold of death as possibility, Malone could not endure the fact of his dying, and the experience of being riveted to existence would overwhelm him completely. And without the belief that control may be exerted over his writing, he would not write at all. But neither death nor the work, in Blanchot's words, "allow[s] itself to be charted" and in both cases Malone attempts to exert power where it cannot be exerted (106). Hence he is involved in a fundamentally paradoxical endeavour with "little hope of coming to its end" (Beckett, *Malone Dies* 176),

a form of waiting that oscillates uncontrollably between the intentional and the non-intentional, the possible and the impossible, echoing Michel Foucault's characterisation of the wait as a restless movement without end (56).

Malone himself experiences the time of dying as an asynchronous double time, an experience he spatialises in his descriptions of the light inside and outside his room:

In a word there seems to be the light of the outer world, of those who know the sun and moon emerge at such an hour and at such another plunge again below the surface, and who rely on this, and who know that clouds are always to be expected but sooner or later always pass away, and mine. (Beckett, *Malone* 215)

The time of the outer world is predictable, regulated by natural cycles, generating a present that is graspable and manipulable, amenable to the subject's projections. It is the time of *la mort* in which death is seized as possibility. By contrast, Malone endures an other time that is full of gaps and strange reversals of expectation. Waiting impatiently for dawn to break, he has the following experience:

And sure enough little by little the dark lightened and I was able to hook with my stick the objects I required. But the light, instead of being the dawn, turned out in a very short time to be the dusk. And the sun, instead of rising higher and higher in the sky as I confidently expected, calmly set, and night, the passing of which I had just celebrated after my fashion, calmly fell again. (214)

This is an impossible temporality in which light is largely absent. Indeed, Malone observes that "it is never light in this place, never really light. The light is there, outside, the air sparkles, the granite wall across the way glitters with all its mica, the light is against my window, but it does not come through" (214). He attempts to approach death in the light, to assume it, in Levinasian terms, by seeking to predict and comprehend it, yet his experience of dying happens, so to speak, in the dark.

Malone is in the dark in more ways than one, and his non-mastery over himself and the dying process is emphasised as the narrative proceeds. He has hardly any control over his "impotent" body, remarking that "[t]here is virtually nothing it can do" (180). Moreover, his intention to meet death in a particular way, that is, according to a schedule and paying less attention to himself, is never realised. For instance, his resolution to write about a genuine other is one he consistently fails to uphold. In Sapo, he tries to create a character totally unlike himself, yet suspects that this intention has been thwarted: "I

wonder if I am not talking yet again about myself. Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?" (183). His plan to tell three stories also comes to naught, for he ends up devoting all of his resources to the story of Sapo (who morphs into Macmann), as does his plan to conclude with an inventory of his possessions. Malone's lack of control suggests that his attempt to master his death must fail, that he cannot help but "make a mess of [his] decease" (176). The kind of wait he had envisaged, in which the time of dying is manageable and open to rational navigation, is revealed to be an illusion. Instead, he waits for death in a manner beyond his control.

The question now arises whether Malone, at death's approach, enters into a relation with what is wholly other, and so departs from himself without return in a time both empty and infinite. Through writing himself in fiction, he believes he encounters otherness: "And on the threshold of being no more I succeed in being another" (188). This other is "far beneath" him, and appears to represent the other within the self (189). Relating to an internal other still involves self-dispossession, and Malone is aware of a process of "departing from [him]self" when he writes fiction (202). He attends to what is beyond himself, but if this process concludes in a return to self, is the search for the other not subsumed under a search for the self? Malone, in fact, has cherished the self's homecoming:

What I sought, when I struggled out of my hole, then aloft through the stinging air towards an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home, to him waiting for me always, who needed me and whom I needed, who took me in his arms and told me to stay with him always, who gave me his place and watched over me, who suffered every time I left him, whom I have often made suffer and seldom contented, whom I have never seen. (189)

The "boon" towards which he struggles is a relationship with that which lies beyond himself, but which is ironically already within him, a state which he describes as "be[ing] another, in myself, in another" (189). Such a state is ultimately "inaccessible," as his repeated failure to sustain a relationship with his alterior self attests, and the fundamental inaccessibility of the foreign appears inevitably to result in a return "to home" and the comfort of the familiar self. Interestingly, this familiar self is not wholly accessible either (Malone has "never seen" him), suggesting that the home to which he returns is not

altogether homely.<sup>14</sup> In an uncanny reversal, the known self is also unfamiliar, unrecognisable; it is both near and far. Having been beyond, if only transiently, Malone is unable to return to a home that is completely familiar. It would seem that the act of departing from himself conditions the nature of the homecoming, putting a "gulf" between him and his known self such that the "relapse" to that self resembles a vertiginous "fall" (189). Departure also conditions the nature of home, providing the contrast necessary in order to characterise home in terms of "darkness" and "nothingness" (189). That the home to which Malone returns is occupied by alterity, suggests that his search for the other informs his very identity and hence cannot be subsumed under a search for self.

Like the familiarity of home, the first death has a strong grip on Malone. Death as possibility is figured as his "old debtor," obliged in a predictable fashion to settle his debt: "I was always content," Malone asserts, "knowing I would be repaid" (174). Yet he is also haunted by the feeling of being "far from the morrow," and considers that "perhaps there is none, no morrow any more, for one who has waited so long for it in vain" (226). What he says of Macmann is a mirror of his own situation: "And perhaps he has come to that stage of his instant when to live is to wander the last of the living in the depths of an instant without bounds" (226). Enduring an interminable, objectless waiting, Malone does experience the empty and infinite temporality of *le mourir*, in which death is essentially out of reach.

Malone's encounter with the other, impossible death is evident in a passage that he narrates only after the fact:

I have spent two unforgettable days of which nothing will ever be known, it is too late now, or still too soon, I forget which, except that they brought me the solution and conclusion of the whole sorry business, I mean the business of Malone (since that is what I am called now) and of the other, for the rest is no business of mine. And it was, though more unutterable, like the crumbling away of two little heaps of finest sand, or dust, or ashes, of unequal size, but diminishing together as it were in ratio, if that means anything, and leaving behind them, each in its own stead, the blessedness of absence. (216)

Such an experience is "unutterable" and, as such, can only take place in a gap in the text – in this case, a space of two days in which Malone is without his pencil. His "solution" to the problematic time of his dying paradoxically involves a dissolution of self, a

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<sup>14</sup> I appropriate the notion of home rendered unhomely from Marais ("Wandering").



disintegration or fragmentation of identity. Indeed, he emphasises this loss of subjectivity when he notes the following: "in my head I suppose all was streaming and emptying away as through a sluice, to my great joy, until finally nothing remained, either of Malone or of the other" (217). In this state, he no longer relates to death as a subject for whom annihilation is a source of terror, but instead feels the "absence" of self as a "blessedness" and a source of "joy" (216, 217). Stripped of all mastery as a subject, Malone departs from himself without return, and endures an impossible, unrepresentable temporality in which his known existence is utterly effaced. His self-effacement, however, is short-lived, as he recovers his pencil and resumes his mastery as a subject by attempting to narrate the unnarratable, to translate the second death into the first.

The tension between becoming other and returning to self, between death as impossibility and death as possibility, remains unresolved in the novel. "At each step we are here and yet beyond," writes Blanchot ("Waiting" 276), and this is true of Malone who, as death approaches, is torn between the self he knows and the stranger he cannot grasp, between a sense of control over the dying process and a sense of passivity and helplessness, of being "in chains," beyond mastery (Beckett, *Malone* 212). At one point he resolves to be himself, at home, when he breathes his last breath: "I want to be there a little before the plunge, close for the last time the old hatch on top of me, say goodbye to the holds where I have lived, go down with my refuge" (187). In the meantime, he calculates, "I have time to frolic, ashore, in the brave company I have always longed for, always searched for, and which would never have me" (188). The end of the novel reveals that Malone, contrary to his intention, does not die at home, alone, but while he is away from himself, in the "company" of his fictional characters, suggesting that when it counts he *is* able to transcend the self's enchainment to itself. "I shall say I no more," he resolves (276). But this final resolution is yet another that he cannot keep, and one of his last thoughts brings him back to the egological realm of the known and familiar: "Macmann, my last, my possessions, I remember, he is there too, perhaps he sleeps" (280). While the known self is distant or dormant (it "sleeps"), and Malone appears to be to an extent beyond himself, to be elsewhere, he manifests in his last moments an almost maniacal desire for control and mastery, indicating that he continues, to the end, to plot and to exert his will in a region in which power is impossible. He also persists in speaking of himself, of his "pencil" and "stick," tools of grasping that will momentarily become useless and

irrelevant (281). It is as if to compensate for the ultimate loss of mastery to come that he is so insistent about how things will be with the world he leaves behind: "never anything / there / any more" (281). While undergoing a process of self-dispossession, Malone, the dying man, clings to his identity as a subject. In his death, he is both here and beyond.

As he waits for death, Malone endures a form of the wait in which intentionality and non-intentionality vie for dominance. This is figured in his grappling with death in terms of both the graspable and the ungraspable. It is in relation to the ungraspable second death that the wait becomes transformative, opening a space in which the subject does not assume the event of death because subjectivity itself has been elided. However, in the novel, the space opened by the wait is fragile and vulnerable to closure by the resumption of the subject's mastery, as the transcendence of self involved in relating to the wholly other is not sustained, but rather pierced by frequent returns or relapses to self. Yet the return to self, to home, is a problematic movement, for home is revealed to be, in a sense, unrecognisable. Malone is never fully at home, composed and rational, facing death as possibility, nor fully away from home, gripped by the ungraspable second death. Instead, he oscillates between two mutually exclusive positions, between a sense of home and a sense of homelessness, between the power of an active seeker and the powerlessness of a passive waiter.

*Malone Dies* hinges on an irreducible ambiguity between identity and transcendence, a tension that Beckett explores through the idea of the wait. In waiting for his death, Malone attends to the beyond and becomes other to himself, is unhomed, yet remains inextricably bound to his known self which reasserts itself even as he breathes his last breath. The ambiguity is intensified by the reader's inability to discern whether Malone actually dies or not, and hence whether he succeeds in attaining the absolute self-transcendence he seeks. Providing no privileged vantage point from which to view the alternation of self and other, here and beyond, the text disallows a final conclusion, ending in doubt and indeterminacy, and so not really ending at all.

### 1.3 *The Unnamable*: Language, Identity and Aporia

Interpreting *The Unnamable* is something of an uphill battle. This is due not only to the complexity of the issues it broaches, issues of language and identity which defy resolution, but also to one of the primary rhetorical techniques employed by Beckett, namely aporia. The unnamed narrator of the novel has the following to say about his method:

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed?  
By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as  
uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts.  
Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless.

(Beckett, *Unnamable* 285)

Aporia signifies "an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory" ("Aporia," *OED*). An aporetic opposition of terms is an irresolvable opposition, meaning that no progress is possible, the argument or idea having reached a dead end. As Hill observes: "Aporia is the name for a rhetorical impasse, a space of radical indeterminacy or doubt where no passage exists, from which there is no exit or issue. By aporia, distinctions collapse and arguments defeat themselves by espousing their diametrical opposites" (63). "I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak" is an example of an aporetic conundrum in which two mutually exclusive positions are yoked together, as is the statement, "impossible to stop, impossible to go on" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 285, 388). Each term prevents the other from making sense, and, in an attempt to resolve the contradiction, the reader is referred back and forth between the terms, without coming to rest. This interpretative process can be described in terms of a logic of perpetual reversal, in keeping with Janus who looks both ways. It can also be described according to a logic of circularity, as Hill notes: "To the extent that it [that is, aporia] creates not significance but further aporia, it is circular in its implications, returning its proponent, or victim, to the very space which he or she would wish to resolve" (65). Reversal and circularity combine in the purgatorial logic discussed earlier in this chapter, in the endless process of "recurrent predomination" or alternation of contraries that characterises Beckett's purgatorial "machine" (Beckett, "Dante," qtd. in Hill 7). An extended analysis of two closely related aporias will act as an introduction to

*The Unnamable's* concern with language and identity, and also provide important context for the later discussion of the role of waiting in the novel.

The Unnamable is caught up in a tumultuous "churn of words," listening to a relentless voice which he "transmit[s] [. . .] as received" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 304, 343). He is under the impression that he is required to say something in particular, in order to earn the right to silence, while utterly in the dark about what that something might be: "I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is" (304). The authority to which he submits in attempting to discharge his pensum is "the college of tyrants" that he imagines controls his fate, the anonymous "they" who dictate the terms of his speech (304). Saying the right words is a means to an end, a means of achieving the "true" or "real" silence: "the one," writes the Unnamable, "I'll never have to break any more, when I won't have to listen any more, when I can dribble in my corner, my head gone, my tongue dead, the one I have tried to earn, that I thought I could earn" (386–87). Thus the Unnamable seeks the silence that puts an end to speech, as opposed to merely interrupting it.

The two aporias that I wish to examine appear in the following passage:

I did what I could, a thing beyond my strength, and often for exhaustion I gave up doing it, and yet it went on being done, the voice being heard, the voice which could not be mine, since I had none left, and yet which could only be mine, since I could not go silent, and since I was alone, in a place where no voice could reach me. Yes, in my life, since we must call it so, there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that's what I've had to make the best of. (389)

The voice which "could not be" his and which "could only be" his is a symbol of an aporia at the heart of identity, a conflict between I and not-I, or rather an aporetic coexistence of unity and disunity within selfhood. The Unnamable is both himself, speaking in his own voice, and not himself, speaking, or being spoken by, a voice that does not belong to him. A related aporia is the coupling of an inability to speak with an inability to be silent. Taken at face value, both of these statements are false, as the Unnamable does speak, a fact to which the existence of the text bears witness, and does go silent at times, pausing in his discourse.<sup>15</sup> Yet there is more than one kind of silence, as he is aware: "Silence, yes,

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<sup>15</sup> He says of the voice that "it has even stopped, many a time, that's how it will end again, I'll go silent, for want of air, then the voice will come back and I'll begin again" (386).

but what silence! For it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps" (302–03). The silence he enters into when he interrupts his speech is not the right kind of silence, in which speaking comes to an end, but rather the wrong one, spent listening for the silence to be broken and the discourse to resume. He is, then, unable to be silent *in the right way*. Similarly, his inability to speak is an inability to speak in the right way: "I say what I am told to say, in the hope that some day they will weary of talking at me. The trouble is I say it wrong, having no ear, no head, no memory" (339). Saying it wrong results from a lack of stable identity, from the ego or "head" being unseated, and the concomitant phenomenon of speaking in a voice that is not one's own. The Unnamable's inability to speak in the right way is, therefore, linked to his inability to be himself, revealing the interconnectedness of issues of language and identity in the novel. Whether speech is right or wrong hinges on the outcome of a search for self, as he suspects: "how to get back to me, back to where I am waiting for me, I'd just as soon not, but it's my only chance, at least I think so, the only chance I have of going silent, of saying something at last that is not false, if that is what they want, so as to have nothing more to say" (315).

In order to gain some grasp of the aporias permeating selfhood and speech in the novel, it is vital to attend to the voice to which the Unnamable listens, and with which he speaks, which is both his own and not his own. It is his own because there is no one else to whom it might belong, a position which involves the ego appropriating language as its own. It is not his own because it is made up of "the words of others" and speaks an essentially foreign language: "I am walled round with their vociferations, none will ever know what I am, none will ever hear me say it, I won't say it, I can't say it, I have no language but theirs" (308, 319). The Unnamable is "possessed of no utterance but theirs" and his relationship with the voice is truly one of possession: "a voice like this, who can check it, it tries everything, it's blind, it seeks me blindly, in the dark, it seeks a mouth, to enter into" (362, 403). As the outside comes inside, the Unnamable is the unwilling host to an alien presence that fractures his identity, creating a schism between the ego and its other, between I and not-I. Although not his own, the foreign voice both fills him and issues from him: "They've blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it's them I hear" (319). While the outside is internalised, as outside, it cannot be integrated or appropriated by the self, so that when the Unnamable speaks it is also not he

who speaks. The kind of possession involved is hence also a dispossession, in which his voice is rendered other to itself, such that it no longer belongs to him: "these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me" (341).

The Unnamable's awareness of the foreignness of his own voice is infinitely problematic. 'They' want him to say I as if it were him, to occupy a secure subject position in language, a task which he is decidedly not up to most of the time, instead saying I as if it were not him: "I, say I. Unbelieving" (285). He doubts the very foundations of his selfhood, going so far as to query his possession of an ego: "Do they believe I believe it is I who am speaking? That's theirs too. To make me believe I have an ego all my own, and can speak of it, as they of theirs. Another trap to snap me up among the living. It's how to fall into it they can't have explained to me sufficiently. They'll never get the better of my stupidity" (339). The Unnamable is clearly no master of himself. Ironically, it is this lack of mastery which allows him to avoid the "trap" of egological being, and his inability to "fall into" synchronicity with himself and achieve a correlation between the I that speaks and the I that exists before language is viewed, for a moment, as an achievement. Mostly, though, the unity of the self is revealed as a fiction so that the search for a unified self may continue: "Listen to them, losing heart! That's to lull me, till I imagine I hear myself saying, myself at last, to myself at last, that it can't be they, speaking thus, that it can only be I, speaking thus. Ah if I could only find a voice of my own, in all this babble, it would be the end of their troubles, and of mine" (341–42). To speak in the right way, according to 'them,' would involve saying I believably, in one's own voice. It would also involve being one with oneself, attaining correspondence between the subject position occupied in language and the extra-linguistic self.<sup>16</sup> Because the Unnamable believes 'they' control the right to silence, he tries to do as 'they' wish, seeking "the right manner, as if it were my own voice, pronouncing my own words, words pronouncing me alive, since that's how they want me to be" (329). He succeeds sometimes, but always fails to sustain a sense of self-possession, is never at home in the I that speaks for long: "I act as if it were [I who speaks], sometimes I act as if it were, but at length, was I ever there at length, a long stay" (400). Any attempt he makes to occupy a secure position in language is inevitably undercut by the resurfacing of radical doubt about whether he has any control over his

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<sup>16</sup> Worm is an attempt to represent the self prior to language, "without voice or reason," the self "who cannot hear, cannot speak, who is I, who cannot be I" (341, 397). Moreover, "he's the one to be sought, the one to be" (406). I pursue the novel's concern with the extra-linguistic in the next chapter.

discourse and whether the words he uses are sufficiently his own: "I know it's not I, that's all I know, I say I, knowing it's not I, I am far" (398).

Were the Unnamable to produce the right speech it would, ironically, mean the end of speech altogether, resulting in the true silence that is never broken, the silence he is seeking. His inability to speak in the right way is, therefore, what prompts him to go on speaking, for if he *were* to speak in the right way there would be nothing left to say. As he observes: "The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue" (293). And he, paradoxically it may seem, fervently wishes the discourse to continue, and has many rhetorical tricks to aid in this design, from questions and hypotheses, to resolutions and aspirations. But, crucially, he wants the discourse to continue so that he might find the words to end it. To find his own voice would mean losing it, as his fantasy of being left to dribble in silence attests.

