‘You as You Always Were’
Samuel Beckett and Kantian Critical Philosophy

Glenn Stewart

Writing and Society Research Centre
School of Humanities and Communication Arts
Western Sydney University

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Dedicated to Roz Elkington

who taught me how to read properly.
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signed: .................................
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Abstract

This dissertation makes an extensive critical comparison between the representation of human consciousness in the work of Samuel Beckett and Immanuel Kant. It examines the proposition that Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy, particularly his representation of the human subject and consciousness as described in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, can be seen to be significant to an understanding of the work of Samuel Beckett. To date, there is no extensive or comprehensive explication of this topic. There are significant theoretical and primary textual grounds for such a comparison, which are further supported by substantial secondary textual, archival, and historical evidence. The thesis is developed through a methodology based on the former of these as opposed to the latter, though the relative virtues of both are discussed in detail. An interpretation of Kantian subjectivity is developed that follows primarily from the work on the subject by Adorno and Deleuze, and emphasises the weaknesses and limitations of human consciousness. This begins with an analysis of Kant’s reformulation of the *cogito* and the problematic nature of the subject, before proceeding to discuss the subsequent problems in the relationship between the subject and the world of objects. All the while the relevance of this to Beckett’s oeuvre is considered through close readings, focusing primarily on Beckett’s later works. Finally, the thesis explores how a species of Kant’s skeptical consciousness can be seen to be reflected in Beckett, on the premise that this is a more legible viewpoint than the historic tendency of readings to polarise Beckett’s work as being either nihilistic or humanist.
Introduction

My contention in this dissertation is that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant had a significant and as yet under-attended influence on the work of Samuel Beckett. It is not, however, my intention to simply read Beckett in terms of Kant. The primary aim of this study is to uncover and articulate the insights into humanity that are provided by both authors’ representations of consciousness. As a general statement, to be explicated in greater detail throughout what follows, it can be said that a traditional conception of the human held little meaning to Samuel Beckett and is of little use to the critic except, perhaps, as a point of contrast. Samuel Beckett, as the German aesthetic and intellectual culture he had wished to experience was succumbing to fascism, wrote the following in his *German Diaries* on 15 January, 1937:

> I am not interested in the “unification” of the historical chaos any more than I am in the “clarification” of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhumane necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know […] I say that the background [historical forces] and the causes are an inhuman and incomprehensible machinery and venture to wonder what kind of appetite it is that can be appeased by the modern animism that consists in rationalising them. Rationalism is the last form of animism. Whereas the pure incoherence of times and men and places is at least amusing.¹

Though these comments were made against the backdrop of the impending Nazi aggression, and from having witnessed their repression of all undesirable versions of history and culture,² they contain a number of valuable insights into Beckett’s developing understanding of the human being, the subject, and subjectivity. His contempt for history and historiography stem from a particular conception of the individual subject’s ability to know itself, the world, and the relation between the two. Primarily, it is the purpose of this dissertation to draw out and

¹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 228.
explicate this conception, while also maintaining that Kant’s influence on its formation has been under-appreciated.

Nothingness is both a theme and a problem that is fundamental to Beckett’s work. But it is important to note that he was equally interested in ‘somethingness’; that is to say, with identifying and understanding it, however small it may be. As Beckett’s writing grew increasingly minimalist, themes of nothingness, ignorance and failure were emphasised. It is commonplace to suggest that these concepts are therefore the total foundation of reality as Beckett understood it, and by extension, to argue that the project of his writing was primarily to convey that nothingness undermines all cognition and reality. This is the mythologised image of Beckett as the ultimate quietist, the ‘silencist’. This image should be resisted as being reductive and simply inaccurate. The dilemma faced by the critic in reading nothingness in Beckett is best described by Boxall:

The problem that Beckett has addressed in his writing, and that Beckett studies has addressed in seeking to develop a critical discourse that is adequate to the philosophical and hermeneutic challenge represented by his work, is how to calculate the value of the nothingness […] without either doing violence to such nothingness by translating it into somethingness, or falling into the silence and inarticulacy that is the only faithful response to the apprehension of ‘the being of nothing’. 3

My position is that, for Beckett, nothingness is not the ‘reality’ lurking within and undermining all our cognition and ‘reality’. We can speak of nothing only from a place of being, and of ignorance only from a place of knowledge. They exist in a mutually reliant binary state. The difficulty lies in defining this relationship, or even the very possibility of such a definition. This is not to be taken as a renewal of the long discarded humanist interpretation of Beckett’s work as a salvaging operation, plucking hope from the pit of despair and emptiness. Indeed, the argument will be made that Beckett at times presented total nothingness as preferable to this binary state which, though unfavourable, is not denied. This ‘something’ will be presented here not least because Beckett himself refers to it, but also simply because speaking of nothingness in isolation is nonsensical. Though it is not uncommon to claim that Beckett is in the business of nonsense or senselessness, 4 such a claim is not made here. According to Boxall as quoted

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3 Boxall, “Nothing of Value”, in Beckett and Nothing, 32.
4 Dolar, “Nothing Has Changed”, 50.
above, the critic must find a way to speak of nothing without either turning it into something, or falling into silence. I will argue that to speak of something and nothing alongside one another (and without allowing them to bleed into each other) is the most appropriate way of doing this. Furthermore, Kant’s importance to Beckett’s work is exemplified most strongly with regard to this issue in particular.

Something that is common to the study of both Beckett and Kant is the perception that they have faith in, and a thoroughgoing preference for, order. Undoubtedly, the manner of their expression encourages this perception. But both authors took things as they understood them to have come, and were led by their perception of order rather than their imposition thereof. Whatever order there is to their expressions is present not for the sake of advocacy but in recognition of the basic principle that one should recognise whatever order one can, and let the rest be named as chaos until it can be named something else. Their intention was to bear their gaze upon the world and make the assertoric judgemental statement that this is how it is. In doing this they showed good faith, not faith in general. Furthermore, if Beckett and Kant did possess some preoccupation with order, it was primarily for the sake of expressing just how to difficult it is to achieve.

These essential statements can also be understood as the little that may be brought to order or, rather, to the little order there is to be found. Correspondingly, the remaining sounds are chaotic. Somethingsness and nothingness would here be understood as two regions – one of known things and the other of unknown, perhaps unknowable, things. Order can be imposed either to resist chaos or draw attention to it, or to do both at once in different ways. The question, given the precisely ordered nature of Beckett’s writing, is: What is their relation to chaos? To address this question we must look more closely at order and chaos. Deleuze and Guattari, in their conclusion to What is Philosophy?, began:

We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master. These are infinite variabilities, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness
they traverse, without nature or thought […] We constantly lose our ideas. That is why we hang on to fixed opinions so much.5

A great deal could be said on the particulars of how Deleuze and Guattari conceive of chaos, and how this could be related to Beckett’s oeuvre, but doing so does not serve the purpose of this dissertation. Nonetheless, as it is obliquely relevant, and as I will refer to Deleuze and Guattari’s work on other subjects in what follows, some remarks on the matter are necessary.

Beckett’s narrators (or speakers, shall we say, in his dramatic works) are constantly spouting ideas that are half forgotten or half learned in the first place and it is rarely, if ever, clear which is which. There are ideas that are half stated, or stated then then gone back on, and ideas that are constantly escaping, or remaining because they have nowhere else to go. These narrators, however, are rarely distressed as such, although this is largely to do with their sheer confoundedness. But one can only be distressed by chaos if we choose, or perhaps give in to the temptation, to view it as the enemy. When we decide we must find a solution to chaos we also must admit that chaos will not solve itself; it is we who must find a solution to it. This application of ‘we’ is problematic. We immediately misidentify the ‘problem’ of chaos in the moment we identify it as a problem as such and more so when we oppose ourselves to it. To give a name to chaos is, to an extent, to indulge our thirst for order, though this is hardly avoidable if we are to speak about it. This is one of the basic problems when it comes to dealing with the immobile, colourless and silent nothingness; it is a problem Samuel Beckett was entirely conscious of throughout his career.

This dissertation will investigate different aspects of the manner in which Samuel Beckett and Immanuel Kant formed their respective concepts of the human and humanity, and the subsequent problems they faced. These problems include seeking clarity in the face of concepts such as order and chaos, nothingness and somethingness, cognitive and epistemological limitation, subjective weakness and instability and so on. More specifically, I will investigate these problems in terms of how Samuel Beckett and Immanuel Kant understood and represented them.

To that end, Chapter One is primarily concerned with providing the context necessary for understanding the virtues of discussing Beckett and Kant together. To do this the chapter includes a review of the appropriate literature and an appraisal of some methodological

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5 Deleuze & Guattari, What is Philosophy?, 201.
questions that have become pertinent within Beckett studies in recent years. This has to do with Beckett’s relation to Continental philosophy generally, and how best to approach and utilise textual and archival material. More specifically, however, the chapter undertakes a detailed analysis of the current progress made on the topic of Beckett and Kant, so as to identify the particular gaps within the topic that this dissertation endeavours to fill.

The first of these, which constitutes the focus of Chapter Two, is the need to reappraise our approach to discussing the presence of the cogito in Beckett. While this has in the past, understandably, been discussed in relation to the Cartesian model, in Chapter Two the argument is made that the Kantian model is not only more intelligible in its own right, but is also more applicable throughout Beckett’s oeuvre. The Kantian cogito, moreover, presents us with a range of problems regarding the nature of the subject and of consciousness that Descartes’ does not – problems which Beckett depicted consistently. These problems begin within the subject and extend outwards to the relationship between the subject and the external world. Chapter Two is concerns itself with the former problems.

Chapter Three concerns itself with these latter problems. The division between human and world and the former’s supposed mastery over the latter – at least as a matter of destiny if not current reality – is a mainstay of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. This is in large part due to the influence of Kant as a pivotal Enlightenment era thinker. But if we take a less humanistic – and arguably less selective – approach to Kant’s critical philosophy we can discern that the human-world distinction is not so stark as commonly held. Theodor Adorno took just such an approach in his lectures on the Critique of Pure Reason and this culminated in his theory of the Kantian ‘block’. The primary task of Chapter Three is to demonstrate how Beckett depicts such a ‘block’ and its related epistemological problems.

Chapter Four broadly addresses the topic of nihilism versus idealism in Beckett’s oeuvre, with a view to showing that neither of these concepts provides a fitting context within which to view his work. Given that ‘problems’ is a key word throughout Beckett studies, and given how often it is noted that his work appears to actively resist consistent interpretation, I propose that it is better to read his work under an approach to judgement that does not seek to avoid or resist the problematic. Therefore, my analysis seeks to emphasise the deep spirit of skepticism that Beckett often displayed.

Scholarship, however, promotes a certain bias towards solutions and firm conclusions. In Beckett’s case, this has often resulted in his being labelled as a nihilist, humanist, or absurdist (and so on). Another contribution that the application of Kantian critical thought brings to Beckett studies is that Kant provides an example of how critical thought can (or, indeed,
should) embrace problems without dogmatically seeking to overcome them. It is due to their relentless focus on the essentially fractured nature of humanity, its consciousness, and its reality, that the works of Samuel Beckett and Immanuel Kant are so elusive, troubling, and enduring. It follows that the task of understanding not just their work but the problems that begat their possibility cannot and must not be put aside.
Chapter One

Fertile Bathos: The Grounds for a Comparative Reading of Beckett and Kant

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the foundations for the wider aims of this dissertation by explaining how an understanding of Kantian critical philosophy can productively inform our interpretation of particular Western philosophical themes in the work of Samuel Beckett. The aim here is to show how Kant’s critique of human consciousness and the limitations of our epistemological and ontological awareness, of our limitations as subjects, can be seen to have influenced Beckett in his own representation and critique of the human situation.

So why even think to compare Samuel Beckett and Immanuel Kant? Firstly, from his personal correspondences we know that Beckett was familiar with the complete works of Kant, which he owned in the original German.\(^1\) We also know that he read Ernst Cassier’s *Kant’s Life and Thought*, which accompanied Beckett’s edition of Kant’s complete works, of which Cassirer himself was the editor.\(^2\) Furthermore, we know that Beckett took notes on Wilhelm Windleband’s commentary on Kant as part of his *History of Philosophy*.\(^3\) This is enough to demonstrate that any similarity, theoretically or textually, between Kant’s work and Beckett’s cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence.

Far more significantly, however, Beckett draws our attention to Kant in his own words in both primary and secondary texts. An early example of this, occurring long before the archival material was made available, was his description of Macmann as ‘rather of the earth earthy and ill-fitted for pure reason’.\(^4\) Yet more significant is his use of the phrase ‘*De nobis ipsis silemus* [of ourselves we are silent]’ in *The Unnamable*.\(^5\) Though this phrase originally comes from Francis Bacon’s preface to his *Great Instauration*, Beckett was aware of its

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5 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 323.
presence in the dedication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason.* We know this because in a letter to the Irish poet and essayist, Arland Ussher, he writes, ‘I read nothing and I write nothing, unless it is Kant (de nobis ipsis silemus).* The significance of this quotation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three but for now I will simply observe that the difficulties surrounding the conceptions of the self and the subject are a constant feature throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, and a key point of discussion in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason.*

Furthermore, Beckett draws our attention quite directly towards Kant in his late fiction when the narrator of *Company* remarks, ‘Pure Reason? Beyond experience’. This is Beckett drawing attention once again to the *Critique of Pure Reason,* and more directly than he ever does to the *Critique of Practical Reason* or the *Critique of the Power of Judgment.* What these quotations demonstrate is that Beckett was thinking about and engaging with Kant’s philosophy four decades after first reading it which, in turn, demonstrates a more serious engagement with Kant’s philosophy than a passing interest would yield. Moreover, they indicate Beckett’s interest in the metaphysics of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in particular, more so than in the subsequent two critiques. Importantly, they appear in the early, middle, and late periods of his oeuvre, long after his documented reading of Kant occurred. So even on empirical grounds that are really no broader than those of the empiricists themselves, we may deduce that Kant’s philosophy remained a subject of Beckett’s interest throughout most of his career.

This is all more than sufficient to provoke the curiosity of anyone who carries some enthusiasm for Kant and Beckett separately. So rather than asking why one would look to make a sustained comparison between the representations of consciousness by Beckett and Kant (i.e. more than a chapter, or part thereof, here or there), the real question is: ‘why this has yet to occur?’ There are two main reasons. Firstly, the theoretical analysis of Beckett was initially dominated by comparison with Cartesian philosophy. It was not long, however, before such analyses were joined by others referencing such philosophers as Schopenhauer, owing largely to Beckett’s significant reference to him in *Proust.* Scholarly attention to Beckett and

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6 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 91.
9 There is an unpublished thesis, entitled *Beckett Through Kant: A Critique of Metaphysical Readings* that attempts to do something like this. It primarily comprises a misreading of Kant, and consequently a misapplication of Kant’s noumena-noumenon/phenomenon division to Beckett’s oeuvre. The final two chapters are devoted to correctly disavowing this reading, which is attributed to Beckett’s alleged resistance to consistent analysis. So, while this may constitute an attempted reading of Beckett through Kantian metaphysics, it remains the case that a successful attempt has yet to occur.
10 Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett,* 52.
Schopenhauer does not end with philosophy, as the latter was also of interest to both Freud and Lacan. Given Beckett’s significant engagement with psychoanalysis, these things together would account for the weight of interest in the topic of Beckett and Schopenhauer. Other common reference points include the pre-Socratics and ancient Stoa, the post-Cartesian Rationalism of Geulincx, Leibniz, and Malebranche, and the anti-empirical metaphysics of Bergson (which Gontarski considers to have deeply influenced Beckett), and Berkley. These latter two are perhaps the first that Beckett was exposed to in an academic setting. Furthermore, analyses in reference to philosophers such as these appear to be all the more consistently and enduringly fruitful. For example, Cordingly provides us with a richly detailed study of Beckett’s contrasting interests in the pre-Socratics and Plato. Weller, following Beckett’s lead, explores how reading Democritus and Geulincx influenced Beckett’s conception of nothingness. According to Feldman, Beckett had an ‘ongoing fascination’ with Geulincx. This is particularly evident in the publication of Beckett’s notes edited with commentary by Uhlmann, which accompany Wilson’s translation of the Ethics. Uhlmann also provides in-depth analysis of the influence of the ancient Stoa, Geulincx and Bergson on Beckett in *Beckett and the Philosophical Image*. These are merely a few examples that indicate that Beckett was more interested in subjectivity prior to and after Descartes, which appears consistent with Knowlson’s summation of Beckett’s reading habits in which he also casts doubt on the sustainability of Cartesian analyses of Beckett.

The threads one could pull seem innumerable, as Tindall put it as early as 1964: ‘The trouble with Beckett, for those intent on affinities or influences, is that he seems to have read everything […] and that, whatever the echoes, his work is like nothing else’. At any rate, it seems Kant has mostly been lost in the shuffle. I have identified Cartesian readings as particularly relevant to this as Descartes is more readily associated with the *cogito* than Kant, though I will leave that subject and return to it in the following chapter.

On a more methodological note, many of those who lean towards empirical research in Beckett studies would argue there is not sufficient material or weight of fact to justify

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11 Wulf, *The Imperative of Narration*, 12-3.
12 Uhlmann, “Withholding Assent”, 60.
13 Cordingley, “École Normale Supérieure”, 49.
14 Gontarski, “What it is to have been”, 74.
16 Cordingly, *Beckett’s Philosophical Imagination*.
18 Weller, *Unwords*.
19 Feldman, “‘A suitable engine of destruction’?”, 39.
20 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 338-43.
comparison with Kant. For instance, in 1976’s *Samuel Beckett*, Pilling asserts that Beckett only writes about Kant once.\(^{22}\) As shown above, however, this was not accurate in 1976 and, even if it had been, it came to be false upon the publication of *Company*. Taking something to be fact does not necessarily make it one, and what is fact at any given moment can be subject to change in the future. With this in mind, facts are not necessarily as reliable a foundation on which to build critique as one might hope.

At any rate, do we need to look further than Beckett’s known familiarity with Kant in order to justify analysing the apparent conceptual affinity between the two? As Van Hulle and Nixon observe, while Beckett’s direct notes regarding Kant may not have been particularly extensive, they nonetheless indicate, with the aid of Windelband and Cassirer, ‘a genuine intellectual engagement with the content of Kant’s philosophy’.\(^{23}\) Is empirical accuracy (putting aside how one defines that for the moment) to be the end, as in the objective, of criticism? Or is it preferable to consider empiricism not as criticism as such, but rather as a kind of textual forensics used to aid criticism? Must not critical analysis at the very least comment on facts rather than merely assemble them? And so must it not, by definition, depart from the factual and the empirical? Answering these questions depends, on the one hand, on the purpose and scope of any particular study and, on the other hand, on how we conceive of the purpose of literary and cultural studies, and correspondingly how we pursue them. So, to answer the question of why we must consider Beckett and Kant together, we must go back a little further and look at the issue of Beckett and philosophy and how we study this topic more generally. What follows, then, is a discussion of the methodology of Beckett studies, its unavoidable dilemmas, and the pronounced divide these dilemmas have produced.

To begin with the issue of archival scholarship, while I do not consider it a false practice, I take issue with some of its premises and conclusions, and consider it to be of limited usefulness. Beckett pushed his methods to the extreme, and this perhaps goes some way to explaining why studying Beckett can so often be a matter of extremities. The line of division is very clear. It is the choice between criticism that is led by theoretical and conceptual analysis and criticism that is led by empirical analysis based on archival research. It would be nice if this could remain no more than what it is at base, a question of differing methodologies. But it seems to follow from the nature of Beckett’s writing itself, with its intense focus on the fundamental, that in studying it every choice and every detail possesses great potential significance.

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Matthew Feldman, who takes a more extreme position on empirical studies than Van Hulle or Nixon, for example, frames the division as follows:

Acceptance of failure, submission to obligation, expressing the inexpressible; these are the working methods Samuel Beckett presents to his readers, not in the interest of offering a doctrine, or in order to make the inexplicable comprehensible, but precisely to use his art to show that consciousness can only take blurred snapshots of memory and experience. Faced with Beckett’s academic pedigree and revolutionary artistic ideas, scholars are thus on notice in attempting systematic readings of his literature […] In response, the perspective here is presented in the following terms: it is inherently preferable to theorize from a position of empirical accuracy. Theorizing is intrinsic to scholarship; theorizing without empirical substance is not.24

Feldman’s methodology is designed to avoid imposing theoretical systems onto Beckett’s work and thereby distorting it to make it fit a given theoretical mould. The question is: Is empirical scholarship the only way to do this? What I would first observe here is that Feldman appears to have asserted that, for Beckett studies, theoretical readings are a misguided attempt to bring sense to Beckett’s challenge to sense-making. But theory is not equivalent to the form of its articulation, as articulation is an unavoidably limiting process. One might almost say that the better a theory is the more limited it becomes by the particulars of articulation. There is a reason, after all, that we continue to write about Samuel Beckett or Immanuel Kant rather than any number of nameless, forgotten others. A theoretical system is the way in which a theory is organised, but the system and the theory are not inseparable and it is possible to compare theory to something (in this case Beckett) without imposing the system. Furthermore, the very question of sense-making is fundamentally theoretical in nature. I would argue that acceptance of failure, submission to obligation, and the identification of the expressible and inexpressible are all theoretical decisions that led Beckett to a certain practice. Yes, these were preceded by largely unsuccessful practice, but these in turn were preceded by theory largely borrowed from Joyce. It is worth noting that the turning point for Beckett, resulting in what is now widely considered the truly Beckettian œuvre beginning with Molloy, corresponds to

25 Knowlson, Damned to Fame, 319-20.
an intense interest in theoretical philosophy. That is not to say, therefore, that only theoretical analysis is appropriate to the task of studying Beckett. But it indicates that an unpicking of his methodology can, likewise, only perform part of that task. What needs to be focused on for the moment is articulating a distinction between theory and system. The construction of a system in philosophy is a methodological choice. Likewise, the systematic application of philosophy (or the application of a philosophical system) to literature is a methodological choice. Granted, when making a comparison between literature and philosophy, such choices are made much of the time. Indeed it is quite difficult not to make them, either from a deliberate attempt to avoid misrepresenting the systematic philosophy of bygone eras, or a less deliberate tendency to adopt the methodological mannerisms of such philosophers. It is reasonable to expect critics to overcome the second of these two problems. The first, however, is a more complicated issue altogether.

While we must at times view philosophical (and indeed literary) works through the prism of their contemporary realities, we must also be able to distinguish between their theoretical content and the methodological conventions of their respective ages. Systems, by which I mean the particulars of how a theory is presented, are subject to change according to the expectations of the academic culture of their time. Theories, however, persist. If system and theory were inextricable from one another, this could not be so, as one could not change without the other doing so correspondingly. Kant may well have had a great interest – bordering on an obsession– with form and system, but the reason for this interest was precisely to stress the importance of not confusing these with content and, in doing so, descending into amphiboly and confusion.26 This remains important. Content is where the theory lives. The dilemma regarding theoretical analysis is then not so much how to avoid the application of system, but how to command system so as to supersede it, in order to access and generate theory. Empirical research seeks to cut through system to the same end, and has had some success, but there is more success to be had. There are some questions it cannot address, though I do not intend to list them at this moment. For now, let us focus on another of Feldman’s observations:

[Beckett’s oeuvre] is a mix of substantial intellectual debts owed to particular books, figures and systems from within European culture. In turn, these assisted him in a mode of expression that is at once

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inspirational and futile, philosophical and artistic: systematic at times within certain limits; and then again, non-systematic in response to those limits.27

To impose limitations on a system, and also to respond to those limitations non-systematically, are theoretical prospects. What remains in the archive amounts to a window into Beckett’s compositional methods, and his published works are of course the results of these methods. From these items stem a host of theoretical possibilities of interpretation. The question regarding theorising from a position of empirical accuracy is this: What can we be empirically certain of, what can we see through the window? Theorising is, as Feldman states, intrinsic to scholarship it must include questioning what can be meant by empirical accuracy and substance. This pursuit of empirical certainty relies fundamentally on theory. We live in a world where epistemological authority stems from empiricism and scientific method. Empirical research in literary studies is no doubt pursued in an attempt to share in some of this authority. This is something of a land grab that runs against the premise of empirical scholarship. As Rabaté observes, Feldman ‘tends to use the archive in order to place a limit on interpretation’.28 Empirical scholarship is pursued in an effort to avoid the restrictive or violent overarching truth claims of big ‘T’ Theory. Only in reference to ‘hard facts’, so it goes, can we (little ‘t’) theorise and interpret reliably. But facts are not merely objects from which to interpret; they are themselves the product of interpretations.

The question ‘What does this mean?’ is useless to us. It must be amended so that it reads something more like ‘What can it mean to us?’ By us, I do not mean we as individuals but we as points in the wider intellectual and cultural schema to which we and all cultural and discursive artefacts belong. Perhaps, then, the question should be ‘What can it mean to this?’, to the schema and to us as part of the schema. This question may also be asked of the archival materials as though they are simply further texts as, to a certain extent, this is what they are. The practice of basing critique on them is framed as a means of reducing or even eliminating error. But how are we to define error, and in relation to what can we be in error? To put the responsibilities of scholarship in terms of what is correct and what is in error is as restrictive, authoritarian and violent as the whimsical imposition of a big ‘T’ Theoretical system. Nearly four decades ago, Mieke Bal posed a fascinating question about structuralism and her relation to it:

28 Rabaté, Beckett’s Three Critiques, 701.
the most reasonable attitude [in the practice of whatever kind of structuralism] I can imagine consists in answering the question, what’s the point?, while taking that question seriously. And that question […] is what all academic work should continually be asked to answer.29

In her article, Bal was asking this question specifically of herself and her own narratological studies. Her answer can be summarised as saying that understanding narrative structures and objects is simply one of many things that may aid our understanding of literature (the tool and not the use). Texts have structures and those structures contribute to their meaning, of course they do, but the structure of a text does not define its meaning any more than a text is equivalent to that structure. Structuralist studies are a means of illustrating a point, they are not themselves pointed, and each individual study must ask of itself, what is the point to which it is a means? Furthermore, Bal points out in a footnote that empiricism, which at the time was a recent development, must also ask this of itself:

The current fashion of “empirical” study of literature – in quotation marks because I do not believe it is empirical in any scientific sense – markedly fails to address the question of its own point (e. g., Fokkema 1988). For example, the “documentary” search for authorial intention – less empirical and more traditional than the author seems to be aware of – seems to me entirely beside the point of the search for insight into literary processes. This falling back into regressive positions could be countered by the kind of permanent self-criticism the question “what’s the point?” summarises.30

In light of this we must ask ourselves – or more precisely the empiricists must ask of themselves – what exactly can be meant by the empirical accuracy that Feldman refers to above (see n. 24)? What exactly is the empirical content of the archival material, and why should it be considered the sole legitimate point of departure for theoretical analysis?

These methodological dilemmas, although common in the humanities, are intensified due to a corresponding intensification in Beckett’s mode of expression. This intensification of

29 Bal, The Point of Narratology, 729.
30 Bal, The Point of Narratology, 729 note 3.
course includes the repetition of themes, imagery and phraseology throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, which itself grew more extreme in his later work. We can reliably deduce from this that he was ruminating on a relatively small variety of concepts in a relatively small variety of ways. Following this the question is: How do we reliably speak to the subjects of this rumination? The common presumption in Beckett studies seems to be that the only way to do justice to Beckett’s precision is to match it, and the only way to do this is to stick to hard facts. But in what sense is that possible, and if it were, what would it amount to? Beckett had a collection of meanings and intents in mind, this much we can discern. His published works and his archival leavings are the only empirical objects we have to work with. We know only what he said. Between the meanings and the expressions that remain there is a gulf we cannot cross. The nature of these meanings and whatever this gulf is, has always been, and shall always remain a matter of speculation. There is, as it were, nothing to be done about that. The aim of empirical research is to foster the material of the archive in an attempt to narrow this gulf, in the hope of potentially leaping across it. But to what end? To ultimately and wholly justify the endeavour of empiricism, its end must be articulated with the same exactitude as its means. If we are to theorise from a position of empirical accuracy the question must then be: What is this position empirically accurate of or towards? And, subsequently, what is the significance of this, what does it allow us to do?

To ask what the meaning of Beckett’s work may be is itself a meaningless question. This is not because any final meaning of Beckett’s work cannot be said to exist but because, supposing that it does exist, such a meaning is not ultimately accessible. We have remaining artefacts that are indicative of a meaning in a manner and to an extent that we cannot fully ascertain. Nor can we know how close we may approach to full certainty. We do not know, then, how close archival material brings us to the ‘true’ meaning of a text or body of texts. The humanities deal in abstractions and a gulf remains a gulf until it is not one. The ‘true’ meanings and intents within or behind Beckett’s works really are akin to something like Plato’s Ideas. But we cannot share in Plato’s mysticism, and we can hold no faith in our ability to access this Ideal plain. Feldman is also aware of this dilemma, though in different terms, as he tells us in his mission statement for Beckett’s Books:

My aim in (hopefully) remaining faithful to Beckett, has been twofold: to emphatically affirm the importance of these extant [archival] materials in the evolution of Beckett’s artistic approach, and to quietly
negate overarching readings of Beckett that attempt to say what he (or ‘it’) actually ‘means’.\(^{31}\)

There is no way of ascertaining what faithfulness would actually constitute. If the significance of Beckett’s work is to be found in what we can be empirically certain of, then we are to remain faithful to the material itself, and what it says. To remain faithful to this is to depart from it as little as possible, to add to it as little as possible, to say as little as possible. The way to do this is to say nothing at all. Yet here we are. We know there are things that can be said and we consider them valuable, so let us continue.

Undoubtedly there must be limitations, but how legitimate is it to define them purely by the contents of the archive? This is a sort of common sense pragmatism pushed to the point where it no longer makes sense. Can we really interpret the cessation of note-taking and direct reference to particular philosophical texts as a loss of interest in philosophy? Rabaté addresses this question without asking it directly. We know, for instance, that Beckett’s surviving notes on Kant were really taken from Windelband’s *A History of Philosophy* in 1933.\(^ {32}\) Despite, or perhaps because of, Beckett’s misgivings with the way Kant is represented by the neo-Kantian Windelband,\(^ {33}\) we know that Beckett did not lose interest in the subject, as he subsequently acquired Kant’s complete works five years later (see n. 1). An apparently influential lesson that Beckett would have taken from Windelband comes in the form of the latter’s observation that ‘Kant discovered that the objects of thought are none other than the products of thought itself’.\(^ {34}\) This, however, is more relevant to the following two chapters.

The fact of the matter is that Beckett ceases his scholarly note-taking at the end of the 1930s, and following empiricist argumentation we must conclude that he lost interest in all subjects altogether at this point, at the beginning of his career and over four decades before his death. But I would also like to emphasise Rabaté’s employment of the term ‘use’. It is important to remember that the archive material is a tool that is put to use. It is not a living document. It is a record only of exactly what it says. It tells us nothing further. As Rabaté goes on to say:

\(^{32}\) Rabaté, *Beckett’s Three Critiques*, 707.
[Feldman] assumes that Beckett’s engagement with philosophy, intense as it was, was short-lived, lasting no longer than a decade, between roughly 1928 and 1938. This position is technically unassailable, based as it is on manuscript evidence and precise dating of Beckett’s allusions, letters, and note-taking.

At this point it is worth noting that Feldman’s position is only unassailable if you look exclusively at those materials not published in Beckett’s lifetime. There are allusions in the published texts (which I take to be the most important of all the empirical articles) that appear well after this decade preceding the Second World War. For example, Beckett quotes the phrase ‘De nobis ipsis silemus [of ourselves we are silent]’ in his fourth published novel, The Unnamable, in both the original French in 1953 (L’Innommable)35 and his English translation in 1958.36 While this phrase comes from Francis Bacon’s The Great Instauration, what the (at the time) unpublished material tells us is that Beckett was only too aware of Kant’s use of it in the dedication to the Critique of Pure Reason (see n. 6). The theoretical significance of this is, however, not my current focus. I mention it now simply to point out that it is an empirical fact that Beckett was directly engaging with philosophy at least twenty years after the period Feldman identifies and, therefore, his claim about the periodicity of Beckett’s interest in philosophy is itself factually – indeed, ‘empirically’ – inaccurate. Similarly, Cordingley notes how signs of Beckett’s reading of ancient Greek philosophy in the 1920s are evident in How It Is, some thirty years later.37 Additionally, Knowlson notes how Beckett’s reading of philosophy is reflected in as late a text as Company.38 Therefore, the answer to the question posed above regarding Beckett’s interest in philosophy is, simply, no. And so, to continue with what Rabaté goes on to say:

While I follow [Feldman] in his Popperian caution by insisting that allusions and references should be verified in drafts and manuscripts, I am not sure that Beckett’s engagement with philosophy can be limited to ten years. Moreover, the wish to ground all textual remarks on pre-publication material risks narrowing the critical discussion to such an

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36 Beckett, The Unnamable, 323.
37 Cordingley, Beckett’s Philosophical Imagination, 383.
38 Knowlson, Damned to Fame, 576.
extreme that the uses of the text would be restricted to self-appointed professionals.39

For the sake of context, it should be noted that Rabaté is responding to Feldman’s application of Popperian falsifiability to Beckett studies,40 though the details of that particular debate are of no specific import here. In principle, I agree that claims regarding specific textual allusions ought to be verified, but they may also be verified from letters, interviews and other secondary material in addition to manuscripts. Nonetheless, Rabaté is quite right to be concerned about the narrowing of scope in criticism that empiricism demands. While this same narrowing may be due to a sort of aversion to risk that arises out of respect for the author, it also disregards the place of literary works in a living culture of wide and vigorous debate, which belongs to no one in particular, and which all art relies on if it is to resist falling into irrelevance. Were this saturation of professionalism to be adopted wholesale, the result would be the demise of culture by suffocation, with art remaining solely the interest of self-appointed professionals, and with art being unduly separated from the intellectual culture from which it emerged and in which it could continue to play its valuable part. As Beckett himself stated, ‘Literary criticism is not book-keeping’, 41 and there will be no attempt here to reduce it to such.

Empirical scholarship may be more than preparatory ‘spadework’, as Van Hulle puts it,42 but remains nonetheless a means rather than and end within literary studies. To put it differently, I do not at all contest the importance of archival materials as such, I merely contest the ways in which they are important (or the ‘use’ to which they are put). That is to say, they are not important in such a way as to form the basis of criticism. I also contest claims that overarching readings that attempt to say what Beckett actually means are exclusively the result of theoretical readings. While examples of such readings undoubtedly exist, it is not justified to tar them all with the same brush. Such errors in interpretation are not intrinsic to theoretical analysis, but to theoretical analysis done poorly. The readings that Feldman contests were poor, not because they lacked ‘scientific’ method, but because they lacked theoretical rigour. His extreme position in Beckett’s Books reads like an over-reaction to such readings. While it is an understandable position, it is equally understandable that, as Uhlmann notes, he has since moderated it.43

39 Rabaté, Beckett’s Three Critiques, 701.
42 Van Hulle, “Notebooks and Other Manuscripts”, 417.
43 Uhlmann, Beckett’s Intertexts, 104.
Whichever side of this methodological debate a critic falls on, the tension remains the same: the tension between the need to pursue research as freely as possible and the responsibility to represent the subject of research as faithfully as possible. This is all the more complicated in the humanities, which is an inherently interpretive field. Nonetheless, pursuing the question, ‘What can it mean to us?’ does not mean we are free to shape the materials left to us like so much modelling clay. Such an undertaking would lack substance. Rabaté refers to this as the ‘other attitude’ adopted by philosophers who are:

aiming to arrive at a new rapport with the novels and plays they tend to read the published texts alone, using archives sparingly and eschewing the work of specialist Beckett commentators. Philosophers like Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, Simon Critchley, and Martha Nussbaum do this because they believe that Beckett’s oeuvre can be read as philosophy, whether critical, ethical, ontological, or political.44

It is interesting that Rabaté criticises those named for not referring to Beckett specialists, having just drawn a line of demarcation between the philosophers and the ‘self-appointed professionals’, both of whom are to be avoided and, by extension, avoid each other. It seems that by Beckett specialists he means writers who have found a happy balance between archival reference and textual analysis. But he does not define this balance or identify the author(s) responsible for it. In the case of Adorno in particular, this charge seems unwarranted as most if not all of his writings on Beckett predate the existence of Beckett specialists as such, and he died seven years before the publication of the first issue of the Journal of Beckett Studies. Moreover, Beckett’s manuscripts and notes were not available to Adorno or the other authors (with the exception of Critchley and Nussbaum) at the time of their writings on Beckett. Furthermore Rabaté, in his chapter in A Companion to Samuel Beckett entitled “Philosophizing with Beckett: Adorno and Badiou”, he discusses in some detail Adorno’s conversations with Beckett in Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s.45 His account includes the often-noted anecdote of Adorno insisting that the character of Hamm in Endgame is a reference to Hamlet,

44 Rabaté, Beckett’s Three Critiques, 701-2.
45 Rabaté, Philosophizing with Beckett, 100-3.
despite the direct, in fact face-to-face denial of Beckett himself.\textsuperscript{46} There are a number of things to observe and ask about this.

To begin with, why would a philosopher and aesthetic theorist who had had extensive conversations with the author himself feel the need to refer to the works of Beckett specialists? Adorno’s assertion regarding Hamlet, as far as we can tell, was in error, and the circumstances in which it was made are indeed strange. But how important is this? On the one hand, we could interpret this as an error resulting from an over-reliance on theoretical interpretation; Rabaté remarks that from this point on ‘Adorno would embody for Beckett the stereotypical German professor whose watertight architecture of concepts is impervious to facts.’\textsuperscript{47} It is, however, important to emphasise that the issue Beckett took here is with a particular German approach to theoretical interpretation, rather than with theoretical interpretation in general.

