THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE DIVIDED SKEPTIC: SAMUEL BECKETT'S PARODY AND STANLEY CAVELL'S INTERPRETATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

BY
BRIAN JOHN DOMINGUEZ BERRY

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MARCH 2017

To the memory of Kaila Brown.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the continued help and support of my committee. My chair, Loren Kruger, has not only provided invaluable feedback on my ideas, but has also augmented my drive to finish this task. I would also like to thank my committee members, John Muse and Alison James, whose specializations supplement a lack in my own. I am grateful that they were willing to help in a project such as this that borrows freely from different disciplines.

A special thanks to my colleagues in the Department of Comparative Literature, particularly Monica Felix, Stephen Parkin, Mollie McFee, Chloe Blackshear, and Nana Holtsnider for their intellectual and emotional support.

I would also like to thank the Mellon Foundation for their financial support through a dissertation completion fellowship.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett famously claims, in a 1961 interview with Tom Driver, that he is "not a philosopher," and when asked about similarities between his texts and those of contemporary philosophers, he adds that "their language is too philosophical for me" (23). This response can seem surprising, since Beckett's texts clearly invoke philosophy, particularly philosophical skepticism, a tradition in the west that denies the possibility of our knowledge of the world and of other people. His plays and novels paint a picture of human debility wherein the characters are radically uncertain of the things and people they encounter. Beckett's attempt to distance himself from philosophy might be a humble admission of a lack of philosophical competence, or a red herring to throw off critics—these are both viable options. But I would suggest that Beckett's attitude toward philosophical skepticism is fundamentally ambivalent: the problem of skepticism fascinates him, but he ultimately designates skeptical thought and speech as "too philosophical," something to be abandoned. Beckett's texts present us with a divided skeptic, a figure I am deriving from Stanley Cavell's analysis of the skeptical tradition. Cavell notices how skeptical texts invite the reader to imagine the philosopher's context, wherein they confront an object and deliver a skeptical recital, providing an argument for doubt in this particular context. The skeptic is divided because their context and the doubt it inspires seem both unavoidable and unnatural, since they ultimately return to ordinary life and language. Beckett's texts parody skepticism, providing us with characters who take it perhaps too seriously, and end up seeming ridiculous, but not entirely the object of scorn.

The object of Beckett's parody is specifically the tradition of philosophical skepticism that originates with Descartes's radical doubt of the existence of the material world. Here we must distinguish two senses of 'skepticism.' The more general sense of 'skepticism' is synonymous with 'doubt,' say, skepticism of climate change. Cartesian skepticism is more specifically *philosophical* skepticism, where reality or existence are in question, requiring a different path of argument than ordinary doubt. Beginning in a state of philosophical skepticism, Descartes invokes his famous *cogito* and his ontological argument for the existence of God in order to re-assert his belief in the existence of the material world. His method of universal doubt should ideally lead to universal conviction of the form: 'if I know *anything,* I know *this*.' The resulting conviction is stronger and purer than any ordinary belief, and is thus qualitatively different (a philosophical conviction in response to philosophical skepticism). Descartes's conclusion, even though it is markedly anti-skeptical, remains within the purview of the skeptical tradition because it begins with a strange universal doubt.

Although Beckett's texts demonstrably engage with Descartes, they do not produce a straightforward argument to either prove or disprove him—we cannot label him as either a skeptic or an anti-skeptic. Edouard Morot-Sir claims that "if there is recurrent in [Beckett's] writings use of Cartesian behavior, objects and semantics, it is not for Cartesian purposes" (Morot-Sir 38). Beckett parodies philosophy in the sense that the philosophical material he incorporates is not meant to assuage philosophical doubts. Morot-Sir furthermore attempts to motivate the parody:

> Beckett condemns any form of literature which even implicitly accepts the possibility of a truth-language…. Scepticism is no solution, for it fails to transcend the duality true-untrue…. And so comes Beckett's decision to put things at their worst: to continue to use philosophical language (vocabulary and patterns), since this is inevitable, but at the same time to deny its claim of conferring any truth-value upon its affirmations or negations. (Morot-Sir 93, 95, and 96)