The predicament in which the Unnamable finds himself is that of every language user. On the one hand, language requires, makes compulsory, the occupation of subject positions, and ascribes mastery to the subject who uses it. On the other hand, the only language a subject has at his or her disposal is "their language," with its irreducibly foreign vocabulary that introduces a disruptive otherness into a region where the demand is for sameness and synchronicity. The unified I called for by language is rendered other to itself *by language*, which is to say, not-I. The task of language, then, is paradoxical and interminable, aporetic at heart, involving an exigency never surmounted, a call never heeded, and a ceaseless listening, a ceaseless seeking for the means to heed the call and so put an end to listening and seeking. Using language involves one in a whirling "dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing" (380), a movement that is nonetheless fundamentally structured in relation to an end point, oriented towards a goal that must, however, be unattainable in order for the discourse to continue.

It initially appears odd that aporia, or rhetorical impasse, is such a dominant figure in a discourse in which going on is necessary and unavoidable, a discourse which does go on, unyieldingly, for some one-hundred-and-twenty pages. Hill is astute on this point:

Paradoxically, though, aporia functions in Beckett's text, on one level, as a rhetorical figure like any other, as a moment of discourse, as an easing of passage from one verbal site to another. In Beckett's text, as in its etymology, aporia comes to mean a peculiar kind of discontinuous or circular movement, a crossing of navigable verbal territory into uncharted and disorientating non-space. (63)

An aporia in *The Unnamable* need not lead to a dead end, and is far more likely to exhibit a movement whereby opposites continuously feed back into each other, in a perpetual oscillation between mutually exclusive positions. Attempting to follow this movement draws the reader into what Hill calls "non-space," a region of irreducible doubt and indeterminacy. Importantly, the fact that an aporia is no longer immobilising does not mean that the contradiction is resolved, for there is nonetheless no authoritative position outside the oscillating movement from which to view the opposition and determine a privileged term. The Unnamable's aporetic method disallows any conclusion or rhetorical place of rest, thereby involving him in a never-ending circular movement which recalls Beckett's purgatorial machine.

Aporia in the novel becomes generative, not immobilising, producing dynamic sets of oppositions in which both terms vie in turn for significance, each rendered incomplete by the other. In this way, utterances in the novel are rendered provisional, open to modification or, more likely, cancellation. The cancelled term, however, is not completely effaced, for vestiges of it remain, lingering in the background as the discourse continues. Furthermore, the term invariably returns to the foreground sooner or later, only to be effaced again, in a cycle of transient utterances, each but a "project for the moment" (365). For instance, although the Unnamable goes to some lengths to explain his "pensum," and to explore the possibility of him discharging it by finding his own voice, the following passage, early in the novel, irrevocably undoes such notions:

All this business of a labour to accomplish, before I can end, of words to say, a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end, of an imposed task, once known, long neglected, finally forgotten, to perform, before I can be done with speaking, done with listening, I invented it all, in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway. All lies. I have nothing to do, that is to say nothing in particular. I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. No one compels me to, there is no one, it's an accident, a fact. Nothing can ever exempt me from it, there is nothing, nothing to discover, nothing to recover, nothing that can lessen what remains to say, I have the ocean to drink [. . .]. (307–08)

Here the idea of right speech, speech that ushers in its own end, is revealed to be an explanatory fiction, one which, by providing an (invented) end point to speech, makes



possible a sense of progress, a sense of bearing down upon a goal. The Unnamable abandons this fiction of the end, showing it to be false, showing it to be fiction.<sup>17</sup> Iser follows Frank Kermode in maintaining that fictions of the end "can never be *permanently* falsified," so integral are they to human culture and consciousness ("The End" 37). This opinion is confirmed by the Unnamable when he notes that abandoning outright the idea of an end, and the complementary idea of a beginning, is asking too much:

if only they'd stop committing reason, on them, on me, on the purpose to be achieved, and simply go on, with no illusion about having begun one day or ever being able to conclude, but it's too difficult, too difficult, for one bereft of purpose, not to look forward to his end, and bereft of all reason to exist, back to a time he did not. (Beckett, *Unnamable* 378)

The Unnamable repeatedly, insistently, invokes the fiction of the end, only to expose it as fiction, only to invoke it again, only to expose it again, and so on, in a circle, without ever settling on one position or the other.

Similarly, the Unnamable reveals the I to be a fiction, to be constituted by an otherness that merely parades as the self, requiring the self to integrate it, while all the time remaining foreign. This awareness is at the root of his inability to be himself and his inability to speak in his own voice. However, as with the notion of an end, the fiction of selfhood is not permanently falsified. As Schwalm observes, the novel "seeks to deny the subject knowing that it can never be fully denied" (188). The Unnamable continues to say I, despite resolving not to, and, as the novel nears its end, the hope remains of somehow corresponding with his extra-linguistic self and no longer being divided, of speaking his own story in his own voice, of being at home with himself: "it will be I," he repeats numerous times in the final passage (Beckett, *Unnamable* 406–07). Yet his doubt is never assuaged and the refrain "it's not I" persists (407). In this way, identity is placed in "perpetual motion," making visible not only, as Mihaela Harper points out, the disunity of

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<sup>17</sup> Although this sentence may appear to verge on the tautological, it does not quite say the same thing twice. Engagement with fiction involves, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous formulation, a "suspension of disbelief" in the reality of what is represented (Vol. 2, 6). Fiction, in this sense, must not be *shown* to be fiction, for this breaks the imaginative engagement. To abandon a fiction is to reactivate the disbelief in its content, thus revealing its falseness, its fictiveness.

the self, the I's "failure to constitute and stabilize itself as *one*" (153), but also the tenacity of the ideal of a unified self and the accompanying search to realise this ideal.<sup>18</sup>

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Waiting in the novel is inextricably bound to seeking, and, as in *Molloy*, the search devolves into a kind of waiting and is transformed into a non-quest. The Unnamable seeks an end to discourse, and, to further this aim, seeks to find himself at home. This search for home, however, is fraught with difficulty:

If I could only shut myself up, quick, I'll shut myself up, it won't be I, quick, I'll make a place, it won't be mine, it doesn't matter, I don't feel any place for me, perhaps that will come, I'll make it mine, I'll put myself in it, I'll put someone in it, I'll find someone in it, I'll put myself in him, I'll say he's I, perhaps he'll keep me, perhaps the place will keep us, me inside the other, the place all round us, [. . .] perhaps that's all they're waiting for, there they are again, to pardon me, waiting for me to reach home, to pardon me. (Beckett, *Unnamable* 393)

The primary sense here is one of homelessness, in which no place exists for either body or mind. In response, the Unnamable resorts to the invention of home, imagining a grounded self that is able to harmoniously accommodate alterity. Importantly, the homecoming is still awaited, not yet achieved, and its tenuousness is revealed by the fact that the search for home alternates with a rejection of home: "I won't seek my home any more, I don't know what I'll do, it would be occupied already, there would be someone there already, someone far gone, he wouldn't want me, I can understand him, I'd disturb him" (394). Thus the Unnamable remains divided, the host of a foreign presence. Home is no longer homely, but is constituted by an uncanny experience of the familiar become strange, in which the outside intrudes and, as outside, renders the inside strange to itself.

The novel offers numerous imaginings of home, the last being an "[e]normous prison, like a hundred thousand cathedrals [. . .], and in it, somewhere, perhaps, riveted, tiny, the prisoner" (402). Again, homecoming exists only in anticipation:

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<sup>18</sup> In my second chapter, I argue that, in *The Unnamable*, Beckett conceives of the subject as fundamentally dispossessed of itself. In this light, the fiction of a unified self *is* permanently falsified or fully denied. However, from the Unnamable's perspective, it is not, because the fragmentation of his identity propels him to search for unity.

I'm alone, perhaps the first, or perhaps the last, talking alone, listening alone, alone alone, the others are gone, they have been stilled, their voices stilled, their listening stilled, one by one, at each new-coming, another will come, I won't be the last, I'll be with the others, I'll be as gone, in the silence, it won't be I, it's not I, I'm not there yet, I'll go there now, I'll try and go there now, no use trying, I wait for my turn, my turn to go there, my turn to talk there, my turn to listen there, my turn to wait there for my turn to go, to be as gone, it's unending, it will be unending, gone where, where do you go from there, you must go somewhere else, wait somewhere else, for your turn to go again, and so on. (402–03)

The repetitive cycle in which the Unnamable is caught induces a kind of waiting. All that is available to him is to wait his turn to be at home, but merely so that he may depart from it once more, only to return in order to "go again." He has no mastery over the process and the wait he endures is beyond the will, something that there is "no use trying" to control. The temporal dimension of the wait is foregrounded as the moment of attainment is delayed by a movement of perpetual reversal and circularity. Closure is interminably deferred in an "unending" cycle in which the activity of seeking reverts to the passivity of waiting. A possible reason for this is that the object of the Unnamable's search, himself at home, is aporetic in nature. For home to be homely, it must be familiar. Yet home is not completely familiar if it is occupied by something foreign. Similarly, identity is predicated on unity, yet is never whole, equally informed by the outside: I is also not-I. Thus the linearity of the quest, directed towards an achievable object, becomes the self-defeating and interminable circularity of the non-quest.

A circle is without end, but equally without origin, and the text approaches the issue of interminability from the other side, so to speak, from the perspective of being without beginning. The Unnamable imagines waiting for a performance of some kind to begin, waiting for the curtain to rise, while listening to an anonymous voice, which is perhaps that of the artist "only preluding, clearing his throat" or perhaps the stage manager giving last-minute instructions (375). The prelude, however, is interminable:

that's the show, you can't leave, you're afraid to leave, it might be worse elsewhere, you make the best of it, you try and be reasonable, you came too early, [. . .] that's the show, waiting for the show, to the sound of a murmur, [. . .] you didn't notice, in the anguish of waiting, never noticed you were waiting alone, that's the show, waiting alone, in the restless air, for it to begin, for something to begin, for there to be something else but you, for the power to rise, the courage to leave, you try and be reasonable, perhaps you are blind, probably deaf, the show is over, all is over, but where then is the hand, the helping hand, or merely charitable, or the hired

hand, it's a long time coming, to take yours and draw you away, that's the show, free, gratis and for nothing, waiting alone, blind, deaf, you don't know where, you don't know for what, for a hand to come and draw you away, somewhere else, where perhaps it's worse. (375)

The spectator is powerless, unable to leave and unable to set the show in motion. She or he is "riveted," like the prisoner, and although the show may be free, the spectator is anything but. Being stripped of mastery appears inevitably to accompany the Unnamable's idea of the wait. Waiting for the beginning becomes a waiting "for nothing" in which there is no longer anything to be awaited, in which the object of waiting is abandoned. Blind and deaf, moreover, the spectator waits for that which he or she would be unable to identify were it to appear. This makes her or him liable to announce that the end has indeed arrived, that "all is over," having no evidence either way, in an attempt to resolve the wait through a fiction of the end. The attempt, however, is half-hearted, and the end is not "the ending end," but an end that is also a beginning again (401). And so the purgatorial cycle continues, as the spectator is drawn away to some other place, the same or worse. Whatever threshold is crossed in this change of place, it does not lead to the end, but to a rebeginning; it is not the threshold, or "door," which the Unnamable imagines at the close of the text, the one that leads to his true story, that opens onto the real silence (406, 407).

Like the spectator, the reader of the novel tries to be "reasonable," to proceed rationally through a mire of irrational paradoxes and aporias. Also like the spectator, she or he is "riveted," prisoner rather than master, fascinated by a text that seems to strip away all interpretative mastery. Does this mean that there is "no use trying" to understand or appreciate it? If not, readers, and especially critics, would find themselves faced with an insoluble dilemma. Yet, while the novel may resist interpretation, the opposite appears equally true since it also actively invites comment and speculation. Although often difficult to say, there is always much to be said about a Beckett text, as the vast body of Beckett criticism attests. Reading *The Unnamable* involves one in a quest for sense, although a quest of a peculiar kind in which seeking is not linear, but circular, a purgatorial round of transient success and unavoidable failure. In the novel, the kind of seeking involved is described in the following terms, in relation to the search for some rational principle to ground discourse:

seeking the cause, the cause of talking and never ceasing, finding the cause, losing it again, finding it again, not finding it again, seeking no longer, seeking again, finding again, losing again, finding nothing, finding at last, losing again, talking without ceasing, thirstier than ever, seeking as usual, losing as usual, blathering away, wondering what it's all about [. . .]. (378)

As it does for the Unnamable, this interminable cycle of finding and losing may induce a kind of waiting in the reader – a waiting for meaning that only ever appears partially, de-totalised by the irremediably aporetic nature of the discourse. But can criticism accommodate a passive waiting? The non-intentional wait, by definition, cannot be willed: in this regard there is certainly "no use trying." What *is* worth attempting is the cultivation of an awareness of the ineluctably provisional nature of what we read and write, its necessary incompleteness, and of the lack of mastery which provides the impetus to continue reading and writing – however problematic and unsettling such an awareness may be.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the Beckettian wait is highly unconventional. At this juncture, it is worthwhile to review the conventional understanding of waiting in order to appreciate the extent to which this is so. The waiting with which we are familiar involves a subject directed towards an awaited object, an intentional relationship in which the I waits *for* something and consciousness is actively aimed towards an intended object. In this aiming, the ego departs from itself. It also returns to itself through a movement of appropriation in which the awaited is yoked into the order of the known and familiar by the expectation or anticipation that accompanies the intentional wait. Were the awaited to arrive, waiting would come to an end, which means that waiting intends and desires its own end. This horizon of the end conditions the wait which is fundamentally temporal and always future-directed, characterised by delay or postponement. For waiting to be successful, the delay must be temporary, at some point or other concluded through the attainment of the awaited.

In the trilogy, a very different picture of waiting emerges. A non-intentional dimension to the wait is revealed, which undermines each essential element of

conventional waiting. The object of waiting becomes ungraspable and is positioned permanently beyond attainment. In this sense the object is absent. The subject, moreover, also tends to disappear, as the act of grasping itself becomes impossible and the subject, in Levinas's words, is "no longer *able to be able*" (*Time* 74), thereby enduring a total loss of the self-mastery that defines and grounds subjectivity. Non-intentional waiting is, like the relation of self to other in Levinas, a "relationship without terms" (32), in which subject and object are undone, while nonetheless remaining connected. This dimension of the wait is non-egological, because the ego's departure from itself does not conclude in return, there being no stable self to which to return, thus facilitating a relationship with that which cannot be assimilated by the self. The absence of both subject and object, along with the aporetic persistence of something resembling subject-object relations, makes the non-intentional wait interminable, without hope of closure. Significantly, the non-intentionality of the wait does not annihilate intentionality, but rather alternates with it. Once effaced, subjectivity tends to reassert itself, only to be abandoned again, only to be resumed, and so forth, in an endless movement of reversal and circularity.

The non-intentional wait has important implications for the trilogy's treatment of alterity. That Beckett disregards otherness in favour of a focus on the self's relation with itself verges on a critical commonplace, and the claim is often levelled that his works are solipsistic (see, for example, Hayes 35, Renner 13 and Schwalm 184). The findings of this chapter point in another direction, for if the Beckettian self is effaced or displaced through encountering what lies beyond it, as, for instance, when it waits for nothing, then that self, it would seem, is not solipsistically centred on itself, but is, much more aptly, decentred or centreless. From the logic of spectrality in *Molloy*, to Malone's relation to the other death, to the Unnamable's preoccupation with the foreignness of his own voice, subjectivity in the trilogy appears to be intimately involved with alterity. The self's relation with itself, through involving something other to itself, is mediated by alterity, suggesting that the Beckettian subject is far from solitary.

In the following chapter, I focus on the encounter with alterity. Drawing on Derrida and Levinas, I expand on the distinction between the self and the other, and examine various manifestations of otherness, including the other person and the alterior self, as well as the involvement of alterity in language and fiction. In the trilogy, one form of the encounter with alterity is the meeting of individuals, which raises issues of

intersubjectivity and community. The self's relation to what lies outside of itself is a pivotal concern of each of the novels, suggesting that Beckett's emphasis on the self does not amount to a disregard for otherness.

## Chapter 2: Alterity

### Introduction

Alterity is not an easy term to define. As "the state of being other or different" alterity is a synonym for "otherness" ("Alterity," *OED*). Being other is itself defined in terms of being different, for example, as the "alternative of two" ("Other," *OED*), and, indeed, difference is the outstanding characteristic of the conventional understanding of alterity: to be other is to be different. Being different, in turn, has the following meaning: "Not the same as another or each other; unlike in nature, form, or quality" ("Different," *OED*). The first part of this definition conceives of difference negatively, as *not* being the same. In a semantic reversal, being the same is also conceived of negatively, as "not different" (in addition to the positive meaning of "identical") ("Same," *OED*). Thus a certain circularity is inscribed into the meaning of difference. Or, more simply, difference is a circular concept, involving a continuous movement that always returns back to where it started from; difference refers to sameness, which refers back to difference, which refers back to sameness, *ad infinitum*. The second part of the definition of 'different' is also negative: to be different is to be "*unlike*" which is to be "different from" or "not similar to" ("Unlike," *OED*). Bracketing the circularity for a moment, we find an important formulation here, namely, 'different *from*,' indicating that for there to be likeness or its opposite, there must be two or more people or things to compare in order to describe them as alike or unlike. For either sameness or difference to apply, there must be at least two items of which it can be said, '*they* are the same' or '*they* are different,' or of one of the items that it is 'the same *as*' or 'different *from*' the other or others. Hence the concept of difference, in addition to being circular, is also inherently comparative. A solitary object or entity can never meet the conceptual criteria for the applicability of either difference or sameness, being incomparable. In order to be what it is, difference must be different from something else, and more specifically, different from the same, which is to say non-identical and non-similar. Alterity, as difference, is an essentially relative idea.

There is, however, another meaning to difference which could potentially offer a non-relative or absolute understanding of alterity. To be different may also mean to be "distinct" or "separate" ("Different," *OED*). The possibility emerges, then, of sameness



and difference being independent of each other, each "forming or viewed as a unity apart or by itself" ("Separate," *OED*). This involves, paradoxically, a non-differential conception of difference, in which comparison is no longer conceptually necessary, but is, rather, necessarily absent. Sameness and difference in this understanding are each unities, whole and complete, needing to refer to nothing outside of themselves in order to be what they are. Yet it must be asked whether the sense of difference as separation is actually viable. The distinction between difference and separation is weak, and a further meaning of 'separate' is, in fact, "different" ("Separate," *OED*). This makes sense, as it would seem that separation is itself a relative concept, in that being separate can only be understood in relation to what is being separated *from*, in relation to another or others from which the separated stands apart. Although the conventional understanding of alterity perhaps suggests, quietly in the background, an alternative, non-relative conception of otherness, it remains settled on the differential character of alterity. If alterity is not relative, it is not alterity. Nonetheless, in its very insistence on the relativity of otherness, conventional wisdom may provoke a questioning stance: can there be difference that is not 'difference *from*'? What would this absolute alterity look like? Could it still be conceived of as alterity? What implications would flow from an understanding of alterity as absolute? These are questions to which we shall return shortly. Suffice it to say, at this point, that an unconventional approach to otherness must involve a continual struggle with language, in an attempt to wrest words from their ordinary and entrenched meanings. To conceive of otherness as absolute entails using language in new ways, for the old ways are bound up with a differential, and therefore relative, understanding of the idea.