On the other hand, could this episode not also indicate that empiricism is not so hardy a defence against error as we could choose to believe? One of Beckett’s more famous remarks about his work, that it is ‘a desecration of silence’, also came out of Adorno’s conversations with him.\textsuperscript{48} The facticity (insofar as it has been established) of Beckett’s having said this carries a lot of weight empirically. But we cannot hope to know precisely what Beckett meant by this. The best we can do is to interpret his statement, in this case, based on our understanding of silence and what may be desecrated, and to describe the manner in which Beckett’s work interacts with these understandings. As a side note, while the potential for a comparison between Wittgenstein and Beckett has been argued in the past,\textsuperscript{49} and has been returned to recently,\textsuperscript{50} remarks such as the one above indicate that, at a certain point, Beckett and Wittgenstein become fundamentally incomparable. While Beckett may have agreed that ‘The facts all contribute only to the setting of the problem, not to its solution’,\textsuperscript{51} he refused (as was noted early on by Hesla\textsuperscript{52}) to pass over the problems we cannot solve in silence.\textsuperscript{53} This is interesting, not least because it relates to one of the main arguments that Rabaté (quoting Critchley, who was paraphrasing the above remark) makes against Nussbaum’s writings on Beckett. According to Rabaté, Nussbaum wrongfully identifies Beckett as a nihilist for whom

\textsuperscript{46} Rabaté, \textit{Philosophizing with Beckett}, 102.
\textsuperscript{47} Rabaté, \textit{Philosophizing with Beckett}, 102.
\textsuperscript{48} Rabaté, \textit{Philosophizing with Beckett}, 102.
\textsuperscript{49} Hassan, \textit{The Literature of Silence}, 129; Robinson, \textit{The Long Sonata of the Dead}, 122.
\textsuperscript{50} Furlani, “Earlier Wittgenstein, Later Beckett”, 64-5. Furlani later expands on the topic in \textit{Beckett after Wittgenstein}.
\textsuperscript{51} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, 88.
\textsuperscript{52} Hesla, “The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett’s \textit{Watt}”, 98.
\textsuperscript{53} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, 89.
silence is the objective (a view that is echoed by Brater\textsuperscript{54}), and Rabaté points to this as a case study of overly theoretical readings of Beckett.\textsuperscript{55} I will refrain, for the moment, from discussing this argument in detail. I refer to it now solely because it leads us back to the key question of this chapter. That question, to reiterate, concerns the lack not just of comparisons between Beckett and Kant, but of ones that specifically concern the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} and the philosophical problems therein.

It is right that there should be some evidentiary link made when performing intertextual comparisons. This should not, however, form the foundation of critique because if we adopt such an approach we will find that we have ‘catastrophically limited our capacity to understand or adequately engage with the challenges offered by Beckett’s texts’.\textsuperscript{56} On the other hand, empirical evidence can and should be used to help support interpretation, if for no other reason than simply because the provision of evidence is fundamental to sound argument.

There are references in Beckett’s work that are almost certainly or indeed inarguably direct references to Kant. We should not forget that the primary texts themselves are by definition the first and most important empirical articles. Here, these references will be identified, followed by a discussion of how they link Beckett’s and Kant’s work together in a general, thematic sense. More detailed discussion of their significance will follow later in the dissertation.

Beckett inserts the phrase ‘das fruchtbare Bathos der Erfahrung’, which Rabaté renders in English as ‘the fruitful bathos of experience’\textsuperscript{57}, in the addenda to \textit{Watt}.\textsuperscript{58} This is a direct quote taken from Kant’s \textit{Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics},\textsuperscript{59} a text that essentially functions as a companion piece to the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} and its problematics. This quote is taken from a footnote in which Kant is sharply rebuking one Christian Garve, ‘the reviewer’,\textsuperscript{60} for failing, as many do, to properly observe his distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental:

\begin{quote}
High towers and the metaphysically-great men who resemble them, around both of which there is usually much wind, are not for me. My place is the fertile bathos of experience, and the word: transcendental –
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54}Brater, “Beckett’s ‘Beckett’: So Many Words For Silence”, 118.
\textsuperscript{55}Rabaté, \textit{Beckett’s Three Critiques}, 704.
\textsuperscript{56}Uhlmann, \textit{Beckett’s Intertexts}, 105.
\textsuperscript{57}Rabaté, \textit{Beckett’s Three Critiques}, 709.
\textsuperscript{59}Kant, \textit{Prolegomena}, 161n.
\textsuperscript{60}Rabaté, \textit{Beckett’s Three Critiques}, 710.
whose signification, which I indicated so many times, was not caught once by the reviewer (so hastily had he looked at everything) – does not signify something that surpasses all experience, but something that indeed precedes experience (a priori), but that, all the same, is destined to nothing more than solely to make cognition from experience possible. 

*If these concepts cross beyond experience, their use is then called transcendent, which is distinguished from the immanent use (i.e., use limited to experience)* [my italics].

For Rabaté, this is immediately relevant to his discussion of the Sublime in relation to Beckett, which he illustrates by saying that

Kant uses “Bathos” in its literal sense of “deep” or “low” place. Beckett’s “deep,” then, plays on “Bathos” in its literal and literary senses. Bathos is a term that was made popular by Alexander Pope, who described it as the “ridiculous and failed sublime.” And it is more than likely that Beckett was aware of the eighteenth-century discussion of the Sublime and the Bathetic.

The Bathetic, in its literal and literary sense, is certainly a prominent characteristic of Beckett’s early novels and, if anything, more so in his early dramatic work. Hamm as a figure would be an example of this; he is restricted to his chair like a slowly rotting king reigning, with affected dignity, over a land that no longer exists. Indeed, Bathos is very much at the foundation of Beckett’s aesthetic during this period, and ultimately of his public identity as an author. The literal sense of the Bathetic is something that was to persist in his work even though the literary sense gradually dwindled and eventually all but disappeared. But more immediately this interest in the Bathetic indicates two things. Firstly, it indicates that Beckett maintained his interest in philosophy and in particular Kant after the period documented in his notebooks, and that he did so with his customary eye for detail as, again, the above passage is taken from a footnote of a relatively minor work. Secondly, it indicates that Beckett was also

61 Kant, *Prolegomena*, 161. All references to Kant are taken from the Cambridge edition of Kant’s complete works in English. The emphasis, in bold and italics, is in the original unless otherwise indicated, as in this instance.

interested in problems surrounding the distinction between the transcendent and
transcendental, that he was aware of Kant’s distinction between the two, and that he was
familiar with the way Kant relates them to idealism in general. This subject will be discussed
in Chapter Three. Kant’s relationship with the idealism that preceded him, and how this relates
to Beckett, is a subject that will be covered in much more detail in the next chapter.

Rabaté very clearly states that ‘Kant can provide an entry-point for a philosophy-
inflected reading of Beckett’. As yet the only significant publication on the subject, other
than Rabaté’s article, is Bjørn Myskja’s *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett*. It is an interesting
publication, as Myskja completely disregards the methodological debate that I have described.
Other than the general debate about how to interpret the Kantian concept of the sublime, there
are two debates that Myskja concerns himself with. The first and foremost of these is whether
or not the novel as an art-form may be considered sublime. Here, Myskja argues in the
affirmative and uses Beckett’s *Molloy* as his prime example. Second to this is whether or not
Beckett’s work may be considered nihilistic. Myskja argues against Nussbaum’s interpretation
that Beckett is nihilistic in the process of arguing his central thesis: that much of Beckett’s
work (specifically *Molloy*) may be considered sublime in the Kantian sense, both
mathematically and dynamically. It is dynamically sublime, he argues, because it contains
morally uplifting content. If this is the case, then Beckett’s work cannot be considered
nihilistic. Unsurprisingly, however, *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett* is almost entirely about
the sublime in Kant. In fact, it has remarkably little to say about Beckett, other than the brief
application of the particular interpretation of the Kantian sublime that it primarily concerns
itself with. Indeed, it adds little to the questions this dissertation addresses other than a few
talking points. For now, I will return to Rabaté’s confidence in a Kantian approach to Beckett.
He is quick to observe that not everyone agrees with him, saying:

Critchley, with whom I am usually in agreement, rejects any connection
with Kant. Criticizing P. J. Murphy’s analysis, he writes, “I find some
of the alleged parallels between Kant and Beckett, particularly on the
question of synthetic a priori judgments and transcendental imagination
[...] slightly impressionistic and less than convincing.”

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63 Rabaté, *(Beckett’s Three Critiques)*, 707.
64 Myskja, *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett*, 54.
65 Rabaté, *(Beckett’s Three Critiques)*, 707.
This quote from Critchley is an accurate summation of his views on the potential for comparison between Beckett and Kant. But it is important to observe that P. J. Murphy does not offer much of an analysis of Beckett and Kant, rather he points towards a number of avenues by which one might make one, as part of a more general and ‘useful account of the philosophical influences on Beckett’. This is entirely appropriate to the nature of the publication in which Murphy’s chapter appears, *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* of 1997, and it should be noted that Murphy was one of first to suggest that someone ought to make a much more extensive comparison between Beckett and Kant (a position he later reiterated), even if he did not do so himself. Of course, Murphy’s article is impressionistic; that is its purpose – to give an impression of the possibilities offered by discussions on Beckett and philosophy. Nonetheless, Critchley foresees problems in a more focused comparison of Beckett and Kant. Also citing Beckett’s use of the phrase ‘De nobis ipsis silemus’, Critchley diligently warns us by saying:

Now, if one had the leisure, the competence and the intelligence, one could imagine a philosophical interpretation of Beckett that might begin from this connection, showing how he inherits a certain Kantian or post-Kantian philosophical world-view. The focus of such an interpretation would naturally be the problem of the subject in and after the Copernican turn, that is, after the critique of metaphysics and the turn to the subject as the ground of knowledge. Of course, the epistemological subject or transcendental unity of apperception in Kant is something that must be logically presupposed in the deduction of the categories – the ‘I think’ must accompany all my representations – but the subject is not itself an item of knowledge; that is, it is formal and insubstantial […] the Kantian subject is a subject without substance.

It is true that the problem of the subject after Kant, and how this relates to Beckett, requires a lot of attention in this context, and consequently that is the topic of the following chapter. For now, I would simply contest the suggestion Critchley appears to make that one

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66 Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 198n.
67 Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 198n.
68 Murphy, P. J., *Beckett and the Philosophers*, 222-40.
69 Murphy, P. J., “Beckett’s Critique of Kant”, 194.
70 Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 144.
would need to base a Kant-inflected interpretation of Beckett’s writing on the premise that he had adopted a specifically Kantian or post-Kantian worldview. To influence someone’s thought, even to do so strongly, is not the same thing as to dominate or define it. Nonetheless, it is as though cultural studies is pervaded with the presumption that one cannot discuss the influence of Kant or Kantian philosophy on any work without pigeonholing it as distinctly Kantian. This likely says more about Kant’s influence on Western thought and culture generally than it does about in influence on any of their particular products. Were one to even attempt a description of Beckett’s worldview, there would be plenty of scope to describe the influence of Kantianism on that worldview without suggesting that Beckett owed his entire worldview to Kant. It is crucial to remember that Kant’s critical philosophy, as critical philosophy, is more than a collection of thought products; it is also demonstrative of a manner of thought that goes beyond the particulars of its articulation. Kant presented a revolutionary way of understanding the problem of perceiving and comprehending the universe. He was arguably one of the first scholars of the humanities as such and as a result pervasively influenced, and continues to influence, Western thought whether it considers itself Kantian or not. Yet as fundamental a part of intellectual history his work may be, Kant did not invent the problematics he described. The problems begat those descriptions and all that have followed. Reason does not produce problems; it encounters them.

At any rate, Rabaté heeds Critchley’s warning about comparing Kant and Beckett in relation to the account of subjectivity taken archetypically from the Critique of Pure Reason, and so follows Myskja in centralising his own analysis around the Sublime. In addition to the work by Rabaté and Myskja, there has been some discussion of the Sublime in relation to Breath, and a comparison of the role of the Sublime in Beckett, Kafka and Blanchot. Locatelli also makes brief mention of the dynamical sublime producing a sense of vertigo in reference to Ill Seen Ill Said. Most of what little has been written about Beckett and Kant centres on issues in the Critique of the Power of Judgment. This is one of the two reasons (the other I will discuss below) why I will not be discussing those issues in detail myself. There are, however, a few things to be taken from that discussion. One is that Kant’s influence is evident in Beckett’s distinctive sense of the ridiculous and of the destitution of humanity and thus – by extension – in the tragicomic poetics we now think of as ‘Beckettian’.

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71 Cassirer, Kant’s Life and Thought, 22-3.
73 Fort, The Imperative to Write, 300-2.
74 Locatelli, Unwording the World, 200.
But first, for the sake of context, I should note that up to now my remarks regarding Rabaté have been in reference to his essay of 2012 entitled *Beckett’s Three Critiques: Kant’s Bathos and the Irish Chandos*. Much of the material of this essay subsequently formed the basis of part of Rabaté’s 2016 book, *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. While the book only contains one chapter specifically devoted to the subject of the comparability of Beckett and Kant, it is nonetheless as substantial an example of such a comparison as any to date. The expansion from the original paper to the book is interesting and surprising in both the lines followed and those not, and it is necessary to take a closer look at this. From the beginning, it is clear that Rabaté intends to do something at least a little bit different to what has come before in Beckett studies. He declares that:

Beckett’s alert writing forces us to become responsible for the forms of art by which we surround ourselves. The situation has not changed drastically […] now that so many philosophical discourses have been used and abused about Beckett. All the possible theoretical approaches have been applied to his works without capturing what makes them tick.

While this last remark is something of an overstatement, it is true that the primary responsibility in criticism of Beckett’s works (not to mention any other art form) is to sincerely attempt to capture what makes them tick. It is also true that Beckett does not let us forget our responsibility, not just for our experience of his work, but for experience in general. He makes us *think*, and this is not in spite of, but very much inclusive of, constantly making us doubt just exactly what it means to do so. Rabaté’s intends to go about this task by ‘rethinking fundamental values, above all by rethinking the humanism that we take for granted’. And as part of doing so he says that:

we will need to move beyond the human and try to think otherwise – like an animal, perhaps like a goat or a pig […] From this vantage point, we will revisit the Dantian foundation of Beckett’s ethics. Such a
foundation was laid early, as we perceive when we see Beckett glossing the work of his literary mentor, James Joyce. Beckett’s commentary on *Finnegans’s Wake* leads to critical theses about salvation and redemption – in a word: they can wait – and to the creation of an ethics of nonvalue, which soon redoubles as an aesthetics of nonrelation. With this double postulation in mind, we will see how Beckett grapples with Kantian ethics in order to usher in a philosophy of the “low”. 78

The surprising thing here is that when Rabaté refers to Beckett being ‘at the limit of the human’, as in the title, he is not referring to the human’s limitations in knowledge, discourse or reason in general. Rather, he is referring to the line of demarcation between the human and non-human animal, and of Beckett’s tendency to either question or ignore it and, in doing so, conflate the distinction between human and non-human animals to varying extents. From this Rabaté will set about building an analysis of this ‘ethics of the low’ and of Beckett’s a-humanism or even anti-humanism. He begins by discussing Lucky’s thought as instigated by Pozzo’s command of ‘Think, Pig!’, 79 which he characterises as a ‘botched performance [which] joins the bestial with the divine in a self-cancelling obliteration of human rationality’. 80 On the one hand this is a surprising way to start as it partly contradicts Rabaté’s earlier promise to ‘to say as little as possible about the absurd or the precariousness of human existence’. 81 On the other hand, it does raise an important question, one that will be addressed periodically throughout this dissertation: of whether or not Beckett ever truly attempts to ‘obliterate’ rationality or sense-making, as he is often apprehended as doing. 82 This is a seemingly ever-present question in Beckett studies because it is virtually impossible to avoid, not least due to the responsibility spoken of above that Beckett places on us. Nonetheless, there is a subtle but important contradiction running through *Think, Pig!*, in that, despite the promise made in the introduction, Rabaté makes consistent reference to Beckett undermining or destroying rationality, and to his bringing the human down to the level of the animal. Doing so invokes both the absurdity and the precariousness of human *qua* human existence. The fact that Rabaté speaks of these things often does not, however, necessarily mean he breaks his promise to speak of them as little as possible. And, so, pointing out this contradiction is by no means

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78 Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*, 9.
80 Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*, 12.
81 Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*, 4.
designed to criticise Rabaté so much as to further indicate why contradiction itself is a central theme of this dissertation.

Boxall, following Critchley, suggests that Beckett’s writing ‘dismantles the critical apparatuses that one brings to it [….] as if Beckett’s writing reads one back, demonstrating the vanishing point of one’s own reading practices while refusing to yield to interpretation’. 83 This is not an uncommon observation in Beckett studies, and it is an issue that will be discussed in more detail momentarily. For now, I mention it only to contextualise the statement that nothing is obliged to yield to interpretation and that, while Beckett’s writing may be uncooperative, this is not the same thing as being actively resistant. Gendron also picks up this theme while ultimately offering the notion that what we witness in Beckett’s inconsistencies is essentially Beckett ‘rewriting his thought’. 84 Beckett was certainly a deeply ruminative author, and we can safely assume that he changed his mind from time to time. The problem, obviously, is that we can never know for certain what was in his mind at one time or another. It worth considering that any individual inconsistency we might find throughout his oeuvre is not necessarily deliberate. Moreover, his deceptiveness may not be designed to deceive the critic (how we flatter ourselves), but rather to mimic the deceptiveness of consciousness itself. Therefore, I posit that it is Beckett’s fascination with contradiction and antinomy, and his work’s saturation in critical thought, that give it the apparent character of resistance. Critical thought, if true to its word, must be simultaneously critical, not only of itself but also of any premise at all of thought and expression. Beckett achieves this utterly, to the extent that his writing acts like a mirror that forces us to look not necessarily at what we are saying about it but at why we do so. A typical response to this, understandably enough, is to interpret it as a kind of pre-emptive counter-critique. As Federman put it in the early days of Beckett studies, ‘The novels of Samuel Beckett seem to defy all classification, evade all possible definition’. 85 The difficulty, then, is to try and say something coherent without attempting to classify Beckett. I propose that rather than seeking to overcome this difficulty we must be willing to accept the possibility, the probability, or even the actuality, that everything we have to think and say, including about Beckett, is ‘all balls from start to finish’. 86

With this in mind, when Rabaté says that ‘Beckett’s main theme was the inhumanity of man. This exploration of human limits would launch a new antiliterature and produce a new

83 Boxall, Nothing of Value, 33-4.
85 Federman, Journey to Chaos, 1.
86 Beckett, How It Is, 127.
writing constantly destroying or negating itself, one is led to wonder if Beckett was identifying man as inhuman specifically, or if he was questioning the meaning of the human more generally. Procedurally, this would necessarily include a questioning of the means humanity has used to conceive of its humanity in the first place and this may indeed appear like a deliberate anti-literature or anti-discourse. This does not at all seem in keeping with the Beckett who reportedly said that

Negation is no more possible than affirmation [...] It is absurd to say that something is absurd. That is still a value judgement. It is impossible to protest, and equally impossible to assent. You have to work in an area where there are no possible pronouns, or solutions, or reactions or standpoints [...] That’s what makes it so diabolically difficult.

Again, Beckett’s writing is saturated with critical thought, almost to the point of seeming paradoxically and dogmatically so, and as such it exists in a space prior to affirmation and negation. Given this, we must hesitate to say that it is either anti or pro literature, and that it affirms neither the human or the inhuman. For one thing, Beckett’s above remark indicates to us that negation is also the affirmation of a negative, and already we are playing an empty linguistic game. Beckett cuts through language precisely so as to avoid this game. Rather than obliterating rationality, Beckett’s writing is intensely rational, but just as intensely mindful of rationality’s limitations, and the attention he brings to these limitations often appears as a kind of indictment of rationality. The point, however, is that we cannot escape rationality or the effect of its limitations. What Beckett shows us is that the little we have is utterly and obligatorily ours, that we have no right to it and no right to divest ourselves of it, and nor is there any premise for doing so.

Rather than obliteration, Beckett performs a kind of neutralisation. Rabaté goes on to discuss Beckett’s fascination with purgatory, specifically Dante’s Purgatorio, wherein we encounter Belacqua. As Caselli affirms, Dante is one of the most consistent of Beckett’s many literary reference points. It follows that the topic has already been discussed in detail frequently, most notably in Caselli’s Beckett’s Dantes and later in her detailed analysis of

87 Rabaté, Think, Pig!, 15.
88 Beckett in Juliet, Conversations, 165.
90 Rabaté, Think, Pig!, 32.
91 Caselli, “Italian Literature”, 246.
Beckett’s references to Dante in his notebooks and manuscripts.\(^{92}\) Therefore, there will be no lengthy effort to discuss Dante here. It is worth noting, however, that Beckett’s fascination specifically with the *Purgatorio* encapsulates the spirit of neutralisation. Just as there is no negation or affirmation for Beckett, there is no *Paradiso* or *Inferno*, no damnation or salvation. Rather than the Divine being brought ‘low’, the Divine and the ‘low’ are brought together, losing individual meaning and so they become neutralised. From this emerges an ethics of nonvalue (see n. 78) and of nonaction. In a similar vein, Protin discusses how inaction in Beckett was in part a questioning of the existence of free will, and question he asks after reading Guelincx, Schopenhauer and Mauthner.\(^ {93}\) My position, however, is that inaction results from non-knowing that cuts at the very premise of action. Such a non-knowing is not limited to merely not knowing *what* to do at a given moment, but not knowing *why* to do anything at all. This is the meaning of limbo in Beckett, a meaning first communicated to him by Dante through Belacqua, and which he gradually cultivated and refined. While the name, Belacqua, only appears in Beckett’s earliest works his image, as Rabaté also notes, appears overtly in later texts such as *The Lost Ones*\(^ {94}\) and *Company*.\(^ {95}\) Caselli devotes a chapter to Belacqua,\(^ {96}\) though more as a matter of literary heritage and the significance this brings to Beckett’s earlier works. Prior to this, Robinson presents Belacqua as the Beckettian hero and the embodiment of the limbo, and Brienza briefly compares Belacqua to Schopenhauer’s will-less subject.\(^ {97}\) This latter case does not, however, seem particularly apt as Beckett’s characters are plagued more by a lack of capacity than of will, which is a theme I shall return to frequently throughout this dissertation. I, like Rabaté, am more concerned with discussing how Belacqua as a symbol relates to wider philosophical concepts, particularly in Beckett’s later works. Although Rabaté’s analysis goes in a different direction, he observes that ‘Belacqua’s rebuttal, his “Why go on?”’ [questions] both the eschatological teleology of Redemption and the measured theology of Damnation. Such a radical questioning forces us to meditate on the values presupposed by the simple fact of “going on”.\(^ {98}\) The eschatological themes, which Gontarski also makes particular note of Beckett’s post-war writings,\(^ {99}\) are relevant here rather than the theological themes.\(^ {100}\) Of particular interest here, however, is that Rabaté makes a direct link...
between Beckett’s eschatological themes and his skepticism (which I have also characterised as the spirit of neutralisation), saying that ‘This [Beckett’s skepticism] could only come to him after the Belacqua fantasy of nondoing was relayed to him by Geulincx’s phenomenology of nonknowledge’. The significance of this is that it leads us to the heavily loaded question of Beckett and post-Cartesian subjectivity.

As the issue of Cartesian readings of Beckett has already been discussed, I will turn to what characterises representations of subjectivity in Beckett as post-Cartesian. Geulincx represents in Beckett a turning point between the Cartesian and the post-Cartesian. Beckett’s interest in Geulincx’s philosophy has been discussed thoroughly by others, chiefly by Uhlmann in *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, and so it will not be discussed here more than is strictly necessary. This extends no further than the current observation that Geulincx provided Beckett with a way into conceiving of a subjectivity centred around non-knowing, which you could just about describe as the primary theme of Beckett’s oeuvre. Rabaté, within the broader context of post-humanism (which he is careful not to lump Beckett in with), interprets Beckett’s shunning of the Divine and his return to the visceral and the animalistic as signifying his post-Cartesianism. Certainly, this is perfectly valid for Beckett’s work up to and including *The Unnamable*, but from at least this point onwards the issue becomes more complicated. This is because the idea of Beckett bringing the Divine ‘low’ becomes less relevant as the visceral gradually disappears the further you go into his oeuvre. By this I mean that for Beckett, the visceral, and really the sensible in general, is temporarily fascinating and puzzling but he then seems to eventually lose interest. So, while I partially disagree with how Rabaté conceives of Beckett’s response to humanism, he does concisely capture Beckett’s basic position on the issue in saying that:

What Beckett attacks, before and after the trilogy, is anthropomorphism, in which he recognizes humanism pure and simple. To achieve his program, he decides to stay on the fence between the human and the inorganic. Thus he never finds a solid foundation for being beyond language, but because he discovers an undecidable at the place of the fence or the border, this creates an endless torture of thought through language. Such a torture nevertheless manages to punch

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101 Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*, 34.
103 Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*, 41.
“holes” in the continuum of our doxa, our innate and inane trust in the human as the foundation of value.\textsuperscript{104}

Here, I would like to articulate a fine distinction between humanism and the human. The former is an ideology with a history and a set of values, and the latter is a more general philosophical idea or problem. The point here is that humanism presumes a specific answer to the question of the human, and it is this presumption that Beckett attacks. Beckett questions humanism, not because he is anti-human, but because he does not presume an answer to the question of the human itself. He refrains from humanism, not because it is assertively wrong, but because he finds no real foundation for it and neither, therefore, for anthropomorphism. Or, at least, willing anthropomorphism; there may be, however, a point at which anthropomorphism is unavoidable while remaining empty, and this dilemma will be discussed in Chapter Three.

From this point, Rabaté’s analysis of Beckett, particularly in relation to Kant, turns to the ethical dimension of conceptions of the human and humanism. He bases this on a commonly noted dilemma in Beckett, saying that in \textit{The Unnamable}, the right to remain silent and the duty to keep on speaking (or writing, or both at once) mesh up in a productive tension, a dynamic torsion of incompatibles; they are bound by a nondialectical fusion of contraries. Such a double oxymoron (right versus duty, speech versus silence) defines the site of a struggle',\textsuperscript{105} and that ‘\textit{The Unnamable} pairs freedom and necessity, a central ethical couple, and suggests that their opposition can be reconciled in laughter’.\textsuperscript{106} The first of these quotes, while applied to \textit{The Unnamable} specifically, could happily be applied to the majority of Beckett’s works from \textit{The Unnamable} onwards. The same, however, cannot be said of the second quote, as humour in Beckett gradually dries up. I mention this because the reconciliation Rabaté mentions here never truly occurs and, assuming any such attempts at a reconciliation ever truly occur, they eventually cease. This is all by way of saying that obligation or necessity in Beckett is not first and foremost an ethical problem. This is not at all to say that Rabaté’s decision to frame this in an ethical discussion is misguided, as it is indeed quite valuable. Understandably, it seems to follow from Rabaté’s history of analysing Beckett’s work in terms of psychoanalysis and Gestalt theory.\textsuperscript{107} This is made more compelling

\textsuperscript{104} Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 46.
\textsuperscript{105} Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 46.
\textsuperscript{106} Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 46.
\textsuperscript{107} Salisbury, “Psychology”, 315-6.
by Beckett’s own experience under psychoanalysis,\textsuperscript{108} and his somewhat parodic use of Gestalt theory in \textit{Murphy}.\textsuperscript{109} How Rabaté links Kant to this psychoanalytical context before proceeding towards an ethical analysis is summed up in saying ‘I will examine Beckett’s Kantianism; however, we will see that Kant is always accompanied by his more sinister double, Marquis de Sade’.\textsuperscript{110} Here Rabaté is following from the coupling of Kant and de Sade made by Lacan and Adorno.\textsuperscript{111} If one were to talk about ethics in Beckett, specifically ethics centred on the bodiliness and animality of the human, or on the logic of self-denial, this is entirely appropriate. The fact that Beckett read de Sade, and had even been invited to translate de Sade’s \textit{Les 120 Journées de Sodome} into English,\textsuperscript{112} makes this all the more interesting from an ethical or psychoanalytical viewpoint. This dissertation, however, is not written from either of these viewpoints.

As Adorno reminds us, morality and its object (action) are brought into being by the subject and subjectivity,\textsuperscript{113} and the task of understanding it is inseparable from that of understanding the nature of reason itself. To centre the notion of Kantianism in Beckett on ethics is to overlook something more fundamental, just as with the sublime. It is not clear where if anywhere a right to remain silent comes into any particular focus in Beckett. So, the opposition of such a right against an obligation to speak seems like a misconception or a misframing of the dilemma. There is for Beckett an explicit opposition between the obligation to speak and the inability to do so.\textsuperscript{114} The kind of struggle or agonism that would result from this opposition is readily apparent, and it is a pre-ethical dilemma. This then marks the point at which Rabaté’s reading of Kant and Beckett and my own reading diverge.

When making a comparison between Beckett and Kant, the first thing to observe is the similarity between this very struggle of the \textit{obligation to speak} and the \textit{inability to speak} that Beckett refers to, and the following remark Kant makes in the preface to the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}:

\begin{quote}
Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognition that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[108] Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 57.
\item[109] Salisbury, “Something or Nothing”, 222.
\item[110] Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 47.
\item[113] Adorno, \textit{History and Freedom}, 240.
\end{footnotes}
given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also
cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason.\footnote{Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 99.}

The dilemma of speech is preceded by the dilemma of thought, specifically a dilemma brought about by its limitations. There is in truth no limit to speech as such, but there is a limit to speech that is not empty, as at a certain point we no longer know what we are saying. Acute awareness of this limitation is closely linked to the sublime, and for this reason the majority of what has been said about Kant and Beckett has been at least broadly centred around that concept. On the one hand, this seems like a perfectly natural thing to do, as there is no reason not to talk about Beckett and Kant in the context of aesthetic theory. On the other hand, this could lead to the kind of theoretical analysis Rabaté refers to, the kind that does not get to the heart of what makes Beckett’s texts tick (see n. 76). In this sense, what makes Myskja’s \textit{The Sublime in Kant and Beckett} successful is that it is first and foremost a book about the sublime as a concept; it is not really a book about Beckett. He refers to Kant’s theory of the sublime as it is essentially the archetypical example, and he links this to Beckett as the sublime is not something many associate with Beckett, and is therefore a point of interest. Demonstrating the presence of the sublime in Beckett helps Myskja articulate his particular understanding of the sublime, which again is the central topic of the book. There is, however, a reason why the sublime is not typically associated with Beckett. That is because present as the sublime may be in his work, representing such an experience is never really its focus. Furthermore, as Rabaté observes, it is not a concept that seemed to directly interest Beckett at least around the time he was reading from and about Kant.\footnote{Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 99.} While this in no sense precludes discussing the sublime, and specifically a Kantian sublime, I contend that Beckett’s focus is rather more fundamental and has to do with human limitation. As Myskja notes:

An object or event is sublime when it evokes a particular feeling of combined repulsion and attraction connected to cognitive failure. Both nature and art is experienced as sublime when it resists cognition in a way that elicits this particular kind of feeling in the subject. The cognitive failure is not of the kind where something is experienced as
merely meaningless, but rather one where the existence of something that is inaccessible to ordinary cognition is indicated.\textsuperscript{117}

Without such failure, one could not experience the feeling of being overwhelmed, which is in turn fundamental to the feeling of the sublime. But it must also be failure in something at which we must succeed, an endless repulsion from that which we are endlessly drawn to, questions we cannot dismiss but cannot answer.

Rabaté links the sublime to his broader discussion of ethics in Beckett via Beckett’s interest in psychoanalysis, which led him to be aware of Freud’s own linking of ethics and the sublime in Kant.\textsuperscript{118} More than this, he posits that ‘Beckett’s intellectual evolution duplicates Kant’s passage from the first to the third \textit{Critique}'.\textsuperscript{119} He implies a comparison between Kant’s Copernican revolution and Beckett’s early avant-gardism; between Kant’s ethics and Beckett’s struggle with the truth of art; and finally between Kant’s critique of judgement and Beckett’s critique of the imagination.\textsuperscript{120} As a comparison of the passage of Kant’s critical philosophy (quite specifically) and Beckett’s oeuvre, this has some truth to it, but only if taken in the broadest possible sense. This does, however, give the impression that to compare Kant and Beckett would be to take the first critique as no more than a starting point, with a focus primarily on Kant’s \textit{Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals} and \textit{Critique of Practical Reason}, and culminating with the \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgement}. Indeed, Rabaté’s book seems to do just that. But this is to overlook the deeper problems Beckett focuses on, questions that precede the arguments Kant makes in these works. That is why my own comparison of Beckett and Kant will focus on the type of problems described in the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}. This is where Kant describes the questions we cannot dismiss and the reasons we cannot answer them. This is not at all to say that either Rabaté’s or Myskja’s points of focus are incorrect or misguided, as they are highly valuable parts of the discussion. Nonetheless, a significant part of the picture is missing and the basic purpose of this dissertation is to go some way towards filling it in.

I would like to return now to the passage from Kant’s \textit{Prolegomena} (see n. 61) and emphasise that Beckett’s familiarity with that passage also indicates his awareness of the relation between immediate experience and consciousness and, with this, at least the basics of

\textsuperscript{117} Myskja, \textit{The Sublime in Kant and Beckett}, 1.
\textsuperscript{118} Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 85.
\textsuperscript{119} Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 107.
\textsuperscript{120} Rabaté, \textit{Think, Pig!}, 107.
Kantian epistemology. All this is in connection to a concept – the Bathetic – that he would carry with him throughout his career. Furthermore, Kant’s atypically comical remark about metaphysically-great men and the wind surrounding them would likely have appealed to the Beckett who said that his work was ‘a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible’. Now of course the joke was intended, but it is also a frequently quoted line about which many important points have been made. ‘Deepness’, ‘lowness’, ‘fundamentally’ – these are concepts which drove the increasing minimalism in language and form of Beckett’s post-war writings. It is reasonable to assert that Kant’s philosophy played a discernible hand in shaping Beckett’s understanding of these things, and that this is well worth exploring. Furthermore, as I stated above, the Prolegomena is a work that essentially functions as a companion piece to the first Critique, where Kant shapes his fundamental conception of human reason. This is the reason why my reading of Kant and Beckett will focus on the first Critique. I consider its content to be of great importance in understanding the relation between the two authors. Beckett consistently responded, not necessarily to the text of the first Critique itself, but to many of the problems presented within it: predominantly, though not exclusively, the limitations and weaknesses of consciousness, reason and knowledge.

By this I mean to say that I do not consider Beckett to have been a philosopher, or that I intend to read him as such. Rabaté’s assertion that philosophers have had a tendency to read Beckett as philosophy has some truth to it, though I would argue it is somewhat overstated. There seems to be a slight quirk in discourse within the humanities, to the effect that problems that are predominantly spoken of within philosophy or by philosophers are considered inherently philosophical problems. As Uhlmann notes, ‘Beckett sees himself as a poet rather than a philosopher, but equally recognises that he is concerned with the same kind of problems which interest philosophers: problems of being (and non-being), problems of knowing (and not knowing) problems of meaning (and failing to mean)’. As much as discursive and cultural expression shape our understanding of these problems they, nonetheless, remain pre-discursive and pre-expressive. They belong nowhere and to nothing, except perhaps to the human being in general, although defining what exactly that is numbers among these problems. Uhlmann goes on to say that ‘the poet and philosopher might be thought to encounter the same problems but to approach them from opposite ends, the poet concerned with the particular experience or feeling of the problem, the philosopher with the problem in general and abstract

122 Uhlmann, Beckett and Philosophy, 87.
terms’. This in itself is hardly a new prospect, and its applicability to the relationship between literature and philosophy should be readily apparent. But with Beckett, more than with most authors, the waters of this relationship become awfully muddy. The problem of clarifying the relationship between literature and philosophy is a problem I have no intention of attempting to find a solution to, as I do not believe it is necessary and, more pertinently, do not believe that such a solution exists. I would also question whether or not this is a real problem. Throughout Creative Involution, Gontarski presents the argument that regular collaboration between literary and philosophical discourse is not to be avoided, and that it is indeed necessary for the progressive evolution of thought and culture. I am not concerned, however, with arguing a position one way or another on this issue so much as with looking at how it is that this issue exists, and what it has to do with Beckett.