While I agree that Beckett's literary texts challenge truth-language, I find that skepticism challenges truth-language more than Morot-Sir gives it credit, which is why Beckett is not simply a skeptic or anti-skeptic. If we often think of ordinary language as the medium of truth,[1] the premises of skepticism *contradict* ordinary beliefs without definitively showing them to be false, thus complicating the true/false distinction. Or rather, we might say that philosophical claims are true or false in a qualitatively different sense than non-philosophical (ordinary) claims. Skeptical language is already a parody of ordinary language, and Beckett's texts are a parody of a parody.

Beckett's literary texts engage with philosophical skepticism at a further remove and play with philosophical language in ways that philosophical texts could not. Descartes speaks in his texts in the first person, and we would ascribe the claims made to the author himself, assuming that he would stand by them as true. However, he also makes himself a kind of character, the protagonist of his meditations, and as he invites us to imagine ourselves in his position, in a

[1] I qualify this phrase because J.L. Austin's version of ordinary language philosophy also wants to go beyond the true-false model of language, what he calls the "descriptive fallacy" (cf. *How To Do Things with Words* 3 and 100). However, as contemporary French philosopher Sandra Laugier notes, the destruction of the true-false fetish "does not mean abandoning the concept or criterion of truth; it means enlarging it, extending it outside of the domain of 'description'" (*Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy* 100).

nightgown by the fire, he also questions the status of the speaking 'I'.[2] We cannot safely ascribe the claims that Beckett's characters make to the author himself, and yet we are sometimes invited to do so, or at least question the status of the Beckettian 'I.' In an early short story, "First Love," the narrator claims, "I have always spoken, no doubt always shall, of things that never existed, or that existed if you insist, no doubt always will, but not with the existence I ascribe to them" (35). This line makes sense attributed to the narrator, in the context of his other skeptical remarks. But it also makes sense attributed to Beckett, as either his own skeptical remark, or as a reflection on his writing as a literary author. The humor of the line depends upon a literary sense of 'exist' wherein we think of Beckett as an author whose vocation is to speak of things that do not exist as if they did. We might take the narrator of the story to be speaking either as a literary author himself, or as an amateurish philosopher, since philosophers also use 'exist' in strange ways.

As its main contribution to the tradition, ordinary language philosophy (OLP) brings out the strangeness of skeptical language, particularly the use of 'real' or 'exists.' OLP invites us to imagine a context in which a claim might be made, and it turns out that we need very special reasons for asking if something is real or if something exists. For instance, I might ask, 'Is this table real?' if I were visiting a friend who programs convincing holograms, or who makes tables that are designed to collapse. The ordinary use of inquiring about existence or reality occurs only in a context in which there is a very specific reason for suspicion. Since the skeptic's doubt and Beckett's narrator's doubt do not emerge in this kind of context, it is clear that they depart from ordinary usage. Stanley Cavell enters the OLP/skepticism debate as something of an arbiter: he

---

[2] In the Second Meditation he admits, "I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is" (Descartes 17).

concedes that the skeptic's language is extraordinary (departs from the ordinary) but adds that they cannot help it—extraordinary doubt and language seem unavoidable to the skeptic however much they might wish to avoid them.

Cavell's OLP-inspired insight helps us understand both why Beckett would deny being a philosopher, and why his texts seem philosophical anyway. On the one hand, neither Beckett nor his characters share the skeptic's exact context. The characters find themselves in a nebulous context somewhere between the skeptic and the OLP, since the worlds Beckett creates for them almost warrant radical doubt in the more ordinary sense.[3] On the other hand, Beckett and his characters share with the skeptic a similar necessity that they seem to wish to avoid, and yet cannot. Cavell's interpretation of philosophical skepticism provides the best model for understanding Beckett's expressive dilemma, his necessity to express the conviction that there is nothing to express.