I have defined the conventional conception of alterity as 'difference *from*.' In a narrower, philosophical usage, the other is taken as different from, specifically, the self or the ego, which is defined as the same. The self's purported relation to sameness is at least twofold. Firstly, it lies in the self's identity as an individual, and in the persistence of this identity over time and despite change. Secondly, it lies in the way the self tends to bring everything back to itself, in which its structures of knowledge and perception are intrinsically geared toward self-reference. What I perceive always stands in relation to me, and is, moreover, apprehended in terms of my beliefs, values, interests and so on. To perceive is to move outward, on the one hand, towards the world that is perceived, but also, on the other hand, to return back to the self who perceives. Similarly, to know or

comprehend something is to render it familiar to the self, to travel into the unknown and return with intelligence, to bring close what was far. Both perception and knowledge are thus forms of assimilation, in which the self integrates what is other to it, such that alterity is overcome. Levinas calls this dimension of human existence, totality. In totality, the self reduces otherness to itself. As Brian Treanor observes: "I see the other as 'like me' in some respects and 'unlike me' in others, but both these ways of seeing the other are in terms of 'me'" (16). The comparative or differential understanding of alterity is also totalising because it unites the self and the other: alterity is thought in terms of the same, and vice versa, like two sides of the same coin.

As different from the self, alterity is all that is alien and foreign, the unknown or unknowable, that which resists assimilation by the self. The other person is a special instance of the exterior, one on which much poststructuralist philosophy places great emphasis. Levinas, for example, who, while not a poststructuralist per se, had an immense effect on the movement, insists that the other person is *absolutely* other. This means that otherness or difference cannot be thought in terms of the same, for then it would no longer be absolute, but relative. For Levinas, the difference between the same and other is infinite, and this infinity, according to Anthony Uhlmann, "is an irreducibility": "the same can never contain or reappropriate the other, the distance between the two can never be effaced, their difference is that which can never be reconciled, is difference itself" (157). In contrast, I would argue that the infinite difference between the same and the absolutely other is not "difference itself," but, rather, paradoxically, non-relative and thus non-differential. Nonetheless, what Uhlmann notes about irreducibility and irreconcilability remains important in an account of infinite difference. The concept entails an other that is irreducibly distant, and therefore wholly separate, from the same; an other that is no longer other from the perspective of convention and language, which sees alterity as necessarily connected to sameness. There is, however, no other word than 'other,' hence the use of descriptive tags in an attempt to modify the meaning of the word in order to accommodate non-relative alterity: 'radically' other, 'wholly' other, 'absolutely' other. Each of these adjectives, when joined to the idea of otherness, creates a contradictory, aporetic concept of something that is by definition relative, yet which is also not relative, but self-sufficient. Importantly, the infinite difference between the same and the other means that it is "a relation through which the terms cannot form a totality" (Uhlmann 157). The infinity of

the relation to absolute alterity fractures the totality of the self and its egoistical concerns, making it impossible to reduce the other to a version of the same.<sup>19</sup>

Postmodernity is characterised by a radical critique of all totalising systems. In order to understand this critique, one must appreciate the privileging of reason and comprehension in Western thought. With roots in a Greco-Roman heritage, the privileging of reason as the fundamental mode of human interaction with the world was revived during the Enlightenment, most notably by Descartes, and pursued by later thinkers such as Kant and Hegel. The focus of this colossal tradition is on understanding the self, the world and others, on vanquishing the darkness of ignorance with the light of knowledge and making visible what was obscure, most especially by building comprehensive ontological systems that describe and classify being and equally comprehensive normative schemes that thematise and regulate human behaviour. These systems are designed to leave nothing outside. In other words, they are designed to overcome alterity. Treanor is astute on this point:

Generally speaking, the Western philosophical tradition has thought of otherness as something to be conquered. [. . .] Thus, when confronted with otherness, scientists, explorers, philosophers, and theologians have generally attempted to analyze the foreign phenomenon in order to learn something – indeed ultimately everything – about it. This almost invariably entails placing the other within a system where it can be understood in juxtaposition to other elements in the system. When confronted with something unknown, we tend to relate to it by asking ourselves where and how it 'fits' among all the other things we already know. Otherness is thought in juxtaposition to, or in terms of, the same; otherness is other-than-the-same. The goal is to convert something unknown (other) into something known. (3–4)

Western thought, then, in rationally seeking out knowledge, tends strongly to efface the other by reducing it to the same and rendering it relative. Reason is totalising because of its drive to comprehensiveness, its impulse to encompass its subject entirely, and because of its systematising function, which weaves acts of thinking and perceiving into logical and epistemological structures, or forms of totality. In its primary function of rendering known the unknown, reason operates in the domain of the same, and struggles by nature to accommodate alterity.

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<sup>19</sup> In Levinas's account, despite the infinite distance or difference between the self and the absolutely other, the two are nonetheless in a relationship. While relationship entails relativity, the relation to absolute alterity is non-relative, a problem which Levinas addresses through the paradox of the "unrelating relation" (*Totality* 295) – a notion that I discuss in more detail later in this section.

According to Jean-François Lyotard, a reliance on metanarratives, or "grand narratives," to explain and legitimise fields of inquiry characterises the Western tradition. The Enlightenment narrative, for example, elevates "the hero of knowledge" who braves "great dangers" and "great voyages" with the goal of nothing less than "universal peace" (Lyotard xxiv). This metanarrative of the knowing subject surmounting obstacles while confidently striding towards a universalising light served to justify the Enlightenment ethos of rational investigation. As a metadiscourse used to legitimise knowledge, a grand narrative aims to be comprehensive in order to secure a firm foundation for whatever human behaviour is at stake. Importantly, because of their totalising function, "Grand Narratives will not tolerate otherness" (Treanor 2). Treanor explains: "Anything unknown – that is, anything foreign, novel, surprising, disturbing, or otherwise resistant to the neat categories of the Narrative – challenges the comprehensiveness of the Narrative" (2). And a challenge to the comprehensiveness of a grand narrative is a challenge to its very essence.

Lyotard goes on to define the postmodern as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). This incredulity takes the form of a radical questioning of the privileging of reason and institutional forms of knowledge, and a focus on the limits of understanding, on that which resists the rational process of making visible and which cannot be brought to light. Alterity is no longer so easily sidelined; the same is revealed as incapable of reducing all otherness to itself, and the intractability of alterity makes all-inclusive systems impossible. When alterity is irreducible, it becomes something to be respected in its own right, and to be approached on its own terms, rather than something to be conquered and brought back to the same. The intolerance for otherness betrayed by grand narratives and other such totalising structures renders them, at best, inaccurate and impotent, incapable of providing the legitimisation for which they are designed. Otherness, in the postmodern paradigm, is not to be overcome – in fact, cannot be overcome – but must be accounted for.

Beckett is highly suspicious of the rational, totalising mindset. Adopting this mindset is, in the Unnamable's words, "committing treason" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 378) – the implication being that using reason is a kind of treason, a manner not of securing but of subverting the truth. Beckett's texts are themselves refractory to rational analysis. Reason's privilege is revoked, and readers of Beckett are offered no logical frameworks for viewing life, no recoverable theories or unified structures of knowledge. There is, it

must be noted, a good deal of reasoning that goes on in the texts, but very little comprehension, because the kind of reasoning employed generally fails to achieve its goal of illumination. It is a kind of reasoning that takes a radically critical stance towards itself, continually looking for alternative possibilities and liable at any moment to announce itself insufficient or faulty. Hence Beckett's proclivity for figures such as paradox and aporia, which are rhetorical sites where reason breaks down. Hence, also, his abandonment of grand narratives. As Critchley argues, Beckett offers a "radical de-creation" of "salvific narratives," whether "religious, socioeconomic, scientific, technological, political, aesthetic or philosophical," and in doing so, offers us "*a redemption from redemption*" (32). That there is a need to be redeemed from grand narratives which purport to offer redemption, implies that totalisation is a kind of enslavement, a shackling or holding in chains.

Beckett, then, would seem to foreshadow the postmodern idea that comprehension is domination and violence. There emerges in his work an imperative to incomprehension, or de-comprehension, a movement in which totality is undone, like the broken circle in *Watt*. Just as the breach in the circle renders it permeable to the outside, and results in the loss of its centre, so too the movement of incomprehension opens the self to the other, resulting in the destabilisation of the self. To comprehend is to conquer the unknown, to make familiar by grasping something in its totality, thereby securing the position of the knowing subject. Beckett's texts, by contrast, do not reduce alterity by comprehending or encompassing it, but remain open instead to that which cannot be assimilated by rationality, to "the unthinkable unspeakable" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 328), that which unsettles conventional modes of knowledge and the subject positions that accompany them.

Why, it might be asked, is comprehension, and the way it has of reducing the other to the same, a problem? Crucially, it is only a problem when one relies on a certain definition of alterity. If the other is relatively other or other-than-the-same, then it is inescapably tied to, defined against and interpreted in terms of the same, and the assimilation of the other to the same is inevitable, normal, even desirable. However, if alterity is absolute, other without reference to the same, then the situation is very different. If the otherness of the other is absolute, it is wholly and completely other, not other-than-the-same but purely, irreducibly other, self-sufficient and utterly separate, needing to refer

to nothing else in order to be what it is. Such a conception of radical alterity entails a demand to preserve absolute otherness, to respect the other qua other, for without such respect the other is no longer truly other. This imperative to preserve otherness brings with it a host of further demands; for example, the demand not to reduce the other to the same, because such a reduction compromises the other's self-sufficiency and attempts to reduce what should remain irreducible. On the other hand, if alterity is relative, other only in relation to the same, then there is no demand to preserve absolute otherness. If what it means to be other is to be different than the same, then seeing the other in terms of the same does no damage to the other, does not violate its otherness, for that otherness is essentially relative. Aiming to comprehend the other, then, is not an improper relation. In fact, to "understand better" is the primary imperative that follows from a relative account of otherness (Treanor 8). Whether alterity is relative or absolute is the question on which the contemporary debate around alterity hinges, says Treanor (9). Beckett's emphasis on incomprehension implies a concern with the absolutely other, suggesting that his work, while not contemporary, remains highly relevant.

A significant implication of absolute alterity relates to the project of attempting to rationally expound it. Exposition is explanatory and to explain is to make clear. In this sense, exposition is an exposure. Absolute alterity is by definition, however, that which is not clear and cannot be exposed, which means that expounding alterity in its absolute form is actually impossible. In attempting to explain it, otherness is assimilated into the economy of the same, according to the dictates of reason, and is thereby positioned as relative and non-absolute. If alterity is absolute, then explaining it is effacing it. As Colin Davis points out, "[t]o *expound* alterity would also be to *expose* it, to bring it to light as an object of vision, reflection and knowledge; [. . .] alterity is also thereby annihilated as it is reconciled with that to which it had seemed external" (56). When exposed, the otherness of the other ceases to be other, or, more accurately, the absolute otherness of the other ceases to be absolute. Thus any expository account of absolute alterity, such as the one here underway, necessarily violates its object, precisely by making it an object of intentional acts such as knowing and reflecting. Davis raises the possibility of aiming "at exposure to alterity rather than exposition of it," such as we find in Levinas's writings (56). Yet it is hard to imagine how to avoid exposition altogether, especially when formulating academic responses to texts. Furthermore, the language we have at our disposal is heavily

disposed towards a differential, relative understanding of otherness. Even if one's aim is not to explain alterity, it would seem that to think and speak about it at all, which must involve language, entails compromising the absolute otherness of the other. Simply using the word 'other' is to circumscribe alterity by unavoidably imbuing the otherness in question with the sense of relativity that stubbornly attaches to the conventional conception of alterity. Therefore, any approach to absolute alterity is paradoxical and self-defeating, a seeking for something that is rendered unattainable through the very act of seeking, which, if found, would no longer be itself but something else produced by the terms of the search. A discourse of otherness can only hope to be aware of its own mortal limitations, and to proceed in spite of them.

Having introduced the concept of alterity and its significance for Beckett and the philosophical tradition, I shall now discuss a selection of Levinas's and Derrida's views on alterity, before turning my attention to the trilogy. Since both these thinkers are interested in absolute alterity, they may be helpful in appreciating what I have intimated to be Beckett's similar concern.

For Levinas, the concept of totality has been historically dominant, and "the primacy of the same [. . .] marks the direction of and defines the whole of Western philosophy" (*Totality* 45).<sup>20</sup> In radical contrast to this tradition, Levinas develops a philosophy which privileges neither sameness nor alterity, but respects each in its own right. Totalising systems are unavoidable and even necessary in some instances, but they are unable to secure the comprehensive account of human existence which they purport to provide because there is a dimension of experience that transcends totality. As Levinas says, "we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other" (24). In totality, otherness, being only relatively other, is reducible to the same. Because, for Levinas, the human other is absolutely, irreducibly other, her or his alterity always exceeds totality. The encounter

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<sup>20</sup> My discussion of Levinas and alterity will centre on *Totality and Infinity* and the essay "Transcendence and Height," the latter originally given as a speech to the *Société Française de Philosophie* shortly after the publication of the former. The choice to focus on *Totality and Infinity* rather than *Otherwise than Being* is due to the respective foci of the two books. As Treanor explains: "Although arguing the same general thesis, *Totality and Infinity* concentrates on the epiphany of the other's face (alterity) – which is our guiding question and concern – while *Otherwise than Being* concentrates on ethical subjectivity and the selfhood of the subject" (274). Michael Morgan also points out that Levinas's later work is concerned with the "face-to-face from the point of view of the self or subject" (80).

between the self and the other person is thus fundamentally different from the way in which the self usually encounters the world, as made up of objects present to intentional, totalising consciousness. In the intersubjective relation, or face-to-face, the other remains exterior to the same, resisting its domination. It is in the nature of the face to be wholly other, a fact from which everything else about the face stems. This discussion will limit itself to a consideration of four features of the face, each one a direct implication of its absolute alterity, namely, that it is separate and self-signifying, that it cannot be comprehended nor be the object of intentional consciousness, and that it commands infinite responsibility.

However, before examining the Levinasian face in more detail, it is worth asking how the term as Levinas uses it relates to the ordinary meaning of a human face, as the front part of a person's head or its expression. On the one hand, as Morgan observes, "[t]he face of the other person is not the appearance of that person; it is not a collection of features given to visual perception. It has no parts, no components" (66). The face is not seen because it presents no physical surface or representation thereof. Actually gazing into the other's eyes, then, is not a precondition of the face-to-face, is, in fact, irrelevant to the encounter with absolute otherness. In Levinas's words, the face "remains exterior to every image one would retain of it" (*Totality* 296). On the other hand, as Diane Perpich points out, "[t]he face, as Levinas often admits (and how could he do otherwise), is an assemblage of brow, eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, chin" (47). It seems that the concept of the face cannot be fully separated from the physicality of the face, without ceasing to be meaningful: the concept inevitably involves a representation. There is therefore a fundamental aporia in Levinas's concept of the face, as both image and not image. "The face," writes Perpich, "is exposed as a figure of unreconstructed paradox: it represents that which it claims is unrepresentable; it presents immediacy through the mediation of an image; it makes an ethical claim that compels the hearer without ever becoming audible or legible" (54). In the face, Levinas figures what he claims is beyond form.

Keeping the paradoxical nature of the face in mind, I will now consider certain implications of the other person's absolute alterity, which are also salient features of the face. Firstly, the face is separate and self-signifying. Davis explains that "Levinas describes the self as neither different from nor opposed to the Other, but separate from it" (42). The reason for this is that both difference and opposition would entail a relative



other, united with an equally relative same within a logical totality. In Levinas's view, "[t]he Other is not other with a relative alterity [. . .]. The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity" (*Totality* 194). Relative alterity, for Levinas, is a misnomer: for otherness to be other it must be absolute. And for it to be absolute there must be a "radical separation between the same and the other" in which each term is self-sufficient (36). Accordingly, Levinas stresses the "essential sufficiency" and "self-reference" of the face (299). Importantly, this complete independence applies equally to the self or the same: "The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely" (36). If the same is negatively defined by the other, and vice versa, then otherness cannot be encountered as radical or absolute, for it is by nature relative.

For the other to be absolutely other, the relation between the same and the other must be a relation of separate, independent terms, and the distance between the two must be untraversable: a relationship, it appears, without contact. Such a relation is, in a sense, no relation at all, because it is in the very nature of relationship to establish contact, and it would seem that the fact of two terms being in a relationship with each other precludes them from being separate. Accordingly, Davis observes that

[t]he central difficulty for Levinas is to elaborate a philosophy of self and Other in which both are preserved as independent and self-sufficient, but in some sense in relation with one another. This is more difficult than it might appear, since it is in the nature of the *relation* to bring the Other into the self's sphere of familiarity, thus making it intelligible from the perspective of the self and reducing its true otherness. (41)

Levinas's solution to the problem of maintaining absolute terms in relation is the paradoxical concept of an "unrelating relation," in which "radical separation and relationship with the other are produced simultaneously" such that "the transcendence of the relation does not cut the bonds a relation implies, yet where these bonds do not unite the same and the other into a Whole" (*Totality* 295, 299, 48). Instead of involving no contact whatsoever, then, the "unrelating relation" is a relationship in which the terms are simultaneously proximate and distant. The face-to-face is also described by Levinas as a

relation in which the other "absolves itself from the relation which it enters into" ("Transcendence" 16), a description which again attempts to capture the possibility of a relationship that is not a relationship. That the same and the other in relation nonetheless remain separate, is not so much argued for by Levinas, as presented as a necessary condition for absolute alterity, thus begging the question: does relation not always entail relativity? Furthermore, that the concept of separation – even "radical separation" – is robust enough to preserve absolute alterity is unclear. After all, what is it to be separate if it is not to stand apart from something else? Levinas's account of absolute alterity rests precariously on a foundation of circularity, paradox and aporia.

The second feature of the face that I would highlight is its resistance to comprehension. "The face," writes Levinas, "is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (*Totality* 194). Perception is comprehensive because it encloses or circumscribes otherness within contents of intentional consciousness, but the face is not given as an object of perception, and is, in this sense, incomprehensible. Nor is it given as an object of knowledge, for if it were, it would no longer be absolutely other, but other relative to the knowing subject: "If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other" (Levinas, *Time* 90). The face-to-face is, rather, in Levinas's words, a situation in which "the knowing subject goes astray and loses itself" ("Transcendence" 14). Implied here, as Davis points out, is that a "lack of intelligibility" or "failure of understanding is essential if the radical otherness of the Other is to be preserved" (41). As absolutely other, the face, for Levinas, is "transcendent" and "transcendence precisely refuses totality, does not lend itself to a view that would encompass it from the outside. Every 'comprehension' of transcendence leaves the transcendent outside [. . .]. The transcendent is what can not be encompassed" (*Totality* 293). Because of the infinite distance between the same and the other, it is not possible to include both within a single, unifying perspective, or totality, which is the province of vision: "Vision is an adequation of the idea with the thing, a comprehension that encompasses" (34). Accordingly, Levinas is concerned with overturning the philosophical primacy of "panoramic existence and its disclosure" (294). Both "knowledge" and "clarifying thought" are "panoramic," in his conception, tied to visual metaphors of illumination and disclosure, or making clear what

was hidden (305). Avoiding such visual metaphors, as well as tactile metaphors of grasping and laying hold of, Levinas describes the encounter with the other as a "revelation" or "epiphany" (see, for example, *Totality* 196 and "Transcendence" 17).