Beckett’s focus may have been on the feeling and human experience of certain ‘philosophical problems’ and so in this sense it was consistent with the traditional literary figure, but his methods of shaping his expression are closer to that which philosophers use to sculpt their concepts. His work tests the boundaries of the human experience and the ability to express it, just as critical philosophy tests the boundaries of what can be thought and effectively communicated. These boundaries are among the pre-discursive and pre-expressive problems spoken to above; they are of the kind of primitive or primordial nature that makes them universal. Literature that speaks to them, regardless of intention verifiable or otherwise, will be to some extent akin to philosophy and vice versa. Literature and philosophy can neither be fully integrated nor detached, and to attempt to do so is to forget that the division between them is of our own inessential, even if useful, doing. I would argue that it is incorrect to say that Adorno and Deleuze – for example – thought or spoke of Beckett as a philosopher. They did, however, speak of him as philosophers and with the intellectual resources available to them as such. More significantly they spoke of him as philosophising, and this is not the same thing as naming him a philosopher. The influence that Beckett had on Deleuze and Adorno in their own philosophising serves to obscure this distinction, but the distinction remains. Nonetheless, Samuel Beckett is strongly integrated with the theoretical humanities of the last half-century in particular. On this basis, Rose posits that the name, Samuel Beckett, now constitutes a ‘quilting point’ at which diverse fields of thought are integrated. Perhaps the problem is merely a stylistic one arising, for example, from the seemingly casual way Deleuze and

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123 Uhlmann, Beckett and Philosophy, 87.
125 Rose, “Beckett: a Quilting Point?”, 84.
Guattari co-opt Beckett into their theories of desiring-machines and assemblages.\textsuperscript{126} Similarly, it appears that Adorno’s tendency to weave artistic work into philosophical arguments has led to the impression that he made little distinction between the two. On the other hand, at times Beckett interested Adorno in terms of what he represented for him in a more directly socio-political sense than philosophical.\textsuperscript{127} Moreover, as Van Hulle points out, it is often overlooked that one of his first acts as a Beckett critic was to emphasise the distinction between Beckett’s work and that of his Parisian existentialist contemporaries.\textsuperscript{128} Moreover, Adorno made note of the differing natures of art and philosophy by confiding that ‘it is strange that these things in the realm of art have a metaphysical power that their philosophical equivalents – Wittgenstein perhaps, who is clearly an influence on Beckett – seem to me completely to lack’.\textsuperscript{129} He later compounded this by offering the opinion that Beckett’s writing cut closer to reality than most of the philosophy of its time.\textsuperscript{130} As discussed above, this remark on Wittgenstein is something of an (understandable) overstatement. But the salient point is the clear distinction he makes between the powers and potentials of art and philosophy. Something we can learn from this is that there can be no clean separation between thought about an author and their influence on thought itself.

Specific intent should not be considered important here. The significant and ongoing affect that Beckett has had on aesthetic, philosophical, psychoanalytical, and political discourse is a testament to the depth of insight into human experience with which Beckett left us. Genius leaves a legacy that the genius does not control. There is a swirling nebula of concepts and ideas, order and chaos, ignorance and knowledge, ranging from the quite petty to the occasionally less petty; they are creation and destruction and any number of other features of a circumstance than we can rarely do better than lump together under the name of the ‘human condition’. This is essentially what Deleuze was referring to, in his very particular way, when he spoke of chaos in rebuttal to Plato.\textsuperscript{131} As stated in the introduction, analysing the details of how Deleuze’s response to chaos may or may not compare to Beckett’s is not the purpose of this dissertation. It is, however, worth observing that they hold in common the premise that chaos and disorder do not need to be taken as antagonistic to knowledge or to human consciousness itself. This is another way of stating a premise that Kant and Beckett share, and

\textsuperscript{126} Deleuze and Guattari, “Anti-Oedipus”, 371; A Thousand Plateaus, 555.
\textsuperscript{127} Benzer, “Lifelong Death Penalty”, 95.
\textsuperscript{128} Van Hulle, “Adorno’s Notes on Endgame”, 199.
\textsuperscript{129} Theodor Adorno to Werner Kraft, May 21, 1962, quoted in Weller, “Adorno’s Notes to The Unnamable”, 180.
\textsuperscript{130} Adorno, Metaphysics: Concept and Problems, 114-8.
\textsuperscript{131} Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 81.
which it is the purpose of this dissertation to explore: that contradiction does not necessitate, or even presume the possibility of, resolution.

Art and philosophy are simply two things that can speak to these issues, and there is no reason not to speak to the similarities we may find between works in both fields. Regardless of authors’ knowledge or intent, regardless of what they can be said to mean to one another, critique’s primary obligation is to direct our gaze to what they mean to us all. To do this is to consider, first and foremost, the connection between the expression and the swirling nebula. More specifically, our responsibility is described by Uhlmann as follows:

In the case of critics proceeding through an understanding of shared problems or apparent affinities between Beckett’s works and ideas expressed by philosophers, readers need to consider whether the ideas outlined are actually drawn from Beckett’s texts, or whether alien philosophical systems are being superimposed over ideas within these texts […] the onus falls upon the critic to justify their claims, in the first instance found in the works themselves.\textsuperscript{132}

Amidst the well-meaning clamour of methodological debate, it has been forgotten that the texts themselves are the first, and easily most important, empirical articles. Granted, we must not say just anything about them, but affinity is what it is regardless of design. Is it really reasonable to expect of ourselves as people or of each other as scholars to do more than make sense? To be clear I do not mean to make sense \textit{of} Beckett, but \textit{about} him. Primarily, however, I mean to make sense regarding the problems of human consciousness that drove his writing and as well as Kant’s.

After all, what is philosophy? And I ask this not only because I do intend to discuss Deleuze and Guattari’s book on the subject, but also because the question of Beckett’s relation to Kant, and to philosophy in general, creates division, at times purely as a result of the weight we attach to labels such as literature and philosophy. But let us put that aside for a moment and consider the act of philosophising, as Deleuze and Guattari do as follows:

If one concept is “better” than an earlier one, it is because it makes aware of new variations and unknown resonances, it carries out unforeseen

\textsuperscript{132} Uhlmann, \textit{Beckett and Philosophy}, 91.
cuttings-out, it brings out an Event that surveys us. But did the earlier concept not do this already? If one can still be a Platonist, a Cartesian, or Kantian today, it is because one is justified in thinking that their concepts can be reactivated in our problems and inspire those concepts that need to be created. What is the best way to follow the great philosophers? Is it to repeat what they said or to do what they did, that is, create concepts for problems that necessarily change?\textsuperscript{133}

Samuel Beckett certainly responded to problems that do not exist exclusively in philosophy or for philosophers, but which pertain to philosophising generally. He reactivated concepts for philosophising, and it is because he was a creative author rather than a philosopher that his work brought about this reactivation. Something that is missing from the debate about Samuel Beckett’s relationship with philosophy is that it is precisely that he was not a philosopher that makes his philosophising so pertinent. He did what great philosophers do, albeit in a very different form and with different motivations. And it did inspire or influence philosophers such as Deleuze, Adorno, Badiou, and others, in their own philosophising to varying extents. This is an empirical fact to the same degree as anything we can glean from the archive. Beckett’s work is integrated with intellectual problems that are present in the works of Kant, and indeed much earlier works. Whether or not Samuel Beckett specifically intended for this to be the case (though it is highly unlikely he was not aware of this) is completely irrelevant. It happened and it is well worth talking about. For this reason, I am not the first and will not be the last to do so.

Rabaté says that ‘In Kant we find a well-known philosopher whom Beckett could be seen to read against and with’.\textsuperscript{134} Though Beckett and Kant responded to many of the same problems, and display similar attitudes to critical thought, I certainly do not suggest that their responses to these problems are absolutely comparable. To return to the passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, when Beckett spoke of the unification and the clarification of historical and individual chaos respectively, this may seem like a reproach of something like Kant’s project. There is some truth to this. But though there are differences between Beckett and Kant, their similarities are far more significant and interesting. This being the case, I can think of no convincing reason for the near total lack of comparative analysis of the two, other than a coincidental lack of interest in, or familiarity with, Kant from within Beckett studies.

\textsuperscript{133} Deleuze & Guattari, \textit{What is Philosophy?}, 28.
\textsuperscript{134} Rabaté, \textit{Beckett’s Three Critiques}, 709.
On the face of it, Kant, the great categoriser and symmetry enthusiast, may not seem particularly compatible with Beckett. Granted, this aspect of Kant’s philosophy may not be. But to focus on that aspect is to forsake the critical thought of one of Western civilisation’s greatest critical minds. This is an error. In the ordered nature of his writings, and his tendency to at times suggest humanity’s capacity to supersede the limitations he himself had described, Kant was responding to the expectations of his time. If a philosopher wishes to be taken seriously, they are not permitted to say that hope is unintelligible. This could not be more the case at any time than the time of the Enlightenment during which Kant wrote. For a writer, particularly in the twentieth century, the opposite is closer to the truth. Despite his seating of all human capacity for knowledge and virtue within the human, it is not accurate to say that Kant was a humanist. For Kant, the human is perhaps no more than an entity that can choose to recognise itself as subordinate to reason. For Beckett, the human is perhaps no more than an entity that cannot escape the tyranny of reason. These two statements offer a summary of the similarities and differences between Beckett and Kant. It is among the aims of this dissertation to clarify them.

It is in focusing on the limited, fractured nature of consciousness that we see a truer picture of Kant. This is not the more traditional picture of Kant as the grand categoriser, the archetypical Enlightenment humanist. This is the picture of Kant as the critical philosopher first and foremost, who understood that the significance of philosophy, and its central task, lay in displaying the life of the problematic rather than in dogmatic attempts to resolve it. One of the primary motivations Adorno gave for his lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason* was to recover this picture of Kant from a philosophical history that had all but forgotten it, Adorno said that the central idea of Kant’s philosophy:

is the attempt to give an account of the totality, while simultaneously conceding that this totality is no such thing, that subject and object do not seamlessly fit together […] I should like to emphasize that, with hindsight, this seems to me to provide the justification for the procedure I have adopted in this course of lectures. This procedure is one that places far greater emphasis on the ruptures, the immanent antinomies in his thinking, than upon its harmonious, synthetic form. This is because these ruptures
can almost be said to *constitute* the Kantian philosophy, for the reason that they reveal the innermost core of his thinking.\textsuperscript{135}

Kant did not content himself with the unresolvable, at least not to the point of silence, and neither did Beckett. At times Kant may have contradicted himself, but that is because he dealt with contradictions. A lack of contradiction is not the mark of great philosophy as philosophy lives in contradiction. This is not as simple as saying that our concepts come in pairs of binary opposites, that capability and incapability, for example, receive their definitions from one another. Here capability only achieves definition in the moment of recognising its place within a greater incapability. All aspiration amounts to no more than a fleeting handful of clarified moments, without reliable direction or indelible purpose. This Kant is there for those who care to look, and is not at all incommensurate with Beckett. This is a different Kant to the more common image of him that was shaped by authoritarian Neo-Kantians, including Windelband. As Rabaté observes, Beckett’s notes to Windelband’s writings on Kant indicate reservations about such authoritarianism, which he posits as being perhaps related to the Protestant moralism under which Beckett was raised.\textsuperscript{136} Nonetheless, he clearly chose to look further, and so should we. Beckett’s work is full of choosing to look further, but also of failing to see further. It has not been the convention to read failure such as this into Kant’s philosophy, but nonetheless it is there. Perhaps it is only apparent to those, such as Adorno, who would take the step of critiquing the Enlightenment as a whole. Beckett, in his own way, critiqued the notion if not the movement, of enlightenment. I do not mean to suggest that we may read Beckett’s and Kant’s oevres as companion pieces, but there is an extent to which the reading of either can aid in the comprehension of the other. At times the literary author, all feeling, is able to place the reality of ‘philosophical’ problems in places where the philosopher is not permitted. As I said above, the philosopher is at liberty to despair where the philosopher must hope. Beckett has precedent in this, as Adorno observes of the relation (of some, though quite limited, validity) between Beckett and the Parisian existentialism of his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{137}

The comparison of Beckett to Parisian existentialism was simply one of many attempts to place Beckett within a box into which he does not quite fit. Beckett is notoriously resistant to categorisation and consistent, systemic interpretation. Rather than attempting to overcome this, or find a way around it, it is better to ask why even attempt to ‘do’ this to Beckett? Why

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\textsuperscript{135} Adorno, *Kant’s Critique*, 178.
\textsuperscript{136} Rabaté, *Kant’s Three Critiques*, 708.
\textsuperscript{137} Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*”, 264.
\end{flushleft}
try to seek consistency as though it is the ‘correctness’ required to combat the perceived ‘incorrectness’ of the inconsistent? Undoubtedly this dissertation involves quite a bit of critical comparison between Beckett and Kant, but this is in no sense in order to suggest let alone demonstrate that the former may be accounted for in terms of the latter. Rather, it is done in order to explore the premise that instead of trying to reconcile or avoid contradiction it is preferable to embrace it. This applies not only to analysing Beckett’s work, but also to reflecting on the nature of consciousness in general, the former here being in a sense a case study in the latter.

This is not to say that Beckett was deliberately nonsensical, despite early interpretations of him as an absurdist. This could not be further from the truth. There is in Beckett, as will be shown throughout this dissertation, a fierce desire to make sense. There is, however, no presumption of making sense, of where it can be made, or the extent of our capacity to do so. Consistency cannot allow order and disorder to exist together; the latter must be overcome. When we allow contradiction, we rid ourselves of this cognitive prejudice. This makes it easier for us to accommodate moments when Beckett is lamenting both the unalterable and the indecipherable. In this way, it is contradiction that allows us the kind of interpretative consistency we may aspire to as critics.
Chapter Two

‘The Fable of One Fabling’: Samuel Beckett and the Kantian Cogito

The world is not deceitful. Any perceived deceitfulness or illusoriness of the world is the deceit of the mind unto itself. But to be deceived we must first arrive at a judgment, a judgment based on falsehood. The subject is constructed of falsehoods created by and presented to the mind itself: quite simply, self-deception. To explicate this, we must look closely at the inner workings of human consciousness, starting with the fundamental instance of consciousness: the cogito. This concept has been spoken to in relation to Beckett extensively in the past, though the approaches used have had their limitations. I contend that this is due largely to the limitations of the Cartesian cogito itself. The purpose of this chapter is to address this problem, with the premise being that the most fruitful way to do so today is in relation to Kant’s conception of the cogito.

To suggest that Beckett’s minimalism follows on from his familiarity with Descartes’ philosophy, or that it is even the poetic expression of Cartesian doubt, has been a prominent feature of philosophical readings of Beckett. This began in the late 1950s, and gained momentum throughout the 1960s and 1970s with contributions from significant authors such as John Fletcher, Ruby Cohn, and John Pilling. The most notable – and notably – Cartesian reading of Beckett is Kenner’s The Cartesian Centaur, in which Kenner asserts that Beckett is at times even more Cartesian than Descartes himself. Some, however, consider the issue to be more problematic. In his PhD dissertation, Coetzee presents the argument that Beckett’s interest in Descartes – and Geulincx for that matter – was parodic as much as anything else. This view

3 Cohn, “Philosophical Fragments”, 33-4.
5 Feldman, “Philosophy”, 301.
6 Kenner, “The Cartesian Centaur”, 120.
has also been echoed more recently by Montakhabi. Regardless of the individual positions and merits of each contribution, the topic became and continues to be a mainstay within Beckett studies. Cartesian readings of Beckett show no sign of abating either, as there is no shortage of recent examples approaching the issue from various angles and with varying success. For example, Bennett frames Beckett as a Cartesian as opposed to a Parisian existentialist. Inoue discusses how Beckett can be frequently seen as depicting a pessimistic version of Descartes’ mechanistic image of the body. What distinguishes recent commentary on the relationship between Beckett and Descartes from earlier examples is a growing tendency to eschew traditional interpretations, or to minimise the relationship altogether. Degani-Raz takes a less typical path in focusing on Descartes’ influence on Beckett’s understanding of the limits of imagination rather than on his understanding the nature of the subject itself. Others argue that scholars have until recently overlooked Beckett’s familiarity with Medieval thought and the immediately post-Cartesian thought of Geulincx in particular, leaving the figure of Descartes himself standing apart and so lending him a false prominence in Beckett’s intellectual development.

Cartesian readings of Beckett are not entirely baseless and have a certain amount of primary textual support, particularly in the earlier works. But, as stated above, Cartesian readings of Beckett are limited by the limitations of Descartes philosophy itself. Even if we interpret minimalism in Beckett by way of the *cogito*, it is not necessary to do this in exclusively Cartesian terms. To Descartes the *cogito* confirms only the subject, and only in its capacity to think. But this is not all that may be attributed to such a concept.

The over-emphasis on Cartesian readings of Beckett can be characterised as just that; an over-emphasis on Cartesian readings. As discussed in the previous chapter, empirical research obviously has the value of providing a different perspective, but to characterise the over-emphasis on Descartes as a subset of a wider over-emphasis on theory-led analysis is an overreaction. The significance of Descartes’ philosophy to Beckett’s own work can also be disputed on theoretical grounds. The following passages will be devoted to doing just this.

In the previous chapter I made brief mention of Simon Critchley’s speculation on a Kantian interpretation of Beckett. In *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* he devotes a page to

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8 Bennett, “The essential doesn’t change”.
9 Inoue, *Cartesian Mechanics*, 140.
10 Degani-Raz, *Cartesian Fingerprints*, 224.
11 Byron and Rosignoli, “Introduction: The Centuries that Fall from the Pod of Eternity”, 12-5.
12 Van Hulle, “The Extended Mind and Multiple Drafts”, 278.
explaining why one might attempt such an undertaking, but also why it would likely prove unsustainable. In a previously quoted passage (see Ch. 1, n. 70) he states that such a study would naturally focus on the problem of the subject after Kant’s Copernican revolution. This is essentially accurate; however, the way Critchley poses the problem of the subject appears to be based on a small but crucial misreading of the way Kant poses this problem himself. As he says, ‘the epistemological subject or transcendental unity of apperception in Kant is something that must be logically presupposed in the deduction of the categories – the “I think” must accompany all my representations – but the subject is not itself an item of knowledge; that is, it is formal and insubstantial’.\(^\text{13}\) What Critchley appears to mean by the term ‘epistemological subject’ is not the known subject but the knowing subject, and he uses the term interchangeably with the transcendental unity of apperception. But while this unity must be presupposed in the deduction of the categories, Critchley mischaracterises the relationship between the unity of apperception and the cogito. Or rather, he negates this relationship by seemingly implying they are the same thing, and thus have no relationship as such. Alternatively, this apparent conflation of two different concepts is merely a misspeaking, simply the product of overly vague language used in a section of the book that represents a slight detour from its central theme. Either way, it is necessary for my purposes to clarify the issue. The circumstance of the ‘I think’ accompanying all my representations is not itself the transcendental unity of apperception. Rather, the latter is a deduction or determination stemming from the former. Kant articulates this deduction in his discussion of the grounds of the possibility of all experience:

> Every necessity has a transcendental condition as its ground. A transcendental ground must therefore be found for the unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions, hence also of the concepts of objects in general, consequently also of all objects of experience, without which it would be impossible to think of any object for our intuitions […] Now this original and transcendental condition is nothing other than the **transcendental apperception**. The consciousness of oneself in accordance with the determinations of our state in internal perception is merely empirical, forever variable; it can provide no standing or abiding self in this stream of inner appearances, and is customarily called **inner sense** or

\(^{13}\) Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 144
empirical apperception [...] There must be a condition that precedes all experience and makes the latter itself possible, which should make such a transcendental presupposition valid.\textsuperscript{14}

The object of this inner sense or empirical apperception is the ‘I think’. When we say that it accompanies all our other representations, really what is meant is that it only appears as an accompaniment to these representations. It is manifested via the impression of external objects on our inner sense, and is thus as variable as those impressions. Despite the variability of these representations, we nonetheless recognise persistence in the accompaniment itself. From this Kant determines that there must be some transcendental condition for the unity of self-consciousness. The unity itself is not this condition, as Critchley appears to imply. He oversimplifies matters in saying that the subject in Kant is not an item of knowledge. The subject is divided into two factors: the empirical and the transcendental. The empirical subject, which finds its expression in the ‘I think’, is an empirical object like any other, and is thus an item of knowledge. It is known only as it appears. There must, however, be a condition for these appearances, and from this emerges the supposition of the transcendental subject. This transcendental subject is not known but it is also a very different notion of consciousness to that of the ‘I think’.\textsuperscript{15} Critchley says that the Kantian subject has no substance.\textsuperscript{16} But it is not that the subject has no substance; it is simply that it is not an object of possible experience and thus we cannot know one way or the other. Nonetheless, it remains necessary presuppose the transcendental subject as a condition of possible experience. As Kant goes on to say:

Now no cognitions can occur in us, no connection and unity among them, without that unity of consciousness that precedes all data of the intuitions, and in relation to which all representation of objects is alone possible. This pure, original, unchanging consciousness I will now name transcendental apperception. That it deserves this name is already obvious from this, that even the purest objective unity, namely that of the a priori concepts (space and time) is possible only through the relation of the intuitions to it. The numerical unity of this

\textsuperscript{14} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 232.
\textsuperscript{15} Aquila, “The singularity and the unity of transcendental consciousness in Kant”, 353; Banham, \textit{Kant’s Transcendental Imagination}, 68.
\textsuperscript{16} Critchley, \textit{Very Little...Almost Nothing}, 144.
apperception therefore grounds all concepts *a priori*, just as the manifoldness of space and time grounds the intuitions of sensibility.\(^{17}\)

Though the subject of self-consciousness is an empirical, variable object, there must be a unity, or apparatus if you like, which precedes that self-consciousness and which makes it possible. We do not learn the structure by which we do this; it is simply there. This pure apperception is essentially the counterpart to the pure intuition Kant identifies in space and time.\(^{18}\) From this pre-conscious apparatus spring our concepts and our ability to bring sensible impressions to order under these concepts and, in so doing, form cognitions and achieve knowledge as such. How it is exactly that we come to have this capacity, and why it takes the form it takes (regardless of how one chooses to describe it), are things we cannot account for. Yet we owe our entire consciousness to it, and it is a necessary determination. This, then, would represent the type of question human reason is bid to ask, yet cannot hope to answer; an unshakable, unresolvable dilemma. It is important to keep in mind that these questions are not limited to the four conflicts of transcendental ideas Kant outlines in the section on the Antinomy of Pure Reason.\(^{19}\) Reason is ridden with intelligible determinations that it must make, but cannot ever possess as knowledge; the transcendental subject is only one such example. Thus it is clear, if close enough attention is paid, that the problem of the subject after the Copernican turn has a kind of natural comparability with Beckett’s work, full as it is with doubt of the self as it is apprehended.

Though *The Unnamable* is not the focus of this chapter, it is necessary here to speak to some of the comments Critchley makes about it. Following the above analysis of apperception, when Critchley observes that the protagonist of *The Unnamable* uses the phrase ‘de nobis ipsis silemus’ ironically,\(^{20}\) this is both accurate and inaccurate depending on which aspect of the subject is referred to. Indeed the Unnamable is unable, literally speaking, to keep silent about itself despite its resolve to do so. But its torrent of speech is directed only to the self as apprehended, the object of empirical apperception. This self has no substance, as it is endlessly variable, and reason necessarily determines that there must be a transcendental condition behind it. The Unnamable pursues such a condition relentlessly, but stays forever beyond knowledge, and so the determination is never resolved. The silence, or the saying of nothing in ‘de nobis

\(^{17}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 232-3.

\(^{18}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 73-82.

\(^{19}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 470-95.

\(^{20}\) Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 144.
ipsis silemus’ is not a literal silence but a semantic one, in which nothing meaningful is said.

Critchley goes on to say that ‘when the voice in *The Unnamable* writes, at the beginning of its exhausting 112-page final paragraph, “I, of whom I know nothing”, one might well want to pursue the question of the “I” in Beckett and the continuous negotiation that it maintains with the “not I” in terms of the way the category of the subject is reduced from an ontological substance to a logical place-holder in Kant’, and indeed that is broadly speaking the current task, although the meaning of the ‘not I’ or the external world in relation to the subject is more the topic of the following chapter. It is interesting that Critchley refers to the subject in Kant as a logical place-holder, as this is essentially what the transcendental subject is, yet he says this after neglecting to make any distinction between the transcendental subject and the subject of empirical apperception. Critchley then concludes his remarks on the topic of Beckett and Kant in the following paragraph:

Now, although such an interpretation would not be foolish or fallacious and might even offer an illuminating historical analogy between the discourses of modern philosophy and modernist literature, nonetheless one feels that even such a clever interpretation inevitably both lags behind the text that it is trying to interpret and overshoots it: saying too much and saying too little, saying too little by saying too much. In relation to Beckett, the philosophical hermeneut becomes a rather flat-footed puppet dancing to the author’s tune. As the voice in *The Unnamable* says with sardonic compassion, ‘So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it’.

Firstly, it is not clear if Critchley includes himself among these flat-footed puppets. The section of Critchley book that is devoted to Beckett comprises a comparison of Beckett with or against philosophy, and thus it is not clear how he could avoid choosing to do so. Even if one chooses to interpret Beckett as satirically undoing or resisting philosophical discourse, this is still to play the same philosophical hermeneutic ‘game’. Referring to a Derridian metaphor of reading as acting like a dredging machine, Critchley says that ‘however much the philosophical hermeneut may wish to elevate a particular literary text into an order of meaning

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21 Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 144.
22 Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 144.
or give a coherent interpretation, water and silt will inevitably slip through the teeth of the reading machine and remain.\textsuperscript{23} So it seems that the problem for the philosophical hermeneut, as far as Critchley is concerned, is that they must demonstrate how a particular philosophical discourse can consistently and comprehensively explain a work or oeuvre of literature, but there will be an excess and therefore they will inevitably fall short, and will thus have said too little. In having then misapplied a philosophical discourse, however, they will have simultaneously said too much. All this may well be the case, but the question is, why does Critchley imply this problem applied to Kantian philosophy more than other philosophies, and why does he feel this would be inevitable? It seems that there are a couple of methodological assumptions involved.

The first of these assumptions is that one can only take the Kantian system as a whole and apply it to Beckett to demonstrate how the latter had adopted the former’s world-view. Undoubtedly, this would be to overstate matters but it would also be unnecessary in any case. Kant’s system may be a complex web of interconnected ideas and arguments but, nonetheless, it is not indivisible. One is permitted to take an interest in particular parts of it and apply them, either creatively or analytically. But more importantly, it should not be forgotten that philosophy is at base a response to a problem or set of problems. The particulars of how individual philosophies describe and respond to these problems, the systems or texts, are not identical to the problems themselves.

And so the second of these assumptions is that comparing Kant and Beckett would have to be confined to a historical analogy. This may be the case if one were to proceed on a purely textual, level but critique must be more than that. The problems of antinomy, of human weakness, and the limits of language and cognition existed well before Kant and they continue to exist after Beckett. They do not cease to exist just because early modern philosophy and modernist literature exhausted their possibilities in speaking to them. They continue regardless, and just because Kant and Beckett have fallen silent does not mean we have to. Is the voice in \textit{The Unnamable} really being sardonic about philosophy in general when he says, as Critchley quotes above, ‘they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it’? Hypotheses are entirely theoretical propositions, however, and it is only when they are taken to be knowledge in themselves that they become subject to collapse. But it is precisely this kind of empty rationalism that Kant’s critical philosophy was devoted to overcoming. The problem is that our ability to overcome empty rationalism is fundamentally limited, and to understand how Beckett depicts this one must take a closer look at his use of

\textsuperscript{23} Critchley, \textit{Very Little...Almost Nothing}, 146.
All of our thought occurs within our empirical consciousness, accompanied by the ‘I think’ of empirical apperception. This would include thought about the transcendental subject, the empirical subject and the division between the two. When we do think about these concepts, we suppose a third person observing this duality from the outside, what I will call a reflective voice. This is how Beckett depicts reflective reasoning which, for Kant, is ‘the hypothetical use of the psychological idea’\(^{24}\) within empirical consciousness, which is important for the purpose of analysing our cognitive faculties. This kind of reflective reasoning remains useful insofar as we remain conscious of it as both a hypothetical act, and a regulative act of self-critique. For Kant, the purpose of metaphysical thought is not to attain knowledge, but rather to avoid illusion.\(^{25}\) But with this subjective division (transcendental, empirical, reflective) you are left with three voices: first, second, and third. It is clear from this that such a way of conceiving the subject could be explored in narrative voice, and this is a potential of literary depiction that Beckett explored extensively.

As Critchley rightly identifies, after reading *The Unnamable* one might be provoked into pursuing the problem of ‘I’ in Beckett by way of Kant. Anyone familiar with Beckett’s oeuvre would be aware that the problem of ‘I’ is one that he ruminated on quite consistently. One thing that is particularly illustrative of this is the conspicuous return of the word ‘unnamable’ in *Company*, over three decades after its original use:

> Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice asking this? Who asks, Whose voice asking this? And answers, His soever who devises it all. In the same dark as his creature or in another. For company. Who asks in the end, Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself, Unless another still. Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable last of all. Unnameable. Last person. I. Quick leave him.\(^{26}\)

There is no intent here to suggest that the subject and subjectivity in Kant and Beckett are analogous. Nonetheless, something like the trisected subjective voice as described above occurs in *Company* and other texts, and this way of understanding the subject is notably (and

\(^{24}\) Goldman, *Kant and the Subject of Critique*, 173.

\(^{25}\) Goldman, *Kant and the Subject of Critique*, 173.

arguably archetypically) Kantian. Again, given the evidence of Beckett’s knowledge of Kant, this is unlikely to be a coincidence even if this is not the only factor to have influenced Beckett’s narrative voice. Grammatically, the use of the pronoun ‘I’ denotes a first person narrative, and Beckett consciously negates this by identifying ‘I’ as the last person. There must be reasons for this. Kant’s division between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject can help us understand this, as the transcendental subject, since it is a supposition and is never experienced, is the last person, the last voice. It is unnameable because we cannot encounter it. It is nowhere to be sought. This subject, our supposed ‘subject-in-itself’, is that which devises it all, devises the empirical subject his creature, for company. In ruminations such as these, Beckett is depicting the reflective voice, while it seeks the last person, the person that it is never able to encounter or identify. This struggle of the empirical consciousness seeking the transcendental condition, the ‘real’ self, that grounds its existence or reality, can be read as the central narrative of *Company*. It is in this sense a kind of fable of consciousness’s self-delusory and self-agonising nature. Beckett uses the second person voice to essentially mimic the voice of self-consciousness and self-apprehension, with the third person voice attempting to make sense of this. Simultaneously, Beckett uses the second person voice in a more conventional way, to address the reader directly as though it is their own self-conscious. On the other hand, Beckett also uses the third person voice to coax us into adopting the stream of consciousness it presents as though it were our own. He does this right from the start of *Company* by opening with ‘A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine’. This is at once a sort of reflective expression of incredulity (‘Just imagine!’) and also an instruction. Then the scene of these imaginings and of consciousness’s struggle towards its own conditions is set:

To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts and by how the dark changes when he shuts his eyes and again when he opens them again. Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As for example when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said. But by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified. As for example when he hears, You first saw the light on such and such a day. Sometimes the two are combined as for example, You first saw the light on such and such a day and now you are on your back in the dark. A device perhaps

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from the incontrovertibility of the one to win credence for the other. That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusion to a present and more rarely to a future as for example, You will end as you now are. And in another dark or in the same another devising it all for company. Quick leave him.  

Beckett’s later work dramatises the subject’s attempt and failure to reliably establish anything beyond its most basic condition, but this condition is given in (and perhaps simply equates to) the mere fact of consciousness itself. One can see how critics could be led to read this in Cartesian terms. But I argue that it is more fruitful to read it in Kantian terms, following his refutation of Cartesian problematic idealism. Take the following: ‘You are on your back in the dark’. What is contained within this statement? We can read the words ‘You are’ as the second-person perspective form of ‘I am’, and in this way it is a more direct representation of the self becoming other in its own declaration. This ‘You’, this ‘I’, is on its back in the dark and as such is aware that it is, and is present in a world. But there is no confirmed detail beyond this basic statement; it is simply world. Time and space, the basic forms of intuition, become an increasingly focused source of fascination for Beckett. The way Beckett understands time and space, and the role they play in knowledge construction, take on a distinctly Kantian character. This understanding of space is evident in Beckett’s work in that outer perception is problematic, not in terms of its actuality, but in that it is merely a perception. It is not deceptive, not an illusion, but only so because we may cognise it through our subjectively-given conditions. There is an absurdity in the circumstance that, by situating the source of knowledge in the subject (beginning with intuition), we gain an actual and valid knowledge of the world of things that is not tinged with ideality, as in Descartes; but in doing so we completely rule out the possibility of explaining the mere fact of that world. So, we gain an actual knowledge of the world as it appears to (and to some extent via) us, but not as it is.

Here, the criteria for verifiability, for knowledge, are entirely empirical. Moreover, they are empirical in the extreme as it is only the immediate present that is taken as knowledge; the one on his back in the dark provisionally recognises references to his past and future, though he diligently maintains skepticism. There is also here the first inkling of the hypothesised first person (or ‘Last person. I.’) in the same dark as his creature or another. In addition, this passage

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includes the first instance of the third person voice’s use of the phrase, ‘Quick leave him’, in an attempt to turn away from the one on his back in the dark. This occurs five times throughout the text\(^{29}\) and essentially acts as a motif invoking a theme of inescapability from the destitution of the subject. The reflective voice is consistently attempting to escape the poverty of the subject to which it belongs and is consistently unable to do anything but return. But the more immediate problem regards the identity of the second person voice, and Beckett essentially tells us quite explicitly that he is focusing on the problems of self-consciousness in saying, ‘Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You shall not’.\(^{30}\)

The third person voice appears to refer to itself without realising it. This seems to reflect the idea of the reflective voice, which we represent as though it were observing our self-consciousness from without, though of course it is not. Throughout the text the voices seem at times clearly defined and at others quite hazy in their distinctions. Just as describing consciousness and self-consciousness tests the limits of the ability of language to represent thought, Beckett operates at the edge of the possibilities of literary depiction. Beckett’s narrators are an interesting take on the idea of the unreliable narrator in that they are at all times doing their best to tell the truth, but for the most part they have quite a bit of trouble doing so. As the third person voice goes on to say:

Though now even less than ever given to wonder he cannot but sometimes wonder if it is indeed to and of him the voice is speaking. May not there be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking? Is he not perhaps overhearing a communication not intended for him? If he is alone on his back in the dark why does the voice not say so? Why does it never say for example, You saw the light on such and such a day and now you are alone on your back in the dark? Why? Perhaps for no other reason than to kindle in his mind this faint uncertainty and embarrassment.\(^{31}\)

With the words ‘less than ever’ we are left with the impression that the one on his back in the dark has been pondering these questions for some time and, as we are right near the

\(^{29}\) Beckett, *Company*, 4, 17, 33, 44.


\(^{31}\) Beckett, *Company*, 4-5.
beginning of the text, we can reasonably presume that the end and the beginning may not be terribly distinct from one another. Furthermore, as the one on his back in the dark cannot recognise the second person voice as addressing him as his own self-consciousness, what is emphasised is the experience of the self as other. The foundations of these two observations regarding time and self-perception are important, as they are fundamental to understanding Kant’s reconfiguring of the cogito in response to Descartes. This is in turn important because by understanding how Kant reconsiders the cogito, we may come to see how this concept remains applicable to Beckett’s work long after his depiction of the subject and subjectivity outstrips Descartes in its complexity. The significance of Kant’s cogito is larger in its scope, as he describes here when introducing his refutation of Descartes’ problematic idealism:

The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me […] I am conscious of my existence as determined in time. All time-determination presupposes something persistent in perception. This persistent thing, however, cannot be something in me, since my own existence in time can first be determined only through this persistent thing. Thus the perception of this persistent thing is possible only through a thing outside me and not through the mere representation of a thing outside me. Consequently, the determination of my existence in time is possible only by means of the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself […] the consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me.32

If, like Kant, we look more closely at knowledge and judgement, scrutinising their possibility, we may find that reality is not quite as small as it is for Descartes. Kant essentially asks how we may have representations accompanied by the ‘I think’ if there is nothing behind these impressions. If the world is conditionless, how can we say that this ‘I’ is not also conditionless? But the differences between what Descartes and Kant take as a confirmable world are not simply a matter of scope, but also of constitution. The world or, if you like, world concept, is not subject to doubt. Nor are the particular articles of sensation, which combine with

32 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 327.
the faculty of the understanding to form cognitions and, with them, knowledge. It is only the
universal reality of these particulars that is, for Kant, deemed beyond our capacity to know. We
necessarily deduce that there is something, the persistent thing, and that it is represented in such
and such a way. We do this in the same way that we deduce the transcendental subject; we
cannot presume one without the other. But this is nonetheless a deduction rather than an act or
instance of knowing; it is a realm of ignorance and of cognitive incapability. Much of the
following analysis will be concerned with the ‘persistence’ that Kant mentions here. For the
moment, however, let us look at what Descartes has to say on the matter. In his Discourse on
Method, Descartes states that,

[Though] I could pretend I had no body and that there was no world nor
any place where I was, I could not pretend, on that account, that I did
not exist at all […] on the contrary, from the very fact that I thought of
doubting the truth of other things, it followed very evidently and very
certainly that I existed.33

Now in the first instance it is safe to say that Kant would have it that the ability to
pretend that one’s body and the world do not exist is epistemologically quite meaningless. What
strikes one as remarkable is that Descartes does not distinguish between ‘world’ in general and
each individual’s particular empirical concept of a world, or their world. We may very well
suppose that our particular experience is illusory and possessed of no actuality. But can we
infer from this that we can reasonably doubt ‘world’ in such absolute terms? This is odd, to say
the least. If the world is taken to be an illusion it is, no doubt, a persistent one and a remarkably
common one. We must give an account, as Kant does, of this persistence and commonality.
Based as it is, albeit among other things, on the observation that ‘there are men who make
mistakes in reasoning’,34 Cartesian doubt is unstable. According to its own modus operandi,
Cartesian doubt must subject itself to its own judgement and, simultaneously, distrust its own
power of judgement. In Kant, despite a history of emphasis being placed on his grounding of
knowledge within the subject, the status of the subject is altered and arguably perhaps
undermined. The ‘I’ and the world rely on a common presumption. Deleuze extrapolates on this
point:

33 Descartes, Discourse on Method, 18.
34 Descartes, Discourse on Method, 18.
My representations are mine in so far as they are linked in the unity of a consciousness, in such a way that the ‘I think’ accompanies them. Now, representations are not united in a consciousness in this way unless the manifold that they synthesize is thereby related to the object in general [...] But the manifold would never be referred to an object if we did not have at our disposal objectivity as a form in general (‘object in general’, ‘object = x’). Where does this form come from? The object in general is the correlate of the ‘I think’ or of the unity of consciousness; it is the expression of the cogito, its formal objectivation. Therefore the real (synthetic) formula of the cogito is: I think myself and in thinking myself, I think the object in general to which I relate a represented diversity.\textsuperscript{35}

For Kant, consciousness presumes a world with actuality and independently of the content of consciousness, or of what we may take as having ‘plainly conceived’.\textsuperscript{36} It is one thing to observe that the scope of what we may infer from the cogito is much wider than Descartes would have it, but the true concern is what (for Kant) makes this possible, and what this means for the subject. Despite Kant’s theoretical agnosticism, and his emphasis on the subject as the centre of knowledge, he also takes the subject’s task of situating itself ontologically out of its hands. Innate ideas, and our reasoning from them, become simply a means for seeking universal truths, rather than themselves being universal truths. Form takes precedence over subject and object and so, at least initially, the epistemology and ontology of the mind are placed in a sort of limbo: there, but not there.