Beckett's expressive dilemma develops and proves most fruitful in his mature, post-war period. Shortly after the war, Beckett reports that he had a "revelation," in which he "realized that [his] own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away" (qtd. in Knowlson 318 and 319). My project will consider three texts from this period that trace his lack-of-knowledge trajectory: *The Unnamable* (1949), *Endgame* (1956), and *How It Is* (1961). I do not claim that Beckett was reading Cavell,[4] but particular Cavellian insights clarify how Beckett

---

[3] As a schizophrenic might justifiably and without philosophical intent wonder whether they are hallucinating. In Descartes, the skeptic is not mad, they only *seem* mad from a certain perspective, which is a vital nuance.

[4] Although Andre Furlani, in *Beckett After Wittgenstein,* suggests that Beckett may have read Cavell's "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," by the time he was working on *How It Is* (Furlani 25).

converges with and diverges from philosophical skepticism. *The Unnamable* presents a particularly clear and prolonged example of what Cavell would call a skeptical recital, a scene in which the skeptic publicly confronts the object of doubt and delivers a stream-of-conscious or narrative account of their argument. With *Endgame,* the dramatic medium provides a unique opportunity for the representation of the divided skeptic, with the strange juxtaposition of a semi-ordinary domestic scene and surroundings that almost inspire radical skepticism. *How It Is* shows what is at stake in skepticism, the denial or affirmation of shared forms of life, since the narrator is fleeing from or denying a pervious shared form of life with the hope of establishing a new form of life with another like himself. These texts parody the skeptical tradition, often to humorous effect, but the humor does not directly ridicule the tradition; that is, Beckett's texts do not dissuade us from doing philosophy.

1. Beckett's Parody Reveals the Gap Between Literature and Philosophy

Beckett's parody of philosophy brings out the irreducibility of the gap between literature and philosophy. I am borrowing the term 'gap' here from Martin Puchner, who encourages us to mind the gap between literature and philosophy, instead of getting "rid of the 'and,' and with it of the distinction itself" ("Mind the Gap" 541). Puchner discusses more specifically the relation between theater and philosophy, fields which in the west have proven to be particularly contentious sibling rivals. Both were born in ancient Greece, but philosophy has been the favorite child because academia has accorded it more prestige than the study of theater (542). This imbalance in prestige holds for literary studies more generally, and although it is not

justified, it might account for the stronger desire to erase the 'and' from the side of literary studies. For Puchner, Beckett has garnered so much philosophical commentary precisely because he is such a rigorous defender of the gap (549–50). Puchner has in mind professional philosophers (specifically Stanley Cavell, Alain Badiou, and Theodor Adorno) who see the philosophical import of Beckett's writing to be a function of its irreconcilable difference from philosophy. A philosophical text might satirize a particular philosophical position to make it look foolish, and plays and novels might also include a philosopher for comic relief,[5] but Beckett's parody refuses such straightforward satire, just as it avoids straightforward philosophical solutions.

The word 'parody' often connotes a satirical take on some cultural object, with the effect of ridiculing the source material, but we will expand the term to include both satirical and non-satirical parody. Gérard Genette notes that this is the original sense of 'parody,' which is merely a textual transposition in that it "consiste donc à reprendre littéralement un texte connu pour lui donner une signification nouvelle" (*Palimpsestes* 24) ["consists, then, of taking up a familiar text literally and giving it a new meaning" (*Palimpsests* 16)].[6] Genette makes this sense of parody synonymous with what he calls hypertextuality, a relationship between a later text (hypertext) and an earlier text (hypotext), "sur lequel il se greffe d'une manière qui n'est pas celle du

---

[5] In his book on philosophy and theater, *Drama of Ideas,* Puchner is consistently frustrated with what he calls the "comic stage philosopher": "When philosophers such as Socrates are allowed onstage at all, invariably they turn out to be comic: concerned only with ideas, they keep stumbling over concrete reality" (*The Drama of Ideas* 16). Beckett avoids this type of character and, for Puchner, "becomes the playwright who captured the absurd without a single philosophical speech" (149–50).