Revelation, according to Levinas, is "fundamentally different from disclosure" (*Totality* 28). Treanor is astute on this point:

Levinas claims that the ontological manner of thinking is 'Greek' in nature and that it is symptomatic of Western thought. Ontological knowing, as a process of disclosure, is the removing of a thing from its hiddenness 'into the light.' Greek thinking always equates knowledge with vision, which is ultimately the coincidence of the perceived with the perceiver. However, the Greek metaphor for knowledge is not the only one, and disclosure is not the only way in which things are encountered. [. . .] The biblical, Hebraic, auditory metaphor for knowledge is one wherein knowledge, spoken by the other, comes to me unanticipated: revelation. [. . .] Disclosive knowledge is the result of going out into the world, wresting things from their hiddenness, bestowing meaning on them, and returning with that understanding. It is a relation of self to self. Revelation, however, is unanticipated and comes to one unannounced. Things disclosed to us undergo examination with the goal of comprehension; but others who speak to us are heard, and we in turn respond to them. (19–20)

As revelation, the coming of the other is beyond any horizon of expectation, always exceeding the self's capacity to render the unknown familiar by relating it to itself. Whereas disclosive knowledge involves the self departing from itself and then returning, revelation is a movement of self-dispossession without return. Levinas says that the desire for the absolutely other "does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature" (*Totality* 33–34). The difference between the immanence of disclosive knowledge and the transcendence of revelation is represented metaphorically by Levinas as that between Odysseus and Abraham: "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land" ("Trace" 348). Treanor is once more helpful in understanding this distinction:

Transcendence is not a relationship of myself to myself wherein I sojourn among beings in the world only to, like Ulysses, return home and reclaim my rightful position by restoring my house to order [. . .]. Rather, the movement of transcendence is from my home toward a land not of my birth, towards the absolutely other, the unknown. It is to be surprised by the voice of the other and to leave home, like Abraham, without knowledge of one's destination. (21)

The face, then, as transcendent and incomprehensible, is never an object with which the self can return home. It resides in an irreducibly foreign land, and the self, in order to encounter the face, must be unhomed. The self must also go toward the other "aimlessly," as Levinas says, "that is, as toward an absolute, unanticipatable alterity, as one goes forth unto death" (*Totality* 34).

Intentional consciousness always involves a return to self, and the non-intentionality of the face-to-face is an extension of the face's incomprehensibility. In intentionality, Levinas notes, there is "perfect mastery of the object by the subject" ("Transcendence" 19). The consciousness of a subject is aimed at objects of consciousness, intended objects that correlate with or are adequate to the thoughts which constitute them, and the subject masters the world by representing it. As Levinas argues, intentionality implies "a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery [. . .] is accomplished as a giving of meaning" (*Totality* 123–24). Perpich observes that the

most important feature of representational intentionality is derived directly from this notion of a thought forever adequate to its object. In representation, the ego 'determines' the other – that is, confers a meaning on it, assigns it to and recognizes its place in an intelligible order – *without being determined by it in return*. Representation involves a non-reciprocal determination of the other by the ego or 'the same.' (56–57)

Because intentional consciousness deals in representation, and representation reduces the other to the same, intentionality cannot encounter the absolutely other. Thus Levinas, in opposition to the phenomenological tradition in which *all* consciousness is intentional, posits the encounter with the other as being non-intentional: "The absolutely Other is not reflected in a consciousness; it resists the indiscretion of intentionality" ("Transcendence" 16). Intentionality is indiscreet because it seeks to expose its objects entirely. Absolute alterity, however, cannot be exposed if it is to remain absolute, and this resistance to exposure, according to Levinas, has a profound effect on the self: "The resistance of the Other to the indiscretion of intentionality consists in overturning the very egoism of the Same; that which is *aimed at* unseats the intentionality which aims at it" (16). Similarly, when consciousness attempts to think the infinite, that which is aimed at exceeds intentionality's ability to encompass its object: "infinity overflows the thought that thinks

it. Its very *infinition* is produced precisely in this overflowing" (*Totality* 25). Levinas explains:

intentionality, which is the opening of thought onto the theme, does not overflow this theme. It does not consist in thinking more than that which is thought in it. The noema is perfectly outlined in the noesis. The idea of the infinite consists precisely and paradoxically in thinking more than what is thought while nevertheless conserving it in its excessive relation to thought. The idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable. ("Transcendence" 19)

Like the idea of the infinite, the "face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me," always "exceeding *the idea of the other in me*" (*Totality* 50–51). The face-to-face overturns intentionality because to encounter the wholly other is to relate to the infinite: "The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the other with respect to the same, despite this relation" (196). The "infinition" of the other's otherness is what secures its absolute nature, allowing the relation between the same and the other to be an "unrelating relation" in which the fact of relationship, paradoxically, does not diminish distance.

The fourth and final feature of the face I will examine, that it commands infinite responsibility, has to do with the action of the other upon the self. Levinas stresses time and again that the other puts the self into question, more specifically its way of existing in self-sufficient enjoyment, at home in the world, concerned only with itself. The other reveals to the self that it shares the world, and that the ego's dominion is exceeded by the other's exteriority, thereby calling the self to justify the exercise of its mastery. This critique of the same by the other Levinas calls "ethics," and goes on to note that the "strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (43). The irreducible or absolute alterity of the other manifests itself as a calling into question of the ego, which is the original ethical moment in Levinas. In the same breath, the critique is a "summons to respond" ("Transcendence" 17), evoking the 'response' in responsibility. "The I," writes Levinas, "is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond, as if it were a matter of obligation or a duty about which a decision could be made; rather the I is, by its *very position*, responsibility through and through. [. . .] Hence, to be I signifies not

being able to escape responsibility" (17). Here is one sense in which Levinasian responsibility is infinite: it applies without exception. Another sense is that it can never be fulfilled because assuming responsibility does not lessen my responsibility, but, ironically, increases it, as Treanor notes: "Responsibility grows in proportion to the assumption of it" (39). Despite its infinite applicability, responsibility does not obliterate the subject's freedom. Rather, in an ethical paradox, "the sovereign, autonomous self," in David Sherman's words, "is founded by its binding in responsibility to the other" (69). The other "invests and promotes" my freedom "by calling me to goodness" (Treanor 33), demanding of me that I assume my responsibility by responding in an appropriate or ethically good way, that is, in a manner that respects his or her alterity, which is the highest exercise of my freedom. That the other demands this of me is not to say that I always rise to the challenge, and Levinas is well aware that although the subject qua subject is responsible, responsibility is often unfulfilled or degraded. At the descriptive level, as Davis points out, people often respond to each other irresponsibly (49). Nonetheless, the responsibility of the self before and for the other person is what, for Levinas, characterises humanity at its most basic level.

Responsibility, as I have noted, is a responsibility to respond. But how is the self to respond to absolute alterity without compromising its absolute nature? Levinas says that, in the face-to-face, or ethical relation, the self *is* able to accommodate absolute alterity because the "putting into question of the self is precisely a welcome to the absolutely other" ("Transcendence" 17). Alternatively, he says that "transcendence" is a "welcoming of the other by the same" (*Totality* 43). The self, then, 'receives' the other, and Levinas repeatedly describes the proper response to alterity as "hospitality" (see, for instance, 27, 299, 305). For a fuller appreciation of the significance of hospitality in the relationship between the self and the other, I now turn to Derrida's *Of Hospitality*.

Derrida begins by observing that, traditionally, the other as foreigner has a right to hospitality, a right to be welcomed by "the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc." (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 15).<sup>21</sup> The hospitality to which the foreigner has a right is first and foremost a conditional hospitality, one that depends upon the foreigner meeting certain criteria laid down by the host. As Derrida points out:

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<sup>21</sup> Quotations from *Of Hospitality* are by Derrida, unless otherwise indicated.

[The foreigner] is someone with whom, to receive him, you begin by asking his name; you enjoin him to state and to guarantee his identity, as you would a witness before a court. This is someone to whom you put a question and address a demand, the first demand, the minimal demand being: "What is your name?" or then "In telling me what your name is, in responding to this request, you are responding on your own behalf, you are responsible before the law and before your hosts, you are a subject in law." (27)

In this situation, hospitality is only extended if the foreigner identifies her- or himself, and, in doing so, attests to his or her position as a responsible subject. Before hospitality is granted, then, the foreigner must be framed in familiar terms, as nameable – that is, placeable within a known system of reference – and subject to community's laws. As subject to the law, the foreigner has obligations, duties which mirror, reciprocally, her or his right to hospitality, such as the obligation to guarantee identity. Hence the foreigner, despite being an outsider, is nonetheless positioned as part of community's overall structure, which amounts to defining the alterity of the foreigner as relative, as other-than-community. Derrida explains that the foreigner "is not [. . .] the completely other who is relegated to an absolute outside, savage, barbaric, precultural, and prejuridical, outside and prior to the family, the community, the city, the nation, or the State. The relationship to the foreigner is regulated by law" (73). In Derrida's account, hospitality is offered specifically to the foreigner and the foreigner is approached as a relative other, which places absolute alterity beyond the ambit of hospitality, as traditionally conceived. If an other comes from the "absolute outside" of community, an outside that is not tied differentially to the inside – in other words, if the other is absolutely and not relatively other – then he or she is not treated as a foreigner, but as a "savage" or "barbarian" to whom no hospitality is due (73, 25).

Herein lies the problem with conditional hospitality, namely, that it can be very inhospitable. Not only can it not accommodate the absolute other, but the way in which it accommodates the relative other, or foreigner, is, according to Derrida, a kind of brutality. The "first act of violence" is the imposition of the host's language on the foreigner or guest, who "has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own" (15). Requiring the foreigner to speak in my language is not merely a linguistic operation, but a demand that he or she be hospitable to me, understand and accept me and my culture,

before I am hospitable in return – which amounts to a demand for the other to reduce her or his otherness. In hospitality, there is also

the necessity, for the host, for the one who receives, of choosing, electing, filtering, selecting their invitees, visitors, or guests, those to whom they decide to grant asylum, the right of visiting, or hospitality. No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home [. . .]. (55)

Crucially, "filtering" and "choosing" are means of "excluding" and thus "doing violence" (55). Therefore, "a certain injustice [. . .] begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality" which is "limited and contradictory *a priori*" (55, 65). Conditional hospitality undermines itself necessarily, as the very act of placing conditions on the other, linguistic or otherwise, is a form of hostility.

In dramatic distinction to conditional hospitality, Derrida develops the concept of absolute hospitality:

absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. The law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right. (25)

The absolute other is unnameable, and so fails to meet the primary condition for traditional hospitality, or "hospitality by right." Absolute or unlimited hospitality, however, is unconditional and is "*given* to the other before they are identified, even before they are (posited or supposed to be) a subject, legal subject and subject nameable by their family name" (29). The host's responsibility before his or her guest, in this situation, does not depend on the guest's reciprocal responsibility. In fact, it depends on nothing at all, for absolute hospitality demands of one "to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition" (77). Absolute hospitality entails "say[ing] yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*" (77). This involves the host abdicating sovereignty over his or her home, relinquishing the power to filter and select guests, and to make demands on them. Hence, while the home and a master of the house are necessary for conditional hospitality, the opposite may be said to be true of absolute hospitality, as Anne Dufourmantelle observes:



"To offer hospitality [. . .] is it necessary to start from the certain existence of a dwelling, or is it rather only starting from the dislocation of the shelterless, the homeless, that the authenticity of hospitality can open up? Perhaps only the one who endures the experience of being deprived of a home can offer hospitality" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 56). In being securely at home, the host is in a position of power over the guest, a domination which must be overturned if the absolutely other is to be welcomed. This overturning consists in a dissolution of the host's 'at home' whereby the host is rendered, if not homeless, less at home.

Derrida's conception of an unconditional hospitality that is able to accommodate the absolute other is not meant to dispose of conditional hospitality. Instead, he posits an irreducible tension between the two:

It is [. . .] as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men or women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it. And vice versa, it is as though the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consisted in challenging and transgressing *the* law of hospitality, the one that would command that the 'new arrival' be offered an unconditional welcome.

(Derrida and Dufourmantelle 75, 77)

Yet, if *the* law of unconditional hospitality is "above" the laws of conditional hospitality, why is there an "aporia," as Derrida says there is, in the relationship between the two realms of law (79, 77)? If one term has priority over another, if we can say that unconditional hospitality is just better than conditional hospitality, then there is 'passage,' thought reaches a conclusion, is satisfied, unlike in aporia which, as a form of non-passage, must refuse to privilege one term over the other. The reason for the aporia seems to be that absolute hospitality, paradoxically, depends on the conventions or conditions of traditional hospitality in order to manifest itself concretely and be identifiable as hospitality. Without the laws, *the* law

would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite. In order to be what it is, *the* law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. [. . .] And vice versa, conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, given inspiration, given aspiration, required, even, by the law of unconditional hospitality. These two regimes of law, of *the* law and the laws, are thus both

contradictory, antinomic, *and* inseparable. They both imply and exclude each other, simultaneously. (79, 81)

Derrida here is making the disorienting claim that unconditional hospitality requires the conditions that corrupt it, making it inseparable from conditional hospitality. Is this also to say that in order to welcome absolute otherness one must, to a certain degree, treat that otherness as relative, as subject to conditional laws such as that of identification? If so, this would certainly generate an aporia by being insolubly at odds with the imperative to say "yes" to whatever or whoever arrives, without question or demand. Treating the other as relatively other is precisely what precludes an encounter with his or her absolute otherness, so this cannot be what Derrida means. Perhaps a more helpful perspective on the relationship between conditional and unconditional hospitality emerges when one considers that absolute, unlimited hospitality is an impossible imperative, and that "the law of hospitality define[s] this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it" (75). Unconditional hospitality is inevitably compromised: no host is capable of being absolutely hospitable. Furthermore, were absolute hospitality to be achieved, community, which is presupposed by hospitality, would cease to exist, for the host's 'at home' would be undermined to such an extent that she or he would no longer be a subject capable of welcoming at all. However, this does not imply that there is no point in attempting to accommodate the wholly other. Rather, the imperative remains to render conditional hospitality *less* conditional, to at least reduce the inhospitable elements of traditional hospitality.

Having explored alterity in its relative and absolute forms, and, through readings of Levinas and Derrida, having laid emphasis on the encounter between the self and absolute otherness, I shall now bring the question of alterity to bear on the trilogy.

## **2.1 Molloy: Responding to Alterity**

Derrida maintains that the question of otherness is a question of "response or responsibility" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 131). I argue, in this section of my chapter, that Molloy, as outsider, precipitates this question, and that his narrative is centrally concerned with the issue of response. Drawing on Levinas's insights into the relationship

between the self and the other, and Derrida's work on hospitality, I examine the encounter with alterity in the first part of *Molloy*, firstly from the perspective of Molloy himself, and then from that of others who respond to him.<sup>22</sup>

Molloy's response to alterity can be divided into two categories, namely, his response to impersonal alterity and his response to the personal alterity of the other person. Impersonal alterity, to begin with, consists in the unknown, the unfamiliar, that which resists assimilation into existing structures of knowledge or experience, thereby interrupting or fragmenting those structures. I approach Molloy's response to such impersonal alterity through a consideration of four interrelated aspects of the novel: non-intentional waiting, vagrancy, namelessness and incuriosity.

Non-intentional waiting, as a relationship between a subject stripped of subjectivity and an ungraspable object, is, to again use Levinas's phrase, a "relationship without terms" (*Time* 32). As such, it is a form of the "unrelating relation" which constitutes the paradoxical bond between the self and absolute otherness (*Totality* 295). In non-intentional waiting, subject and object are infinitely distant, yet nonetheless remain connected, which allows the preservation of alterity as absolute while in relation to the self. The otherness of the awaited object is not reduced to the familiar terms of the same, but maintained as irreducibly other. This is due both to the fact that the object is ungraspable and also to the subject's loss of mastery. As ungraspable, the object is placed permanently beyond the subject's cognitive reach, and is thus immune from reduction to the same. And as a consciousness without a controlling subjectivity, the waiter is unable to manifest the mastery that is presupposed by the incorporation of otherness into sameness. In non-intentional waiting, the self's departure from itself is an endless process that does not conclude in return, precisely the movement, according to Levinas, by which absolute alterity is welcomed by the self. If Molloy's quest repeatedly devolves into a state of non-intentional waiting, as I have argued, he is, intermittently at least, open to absolute alterity.

Molloy is, first and foremost, a creature of the road, speaking with affection of being "on [his] way": "that way of which I knew nothing, qua way, which was nothing more than a surface, bright or dark, smooth or rough, and always dear to me, in spite of all,

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<sup>22</sup> My focus in this chapter is exclusively on the first part of *Molloy*. Examining alterity in Moran's narrative would risk too great an overlap with material previously covered, such as Moran's "disintegrations" and the logic of spectrality.

and the dear sound of that which goes and is gone, with a brief dust, when the weather is dry" (Beckett, *Molloy* 22). On a larger scale, vagrancy in the novel is used as a metaphor for an openness to alterity. Vagrancy, or wandering, is a movement without return, in distinction to travel, which has the fixed point of home as an origin and ultimate destination. Accordingly, the wanderer is a figure of the aimlessness that we have seen Levinas observe to be characteristic of the self's movement towards absolute otherness. Furthermore, while on the level of traditional hospitality the vagrant's homelessness precludes her or him from being a host, absolute hospitality brings with it an imperative to homelessness. The master of the house must be, to an extent, unseated, rendered less masterful, less authoritative and domineering. By virtue of his homelessness, then, in not reducing the unknown to the familiar by orienting it in relation to a home, Molloy is better able to welcome absolute alterity. He also avoids the possibility of xenophobia, which, as Derrida notes, attaches to the host's sovereignty over her or his home and the accompanying desire to protect that position (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 53).

It must be noted, however, that Molloy's movements are not entirely aimless, nor is he entirely homeless. For his whole life, Molloy believes, he has been oriented towards his mother:

all my life, I think I had been going to my mother, with the purpose of establishing our relations on a less precarious footing. And when I was with her, and I often succeeded, I left her without having done anything. And when I was no longer with her I was again on my way to her, hoping to do better the next time.

(Beckett, *Molloy* 81)

This aim, however, is not fixed and permanent. After his encounter with the police, Molloy forgets his reasons for wanting to visit his mother, and heads out into the country, away from her. He also forgets his goal during his stay with Lousse, after which, although he remembers his destination, he changes his mind about it and travels into the country yet again. At best, then, Molloy oscillates between aiming and aimlessness. It might also be noted that he, in a sense, reaches his destination at the beginning of the narrative, when he gives a detailed account of his visits to his mother. Thus his aim, having fulfilled itself in the opening pages of the novel, becomes aimless, so to speak, leaving room only for a repetition of the same event.