The division between subject and object, which is quite rigid in Descartes, has a significant ambiguity to it in Kant. While much of the consequence of this ambiguity is really the subject of the following chapter, it also relates to the central problem here: the problem of the act of ‘I’. This ‘I’ is nothing more than the idea of the object, distinguished and defined in particular by nothing other than the manifold it happens to encounter and accompany. The body, memories and other representations of the subject, of the individual, are an accidental grouping of representations occurring under exactly the same terms as all other representations. Cartesian doubt does not express this same anxiety, and this anxiety over a simultaneously widened and shallowed scope of knowledge is more akin to that expressed by Beckett. Company provides

\textsuperscript{35} Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, 14.
\textsuperscript{36} Descartes, Discourse on Method, 20.
perhaps Beckett’s most focused expressions of this.

After the previous passage from *Company* (see n. 28) the one on his back in the dark is presented with three memories: as a young boy leaving a store, the day of his birth, and as an old man. This is the point in the text where the problem of memory is introduced, further complicating the problem of identifying the voice. It seems clear that Beckett is consciously considering the significance of memory in relation to the subject as this is shortly followed by the following reflection:

Another trait its [the voice in second person] repetitiousness. Repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember. What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular. Murmuring now and then, Yes I remember.40

In noting repetitiousness, Beckett is also invoking persistence, and from this we can extrapolate an awareness of how important this is in establishing and maintaining a coherent and meaningful sense of self. *Company* as a whole reflects how difficult this can be upon close inspection. In a theoretical rather than linguistic sense, the shift from ‘You’ to ‘I’ is significant and complicated, and the Cartesian *cogito* does not adequately reflect this. While Descartes implicitly notes the persistence of ‘I’, as accompanying all other representations, he does not give an account of persistence and its relation to justifying the act of the ‘I’. And so in Beckett’s hesitance to make this act, in his suggestion that one might even need to be dared to make it, it becomes apparent that even if Cartesian doubt was evident in his earliest works, at some point it is replaced with a breed of skepticism more like that of Kant.

Descartes’ *cogito* is an example of an excessive application of the reductive method, gratuitously reductive, as Adorno explains:

*a reductive method. This means that everything that can be regarded as ephemeral, transitory, deceptive, and illusory is left to one side, so that*

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what remains is supposed to be indispensable, absolutely secure, something I can hold permanently in my hands. I have called this idea the residual theory of truth [...] This theory asserts that truth is whatever remains once everything sensory, everything ephemeral and hence deceptive has been subtracted [...] it must be regarded as the point of departure'.

A reductive trend towards minimalism is readily apparent in Beckett’s oeuvre, and may be interpreted as a reflection on cognitive limitation, as indeed it is here. And this theme has been explained most prominently in reference to a specifically Cartesian cogito. But this does not account for the kind of intra-subjective doubt evident in Beckett that a Kantian reading can. In a text such as Company, Beckett depicts the subject attempting to reliably judge (with what judgement remains to it), beyond its most basic judgement (most basic knowledge), of merely being in a world. The subject is responsible for knowing, the capacity for knowledge is rooted within the subject, and ignorance is emblematic of a shortcoming within the subject. Knowing is a problem, not only for the subject, but of the subject. Epistemological problems originate from the very same entity that is responsible for solving them.

This paradox, itself a key problem in Kant’s epistemology, forms a central part of Beckett’s understanding and representation of the subject. The ultimate result, as will be seen, is impasse. Knowledge, when established, is ultimately the result of a subjective apparatus involved in a reciprocally determining relationship with the objective world, the world of things. The subject imposes itself on the world in perception as much as the world of things imposes itself on the subject in sensation. Kant asks the question: ‘If I cannot admit a world, then how can I know myself? What is the procedure?’ He finds no satisfactory answer. So, ‘I’ must be in a world, and the ‘I’ and the world must be established together. For Kant, if we do not accept this then we must accept the ‘absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything which appears’. Knowledge is knowledge of the world, and so if knowledge is to mean anything it must include intuition under its concept in some capacity. The world as we experience it, the world that pertains to knowledge or that knowledge refers to is, however, impermanent. This means then rethinking the relation of permanence to truth and in turn the relation of knowledge to truth. If truth is what remains when all that is ephemeral, sensory, and

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41 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 25.
43 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 115.
impermanent is removed then, following Kantian epistemology, it is also beyond our capacity for knowledge. ‘Truth’ could refer only to those transcendental conditions that we necessarily deduce to ground the possibility of knowledge. Yet how do we identify truth if we cannot behold it? It is as though the possibility of knowledge is identical to the impossibility of truth. Yet truth is to be deduced in the same plain as the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. So it is that we find ourselves in an unbreakable vicious cycle.

This division between appearance and reality is of course not novel ground, but for Kant this division has its origin in the very same faculties responsible for perceiving and comprehending reality in the first place. This is the dilemma for the subject in *Company*:

> Imagine closer the place where he lives. Within reason. To its form and dimensions a clue is given by the voice afar. Receding afar or there with abrupt saltation or resuming there after pause. From above and from all sides and levels with equal remoteness at its most remote […] So much for form and dimensions. And composition? What and where clue to that if any anywhere. Reserve for the moment. Basalt is tempting. Black basalt. But reserve for the moment. So he imagines to himself as voice and hearer pall. But further imagination shows him to have imagined ill. In the immeasurable dark. Contourless. Leave it at that for the moment. Adding only, What kind of imagination is this so reason-ridden? A kind of its own.44

Knowledge of the world gains in validity but is reduced in scope and depth. This is the legacy of the simultaneously empowered and responsible, yet impotent, subject. Such a subject is the central focus of most of Beckett’s later work. We may understand we are in a world, but as expressed in the above quotation, a meaningful description is elusive. More elusive still is of course the understanding of what it is to be in a world, regardless of its composition. Yet this composition must be ascertained before one could reliably consider the alleged point of it all. The subject’s repeated attempts and failures to do this constitute much of the drama of Beckett’s later works. You *are* on your back in the dark, but what further? Little can be verified. But. of course. space is only part of intuition, part of this process of verification, of determination. In considering time, Kant offers the following description:

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Time is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our self and our inner state. For time cannot be a determination of outer appearances; it belongs neither to a shape or a position, etc., but on the contrary determines the relation of representations in our inner state. And just because this inner intuition yields no shape we also attempt to remedy this lack through analogies, and represent the temporal sequence through a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series that is of only one dimension, and infer from the properties of this line to all the properties of time, with the sole difference that the parts of the former are simultaneous but those of the latter always exist successively […] all representations, whether or not they have outer things as their object, nevertheless as determinations of the mind themselves belong to the inner state, while this inner state belongs under the formal condition of inner intuition, and thus of time, so time is an a priori condition of all appearance in general\textsuperscript{45}

To consider time and space together (or, pure intuition as a whole) for a moment, it is their passivity that is most important. Time and space are the forms in which we passively receive the matter of our thought with a view to knowledge. But most importantly, they (as our passivity) determine the relations between what is presented to our outer sense and what is presented to our inner sense, rather than these relations being something we determine (as an activity) through time and space. That is to say, we cannot instrumentalise pure intuition, so while the subject is responsible for knowledge, it also has no control over how the matter of knowledge is presented to it. This includes the empirical self as an object. Most importantly time relates only to our empirical self. Or, to put it another way, it is the persistence of the empirical self, relative to the constantly changing array of other empirical objects that constitutes the experience of time. Time, in the Kantian sense, is really nothing other than the condition of persistence and alteration. And it is from this that we determine the persistence of the empirical apperception which accompanies all other representations, and from this in turn that we deduce the existence of a transcendental subject. The linear experience of time, the

\textsuperscript{45} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 180-1.
objectifying of time in this way, imposes an order on our inner sense. This is not, however, a quality of time but rather a subjective contrivance made possible by the *a priori* condition of time. This allows for the transcendental unity of apprehension, and thus for the ordered and coherent empirical consciousness we possess. But Beckett refuses to ignore that this is a contrivance, something we devise for company. He depicts a broken sense of chronological order, not to question the coherence of consciousness in time, but to question the significance of this order. This aspect of time in Beckett will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. For now I would like to focus on how time, as the form of inner intuition, is of greater significance than space, when considered in relation to the *cogito*.

To continue with the question of persistence, consider Descartes’ declaration of the *cogito*:

I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more than mere illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noticed that, while I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. And noticing this truth—*I think, therefore I am*—was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.\(^{46}\)

Now if we look at this while emphasising the concept of persistence, it is clear we must question exactly what is meant by this ‘I’ that Descartes refers to. One must suspect that this term contains too many assumptions, precepts or assertions of one kind or another to be rightly taken as the ‘first principle’ of a philosophy regarding the existent and the knowledge they may attain. ‘I’ presume persistence, and must do so in order for its existence to be designated as ‘I’. Knowledge must be retained, and this also presumes persistence, both of an ‘I’ and of a means of continued possession of its knowledge, thus a retention. The ‘I’ is defined in relation to the impermanent and apprehended in the same way. Persistence is the *only* difference between ‘I’ and any other representation within consciousness, and this is only determined by virtue of the pure intuition of time, which precedes our understanding and our reason, and for which we have no account. To say ‘I’ presumes time, and so thinking does not in itself demonstrate the existence of ‘I’, as persistence requires both thought and apprehension in time, with time as the

\(^{46}\) Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 18.
a priori condition of both. Further, one cannot accept the apprehension of a thinking self while dismissing the apprehensions it accompanies. In order to maintain its integrity, the Cartesian cogito would require an account of persistence, but to do so would involve a fundamental augmentation of the concept. This is what Immanuel Kant’s refutation of Descartes amounts to, as described here by Deleuze and Guattari:

Suppose a component is added to a concept: the concept will probably break up or undergo a complete change involving, perhaps, another plane – at any rate, other problems. This is what happens with the Kantian cogito. No doubt Kant constructs a “transcendental” plane that renders doubt useless and changes the nature of the presuppositions once again.47

Kant’s augmentation of the cogito depletes the significance of Cartesian doubt in two different ways. Firstly, as discussed above, such dogmatic doubt is inherently self-negating. It is also hypocritical by its own terms, given that Descartes declared that ‘its greatest utility lies in freeing us of all prejudices’.48 Kant would very much have it that Descartes’ transcendental idealism is indeed quite prejudiced towards doubt. A reasoning that does not know itself is a reasoning that is not trustworthy. For Kant, the inner experience (including the ‘I’) is not the immediate experience, but is rather mediated by outer experience and he places the onus on Cartesian idealism to demonstrate otherwise.49 And the question then, for Kant, is how the representation of outward objects could be possible at all. Representation is preceded by sense, and so how can there be no outer world acting upon sense?

Furthermore, the persistence of thought and the ‘I’ attached to it presumes too much to be considered a first principle of knowledge or truth. Investigating these presumptions leads us to the second point, which is that the said presumptions are largely centred on the claim of the ‘I’, and this demands to be accounted for. Deleuze and Guattari go on to describe the beginning of such an account:

But it is by virtue of this very plane that he can declare that if the “I think” is a determination that, as such, implies an underdetermined

47 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy, 31.
48 Descartes, Meditations, 54.
49 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 326.
existence (“I am”), we still do not know how this undetermined comes to be determinable and hence in what form it appears as determined. Kant therefore “criticizes” Descartes for having said “I am a thinking substance,” because nothing warrants such a claim of the “I.” Kant demands the introduction of a new component into the cogito, the one Descartes repressed – time. For it is only in time that my undetermined existence is determinable. But I am only determined in time as a passive and phenomenal self, an always affectable, modifiable, and variable self [...] This is not another subject but rather the subject who becomes an other.50

Beckett’s fascination with time as an integral feature of consciousness and of the process of self-identification puts his work out of step with Cartesian philosophy. The ‘I’ as other (or the process of the ‘I’ becoming other) is a prominent and consistent theme in Beckett’s work, particularly from The Unnamable onwards. It is also a problematic that Descartes does not address, and this is owing to the lack of consideration he gives to persistence. He reveals this in a telling passage from the Meditations beginning with,

Is it not the very same “I” who now doubts almost everything, who nevertheless understands something, who affirms that this one thing is true, who denies other things, who desires to know more, who wishes not to be deceived, who imagines many things even against my will, who also notices many things which appear to come from the senses?51

One of the more salient details to this question is Descartes’ assertion that the ‘I’ is the active or responsible party in the affirmation of truth. The narrative of Company (and of numerous other works, such as That Time and The Unnamable, which will also be discussed throughout this dissertation) is related in the form of ‘past’ events which we may interpret as being the memories of their respective hearers. The extent to which the one on his back in the dark recognises the events related to him as his own memories is of course limited. But what is apparent is that the representations of both world and self are recognised as nothing other than representations, and largely impressionistic ones at that. Furthermore, the relation between the

50 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy, 31-2.
51 Descartes, Meditations, 66.
self that is represented and the self that is represented to is severely questioned; more so than the relation between the self that is represented and the world that is represented. In the former case, we are speaking of two aspects of essentially the same entity. This redirection of doubt is a key difference between the Cartesian and Kantian cogitos, and the path Beckett’s own doubts follow is very similar to Kant’s.

Gradually, seemingly according to no criteria other than persistence, the one on his back in the dark considers the images related to him by the voice in the second person as his own memories; saying, ‘If he were to utter after all? However feebly. What an addition to company that would be! You are on your back in the dark and one day you will utter again. Yes I remember. That was I. That was I then’. In spite of his abstractionism and his a-humanism, Beckett retains here an almost sentimental sympathy for the human condition. The primary motivation for the one on the back in the dark is to find company while he waits until the end. The theme of company in Beckett goes back at least as far as Waiting for Godot, though the way it is represented becomes more and more focused on its problematic and elusive nature. Capturing this sense of isolation could well be thought of as one of the driving forces behind Beckett’s fascination with monologue and its theatrical possibilities, with Krapp’s Last Tape being the first major example. Krapp’s Last Tape also works closely with the theme of memory, though the major difference between it and later texts such as Company and That Time is that Krapp is perfectly aware of the relation between himself and his recordings and so there is not the same theme of division within the subject. The addition of the theme of intra-subjective division allows for idea that the self acts as company unto itself in one way or another. This not only constitutes the central drama of Company but also, quite notably, of texts such as Ohio Impromptu, Not I, That Time, and Rough for Theatre II, and others. What is common to these texts is the motif of memories being related to a silent, unidentified figure, an image reminiscent of Kant’s division between the transcendental and empirical subjects. Though Beckett, in keeping with his tendency to ruminate over particular themes, words and images introduces minor variations with each instance. In Rough for Theatre II there are two voices, though they read from the same file of memories. In Ohio Impromptu the listener, while silent, raps the table compulsively demanding the reader tell him more, just as the mind is compelled to ask questions it cannot answer; ask as much as we like, ‘Nothing is left to tell’. In the companion pieces Not I and That Time, the auditor and the listener can only shrug helplessly and grin toothlessly respectively in response to what they hear.

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53 Beckett, Ohio Impromptu, 448.
Despite the subtle differences between each of these listening figures they remain incapable and unnamed, indeed unnameable. Furthermore, there is the impression that all of Beckett’s ‘characters’ are not really doing anything other than trying to pass the time until, hopefully, the sub stops shining on the nothing new. This idea is featured quite prominently at least as early as Godot and trends increasingly towards motif in its representation, and with a more visceral sense of keeping time than one might think, as with the breathing in and out featured in That Time and Breath. These examples are not exhaustive, though they are the ones most focused on this particular set of themes. From all this we can discern that, for Beckett, time and our experience of it are intimately connected to the struggle to determine the self, rather than simply an inert and externalised venue where this struggle occurs.

And so, Beckett’s interest in time extends to its role as a subjective condition of knowledge, and its subsequent role in determining the self and its activities. Following Kant, we must question what we understand by the passage of time and the significance we attach to our experience of time itself insofar as we experience it. Deleuze provides insight into what follows from Kant’s introduction of time into subjectivity:

Time is no longer defined by succession because succession concerns only things and movements which are in time. If time itself were succession, it would need to succeed in another time, and on to infinity [...] It is no longer a question of defining time by succession, nor space by simultaneity, nor permanence by eternity. Permanence, succession and simultaneity are modes and relationships of time [...] It is the form of everything that changes and moves, but it is an immutable Form which does not change. It is not an eternal form, but in fact the form of that which is not eternal

Therefore, rather than being a separate entity, a condition which affects my experience, time is an internal condition by which I understand affect and change. In Company, the voices in both second and third person understand past, present and future. Despite the lack of chronological order in the memories presented to the one on his back in the dark or the listener in That Time, or the auditor in Not I, and so on, it would be wrong to suggest that the sense of time is confused. Rather, the order in which the events occurred and so also the order in which

54 Beckett, Murphy, 1.
55 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, vii-viii.
they are related, is not confused, but irrelevant. The subject’s linear experience of time is part of its passivity; it is an immutable form that the subject cannot influence. Memories are really the retention of the cognitions accompanied by the ‘I’ that thinks them, which is othered by virtue of this very a*-company-ment. This other is also in the past; it is the ‘I’ that experienced that, and distinct from the subject that experiences this. Thought is representation, and representation occurs after the fact. The ‘I’ who thought that is no longer, the entirety of memory is no longer, and has only a nominal connection to the subject that is. The connection is nominal, as it refers only to the ‘I’ that we experience and so name, and we only deduce the foundation of this connection from moment to moment in the transcendental subject that is not named. Yet the struggle and the ‘unformulable gropings of the mind’, continue unerringly. In Company the reflective voice in third person describes this situation in a moment of dramatic irony, seemingly both aware and unaware of its relation to the voice in second person and the one on his back in the dark:

Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company. Leave it at that. He speaks of himself as of another. He says speaking of himself, He speaks of himself as of another. Himself he devises too for company. Leave it at that. Confusion too is company up to a point. Till the heart starts to sicken. Company too up to a point. Better a sick heart than none. Till it starts to break. So speaking of himself he concludes for the time being, For the time being leave it at that.57

The irony continues here as, in noting its confusion, the voice is having a moment of rare lucidity, or at least approaching one. The voice in third person here is aware that it is the voice of the self speaking of itself, just as it was already aware that the voice in second person is the voice of the self speaking to itself. Yet it does not wholly take its place within the self as in order to speak of the dilemma of the division of the self, and of self awareness, it must contrive to speak as though outside the self. It does this just as we all must when attempting to describe the subject.

This is so often how Beckett depicts the basic human situation: as a consciousness in empty space with nothing to do but reflect on how it arrived at its situation. This is also the case

56 Beckett, Company, 16.
for the hearer in Company. This drama is of the terror of auto-perception, when ‘I represents itself to itself’. The terror of the ‘act of the I’, the cogito, is not arrived at immediately. Following Kant, cogito is determined empirically, and so we get there by way of experience, when our faculties of knowledge which pertain to experience are turned inwards.

The subject has been bisected, and this before it has even begun to act. The mere and most basic consciousness of being in the world permanently ruptures the subject of that very consciousness. Adorno, in Trying to Understand Endgame, observes that the ‘Beckett oeuvre has several elements in common with Parisian existentialism’. The ruptured subject would be one of those elements, and the topic of Beckett’s relation with Parisian existentialism has been well covered. But, as Adorno observes, Beckett’s understanding of the ruptured subject is different in significant ways. It has to do not only with the way that the faculties of knowledge are turned back on the subject, resulting in both the derivation of the cogito, but also (perhaps paradoxically) in a corresponding epistemological legitimacy crisis, a crisis between the subject, the world, and itself.

Division from ourselves is the central motif of Beckett’s Company. The complex interplay between the voice and the hearer makes Company (or, indeed, Nohow On as a whole) one of Beckett’s most difficult texts. Another legible way to conceive of the subjective division in Company, is in comparison to the division Deleuze notes between the ‘I’ and the Ego when discussing Kant. In this particular model, however, Deleuze is not making a distinction between the transcendental and empirical subjects, as has been discussed throughout this chapter. Rather, he is making a division between the structure of empirical subjectivity and a particular determination made within this structure. What this indicates is that there are ambiguities in how we might interpret or characterise the empirical subject in Kant, and it is necessary here to describe these ambiguities.

Deleuze refers to Ego as a passive receptivity, constantly changing in time. The ‘I’ is then ‘an act which constantly carries out a synthesis of time, and of that which happens in time, by dividing up the present, the past and the future at every instant’. That is, the act of the ‘I’ is the determination that establishes our conception of time as divided into past, present, and future relative only to the determined ‘I’. This is opposed to the idea of the ‘I’ determining itself in a separate and universal stream of time as, for Kant, there is no common time but only

58 Dowd, Abstract Machines, 184.
60 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
61 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
62 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
a common faculty for perceiving it. So the division here is within the empirical subject, between a collection of receptive faculties on the one hand, and the act of determining the ‘I’ on the other. Or, to put it in more Kantian terms, it is a division between the ‘unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions’ (see n. 14), and the act of empirical apperception. This, however, implies that the act of ‘I’ is separate from apprehension. The ‘I’ that thinks, however, accompanies all things that it thinks, and it changes with them. Arguably, in this particular passage Deleuze almost seems to conflate the transcendental condition of the unity of apperception (the transcendental subject) and the subjective faculties of intuition and understanding, pulling them towards one another to form a single, passive, and constant though still empirical self. This leaves the act of ‘I’ dangling in a different sphere as a separate subjective entity. But what is this act of ‘I’ other than a moment when our self-awareness is drawn to the forefront of our consciousness, rather than a kind of background noise constantly drowned out by the clamour of experience? Deleuze seems to be simply another way of describing the reflective consciousness described above; not a separate act of consciousness but a necessary contrivance in the discussion of self-awareness. The way Deleuze frames this perhaps owes much to his close relationship with psychoanalytic thought, and that many of his other writings on the cogito are co-authored with Guattari, as in What is Philosophy? And, moreover, he presents what is likely an effective model for drawing Kantian intra-subjective division into psychoanalytic discourse. That subject is, however, beyond the scope of this dissertation and so I shall refrain from discussing it further.

What can be said here is that Deleuze shows us that persistence only implies permanence rather than demonstrates it. This is consistent with Kant’s placing of the transcendental subject beyond the horizon of knowledge, but Deleuze goes on to express how questionable the consistency Descartes posits for the ‘I think’ really is. He says ‘The I and the Ego are [...] separated by the line of time which relates them to each other, but under a condition of a fundamental difference. So that my existence can never be determined as that of an active and spontaneous being’. So it appears the choice one must make in interpreting the meaning of the cogito in Kant is whether the othering implied by apperception is established in the very fact of self-consciousness, or whether it is the result of a separate though still necessary determination made within that consciousness. Thus far, my own interpretation has lent towards the former, and Deleuze’s towards the latter. Though as Deleuze states, this is ‘the most difficult’ aspect of the Copernican revolution to understand, and it would be meaningless to

63 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
64 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
state which interpretation is ‘correct’, even assuming these are the only two. The ultimate truth, if there is one, most likely lies somewhere between us and, again, the focus must always be on the nature of the question rather than on any particular answer. Whatever the manner in which the othering of the self comes about, the result is a fundamental confusion in determining the self as situated in a world, and again this is something Beckett depicts quite pointedly, as in the following:

If the voice is not speaking to him it must be speaking to another. So with what reason remains he reasons. To another of that other. Or of him. Or of another still. To another of that other or of him or of another still. To one on his back in the dark in any case. Of one on his back in the dark whether the same or another. So with what reason remains he reasons and reasons ill. For were the voice speaking not to him but to another then it must be of that other it is speaking and not of him or of another still. Since it speaks in the second person [...] It is clear therefore that if it is not to him the voice is speaking but to another it is not of him either but of that other and none other to that other.65

This passage in itself, while focusing on the othering of the subject, contains little of the experience of time. But consider it in combination with the earlier quoted words: ‘That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusion to a present and more rarely to a future as for example, “You will end as you now are”’.66 This emphasises the effect that the introduction of time has on the cogito. Deleuze notes that:

If it is true that the I think is a determination, it implies in this respect an indeterminate existence (I am). But nothing so far tells us under what form this existence is determined by the I think: it is determinable only in time, under the form of time, thus as the existence of a phenomenal, receptive and changing ego.67

In other words, there is a slight paradox in that the act of the ‘I’ determines the existence

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67 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
of the inactive Ego. Thus, the paradox is extended because time, in which we establish the persistence necessary to deduce the transcendental conditions of subjective unity, is also the realm in which the determination ‘I think’ is made. The unity of the transcendental self then leads to a division between the existence of the ‘I’ that thinks and the representation of ‘I’, the empirical article that may be considered an object of possible knowledge. So it is that, for Deleuze, ‘I am separated from myself by the form of time, and nevertheless I am one […] The form of the determinable means that the determined ego represents determination as an Other. It is like a double diversion of the I and the Ego in the time which relates them to each other, stitches them together. It is the form of time’.68

The one on his back in the dark apprehends himself as other: ‘You are on your back in the dark’. This may be read as a depiction of the Ego representing itself to itself, or ‘othering’ itself. But note that while this is not (chronologically) the first act of self-apprehension represented in Company, it is the first that is recognised by the hearer as other: ‘Those its first words’.69 This is the first genuine act of the ‘I’, the cogito, as represented in the text. So what then are we to make of the various concrete images that are related throughout? Consider statements such as ‘A small boy you come out of Connolly’s Stores holding your mother by the hand’,70 and ‘You are an old man plodding along a narrow country road’.71 They are formally identical to the sentence ‘You are on your back in the dark’. Written from the same perspective and in the same tense, the form of the words indicates the same division of the subject, the ‘I’ presented to the ego as other (that is to say, linguistic form has been used to represent this). Why is it that the last of these three has much greater significance attached to it, when it differs only in content? That is to say, the first two sentences also indicate a conscious subject situating itself, in a world and in time, perceiving and thinking one thing after another. Yet the one on his back in the dark has discarded them. The significance lies simply in the discarding implied by the differences between them. The passivity in which the subject receives and retains these experiences is key to understanding this. Deleuze makes an important observation when he says that ‘I cannot […] constitute myself as a unique and active subject, but as a passive ego which represents to itself only the activity of its own thought; that is to say, the I, as an Other which affects it’.72 The activity of thought is only the ordering of experience in relation to the determination of ‘I’, and it is from this that we form for ourselves what we

68 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
69 Beckett, Company, 11.
72 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, viii.
consider a *unique* identity. But the conditions of this activity are *a priori*, unchanging and, as far as we can know, universal. Moreover, the experiences we relate to the ‘I’ we represent to ourselves originate externally and we encounter them accidentally. If then this ‘I’ is unique, it is only due to the sheer diversity of possible affects that happen *to* us as opposed to *by virtue* of us. Therefore, whatever uniqueness we may apprehend of ourselves cannot properly be said to be constituent of our selves. This leads us to a further problem in the determination of the self in that there is a circumstance of a kind of co-dependent inter-determination between the subject and the world of objects. This, along with other topics already mentioned, is the focus of the following chapter.

For now, it is most pertinent to look at how Beckett depicts the subject in *Company* consciously attempting to determine itself, as in the following example:

Let the hear be named H. Aspirate. Haitch. You Haitch are on your back in the dark. And let him know his name. No longer any question of his overhearing. Of his not being meant. Though logically none in any case. Of words murmured in his ear to wonder if to him! So he is. So that faint uneasiness lost. That faint hope. To one with so few occasions to feel. So inapt to feel. Asking nothing better in so far as he can ask anything than to feel nothing. Is it desirable? No. Would he gain thereby in companionability. No then let him not be named H. Let him be again as he was. The hearer. Unnamable. You.

Notice the arbitrariness of the naming here. This reflects the arbitrariness of the act of ‘I’, being as it is a determination based on a deduced but not known transcendental condition. But also evident here is the ambivalence towards self-actualisation. It is on the one hand the primary objective of the subject, yet once this ‘faint uneasiness’ of intra-subjective confusion is overcome, so too does its faint hope fade; the faint hope that its reality would not be as repulsive as it has hitherto feared. This feeling of repulsion is a direct response to the circumstance revealed in the determination of ‘I’, the *cogito*; the circumstance that the subject is little more than a standardised framework of unknown origins or conditions that does nothing but place random impressions in an order that leads nowhere, except to an unproductive presumed end, which itself comes to constitute the subject’s renewed hope. So it is that the

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voice opts to allow the one on his back in the dark to revert to its original status as the Unnamable, as the state of confusion comes to seem more desirable than what is revealed in lucidity. But it is not as simple as that, and the voice is drawn back to the task of self-determination over and over. I should like to emphasise once again that this circumstance only arises as a result of the Kantian, as opposed to the Cartesian, cogito.

Moreover, we are given the distinct impression that this is not the first task for the voice and the one on his back in the dark as, though it could be said to be their shared primary task. This much we can deduce from the stream of memories (those quoted above being some of many examples) presented to the one on his back in the dark, and to we the audience. Chronologically, these memories appear to lead to this early point in the narrative:

Slowly he entered dark and silence and lay there for so long that with what judgement remained he judged them to be final. Till one day the voice. One day! Till in the end the voice saying, You are on your back in the dark. Those its first words. Long pause for him to believe his ears and then from another quarter the same. Next the vow not to cease until hearing cease. You are on your back in the dark and not till hearing cease will this voice cease. Or another way. As in the shadow he lay and only the odd sound slowly silence fell and darkness gathered. That were perhaps better company. For what odd sound? Whence the shadowy light? 

The voice’s first words, that is, the first words apprehended as the voice (the act of ‘I’) are spoken after everything else is pared away; after silence has fallen and darkness has gathered. The vow is not to cease until hearing ceases, as sensation precedes thought, particularly thought of the self. This too is in keeping with Kantian subjectivity. And already here the idea that the state of confusion is preferable, that it makes for better company, is expressed as it leaves the one on his back in the dark with questions regarding the origin of the odd sound and the shadowy light. It is at least something to do to pass the time.

From the point of this last quoted passage the voice conducts experiments in increasing its companionability, by evening out its tone, so as to have the one on his back in the dark acknowledge his past. And this appears to work, as the next two memories presented by the

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74 Beckett, Company, 11-12 [my italics].
voice are received with a greater sense of recognition. Moreover, they appear distinctly more relevant to the one on his back in the dark’s current situation. Seemingly, the beginning of the end is recalled when the voice says, ‘The last time you went out the snow lay on the ground. You now on your back in the dark stand that morning on the sill having pulled the door gently behind you. You lean back against the door with head bowed making ready to set out’. Despite the increased sense of recognition and the lucidity this implies, there nonetheless remains a deep sense of confusion. The voice says that ‘you need normally from eighteen hundred to two thousand paces […] but on this morning many more will be required’, but soon after it also says ‘You do not count your steps anymore. For the simple reason they number each day the same. Average day in day out the same. The way always being the same’. The subjective unravelling or deconstruction, characterised by a lack of belief in any substance to the experience of time and space, begins in earnest with the voice saying ‘You do not hear your footfalls anymore. Unhearing unseeing you go your way. Day after day. The same way. As if there were no other way. For you there is no other anymore’. This is reiterated in the observation that this ‘You’ no longer needs to halt to make ‘your [its]’ reckoning. The destination is never made clear though it is suggested the ultimate goal is ‘To be gone’. The only explanation given for why, despite the many repetitions, this is the last time ‘You’ set out is contained in the statement ‘Almost as if at once the heart too heavy. In the end too heavy.’ This is preceded with the term ‘Withershins’, denoting that something ‘You’ did ran contrary to reason. Most likely, this was setting out to begin with. These lines, incidentally, were retained from their original, separate publication at the end of Heard in the Dark I. The lines that beginning the following paragraph, ‘Bloom of adulthood. Try a whiff of that’, previously began Heard in the Dark II. But it is more appropriate that the line ‘in the end too heavy’ would be in the middle of the subsequent publication, Company; in a Beckettian text the end is the last place the end should be.

Again, the attempt at self-recognition breaks down into a hypothetical game of sorts; ‘Wearied by such stretch of imagining he ceases and all ceases. Till feeling the need for

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80 Beckett, Company, 27.
84 Beckett, Heard in the Dark I, 249.
company again he tells himself to call the hearer M at least. For readier reference. Himself some other character. W. Devising it all including himself for company. In the same dark as M when last heard of. The confusion is compounded in that, while prior to this passage we have the voice in third person relating the perspective of the one on his back in the dark hearing the voice in second person, here there is a transition to the perspective of the voice in second person. This voice ‘devises’ itself and is uncertain of its relationship to the one on his back in the dark. Now this more directly depicted mind-body division, and doubt towards the empirical world, may seem more Cartesian and, if taken is isolation, it is. But, as has been discussed, and as Beckett will go on to depict, things are not so simple; not least because thought and the apprehension of the self as a thinking thing are also part of the empirical world. Cartesian doubt is itself questioned when we return to the perspective of the one on his back in the dark, or ‘M’, as he is referred to at this point:

M so far as follows. On his back in a dark place form and dimensions yet to be devised. Hearing on and off a voice which uncertain whether addressed to him or to another sharing his situation […] Doubts gradually dashed as voice from questing far and wise closes in upon him. When it ceases no other sound than his breath. When it ceases long enough vague hope it may have said its last. Mental activity of a low order. Rare flickers of reasoning to no avail.

What is evident here is that while ‘M’ retains doubts over the content of what the voice tells him, doubt of the connection between the two of them has now been dispensed with. There is almost, therefore, a kind of reversal of Cartesian doubt in that ‘M’ is certain of his physical, bodily reality while doubting his mental activity. There is even the desire for this mental activity, as it can be no more than meek, to discontinue. But a problem dawns upon this divided consciousness:

But no improvement […] by some successful act of intellection as were he to think to himself referring to himself, Since he cannot think he will give up trying. Is there anything to add to this esquisse? His unnamability. Even M must go. So W reminds himself of his creature

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as so far created. W? But W too is creature. Figment. 88

For Kant, body and thought are represented to the self empirically, and such representations are formulated as acts of the faculty of imagination. To refer to such representations as ‘figments’ of the imagination is, strictly speaking, consistent with Kant’s understanding of self-consciousness, albeit pointedly belittling. Most importantly, here body and mind, rather than just body, are both figments, equally ‘imaginary’ in Kant’s more precise sense. This is in keeping with the Kantian cogito but not with the Cartesian cogito. With the names ‘M’ and ‘W’ now dispensed with, we are left again with the one on his back in the dark and the voice. Their duality at this point seems to have been settled; a self-recognising binary of sorts that chooses to understand itself as a figment of imagination. This then raises the question of whose imagination, exactly? So it follows that from this point the narrative voice proceeds to speculate about ‘Yet another then. Of whom nothing. Devising figments to temper his nothingness’. 89 What follows are passages that are, grammatically speaking, narrated in the third person but it has become unclear whether this is the voice in second person’s stream of consciousness or a continuation of the third person voice from earlier in the text:

Devised deviser devising it all for company. In the same figment dark as his figments. In what posture and if or not as hearer in hid good not yet devised. Is not immovable enough? Why duplicate this particular solace? Then let him move. Within reason…Craw and fall. Crawl again and fall again. In the same figment dark as his other figments. 90

The transitions between narrative voices and between perspectives in Company, and the potential significance these transitions convey, are quite difficult to follow. This is most likely deliberate, pursued in order to provide a truer rendering of the complications of meta-consciousness. Nonetheless, what appears to have happened by this point in the text is that the prior distinction between the voices in second and third person (denoted, primarily, by the use of the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘he’ respectively) has been dissolved. Instead, everything is now told from the perspective of the voice that used to be that of the second person, though it now uses third person pronouns in reference to the supposed ‘devised deviser’. That is to say, from this

89 Beckett, Company, 33.
point there is only one ‘Voice’.

The image Beckett uses, of the devised deviser or crawling creator, appears to be designed to communicate several things at once. On the one hand, such phraseology puts one in mind of a god-figure as an unmoved mover; the ultimate condition of the universe. This certainly appears to be a factor in the Voice’s speculation, at least to begin with. On the other hand, the farther the Voice pushes its thought, the more this devised deviser seems to be created in the image of the one on his back in the dark. Within the context of this analysis, there are two ways to interpret this. Firstly, when the Voice posits a devised deviser in the image of the one on his back in the dark and in the same dark as his figments, this is again reflective of the division between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject. For all intents and purposes whether this devised deviser is a god-figure or a transcendental subject makes little difference, as in both cases we are referring to a transcendental condition of reality that lies beyond our capacity for knowledge. Furthermore, the Voice understands that knowledge refers only to objects of possible experience. In a crucial passage the Voice assesses the one on his back in the dark’s senses of hearing, sight, taste, touch, and finally smell, and finds that they yield no knowledge of the crawling creator. The Voice then concludes this critique by asking after ‘Some sixth sense? Inexplicable premonition of impending ill? Yes or no? No. Pure reason? Beyond experience’. This may only be a brief comment, but it is also unfeasible to suppose that Beckett was unaware of the significance of employing the phrase ‘Pure reason’ in this passage, or that it was somehow a coincidence. Furthermore, studying Beckett certainly teaches us, if nothing else, the power a brief comment may have.