[6] All translations within quotation marks are from published translations (included in the bibliography). All other translations are my own. The French and English versions of the three primary texts are from Beckett—he composed all three in French and translated them into English.

commentaire" (11–12) ["upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5)]. Genette means this caveat to exclude critical texts. There are many instances in which Beckett's narrator parodies philosophical skepticism in this sense. To give just one preliminary example, the narrator of *L'Innommable* [*The Unnamable*] proclaims, "Je ne sais pas ce que je sens, dites-moi ce que je sens, je vous dirai qui je suis" (*L'Innommable* 158) ["I don't know what I feel, tell me what I feel and I'll tell you who I am" (376)], which directly parodies, though not necessarily satirically, Descartes's *cogito:* "Je pense donc je suis ou j'existe" (*Discours* 156) [I think therefore I am or I exist]. The *cogito* emerges explicitly at certain points of *The Unnamable,* and remains a hypotext throughout, serving as the foundation upon which Beckett builds his parody of philosophy.

It is tempting to take the parody's apparent philosophical *failure* as a philosophical *solution*, with Beckett as an intentionally failed philosopher (and his characters as unintentional failures). H. Porter Abbott claims that "the deep difference between what Beckett does as an artist and what philosophers do as philosophers is fail" (Abbott 83). Abbott here encapsulates what is often referred to as Beckett's 'aesthetics of failure,' which sees failure as his achievement. The 'aesthetics of failure' approach expresses the desire to escape the perceived totalizing effect of philosophy, however, the claim that Beckett succeeds at failure merely perpetuates the problem. Audrey Wasser helpfully shows that this approach is unsatisfactory because it reinstates "at another remove those totalizing concepts of subject and work that they seek to criticize" (Wasser 246). By saying that Beckett is a failed philosopher or a failed artist, and that this was his intention, we thereby assert that he has succeeded at failure, causing an infinite failure/success regress. In the place of an aesthetics of failure, Wasser suggests an

"aesthetics of necessity," which accounts for the heterogeneous discourses in Beckett: "a discourse of assertion, on the one hand, and of censure, correction and depreciation on the other" (265). Wasser's "necessity" might invoke the philosophical necessity/contingency distinction, though I do not think her point is that Beckett's language has the weight of philosophical necessity. I will use 'unavoidable' instead of 'necessary' to describe the way in which language imposes itself. The sense of failure in Beckett is more pointedly and interestingly the *failure to avoid the necessity of expression* than the failure of expression itself.

The unavoidability of expression, despite his heterogeneous discourse or apparent self-contradiction, is what connects Beckett to the skeptic. However, this connection does not eradicate the distinction between literature and philosophy. On the point of minding the gap with Beckett, Stanley Cavell's approach is particularly useful because he appropriately leaves the question of the relation between philosophy and literature open. Cavell does not starkly distinguish between his interest in literature and his interest in philosophy, but he also does not deny that there are differences: "I am suggesting that we do not understand these differences" ("An Audience For Philosophy" xxxii). Does a difference meaningfully exist if we do not understand it? I take Cavell to mean that there are no clear criteria (no formal features) by which we can distinguish literature from philosophy beyond doubt, and yet this lack does not effectively blur the distinction. In this case, there is a shared sense that a certain context leads unavoidably to certain language use, but the particular context imposed upon Beckett and his characters is distinct from the traditional skeptical context, as is the resultant language.