Of Molloy's homelessness it can be observed that at the time of his wanderings he *is* utterly without abode, as he admits to the police (18). But when we first meet him, and for the duration of the time of narration, he is installed in his mother's room, a kind of home. This room cannot be said to be his home in the full sense of the word, however, as it is not in fact his own, but someone else's, and so fails to represent the site of his unique selfhood. Hence, in narrated time, Molloy is initially homeless, for most of his life it would seem, and then later at home only in a limited sense when he is settled in his mother's room.

Molloy characterises the "now" of narration as a time in which "the icy words hail down upon [him], the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named" (27). He here implies that naming is a kind of murder, a practice that attempts to capture the essence of things, but, ironically, ensures that that essence is effaced. Moreover, he contrasts his immersion in language with his life before writing, in which naming is largely absent. At one point he says of the name of his town: "It's too difficult to say, for me. And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate [. . .]. And so on for all the other things which made merry with my senses. Yes, even then [. . .] there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names" (27). Molloy's aversion to naming continues even as he constructs his narrative, notably in his characteristic uncertainty about the names of people he has encountered and his tendency to provide a number of possible alternatives. For instance, he introduces Lousse as follows: "Mrs. Loy [. . .] or Lousse, I forget, Christian name something like Sophie" (29), before finally settling on "Lousse, without the Mrs." (30). Similarly, the old woman with whom he has a sexual relationship is never assigned a definitive name, and is known alternatively as "Edith" (52), "Ruth" (53) or "Rose" (78). Naming, and everything that comes with it, is the primary criterion of a conditional hospitality, and Derrida, as we have seen, argues that in order to truly welcome the other qua other, acts of identification must be suspended. In this light, Molloy's resistance to naming may be viewed as an openness to absolute alterity, a refusal to render otherness relative by assigning it a place within a known system of reference.

Perhaps the trait that most clearly illustrates Molloy's openness to the absolutely other is his way of encountering the world "without desire of enlightenment" (45). His inclination is to let things be or remain as they are, without trying to dominate them

through comprehension, thereby accommodating objects in a manner that allows their otherness to remain other. The prime example of this attitude is given in Molloy's relation to a small, unidentified, seemingly insignificant object made up of "two [perfect] crosses joined, at their points of intersection, by a bar" such that the object "did not seem to have any base properly so-called, but stood with equal stability on any one of its four bases, and without any change of appearance" (58). In a passage that introduces the notion of the "incurious seeker" to which I referred in my first chapter, Molloy's enchantment with the anonymous object is explained:

it had a most specific function always to be hidden from me. I could therefore puzzle over it endlessly without the least risk. For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker. (58–59)

Molloy posits the object not only as unknown, but as unknowable, and himself not only as ignorant, but as beyond knowledge.<sup>23</sup> The aporia of knowing one is beyond knowing anything points to a different kind of knowledge, one that does not aim at comprehension because it recognises the intractability of the unknown or alterior. This is an unstable, transient knowledge, as what *is* known (that there is nothing to be known) undermines the very notion of knowledge, and is thus vulnerable to radical self-critique, even self-effacement. In fatally undermining itself, knowledge becomes a kind of non-knowledge, and knowing a kind of un-knowing, in which the defining feature of conventional knowledge, that it grasp its object, is reversed. Molloy also suggests a different kind of seeking to match a knowledge stripped of comprehension. Seeking is usually curious, that is, driven by an impulse to 'find,' to learn and know. To accommodate that which is unknowable and incomprehensible, seeking must become "incurious," content to let its object remain beyond knowledge. Involving both an absent object and infinite delay, incurious seeking may be understood as a form of non-intentional waiting in which the self relates to an irreducible alterity. Interestingly, it is this radical otherness that motivates Molloy to seek in the first place (he puzzles over the unidentified object *because* he can never understand it), positioning alterity as simultaneously impetus and obstacle. As the incurious seeker's impetus, alterity is not something to be conquered, but, rather,

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<sup>23</sup> The object is most likely a knife-rest, or at least exactly like one. So, theoretically, Molloy *could* learn its function. But the point is that he *believes* himself to be beyond knowing anything about it.

something to be preserved and welcomed. In this hospitable welcome of otherness by the self lies the "peace" to which Molloy refers, a non-antagonistic, or, to use Levinas's term, "non-allergic" relation between the self and the other (*Totality* 51).

Towards the natural world, too, Molloy is capable of a kind of absolute hospitality. Lying in Lousse's garden he listens to "another noise":

that of my life become the life of this garden as it rode the earth of deeps and wildernesses. Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be. Then I was no longer that sealed jar to which I owed my being so well preserved, but a wall gave way and I filled with roots and tame stems for example, stakes long since dead and ready for burning, the recess of night and the imminence of dawn, and then the labour of the planet rolling eager into winter [. . .]. (Beckett, *Molloy* 44)

Beckett often uses an auditory metaphor for representing the encounter with alterity. In this scene, Molloy listens to the sounds of the natural world around him, and what comes to him, what arrives as epiphany, is his intimate connection with a vast, impersonal otherness. This encounter involves an opening of self that allows alterity to penetrate the sphere of the same. Like the host to the guest, Molloy says, not only 'come,' but 'enter,' although this welcome is not an act of saying or intention at all, but more a case of giving way and allowing otherness to arrive on its own terms. Towards objects and towards nature, and towards the unknown in general, then, Molloy displays the hospitable welcome that accommodates and respects alterity. The question now emerges of his relationship with personal alterity, or the otherness of the other person.

The episode in which we have seen Molloy observe, from a distance, an encounter between two men unknown to him, named only "A" and "C," is central to the novel's concern with intersubjectivity. Long before the men know that they are moving in relation to each other, Molloy recognises the fact of relationship, sees them steadily approaching one another, on a collision course, so to speak. Upon finally meeting, "they did not pass each other by, but halted, face to face, as in the country, of an evening, on a deserted road, two wayfaring strangers will, without there being anything extraordinary about it" (5). Prior to their meeting, Molloy encounters each in turn, both visually and in reflection, and does so again after the two have parted ways. In doing so, he betrays an intense curiosity about where the men have come from, where they are going and with what aim. Not only does he carefully describe the physical features and overall appearance of the two, but also

ascribes a detailed explanatory narrative to each, going to some lengths to account for and make sense of their behaviour. He thereby attempts to circumscribe their alterity with familiar terms drawn from what can only be his previous experience and knowledge of people. In other words, he attempts to understand them. According to Levinas, such an attempt precludes an encounter with the genuine otherness of the other person, suggesting that in his interpersonal relations Molloy is closed to absolute alterity. Indeed, the manner in which he relates to A and C involves a return to self. Referring to C, he speaks of his "soul's leap out to him, at the end of its elastic," and implies that it is in the same manner that his "soul [. . .] strain[s], wildly" towards A (7). A stretched elastic will return to its previous dimensions, a sign that Molloy, while moving towards the other, is nonetheless bound to return 'home.' As a *curious* seeker, he seeks to learn, to acquire knowledge of the other, and in doing so, conceives of the other's otherness as relative, as amenable to comprehension by the self. Molloy, it seems, is not beyond knowing when it comes to people.

Tellingly, he emphasises knowledge a number of times during the narration of the episode. He lingers on the idea that C, having traversed the land, now "knows these hills, that is to say he knows them better, and if ever again he sees them from afar it will be [. . .] with other eyes" (6). Molloy here imagines C conquering the unknown with panoramic vision. He also imagines that the encounter between A and C engenders familiarity between them, that it establishes a lasting connection, if one was not already present: "But they knew each other perhaps. Now in any case they do, now I think they will know each other, greet each other, even in the depths of the town" (5). Furthermore, when Molloy imagines actually catching up to A, it is primarily in the interests of satisfying his curiosity: "There I am then, informed as to certain things, knowing certain things about him, things I didn't know, things I had craved to know, things I had never thought of" (9). When encountering people, then, Molloy seeks disclosure, a shedding of light on the other. He also approaches the other within a clear horizon of expectation, noting "[h]ow agreeable it is to be confirmed, after a more or less long period of vacillation, in one's first impressions" (11).

There is, however, a tension in Molloy's narrative between claiming knowledge of the other (through explanatory narratives, for instance) and the admission that nothing is ever truly known. While using his powers of observation to draw conclusions about the



two men, he is well aware that appearances can be deceptive. He imagines C, in the past, looking over the land he travels now, from a height:

From there he must have seen it all, the plain, the sea, and then these selfsame hills that some call mountains, indigo in places in the evening light, their serried ranges crowding to the skyline, cloven with hidden valleys that the eye divines from sudden shifts of colour [. . .]. But not all are divined, even from that height, and often where only one escarpment is discerned, and one crest, in reality there are two, two escarpments, two crests, riven by a valley. (5–6)

Molloy thus implicitly admits that he may be wrong about A and C, whom he views from a distance. More specifically, he questions the narrative he ascribes to A. His first impression of A is that he has emerged from the city for an evening stroll, an impression initially justified by the fact that A walks leisurely, smoking a cigar, wears shoes unfit for long-distance travel, and is accompanied by a small pet dog. This, however, does not stop Molloy from wondering the following: "But was not perhaps in reality the cigar a cutty, and were not the sand-shoes boots, hobnailed, dust-whitened, and what prevented the dog from being one of those stray dogs that you pick up and take in your arms [. . .]?" (8). His knowledge is thus not totalising, instead leaving open a host of alternative possibilities. It still places the other within limits, thereby circumscribing his or her alterity, but, like Beckett's broken circle, not totally. Radical doubt constitutes a breach in rationality, which goes too far in self-critique to return (and complete the circle). What emerges is a broken, self-undermining rationality that, pushed to the limit, renders itself impotent, and which is incapable of comprehending the other. In the novel's concern with knowledge, then, there is an unresolved tension between treating otherness as relative or subject to knowledge, and treating it as absolute or beyond knowledge.

According to Levinas, the relation to absolute alterity is one of desire, not knowledge (*Totality* 82). In his encounter with A and C, Molloy certainly is in the grip of desire, but is it desire for the absolutely other? Of C, he says: "I watched him recede, at grips (myself) with the temptation to get up and follow him, perhaps even to catch up with him one day, so as to know him better, be myself less lonely" (Beckett, *Molloy* 7). He also admits that his interest in A and C stems from his "craving for a fellow" (11). It would appear that Molloy desires, not a relation with radical otherness, but contact and intimacy, friendship or love, a kind of relationship that involves enlightenment or knowledge of the other person. This is very different to Levinas, for whom, as Treanor observes, "[l]ove is

an unjust modification of responsibility insofar as it privileges one other on the basis of nearness, similarity, reciprocity, or sexual attraction" (48). In the Levinasian encounter with the other person, the self and the other, as we have seen, enter into a relationship while simultaneously remaining separate. "The intimacy that is normally associated with love," Treanor continues, "is, and must be, entirely absent from this relationship" (48). Yet it is precisely such intimacy that Molloy desires, a bridging of distance and a relation of understanding. In other words, he desires a relationship with a relative other in which the other's alterity is reduced through contact.

It is, however, only in imaginative contact with A and C that Molloy is able to manage something amounting to an understanding of the other. At close quarters, he is generally at a loss, failing to render the other person familiar – but not through want of trying. From his perspective, the other is often inassimilable because, as outsider, he lacks the 'inside' knowledge and skills necessary to decode the other's behaviour and respond appropriately. Most notably, he lacks linguistic mastery; during his wanderings, he is not at home in language but lives "far from words" (Beckett, *Molloy* 27). In verbal exchanges with other people he is often "reduced to confabulation" (16), either saying "too much or too little" or honestly believing he has responded suitably but in reality doing nothing of the kind (29, 16). The most imposing obstacle to his understanding of others is his trouble translating the sounds of language into sense:

Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning, and this is probably one of the reasons why conversation was unspeakably painful to me. And the words I uttered myself, and which must nearly always have gone with an effort of intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect. And this is perhaps one of the reasons I was so untalkative, I mean this trouble I had in understanding not only what others said to me, but also what I said to them. (45)

Molloy's failure of understanding provides a comic slant on the Levinasian imperative to incomprehension. Importantly, though, he often fails to comprehend correctly, rather than not comprehending at all, as, for example, when he understands the police sergeant to be threatening him with "a cylindrical ruler" (18). He desires to make the other person intelligible, but is largely unable to do so. In practice, then, the other is beyond his grasp, and the alterity of other people to which he relates is effectively absolute.

Considering the ways in which Molloy is isolated from others, it may be asked whether he is a solipsist. He has a propensity to reach out to others, as we have seen with his response to A and C, but this propensity exists primarily in his imagination and is rarely manifested in concrete acts. After all, he does not actually follow either traveller, but remains caught up in the "murmurs of [his] little world" (11). When he does manage to reach out to the other concretely, the response is not encouraging: "Thanks I suppose, as the urchin said when I picked up his marble, I don't know why, I didn't have to, and I suppose he would have preferred to pick it up himself. Or perhaps it wasn't to be picked up. And the effort it cost me, with my stiff leg" (44–45). Nonetheless, instead of a solipsist, utterly self-centred, Molloy is someone who wants to connect with others but does not know how. Drawing on Levinas, we might say that the way he attempts to connect undermines connection: by attempting to understand others, by "shackl[ing]" them with stories, to use Moran's term (120), he reduces their alterity. Hence, any connection he establishes is not with a genuine other, who, to remain other, must be infinitely distant or different from the self, despite the fact of relationship. In short, whereas Molloy relates to the absolutely other when it comes to impersonal alterity, he relates primarily to relative otherness when encountering people.

Having examined Molloy's response to both personal and impersonal alterity, I now turn to others' responses to him, as a figure of alterity. One response to the outsider that the novel portrays as conventional is figured in A's reaction to Molloy:

He is a little frightened of me, a little sorry for me, I disgust him not a little. I am not a pretty sight, I don't smell good. What is it I want? Ah that tone I know, compounded of pity, of fear, of disgust. [. . .] he leaves me, he's in a hurry. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, he was loitering, I've already said so, but after three minutes of me he is in a hurry [. . .]. (8–9)

The encounter between the two is, of course, imagined, suggesting that Molloy has internalised the response in question and accepted it as the most likely. A's first move is to question the outsider, to demand that he state his purpose (which, in this case, is simply to satisfy curiosity). Overall, he is gripped by mixed emotions, caught between sympathy and repulsion. For a short while, his sympathy dominates, and he pauses to acknowledge and respond to the other's plea, but before long his "fear" and "disgust" take over and he

turns his back on the outsider. One can quite confidently surmise that if Molloy had not approached him, he would never have approached Molloy, so strong is his aversion.

Indeed, other characters merely ignore Molloy. For example, the people departing the lodging house, on the steps of which Molloy spends the night after leaving Lousse, who pay "no heed" to him (55), or the "young old man," taking shelter from the rain in a doorway, who moves on the moment Molloy joins him (57). Sometimes, however, sympathy overpowers disgust, and charity emerges, yet in a dubious form. When a social worker offers Molloy an unappetising cup of grey tea and a slice of dry bread, he observes as follows: "Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth" (19–20).

A more extended example of charity in the novel comes in the form of Lousse's response to Molloy, which I will examine shortly. First, I would note that against the law, too, Molloy is defenceless. Challenged by a policeman for resting while astride his bicycle, arms on handlebars, head on arms, "rocking and abandoned," his perfectly innocent behaviour is mistaken for public indecency (20). His uniqueness – the fact, for instance, that, given the state of his legs, riding a bicycle is exceptionally taxing, and resting in more normal positions, such as sitting, is not viable – is of no consequence to this law which rises up before him, to which he is subjected. The law is universal, applying to every person as if they were the same: "there are not two laws, that was the next thing I thought I understood, not two laws, one for the healthy, another for the sick, but only one to which all must bow" (16). In the novel, the law thus represents a total encroachment of a person's alterity, in the name of equality. Even more basically than the injunction against eccentricity, the law demands identification: a person must have "papers" (16). Molloy, however, possesses no identifying documents, and for some time cannot even remember his own name. From the perspective of community and its laws, Molloy, as unidentifiable, poses a threat, which is why he is arrested and detained. The law cannot accommodate alterity, but, rather, through the imperative to identify and shed light on the other, seeks to eliminate it. It is with this impulse that the police sergeant conducts his interrogation of Molloy, forcing the other to give an account of himself, a narrative to explain his conduct and intentions. All Molloy can manage is to indicate that

he has no papers, no occupation, no home, and that he is on his way to his mother, whose exact location he cannot describe. As to everything else he is "in the dark" (18). Since there is very little to disclose or wrest from hiddenness, the sergeant's attempt to understand Molloy, and thereby circumscribe his alterity, is hopelessly ineffective, exposing the law as comically impotent in its drive to eliminate otherness. The point is not so much that Molloy is treated unjustly, as that when faced with the outsider, justice turns into a parody of itself.

Molloy is ultimately deemed harmless and let off with a warning to behave better in future. Upon gaining his freedom, he finds himself outside, and immediately celebrates his freedom through "play":

the declining sun fell full on the white wall of the barracks. It was like being in China. A confused shadow was cast. It was I and my bicycle. I began to play, gesticulating, waving my hat, moving my bicycle to and fro before me, blowing the horn, watching the wall. They were watching me through the bars, I felt their eyes upon me. The policeman on guard at the door told me to go away. (21)

Through play, Molloy sets himself in sharp relief against the rigid seriousness of the law. That he uses the very surface of the structure that had imprisoned him as material for his play, is a kind of rebellion, an obstinate resistance to the law's dominion over him. Yet not conscious rebellion, for he acts spontaneously, as if his little game were the most natural thing in the world. In a sense, he can't help himself, for his nature is foreign to the law which can only fail to control him. Without knowing it, he shows himself to be fundamentally beyond the law's grasp.

I return now to Molloy's sojourn with Lousse, which occupies the middle third of his narrative. The two meet when Molloy fatally runs over Lousse's dog with his bicycle. Despite this fact, Lousse's first impulse is to defend him, both against the angry crowd which soon gathers and against the law, which rises up in the form of a police constable: "But it is clear he has not all his wits about him," she pleads, "that he is beside himself, for reasons of which we know nothing and which might put us all to shame, if we did know them" (28–29). Here Lousse posits limitations to knowledge of the other, and pays respect to Molloy's alterity. She does not ask him to identify himself or question him at all, but does make certain demands on him, calling him to responsibility by pointing out

that, having killed her dog [he] was morally obliged to help her carry it home and bury it, that she did not wish to prosecute [him] for what [he] had done, but that it was not always possible to do as one did not wish, that she found [him] likeable enough in spite of [his] hideous appearance and would be happy to hold out to [him] a helping hand [. . .]. (29)

Couched suspiciously in a veiled threat, the charity Lousse extends appears to be of the conventional kind, in which sympathy outweighs, but does not eliminate, disgust. The concrete manifestation of her charity, however, is not conventional. She opens her home to the outsider, shelters and nourishes him, without, it seems, asking anything in return, apart from help in burying her dog. Imposing no conditions whatsoever on Molloy's stay with her, she allows him the freedom to be himself, lets him be, whatever that may entail. Her apparently unconditional acceptance of Molloy, the way she allows him free rein in her home, strikes us as strange, and, like Molloy, we look for ulterior motives. Unconditional hospitality, however, *is* strange, breaking all the familiar laws of traditional hospitality, as we have seen Derrida argue.