As a result of all this, the notion of the crawling creator comes to lose credibility for the Voice. This occurs after the Voice asks, ‘Can the crawling creator crawling in the same dark as his creature create while crawling?’ The most salient thing here is that there is an implicit self-recognition of the Voice and the one on his back in the dark as the same entity, as we are told this is ‘One of the questions he put to himself as between two crawls he lay’. Yet this is not from the perspective of the crawling creator. Ergo, the Voice and the one in his back in the dark are at this point acting as a unified being, the unnamed ‘I’, and this ‘I’ is answering this question by referring to its own experience of crawling. The conclusion that the unnamed I

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94 Beckett, Company,
comes to is that the supposed crawling creator ‘Could not conceivably create while crawling in the same dark as his creature’. Yet the unnamed I has been created and, as a result, speculation about the crawling creator is terminated.

What we are left with is the strong impression that the images of crawling and falling that the unnamed ‘I’ has been ruminating on are not the imaginings of a separate crawler in the dark, but rather its own memories, though it does not yet recognise them as such. The remainder of the text, however, reads like a recollection of all the crawling and falling that led to the moment where the text begins, with the voice saying ‘You are on your back in the dark’. And so it is described how the one his back in the dark came to be on his back in the dark, how he ‘Crawl and falls. Lies. Lies in the dark with closed eyes resting from his crawl. Recovering. Physically from his disappointed at having crawled again in vain. Perhaps saying to himself, Why crawl at all? Why not just lie in the dark with closed eyes and give up? Give up all. Have done with all’.

Soon after this we are shown how the ‘hearer’ chooses, as most companionable, the position of being supine, naked, and with eyes closed in the dark. Although it does not quite end there as he appears to spend a certain period alternating between the prone position and a huddle. This period is the time between the last time ‘You’ went out and the hearing of the voice by the one in the back in the dark. This would be the last period in which this duality understood itself as a single and indivisible entity addressing itself in the second person: ‘Thus you now on your back in the dark once sat huddled there your body having shown it could go out no more’. Then, without a description of a change in position, this is followed with: ‘Huddled thus you find yourself imagining you are not alone while knowing full well that nothing has occurred to make this possible. The process continues nonetheless lapped as it were in its meaninglessness’. And it is perhaps that the crux of this meaninglessness is the confrontation with the unnameable, or unnamability itself, as the Voice continues; ‘You do not murmur in so many words, I know this doomed to fail and yet persist. No. For the first personal singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary. But without a word you view yourself to this effect as you would a stranger’.

The meaninglessness of self-actualisation is, as Beckett depicts it, that the irreconcilable stranger-hood of the unnameable and the object of empirical apperception from one another is

95 Beckett, Company, 39.
96 Beckett, Company, 40.
97 Beckett, Company, 42.
100 Beckett, Company, 45.
101 Beckett, Company, 45.
written-in to the act of ‘I’. That is to say that unity of consciousness, and the knowledge that is made possible by it, comes at the cost of division within the subject that the said knowledge refers or ‘belongs’ to. Knowledge, including and especially knowledge of the self, is therefore rendered ultimately worthless by the conditions of its very possibility. With such an idea the text, fittingly, ends:

You now on your back in the dark shall not rise to your arse again to clasp your legs in your arms and bow down your head till it can bow down no further. But with face upturned for good labour in vain at your fable. Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone.102

Finally, the transition to the supine position is complete, and the one on his back in the dark becomes just that. This goes hand in hand with the comprehension that the act of ‘I’ refers only to an internal representation within and of the mind rather than to a substantial reality. The pronoun, then, has no meaning and is duly abandoned; its presumed object thus remains the unnameable. Given the non-linear narrative, it is not certain that we witness here the first instance of the fable being recognised for what it is. Given that an indeterminately long cycle of self-delusion and recognition was a well-established motif of Beckett’s by the time Company was written, it seems to be the most stable platform for interpreting the narrative form here also. Following from this, we could say that the beginning and the end in Company are quite deliberately and pointedly indistinct. Beckett’s oeuvre is full of words coming to an end and words nonetheless continuing. The fabling comes to an end but will most likely resume. It cannot terminate as it continues in pursuit of what must, yet cannot, be named. Thus, resolution is not possible. The only constant is solitude. Thus, it seems that the initial choice in interpreting the meaning of fable in Company is whether to consider the images presented to the one on his back in the dark as memories that he flits in and out of recognising, or whether these are all

simply figments and extensions. Arguably one is as likely as the other. In considering the influence of Kantian thought on Beckett, however, the difference between the two could be seen as negligible.

Memories are not illusory as such, but they are nonetheless representations of the imagination. As regards the events, images and sensations recounted in them, it is not their actuality that is problematic but their value. They are essentially the retention of empirical knowledge. It can be easily, and understandably, suggested that Beckett disputes the validity of such knowledge as knowledge, owing again to the influence of Descartes. But it is the meaning and value of the self as empirically determined that is challenged, not its status as knowledge. It would be wrong to suggest that the matter of such knowledge, derived from appearance, is illusory. For something to be termed an illusion, the reality behind it must have been revealed. This reality, the transcendental subject that we deduce is empirically, and so therefore also epistemologically, completely beyond us. This circumstance is one of the clearest and most basic points that Kant makes:

If I say: in space and time intuition represents both outer objects as well as the self-intuition of the mind as each affects our senses, i.e., as it appears, that is not to say that these objects would be a mere illusion. For in the appearance the objects, indeed even properties that we attribute to them, are always regarded as something really given, only insofar as this property depends only on the kind of intuition of the subject in the relation of the given object to it then this object as appearance is to be distinguished from itself as object in itself.103

Illusion is arrived at only when we attribute objective reality to our manner of representing objects to ourselves.104 But a division between appearance and reality is not the real problem for Beckett. The problem, again, is not the epistemological validity, but rather the value, of experience. Furthermore, this holds greater significance for the subject that empirical knowledge refers to, rather than the objects. The connotations of the Cartesian cogito are largely external and pertain to the relation between the knowing subject and the world. It is a problem of insufficient information and a limited capacity to interpret said information. But the connotations of the Kantian cogito, particularly following Deleuze’s analysis, are intra-

103 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 190.
104 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 190.
subjective and inescapable. The ‘I’ of the ‘I think’, the self represented to the self, is only nominally different from our other representations and the substance behind it is presupposed rather than known. The self, in any persistently meaningful sense, dissipates not its own determination, but the very ability to make this self-determination. This is what Deleuze saw in the difference between the Cartesian *cogito* and Kantian *cogito*.

Doubt directed externally, that is, doubt of the world and even of the thinking subject’s capacity to know that world, is an ultimately insufficient character of doubt to interpret in Beckett’s oeuvre, particularly his later work. It is the Cartesian model of doubt that leads one towards such an interpretation. But our focus must shift to the doubt turned within; a doubt of the subject born of the subject, a doubt of reason arrived at via the very nature of reason itself. This application of doubt, of critical thought, is certainly present in Beckett’s work, but it is also archetypically Kantian. There is space to acknowledge that such similarities are not a coincidence without reducing the literary work to those similarities alone, a reduction which would imply that the literary work poetically replicates the intent of the philosopher. The anxiety that such a reduction could result from a conceptual, as opposed to purely textual, reading of Beckett (or indeed any author) is unnecessary, and to act upon it is reductive in itself. The overemphasis on Cartesian readings over the last forty years is an example of such a reduction. It has resulted in the near total disregard of a greater conceptual fidelity; that between the work of Samuel Beckett and the thought (as opposed to merely the texts) of Immanuel Kant. Following Kant, we must not doubt the existence of the thinking subject or of the world, but rather we must examine the meaning of the relationship between the two as represented in thought. This very relationship is the central topic of the following chapter.
Chapter Three

‘Something to do with Dust’: Samuel Beckett and the Kantian ‘block’

Of all his writings on the work of other philosophers, Adorno’s lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* are perhaps the most illuminating and enduringly valuable. More specifically, they are of immense value to this chapter as it is the particular image of Kant that Adorno reveals to us that is most applicable to the work of Beckett; the image of a limited and significantly incapable subject, plagued by questions of nothingness and meaninglessness. There is a tendency when looking at these questions to emphasise the universal; that is to say, the cosmically universal. And this tendency, while justified in the study of Kant, is certainly present in the study of Beckett to an extent that exceeds what is justified. His proclaimed interest in fundamentals all but ensured this would be the case.¹ Fundamentals and universals are, however, not the same thing. It is therefore necessary to shift our attention to commonalities, emphasising that to which something can be meaningless, to which nothingness is a problem for both Beckett and Kant: the *subject*. This is, however, in no sense an attempt to re-introduce the human element of this problematic, and certainly not in advocacy of humanism.

Meaninglessness and nothingness, however else they may be considered, are products or characteristics of our selves. Subjectivity both introduces them to our reality and is introduced to them at the same time. An improper metaphysics, one that seeks to exceed our limitations rather than tend to its proper task of describing them, suspends our immersion in this situation. Patrick Bowles (who worked with Beckett on the English translation of *Molloy*) reports that Beckett told him that ‘if you want to render the world *truly*, call it chance if you like, you cannot represent yourself as being outside it, you are *not*, you and it are part of chance and must represent ourselves as blindly immersed in it, for no reason, with no object, by no

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¹ Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider, 27 December 1957, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol. 3*, 82.
Kant devoted much of his career to debunking such improper metaphysic and so, in his own more unsettling way, did Beckett. I use the term ‘unsettling’ in a manner that is more literal than it may at first appear.

Questions such as ‘how can one use language to effectively communicate the emptiness of language?’, ‘how can one meaningfully represent a lack of meaning?’ and ‘how does one describe nothingness and silence?’ are quite familiar within Beckett studies. My question here, a dual question, is somewhat different: ‘exactly how does Beckett repurpose an accumulative process such as narrative to represent subtraction?’ and concurrently ‘how does he repurpose the stream of consciousness to represent consciousness’s dissociation from its own subject?’

This chapter will focus on these questions, with the primary goal of articulating how an understanding of Kant can lend insight into Beckett’s restrained lamentation of the subject. The key to this is understanding how both authors move towards the abstract in their expression, and what they achieved by doing so. It is a question of what can be found at the point where the theoretical and the stylistic are seemingly inextricably integrated. There are many examples of this in Beckett’s oeuvre to choose from, but for the purposes of this chapter I have selected the plays That Time and What Where.

Both Beckett and Kant tended towards rigorous abstraction as their careers went on and, while they held different objectives in doing so and went about it differently, their actions shared an important premise. That premise was that the elimination of personality in thought and articulation, as far as it may be practically achieved, facilitates the uncovering of truth or truth-value. The Critique of Pure Reason is infamous for its almost punishing dryness, as is much of Kant’s work from 1781 onwards. But something that is often overlooked is that Kant did not always write this way, and it was a deliberate choice to do so. Despite concerns that removing the personal charm in his writing style would turn readers away, Kant was determined to ensure that any popularity or influence the first Critique attained would be due entirely to the strength of its argumentation.3 Ernst Cassirer, while commenting on the over-emphasis previous biographers of Kant had placed on his apparent eccentricities as a man observed that

the problems of the Kantian philosophy, if one traces their original development, cannot be confined within the sphere of his personality.

On the contrary, in those problems an independent logic of facts

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3 Cassirer, Kant’s Life and Thought, 140
emerges; there dwells in them a theoretical content which, detached from all temporal and subjectively personal bonds, possesses an objective existence grounded in itself alone.⁴

While this is an important observation with regard to the understanding of Kant’s critical philosophy in general, it is more specifically important here as Cassirer makes this point in his *Kant’s Life and Thought*, which was included in the edition of Kant’s complete works (also edited by Cassirer) that Beckett acquired in 1938.⁵ Cassirer proceeds to make a somewhat more evocative observation in the same vein:

from the moment the foundation of the critical system has been definitively laid, Kant’s style also undergoes an inner change. The phrase “De nobis ipsis silemus” [of ourselves, we say nothing], which he takes from Bacon to serve as a motto for the *Critique of Pure Reason* [...], gathers more and more force. The more definitely and clearly Kant conceives his great objective, the more laconic he becomes about everything concerning his own person.⁶

That Cassirer draws direct attention to Kant’s use of the phrase ‘De nobis ipsis silemus’ is significant, as we know that Beckett held a more than passing interest in this phrase himself; he quotes it in a letter to illustrate how much of Kant’s philosophy he had been reading at the time (see Ch. 1 n. 7), and ultimately again in *The Unnamable*.⁷ It is difficult to imagine that Beckett was unaware of Kant’s attempt to leave his personality behind when Beckett himself embarked on a body of work that would constantly question the nature of the subject and subsequently the meaning of identity and personality. The pursuits of both Beckett and Kant to this end are in large part underpinned by one question, namely: what happens, or what may we articulate, when we assess experience without attributing an identity or any other significance to the ‘I’ we associate experience with? Our story is one that is generated simply by the accidental collision of form and content. The significance of self, being an amalgam of blind data, is called into question. Beckett focuses on this dilemma in the 1976 play *That Time* by

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⁴ Cassirer, *Kant’s Life and Thought*, 6.
taking the simple step of having the subject within the play talk to himself in the second person, commencing as follows:

A: that time you went back that last time to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child when was that [eyes close.] grey day took the eleven to the end of the line and on from there no no trams then all gone long ago that time you went back to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child that last time not a tram left in the place only the old rails when was that

Notice here that, as is the case throughout the play, in lieu of being able to place a specific date and time to these memories there is only a vain attempt to discern the position of these memories through association with empirical things (such as trams, rails, the wharf, etc.). The Listener in That Time is sifting through the ruins of his own synthesis, and this situation is brought about by virtue of the discomfiting nature of the understanding itself.

The play, in both its structure and imagery, depicts the illusion of identity and its falling apart. Beckett, incidentally, borrows the image of the disembodied head from Caravaggio’s The Decollation of John the Baptist. For Beckett, however, the body is removed from the head, as the latter is the more important of the two. The imagery within the narration, which will be looked at in more detail below, is in itself straightforward, comprising frequent mentions of dust, public spaces, isolation and facelessness. The concepts that the imagery acts as signifier to are, as typical in Beckett’s work, quite complex. But for the moment the focus will be on the play’s structure, which one may describe as aggressively non-linear. While the narration remains in the second person for the length of the play, and is therefore easier to follow than texts such as How It Is where Beckett switches between perspectives, the relation between the chronology of events, the order of narration within the play, and the depiction of this narration are broken and deliberately disorientating. Furthermore, within the distinctly broken narrative that alternates between the A, B, and C voices Beckett is using the vagaries of memory to stretch, compress and generally warp the experience of time. The basic situation that occurs on stage, however, is simple enough. In his rehearsal notes for the German premiere of That Time, the director, Walter Asmus, recalls Beckett’s distinction between the voices: ‘The B story has to do with the young man, the C story is the story of the old man and the A story that of the

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8 Beckett, That Time, 388
man in middle age. From a great distance he hears the voice he has today, says Beckett’. The middle aged man, however, is largely occupied with recalling himself as a child inventing both company and an image of himself. Voice B tells the story of a young man, but in the form of recollections (suspected to be mere imaginings that never occurred) related by a man of indeterminate age. That is to say, it remains unclear whether the voice of voice B is younger or older than the man of voice A. Little has been written on the play, and most of what has been written focuses on what to make of the form and order of the voices. Though, as Brater observes, ‘Our attempts to order the bits and pieces, to place them in a hierarchy, a chronology, and a progression, lead us nowhere but back to the images themselves’. While some sense of order is possible, and indeed important in interpreting *That Time*, Brater is quite right to say that to try and do so comprehensively is futile and distracts from the more important issue of the imagery. In a similar vein, Gontarski observes that Beckett deliberately blurs the distinction between the memories, just has he often blurs the distinction between autobiography and fiction. As part of a study on Beckett’s process of composing *That Time*, Gontarski goes on to say that ‘both this play and Beckett’s art as a whole are less concerned with memory per se (the character’s or the author’s) than with exploring the artistic impulse’. To this I would add that to bring order to the plot of *That Time* is not only futile and unnecessary, it also misses the most salient feature of the narrative form, which is this brokenness itself. This is important to observe because, given the ambiguity of voice B’s relative age, it is impossible to chronologically situate one of the play’s crucial images with any certainty. While others have focused on interpreting the inability of voice B to determine whether his love story is a memory or something else he made up for company, I would like to focus on the falling of the shroud, foreshadowed here:

B: or by the window in the dark harking to the owl not a thought in your head till hard to believe harder and harder to believe you ever told anyone you loved them or anyone you till just one of those things you kept making up to keep the void out just another of those old tales to keep the void from pouring in on top of you the shroud

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10 Asmus, *Rehearsal Notes*.
11 Brater, “Fragment and Beckett’s form in ‘That Time’ and ‘Footfalls’”.
12 Gontarski, “Making Yourself All Up Again”, 114.
13 Gontarski, “Making Yourself All Up Again”, 114.
This imagery is later completed in the last paragraph of voice B’s narrative strain:

B: that time in the end when you tried and couldn’t by the window in the dark […] when you tried and tried and couldn’t anymore no words left to keep it out so gave it up gave up there by the window in the dark or moonlight gave up for good and let it in and nothing the worse a great shroud billowing in all over you on top of you and little or nothing the worse little or nothing15

It is tempting to combine the use of the words ‘in the end’ and the image of a shroud pouring over and so interpret this as the last event occurring before the image we are presented with in the play of a head suspended in darkness with no words left and so unable to speak. On the one hand the imagery is deliberately used to give this impression, but on the other hand the form of the play also deliberately undermines the notion of order and, with that, of an end. The paragraph quoted above is the last in voice B’s narrative strain, but it is equally intelligible that it is chronologically prior to the events in the last paragraph of voice A’s narrative in which the middle-aged man pledges to get ‘away to hell out of it all and never come back’.16 Indeed, it can read as though voice C’s entire narrative occurs chronologically after this point. Antoni Libera interpreted the three strains of narrative as a kind of progression in reflective critical thought, with voice A concerned with the understanding of self, voice B with the understanding of others and, finally, voice C as a ‘metaphysical adventure’ concerning the understanding of being itself and of time.17 This holds true too, provided we do not take it to be a comprehensive explanation. It is nonetheless also apparent that the final paragraphs of each voice hold a deliberate sense of finality yet, equally, a deliberate sense of endlessness.

Beckett’s broken narratives are not non-linear so much as a subversion of narrative, and he does this precisely so as to eliminate any sense of accumulation or progression that would otherwise be present in a conventional narrative. He does this to effect a fundamental critique of the interplay between, and limitations of, the receptivity and activity of consciousness, the subjective faculties of intuition and of judgement. When we talk of failure in Beckett we are referring to the emotional reality that corresponds to the greater reality of human cognitive limitation or, more exactly, incapacity. Incapacity is not merely an important aspect within

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15 Beckett, That Time, 394
17 Libera, Structure and Pattern.
Kant’s critical philosophy; rather the condition of incapacity is utterly essential for understanding his work. It has been obscured, however, by the association too strongly made between Kant’s philosophy and the Enlightenment and its ideology. Fortunately, Adorno insists on maintaining incapacity’s rightful, indispensable place within Kant’s critical philosophy. He does this through a concept he calls the ‘block’ which he conceives of as resulting from an important theoretical distinction Kant made between reality and consciousness, a distinction that makes him exceptional within the history of German Idealism. I have previously offered a basic description of this in Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui, but what follows is a more comprehensive account of the concept.

To outline this distinction, Adorno said ‘that while Kant does situate the unity of existing reality and also the concept of Being in the realm of consciousness, he simultaneously refuses to generate everything that exists from that realm of consciousness’. This is in essence the theoretical impetus Kant used to form the basis of his Copernican revolution in philosophy, in which he sought to devise an effective synthesis between rationalism and empiricism. So, while dragging the basis of reality down from the ether of ideas, where it had been placed by the secular theology of rationalism, Kant nonetheless refuses to set it down in base sensibility. And this generates a new problematic, which Adorno goes on to describe:

…he [Kant] always has the consciousness […] of a ‘block’. By this I mean the awareness that even though there is no unity other than the one I have already told you about, namely the unity that lies in the concept of reason itself – this is not the whole story and we always come up against some outer limit. We might even say that in a sense the vital nerve of Kant’s philosophy as a whole lies in the conflict between these two aspects, the impulse towards system, unity and reason, and, on the other hand, consciousness of the heterogeneous, the block, the limit […] The vehicle of this process is this concept of the given nature of transcendental conditions.

While we rely on sensibility to provide us with information, and while we rely on an idea of universal reason to bring this information to unity, reality as such begins and ends in human consciousness. But this, while it may appear to be, is not humanism. The human being

18 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 18.
19 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 18.
has total responsibility thrust upon it, and without elevation. There is no ascension, only capacity and incapacity, what is given and what is not. All we can do is judge correctly or, as seems more probable, not. This being established the task then is to describe how it is that we may judge, and this has everything to do with how we form concepts. Concepts, according to Immanuel Kant, are

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grounded on the spontaneity of thinking [...] the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging my means of them. Since no representation pertains to the object immediately except intuition alone, a concept is thus never immediately related to an object [...] Judgement is [...] the mediate cognition of an object, hence the representation of a representation.20
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Now of course, so many of Beckett’s works were written as streams of consciousness, and place great emphasis on the spontaneity of thinking. This at least seems to be something Beckett retained from his days as protégé to Joyce,21 though he later resolved to go by way of subtraction rather than addition. This must have posed a significant aesthetic problem for Beckett, as writing, or rather composition, is an inescapably accumulative process.

In a stream of consciousness, fictional or otherwise, subjectivity and time combine to form a linear and unified image of the world and of our own identity. This is our story, and this invokes learning, wisdom, self-actualisation, attainment and retainment. You know thyself, we say to ourselves, echoing the inscription from the temple of Apollo, and clearly this is all very significant; unless, of course, it is not. By breaking up this unity Beckett is quite precisely attacking, not the unity of the image, but the meaning of this image, being as it is just an image. Knowledge does not necessarily signify much at all of what we would like it to. According to Adorno:

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the content of knowledge in Kant is always what comes to me from the outside: it is the contingent, or, as he sometimes says, the chaotic, the sensory manifold over which I have no control, but to which my knowledge refers. Moreover, it does not refer to it in the sense that we know the sensory. The
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20 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 205
fact is that we do not know the sensory; it is something that we possess; it is given to us. But it is opaque, blind and impenetrable.22

The Kantian subject may well be one of form without content, and this may well be unpalatable, but this does not make it inaccurate. Furthermore, Beckett’s representation of the subject, at least from the time of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* onwards (their compositions being partially concurrent), features many similarities with the Kantian subject. What is problematic here is that the subject’s active faculties, as they pertain to knowledge, are conditioned to respond to empirically given data that is gathered by the subject’s passive faculties. As empirically given, data is externally sourced and its collision with the subject is largely accidental. So when we say that the Kantian subject is form without content this is not to say that the identity attached to the subject is without content, or that this content is doubted as knowledge. For Kant, what is rejected is the possibility that epistemology can provide insight into anything beyond describing what knowledge is and how we form it. The problem is that such things include the origin of both empirical data and our ability to form knowledge from it. For Beckett, correspondingly, what is doubted is the significance of the content, the subject, and primarily the identity supposedly formed in combing them.

If we consider Adorno’s use of the term ‘we possess’ here, focusing on ‘we’ for the moment, we are led to a potentially significant detail. Are ‘we’, in the context of sensory receptiveness, to be considered a singular whole or a conglomerate of individuals? Furthermore, what are the connotations of each alternative? As individuals we would ‘possess’ only that share of the sensory manifold that we have happened upon, which we have each received through broadly identical physiological means and, according to Kant, ordered according to universal faculties. In this sense, as individuals we ‘possess’ the sensory much in the same way that each grain of sand ‘possesses’ the part of a piece of driftwood that happens to have come to rest upon it.

What this indicates is that, in inspecting our relation to the sensory manifold, we can only consider our possession of it in the lightest of senses. This is the case not least because possession connotes, and perhaps is defined by nothing more than, the possibility of dispossession. That is to say, we come to possess only when it can be taken away but, in this context, who or what is to do the taking? The answer could only be the original source of bestowment, which could only be seen by looking through the ‘opaque, blind and

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22 Adorno, *Kant’s Critique*, 43.
impenetrable’. Clearly for Adorno and, as he sees it, for Kant, the problem is insoluble as far as may be discerned. So what are we left with, or, in what condition are we left?

Synthesis, according to Kant, is ‘the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function […] without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom conscious. Yet to bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense’. This function of understanding that brings synthesis to concepts, to knowledge as such, is judgement. Knowledge is not something we possess or acquire. Rather, it is something we choose to do. But the choice is very limited in a very significant way. Knowledge is a judgement, and as such it is the secondary representation of a separate representation that is itself formed blindly by the imagination from opaque, blind and impenetrable sensory information. This is beyond our control, to the extent that perhaps I should say knowledge is not even something we choose to do, but merely something we happen to do. What do judgements mean if the matter to be judged arrives to us by accident? What does the stream of consciousness mean if the order in which it happens by us is an accident? The meaning, if any, can only lie in the accident itself and this is what Beckett’s broken narratives call to our attention. That Time begins at the scene where suspicions are confirmed, an old man returns to the place where, in childhood, he would make up voices for company. He confirms, for the last time, that he has simply been making himself and his world up, and has been doing so for as long as he can remember. This artifice has led nowhere but to the ruin in which it began. Its order, therefore, does not matter, and the length of his memory does not matter. Time appears to have been in his head the whole time; a figment, not of the imagination but of consciousness more broadly. This is further reflected in Beckett’s previous use of the term ‘figment’ in Lessness. There, where the earth and sky are one and the ruins the same grey as the sands, the ‘figment light never was but grey air timeless no sound.’ And to conclude the text we are told ‘figment dawn dispeller of figments and the other called dusk.’ It is not the reality of these experiences that is questioned but rather the significance of the way they are organised. And in this representation of time we again see Kant’s apparent influence on Beckett. Echoing Kant’s conception of time, Beckett represents time as an indivisible form, merely a way of organising

23 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 21.
24 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 210-1.
26 Beckett, Lessness, 201.
things within the mind, not an intrinsic quality of the objective world; ‘was there any other time but that time’ asks the old man, ‘away to hell out of it all and never come back’. 27

And this end to the A strain of narrative seems to lead chronologically to the beginning of the C strain of narrative, in which a spectral figure drifts from one public space to another; a post office, a gallery and finally a library. These are neutral, limbo like spaces, specific to no one. Ironically enough then, this spectral figure belongs here and nowhere else, as he is no one in particular. The revelation that the Listener has experienced here leads us towards the Kantian block, the revelation of a particular understanding of the subject and its place in the world. As Adorno says of the Kantian subject:

you really must imagine […] man as a kind of tabula rasa, who finds himself bombarded with sense impressions, without really knowing where they come from. On the other hand, we do not really know what these sense impressions are...and the collision of these two elements […] is what constitutes knowledge […] the crucial idea in metaphysics is that metaphysics is actually nothing but form which misapprehends itself as content. 28

The human as a tabula rasa is something that is revealed ultimately by everything we can do to deny our emptiness, the words we use to keep the void out, before we inevitably let it in and find little or nothing to be the worse. Whereas in Beckett’s earlier work we see figures trapped inside a meaningless circumstance, in his later work the circumstance is within us. The very capability to know, which lies within us, leaves the capability to account for the possibility of knowledge beyond us. It is here that we arrive at the ‘block’, a circumstance Adorno goes on to describe as follows:

By making the experienced world, the immanent world, the world in its this-ness, commensurate with us, by turning it into our world, so to speak, something like a radical metaphysical alienation is achieved simultaneously […] the more the world is stripped of an objective meaning and the more it becomes coextensive with our own categories and thereby becomes our world, then the more we find meaning

28 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 50.
eliminated from the world; and the more we find ourselves immersed in something like a cosmic night\(^\text{29}\)

The world is stripped of objective meaning; that is, it is stripped of the supposition of objective meaning that we carry around with us. As Adorno states elsewhere:

Kant’s greatness, his ability to subject even his own so-called fundamental propositions to a tenacious critique, proved true not least of all when, completely befitting the actual nature of thinking, he did not simply equate spontaneity, which for him is thinking, with conscious activity. The definitive, constitutive achievements of thinking were for him not the same as acts of thought within the already constituted world. Their fulfillment is hardly present to self-consciousness.\(^\text{30}\)

Beckett’s narrators are of course constantly making suppositions that are soon, if not immediately, withdrawn or negated. Further, they are constantly trying to think their way into a coherent self. But neither thinking nor knowledge belong to us, and we delude ourselves when we attach significance to being able to say ‘this is my world’. The image of being immersed in a cosmic night is hardly one that is incompatible with Beckett’s own imagery, full as it is of dimly lit and largely motionless figures, surrounded with blackness. The Listener in That Time is reduced to listening, as he has nothing further to say. The narrative of That Time is so broken because it does not really occur in the play. That is to say, you have to imagine it as being like a story within a play in which no words are spoken. In this sense the play begins and ends after a fairly dramatic encounter in the Library between whoever the Listener was and the ‘block’:

C: the library that was another place another time that time you slipped in off the street out of the cold and rain when no one was looking what was it then you were never the same after never again after something to do with dust something the dust said sitting at the big round table with a bevy of old ones poring on the page and not a sound […] not a

\(^\text{29}\) Adorno, *Kant’s Critique*, 110.
\(^\text{30}\) Adorno, “Notes on Philosophical Thinking”, 128.
sound only the old breath and the leaves turning and then suddenly this
dust whole place suddenly full of dust when you opened your eyes from
floor to ceiling nothing only dust and not a sound only what was it it
said come and gone was that it something like that come and gone come
and gone no one come and gone in no time gone in no time.\footnote{Beckett, \textit{That Time}, 394-5.}

The entirety of the situation within the play proper of \textit{That Time} occurs after this
narrative point in the story within the play, which simply reveals to us that the situation was
always the case. To answer my earlier question regarding how Beckett re-purposes narrative to
express subtraction, in \textit{That Time}, the narrative is designed to relate everything that had been
made up, everything that had already been put forth and subtracted before the stage lights go
up.

To return briefly to the distinction between philosophy and literature, Clément says that
– commonly – they are distinguished respectively by the ‘need to understand and the
consciousness of the ridiculousness of the belief that one could do that’.\footnote{Clément, “But What is this Voice?””, 80.} On the face of it, this
distinction seems readily applicable to Beckett, given his fixation with ignorance. But Clément
also says that this distinction does not ultimately stand up, not least because Beckett is deeply
concerned with understanding.\footnote{Clément, “But What is this Voice?””, 81.} To this I would add, firstly, that holding little or no hope of
something is not the same thing as considering it ridiculous. Secondly, if literature is conscious
of the ridiculous of understanding it must also lay claim to some kind of greater understanding
and, in doing so, contradict itself. Beckett is more intelligent than this. Thirdly, and most
importantly, even if the task of philosophy is to understand it is also perfectly capable of
considering that understanding the limits of its understanding is fundamental to this task. Kant
provides a prime example of this very consideration. Adorno said that the deepest thing to be
found in Kant was that:

\begin{quote}
he holds fast to the intention of philosophy to understand reality as a
whole, to decode the totality. At the same time, he declares that
philosophy is \textit{incapable} of this, and that the only form in which the
totality can be grasped is the expression of the fact that it cannot be
comprehended […] the totality that the mind is just able to encompass
\end{quote}
is no more than the fact that as mind it is unable to comprehend the totality; but that it somehow contrives after all to comprehend what it does not comprehend and the fact that it cannot comprehend it.\textsuperscript{34}

In his own way, albeit in a far less accepting and serene way, Beckett goes about a very similar task. While the image of dust has often been used to signify loss and the degradation of time, in \textit{That Time} its significance is quite different. Here, nothing turns to dust, dust need not be necessarily presumed to have been something else as, for example, ashes. Dust begins and ends as dust, and the appearance of being anything else somewhere in the meantime is nothing more than a contrivance of comprehension. After all the contrivances, all the Listener can do is bare his toothless grin and implicitly declare such an inability, before supposedly repeating the cycle ad nauseam, an implication that is fairly common in Beckett. In this instance the stain upon the silence amounts to no more than a few harshly drawn breaths, as the Listener briefly recognises this story within the play to be the one he took as his own, before such concepts as ‘his’ and ‘own’ were shown not to lose their meaning, but to have never had any at all. When something begins and ends in ruin nothing can properly be said to have been built.

The lack of faith in identity Samuel Beckett shows in this way is part of a wider epistemological concern. Or perhaps it is rather a higher concern, as it is the concern over the possibility of epistemology itself, echoing Kant’s question regarding the possibility of metaphysical knowledge in general.\textsuperscript{35} It would be fair to hold that this question, the question of ‘Who?’, is the most significant aspect of Beckett’s take on epistemology. Owing to this, analysing that question has been the primary concern of this study and others in the past. But now we must take a look at a bigger picture and we can do this by drawing attention to Beckett’s last play, 1983’s \textit{What Where}. The basic interrogatives, ‘Who?’, ‘How?’, ‘Why?’, and ‘When?’, are notable in their absence. Our question is: why are they absent when the titular questions are not? In the first instance, this is a question of addition versus subtraction. Did the figures begin with nothing and establish the titular questions, before arriving at a point of impasse, the point at which we the audience are introduced to them? Or did they begin with all these questions and discard the titular questions by this very same point? If so, under what terms was this process undertaken?

\textsuperscript{34} Adorno, \textit{Kant’s Critique}, 177-8.

\textsuperscript{35} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 148.
Beckett, as usual, does not make things easy for us. When V announces that ‘In the end Bom appears. Reappears’. We cannot help but observe that this is Bom’s first appearance and thus we can deduce that, for Bom to have reappeared to V, something must have occurred before the action to which we the audience are privy. Again, the general sense of vagueness is quite deliberate. Gontarski reports that Beckett referred to the lighted area of the stage in What Where as an ‘experimental field of memory and on which all is remembered as from a distant past, hence the distinction between the voice of Bam [V] and the other remembered figures, including Bam himself’. What V means by saying that Bom appears ‘in the end’ is altogether less clear. At the end of what exactly has Bom appeared? Certainly not the play. Neither has Bom appeared at the end of the period between when V last switched on and will next switch off. Bom appears in the middle of this period, before disappearing and notably does not reappear before V switches off. If we can conclude nothing specific from this we can nonetheless say that Beckett’s attitude to time here is problematic to say the least. But the problem of time is always related to the problem of the subject, of internal perception. This is encapsulated in the issue of the cogito and the effect of Kant’s introducing time into the cogito, as was discussed in chapter two. The problematic of the cogito, which often appears in Beckett’s work, appears again in What Where when V announces ‘I am alone’ while Bam is on stage, ‘head haught’. From this we deduce that we are witnessing here an instance of apperception; V and Bam are one. In the first line of the play, however, V declares that ‘We are the last five’, and thus acknowledges the presence of all four onstage figures and himself. From this we deduce that V and Bam are not one. V and Bam are at once whole and divided, just as the cogito teaches us that the self is at once whole and divided. The direct significance of that was the subject of the previous chapter. The indirect, though perhaps greater, significance of this is the present subject. If we remain conscious of the block, then in the context of the interrogative questions identified above, the act of the ‘I’ leads us to a wider problem.

To what may the question ‘Who?’ refer? Most directly we can take this as the subject asking after its own identity. The difficulties of this have already been explored and need not be reiterated. There is a need here, however, to make a distinction between the difficulties of self-identification, the act of the ‘I’, and the difficulties contained in the relationship between this ‘I’ and knowledge of its world. The central, ultimate problem presented by the Kantian

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‘block’ is that it demarcates the point at which, as Adorno says (see n. 29), knowledge becomes ‘commensurate with us’. Or, in other words, at a certain point knowledge becomes self-referential, and this is critically undermining. It renders knowledge, the primary and supposedly most significant content of consciousness, quite meaningless. Kant accepted this implication in the dissociative, slightly mannered scholarly way he had adopted. For Beckett, however, the emotional reality of the Kantian block, and the epistemological meaninglessness that follows from it, are inescapable. It cannot, yet can only, be accepted. The veil of ignorance is an all-encompassing shadow of pointlessness, and yet its externality is an illusion. The block, the condition of all our ignorance, of our meaninglessness, is a fundamental feature of our consciousness. Incapacity is an innate characteristic of the subject, just as definitive as capacity.

And this is a crucial juncture, as at this point philosophy and aesthetics are united, albeit in an uncomfortable union characterised largely by confoundedness. Just as philosophy struggles with the possibility of the subject attaining metaphysical knowledge, with going beyond merely assembling what is presented to it, aesthetics must also struggle with the question of what it means to create as its own ‘going beyond’ its material – that is, what it means to do more than re-create or re-present empirical reality. For Kant, philosophy is fundamentally incapable of succeeding in its struggle, and any perceived success is exactly the transcendental illusion. It is beyond doubt that Beckett would agree with this assessment. So, the question then is: how does Beckett respond to the problem of aesthetics’ own struggle? To foreshadow, it may be that there is no response but the struggle itself.