Beckett's literary parody of philosophy brings out the distinction, since it is responding to a similar phenomenon, but creates a different affect. At the time he was writing his essay on

Beckett's *Endgame* (1964), Cavell had not yet fully developed his ideas about skepticism. Later, in his introduction to his collection of essays on Shakespearean tragedy (1987), he more clearly articulates his intuition about the relation between Shakespearean tragedy and skepticism: "tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism—… tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of" (*Disowning Knowledge* 5–6). If Cavell's articulation of this point sounds convoluted, it is a symptom of his attempt to mind the gap between literature and philosophy, and counter the position that literature merely instantiates or illuminates particular philosophical ideas (in this case, skepticism). Instead, both skeptical philosophy and certain strains of literature are separate responses to the same desire, which I might put as the desire to deny shared forms of life, shared criteria for knowledge, membership in a community. The gap is maintained since they are different interpretations, or we might say different expressions, of the same desire. Beckett's parody of skepticism is both an interpretation of skepticism, and an expression of that which is at its foundation, a dissatisfaction with shared forms of life, that is, with ordinary criteria and ordinary language.

2. The Divided Skeptic:

Beckett's Expressive Dilemma as a Variation on the Skeptic's Dilemma

The persistent tone of Beckett's most well-known critical text, "Three Dialogues," is one of dissatisfaction—dissatisfaction with the nature of artistic expression, and dissatisfaction with his inability to give an account of and provide a solution for this dissatisfaction. The text is the distillation of a series of conversations he had with the art critic Georges Duthuit about

contemporary painters, but the insights speak to Beckett's own creative endeavor. Beckett speaks quite vaguely of the desire to depart from the artistic status quo, "weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road" (*Disjecta* 139). Beckett's account of what would constitute a genuine artistic discovery confounds Duthuit, who dismisses it as "violently extreme and personal" (139). Beckett's semi-fictionalized self has no response to Duthuit's dismissal at this juncture (the dialogue ends with Beckett's silence), perhaps because he recognizes the contradiction in what he calls for: "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express … together with the obligation to express" (139). His grounds for artistic discovery are thus tied up with an expressive dilemma.

The nature of Beckett's expressive dilemma comes out more clearly when juxtaposed with the dilemma that emerges in the skeptic's dialogue with OLP. Cavell's intervention in this debate shows how OLP and skepticism are caught in an impasse on a fundamental level that constitutes both sides. The particular occasion of the intervention was initially to show that Ludwig Wittgenstein does not definitely refute skepticism,[7] but rather that skepticism remains an active threat to ordinary language. Cavell lays out the dilemma of skeptical language as follows:

> … The philosopher's words must (or must seem to) be used in their normal way, otherwise they would not conflict with what should ordinarily be meant in using them; and that the philosopher's words cannot be used in (quite) their normal way, otherwise

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the main figures of OLP, though he does not use this term himself. Those who would recruit him to refute skepticism might cite his well-known remark that "philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*" (*Philosophical Investigations* § 38, emphasis in original), which essentially means that philosophical language departs from ordinary language. However, Wittgenstein's project is not simply to advocate that language never go on holiday, but takes a keen interest in what happens when it does.

> the ordinary facts, examples, and considerations he adduces would not yield a general skeptical conclusion. ("The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" 60)

The skeptic's problem is that their words both are and are not used in the ordinary sense, and it is this very dual structure that defines their position. Skepticism on this view has two main conditions: 1) it takes itself to convey a more fundamental and general truth than ordinary belief, and 2) it contradicts ordinary belief. It is this second condition that causes the most trouble, because it reveals that the skeptic must be using words in the ordinary sense, and thus that the grounds for skeptical concerns must emerge from ordinary concerns. A particular skeptic might either revel in or be distressed by the sense of contradiction with ordinary belief, but either way, the contradiction is what drives skepticism and is what lends it the sense that it has made a *discovery.* Skepticism would not be a genuine discovery if it were simply using words differently.

The vision of artistic discovery that imposes itself on Beckett has a similar dual structure, presenting itself both as art and as non-art, a continuation and a negation of the tradition. Toward the end of "Three Dialogues," in his discussion of the painter Bram van Velde, Beckett distinguishes between "what I am pleased to fancy [van Velde] is, fancy he does, and then that it is more than likely that he is and does quite otherwise" (144). Beckett's ideal artist, from a certain perspective, feels that they achieve failure, inexpressiveness; however, from another perspective, they are also forced to concede that they do express after all. It is important that the dialogue ends in an impasse, with Beckett asserting what he fancies the artist does, but not fully conceding "what is more than likely" the case.