But is Lousse's response to Molloy really an example of absolute hospitality? The way she treats him when he first arrives in her home suggests not. She has him washed and shaved, and even perfumed. Significantly, she does this in a domineering manner, without his knowledge or consent (he suspects that she drugs him). Perhaps she thinks it is for his own good, but that kind of thinking, believing that one has the right to speak on behalf of the other, and the right to overpower the other, is certainly not in line with absolute hospitality, which welcomes the other precisely as he or she arrives, without demanding conformity with the host's customs or tastes, or requiring the fulfilment of any condition at all. Lousse also dresses Molloy in another's clothes – her own, it would seem, as he finds himself in a "very flimsy" nightdress, "pink and transparent and adorned with ribands and frills and lace" (34, 39). She thus transforms him, like Circe the witch transforms Odysseus and his crew, an association which the text invites. Furthermore, when Molloy awakes, he finds the door of his room locked and the window barred, making him Lousse's prisoner or hostage, not her guest. Even though he is later released from the room, and his clothes restored to him, that he remains a kind of prisoner is suggested by his sense that Lousse has him under constant surveillance (48).

A further indication that Lousse's hospitality is not unconditional is the dogged persistence with which she endeavours to persuade Molloy to remain with her. After a

brief attempt to ready his bicycle for departure, Molloy gives up and lies down on the grass, "suddenly overcome by a great weariness":

It was then that Lousse, taking advantage of my weakness, squatted down beside me and began to make me propositions, to which I must confess I listened, absent-mindedly, I had nothing else to do, I could do nothing else, and doubtless she had poisoned my beer with something intended to mollify me, to mollify Molloy, with the result that I was nothing more than a lump of melting wax, so to speak. (42)

To "mollify Molloy" is an allusion to Circe, whose magic Odysseus is able to resist with the help of the mythical herb "moly" (Homer, *Odyssey* 10.306). In a scene of seduction, Lousse plies Molloy with a relentless, night-long soliloquy expounding the mutual benefits of him residing with her, and in doing so, attempts to mould him, to make him conform with her desires. In other words, she tries to turn him into someone else, or at least another version of himself, in order to satisfy her own interests. She certainly makes it clear that she has much to gain from him, that his presence addresses a pressing, if mysterious, need. This suggests that her hospitality is premised on receiving something in return, making it conditional. Yet the only thing she wants in return is that he stay, that he make it possible for her to accommodate him in all his eccentricity, without any further condition. This, however, is enough for her hospitality to be a form of domination. In trying to domesticate Molloy and make him a creature of the house, she seeks to circumscribe his movements within a socially acceptable structure, which would amount to rendering him more or less stationary. In short, she wants him to stop wandering. Speaking from community's perspective, in which the vagrant's ceaseless movement towards the unknown is an unsettling threat, Lousse demands that Molloy change, that he alter some of his most fundamental habits and attitudes in order to better coincide with the norms of society.

Whether or not Lousse's persuasion succeeds in its aim is a moot point. Molloy does, in fact, end up staying with her for some time, up to a year he says, but is unaware of why he does so (46). Similarly, during the time of narration, he cannot explain why he devotes so much of his narrative to his stay with Lousse, three times admitting the futility of dwelling on it, but proceeding nonetheless (47, 48, 51). He does make the curious observation that the dog's burial was also his own burial (32), and the dog's grave his own grave (54), suggesting that Lousse's hospitality is a hostile gesture of incorporation that

stifles his spirit or kills an essential part of him, rendering him powerless to resist. In this sense, Molloy is crushed under the weight of his host's demands. But not irrevocably so, for an inner voice eventually comes to him with an appeal from his incarcerated nature: "Get out of here, Molloy, take your crutches and get out of here" (54). "And perhaps I understood it all wrong," he concedes, "but I understood it and that was the novelty" (54). This for Molloy is a rare act of comprehension, but not of the kind which issues in disclosive knowledge. He would be unable, after all, to provide logical reasons or explain with any clarity or insight why he leaves. Instead, Beckett uses an auditory metaphor for knowledge as epiphany, as a revelation that comes unannounced. In following the voice, Molloy shows himself to be ultimately resistant to Lousse's conditional, 'panoramic' hospitality.

To summarise, in the first part of *Molloy*, Beckett broaches, but does not answer, the question of response to alterity. Instead, he presents a variety of perspectives and possibilities. Firstly, we see Molloy relate to impersonal alterity, to the unknown and unknowable. In his vagrant wandering, incuriosity, tendency towards non-intentional consciousness and aversion to naming, he displays an openness to otherness, giving hospitable welcome to absolute alterity. Secondly, Molloy is shown relating to other people, this time in a manner which is closed to otherness, or, more accurately, open to relative alterity, but closed to absolute alterity. His intense curiosity, his desire to know and comprehend others, to assign them explanatory narratives and make them objects of intentional consciousness, is a movement whereby the otherness of others is reduced and rendered relative to himself, the knowing subject. Furthermore, he is gripped by a desire for contact and intimacy, for love, which is to be opposed to the relation between the self and absolute otherness wherein the other must remain distant in order to remain absolute. Thirdly, other characters in the novel relate to Molloy as a figure of alterity. Policemen interrogate him, others turn their backs on him, and some offer him charity, which, however, emerges as a form of disrespect and domination. Both the law and conditional hospitality seek to lay hold of him and render him less other, but Molloy is ungraspable.

Ultimately, none of the responses to him does him justice. The question of how to respond to the outsider is thus foregrounded, and the point is perhaps to encourage the reader to question her or his own response. One possible approach highlighted by the text is that of the incurious seeker, who preserves alterity by placing it beyond knowledge.



While this response is preferred by Molloy in the abstract, it is not the one he has to people, who to him are objects of a very curious contemplation, and hence potential objects of knowledge, which suggests the difficulty involved in relating to the other person as wholly other. Molloy's opposing responses to alterity – curiosity and incuriosity – highlight the Derridean question of hospitality, that is, "[i]s it more just and more loving to question or not to question?" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 29). Is the good relationship one of proximity and understanding, or distance and unconditional acceptance? Whereas Levinas would affirm the latter, and Derrida, although clear that absolute hospitality is impossible, would nonetheless uphold it as an imperative, Beckett leaves the question provocatively open.

## **2.2 *Malone Dies*: Becoming Other**

In *Malone Dies*, alterity plays a key role in the treatment of both death and fiction. In this section of my chapter, while briefly examining the connection between death and alterity, my focus is on Malone's encounter with otherness through writing fiction. As an author, he "depart[s] from [him]self" – is transported "elsewhere" when writing – which appears to put him in touch with something beyond the self (Beckett, *Malone* 202, 210). Just what kind of alterity is at stake in this relation is a question I seek to answer. I also discuss the significance of Malone's encounter with the alterity of the other person, which leads to a consideration of love and proximity in the novel.

In waiting for death, Malone encounters alterity, both in its relative and absolute forms. As I have previously argued, death is doubled in the novel, the first death being possible and comprehensible, the second being impossible and incomprehensible. The subject is able to master the first death by understanding it and by charting a way through the dying process, whereas faced with the other death, she or he is, to reiterate Levinas's phrase, "no longer *able to be able*" (*Time* 74). When Malone deals with death as graspable and amenable to control, he implicitly posits its alterity as relative, as a potential object of knowledge essentially linked to himself and his own projects. This is an intentional relationship in which death is the *noema* of a *noesis*. The other death, in contrast, is characterised by an absolute alterity which is irreducibly other, and therefore cannot be

assimilated or assumed because it exceeds the subject's mastery. As Critchley notes, via Levinas, the self's relation to the impossible, ungraspable death is a relation to "an alterity that cannot be reduced to the self" (97). Because intentionality always involves the ego's return to itself, such an encounter with absolute alterity is non-intentional: Abrahamic rather than Odyssean. I have argued that, in his relation to death, Malone oscillates between the intentional and the non-intentional, between treating death as graspable, on the one hand, and being gripped by its ungraspability, on the other. If this is so, he also oscillates between relations with absolute and relative alterity.

My focus in this section, however, is not on the alterity of death, but on the alterity Malone encounters through his writing. To begin with, the role of author is very different from that which he has filled for most of his life. For him, the creativity of authorship is a kind of "play" which he opposes to his habitual "earnestness" (Beckett, *Malone* 174). Over the years, he has often attempted to 'play,' and while sometimes succeeding briefly, has always ultimately failed, falling back into earnestness. This amounts, in his mind, to a failure to "live and invent":

Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried. While within me the wild beast of earnestness padded up and down, roaring, ravening, rending. I have done that. And all alone, well hidden, played the clown, all alone, hour after hour, motionless, often standing, spellbound, groaning. That's right, groan. I couldn't play. (189)

Malone's emphasis, when it comes to his failure to play, is on solitude, being left "all alone." Successful play here involves playthings or playmates, entities which the author imaginatively conjures up to form the raw materials of fiction. Malone, however, has been unable to sustain a relationship with his fictional creations:

But it was not long before I found myself alone, in the dark. That is why I gave up trying to play and took to myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding. Such is the earnestness from which, for nearly a century now, I have never been able to depart. (174)

Interestingly, this state of earnestness appears to be one that is open to absolute alterity. Like Molloy, Malone has lived in "darkness" or incomprehension and stumbled along in aimlessness. He has been an incurious seeker, which is to say a non-intentional waiter who relates to the wholly other and a subject stripped of mastery. Unlike Molloy, Malone

deeply regrets this state and desires above all to change. Seeking to end his relationship with the darkness of absolute alterity, he attempts to resume his mastery and take control of his remaining days, specifically through the creative process of composing fiction which, for him, is something that happens out of the shadows in the light of representational intentionality. Malone is clear about his desire, noting the following about his protagonist: "I want as little as possible of darkness in his story. A little darkness, in itself, at the time, is nothing. You think no more about it and you go on. But I know what darkness is, it accumulates, thickens, then suddenly bursts and drowns everything" (184).

It is worth stressing that Malone's familiar self, in its relation to alterity, is characterised by a lack of control. As he observes:

I must say that to me at least and for as long as I can remember the sensation is familiar of a blind and tired hand delving feebly in my particles and letting them trickle between its fingers. And sometimes, when all is quiet, I feel it plunged in me up to the elbow, but gentle, and as though sleeping. But soon it stirs, wakes, fondles, clutches, ransacks, ravages, avenging its failure to scatter me with one sweep. (218)

Malone here describes the sensation of an external, anterior agency entering into him and violently seizing power. The unwilling host to a radical otherness, he experiences the usurpation or possession as a trauma. Hence his avowal to resume his mastery and his plan to do this through writing, that is, through his own agency, using his own hand.

Despite his intentions, however, Malone is undeniably out of control when he writes, remaining largely 'in the dark.' His characters, for instance, at times surprise him, seeming to assume lives of their own. Remarking that Sapo was "fleet of foot," Malone interrupts his story to indicate that this attribute surprises him, that, although he ascribed it to Sapo, it was expressed without intention: "Fleet of foot? Well well" (183). He also repeatedly intrudes upon his narrative to complain of its "tedium" (181, 183), strongly suggesting that the story he tells is not the story he wants to tell. Just such a misfiring of intention characterises Macmann's attempt at street-cleaning, which serves as a metaphor for Malone's loss of control over the writing (and dying) process. Employed to remove all refuse, Macmann instead rearranges it, leaving the street looking even worse than before: "But it was truly as if he were not master of his movements and did not know what he was doing, while he was doing it, nor what he had done, once he had done it" (237–38).

Malone himself attributes this lack of control to an encounter with alterity: "But my fingers too write in other latitudes and the air that breathes through my pages and turns them without my knowing, when I doze off, so that the subject falls far from the verb and the object lands somewhere in the void, is not the air of this second-last abode" (228). It is, by implication, an other air that inspires Malone's writing and that undermines his control. Contrary to his expectations, the work, to again use Blanchot's phrase, "eludes all plans," and the artist is deceived if he or she thinks it can be charted ("Death's Space" 106). Malone's attempt to master his story, and so escape his habitual nature, is doomed from the start by an irreducible alterity at the heart of the narrative relation.

In addition to this absolute alterity, Malone encounters a relative alterity in the form of the alter ego. He wants to become another, to become other than himself, and thinks he achieves this doubling by creating a fictional character through whom he might live vicariously. As I have previously pointed out, Malone makes the following remark in reference to his protagonist: "And on the threshold of being no more I succeed in being another" (188). He seeks to escape his familiar self by writing another version of himself in fiction, and is thus involved in a "search for [him]self" (193), for what he deems to be his better self. The otherness he encounters is different to, and thus outside of, the self, but also, paradoxically, inside the self, a relation which he describes as "be[ing] another, in [him]self, in another" (189). On the notion of inner alterity, Levinas comments that "[t]he I is identical in its very alterations," including the sense in which the I "is to itself an other" or is "foreign to itself" (*Totality* 36). When Levinas says that "the I, as other, is not an 'other'" he means that an alter ego is not absolutely other, only other relative to the self: "The alterity of the I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I" (37). In this regard, Davis notes that "the other within the Same prompts a reidentification and forms part of the identity (the process of self-identification) which constitutes the Same" (42). The self, for Levinas at least, is able to accommodate inner difference while nonetheless remaining constant in its identity, or, in other words, is able to reduce the alterity of an alter ego to the sphere of the same.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, it would appear that, in encountering his alter ego or the other

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<sup>24</sup> In the next section of this chapter, I challenge this argument.

within, Malone does not relate to an absolute alterity, but rather, to an alterity which by its nature is other with respect to himself, an otherness that is essentially relative.

Malone's becoming other happens on two planes, which correspond to the novel's two levels of discourse as described by Julie Campbell: "the level of the story of the narrative situation, where Malone 'plays,' and the embedded level of the stories: the result of Malone's 'play'" (437). On the level of the narrative situation, during the time of narration, Malone becomes other to himself by becoming an author who plays and a man who lives and invents, in stark contrast to his familiar self. On the embedded level of his fictional world, during narrated time, the vehicle of his othering is the character of Macmann. I will discuss each in turn.

Malone's success as a writer must be qualified. His narrative is halting, fragmented, frequently pierced by his sceptical authorial intrusions, punctuated to the end with interruptions in which the time of narrative breaks down into the time of dying. He is unable to sustain his 'play' and, as in the old times, regularly finds himself alone, abandoned in the dark. In addition, the stories he tells are not ones which, according to Blanchot, "win the reader's belief": "on the contrary, their artifice is immediately exposed – the stories are *invented*" ("Where Now?" 112). For instance, as Malone constructs the character of Sapo, it becomes apparent that the creative process is driven by a series of more or less arbitrary choices. On a number of occasions, Malone pauses in his narrative with a comment like, "that won't do" or "no, I can't do it" (Beckett, *Malone* 183, 190), revealing the usually hidden decision-making that propels a narrative forward. At stake here, according to Sherman, is "the contingency that haunts every narrative relation and that it is the project of narrative to banish or efface" (74). Malone's narrative flaunts its contingency openly, thereby impeding the reader's imaginative engagement. In Blanchot's view, Malone tells these self-consciously fictional stories as a distraction to fend off the infinite time of death into which he feels himself falling. The conclusion Blanchot draws from this is harsh:

Hence the narrative element is nothing more than a means of public fraud and constitutes a grating compromise that overbalances the book, a conflict of artifices that spoils the experiment, for the stories remain stories to an excessive degree: Their brilliance, their skillful irony, everything that gives them form and interest also detaches them from Malone, the dying man, detaches them from the time of his death in order to reinstate the customary narrative time in which we do not

believe and which, here, means nothing to us, for we are expecting something much more important. ("Where Now?" 112)

However, the fact that his stories detach Malone from his dying, detach him from himself, is pivotal to the text's concern with alterity. His relation with his protagonist is the primary means of his becoming other, and so cannot be ignored in favour of a single-minded focus on the narrative situation or time of narration.

Malone, as I have previously indicated, vows that the fiction he writes will not resemble himself or his own life. Initially, it appears that he gets this right, as he observes the following about Sapo:

We are getting on. Nothing is less like me than this patient, reasonable child, struggling all alone for years to shed a little light upon himself, avid of the least gleam, a stranger to the joys of darkness. Here truly is the air I need, a lively tenuous air, far from the nourishing murk that is killing me.

(Beckett, *Malone* 187)

Malone seems to create a personification of his new attitude to life, of his alterior, better self who escapes the darkness shrouding his familiar self. But, as the story progresses, Sapo comes to resemble Malone more and more, until the older Macmann is well acquainted with "the black joy of the solitary way" (271). Even of Sapo it may be asked whether he really is "a stranger to the joys of darkness," since Malone also notes that from his "ignorance" he "drew a kind of joy" (185). Early on, through a remark that I highlighted in my earlier discussion of the novel, Malone demonstrates an awareness of the similarities between himself and his protagonist: "What tedium. And I call that playing. I wonder if I am not talking yet again about myself. Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?" (183).

Is it fair to say, then, that Malone's concern with the other is ultimately a concern with himself? The following passage would suggest otherwise:

There I am forgetting myself again. My concern is not with me, but with another, far beneath me and whom I try to envy, of whose crass adventures I can now tell at last, I don't know how. Of myself I could never tell, any more than live or tell of others. How could I have, who never tried? To show myself now, on the point of vanishing, at the same time as the stranger, and by the same grace, that would be no ordinary last straw. Then live, long enough to feel, behind my closed eyes, other eyes close. (189–90)

Malone here quashes his earlier suspicion that, in writing of Sapo, he has been writing about himself: this cannot be so because he has "never" been able to "tell" of himself. Sapo is, instead, a "stranger" to him. Yet the hope remains of being able to "show [him]self," in other words, to represent himself, to make an image of himself which manages to capture his true nature. In this sense, Malone *is* concerned with himself, but in a very particular way, seeking to represent himself "at the same time as the stranger, and by the same grace." Such a self-representation is partly constituted by alterity, precluding the self from identifying with the image it creates of itself, from becoming one with it. Accordingly, Malone affirms his sense of an otherness not beyond, but within himself, of "other eyes" behind his own, a paradoxical situation in which what is by definition outside, namely alterity, enters inside, thereby undoing the self's coincidence with itself. The self he longs to be is thus a divided self, made other to itself through its relation to alterity, which makes his concern with otherness 'also' – not 'ultimately' – a concern with himself.

I have examined alterity in the novel with respect to Malone's relation to death and his authorship of fiction. It now remains to discuss the text's treatment of personal alterity, or the alterity of the other person.