When Adorno wrote that ‘Poetry retreated into what abandons itself unreservedly to the process of disillusionment. It is this that constitutes the irresistibility of Beckett’s work’ he was not simply referring to art’s anxiety over its own resources for the creation and communication of meaning. Art’s transition from romanticism to modernism and beyond, characterised by a gradual loss of faith in its ability to create or indeed merely communicate meaning, eventually became a loss of faith in our very ability to access meaning altogether. In Beckett this, voluntary dissociation between the writer and his means is designed to mimic the inescapable dissociation between the subject and the faculties through which the subject exercises its subjectivity. The agonism in Beckett may appear to lie in his characters’s – for want of a better term – attempts to resist and overcome this dissociation, but in truth these are not the stories that he tells. The agonism in Beckett lies rather in the knowledge his characters have, then lose, then return to

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40 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 22.
(although not necessarily related in that order), the knowledge that there is no overcoming or defeat, merely eternal resumption.

Samuel Beckett’s evolution from his early work to his archetypical ‘Beckettian’ work is likely the best possible example of poetic disillusionment. Just as High Modernism had emerged from the trauma of the First World War, having divested itself of the values preceding it, Beckett divested himself of a world and a culture he no longer deemed viable. This unviable, between-the-wars culture included the notion that humanity’s tendency towards outright destruction could be overcome through creativity, by changing our culture. If we instigated an upheaval of the variables of culture and of politics, then the constant, our humanity, would come to the fore. What followed of course was a period of unprecedented industrialised (and unprecedentedly-industrialised) homicide, and art had to once again take stock of its precepts. Our humanity was indeed the fundamental precept and therein lies the problem. What we thought of as inhumanity appeared inextricable from humanity, and so the time had come to question the intelligibility of both these terms. For a social sphere that had been clinging to the notion that there was something fundamentally noble about humanity, that was still salvageable beneath the maelstrom of material and history, and upon which art was understood to depend, this must have been a difficult prospect. The natural temptation in responding to this would be to give in to the force of misanthropy, but Beckett does not do this, which is not to say that he aspired to any sense of humanism let alone philanthropy. Just as Kant maintains that the idea of a more perfect universe is unintelligible, as perfection’s only reference point is the pre-existing capacity of the human mind.41 In this respect, Kant is presenting something like a more secularised version of Spinoza’s statement: ‘By reality and perfection I mean the same thing’.42 Similarly, Beckett does not engage with misanthropy, as this would be to compare humanity to an ideal version of itself that is also unintelligible. Instead, he shows us humanity in as basic a state as possible, placed outside history, ideology, morality, teleology and really all normative concepts. Ultimately all that is left are faded, empty husks, that are only nominally different from one another, and that are unable to do anything but ask half-formed questions that refer to nothing but the questions themselves.

This situation finds its most intensely focused expression in Beckett’s final play, What Where. One can look at the torturous nature of this play in psychoanalytic and political terms of trauma, authority, violence, and oppression.43 In keeping with the object of this dissertation,

41 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 551-2.
42 Spinoza, Ethics, 244.
however, I intend to analyse it in terms of the self-interrogation of the subject and the agonism that follows closely along. In this respect, the only activity in What Where is the interrogation of action itself, and nothing is questioned more than the meaning of a question. In this way, Beckett depicts the human subject as a kind of tabula rasa, as Adorno reads Kant as having done (see n. 28). In What Where the activity of the subject has been reduced to the attempt to enact (with a view to building upon) even the most basic form of a question, and repeatedly failing. Perhaps then the greater half of the problem of the tabula rasa is that it may only be impressed upon superficially. Adorno is careful to emphasise the nature of empirical knowledge as an accidental collision between subjective faculties and external stimuli so that knowledge as to the origins and nature of these stimuli must refer back to the subject. Thus, the struggle continues as it has for some time and, just as in That Time and many of Beckett’s other works, in What Where we the audience appears to have happened upon one instance in a series of repetitions that stretches indeterminately into the past and will stretch indeterminately into the future. Beckett’s repetition ad nauseam is designed precisely to reveal the hollowness of the concepts of past and future so that the entire concept of time is conflated into a single moment that we name the present, and contains everything precisely because it leads to nothing more. This kind of imagery is not particular to Beckett’s later work. Indeed it seen frequently throughout his oeuvre. One of the better known earlier examples would be Pozzo’s short speech on time:

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other, one day he [Lucky] went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we are born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?44

In outbursts like this, and the aggressive breaking up of time in That Time, Beckett displays an attitude of distrust or even open disdain towards time. In What Where this reaches a point at which motion and the passage of time are used to show the hollowness of change, progress, and completion. A voice and four ‘Players as alike as possible’45 that are only nominally distinct from one another appear to us ‘In the present as were we still’. 46 This line

44 Beckett, Waiting For Godot, 83.
45 Beckett, What Where, 469.
can be read as ‘Still in the present, as we too were still’, and when we do so we can see the meaninglessness of time and space laid bare. The players indeed move, coming and going from the stage, but it leads them nowhere. Time passes but nothing changes so time, does nothing but pass. There is no past to be retained and no future towards which to aspire.

There is a real sense that it is the very establishment of empirical reality as matter for knowledge that confirms the subject’s distance from the empirical reality in which knowledge is formed, let alone its distance from the transcendental reality required to endorse that knowledge. To understand this further, it is necessary to take a closer look at how Kant describes the process of cognition:

By synthesis […] I understand the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition […] Synthesis in general is […] the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious. Yet to bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense.47

Keep in mind that, certainly for Kant, interrogation of the external world is at all times an interrogation of the subject, just as for Beckett, the interrogation of the statement is an interrogation of the subject. Looking here at Kant’s description of cognition as following on from synthesis, the alienation of human consciousness from the reality it refers to becomes clear. It is this alienation that Adorno describes in the quote above. The data of cognition is opaque and blind, the faculty of imagination by which we put that data together is blind, and so what is there to say of the faculty of understanding? Its entire function is to withdraw concepts from sensory representation over which it has no control in preparation for the next representation. This is how knowledge is formed. It is interesting here that the imagination has the most power; it is what puts these representations together, yet it is blind and has no discretion. This is the strange effect of the separation of powers that goes on in Kant’s description of the faculties of cognition: the blind leading the hamstrung. Without going so far

47 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 210-1.
as to say it was deliberate, the image Beckett presents of the blind man pushing the crippled around in his wheelchair in *Rough for Theatre I* is an entirely fitting metaphor for this.48

Despite imagination appearing to have the most power, it still does not truly have a great deal. Knowledge is the result of an accidental collision of faculties that are bestowed *a priori*, and externally imposed content. Knowledge, despite requiring a knower, is something that appears to happen *to* them, rather than it being something *they* do. Deleuze offers his own take, following from Kant, of how knowledge is formed:

The important thing in representation is the prefix: *re*-presentation implies an active taking up of that which is presented; hence an activity and a unity distinct from the passivity and diversity which characterize sensibility as such. From this standpoint we no longer need to define knowledge as a synthesis of representations. It is the representation itself which is defined as knowledge, that is to say as the synthesis of that which is presented.49

What I would add to this is that the implication of activity that Deleuze refers to here is just that – an implication and no more. There is a sort of motion, but it is automated according to predetermined specifications. A wheat thresher is active, but it has no control over what actions it can take, or over where it directs those actions. Perhaps the only difference is that a wheat thresher does not pretend to understand why it does what it does. But this understanding makes the difference firstly between creation and production and, secondly, between production and re-production. Let us take a closer look at how Deleuze understands the second of these distinctions:

Synthesis has two aspects: apprehension, by means of which we pose the manifold as occupying a certain space and a *certain* time, by means of which we ‘produce’ different parts in space and time; and reproduction, my means of which we reproduce the preceding parts as we arrive at the ones following.50

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49 Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 7.
50 Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 12.
In this respect the popular notion that the world is ‘what I make of it’ has a grain of truth to it, of a kind revelled in by the Romantics. The problem is that the subject has very little say in what it makes of the world. This is because I have absolutely no say in the matter from which I make my world, and very little say in how I go about this. The concepts contained within the faculty of the understanding are applicable a priori, their appropriateness to the synthesis of my empirical reality is established before I have received and synthesised it. In its correct use the understanding is effectively the faculty of prejudice. Understanding as we know it is a loftier notion than what Kant is referring to when he speaks of the faculty of understanding:

In fact knowledge implies two things which go beyond synthesis itself; it implies consciousness, or more precisely the belonging of representations to a single consciousness within which they must be linked [...] On the other hand, knowledge implies a necessary relation to an object. That which constitutes knowledge is not simply the act by which the manifold is synthesised, but the act by which the represented manifold is related to an object (recognition: this is a table, this is an apple, this is such and such an object).  

Note that ‘the act by which the manifold is synthesised’ is the purview of the faculty of imagination and ‘the act by which the represented manifold is related to an object’ is of the faculty of understanding. Note also that Kant thought of the faculty of understanding as the faculty of rules; it provides the rules by which the manifold is related to an object. This relation, however, is finally enacted by the faculty of judgement, the faculty of ‘subsuming under rules, i.e., of determining whether something stands under a given rule […] or not’. But what form does this judgement take?

To begin with, I would say that Deleuze’s use of the term ‘recognition’ here is slightly misleading as it is in this relating of a manifold to an object that a cognition is formed in the first instance. The indefinite replications of this relation would be recognition (how many times I observe that this is a table, this is an apple etc.). Furthermore, Deleuze overlooks the slight distinction Kant makes, in that understanding is not solely responsible for this relation; it does not finalise the cognition itself. This is undertaken as a sort of double act between the faculties

51 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, 12.
52 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 268.
of understanding and judgement. The understanding provides the rules by which the relation is made, and then judgement applies them.

This is important to note because it means that judgement does not provide the rules it applies. Judgement lies in the assignment of names. It can do this either correctly or incorrectly and it has no discretion over what constitutes the correct or incorrect. But the emphasis Deleuze places on re-cognition is also important because, moreover, it highlights the distinction between a representation and knowledge as such. As Deleuze says, knowledge implies going beyond synthesis, linking the manifold to a unity of consciousness: the ‘I’. But, as discussed in Chapter Two, our experience of the ‘I’ is exactly that, an empirical experience formed in the same way as all others, and this unity is only implied by the perceived consistency of this perception. Time and again, however, Beckett will present us with a deeply inconsistent consciousness to highlight this perception as being merely that, and to highlight that any truth of a unified subject is beyond our ability to know, to cognise as such. Beckett appears to respond to an unasked question about what this cognition-automata of a consciousness is able to truly know, or to achieve, and his response is a resounding ‘little or nothing’. The more closely judgement is looked at, the more hollow the idea that it represents our autonomy and independence as individuals (not to mention our individuality in itself) becomes. The exclusively nominal differences between the figures of Bam, Bem, Bim, and Bom seem to reflect this. This is because each ‘B’ does not represent a different subject of interrogation; rather they are alternative components of the same ‘V+B’ consciousness interrogating itself. No matter the number of alterations, permutations and repetitions within the interrogative automaton, the system remains closed and nothing is added. No new information is uncovered and nothing is learned. The merely goes through the motions as long as it is able.

But to continue, the very possibility of knowledge exists inextricably from the block; the latter is the price we pay for the former, the incapacity that defines our capacity. Knowledge admits limitations in exchange for reliability. In a ‘rationalised’ post-Enlightenment world, reliability (and this is intimately related to usefulness) and value, when considered as properties of knowledge, are not merely deemed synonymous, but are effectively homogenised. Regarding objects or instances of knowledge, Kant makes very little in the way of value judgements, even of knowledge under his own definition. Beckett ultimately does make a kind of value judgement, but makes a very real distinction between value and reliability. In this way reliability becomes detached from any purpose and becomes a largely empty concept, really an irrelevance. For Beckett the reliability of the ‘activity’ of the subject reveals its impotence. Many of his late works are designed to dramatise precisely this revelation. Knowledge itself is
not the problem. Knowledge is everywhere; every moment of our reality is teeming with it. The problem is that, for this reason, the value of knowledge is fundamentally undermined; it is a debased currency. The particulars do not matter, and inquiry is pared down to the meaningless genera of ‘what’ and ‘where’. These are building blocks from which nothing can be built, yet they remain understood as such, and this accounts for the agonism contained in the asking of questions. In this context the subject and the universe are ‘given the works’, not simultaneously but identically, and this constitutes the central focus of What Where in particular. A statement is tautological. It is a representation of concepts which are themselves drawn from representations. These concepts only make sense if they already exist where they are received. Nothing actually changes as the result of a statement; communication is not creation. All a statement can do is indicate towards something that is or is not the case. A statement is chosen in judgement and recognised in judgement, both according to rules that do not belong to judgement. As answers come in the form of statements this leaves one to wonder what the meaning of a question could be.

An automaton is a closed system, predetermined both in its components and activity. Automation, along with interrogation, is a prominent feature of What Where. Automated interrogation in a closed system of finite subjects and terms can only glean so much, yet it has no end point. This is essentially the situation Beckett presents to us. It is important to note that this adds to the significance of Kant’s refutation of Descartes’ problematic idealism as discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation. When Descartes subjects the empirical world to radical doubt he also imbues it with a certain mystification or enchantment. This is either the result of the theological dimension he includes in his metaphysics or it is designed to accommodate this theological dimension; that is, we must doubt the reality of the empirical world so that we may allow the possibility of metaphysico-theological knowledge. For Kant, the reality of the empirical world is beyond doubt (though particular apprehensions of it are subject to error) and metaphysical knowledge is beyond possibility. Indeed, the perceived possibility metaphysical knowledge is itself illusory, let alone any perceived attainment of such knowledge. The world is demystified, disenchanted, but there is a price paid for this, as Adorno observes:

The demystification or disenchantment of the world […] is identical with a consciousness of being locked out, of a darkness in which we are enclosed […] the more the world in which we live, the world of experience, is commensurate with us, the less commensurate, the more
obscure and the more threatening the Absolute, of which we know that this world of experience is only a detail becomes.53

The image of ‘a darkness in which we are enclosed’ is one that Beckett presents to us time and again. A handful of figures, and rarely so many as that, contained within notably limited illumination, is an image Beckett used often and, correspondingly, it is of great interest here. The zone outside the illumination at first appears to take on the character of otherness, and so also elicits the fear of otherness. Beckett’s fractured mutterings, correspondingly, become something like the intra-subjective equivalent of the Old Norse sagas told by people who spent much of their time huddled around a fire and surrounded on all sides by a darkness containing countless unseen perils. Yet even here, these mutterings are not produced for the sake of comfort, but rather for a lack of alternatives for passing the time which is all there is to do. The fear of the Absolute was once the fear of damnation, but the solution was present in the belief in the possibility of salvation. But here where the Absolute lies in impenetrable darkness and so neither damnation nor salvation are applicable. The fear of the Absolute is really the fear that it has no reality and that, therefore, what has reality for us, the here and now, is unconditioned and meaningless. Dante’s influence on Beckett remains perceivable in that his narrators are confined within a kind of purgatory, but it is one without peril or aspiration, with neither the inferno at one end nor paradise at the other. There is instead merely a what and a where, and nothing left to tell. All that remains is the indefinitely repeated mutterings croaked forth in waiting for an end that never eventuates, for where there is no Absolute there is no possibility of absolution or of resolution. Thus, the ending never ends. An end is a temporal concept and has no meaning if time does not either. Yet it remains all there is to anticipate. The ridiculousness of this is something that Beckett joked about frequently in his more comical earlier work but by the time of What Where he no longer seems to find it funny.

Empirical knowledge is the matter from which we conceive of endings, and so this act too is meaningless in the manner described above. The arbitrarily organised material accident that is life disassociates and becomes nothing but dust. This is really what generates the terror of auto-perception. It is the condition that leaves our shallow known world as a contingency, and condemns identity to arbitrariness. For Adorno, the arbitrary automation of consciousness that is subject to the Kantian ‘block’ confirms ‘the chasm of the alienation of human beings from one another, and the alienation of human beings from the world of things’.54 This is an

53 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 110-1.
54 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 174.
inescapable difficulty associated with the subjective faculty of knowledge and it is the aspect by which Kant and Beckett’s work are most strongly comparable. The experience of auto-perception is terrifying because it is the constantly renewed confrontation with the reality that our entire capacity to comprehend is, by its very nature, incapable of explaining the possibility of comprehension itself.

Given Kant’s seating of knowledge within the subject it follows that epistemological limitations are wholly our own, as opposed to an externally imposed deprivation. This is a side effect of the ‘Copernican Revolution’ which entails ‘substituting the principle of a necessary submission of object to subject for the idea of a harmony between subject and object (final accord)’.

In this way, Kant distances himself from the traditional distinction between an illusory empirical world and the transcendental reality behind the illusion. Following from this, the traditional concept of wisdom, based on an ability to overcome the illusion becomes defunct. Beckett would no doubt have understood the significance of such a reversal, familiar as he was with Greek philosophy and those aspects of it continued by Schopenhauer.

Essentially, what this does is completely remodel our relationship with the constant problems of metaphysics. Rather than seeking knowledge, metaphysics concerns itself instead with the intelligibility of questions and the possibility of knowledge; the science of limitation. This transition is, of course, the general motivation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as per the statement from the preface quoted in Chapter One (see Ch. 1, n. 115).

Firstly, this dilemma is not dissimilar to the dilemma Beckett presents in *Three Dialogues*: the incapacity to express coupled with the obligation to express. It is with unintended humour that Kant declares that giving up the pursuit of knowledge beyond our capacity for reason ‘requires only a little self-denial’. It necessitates the most awkward and doubt-inducing task of the subjective faculty of knowledge: that of self-critique, the placing of an embargo on the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and thus permanently separating the self from its own origin. In Kantian terms, our existence (and by extension knowledge) are subject to an assertoric judgement, something that is actual but contingent. For Kant, reason pursues the apodictic judgement, the confirmation of necessity, but it can only find this confirmation among possible objects of experience and, thus, never manages to do so. This goes some way to explaining why such interrogatives as ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’ are absent from

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55 Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 12.
56 Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 12.
Nonetheless, the ambiguity remains as to whether the ‘V+B’ entity has considered and then discarded them as impossible, or whether it simply never occurred to it in the first place. The task issuing from ‘What?’ and ‘Where?’, a task doomed to remain uncompleted, is a regressive search for the unconditioned:

Reason, by following its own destiny, marches on and on, transcending its own finite conditions. And finally, so as not to end up in an infinite progression, it finds that it must somehow postulate the existence of a frontier in the shape of an ultimate cause, an ultimate form of existence, an ultimate absolute being in which everything can be anchored.60

The absolute remains in darkness. And so, at least in retrospect, the extent to which Enlightenment and humanist ideology adopted Kant appears rather odd. Kant’s turn to the subject emerges from a lack of alternatives after establishing the improvability of God, the necessary anchor to this progression. Humanity stands in the stead of God, not in ascension but in wholesale responsibility for its own weakness and isolation. This is neither a revolution nor an achievement. In the turn to the subject, no further capacities are discovered within it nor granted to it. Humanity’s aspirations are simultaneously, and identically, its delusions.

This search for fundamentals, and its stylistic reflection in minimalism, is one of the defining characteristics of Beckett’s oeuvre. So too is the anxiety over the viability of such fundamentals, and any meaning that may or may not follow from them.

And so we arrive at an impasse, and an unavoidable suspension of judgement. This suspension means precisely the inability to complete a cognition and thus achieve knowledge as such, as described above. Metaphysical knowledge is impossible. Knowledge pertains only to objects of possible experience.61 As I can only know what I draw from experience and represent to myself, all knowledge is mediated by the ‘I think’ that accompanies all my representations. The cogito tempers my empirical knowledge, thereby preventing me from unifying it with the transcendental totality, the ‘greater truth’.62 The cogito nullifies truth by mediating it, and while it amounts to no more than a featureless, opaque presence in our consciousness that we are insurmountably exiled from, we are never quite able to permanently

60 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 38-9.
61 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 264.
62 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 124.
shift if from view. The Kantian block is consciousness’s very own myth of Tantalus. My very ability to place myself in a world and know the objects that fill it is that which prevents me from explaining that world, its objects, my presence among them, and my ability to know them even on the level I do. My reality is a contingency:

What stands opposed to the concept of the given, namely the organization of mind to which something is given – is something that Kant himself regards as a kind of given – […] if we could […] transport ourselves outside the prison of our own mind, the organization of our mind, we might almost say the entire logic and the very mode of our relations, our inescapable relations to objects of whatever sort would itself be contingent ones […] an ultimate given beyond which we cannot go.

We are trapped in our possible cognitions, which we know to be insufficient. Nothingness is a problem of cognitive limitation. That is to say, we do not encounter nothingness as such, an ontological nothing. Instead nothingness is really ignorance, a ‘nothing verifiable’. It is that which is above what Kant refers to as the ‘horizon’ of my imperfect cognition, the other side of the block. This is not a linguistic limitation as it precedes language. Nonetheless, this poses a significant problem for language, the problem of how to speak to nothingness without inadvertently bestowing something-ness upon it. A question can do this as much as an answer or a statement. Perhaps for this reason more than any other, Beckett undertook the counter-intuitive task of displaying the hollowness of the writer’s medium, the words themselves. But he never quite managed it as this hollowness, as with nothingness, can never be satisfactorily displayed or articulated but only indicated towards.

So, we have a reality that is not quite nothing but sufficient only that we may know how much we cannot know; ‘by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified. This I assert to be the manner in which Beckett conceives the relation between something and nothing. Nothingness does not haunt us. It is not the reality hiding behind an illusory empirical world. Nothingness does not represent the suspiciousness of empirical reality, but rather its contingent

63 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 174.
64 Adorno, Kant’s Critique, 17.
65 Kant, Blomburg Logic, 50-1.
actuality. This actuality is simply a continuous material accident, the only constant being the mere ability to apprehend it, the process is all that is permanent. Any attempt to build on this effectively formal existence is illusory and unsustainable. The flesh falls from the skeleton. The entire ‘life experience’, and the accumulative progress implied by the linear experience of time, leads to nothing that was not given in the beginning. The library is only dust. The process is everything, and so can only reach a point where it has nothing to do but repeat itself, compounding its failure with each repetition; this is the ‘bad infinity’ that Adorno sees in Beckett. But perhaps what best encapsulates this impasse is the moment Adorno describes as negative καιρός (kairos):

the need for progress is inextricable from its impossibility…without exception his [Beckett’s] response is violent. His work is the extrapolation of a negative καιρός. The fulfilled moment reverses into perpetual repetition that converges with desolation […] a paradoxical dynamic at a standstill. The narratives are marked as much by an objectively motivated loss of the object as by its correlative, the impoverishment of the subject.68

The application of negative kairos to Beckett is more complicated than a straightforward reversal or inversion of kairos, which is itself a politically highly-charged term referring to the individual’s relation to time. Varikas firstly explains how it is distinguished from χρονος (chronos), which is simply our common, quantitatively measured experience of time.69 Kairos, is a ‘more qualitative term with a subjective component. It applies to a time internally controlled and refers to moments rather than to process’.70 Kairos, for Adorno, is a moment filled with a sense of political opportunity and potential for action or even revolution.71 Whatever political dimension there is to kairos is only obliquely relevant to Beckett due precisely to its subjective component. Political action presumes the possibility of subjective action and evolution in general. Due to the subjective conditions discussed in the previous two chapters, Beckett depicts a subjectivity that cannot make this presumption. Ergo, negative kairos is not the moment of political inopportunity or inaction, but inopportunity and inaction

68 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 39. From this point forward I will render Καιρός in Latin characters.
69 Varikas, “The Utopian Surplus”, 102.
70 Varikas, “The Utopian Surplus”, 102.
71 Varikas, “The Utopian Surplus”, 102-3.
in general. The subjective component comes first and foremost, and is then applied to political action simply as a matter of extension. In other words, the weak, failing subject precedes action, and therefore the idea of a positive kairos is never really entertained in Beckett as he takes it as read that its promise could never possibly be fulfilled.

I would like then to focus specifically on the relation between the subject and negative kairos. This relates primarily to the perpetual repetition Adorno refers to here, and to the impoverishment by which we arrive at the chasm of alienation, from each other and the world things (which includes the self). Beckett consciously reveals the lie of aspiration. We lose the object because it becomes commensurate with the subject which is, as Adorno says, impoverished. Moreover, when Kant refers to the burden reason carries in ‘one species of its cognition’ (see Ch. 1, n. 115), he appears to be referring to the process of regressive causal deduction as instigated by the principle of sufficient reason that dictates that every effect has a cause. This cause shall be the effect of a prior cause and so on, and if we go back far enough we come to what is known as the uncaused cause or the unmoved mover or the prima ratio or, by some, as God. Or, as Kant puts it, reason demands that ‘If the conditioned is given, then the whole sum of conditions, and hence the absolutely unconditioned, is also given, through which alone the conditioned was possible’. 72

Kant offers these remarks while introducing the section in the Critique of Pure Reason that describes the antinomy of pure reason, as it is precisely this demand on the part of reason itself that leads to the antinomy, or upon which it is premised. The antinomy contains what Kant terms the four conflicts of transcendental ideas, which we may understand as four fundamental ideas regarding the conditions of our existence, namely: the existence or not of an absolutely necessary being; the finitude or not of the universe; the freedom or not of the will; and whether or not composite things consist of simple parts. 73 The first of these four conflicts is of chief importance, as it represents the end-point of the principle of sufficient reason’s application, or rather the lack thereof as it ‘ends’ without resolution. That is to say, as regards knowing the conditions of our existence (and with it discerning any meaning or purpose thereof), reason is quite simply insufficient. Thus, cut adrift from our conditions, knowable reality is reduced to the here and now, the what and where. Yet we cannot just leave it there; the conditions must be known but can never be known. This accounts for the agonism of reason, an agonistic and torturous nature of consciousness prominently reflected in What Where. The universe and consciousness (keeping in mind that at a certain point, according to Adorno, these

72 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 461.
73 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 465.
become commensurate) are ‘given the works’ until they confess. But just as with the various ‘Bs’, at a certain point the universe has no answers for us and, furthermore, we are no longer certain what we are asking. What we have is the logic or the form of a question and a speculative idea of the corresponding form of an answer. This can be seen in the empty specificity at work in Bam’s interrogation:

BAM: Well?
BOM: [Head bowed throughout.] Nothing.
BAM: He didn’t say anything?
BOM: No.
BAM: You gave him the works?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: And he didn’t say anything?
BOM: No.
BAM: He wept?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: Screamed?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: Begged for mercy?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: But didn’t say anything?
BOM: No.
V: Not good.
I start again.
BAM: Well?
BOM: Nothing.
V: Good.
BAM: He didn’t say it?
BOM: No.
BAM: You gave him the works?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: And he didn’t say it?

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BOM: No.
BAM: He wept?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: Screamed?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: Begged for mercy?
BOM: Yes.
BAM: But he didn’t say it?
BOM: No.
BAM: Then why stop?
BOM: He passed out.
BAM: And you didn’t try to revive him?
BOM: I tried.
BAM: Well?
BOM: I couldn’t.75

First, at this point it is unclear as to whom Bom is being instructed to give the works. Second, and more important, is the transition from the term ‘anything’ to the term ‘it’. From this it becomes apparent that when Bam asks ‘He didn’t say anything?’ he does not mean the same thing as ‘He said nothing?’, but rather something closer to ‘He didn’t say just anything?’. This allows for the possibility that this ‘he’—pointedly unidentified—may have said something specific and thus Bom’s answer of ‘No’ remains ambiguous. At this point V starts again, replacing the ambiguous term ‘anything’ with the more specific term ‘it’. Despite this the situation remains ambiguous for us the audience as we do not know what this ‘it’ refers to. V thus represents a kind of reflective consciousness, observing and questioning the workings of the mind’s rational processes, as though it is the voice of critical thought itself. Reflective consciousness, as such, is unable to alter the nature of the functional mind, the mind of faculties, or alter it in terms of capacity or resources. Its interventions are limited to a redirection of objectives and the ability to start and stop the process. The objectives, however, remain unattainable and, crucially, unalterable. Thus the result is always the same, as lamented on by Arsene, the outgoing manservant in Watt:

if I could begin it all over again, knowing what I know now, the result would be the same. And if I could begin again a third time, knowing what I would know then, the result would be the same. And if I could begin it all over again a hundred times, knowing each time a little more than the time before, the result would always be the same, and hundredth life as the first, and the hundred lives as one.\textsuperscript{76}

Such themes as changelessness and futility are thus two of several that appear throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, and that he focuses on with growing intensity. The negative kairos that Adorno speaks of in \textit{Aesthetic Theory} seems to be a development upon the ‘infinite catastrophe’ that he speaks of in \textit{Trying to Understand} Endgame; it is a state of constant upheaval that is never complete, of stagnant alteration without change.\textsuperscript{77} The state of infinite catastrophe centres on the problem of the autonomy of the social, historical and, in particular, aesthetic subject while the individual is caught in an unending cycle of upheaval.\textsuperscript{78}

For clarity’s sake I would like to distinguish between this sense of aesthetics and the broader one that Kant describes in his transcendental aesthetic, where he presents his theory regarding the foundations of our sensibility in general.\textsuperscript{79} It is worth reiterating, though, that the subject as we are able to properly cognise it – the subject of the \textit{cogito} – is an object and thus does not precede sensibility itself.

But as discussed above, the subject of the negative kairos precedes the historical, social, and political subject. It precedes the aesthetic subject in the sense of the artistic subject that reflects our autonomy (or, as in Modernism, the lack thereof) within the social, historical, and political realm. The state of negative kairos, then, precedes catastrophe – in the sense of an upheaval – as it pertains to a subject that never attains the cohesion, completion, or stability required in order to \textit{be overturned}. This constitutes the subject’s catastrophe – in the alternative sense of disaster – and it never desists. This is what I take Adorno to have been referring to as ‘catastrophe that consists solely in the fact that it never takes place’.\textsuperscript{80}

From the time of \textit{Watt}, until the time we get to \textit{What Where}, the most salient change is the dismissal of the notion that a little more is learned with each repetition, even if it makes no difference. Instead the position is that nothing is learned. The beginning and the end are

\textsuperscript{76} Beckett, \textit{Watt}, 47.
\textsuperscript{77} Adorno, “Trying to Understand Endgame”, 273.
\textsuperscript{78} Holt, “Catastrophe, Autonomy and the Future of Modernism”, 263-6.
\textsuperscript{79} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 172-3.
\textsuperscript{80} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, 202.
identical. Not only does nothing change, but the concept of change is empty. This much is expressed in the conclusion to *What Where*, as V expresses:

V: Good.
   It is winter.
   Time passes.
   In the end I appear.
   Reappear
   [BAM enters as w, halts at 3 head bowed.]

V: Good.
   I am alone.
   In the present as were I still.
   It is winter.
   Without journey.
   Time passes.
   That is all.
   Make sense who may.
   I switch off.
   [Light off P.
    Pause.
    Light off V.]\(^{81}\)

As a side note, the ‘switch off’ here seems to be a deliberate re-working of the ‘switch off’ at the beginning of *Rough for Theatre II*.\(^{82}\) But, to resume, it is clear that from V’s statement ‘I appear’ followed by the appearance of Bam that this is an instance of apperception; that is, V and Bam are two parts of a divided consciousness as described in Chapter Two. This self-awareness is reiterated in the statement ‘I am alone’. The statement ‘In the present as were I still’ is, however, somewhat more complicated. It can be read as meaning ‘In the present as though I were still’, and this evokes a sense of frozenness. This, however, is a difficult ambiguity as stillness could refer both to time and space, and being frozen in one is not the same as being frozen in the other. Rather, it is more intelligible to read it as ‘In the present as I was, still’, as the first person form of ‘as you were’. With this, V understands himself to have


always been in the present, with the past and future having no reality, not only because they cannot be experienced *qua* past and future, but because the concepts of the past and future invoke alteration which stands in contrast to stillness. Time passes, and that is all it does. It changes nothing because there is nothing to change; the start and end point are indistinct and so it follows that there is no journey to be made. With the words ‘Make sense who may. I switch off’, Beckett is himself speaking to the audience almost directly, as though weary of the pretence of creating something meaningful in the face of so much absurdity and hollowness. Frustration of this kind, the frustration of an artist with the meekness of his own medium, which in Beckett mirrors the frustration of the mind with its own meekness in the face of the universe, is constantly seething away beneath the surface. This is one instance where this frustration bursts forth albeit in a more resigned, almost peaceful manner. A less peaceful example would be the simple but effective ‘Fuck life’ from 1980’s *Rockaby*.83

Frustration is the effect of thwarted initiative. Beckett’s frustration expresses the final impermeableness of the in-actionable. One can also feel this palpable frustration in a letter to his friend and confidante, Barbara Bray, to whom he bemoaned that ‘all the verbs have died’.84 This chapter has explored how the Kantian ‘block’ can be seen to condition this situation, and how it subsequently influenced Beckett’s depiction thereof. But as a final point in this chapter it is worth returning to, and reiterating the significance of, Adorno’s negative *kairos*. When Adorno said that Beckett was ‘correct that the need for progress is inextricable from its impossibility. The gesture of walking in place and the end of *Godot*, which is the fundamental motif of the whole of his work, reacts precisely to this situation’,85 he could not have fully realised how apt this would prove to be. This motif appears again and again; the rocking to-and-fro in *Rockaby*, the regimented pacing back and forth described in *Footfalls*,86 the constrained geometry of the ‘given area’ in *Quad*,87 to name just a few examples published after *Aesthetic Theory*. This fundamental motif seems to have gained even starker focus in Beckett’s later work. Adorno’s negative *kairos* is so incisive a piece of analysis that in direct response little more can be said of it, other than that it only became yet more apt to the works that Adorno, unfortunately, did not live to enjoy. Indirectly, however, much can be extrapolated from and connected to it, including much of this dissertation. This will continue to some extent

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in the next chapter, dealing primarily as it does not only with the inevitability, but also the oftentimes necessity, of non-assertion.
Chapter Four

‘By Way of Neither’: Beckett, Nihilism, and Skepticism

It is the lack of faith in the subject as discussed in the previous two chapters that leaves us with the stimulating task of discussing the issue of nihilism in Beckett’s work. In the entire history of discussing nihilism, satisfaction has been perennially absent. Including Beckett in this discussion has done nothing to alleviate this condition. The impossibility of a solution, or of satisfaction, seems to be written into the problem itself. It is also impossible to avoid the problem of nihilism when discussing the greater or predating problem of human limitation. The latter begets the former. The problem lies within us and we, for better or worse, remain.

In Chapter One, several reasons were given as to why the general lack of Kantian philosophy in the study of Beckett is surprising. I contend that the frequency with which nihilism has been discussed in Beckett – likely as high as with any other author – may happily be added to these reasons. To that end, the primary focus of this chapter is to discuss and, to an extent reappraise, the issue of nihilism in Beckett. This discussion will be centred on the argument that Kantian critical philosophy is not just helpful for the understanding of nihilism in Beckett, but is in fact of fundamental importance or even necessity. There are two basic reasons for this to be discussed in more detail below.

First: one needs to understand Kantian critical philosophy to understand the problem of nihilism and how the very idea of it originated. This is because, as Vardoulakis explains, the concept of nihilism originates from a debate between Jacobi and Fichte regarding the fate of the subject and of reason specifically post-Kant.¹

Second: that when we consider Kant’s relation to the origin of nihilism, in addition to an understanding of Kant’s influence on Beckett generally, it can be seen that Beckett is not truly nihilistic. By way of demonstrating this I will undertake a close reading of The Unnamable as it is, to my mind, the archetypical ‘Beckettian’ text and as such one of the most heavily discussed of Beckett’s works. This makes it an ideal candidate for the above proposed

¹ Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 27; Beiser, The Fate of Reason, 44.
reappraisal. In addition to this I will intermittently refer to the much later text, *Worstward Ho*, as there are insights to be found in their comparison that are of particular value to this topic.

The first step, however, is the elusive task of explaining what is meant by nihilism. Weller argues that ‘there is no nihilism as such; there are only specific deployments of the term’.² This is not only because of the number of contexts in which nihilism may be present (the concept is nothing if not malleable), but also because everyone has their own objective in mind when using it, and that objective is usually the indictment of someone or something with which one disagrees. In this respect it is interesting to note that the accusation of nihilism is usually accompanied by an accusation of egoism. I shall take the increasingly rare step of arguing that to being a nihilist is not something for which one should be reprimanded. To make this argument, however, is not to advocate for nihilism. Therein lies an important distinction that at some point our culture developed a tendency to overlook. There is a difference between an unwillingness to commit to particular beliefs, or a belief system, and a disavowal of belief itself and all objects of belief. Nevertheless the two are forced together under the blanket term of nihilism. We live in an age where there is, ever more commonly, no distinction made between restraint in judgement and a lack of conviction, and furthermore no distinction between such a lack and cowardice. So it is that defining nihilism in the first place is so often an unstable and frequently rhetorical task. Nonetheless let us attempt to set down some basic definitions before proceeding.

Weller points to Crosby’s description of five different basic categories of nihilism: political; moral; epistemological; cosmic; and existential. For the purposes of this discussion we may dispense with the political and moral forms. Epistemological nihilism takes two forms. Firstly, the idea that truth is ‘entirely relative to particular individuals or groups’ and, secondly, the idea that semantic intelligibility is ‘entirely relative to self-contained, incommensurable conceptual schemes’.³

The typical example of epistemological nihilism is taken to be the work of Nietzsche.⁴ Provisionally we may say that Beckett would have taken a dim view of the first form (in the sense that such relative truth would not be worthy of the name), but a kinder view of the second owing to his documented attitude towards language.