Beckett and the skeptic are serious in their dilemmas because they insist on *both* the radicalness of their discoveries *and* on the pertinence of their discoveries to the tradition. It would be easy to give up on the latter requirement, which is what Cavell claims fraudulent art does. It is a temptation of "anti-art movements" in general to "claim to *know*" that "the history of a given art has come to an end," while at the same time claiming "the respect due only to those whose seriousness they cannot share" ("A Matter of Meaning It" 222). With Beckett, the conviction that there is nothing to express combined with the obligation to express is not a mere gimmick, but an enduring concern throughout his texts, originating in a creative crisis.

3. Chapter Breakdown

A natural entry point is of course *Endgame,* the subject of chapter 1, "The Unavoidability of Meaning in *Endgame:* The Impasse Between Skepticism and Ordinary Language," not only because it is one of Beckett's most well-known plays, but also because Cavell explicitly wrote about it. In the secondary literature, Cavell's *Endgame* essay is often cited as proof that a serious philosopher is interested in Beckett, though few critics substantively engage with it. Those who do discuss it, often take issue with the relevance of the 'ordinary' to Beckett's play.[8] Although Cavell wrote the essay before he fully articulated the relationship between OLP and philosophical skepticism, he already anticipates some of his later themes. He notices how Beckett attempts to flee from meaning and deny ordinary language, and how even though this is

[8] For instance, Benjamin Ogden in "What philosophy can't say about literature: Stanley Cavell and *Endgame*" (2009), and Gordon Bearn in "Sounding Serious: Cavell and Derrida" (1998).

a vain endeavor, it is undertaken in all seriousness. As a dramatic text, *Endgame* is able to explore the problem of philosophical skepticism in new ways. In particular, skepticism of the minds of others takes on a new form in the relationship between the spectators and the characters. Even though the spectators share a physical space with the performers, who may gesture towards acknowledging the presence of the spectators, this gesture only reinforces the fact that the characters are ontologically separate. *Endgame* brings to the fore that the theatrical sense of 'presence' both is and is not the same as the ordinary sense.

Although Cavell never mentions *The Unnamable,* it deserves special consideration in my project because out of all of Beckett's texts it is the clearest case of what Cavell might call a skeptical recital (cf. *Claim of Reason* 420). The recital is Cavell's way of fictionalizing the skeptic so as to consider the status of the claims they are making. In chapter 2, "*The Unnamable*'s Parody of the Skeptical Recital: Confounding the Categories of Skepticism," I claim that the narrator of *The Unnamable* presents a parody of such a recital. He reproduces lines of argument that could be traced to various different skeptics in the western tradition (notably Descartes and the occasionalists Malebranche and Geulincx), but they are taken out of context, and the doubt itself is brought into doubt. In his analysis of the skeptical recital, Cavell helpfully points out that the object of inquiry is a generic and not a specific object. The narrator's parody of skepticism notably confuses these distinctions, though the comic effect also reveals how skeptical claims can be made seriously. After many permutations of skeptical meditations, the narrator eventually runs out of steam, supposedly exhausting the possibilities for this line of thought. The text ends with one of Beckett's most famous lines, "I can't go on, I'll go on," which encapsulates both his own artistic dilemma and that of the skeptic (UN 407).

Although the final words of *The Unnamable* had a direct application to Beckett's own creative position at the time, he was able to move out of his prose-writing impasse, or make the impasse productive once again, with *How It Is,* which also introduced a new variation to Beckett's engagement with skepticism. Instead of presenting us with a narrator in the midst of a skeptical crisis, expressing himself in ways that are similar to though parodic of actual philosophers, in chapter 3, "Skepticism as Flight From Humanity in *How It Is:* The Scene of Instruction as Fantasy of a New Shared Form of Life," I will consider how the narrator of *How It Is* engages with the desire behind skepticism. In particular, for Cavell, skepticism is the expression of the desire to deny shared forms of life—it is the denial of our own humanity. The narrator of *How It Is* is persistently concerned to distance himself from the human species. This distancing is paired with the desire to create a new form of life, or species, with Pim, a creature that he identifies as being like himself. The new form of life would be predicated on the new language that the narrator attempts to establish between them, though it is never clear if communication is actually successful.