Other people play a far lesser role in *Malone Dies* than in *Molloy*. In the later text, there is, instead, a distinct movement away from the other person. Of the woman who tends to his basic needs, Malone remarks: "in the beginning, I used to see an old woman, then for a time an old yellow arm, then for a time an old yellow hand" (246). Eventually, the woman stops coming at all. When a visitor does appear in Malone's room, the intruder's first act is to hit Malone on the head, suggesting that the other comes as an assault on the self, as a violent interruption of solitude. The encounter between Malone and his uninvited guest is one of general incomprehension. Although the stranger's lips move, Malone hears nothing, nor is he able to communicate himself. Malone wants to interrogate him, in detail, find out who he is and what he wants. He is curious about the other person, like Molloy, and his impulse is to attempt to minimise the other's alterity. This impulse, however, is retroactive, emerging only after the fact, when he is alone, and in the moment of encounter he is unable to question or shed light on the other. He therefore remains in the dark, also like Molloy. For Malone, then, the other is veiled and unfamiliar, and, indeed, distance characterises his conception of intersubjective relations

in general. Of an evening scene in Macmann's story, in which the business day ends and people depart from their workplaces, he remarks:

And even those who know themselves condemned, at the outset, to the same direction, for the choice of directions at the outset is not great, take leave of one another and part [. . .]. And God help him who longs, for once, in his recovered freedom, to walk a little way with a fellow-creature, no matter which [. . .]. (223)

Malone here evokes a longing for human connection which is sorely disappointed. In his view, the independence of people from each other, the distance between them, results in a profound callousness: "men, for example, [. . .] are not tied together, but free to come and go as they please. And they make full use of it and come and go, their great balls and sockets rattling and clacking like knackers, each on his way. And when one dies the others go on, as if nothing had happened" (226–27).

A rare instance of human contact in the novel comes in the form of the couple across the way from Malone's room, into whose apartment he has a view through his window. One night he describes his observations of them:

it is enough for me to see them standing up against each other behind the curtain, which is dark, so that it is a dark light, if one may say so, and dim the shadow they cast. For they cleave so fast together that they seem a single body, and consequently a single shadow. But when they totter it is clear they are twain, and in vain they clasp with the energy of despair, it is clear we have here two distinct and separate bodies, each enclosed within its own frontiers, and having no need of each other to come and go and sustain the flame of life, for each is well able to do so, independently of the other. Perhaps they are cold, that they rub against each other so, for friction maintains heat and brings it back when it is gone. It is all very pretty and strange, this big complicated shape made up of more than one [. . .].  
(231)

Malone is intrigued by the fact that two people, separate and independent, can be so close to one another that "they seem a single body." This kind of intimacy is foreign to him, and for a time he is at a loss to describe what it is they are actually doing. Finally it comes to him: "Ah how stupid I am, I see what it is, they must be loving each other, that must be how it is done" (231). Overall, his attitude towards the couple suggests his craving for harmonious relationship: "Back and forth, back and forth, that must be wonderful" (231).



As his last view of the outside world, this scene is significant. He himself believes it to be "a happy chance" that "augurs well" (231).

Malone's craving for relationship points to the question of why he writes in the first place. He says he writes in order to keep track of things, to remember what he has said, but the deeper reason seems to be to end his solitude. For him, fictional characters are company, and 'play' is a kind of engagement with others. In this regard, I would reiterate his observation about the time that remains before his death, when he will sink with his ship, so to speak: "But between now and then I have time to frolic, ashore, in the brave company I have always longed for, always searched for, and which would never have me" (187–88). At one point, he offers a profound insight into this desire for company that motivates his writing: "And if I tell of me and of that other who is my little one, it is as always for want of love" (219). In creating his protagonist, then, Malone is attempting to form a relationship with another of closeness and intimacy. Reminiscent of Molloy's "craving for a fellow" (Beckett, *Molloy* 11), such a relationship of proximity between the self and the other, as we have seen Levinas stress, is a relation to relative, not absolute, alterity. Malone goes so far as to admit that the character whom he has claimed to be so different from himself, is in fact his own double: "Yes, a little creature, I shall try and make a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image, no matter what I say" (Beckett, *Malone Dies* 219). This act of creation, however, has startling consequences: "And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it. Then be alone a long time, unhappy, not knowing what my prayer should be nor to whom" (219). Malone here envisages himself falling back into old habits, into his established tendency to aggressively turn on his playthings and retreat into earnestness (189). In this way, then, the transience of connection is foregrounded.

Considering Malone's motivation for writing, it is understandable that connection, or lack thereof, is a prominent theme of the stories he tells. Before his confinement in an asylum, Macmann, for instance, is familiar with "the desolation of having nobody and nothing" (271). His relationship with Moll changes this. They appear to fall in love, yet pursue their relations in such a perfunctory, mechanical manner that what ensues is instead a parody of love. In addition, when Macmann seems on the verge of developing a close and caring relationship with Moll, he longs for his previous independence: "And when he grew calm again at last he mourned the long immunity he had lost, from shelter, charity

and human tenderness" (259). In both Malone's relation to his fictional creations and in intersubjective relations within his narrative, during the time of narration and during narrated time, there is therefore a marked ambivalence towards contact and proximity: a desire to connect coupled with a desire to annihilate connection. This dynamic is a guiding principle of the novel, which, on one level, traces Malone's search for company and the obstacles, internal and external, which impede it.

By way of conclusion, I would observe that obstructing his way, first and foremost, is his habitual "earnest" nature, for which Beckett provides a symbol in a primal, nocturnal scene from Malone's childhood. As a young boy, he is entranced by the barking of dogs, "wild and soft, at the limit of earshot, soon weary" and by the "brief scattered lights" which emerge at evening on the hillsides, "merging in blurs scarcely brighter than the sky, less bright than the stars, and which the palest moon extinguished" (200). Of these sights and sounds, he observes the following: "They were things that scarcely were, on the confines of silence and dark, and soon ceased. So I reason now, at my ease. Standing before my high window I gave myself to them, waiting for them to end, for my joy to end, straining towards the joy of ended joy" (200). Malone, it seems, has always been in the grip of earnestness, in thrall to "the joys of darkness" (187). But this open relationship to alterity amounts to a curse for him, a burden that secures his solitude. So he tries to escape his nature by taking control as an author. Yet, instead of controlling, he ends up following his character, as Molloy and Moran follow a voice: "Then things will be better, for Sapo and for him who follows him, who asks nothing but to follow in his footsteps, by clear and endurable ways" (186). In this following, Malone encounters alterity, but his desire for "clear and endurable ways" seeks to diminish that alterity. He wants to *grasp* otherness as he writes, to control a mysterious relation that, during the course of the narrative, is revealed to be fundamentally beyond his control, for inspiration is a radically alterior force that comes from the outside and overturns the self-sufficient mastery of the author. Malone thus remains in relation to the otherness he seeks to efface. Furthermore, through writing, he becomes other to himself, which introduces a certain alterity *within* him – a notion I explore more fully in the following section.

### 2.3 *The Unnamable*: The Dispossessed Self

In this section of my chapter, I pursue the issue of purported solipsism in Beckett, which I raised in my conclusion to Chapter 1, and respond in more detail to the claim that his works are solipsistic (see, for example, Hayes 35, Renner 13 and Schwalm 184). This issue is closely related to the role of alterity in the texts, for solipsism involves a fundamental rejection of otherness. Focusing on the notion of an otherness within the self, I argue that the subject's self-estrangement in *The Unnamable*, its dispossession of itself, makes for an inherently non-solipsistic portrait of subjectivity. This position involves a re-evaluation of Levinas's claim that the other within is not genuinely other. For Levinas, only an encounter with the absolute alterity of the other person is radical enough to unseat the ego, whereas inner alterity, if it disrupts the sovereignty of the ego at all, does so only temporarily, being ultimately absorbed within the totality of the self's identity (*Totality* 36–37). In contrast, my argument is that inner alterity in *The Unnamable* remains inassimilable by the subject.

What is solipsism, and how could a literary work be construed as solipsistic? Philosophical solipsism is the view or theory that only the self can be known to exist (epistemological solipsism), or that only the self exists (metaphysical solipsism), to the exclusion of all else, including other minds, the outer world, and even the body. A text could conceivably be solipsistic if it expressed a version of such philosophical solipsism. The term also has a non-technical meaning, namely, "the quality of being self-centred or selfish" ("Solipsism," *OED*). Applied to people, this sense is straightforward enough, but applied to literary works the matter is less clear. A text might be considered to be 'self-centred' if it was concerned with itself, self-reflexive, but this is stretching the meaning of solipsism too far, and is, in any case, not the characteristic of Beckett's works that commentators have labelled solipsistic. Alternatively, characters in or speakers of works may be self-centred, but it is debatable whether that makes the texts in which they appear solipsistic. Ultimately, a solipsistic literary work can perhaps most aptly be described as one focused on the idea of the self, more specifically, on the interior life of the subject – a work 'centred' on the self which effaces, or at least downplays, what is exterior to the self.

A famous – or rather infamous – account of philosophical solipsism is provided by Descartes. For him, everything can be doubted, except that 'I think.' In other words, all

that can be known to exist is the self. Cartesian subjectivity is constructed around the invincible certainty of the I, of a stable, unified subject which is able to be the object of its own reflection, and hence to be present to itself. In stark contrast, as I have previously observed, the Unnamable writes: "I, say I. Unbelieving" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 285). He does not believe in the I, has "no faith" in it (384). In saying I, he occupies a subject position in language, but, in the same breath, doubts whether this position coincides with the self he feels himself to be, making his inhabitation of the I divided, at odds with itself. As Foucault explains: "'I think' led to the indubitable certainty of the 'I' and its existence; 'I speak,' on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear" (13). The Unnamable is not a solipsist nor the text solipsistic, in the strict philosophical sense, because the necessary core belief in the self is lacking.

That Beckett's writings simply centre on the self is, at first glance, the premise of a more promising argument for solipsism. To align with the philosophical position, such a centring would have to exclude all alterity, yet, surely no critic would argue that there is *no* concern with otherness in Beckett. In this regard, Patrick Hayes's position is helpful in understanding the charge of solipsism. The reason why the texts are solipsistic, he suggests, is that the "otherness most at stake in Beckett is always within the self" (35). If one unpacks this claim, it becomes evident that it contains at least two potential arguments for solipsism. The first of these is that inner otherness is not truly other, which corresponds with Levinas's argument, previously discussed, that relative alterity is a misnomer. In this light, a focus on the otherness within the self is nothing but a focus on the self alone. The second of these potential arguments is that a concern with inner alterity places the self above otherness, prioritises or privileges it. Here the idea is that Beckett's works are solipsistic because their *primary* or *ultimate* concern is with the self. Two questions I aim to answer in the following discussion are whether it is indeed an otherness within that is at stake in *The Unnamable*, and, if so, whether this makes the novel solipsistic.

The notion of an otherness within the subject is explored by Gilles Deleuze and Paul de Man. In opposition to Descartes, Deleuze maintains that the self can never contemplate itself directly: "We must always first contemplate something else [. . .] in order to be filled with an image of ourselves" (74–5). In a similar vein, de Man argues

that self-reflection divides the subject, rendering it other to itself. Gendron provides an astute paraphrase of de Man's argument in "Self (Pygmalion)": "in order to reflect upon the self, the self must mutate into something other than it is. In order to contemplate the self, it must cease to be the subject that contemplates and become instead the object of contemplation. In other words, the self can never be present to itself, as a subject" (49). Reflecting on itself, the self splits apart, becoming multiple, or to use Deleuze's term, "schizophrenic," exposing "a fissure or crack in the pure Self of the 'I think'" (58). Henceforth, the self can only encounter itself "like an Other within itself" (Deleuze 86).

Gendron points towards the significance for Beckett of an otherness within the subject when she writes of the "self-estrangement" of the Beckettian character who is "split apart on the inside and is often unrecognisable even to itself" (51). Similarly, Trezise posits the "non-self-identity" of the subject, and argues for a "breach" in subjectivity, into which, he maintains, Beckett writes (75, 33). I will now examine to what extent such conceptions of inner alterity, in which the self becomes other to itself, apply to the kind of subjectivity portrayed in *The Unnamable*.

Bearing in mind that, in this text, "[i]t all boils down to a question of words" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 329), it becomes apparent that inner alterity *is* at stake, for the text's conception of language is one in which the self is necessarily rendered other to itself. Language for the Unnamable, as we have seen, is made up of the "words of others" and is always "their language" (308, 318). In one respect, this signifies that language is inherited, that words and their meanings are conferred upon a subject, not invented by it. The words I use literally belong to others, having their origin in other minds than my own. Furthermore, the meanings of words are established cooperatively, making language inherently communal. Others thus speak in and through the voice of any one subject. But the othering that language effects runs deeper than this, for the self is "made of words" (379). Because the self inevitably finds its identity constituted in and through language, and language is always "their language," alterity exists within the self. And because of this inner alterity, the self is rendered non-self-coincident, or other to itself. Through language, then, as the Unnamable is aware, the self is involved in "making" or "finding" itself, as well as "losing" itself (296).

Caught up in the unremitting "churn of words" (304), the Unnamable is engaged in a ceaseless process of self-representation, in which his identity is both constituted and

fragmented. The stories he tells about Mahood and Worm, as well as those he believes he has told about all the Beckettian characters who precede him, including Molloy and Malone, are, in fact, about himself, or different incarnations of himself. He describes the characters as "avatars" of himself who exist "in [his] stead" (309, 303), who take themselves for him, and for whom he takes himself. A self-representation is precisely such an entity, for when one represents oneself to oneself, one creates an image that takes one's place, an other version of oneself with which one seeks to identify – which amounts to another way of conceiving of the splitting apart of the subject and its becoming other to itself. Although his self-representations are like "creatures" and he their creator (294), the Unnamable has learnt everything he knows from them (291–92). Most importantly, they tell him what kind of creature *he* is, inverting the creator-creature relationship (309). He is, as Iser observes, "invented by his own inventions" ("Subjectivity" 172).<sup>25</sup> We may think that we have control over our incarnations, that we can choose how to represent ourselves, but language actually represents us *to* ourselves. And in representing the self to itself, language divides the self, dispossessing it of any singular identity.

In the novel, this loss of self is explored in spatial terms: speech takes the self "elsewhere," thereby "putting an end" to "me and here" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 295, 296). The self is figured as displaced by language, as being outside of itself. Yet the Unnamable also, at times, affirms the inside, the self at home, in possession of itself: "I am here"; "I have never been elsewhere"; "my speech can only be of me and here" (295, 296). Is the self, then, involved in a paradox: never itself and yet never anything else? To an extent, this is so, although we should be wary of taking the Unnamable at his word when he claims that he has "never been elsewhere," for he himself admits that the only reason he had said such a thing was because he could think of nothing else to say at the time and "had to say something quick" (296). Ultimately, he is preoccupied with the idea that the self is "here," present to itself as itself, and never anywhere else – as he is with the idea that he is at the centre of his world – because it is the "simplest" explanation, not because he believes it to be true (295). For a self to never have been "elsewhere," or outside of itself, implies that that self has no knowledge of anything but itself, that is, it implies solipsism. But the Unnamable, as a linguistic subject sceptical of his own subjectivity, *is*

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<sup>25</sup> This runs counter to Perpich's claim, discussed in the introduction to this chapter, that "[i]n representation, the ego 'determines' the other [. . .] *without being determined by it in return*" (56–57).

indubitably outside of himself: from the moment he says I unbelievably, the reader knows this.

Dispossessed of himself, the Unnamable is positioned in an "unfamiliar native land" (308). Since it signifies the place into which one is born, "native land" might also represent the site of subjectivity. That it is "unfamiliar" evokes the idea of home rendered unhomely, or, to use Marais' term, "the unhomeliness of home" ("Wandering" 2). For the Cartesian subject, possessed of and present to itself, home is the most familiar thing, while for the Unnamable it is profoundly strange because *he* is not present at all: "how can I recognise myself," he asks, "who never made my acquaintance" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 391).<sup>26</sup>

The Unnamable's self-dispossession engenders a search for his lost self. He wants himself "in [his] own land" where he would no longer be "a stranger in the midst of strangers, a stranger in [his] own midst" (390). As Marais argues is the case for Murphy, the self that he has lost is the one displaced by language and community ("Incurious" 6). By extension, I would suggest, his search is for the extra-linguistic self, or the self outside of language. The Unnamable attempts to represent this self in the form of Worm; he who is speechless, and therefore "can't take thought," and who is "the one to be sought, the one to be" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 353, 406). The implication is that this is the Unnamable's true self, or at least the self he wants to be, of which language dispossesses him. Significantly, Worm has no concept of an interior because language has yet to introduce the necessary exteriority against which the self attempts to define itself as interiority (340). It is,

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<sup>26</sup> The Unnamable's dispossession of self invites a critical examination of the practice of making the voice that speaks in the text into a narrator-character dubbed 'the Unnamable.' By assigning him a proper name, and by using the personal pronoun to designate 'him,' we ascribe to the voice a certain kind of subjectivity, that of stable interiority which persists through time. The reader is encouraged to do so by the fact that both of the first two novels have narrator-characters with proper names (Molloy, Moran, Malone) and hence with at least relatively stable identities. While inviting this move to personalise the narrative voice, the text also renders it deeply problematic, not least through the voice's disbelief in itself. The question of whether there exists, within the textual world, an adequately stable and fixed being whom we are justified in calling 'the Unnamable' is, then, an important one, pointing towards the novel's concern with the dispossession of the first person. Dispossessed of itself, the subject in *The Unnamable* is neither fixed nor stable, suggesting that the use of the proper name is unjustified. However, Beckett makes the point that *every* subject, simply by virtue of being a subject, is dispossessed. Thus if one were to reason that a dispossessed subject does not warrant a name, then no subject would. In a sense, this *is* what Beckett is saying, that the subject is unnameable. The proper name, then, like the first person pronoun, is unable to do what it purports to do. But this does not entail that we should cease to make use of either, or that this option is even available to us. Despite disbelieving in the I, the Unnamable continues to say I because language leaves him no alternative, and using names and pronouns, according to him, is justified as long as one "sees through" them (336). This aligns with my approach which is to use the proper name, but under erasure.

moreover, unclear whether the self that the Unnamable seeks, being extra-linguistic, would be recognisable as a self at all. What he seeks, then, in seeking himself outside of language, is, in a sense, to escape his own subjectivity, to enter a kind of no-man's land. But 'they' will never allow this. 'They' will not let Worm be, and instead go to great lengths to "humanize" him through language by forcing him to listen to a voice (353). This gives him the distinction between inside and outside, the first step towards subjectivity, a distinction that alters him such that he is no longer Worm, or, as the Unnamable puts it, "no longer is" (342), which in turn indicates that the subjectivity here at stake is inescapably divided and dispossessed. The dispossession of the self is, paradoxically, its entry *into* subjectivity.

As unthinkable and unspeakable, the extra-linguistic is absolutely other. The Unnamable's relation to his extra-linguistic self is therefore non-intentional, because radical otherness is ungraspable and, as such, can never be an object present to consciousness. Furthermore, in attempting to grasp the ungraspable, that which is aimed at unseats the ego of the subject who aims, stripping it of its mastery and, as such, the very ability to aim. The relation is thus one of aimlessness, and the distance separating 'subject' and 'object' is untraversable. In addition, like any relation to absolute alterity, the Unnamable's relation to his extra-linguistic self is non-oppositional and non-differential. Both difference and opposition involve thinking one thing in terms of another, but the infinite distance separating a subject stripped of subjectivity from an ungraspable object precludes such interdependence. What kind of relationship is it, then? As Levinas argues, the only possible relation between the self and the absolutely other is an "unrelating" one, a relationship that at the same time is not a relationship (*Totality* 295). While it is a relationship because an encounter does take place, it is not a relationship because the encounter does not unite the self and the other within a totality, the ungraspable remaining ungraspable and infinitely distant.