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Cosmic nihilism takes the universe to be meaningless, being (in one combination or another) ultimately unintelligible and unsupportive of any and all attempts at evaluation.\(^5\) The temptation is to declare that Beckett adopted this view quite strongly. This is not unfounded, but is ultimately an overstatement.

Finally, there is the relatively simple existential nihilism, which adjudges human life to be void of all purpose and meaning. This, prima facie, would seem the form of nihilism we would ascribe to Beckett first and foremost. The difficulty lies in how we identify the source of such nihilism. On the one hand, existential nihilism could be a logical conclusion following from the embrace of epistemological and cosmic nihilism. That is to say, we could interpret human pointlessness as resulting from a wider universal pointlessness. On the other hand, one could declare human existence as meaningless even if the universe is not. We are, after all, impermanent and altogether better at destruction than creation. Our entire existence amounts to a miniscule dot in the chronology of matter. Quite simply, the universe has never required us, and it remains unchanged whether we comprehend it or not.

Beckett work, however, is not quite consistent with any of these interpretations. His extreme skepticism, often attributed to the influence of Descartes, is nonetheless mistaken for such nihilism. But is there not a difference between believing that nothing has been established, and believing in established nothingness? Furthermore, following from the previous analysis of the presence of the Kantian cogito in Beckett, Beckett does not appear to believe that nothing has been established, merely pitifully little. Scarcity and absence are obviously not the same thing. The confusion seems to be the result of Beckett’s tendency to reduce the interpretation of reality to this choice and then express a preference for the latter. This is a prospect that persists throughout Beckett’s work but is perhaps most extensively pursued in The Unnamable. Early in the novel its narrator states, ‘Yes, it is to be wished, to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am’,\(^6\) and goes on to express his hope for ‘the statement begin that will dispose of me’.\(^7\) As will be explored in more detailed below, much of the novel depicts the narrator’s search for the statement that will bring about his end, a search that continues right up to the end of the text and, implicitly, beyond.

Beckett, to restate, was not a nihilist, despite his apparent interest in (or at least proximity to) the topic. He is reported to have received his characterisation as a nihilist with palpable annoyance, as evidenced in statements such as ‘I simply cannot understand why some

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\(^7\) Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 296.
people call me a nihilist. There is no basis for that’, ⁸ and ‘Negation is no more possible than affirmation’. ⁹ Nonetheless, Beckett’s work falls inescapably yet quite problematically alongside (as opposed to within) the complex topic of nihilism and the modern subject. Specifically, we are faced with the question of how Beckett’s work relates to a version of this topic that was shaped by Kant and Adorno in particular, and what Beckett’s work may add to the topic, owing to its access to forms of representation not truly available to the philosopher.

So, what then makes Beckett appear nihilistic? What insight does Beckett’s depiction of the subject, consciousness, and knowledge provide us into the problem of nihilism? And what aspect of Kant’s critical philosophy affected Beckett in such a way as to lend it this appearance? To answer this, I would like to return to the suspension of judgement, or rather, skepticism. Extreme skepticism that admits nothing is not the same thing as nihilism. In-admission, or non-assertion, is not the same thing as the positive assertion of nothing or the negation of anything. Beckett clearly believed in the reality of failure, and you cannot believe in failure as a nihilist. There can be no failure where there is nothing, as failure means something was not completed, and to be incomplete is not the same thing as to not be at all. What remains is the space to interpret the latter as preferable to the former, as Beckett chooses to do with such remarks as ‘All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught’, ¹⁰ ‘drowned in dreams and burning to be gone’, ¹¹ and ‘Better than nothing! Is it possible?’ ¹² Preferences, also, do not fall within the purview of the nihilist.

Beyond these features what marks Beckett as a skeptic in the Kantian sense, more than anything else, is not the simple awareness of uncertainty but the awareness of a lack of means to achieve certainty. To be clear, in this context certainty refers to that of the transcendental conditions of being, consciousness, and knowledge, as discussed primarily in Chapter One. This is opposed to empirical knowledge, of which we are able to be certain, but which is ultimately of negligible or at least questionable significance due to the uncertainty over its conditions. In The Unnamable, the narrator’s ruminations are characterised by a hesitance to speak beyond immediate, empirical experience, for example:

My eyes being fixed always in the same direction I can only see, I shall not say clearly, but as clearly as visibility permits, that which

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¹⁰ Beckett, Worstward Ho, 115.
¹¹ Beckett, Krapp’s Last Tape, 222.
¹² Beckett, Endgame, 121.
takes place immediately in front of me…For the visibility, unless it be the state of my eyesight, only permits me to see what is close beside me. I may add that my seat would appear to be somewhat elevated, in relation to the surrounding ground, if ground is what it is. Perhaps it is water or some other liquid. With the result that, in order to obtain the optimum view of what takes place in front of me, I should have to lower my eyes a little. But I lower my eyes no more. In a word, I only see what appears immediately in front of me, I only see what appears close beside me, what I best see I see ill.\textsuperscript{13}

This places the Unnamable within the bounds of the Kantian ‘block’ as previously described. With this comes the sense of the worthlessness or meaninglessness attributed to immediate experience, alienated as we are from its absolute conditions. Worthlessness and meaninglessness, however, are not evidence of nothingness, and nor is the act of judging anything as worthless or meaningless a nihilistic act. On the contrary, these are labels we attach to \textit{some}-thing. When we say that something is meaningless, what we indicate is a lack of significance. To attach no significance to being is not to deny being. This is not a nihilistic action. There can be no worth where the possibility of worthlessness has been precluded. Those who mistake restraint in the assigning of value for nihilism, who dogmatically insist on the presence of value prior to inspection, imbue the world entire with worthlessness. This action I would call annihilation, in which judgement or indeed consciousness itself is applied in such a way as to make the concepts of somethingness, meaning or worth unintelligible and non-applicable. This is somethingness pursued in such a way as to bestow nothingness. It is exactly this kind of pursuit that Beckett rejects entirely. This is positivism and idealism turned unknowingly violent, and their violence is all the more vehement due to their belief that they are incapable of intending it. As Weller states, ‘it is precisely when nihilism is taken to have been overcome that it is at its most extreme’.\textsuperscript{14} And in idealism’s and positivism’s presumptions of meaning, they also presume their enemy (nihilism) to have been overcome. The result is annihilation, an active, radicalised form of nihilism that completely undermines the avowed intentions of those who had turned it loose.

So the question, therefore, is: what form or forms of nihilism are to be resisted, and in what sense does Beckett’s work constitute such a response? It may be that nihilism is not to be

\textsuperscript{13} Beckett, \textit{The Unnamable}, 291.

\textsuperscript{14} Weller, \textit{Modernism and Nihilism}, 54.
resisted, and that anything that provokes resistance is not truly nihilistic. And it may be that
Beckett is not truly to be understood in terms of a response to this problem. Ultimately, this
will lead us to a discussion of Adorno’s fascination with Beckett, but to get there we must first
come to a particular understanding of Beckett’s more specifically aesthetic project. I would
suggest it is impossible to separate Beckett’s aesthetics from whatever extra-aesthetic
significance it may have. Adorno knew as well as anyone that art often deals with the topic of
nothingness better than philosophy, being altogether more comfortable with it, and Beckett was
certainly more comfortable than most.

Adorno states that, ‘Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it
developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other;
it is the process that transpires with its other’.\textsuperscript{15} Art is the powerless developed out of the
powerful, which tolerates art only insofar as it reconsolidates the legitimacy of the powerful in
one way or another. The nihilist is not tolerated by the powerful, and is apologised for by the
powerless, because power does not thrive where populist ideals are not supported, sincerely or
otherwise. Art is allowed to be considered the venue for unqualified freedom of expression
precisely because it is not:

For absolute freedom in art […] comes into contradiction with the
perennial unfreedom of the whole. In it the place of art became
uncertain. The autonomy it achieved, after having freed itself from the
cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity.
As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered.
Drawn from the ideal of humanity, art’s constituent elements withered
by art’s own law of movement. Yet art’s autonomy remains irrevocable.
All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function […] are doomed.
Indeed, art’s own autonomy shows signs of blindness […] It is
uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete
emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions.\textsuperscript{16}

Severed from its ritualistic origin, the purpose of art, such as it is, was until recently to
preserve and celebrate our humanity. Under the banner of Romanticism it continued in this task
unabated until the cultural and ideological crisis following the First World War. The problem

\textsuperscript{15} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, 3.
\textsuperscript{16} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, 3.
is not, as Adorno claims, that society has become less humane, but rather that humanity has become more damaged and hollow. Instead of declaring that we need art to function as a conservatory of the humane, we must instead ask why society required such a conservatory, unless of course it intended to affront that very humanness with the rest of its endeavours. Art becomes itself in autonomy. Art’s powerlessness is written into the very terms of this autonomy. Autonomy without power is not autonomy, and so the premise of an art without power implodes in the very same moment of its inception. Yet the reality of this (and the unfreedom that accompanies it) must not be revealed. Neither the trauma Adorno was responding to, the trauma of mid-20th century fascism and the Holocaust, nor the character of the epoch (that is, the post-War era) that has followed it are inhuman. It is not in idealism but rather in nihilism that humanity may resist its ‘inhumaness’.

If humanity is to mean anything as a concept, it must be pursued under the suspicion that there is a very real chance that it means nothing at all, and indeed never has. Those who have held such a suspicion have traditionally stood to one side, voluntarily or otherwise, and carried their lantern by daytime. The unfortunate truth about Beckett’s humour is that it has been reduced to mere comic relief, where once it was an aesthetically integral aspect of his early work, and theoretically inseparable from its tragedy, with which it shares a common source. Rather than appreciating the relationship between Beckett’s comedy and tragedy, and the skill with which they are woven together, the audience demands the comedy for the sake of its own comfort. As is the case with many things in the history of consumerism, things that were once considered luxuries come to be demanded, and their value forgotten along with the hardship of their absence. More and more the way Beckett is performed demonstrates the cultural repression of negativity that Adorno had observed occurring in his time:

The darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational: radically darkened art. What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its negativity is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn.  

17 Diogenes the Cynic, Sayings and Anecdotes, 19. To clarify, note that, as none of Diogenes the Cynics writings survives, this refers to the account of his famous lantern remark given by 3rd century historian, Diogenes Laertius. Diogenes the Cynic is, however, listed as the author of the text cited here.
18 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 3.
Amid all the talk of art’s redundancy, the simple notion that art is fundamentally a reactive exercise is forgotten. It is an activity, by definition preceded by life and the living. The very existence of art refutes the claims of its enemies. The neo-liberal pragmatist’s humanist vision of happiness, plenty and (above all) freedom for all cannot abide the aesthetic sphere, as it houses the nihilist. The existence of radically darkened art belies the promise of this ‘humanist’ vision. Art has become the flotsam of the wreck that is the current hegemonic notion of freedom. Scar tissue will always appear insignificant to those who inflict the wound, and the possibility of art has been reduced to being the scar tissue of freedom. Art can only impotently represent the problem of unfreedom, and this is inclusive of the limitations in its own resources; that is, its ability to demonstrate the autonomy or freedom of the subject and, in so doing, ratify the human and human worth. When Adorno says that ‘Poetry retreated into what abandons itself unreservedly to the process of disillusionment. It is this that constitutes the irresistibility of Beckett’s work’, 19 he was not simply referring to this anxiety, but also to the depth of Beckett’s achievement in response to it. Art’s transition from romanticism, its loss of faith in its ability to create or indeed merely communicate meaning, eventually became a loss of faith in the existence of faith in our ability to access meaning altogether. Samuel Beckett’s transition from his early work to his archetypical ‘Beckettian’ work presents a kind of microcosm of this process. Beckett himself was perfectly conscious of this, as Knowlson recounts:

> while attempting to define his debt to Joyce [Beckett stated]: “I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one’s material […] I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.” 20

From the 1938 novel, *Murphy* onwards, Beckett began exploring an aesthetic based on the depletion of expression, designed to reflect the depletion of confidence in what we may confidently state. In one sense, this is the story of one author finding their voice. In broader sense this is, in retrospect, one of the key voices of mid-to-late 20th century literature divesting himself of a Modernist tradition that had had its day, and with which he had never been particularly comfortable. 21 This new aesthetic, which he developed in *Texts for Nothing*,

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20 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 319.
Molloy, and Malone Dies, found its first mature expression in The Unnamable. In this new aesthetic, Beckett quite consciously achieved a form of expression the aesthetic sphere had previously considered to be self-undermining:

He’s [Joyce is] tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance. There seems to be a kind of esthetic [sic] axiom that expression is achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that was always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.22

Notice here a certain ontological character to this statement, in referring to a zone of being. I take Beckett’s use of the word ‘zone’ to mean something closer to ‘way’ or ‘manner’. For Beckett, the artist’s manner of being can no longer be one based on a belief in a genuine capacity to create, to express, to make statements. The artist must reflect that our reality lies in quite the opposite zone. I would argue that Beckett’s aesthetic of depletion, which originally seemed destructive to art, may now be its only possibility. Badiou understands this to be the direction taken by 20th century art in general, the path of destruction and subtraction.23 For Beckett, however, this is about much more than art wishing to ‘exhibit its own process’24, as this exhibition refers more to the possibility of expression and statement. While this is definitely a concern for Beckett, it is a concern arising from the more fundamental problems of subjectivity and cognition, as discussed throughout this dissertation. While I have used the terms ‘destruction’ and ‘subtraction’ (and others like them), I intend them in a more general sense than Badiou’s quite particular and weighted sense. Beckett subtracts in that he pares down his expressions to focus on the essential or the ‘residual’.25 This is similar – though not to be taken as identical – to Badiou’s sense of subtracting ‘of and […] through language’.26 Beckett destroys in that he practises a sort of disillusionment, implicitly dissolving or undermining that which he deems untruthful – as opposed to simply bypassing it – in order to arrive at the essential expression. This is consistent with Badiou’s assertion that Beckett’s writing was

23 Badiou, The Century, 54; Ling, Badious Reframed, 23.
26 Power and Toscano, “An Introduction to Badiou’s Beckett”, xxv.
‘governed by a severe principle of economy.’ \(^{27}\) Moreover, this is true at least in regard to Beckett’s style or process. There is, however, a point of contention here over what this economy is for.

As I have argued, this essential expression is a vision of a human subject based on weakness, impoverishment, and failure. Badiou associates this – and, with it, Beckett – with an art that is ‘starkly anti-humanist’. Though I have argued that Beckett was not a humanist, that is altogether different from his being specifically opposed to humanism, let alone starkly so, and thus I cannot but consider this a mischaracterisation. I will discuss this further below, but to do that it is first necessary to discuss how Beckett pushes through the aesthetic question of expression and towards this ‘zone of being’.

In *The Unnamable*, the aesthetic of depletion is expressed through the narrator’s search for a position beyond negation, a statement. Propositions are posited and soon negated, and this begins with the opening sentences: ‘Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning’. \(^{28}\) Further into the opening passage, this seemingly unwitting contradiction is revealed as the commencement of a particular *modus operandi*:

> 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. I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means. Can one be ephetic otherwise than unawares? I don’t know. \(^{29}\)

Beckett’s pursuit of an aesthetic of depletion is clearly the result of more than an exclusively aesthetic consideration. Notice the intensity of interest in the notion of aporia indicated in this passage. Furlani reads this as a typical Beckettian joke, explaining that ‘if one may only be ephetic unawares, then not to know so proves one to be ephetic. Thus the Beckettian narrator may slyly affirm in the teeth of negation, rehabilitating while seemingly subverting himself’. \(^{30}\)

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maieutic Socratic method. For Socrates, this was a somewhat rhetorical movement designed to test the knowledge (or, more likely, lack of knowledge) if his interlocutor. In *The Unnamable*, however, the narrator’s ‘interlocuter’ is the narrator himself. Formally, the method employed by the narrator retains a somewhat Socratic character, but the objectives of the method are more in line with Kantian critique. In this way the interrogation is something more like a self-critique of consciousness as discussed in the previous chapter. The narrator may claim not to know what aporia means, but is perfectly aware of its complexities and implications, and so displays a paradoxically unwitting wisdom. Is a pure and simple aporia a contradiction in terms? Is an affirmation that may be negated in an utterance invalidated only in the event of that utterance? In such a case, is negation synonymous with invalidation itself? Or is such an immediately negatable affirmation invalid before the fact of its negation? It is easy to see how, from this, one may conclude that the utterances mean nothing, even if (or, indeed, precisely because) they are all we have to go on. But as a result of this very situation, conclusions are deeply problematic. So, how then to proceed? In a word, uncertainly:

With the yesses and the noes it is different, they will come back to me as I go along and how, like a bird, to shit on them all without exception. The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak, I shall never be silent. Never.

Amusingly enough, this last passage is followed by a break in the text. The humour Beckett found in the – often contradictory – experience of consciousness largely accounts for the reputation as an absurdist that was thrust upon him primarily by Martin Esslin. The issue of Beckett and absurdism is of no particular interest here, and it has been brought up only for the sake of observing that there is a difference between absurdity and contradiction. Contradiction is not itself illogical, but is rather an entirely logic-based proposition. Failing to recognise contradiction is illogical, and proceeding from such a failure may be absurd. But

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Beckett does not do this. Behind the jokes his work is profoundly logical and intensely focused on reason. So it is that his critique of consciousness focuses (as Kant’s does) on the ultimately contradictory or antinomic nature of reason. In the above passage, and in countless others, the Unnamable approaches the brink of quietism before withdrawing and in doing so emphasises the aesthetic danger of Beckett’s project: to speak of things of which one cannot speak, to admit at all that are things of which we cannot speak. The fact that Beckett has the Unnamable, and many of his other speakers, continue regardless, is not a humanist or idealist resistance to nothingness, nor a nihilistic embrace of same. It is based rather on a paradoxically confounded yet incisive view of thought itself.

Moreover, Beckett’s struggle with the language of affirmation and negation point to an extra-linguistic set of criteria, according to which we affirm or negate. Yet as language is the medium of thought, how else do we access such criteria, but through speaking? In this way language comes to be burdened with the responsibility of fulfilling the ontological need felt by the opponents of nihilism, though without concurrently being furnished with the means to do so. Beckett, while not a nihilist, is not an opponent thereof, and thus does not feel this need, and should not be burdened with such a responsibility. If negation is no more possible than affirmation, it is because they are both equally burdened by this ontological need, a burden of proof if you like, and both fail to carry it.

Kant and Beckett’s respective critiques of reason work from a similar notion of skepticism. This notion asserts a kind of poverty in our way of knowing, an assertion which is in part responsible for provoking accusations of nihilism towards both Kant and Beckett in the past. It is strange that this accusation of nihilism, particularly in Kant, is linked to an accusation of egoism, given that this assertion of poverty follows from ‘Kant’s famous line that the “transcendental idealist” is an “empirical realist”’. This in no sense appears to support the case for egoism, for human potency, to the extent that advocates of the human have often ignored this aspect of Kant’s critique. According to Adorno:

Admirers of the critic of pure reason, and of his attempt to find reasons for experience, were deaf to this admission of bankruptcy: that the immeasurable strain of that critique was ἀδιάφορον with respect to the content of experience.

35 Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, 61.
36 Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, 72.
37 Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, 72.
The problem of nihilism does not concern the admission or denial of empirical reality and knowledge, but rather the affirmation or negation of the possibility of an explanation for it. Both Kant and Beckett admit empirical reality, and the possibility of empirical knowledge. However, they do not declare that it means nothing, or that it does (let alone must) mean something. It simply is what it is. Moreover, while acknowledging the limited nature of human reason, both Beckett and Kant maintain their skepticism regarding the possibility or impossibility for an ultimate explanation for knowledge. This is in keeping with the very same acknowledgement of human reason’s limitations, as it follows that judgements of that very reason regarding its origin and purpose can only be relied on up to a point. Nihilism goes beyond such a point. It asserts impossibility and meaninglessness where assertoric judgement cannot be made with any finality. Beckett’s epistemological and teleological despondency is just that and nothing further: despondency. Hopelessness and nihilism, while easily and often intermingled, are not the same thing. Nihilism seems to be little more than a negative attempt to wrench sense out of the senselessness, beyond the limits of reason, where positive belief systems have been found wanting. The premise, however, is common: that few are sincerely willing to live in perpetual uncertainty, and with the despondency that seems to naturally follow along.

This brings us back to the debate from which nihilism emerged in the first place (see n. 1), a debate which, incidentally, Beckett was at least broadly familiar with. While there is little to be gained by going through the details of this debate, Vardoulakis provides a useful summary, beginning with observing that Jacobi centres the problem of nihilism around the ‘unavoidable epistemological dilemma’ of choosing between skepticism and faith, or rationalism and irrationalism. To further explain this dilemma, Vardoulakis writes that:

Fichte is a rationalist insofar as he trusts in reason and uses reason as the primary instrument of his system. Jacobi is an irrationalist insofar as he denies the primacy of reason. For Jacobi, a rationalist is forced to a skeptical position since it is impossible for reason to underpin reality as something other than itself – in other words, there is nothing but reason. To avoid nothingness, one has to turn to faith […] The choice then is between “chimerism,” mysticism, pietism on the one hand, and

38 Tonning, Abstract Drama, 183.
nihilism, atheism on the other; [...] For Jacobi, there is no third option that can be discovered within philosophy itself.⁴⁰

Evidently, Jacobi considered skepticism and nihilism to be either synonymous, or that the latter must follow necessarily from the former. Moreover, according to Crowe, Jacobi considered secular – or secularised – idealism to be identical to nihilism.⁴¹ The key to understanding what this has to do with Kant lies in first understanding Fichte’s specific response to this same prospect of nothingness. Jacobi would consider Fichte to have dogmatically and egotistically attempted to rationalise what cannot be accounted for in reason, that is, the absolute. This would, incidentally, explain why accusations of nihilism and egoism tend to accompany one another. But to resume, Jacobi attacks Fichte’s notion of the absolute I, which Fichte derived from his theory of ‘the conditions of the possibility of experience based on the conception of subjectivity’.⁴² This concept of the absolute I is essentially Fichte’s amendment to the Kantian transcendental subject, as described in Chapter One. Vardoulakis explains that Fichte expresses his absolute ‘I’ in three principles. First, that the I posits itself absolutely and is self-identical (I = I).⁴³ Second, that in doing so the not-I is also posited as a logical necessity.⁴⁴ Third, that the two limit each other and, in their doing so, the empirical self is formed.⁴⁵ Now, despite acknowledging that the first of these principles cannot be proved,⁴⁶ Fichte nonetheless proceeds as though it is known. Fichte, in his attempt to move beyond Kantian subjectivity is forced, despite maintaining the primacy of reason, to speculate beyond the bounds of rationalism. As a side note, this seems odd if one takes into account that Fichte (according to Hoeltzel) considered reason to be a purely practical faculty.⁴⁷ At any rate, for Fichte, the subject-object division attains a certain rigid determinateness whereas, as explored in the previous chapter, for Kant it is ultimately hazed and porous.

It is as though Jacobi considered his theological turn to be the more self-aware response to the limitations of human reason. Notice again, however, that the premise or the motivation of their respective responses is the same. They seek to avoid or, rather fill in, nothingness. They give a name to what cannot be named.

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⁴⁰ Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 28.
⁴² Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 29.
⁴³ Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 29.
⁴⁴ Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 29.
⁴⁵ Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 29.
⁴⁶ Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger, 29.
⁴⁷ Hoeltzel, “The Unity of Reason in Kant and Fichte”, 146.
It follows that the incessant questioning of the narrator in *The Unnamable* is not to be taken as an indication of any particular interest in the subject matter of his questions, or their answers. As he himself asserts, ‘And all these questions I ask myself. It is not in a spirit of curiosity. I cannot be silent. About myself I need know nothing’.\(^{48}\) This action is simply the automation of the mechanism of consciousness, functioning as it functions. It resumes, having no alternative.\(^{49}\) This is a consciousness that has no design or purposiveness behind its questioning, as this would presume a significance behind an answer as yet undiscovered. Beckett refuses to make this presumption. Again, nihilism is assertive. The withholding of assertions and of presumptions, as practised by Kant and Beckett, is mistakenly taken to be nihilistic. Following from the earlier discussion of the *cogito*, and specifically Kant’s refutation of Descartes, this withholding is simply the healthy skepticism of a consciousness that presumes nothing of the empirical data that is presented to it. This includes the said consciousness and its functions. Here in *The Unnamable*, we see another example of an image reminiscent of the Kantian *cogito*:

It would help me, since to me too I must attribute a beginning, if I could relate it to that of my abode. Did I wait somewhere for this place to be ready to receive me? Or did it wait for me to come and people it? By far the better hypothesis, from the point of view of usefulness, is the former, and I shall often have occasion to fall back on it. But both are distasteful. I shall say therefore that our beginnings coincide, that this place was made for me, and I for it, at the same instant. And the sounds I do not yet know have not yet made themselves heard. But they will change nothing. The cry changed nothing, even the first time. And my surprise? I must have been expecting it.\(^{50}\)

The prediction that the sounds not yet heard shall change nothing is the greatest complication, seeming as it does to characterise Beckett as a nihilist. But again this would be to interpret the withholding of assertions or presumptions as constituting nihilism. It is a withholding because the sounds refer to empirical subjectivity, which does not change but rather accumulates, and so the narrator here withholds from it an attribution of significance. The

\(^{50}\) Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 290.
reasons for such a withholding have been explored in the previous two chapters. The point here is that nihilism, despite its negativity, is a position, an assertion. To withhold is to refrain from assertion. In this context it is to let the world, reality, or however you may term it, to speak for itself. It may be, however, that it cannot do so. It appears to be Beckett’s belief, following from the Kantian ‘block’ discussed earlier, that it is only we that speak, and that we speak to ourselves. But this self that we speak to is only the empirical self, the self of ‘I’ or ‘You’. So it is that the Unnamable is unnamable, as we do not speak to it but only of it and only obliquely. It is a place-holder of much the same kind as spoken of previously (see Ch. 1, n. 21). For Beckett, just as for Kant, ‘I’ is not self-identical. This is why the attempt to give a name to the Unnamable gives an impression of company, before a return to ‘You’, alone as always.

In this respect, and for several other reasons, Nohow On as a whole can be interpreted as a sort of revisiting or refocusing of The Unnamable after three decades of aesthetic evolution, though this applies more to Company and Worstward Ho than to Ill Seen Ill Said. As noted in Chapter Two, the link is most conspicuously evident in Beckett’s use of the term ‘unnamable’ in Company. But more broadly, the refocusing can be seen in the characteristic paring down Beckett undertakes between The Unnamable and Company. The Unnamable takes himself to be accompanied by an indeterminate number of ‘delegates’51 or ‘avatars’52, as he identifies them generally. At times he refers to seemingly specific ones by name, such as Malone,53 or Basil54 to name just a couple. At other times, he conflates the general and the specific in identifying them, as when he refers to ‘All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones’.55 There are dozens of examples throughout the text. In Company, however, all these terms are erased in favour of the general term of ‘company’ itself. There, company is emphasised specifically for the purpose of exposing it as a lie. While this suggests a change of priorities for Beckett, this is not to say that Company or Nohow On as a whole, are a ‘purer’, let alone ‘better’, version of The Unnamable. The paring down seen in the later texts gains much of its significance only in relation to the more expansive earlier text, after all. At times it is worth remembering that there is a significance to an oeuvre as a whole that differs not only that of individual texts, but also from that of their sum. A critical comparison of texts from distant points of an oeuvre, chronologically speaking, is the best way to display this.

52 Beckett, The Unnamable, 309.
54 Beckett, The Unnamable, 292.
55 Beckett, The Unnamable, 297.
Keeping that in mind, and returning to the passage quoted above, the withholding of judgement must accompany a critique of the faculties with which judgement is made. Which is to say that the former follows the latter, not just typically but by necessity. And to effect such a critique we must endeavour to situate consciousness and existence in their most basic states. As discussed, this has traditionally led to a heavily Cartesian inflection on studies of Beckett’s work. But here, again following Kant’s cogito, thought demonstrates the existence of the self and the world ‘in the same instant’. A statement very much like this appears at the beginning of Worstward Ho as the narrator ponders, ‘First the body. No. First the place. No. First both’. This differs from Fichte’s notion that the I posits itself and then determines the Not-I subsequently. For Kant, the two are determined simultaneously because they are inter-determined and inter-determining. Another way to think of it is that their determination is the same occurrence.

Not only this, but in the above passage from The Unnamable Beckett describes the I and the Not-I as being made for each other, essentially responsible for and beholden to one another. And from this instant, this consciousness waits to receive what empirical data, the sounds not yet heard, may come its way to be reflected on. The prediction that the sounds that have not yet made themselves heard will change nothing is in one sense a statement of pattern recognition. But it also implies a question as to the origin of these sounds to begin with, the suspicion that the world does not speak for itself.

So the question is, then, what is this cry the Unnamable speaks of? It is the first sound he remembers hearing, which he uses to mark the beginning of residence in this abode. The Unnamable merely posits his own existence before the first hearing of the cry. Unbeknownst to the Unnamable, this is the first instance of apperception which, following Kant’s cogito, simultaneously demonstrates the existence of this ‘abode’. At this point there remains a great deal of confusion regarding this:

So after a long period of immaculate silence a feeble cry was heard, by me. I do not know if Malone heard it too. I was surprised, the word is not too strong. After so long a silence a little cry, stifled outright. What kind of creature uttered it and, if it is the same, still does, from time to time? Impossible to say. Not a human one in any case, there are no human creatures here, or if there are they have done with crying. Is

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56 Beckett, Worstward Ho, 90.
Malone the culprit? Am I? [...] Perhaps it is something breaking, some two things colliding.  

The presence of that which the Unnamable is calling ‘Malone’ is part of the wider problem of apperception in the novel, and its significance will become clearer as the discussion continues. For now the important thing to remember, for the sake of context, is that Malone is the central character and narrator of the second novel of Beckett’s early trilogy, Malone Dies. However, the degradation of self-identification becomes more dramatic as Malone alternates between narrating his own situation and that of a youth named Sapo, later renamed MacMann. Malone Dies and The Unnamable are significantly different texts with little in the way of explicit narratological continuity, but there is a connection evident in the seemingly contradictory way in which the narrative of Malone Dies comes to terminate. Malone’s narration of his own situation terminates close to the end of the novel as follows:

All is ready. Except me. I am being given, if I may venture the expression, birth into death, such is my impression. The feet are clear already, of the great cunt of existence [...] My story ended I’ll be living yet. Promising lag. That is the end of me. I shall say no more.  

Here we have the ambiguity of the conglomeration of death and (re)birth, and the possibility of a purgatorial reality occurring as a consequence. This expression has precedent in Waiting for Godot when Pozzo declares that ‘one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? [...] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more’. As Weller observes, Beckett originally follows Schopenhauer’s axiom that a life of suffering is expiation for the sin of being born, but gradually twists this idea, pushing it further to eventually question what is meant by birth - coming into being – itself. Russell poses a similar idea in more psychoanalytical terms, wherein birth may be the origin of anxiety, but as anxiety seeks a concrete representation in order to convert itself into fear, and as nothingness can have no such representation, the anxiety

58 Beckett, The Unnamable, 290.  
60 Beckett, Waiting for Godot, 83.  
61 Weller, A Taste for the Negative, 133-4.  
62 Russell, It’s nothing: Beckett and Anxiety, 194.
can never be resolved. The result, again, is purgatorial. We remain in a state of both life and death and, thus, also neither. In his typical way, Beckett pares down Pozzo’s outburst into the more – fittingly – neutral statement: ‘Birth was the death of him’. Similarly, and in a more comical take on false-birth, the narrator of *Fizzle 4* declares ‘I gave up before birth, it is not possible otherwise’. In such passages Beckett conflates life into death, destroying their distinctions, and so follows beginning and end. So, too, follows time, reduced to a notion that exists solely in our heads (as it is for Kant) and having, for Beckett, lost significance.

Despite Malone’s promise to say no more the narrative continues for several pages. The end begins again and reaches another termination in which the character, Lemuel, dispatches the remaining names with a hatchet before language and narration breaks down as follows:

Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anymore, he will not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more, either with it or with it or with it or with or or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his fist or in thought in dream I mean never he will never or with his pencil or with his stick or or light light I mean never there he will never never anything there

any more

The idea that this leads straight into the beginning of *The Unnamable* is at best an implication. Primarily, the purpose of this passage, specifically in relation to *The Unnamable*, is to set up the themes of the ambiguity of life and death, subject and other, and also to emphasise the motif of statement and immediate negation.

To return to the previous passage (see n. 58), much of what is set up at the end of *Malone Dies* comes more strongly to realisation. Firstly, the phrase ‘immaculate silence’ is interesting if interpreted as a gentle parody of both the biblical immaculate conception, and of spontaneous creation in a secular sense. The latter could be understood in the sense of spontaneous self-creation or self-causation: the *prima ratio*, the unmoved mover, or however you wish to term it. The interesting part is that it is the silence, or the non-being, that is immaculate rather than the interruption thereof, the cry or the creation. The Unnamable appears to find the notion of this spontaneous coming to be distasteful as a hypothesis, and yet can find no basis to choose anything but to go along with it.

Secondly, the Unnamable excludes the possibility that the cry is a human one, then immediately questions whether Malone or the Unnamable is the culprit. This of course reveals the Unnamable’s tentative approach to declaring humanity to follow immediately from consciousness, and its subsequent hesitance to attribute humanity to itself.

All very well, but the most interesting part of this passage is the introduction of duality into the novel’s thematics. This image of something dividing, or of two things colliding is reminiscent of Deleuze’s interpretation of apperception in Kantian philosophy, as discussed in Chapter One. I would argue, then, that this cry represents the birth of the Unnamable’s consciousness, which is really the empirical consciousness attached to an unknowable (and so unnamable) transcendental consciousness. And in answer to his question, about whether this is the sound of something dividing or two things colliding, I contend that the answer is both. The subject is divided in its encountering the world of things. On the other hand, the subject is also alienated from the world of things in the same moment. This would include memories, images of previous ‘I’s’ that thought, seemingly consistent with yet foreign to the ‘I’ that thinks, a different object moment to moment. The slayings of Lemuel indicate the primary difference between how Beckett represents the trauma of apperception in his earlier and late works. At the end of *Malone Dies*, he gives it a narrative. The trauma of apperception, the trauma in which the Unnamable lives, is arrived at literally through violent trauma. Beckett uses violent death as an analogy for the death of these others and the imprisonment within the ‘I’. In *The Unnamable* he depicts the alienation of the self from itself and from the world of things as a
kind of living death. But the narratological analogy is ultimately ill-fitting because it is narratological. Narrative indicates a sense of significance to order whereas, here, it does not belong. Hence, along with his discarding of realism, Beckett also came to discard narrative as such. In his late texts, nothing leads up to the trauma of apperception. There is no process, it just occurs, it is simply how it is.

Other than this, the stream of consciousness in *The Unnamable* proceeds in essentially the same way as it does in many subsequent texts. The fundamentally violent, divisive trauma of apperception is only hinted at for now, temporarily remaining unrealised. The Unnamable is attempting to determine his situation by describing his surroundings, which seems reasonable enough, but we see that it is not long before he begins to doubt the feasibility of this project, as in the above quoted lines: ‘I only see what appears immediately in front of me, I see only what appears close behind me, what I best see I see ill’.[67] It is perfectly reasonable then (or rather, it is for want of an alternative) that the Unnamable should turn to information delivered to him by his ‘delegates’.[68] As we can see in the following passage, there are reservations from the start and yet the Unnamable has no choice but to (at least tentatively) accept some of it:

> Why did I have myself represented in the midst of men, the light of day? It seems to me it was none of my doing. We won’t go into that now. I can still see them, my delegates. The things they have told me! [...] I refuse to believe them. But some of it has stuck. But when, through what channels, did I communicate with these gentlemen? Did they intrude on me here? No, no one has ever intruded one me here. Elsewhere then. But I have never been elsewhere.[69]

Already, then, the Unnamable is aware that the information he relies on for the sake of self-awareness is reported to him from external sources that he cannot trust, though he acknowledges their attachment to him. And it is this attachment, or rather the lack of any but this attachment, that makes this information so hard to dispense with, as the Unnamable reflects on, saying, ‘What puzzles me is the thought of being indebted for this information to persons

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with whom I can never have been in contact. Can it be innate knowledge? Like that of good
and evil. This seems improbable to me’.\textsuperscript{70}

The introduction of the notion of innate knowledge into the discussion regarding these
delegates, and their relation to self-consciousness, complicates matters quite thoroughly. This
is due not least to the subject matter of the lessons forced on the Unnamable:

They also gave me the low-down on God. They told me I depended on
him, in the last analysis […] But what they were most determined for
me to swallow was my fellow-creatures. In this they were without
mercy. I remember little or nothing of these lectures. I cannot have
understood a great deal. But I seem to have retained certain
descriptions, in spite of myself. They gave me courses on love, on
intelligence, most precious, most precious. They also taught me to
count, and even to reason. Some of this rubbish has come in handy on
occasions, I don’t deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen
if they had left me in peace.\textsuperscript{71}

Of primary interest here is the subject matter of these lessons, and the Unnamable’s
insistence that he has retained little or nothing of them. Love, reason and intellect as such we
consider to be specifically human capacities, which not only separate us from the animals, but
also form the basis of our sense of purposiveness and meaning. It is not Beckett’s intention,
through the distancing of the Unnamable from these delegates, to question the innateness of
these characteristics, but to undermine our derivation of purposiveness and meaning from them.