CHAPTER 1

THE UNAVOIDABILITY OF MEANING IN *ENDGAME:* THE IMPASSE BETWEEN SKEPTICISM AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE

The first word of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame,* "finished" (E 1), may strike us as a joke, since we could take its deliverer, Clov, to be stepping out of character to address the spectators regarding the performance that has just begun. An alternative sense emerges if we take Clov to be speaking to himself and referring to his domestic routine of opening the curtains and removing the sheets covering Hamm, Nagg, and Nell, which in this strange world constitutes getting them up. The rest of his speech opens up a philosophical sense of the word 'finished,' suggesting that his existence "must be nearly finished," because he cannot conceivably "be punished anymore" (E 1). These three senses (among others) remain in play, not necessarily for every viewer on every viewing, but always as a possibility: the opening of *Endgame* can be seen as theatrical, or as a slightly distorted depiction of an ordinary domestic scene, or as expressing a philosophical position.

The opening of *Endgame* is both a provocation and an invitation—it provokes confusion and invites us to make sense of it—much like the ending, which finds Clov ambivalently poised between staying and leaving. In the stretch of time between those two curtains, the confusion provoked contrasts with the spectators' ordinary lives and ordinary ways of speaking, and the means of making sense emerge in this confrontation. *Endgame* projects away from ordinary life and language on three different levels: 1) it presents an extraordinary domestic scene, 2) it incorporates philosophical themes and language, and 3) it is self-consciously theatrical. The

invitation to make sense of the play does not mean that we should deny its extraordinary surface appearance, but that we should recognize that the extraordinariness is based on ordinary life and language, to which we ultimately return.

First, the domestic scene of *Endgame* can strike us as extraordinary, creating a gap between their living space and our own. In an act of interpretation, we might consider how the characters got into this situation in an attempt to bridge the gap between our world and theirs. For instance, given that Hamm speaks of the room we see before us as a "shelter" (E 3 and 69),[1] we might assume that it is a bomb shelter and that they are the only known survivors of a global nuclear war. While this assumption is certainly warranted, it would be unhelpful to take it as an explanation of what the play is 'about,' as if it were a realistic speculation about what post-apocalyptic life might be like. Instead of seeking an explanation for their situation, we should accept it as given and attempt to recognize ourselves in that extraordinary context.

Second, *Endgame*'s philosophical language complements the extraordinary domestic scene, suggesting a knowledge gap between the characters and their surroundings (skepticism of the world), and a knowledge gap between the characters themselves (skepticism of the minds of others). However, the play does not directly represent a philosophical system or treatise on the stage. When the characters use philosophical language, it is usually parodically, as when Clov claims that the "whole universe" stinks of corpses (E 46). While claims about the whole universe tend to have a philosophical ring, philosophy does not concern itself with secondary qualities

[1] The UK Faber edition has "refuge" (*Complete Dramatic Works* 93 and 126), which is a cognate of the original French "refuge" (F 15 and 90).

like smell. Philosophical language already departs from ordinary language, and the parody thereof highlights this departure.

Third, the very experience of being a spectator is extraordinary since we bracket the kinds of response we would have outside the theater, and *Endgame* draws our attention to this disjunct. Most of the play proceeds as if a fourth wall[2] were in place, since the characters behave as if the spectators were not there, but there are moments when this feature seems to falter. For instance, when Clov first says, "It's finished," he potentially appears to us as an actor (or stagehand) addressing the auditorium, instead of as a character speaking to himself. Apart from these potential breaks, the characters persistently inject theatricality into their 'ordinary' relationships. They treat each other as if they were scene partners, with their exchanges scripted and rehearsed like clockwork day after day.