However, the novel invites us to ask, is an encounter with the extra-linguistic self, in itself, actually possible? By creating Worm, the Unnamable attempts to secure such an encounter, but Worm is a representation of this self, not the real thing, and, furthermore, a representation of something that cannot be represented. The text makes it clear that the extra-linguistic self cannot be encountered through language. But the Unnamable is also in touch with "the unthinkable unspeakable" beyond language (Beckett, *Unnamable* 328).



This relation is established through his acute awareness of the inadequacy of the words he uses, of their failure to say what he wants them to say – which means that there is always more to be said, leaving an ineliminable remainder in the wake of every saying, an excess that language cannot accommodate. The Unnamable *is* in an unrelating relationship with this incomprehensible excess.

That the Unnamable relates to the absolute otherness of that which exceeds language, needs to be distinguished from the way in which alterity exists within him because he is other to himself. If something is other *to itself*, I would argue, the otherness in question cannot but be differentially constituted. The self can only encounter itself as an other if it is faced with different versions of itself. When the Unnamable says I unbelievably, for example, he feels that the self he is in language somehow does not equate with what he believes to be his true self. He occupies a subject position, but at the same time distances, or differentiates, himself from it, such that the position he actually occupies (a doubting one) is different from the position language demands he occupy (a believing one). The position in which language situates him thus fails to reflect, or differs from, both his actual position, and the one he would like to assume (that of his true self), and he is other to himself because of the difference between these positions. In other words, the otherness within him is *constituted* by the *relation* between competing versions of himself, making it relative and not absolute.<sup>27</sup>

Deleuze, for one, maintains that the otherness within the self is differential, that the breach which is subjectivity "opens Being directly on to difference" (58). In agreement with him, my approach is to rethink relative or differential alterity in light of the dispossession of the Beckettian subject. For Levinas, the difference between the self and its alter egos is ultimately neutralised as the other is reduced to the same, whereas in the case of the Unnamable, the difference between competing versions of the self is never reconciled in a totality: the Unnamable is ineluctably, irreducibly other to himself. This kind of inner alterity is differential, but, crucially, the movement of difference is without end – which amounts to saying that not all relative alterity is assimilable by the self.

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<sup>27</sup> I have said that the relationship between the Unnamable and his extra-linguistic self is non-oppositional, while here I imply that this self does occupy an oppositional position in language. However, it is not the extra-linguistic *itself* which occupies this position, but the Unnamable's conception of it – the idea he has of his true self – which *is* able to occupy an oppositional position.

My argument is that, in the novel, the otherness within the subject remains other, *contra* Levinas, for whom relative alterity is a misnomer. If the self and the otherness within it are inseparable, as they are in *The Unnamable*, the self cannot reduce the otherness of that inner alterity to the same, cannot see that otherness in light of itself, for this involves separating itself from it and, as Levinas says is the case, remaining a stable identity in which alterity is assimilated, in which the other becomes a part of the self (in the sense that a part is contained within, but is also distinct from, the whole). But the self does not 'contain' or encompass otherness, neatly and completely, while remaining a whole unto itself. By entering within, the outside *changes* the inside, making it other to itself, and the whole point is that the self is unhinged when alterity erupts within it, that it ceases to be a fixed and stable identity and is thereby rendered incapable of reducing anything to itself. In this light, relative otherness can still be radical. The self does *try* to reduce alterity, to centre itself and maintain the distinction between inside and outside, itself within and all the rest without. One might say that it tries to conceive of itself as a perfect circle. Yet the circle of self is always broken and incomplete, like the one depicted in *Watt*, in which the breach not only lets the outside in, but also lets the inside out. The circle loses its centre through this breach, as the self is dispossessed of itself.

The identity of the Beckettian subject is therefore not a totality, which questions the equation of the self with the same.<sup>28</sup> It is only one idea or incarnation of the self that is 'all the same,' namely, the unified, stable, self-possessed, Cartesian one.<sup>29</sup> But the Cartesian subject is *not* the self which, in *The Unnamable*, has been lost or displaced by language and which is sought. It is not the case that the self is at some point unified and then later undone; it never was unified, never had a centre, is always and already fragmented, making the Cartesian subject a myth of epic proportions. Furthermore, the self that the Unnamable sees himself as having lost is the extra-linguistic self, which, as I have indicated, may not even be recognisable *as* a self. For the self to be 'dispossessed of

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<sup>28</sup> In this regard, Derrida writes as follows: "the other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other; and [. . .] consequently, the same is not a totality closed in upon itself, an identity playing with itself, having only the appearance of alterity, in what Levinas calls economy, work, and history. How could there be a 'play of the Same' if alterity itself was not already *in* the Same, with a meaning of inclusion doubtless betrayed by the word *in*?" (*Writing* 127).

<sup>29</sup> While Cartesian dualism may seem to suggest that the self is divided in two, it is more a case of the self, or mind, being divided from everything else, including the body. In this model, the mind is 'all the same' in the sense that it is a single substance, separate and distinct from all other things and, most importantly, present to itself or self-coincident.

itself' or 'other to itself' is therefore somewhat problematic, for there seems to be no self of which to be dispossessed.

It is here that we encounter the limitations of language. For the self to 'lose' itself invariably implies that it was once in possession of itself. Similarly with 'fragmented,' which signifies in relation to 'whole,' and, more obviously, with words like 'dispossessed,' 'displaced,' 'decentred' and 'unseated.' That the subject is 'decentred,' for example, poses the question: 'decentred from what centre?' The reply here must be: the one previously (mis)conceived as grounding the Cartesian subject, that is, the very centre the phrase is meant to efface. All one can do is explain that the decentred subject has always been centreless. The Unnamable is *never* self-possessed, nor at home with himself, for, in the novel, self-dispossession is a condition of the linguistic subject.<sup>30</sup> He thus loses something that never belonged to him in the first place. For this reason, the 'possession' invoked by 'dispossession' is misleading, obscuring the meaning which, in this context, 'dispossession' is designed to convey. I continue to rely on the notion of the self dispossessed of itself, firstly, because I can find no substantively different alternatives to express the idea in question, and secondly, because 'possession' can be read otherwise, as the outside coming in and taking over the self, such that the self no longer belongs to itself – in other words, quite pleasingly, as itself a form of dispossession.

I have stated that the Unnamable is never at home with himself, but the possibility exists that, rather, his home is rendered unhomely, which corresponds to the idea that he *is* self-possessed, to an extent, but that this possession is incomplete. While he does imagine his home as already occupied by someone else (Beckett, *Unnamable* 394), and the notion of the unhomeliness of home is at work in the text, as I have suggested, he, unlike Moran, does not start from a position of self-possession: he has no home to become unhomely. Instead, he engages in multiple, inchoate imaginings of home, in an attempt to counter an essential homelessness. In the *Unnamable*, Beckett paints a portrait of the subject as wanderer or vagrant, in perpetual search of a home.

To conclude, *The Unnamable's* primary concern *is* subjectivity, but that does not make it solipsistic. In fact, the label does violence to such a complex and nuanced exploration of the subject. The dispossessed nature of the subjectivity in question runs

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<sup>30</sup> In my first chapter, I argue that the Unnamable is involved in an interminable alternation of home and homelessness. While he never *is* at home, he sometimes believes he is, which makes possible this cycle of (purported) finding and losing.

directly against the grain of solipsism, in that the constitutive role of alterity in the subject's identity makes the subject fundamentally non-solipsistic. Furthermore, a concern with a self with otherness within it is a concern with both selfhood *and* otherness. Beckett does not focus on the self to the exclusion of alterity, nor does he prioritise or privilege the self above alterity, for they are inseparable. His point is that the whole notion of 'centring' on the self is problematic: the self, being centreless, eludes that kind of single-minded focus. And perpetually other to itself – multiple or schizophrenic – it is never truly alone.

## Conclusion

The investigations of this chapter show that the trilogy is intently concerned with otherness, both in its absolute and relative forms. I have argued that Molloy and Malone are each, in his own way, open to absolute alterity. The radical exteriority that they encounter is impersonal, a form of alterity which I have defined as the unknowable, unthinkable and unspeakable, or that which is inassimilable by the subject.<sup>31</sup> Molloy's openness to such absolute alterity is established through his waiting, wandering and incurious seeking, all of which unseat the subject such that it cannot reduce otherness to itself. Like Molloy, Malone is by nature an "incurious wonder[er]" (Beckett, *Malone* 174), able to accommodate the incomprehensible (although 'able' is an imprecise word,

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<sup>31</sup> I have argued, by way of *The Unnamable*, that not all differential alterity is assimilable by the subject. If this is the case, it would mean that absolute alterity cannot be defined, strictly speaking, as that which is inassimilable, for, while it *is* inassimilable, it is not all that is so. It is, moreover, arguable whether terms such as 'unknowable,' 'unthinkable,' 'unspeakable' and 'inassimilable' adequately capture the idea of absolute alterity. Do they not only make sense *in relation to* the subject who knows, thinks, speaks and assimilates? In relating to the inassimilable, the subject loses the cognitive mastery which is partly constitutive of subjectivity. Furthermore, the inassimilable is, by its very nature, beyond the subject's grasp, and so never really an object at all. As a relation between an absent subject and an absent object, the self's encounter with the inassimilable does involve a radical separation between the self and otherness, a necessary criterion, as Levinas argues, for a truly absolute alterity. However, taking the unknowable as an example, while it may be the case that subject and object are radically separated, with no possibility of bridging the distance between them, it seems inescapable that the unknowable is only what it is in relation to a subject who goes about the business of knowing certain things and not knowing others. Like the first person pronoun, then, the term fails to do what it purports to do, that is, go beyond the concept of knowledge, for if there is no knowing subject, it seems that there can be no being unknowable. And the same goes for being unthinkable, unspeakable and generally inassimilable. Do these terms, then, actually refer to absolute alterity? The problem appears to be that no words can adequately capture the idea of absolute alterity because it is an inherently aporetic concept, involving a non-differential conception of difference. Ultimately, I make use of terms such as 'unknowable' to describe the absolutely other because, while inaccurate, they are the *most* accurate I can find.

implying agency where there is none). Malone also encounters the wholly other when he is gripped by the ungraspability of death.

The alterity at stake when the two narrators relate to other characters is of a different order, for in these relations each displays a drive to diminish the otherness of the other person, most notably through curiosity, a comportment which seeks disclosure and hence the reduction of alterity. Both are engaged in a search for an otherness which might be brought close, motivated by a desire for proximity, contact and connection – a bridging of distance between the self and the other person and a relation of understanding. They thereby approach the otherness of the other person as relatively other, in distinction to their approach to impersonal alterity.

In the trilogy, does relating to the other as relatively other necessarily do violence to him or her, as is the case for Levinas and Derrida? It seems there is no evidence for this position. When all is said and done, neither Molloy nor Malone succeeds in connecting with other people, and so reducing their alterity. Beckett's emphasis is, rather, on the impotency of the self's attempt to assimilate the other person, on the failure to bring close and establish relationship. It is thus only so far that one can apply Levinas's and Derrida's thinking of alterity to the trilogy. Whereas they focus on the absolute otherness of the other person, and how to respond, Beckett, while deeply concerned with the question of response to alterity, does not present the face-to-face as a privileged site of the encounter with absolute otherness, which comes, instead, in an impersonal form.

In addition, Beckett does not privilege the significance or value of absolute alterity over relative alterity. Through the notion of an otherness within the subject, he explores a kind of differential alterity which, nonetheless, remains radical in the effect it has on the subject. I have discussed in detail how alterity exists within the Unnamable such that he is other to himself, but the same is true of the other narrators: Molloy "strut[s] before [his] eyes, like a stranger" (Beckett, *Molloy* 37); Moran, possessed by the spectre of Molloy, suffers a collapse of all he used to be, becoming unrecognisable to himself; and Malone feels the presence of "other eyes" behind his own (Beckett, *Malone* 190). The radical effect of inner alterity culminates in the final novel of the trilogy, for the otherness within the Unnamable fragments his identity in such a way and to such an extent that he is rendered incapable of reducing anything to himself, for that self is displaced and

dispossessed of itself. Of all the trilogy's narrators, he therefore manifests the greatest openness to alterity.

## Conclusion

Reading the trilogy is an endless waiting for nothing – that, at least, is my experience. One begins by seeking, since reading is by nature a kind of seeking, involving both a search for sense and the expectation that it will be disclosed. The search for sense in Beckett, however, amounts to a perpetual search for bearings, for an awareness of where one is and which way, more or less, one is headed. One can establish neither position nor direction without relation to a fixed point, but Beckett's readers are, as Moorjani puts it, "set adrift" (19), or, in the Unnamable's words, "set loose, alone, in the unthinkable unspeakable" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 328). Without a fixed point – something to be sure about or take for granted – the reader must endure a seemingly insoluble disorientation. Attempts to direct or 'aim' consciousness are thwarted, for there is no position *from which* to aim. The absence of a sense of direction distinguishes the wanderer, who moves aimlessly, from the traveller, whose movements are established as directional in their relation to a fixed point, usually home. Set adrift, the reader of the trilogy is unhomed. In searching for bearings, she or he searches for a fixed point, which may be likened to a wanderer in search of a home. It appears, then, that the reader cannot help but be a wanderer, for the texts position him or her as such.

Because of the ineluctable and infinite delay which informs the search for sense in Beckett, the activity of seeking devolves – or evolves – into the passivity of waiting. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the reader waits for something of which she or he has only a very rough idea. Despite being mysterious, the awaited is the object of certain expectations, most notably the expectation that, on arrival, it should provide some kind of solution to the waiter's predicament. For the reader, such a solution would be for textual elements to 'fall into place' or finally 'fit together.' The two tramps are acutely unsure about their waiting, about whether they are waiting in the right place, and whether Godot has not already come and gone. Similarly, the reader's lack of bearings precludes any place from being 'right,' and contributes to a haunting sense that something ineffable is, always, being missed. As the wait proceeds and the awaited fails to draw near, the reader's expectation of solution dwindles. He or she may even, like Didi and Gogo, forget the object of waiting. That nothing resembling a solution ever arrives, that waiting persists after the final page has been turned, confirms that the wait has, all along, been for nothing. The reader, it turns

out, has been waiting for the wrong thing, or, more accurately, has been waiting *for something* when what was required was 'just' to wait.

Since the texts deny solution, constructing a coherent picture of Beckett's three novels is very difficult. Adopting a bird's-eye view to encompass the trilogy leaves out more than it includes, yet such a position is necessary if one is to give an account of the relationship between the novels. But the fact seems to be that the trilogy disallows any privileged vantage point from which to make comprehensive judgements. Drawing conclusions about it as a whole is thus a vexed endeavour, perhaps not least because it simply is not a whole, and was never meant to be. Each on its own, or linked together, the novels do not offer a *coherent* account of anything, making Molloy's refrain that "all things hang together" deeply ironic (Beckett, *Molloy* 36, 51, 57). However, this fundamental incoherence, and the absence of stable ground for interpretation, diminishes the reader's ability to reduce the alterity of the texts.

A text's otherness may be thought of as that which the reader encounters when an attempt at interpretation falls short. With the trilogy, this happens invariably, as the texts always overflow any effort to contain them. Metalanguage both enables interpretation and, as we have seen Critchley observe with regard to Beckett's works, leaves something *essential* out (166). Derrida points to what remains after thematisation in his metaphor of the dredging machine, discussed in the introduction to this thesis, in which what stays behind after the machine has emerged with its bounty is no less than the entire sea, or agonisingly close to it. In this way the reader comes to the 'end' and feels that there is still "the ocean to drink," to borrow a phrase from the Unnamable (Beckett, *Unnamable* 308). The unthinkable, unspeakable, ineliminable excess which remains after the act of interpretation is an absolute alterity to which the attentive reader relates in an unrelating relationship – more so, I would suggest, when engaging with Beckett than with most other writers. The question of how to respond to this otherness is a profound question of responsibility, of heeding the call of the work to make a home in language and thought for that which exceeds language and thought.<sup>32</sup> To think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable – which is to say, grasp the ungraspable – is the paradoxical task of interpretation.

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<sup>32</sup> I draw this notion from Marais, who says the following concerning the author's responsibility for the stranger: "Through his writing, the writer must make a home for that which exceeds language" ("Incurious" 7).



Any relation to the absolutely alterior must be non-intentional, because what is wholly other cannot be an object for thought. How, then, might non-intentional consciousness feature in reading and writing? Both seem inherently intentional, aimed at particular words and ideas. Yet intentional thought, as Perpich notes, is "forever adequate to its object" (56), and the intentional thinker *masters* objects through conceiving them. Trying to master a Beckett text is a laughably misguided enterprise: thought, instead, appears forever *inadequate* to its 'object,' foregrounding the insufficiencies of intentional thinking, which cannot be the model for *all* thought. Consciousness is also, sometimes, non-intentional, and the reader of Beckett is drawn into just such a state since that at which he has us aim, namely, the ungraspable, unseats our very intentionality and thus our ability to aim at all, which amounts to a masterful annihilation of mastery. I agree with Salman Rushdie that the best attitude in the face of such an experience is one of "[s]urrender" (xiv). Reading Beckett makes one realise that grasping is not always possible, and, moreover, that attempting to grasp, instead of bringing a text closer, may, in fact, push it further away.

Incurious seeking is presented in the novels as a way to approach the ungraspable *as* ungraspable. What would the reader or writer look like as an incurious seeker? She or he would, most crucially, be involved in an ateleological quest: that is, in a seeking without desire to find or expectation of finding. Being aimless, incurious seeking makes room for all that which cannot be an object for consciousness, thereby accommodating the unexpected and the unawaited, and would therefore, as a critical comportment, facilitate the paradoxical relationship between the reader and a text's absolute, ungraspable alterity. Stilling the desire for enlightenment is, I believe, the key to reading Beckett without going mad. Writing about him in an academic setting, however, is a different story, for an incurious, aimless, wandering commentary would find itself received as distinctly non-academic. Criticism could, nonetheless, be *less* curious, less eager to secure knowledge and understanding, and more content to remain open-ended.

My approach to the trilogy has been hardly incurious. I have been eager to learn and have aimed at enlightenment. I have tried, at every corner, to understand, and to construct logical arguments which elucidate that understanding clearly and precisely. Moreover, I have sought an appreciation of the trilogy in which things 'hang together,' valuing consistency and correlation. I have, then, tried to extract coherence from the

incoherent, to be logical about something which is not logical, or which operates according to its own logic, and to expose something that, when exposed, ceases to be itself. Ultimately, instead of surrendering, I have fought the position in which the trilogy has attempted to situate me, insisting on being a curious traveller when the one to be was an incurious wanderer. By nature, then, because of its aims and methods, my research can only be of limited success. It has undeniably missed something essential, towards which I can only gesture. This leaves a hole in my thesis which I am left feeling compelled to fill, while knowing that it is beyond ever being filled completely. Molloy is very right when he observes that, even when one is modest and tries to "mention only a few of the things there are," one is never done with saying. At the same time, though, "that's what counts, to be done, to have done" (Beckett, *Molloy* 37).

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