The overarching problem faced here is that of representing the division created in self-
consciousness, the trauma of apperception. That is, how does one represent the interplay
between, for instance, the Id and the Ego as in Deleuze\textsuperscript{72}, through a first person narrative voice
that can only appear as a third consciousness? Does this represent a second consciousness with
its own problems, or a second division and thus third aspect of the one consciousness? One of
several things that make this one of Beckett’s more difficult texts is his inclusion of all these
problems at once. In \textit{The Unnamable}, Beckett introduces the kind of intra-subjective division

\textsuperscript{70} Beckett, \textit{The Unnamable}, 191.
\textsuperscript{71} Beckett, \textit{The Unnamable}, 292.
\textsuperscript{72} Deleuze, \textit{Kant’s Critical Philosophy}, viii.
– exactly the kind described in Chapter One – that would go on to feature heavily throughout the remainder of his oeuvre.

Much as in many of Beckett’s other texts, *The Unnamable* begins with a self that does not understand itself as divided reflecting upon the information and images presented to it, assumed to be the product of some person or persons or other, a figment, perhaps. Ultimately, be it gradually or suddenly, this assumption is revealed to be false. The narrating self realises itself to be witnessing its own direct experiences or recounting its own memories. What sets *The Unnamable* apart from later texts such as *That Time*, *Company* or *What Where*, for instance, is that the experience of the Kantian ‘block’, and the subjective conditions associated with it, is less agonistic. The Unnamable, in its more lucid and self-aware moments, seems to accept its lot with a kind of shrug, as though practising a sort of affected denial. In those later texts the narrator is attempting to defeat silence and nothingness but has forgotten either the impossibility of doing so or their own countervailing intent to embrace defeat. In *The Unnamable*, however, the narrator is still aggressively and somewhat naively seeking the point at which he can cease speaking. The difficulty is that seeking the end of the process requires going through the process:

Unfortunately I am afraid, as always, of going on. For to go on means going from here, means finding me, losing me, vanishing and beginning again, a stranger first, then little by little the same as always, in another place, where I shall say I have always been, of which I shall know nothing, being incapable of seeing, moving, thinking, speaking, but of which little by little, in spite of these handicaps, I shall begin to know something, just enough for it to turn out to be the same place as always, the same which seems made for me and does not want me, which I seem to want and do not want […] which is perhaps merely the inside of my distant skull where once I wandered, now am fixed, lost for tininess, or straining against the walls, with my head, my hands, my feet, my back, and ever murmuring my old stories, as if it were the first time.73

This passage broadly encapsulates most of the subjective difficulties described throughout this dissertation: the othering of apperception and paradoxical inter-formation and

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the alienation of subject and object that follows from the Kantian ‘block’. It is worth observing that this fragment is not dissimilar to the speech Arsene gives in *Watt*, as quoted previously (see Ch. 3, n. 76), as this emphasises a significant transition in Beckett’s literary evolution. Arsene’s speech is a sprawling (and in this sense still somewhat Joycean) lament on changelessness, and if it is also a focused critique of the nature of consciousness, this is at most only vaguely implicit. From *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* (composed, as already noted, in part, concurrently) onwards, the vast majority of Beckett’s prose, and a great deal of his drama, would take place within a single consciousness. As an indication of the increased skepticism since his earlier work Beckett’s narrator, while still deeply suspecting there is nothing new to know or say, nonetheless recognises that he could be wrong:

So there is nothing to be afraid of. And yet I am afraid, afraid of what my words will do to me, to my refuge, yet again. Is there really nothing new to try? I mentioned my hope, but it is not serious. If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? [...] But it seems impossible to speak and yet say nothing, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook something, a little yes, a little no, enough to exterminate a regiment of dragoons. And yet I do not despair, this time, while saying who I am, where I am, of not losing me, of not going from here, of ending here [...] In a word, shall I be able to speak of me and of this place without putting an end to us, shall I ever be able to go silent, is there any connexion between these two questions? Nothing like issues. There are a few to be going on with, perhaps one only.74

This issue, which the Unnamable goes on to address in the following paragraph, is that of his delegates. He complains that they have kept him from speaking of himself, which he believes will bring about his end.75 On the other hand, these delegates are figments within his own consciousness, aspects of the self apprehended as other. Ergo, it is really speaking of himself that prevents the unnameable from bringing about his end. It follows from the Kantian ‘block’, and the way it leaves us to make the world commensurate with us, that no matter what we try to speak of, speaking of ourselves is inevitable and inescapable. We can only wait for the end. This last realisation is the essential difference between the Unnamable and Beckett’s

later narrators. Its agony is the fear brought about specifically by uncertainty; it fears that it might just miss something crucial before the end comes. The agony of the later narrators is the torture of being trapped in a closed system of impenetrable ignorance; they fear that the end will never come. On the other hand, as mentioned above, they also tend to only remember this intermittently.

By contrast, what makes the narrator of *Worstward Ho* so interesting, apart from anything else, is that it has neither the forgetfulness of the narrator from *Company* or *That Time*, or the naivety of the narrator from *The Unnamable*. Take for example the full paragraph from which the above quoted lines (see n. 56) were taken:


Here too the narrator aggressively seeks silence, yet also remains fully aware that it is trapped in a seemingly unending cycle of failure to that end. More importantly though this awareness follows immediately from the very moment of apperception. Or rather the narrator understands that apperception instigates the process of accounting for what is revealed in apperception – the self and the world – and so recognises it as essentially the harbinger of failure and the sickness to which he refers. The narrator’s resignation is evident from the outset, as in saying ‘All of old. Nothing else ever. But never so failed. Worse failed. With care never worse failed’.\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, silence has been reduced from an ambition to an all but, if not entirely, empty hope: ‘Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no. Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere-most minimum.’\textsuperscript{78} The Unnamable’s fear marks him as the more strictly skeptical of the two and perhaps the most skeptical of all Beckett’s narrators.

\textsuperscript{76} Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 90.
\textsuperscript{77} Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 91.
\textsuperscript{78} Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 91.
But to return to the Unnamable’s belief that speaking of himself will lead to silence; ‘I, of whom I know nothing’, is how he begins this process. Following from the connotations of apperception in the Critique of Pure Reason, as discussed previously, this designation of ‘I’ is of course much more significant than the Unnamable understands it to be in this moment. The rest of the novel is largely devoted to telling the tale of the complications involved in this assertion. The matter is not settled from the beginning as it is in later texts. Furthermore, in keeping with the affirmation/negation technique used throughout the novel, this statement is immediately negated, as the Unnamable then proceeds to list a series of things that he indeed knows of himself – a description of his body and its position, for instance. These things, however, will later be thrown into doubt by further assertions and observations, and so on. On the face of it, the narrator of The Unnamable appears to be the unreliable narrator par excellence. But again in keeping with the Kantian cogito, apperception here coincides with an empirical awareness of the world in which the self is apprehended. The Unnamable is not unreliable, but simply doing his best in unreliable circumstances. In keeping with this only the sense of time and space are allowed to stand for any significant period, though the Unnamable’s sense of his connection to them is often hazy. The Unnamable deduces his orientation from the downward flow of tears and a vague spherical shape to his body so, even amidst the focus on his bodily nature evident in this passage, all categories of humanity are suspended.

According to traditional philosophical procedure this suspension would be gradually relaxed as more and more concepts are added to the pile that amounts to the ever elusive ‘human condition’. In the consistent breakdown of this procedure in The Unnamable we see Beckett in a mode one might consider nihilistic. Following the passage in which the Unnamable seeks to describe his body, we see the beginnings of an underlying critique of human consciousness, specifically of the Platonic notion of all knowledge understood as recollection. The Unnamable halts the analysis of his corporeality, saying:

No, between me and the right to silence, the living rest, stretches the same old lesson, the one I knew by heart and would not say, I don’t know why, perhaps for fear of silence, or thinking any old thing would do, and so for preference lies, in order to remain hidden, no importance. But now I shall say my old lesson, if I can remember it.

79 Beckett, The Unnamable, 298.
80 Plato, Phaedo, 66.
81 Beckett, The Unnamable, 300.
The Unnamable rejects his accumulative procedure of grasping reality in favour of pursuing the recollection of a lesson. Here Beckett represents a back-handed Platonic understanding of the pursuit of knowledge. Our knowledge may indeed be recollection, but it amounts to no more than a single memory, and one that seems to have drifted beyond recall.

It is difficult to know what it is about truth that Beckett is critiquing here. It is either its existence, or the idea of truth as an end of some kind. The former seems too obvious and, frankly, too dull to have occupied Beckett. The latter is altogether more interesting. If knowledge is recollection, and if the lesson therefore originates internally, it is not a lesson proper but a discovery. Here I mean discovery in the literal sense of a dis-covery. This puts one in mind of the idea of truth as un-concealment, which Heidegger reads in Plato.\(^82\) I can only argue that this is the reason the Unnamable seems to instinctively understand that in order to fall silent he must speak of himself, to discover the thing-in-itself of his own being. In discovering this primordial self, rather than the one that lives in representation, he could have done with representation and thus with words, and so at last fall silent. Perhaps then truth would be an end. But this self lies beyond representation, beyond words and, therefore, cannot be named. Thus, the process can only, and constantly does, fall apart.

In *Phaedo*, Socrates tells us that ‘if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself. It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom’.\(^83\) So what was discovered in the death, such as it was, of Malone? Well, simply, nothing in particular. That is to say we learn of nothing supposedly concealed by Malone’s presence so much as we learn something of the nature of his presence. In his death, and in the fact of the narrative continuing afterwards, we learn that he did not live in truth but merely as one of many ‘delegates’ that appear and reappear. Life and death intertwine and, as Socrates tells us, ‘come to be from one another’.\(^84\) Behind all these comings and goings is the truth that would be the end, would mean silence, but lies beyond reach and the possibility of a name. There is no alternative but for words to continue.

What is indicated in the folding together of life and death, the ‘two processes of becoming’, \(^85\) is that Beckett seems to accept a possibility that Socrates rejects. As Socrates

\(^82\) Heiddeger, *The Essence of Truth*, 35.
\(^83\) Plato, *Phaedo*, 58.
\(^84\) Plato, *Phaedo*, 62.
\(^85\) Plato, *Phaedo*, 63.
asks, ‘If […] generation proceeded from one point to its opposite in a straight line and it did not turn back again to the other opposite or take any turning, do you realize that all things would ultimately be in the same state, be affected in the same way, and cease to become?’ 86

In Beckett, life and death, past and present, self and other are conflated into a single ultimate and original state. The idea of ‘humanity’, and with it all the knowable universe, are reduced to a collection of forms and faculties. To clarify, these forms are of the Kantian variety, as opposed to the Platonic, and refer not to a higher or ideal plain, but simply to part of a fundamental reality of consciousness that bears no further significance. It is, simply, the case.

This brings us back to the ornery question of nihilism. There are two different ways in which Beckett could be considered to be taking a nihilistic tack, despite them both arising from two seemingly incompatible interpretations of the Phaedo. The first is relatively straightforward and would see Beckett reducing the possibility of Plato’s idea of truth, in some combination of cosmic or existential nihilism, as described above. The second is the more complicated situation in which Beckett does not reject Platonic truth as such, but rather its wider significance or connotations. This situation is described by Weller, following from Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche. In this account the very positing of such highest and eternal values, which we come to know only in recollection, is itself nihilistic.87

Yet the Unnamable enters the pursuit of his lesson with an affected confidence, in keeping with the cycle of desperation and disappointment that goes hand in hand with possessing a consciousness. For anyone familiar with Beckett’s work as a whole it is no secret that the Unnamable’s pursuit will lead him back to where he started, unable to end. It would be too easy and, ultimately, unfitting to compare this feeble and cyclic image of consciousness to a broken record, for the simple reason that there is a difference between what is broken and what is merely inadequate. Brokenness as a concept is only truly applicable to things that begin as equal to their purpose or intent. Broken things, furthermore, have a habit of ending and ending is, after all, the Unnamable’s ultimate goal. Brokenness, then, cannot be read as the source of any tragedy, pathos or frustration here.

The Unnamable then immediately provides us, in the passage below, with the first hint that there will be no distinction between the search for the lesson and the activities in which he has been engaged up to this point:

86 Plato, Phaedo, 63.
87 Weller, Modernism and Nihilism, 33.
Under the skies, on the roads, in the towns, in the woods, in the hills, in the plains, by the shores, on the seas, behind my mannikins, I was not always sad, I wasted my time, abjured my rights, suffered for nothing, forgot my lesson [...] I speak, speak, because I must, but I do not listen, I seek my lesson, my life I used to know and would not confess, hence occasionally a slight lack of limpidity. And perhaps now and again I shall do no more than seek my lesson, to the self-accompaniment of a tongue that is not mine.88

Strangely enough it is the Unnamable’s intermittent moments of lucidity that, in a sense, define his unreliability as a narrator and make this one of Beckett’s most difficult texts. It need hardly be said that Beckett is well aware of this, and this forms the basis of the humour in the comment ‘occasionally a slight lack of limpidity’. But here for once the Unnamable represents memories he understands to be his own, albeit with the bitter but amusing irony of having forgotten the all-important lesson that originally accompanied them. Here also, for the first time, the Unnamable regards his delegates as fragments or instances of his own self or consciousness when he refers to them as ‘his mannikins’. The term ‘mannikin’ essentially conveys a more passive sense of the term ‘avatar’, which Beckett uses in a later passage.89

Yet even in this more lucid passage certain crucial details are obscured. We are left to question the nature of these abjured rights, and of the failed objectives in the pursuit of which the Unnamable suffered. Perhaps these, too, were forgotten along with the lesson. But the most interesting aspects of this passage are the paradoxes it contains. Firstly, the Unnamable does nothing but seek his lesson, though he does this by speaking alone, and not listening. The lesson, then, originates internally, and is not a lesson proper but may perhaps be more precisely understood as a discovery. Secondly, and more obviously paradoxically, the Unnamable will do all this self-accompanied by a foreign tongue. I use this phrase, ‘foreign tongue’, to emphasise the ambiguity of the use of the word ‘tongue’ in this passage. It could be used to denote a foreign language, or to denote the tongue not in the physical sense but specifically in its capacity as the instrument of speech. Either way, this line is designed to refer to a schism within the subject.

This in relation to the drama of apperception in Beckett adds further significance to the pattern of pseudo-revelation common in his work. That is to say, the revelation of the

protagonists’ true situations is itself what mires them in a claustrophobic atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty, leading back to their original path in search of revelation. The beginning of each narrative, so it is heavily implied, begins just after the latest in an indeterminately long series of such revelations. Again, the primary difference in this respect between The Unnamable and the late texts is that in The Unnamable there is no strong implication that we are witnessing a small, fixed series repeating itself indefinitely. Rather, we appear to be observing a singular winding down that may never come to an end.

This kind of revelation is, as has been discussed, one of Beckett’s more distinctive literary motifs and, following its implications, we can suppose that Beckett did not consider truth to be an end in itself. Beckett’s search for fundamental statements, seemingly ventured into under the premise that permanence must be a characteristic of truth, ultimately fails. Not only does it fail but, upon reflection, the failure of the search is written into the very same terms that make it possible to begin with, the very conditions of subjectivity. It is not that truth does not exist, but that both the fact and nature of truth are indeterminable. Truth cannot be an end because the search for it cannot end. The Unnamable remarks on this situation as follows:

But instead of saying what I should not have said, and what I shall say no more, if I can, and what I shall say perhaps, if I can, should I not rather say some other thing, even though it be not yet the right thing? I’ll try, I’ll try in another present, even though it be not yet mine, without pauses, without tears, without eyes, without reasons. Let it be assumed then that I am at rest, though this in unimportant, at rest or for ever moving, through the air or in contact with other surfaces, or that I sometimes move, sometimes rest, since I feel nothing, neither quietude nor change, nothing that can serve as a point of departure towards an opinion on this subject, which would not greatly matter if I possessed some general notions, and then the use of reason, but there it is, I feel nothing, know nothing, and as far as thinking is concerned I do just enough to preserve me from going silent, you can’t call that thinking.\(^90\)

There are dozens upon dozens of examples such as this in The Unnamable in which the basic premise of action, or of going on, is either elusive, denied or undermined. This puts one

\(^{90}\) Beckett, The Unnamable, 300.
in mind of limbo and of purgatory and, as briefly touched upon in the first chapter, this is to a significant extent owing to Beckett’s well documented fascination with *The Divine Comedy* (a copy of which, much like T. S. Eliot, Beckett carried on his person much of the time).91 Specifically this brings to mind again the figure of Belacqua, here no longer a simple symbolic or allusive presence. It would be reductive to say that *The Unnamable* reads like an attempt to depict Belacqua’s own stream of consciousness, but it is written with a particular understanding of his significance in mind. Beckett’s fascination with Belacqua indicates a more complicated understanding of purgatory on the basis that, as Rabaté observes, ‘Belacqua does not fit neatly in the symbolic geography of the purgatory. He sits in the ante-purgatory, a transitional space between the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, a limbo for adults who have never properly been born’.92 Belacqua sits hunched in a limbo within a limbo, in a state of stagnant transition. The palpable and simultaneous sense of both arrival and failure to depart, present throughout Beckett’s writing, follows from this idea. This, for Beckett, is the meaning of waiting. Moreover, this is intimately connected to the development of skepticism in Beckett. As Rabaté continues:

> Belacqua is an exhausted ironist, an indolent questioner, a medieval Bartleby who seems, on top of all this, to enjoy himself. Despite of his “head in his thighs,” he is called a “megalomaniac.” This skeptical critic is “stuck,” whether by his own lack of will or by divine decree, but then from this stymied position of blockage, he can voice the most devastating antiheroic objection to the grand pattern of the quest.93

In using the terms ‘exhausted’ and ‘Bartleby’, it seems likely that Rabaté is making an implicit reference to Deleuze’s *The Exhausted*, wherein he suggests that Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ follows a Beckettian formula.94 But, more importantly, Rabaté emphasises that Belacqua’s impact on Beckett is more than a simple matter of literary allusion. While Rabaté’s use of the phrase ‘blockage’ is a coincidence, it is not for nothing that he too points to both Belacqua and Kant when discussing human limitation in Beckett. For purgatory is conventionally believed to be a matter of divine imposition and not necessarily eternal.

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91 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 86.
92 Rabaté, *Think Pig!*, 32.
93 Rabaté, *Think Pig!*, 32.
Belacqua’s purgatory, however, comes also from within, by virtue not only of a seeming inability to go on but more importantly from an otherwise unheard-of propensity to question the point of doing so altogether. The advent of Kantian skepticism, his agnosticism, and the inability to know the absolute conditions of the universe of consciousness that follows from it, only lend more significance to such questioning. If we cannot know the possibility of salvation, and if we cannot know how to achieve it even if we could, then why, as Belacqua asks, go on (see Ch. 1, n. 98)? But this again is not nihilistic as it allows for the converse: if we cannot know the impossibility of these things, then why go back? Instead, Beckett’s characters take a seat, huddle up, lie or just fall down and they wait – for something to happen, to say, or to do. Even if these things are never seen to eventuate, this is still not nihilistic, for only something can wait and one can only wait for something.

With this in mind it should be reiterated that if Beckett does construct a theory of the human it is one based just as much – if not more – on its inability as its ability. In Chapter I, Section II of the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, Kant compares our reason to a sphere, the boundaries and contents of which can be deduced with certainty. The explanation or origins of these boundaries and contents lies beyond the sphere and can only be subject to nothing more reliable than the speculative use of reason. The problem for Beckett is the value or meaning of this sphere if there can be no account of its content and boundaries. Kant appears to have very little anxiety about this problem and it did not represent a priority for him. Nevertheless, the problem follows directly from his own particular analysis of consciousness. Thinking about thinking is, to say the least, problematic. In addition to the material discussed in Chapter Two, Kant had this to say about the cogito:

the proposition “I think,” insofar as it says only that I exist thinking, is not a merely logical function, but rather determines the subject (which is then at the same time an object) in regard to existence, and this cannot take place without inner sense, whose intuition always makes available the object not as thing in itself but merely as appearance […] The thinking self must now seek the conditions of the use of its logical functions for categories of substance, cause, etc. […] to determine its kind of existence.96

95 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 654-5.
96 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 457.
Kant makes the above comments in the section *General remark concerning the transition from rational psychology to cosmology within the Transcendental Doctrine of Elements*, returning to ground covered in his initial refutation of Descartes’ transcendental idealism, and the amendment of Descartes’ *cogito*. This, to remind the reader, is summed up in the theorem; ‘The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me’. Now this puts the phenomenon of the self on the same plain of intuition as that of any and all other empirical intuitions, where otherwise it would be deemed exceptional, a situation which attracted much of the discussion in Chapter Two. The task here (and also the task of the Unnamable) concerns the dilemma of attempting to go beyond, and uncover the conditions, of this plain.

In seeking the conditions of our logical functions we must turn from our own minds and seek the answers in the cosmos. The reason for this, which in turn relates to the Unnamable’s folly in seeking silence by talking of himself, is that we are, within ourselves, inexplicable. For, according to Kant, even if we were to uncover laws within our consciousness that provided us with ‘occasion for presupposing ourselves to be legislative fully *a priori* in regard to our own existence, and as self-determining in this existence’, this determination must be predicated on our existence as related to (or as part of) the empirical world and thus it also presupposes the passive receptivity of our faculties of intuition. Otherwise, such a determination is purely intelligible, without synthesis with the sensible, and thus cannot form an empirical concept and, consequently, cannot constitute an object of knowledge. In other words, even if we uncovered such laws we would still, in regard to our existence, be left where we began: ‘in need of sensible intuitions if order to obtain significance for my concepts of the understanding […] but those intuitions can never help me up beyond the field if experience [the sphere]’. And so, having no clear idea of how to attain knowledge outside his sphere, the Unnamable is reduced to resorting to mere speculation, and hence asking ‘should I not rather say some other thing, even though it be not yet the right thing?’ This also goes some way to account for why the Unnamable repudiates his prior methods and so resolves to proceed ‘without pauses, without tears, without eyes, without reasons’.

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97 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 327.
98 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 327.
99 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 327.
100 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 300.
But inevitably, regarding his existence, the Unnamable is also left where he began. He seeks his end in the conditions of his beginning, but constantly fails and begins again. As his environment renews itself identically over and over, constantly shifting and yet not altering, he knows ‘neither quietude nor change,’¹⁰² the purgatory of attempting to seek beyond the sphere. In this respect one thing Beckett seems to retain from his more Joyceean days is a purgatory that ‘excludes culmination’ from which there can be ‘no ascent’.¹⁰³ This purgatory is defined by having just enough capacity for knowledge to be able to define this sphere, but not enough to define its conditions. Existence may cease at one point or another, but it is never ‘finished’. Nothing is ever accomplished. This, however, is not to be taken as nihilistic, as it is intended simply as an act of recognition rather than an assertion or judgement beyond what is to be recognised. There is no normative claim, no ‘ought’ beyond what is, as best as it can be seen. For Beckett, a humanity defined by inability refers to a humanity that is unable to cease, just as much as it is unable to go on – failure in perpetuity.

This termination would be silence, the end of thought, which is the Unnamable’s stated objective. But to refer back to the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is within the nature of reason to ask questions that, due to that very same nature, it cannot answer.¹⁰⁴ So, to further define the Unnamable’s purgatory, his dilemma is that in order to cease thought he must continue thinking and, in so doing, will inevitably reach the boundaries of his sphere. At this point the cycle implicitly repeats itself, though the implication is not as strong as in the later texts, where it is so strong as to be virtually explicit. *The Unnamable* reads more like a single cycle of repeated and virtually identical failures of consciousness and of attempted assertion. Among the many examples of the Unnamable returning to his starting point, the most pertinent here would be the following one, taken from very near the end of the novel:

I feel the end at hand and the beginning likewise, to every man his orbit, that’s obvious. But, and here I return to the charge, but has nothing really changed, all this mortal time, I’m speaking now of me, yes, henceforward I shall speak of none but me, that’s decided, even though I should not succeed, there’s no reason why I should succeed, so I need have no qualms. Nothing changed? I must be ageing all the same, bah, I was always aged, always ageing, and ageing makes no difference, not

to mention that all this is not about me, hell, I’ve contradicted myself, no matter. So long as one does not know what one is saying and can’t stop to enquire, in tranquillity, fortunately, fortunately, one would like to stop, but unconditionally, I resume, so long as, so long as, let me see, so long as one, so long as he, ah fuck all that, so long as this, then that, agreed, that’s good enough, I nearly got stuck.105

Once again, what sets these instances of repetition apart from similar instances in later works is that the Unnamable has gained further awareness of his plight. He seems able to retain this awareness between cycles, whereas in later texts, such as That Time, for example, the narrator remains oblivious to the futility of their activities until a sudden moment of revelation just prior to (and seeming to provoke) the beginning of another identical cycle. The Unnamable is consistently aware of his situation, yet carries on for want of an alternative. He cannot be silent. Resolution is beyond him. What he does not seem to grasp is that speaking of himself will in no way lead to silence. Here he again resolves to fall silent as he did at the beginning, and as he has been attempting to do for just about the entire length of the text.

Having already discussed the futility of this, I should like to reiterate that in Beckett the inability to go on is not nihilistic. Conversely, the inability to go on, and the going on regardless, is not an idealist let alone humanist resistance to nothingness. In either case, a decision, an assertion, would be required. But this, too, is impossible, as of this, too, we are incapable but for what is allowed within our minimal and inadequate sphere of knowledge. Once this sphere or horizon has, as far as possible, been established all that remains is to ask if there is a meaning to going on. If for the nihilist and the idealist the answer is a definitive no and yes respectively, and if Beckett is neither of these things, what then might be the answer for Beckett? In light of the preceding analysis, the most fitting response is that the question itself proves irrelevant, as the going on goes on regardless. I say irrelevant rather than meaningless as – to give an alternative view of meaninglessness in Beckett generally – skepticism is extended to the question of meaning. It is neither confirmed nor denied but is rather intractably elusive; it is potentially existent, but neither for nor in spite of us. This, however, is an exclusively theoretical position to take. The emotional reality here is very much like one of a confirmed meaninglessness and confirmed nothingness regarding the conditions and purpose of existence and of carrying on with it. This reality touches Beckett’s work

pervasively and this certainly gives the impression of nihilism just as persisting in the face of it, at least for a time, gave the impression of humanism. But this conflict exists for the same reason that the question is irrelevant, in that the going on occurs in spite of all. The question exists and goes on unanswered due to the limits of reason, both settled and insoluble in the asking itself.

In summation, this kind of aporia is the crucial factor in understanding Beckett’s relation to nihilism, as it is crucial to understanding his relation to the problem from which nihilism emerged: the fate of the subject and the fate of reason post-Kant. Metaphysical thought in Beckett shares the character of Kant’s definition of metaphysics – as the science of limitation – and takes on the form of an unending oscillation between something and nothing, the purposeful and the purposeless, the meaningful and the meaningless, without ever resting on one or the other. This reflects the perpetual fluctuation between subject and object, self and other: ‘To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow / from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither’. Only a small part of what is said can be verified. Yet here the waters are muddied by the simple practical fact that in written language one thing must follow another. When discussing the motif of negation in Beckett, and particularly in The Unnamable – the positive statement is immediately followed by the negative – it is important to note that the positive statement is not erased by the negative, and nor is the negative statement absorbed by the positive. They may cancel each other out as knowledge, but the possibility of either remains. We lend a natural preference to the last word but there is no innate superiority to it. This becomes keenly evident in the final stages of The Unnamable:

I’ll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again, dream of a silence, a dream of silence, full of murmurs, I don’t know, that’s all words, never wake, all words, there’s nothing else, you must go on, that’s all I know […] the lasting one, that didn’t last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will

be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in
the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.\textsuperscript{107}

We can legibly consider the experience of consciousness to be what Beckett is
referring to here as the ‘silence full of murmurs’. We can extend this to say that the subject is
‘the lasting one who didn’t last’, the one that ‘will be I’ and thus has yet to eventuate even
though it ‘still lasts’. This is yet another depiction of the paradoxically self-othering ‘I’ –
already discussed in detail – that is always motioning to depart and to arrive and never quite
managing either, always at the threshold of its story without knowing whether it is coming or
going. With Beckett, we oscillate perpetually between both and neither. The statements ‘I can’t
go on’ and ‘I’ll go on’ and the termination of the text at this point are suspended together in a
diligently maintained a-assertive skepticism. No one thing is privileged over another. Nothing
is not privileged over something, and vice versa. This is simply a statement of pattern
recognition rather than an ongoing epistemological, ontological, eschatological, or teleological
– in short, metaphysical – claim. In this respect, little changes (how could it?) by the time we
get to \textit{Worstword Ho} where all is ‘Never since first said never unsaid’.\textsuperscript{108} Simply, negation is
not deletion. This does not, however, amount to a hopeful statement as the voice here is
nonetheless ‘never not gnawing to be gone’.\textsuperscript{109} The parallel between this and the Unnamable’s
quest for silence is readily apparent. The inability to be silent is, as always, coupled with the
fact of there being nothing more to say. Hence, we remain intractably stagnant in the
‘Unmoreable unlesssable unworseable evermost almost void.’\textsuperscript{110} This almost void, clearly
identified as unalterable, is the strongest rebuke to the prospect of nihilism in Beckett.
Moreover, seemingly in defiance of Jacobi’s claim that there is no alternative within
philosophy to the choice between egotistical rationalism and irrational faith, Beckett presents
us with an image of post-Kantian subjectivity that follows neither of these paths. In this way
considering the influence of Kant’s thought brings further meaning to Gontarski’s notion of
Beckett’s ‘literature that refuses to teach’.\textsuperscript{111} This, however, is not to say that we cannot learn.
While he places the subject as central to the rational life, he also undercut egoism by basing
this on its weaknesses and inadequacies, while maintaining rationalism in the form of
skepticism. In other words, Beckett resists Jacobi’s implicit assumption that one must choose

\textsuperscript{107} Beckett, \textit{The Unnamable}, 407.
\textsuperscript{110} Beckett, \textit{Worstward Ho}, 113.
\textsuperscript{111} Gontarski, “Introduction,” 5.
one alternative or the other. This leaves us with the insight – among the most important that Beckett’s image of the subject provides us with – that to be true to reason in the modern age one must forgo the dogmatic creed that the human *must* overcome, or could ever come to rest. Home is, and shall remain, ‘unspeakable’.112

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Conclusion

From the preceding investigations, it is apparent that the most extreme and sincere critique of the human still relies on the concept of the human as a distinguished, or privileged, entity. Indeed, critique compounds the distinction, as it is an action only the human being can undertake. The premises of such a critique, and of such a distinction are intertwined in the observation that humanity is the only species that knows failure. Critique, by definition, presumes failure. This is of utmost importance if we return to the question of the sublime, both generally and in Beckett specifically. In Chapter One I explained that my study on the topic of Immanuel Kant’s influence on Beckett would focus on the first *Critique as* – among other reasons – the problems he describes therein are fundamental to understanding the concepts he proceeds to describe in subsequent works.

The sublime is an important example of this as the majority of past comparisons of Beckett and Kant have been focused around it. The conditions of the possibility of experiencing the sublime, however, are more important and fundamental to any notion of the ‘human condition’ than the sublime itself. This holds as both a comment on philosophy in general and a remark on the practice of critique that invokes the sublime. I mention it again here not to emphasise the importance of the sublime, but rather to emphasise the importance of the failure that the sublime signifies. Failure is the simplest term one can use to encompass the conditions of cognitive limitation, subjective division, transcendental illusion, and others that have been discussed throughout this dissertation. It is only in understanding these conditions that we may truly appreciate the simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion that distinguishes the sublime not just as an aesthetic category but more immediately as an empirical concept. And it is worth remembering that at base the sublime is an aesthetic theory, nothing more than an empirical concept and so an idea determined *a posteriori* that joins the ranks of the virtually countless others that happen to have occurred to us. Furthermore, on the basis of how Beckett conducts his critique of consciousness, I can only conclude that if he invokes the sublime it is only to question its significance and even distinctiveness as an experience. What appears to distinguish the sublime from other experiences is the notion of its being the ‘highest’ of our possible experiences. For Romanticism, it even represented the potential to transcend experience itself, whereas Modernism has concerned itself with bemoaning the fruitlessness of
this endeavour. ¹ Beckett takes this further to the point where any critique of the sublime evident in his work is just the tip of the iceberg that is his critique of consciousness itself.

In Chapter One I discussed Rabaté’s analysis of the bathetic in Beckett. Rabaté’s analysis is centred on the definition, as provided by Alexander Pope, of the failed sublime, the sublime brought ‘low’ (see Ch. 1, n. 62). I also referred to Myskja’s apt description of the sublime’s indelible connection with cognitive failure (see Ch. 1, n. 117). This being the case, one can only question the substance of a failed sublime as a concept, as the sublime lives in, or by virtue of, failure. It may well be that Beckett invoked bathos and depicted bathetic thought in order to address this question. What we can learn from Beckett is that the sublime cannot be brought low, nor us with it. Rather, the point where the delusion of our own elevation breaks down is itself the event that we call the sublime. Or in other words, all cognitions, no matter how basic, are intimately linked to the limitations of our consciousness and all contain the same premise as the sublime. The only difference is that we do not always care to remind ourselves of our weaknesses. The moments where we cannot help but be reminded are what we call the sublime. Beckett shows us that the potential for this in present in every moment, and that creating another category of experience for it is quite possibly a false distinction.

What we can learn from Beckett is that we remain what, where, and how we begin. He reminded us of this right at the last in saying ‘folly given all this –/ seeing –/ folly seeing all this this here –’.² This seems most readily to mean that neither the given, nor the given as we apprehend it, nor the fact of our apprehending it, amount to substance. The rest – be it love, achievement, a sense of purpose, and so on – is just a fleeting distraction, albeit an agreeable one which we are perpetually drawn to. And we are drawn to these things because knowledge, which in Kant is simple and everywhere, is of insufficient significance and because there is nothing else to pass the time. Folly nonetheless. The human being is the only species that presumes or demands a significance to its existence and actions and, consequently, the only species capable of conscious self-delusion. Beckett tries his best to shake us out of this:

[Beckett’s works] enjoy the only fame now worthy of the name: everyone shrinks from them in horror, and yet none can deny that these eccentric novels and plays are about things everyone knows and none wants to talk about. Philosophical apologists may find it convenient to view Beckett’s oeuvre as an anthropological sketch, but in fact it deals

¹ Fort, The Imperative to Write, 7.
² Beckett, What is the Word. 1085.
with an extremely concrete historical state of affairs: the dismantling of the subject. Beckett’s *ecce homo* is what has become of human beings. They look mutely out from his sentences as though with eyes whose tears have dried up.³

I would only alter this to say that Beckett does not depict what *has become* of human beings, but rather what has *always been* there to be said of them for anyone who cared to say it. This is what makes Beckett’s work such a significant act of critique. It is not in making the statement or asking the question no one has thought of, but in the devotion to speaking the truth that we already know but of which we choose to remain silent. The need for such critique seems ever more pressing, as Adorno put it: ‘Better would be a consciousness that realized its own diminished potential: Beckett has it […]. The only means by which culture can cure its curse of futility is by submitting that curse to interrogation’.⁴

On the other hand, what faith can we place in such an interrogation? Few authors emphasise humanity’s propensity for self-delusion as did Samuel Beckett, but one of them was certainly Immanuel Kant, some two centuries earlier. Fewer still take this propensity to be as fundamental to our consciousness as that which we take as our first and strongest defence against illusion: reason itself. The human being is limited in many capacities, perhaps none more than the capacity to sincerely acknowledge this simple observation. The impulse remains not simply to go beyond the horizon of possible cognition but, further, to deny this horizon altogether. But a limitless mind would have no need to question itself. Questioning would not occur to it. We have seen Kant argue that there is a point at which the limited mind necessarily fails to answer all of its questions, and we have seen Beckett depict this point. The formulation of these questions a process originating from limitation itself; an unstillable oscillation between ambition and failure. The impossibility of concluding critique is contained the very fact of critique. The fact that previous discussions – specifically, those mentioned in Chapter One – on Beckett and Kant have focused on the sublime serves to emphasise the importance of failure, a concept the sublime presumes and that is fundamental to, indeed definitive of, human reality. In denying this, humanism flees from the human and, in so doing, reaffirms our propensity for self-delusion. The heart of this may be, to follow Kant, that the transcendental illusion is ‘natural and unavoidable’⁵ and it does not, unlike illusions, desist simply because we become

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³ Adorno, “Commitment”, 90.
⁴ Adorno, “Those Twenties”, 45.
⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 386.
aware of it. Similarly, the most awkward of Beckett’s lessons is that even if we successfully pierce through this illusion, we shall find no contentment. If we return briefly to the eschatological question, in Beckett it could be phrased as ‘What shall become of us?’, and there is the overwhelming sense that the answer is something like ‘Nothing that has not already happened, nothing that will not be repeated indefinitely’. When illusion desists we are left with the tension between going on and simultaneously doing nothing, the negative kairos, knowing only that this is the point where we began and that we have never truly left. Not even for a moment. In a sense then, there is no Beckettian eschatology, as there is no future, and no history to predict it, but only a stagnant, singular present that for us eventually ends in our death but never actually concludes. This is summed up most succinctly by Hamm when he declares that ‘The end is in the beginning and yet you go on’. 

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6 Beckett, Endgame, 126.
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