In order to examine the interweaving of literature and philosophy in Beckett's extraordinary domestic space, we will turn to Stanley Cavell's analysis of the uneasy way in which philosophical thinking fits into ordinary life. In academic philosophy, Cavell is most well known for his evaluation of the significance of philosophical skepticism in the light of ordinary language philosophy (OLP), seeing the skeptical and ordinary outlooks locked in an impasse. But before he fully developed his position on skepticism, he turned his attention to *Endgame* in "Ending the Waiting Game" (1964), which provides an interpretation of the play influenced by

---

[2] As will be discussed more below, I am using the concept of fourth wall here somewhat eccentrically to designate the dramatic feature that the *characters* proceed as if the spectators were not there, because this is the case in *Endgame,* and there is no better term for it. The emphasis is on the divide between the characters and the spectators, not the performers/actors and the spectators. I do not mean it to refer to blocking and acting choices, which concern actors and not characters, though this was the initial purpose of the term.

his growing interest in OLP. Although this piece is moderately well known, it has not proven influential in readings of Beckett more broadly, perhaps partly because of its insistence on the relevance of the concept of 'the ordinary' for literature. In this chapter, I hope to show the usefulness of Cavell's basic approach to *Endgame,* while also extending the scope beyond that initial essay to reflect his more developed approach to philosophical skepticism from later in his career. His basic approach suggests that we attempt to read moments of *Endgame* either literally or within the context of an ordinary domestic scene. This approach brings out the significance of the play's extraordinary setting, and brings into sharp contrast a primary motive behind the play: the exasperation with our *inability* to *not* produce meaning. The will to meaninglessness and its inevitable failure in *Endgame* mirrors the skeptic's departure from and eventual return to ordinary life and language.

My argument expands on Cavell's essay, claiming that the exasperation with meaning manifests itself as a parody of literal and ordinary meaning, inverting the structures of surface and depth, and leads to a philosophy-like impasse between ordinary and extraordinary life and language. Cavell's later work on philosophical skepticism builds on his earlier conception of the ordinary/extraordinary relation in that the positions of skeptic and anti-skeptic are indefinitely stuck in an impasse that defines their discourse. I claim that this type of impasse is already present in *Endgame,* where it emerges in the relationship between the characters themselves, and between the characters and the spectators. Although Cavell's later work proposes a non-philosophical sense of acknowledgement as a way out of the obsession with knowledge that produces skepticism, Beckett parodies acknowledgement and relegates it to failure. Just as acknowledgement bridges the gap between other minds, it can also bridge the gap between the

stage and the theatrical spectators. But in performance, what appears to be an acknowledgement of the spectators by the characters actually only reinforces their ontological separateness. However, this process also redefines the boundary, leading to a re-examination of the concept of 'spectator.' In my analysis of *Endgame,* the Cavellian understanding of ordinary life and language brings out the effectiveness of the play's extraordinary domestic scene, its integration of themes from philosophical skepticism, and its re-examination of the character/spectator relationship.

1. Parody of Ordinary and Literal Language in Stanley Cavell's *Endgame* Essay

Although literary texts are the kinds of objects that invite interpretation par excellence, *Endgame* presents itself, at least on the surface, as a text that not only resists but outright forbids the search for meaning. Negotiating these opposing sentiments, Stanley Cavell asserts in "Ending the Waiting Game" that the characters in *Endgame* do not take meaninglessness as a given, but rather make meaninglessness their *goal*, one that is bound to fail ("Ending" 156). The failure of the play's own apparent aspiration provides what I take to be the thesis of Cavell's essay: "The discovery of *Endgame,* both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning (if that means lack of meaning) but its total, even totalitarian, success—our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean" ("Ending" 117). The futility of resisting meaning lies in the fact that it is out of our hands; language is a given that bears meaning whether we like it or not. Some might object to Cavell's point and claim that the words in the play only bear their *surface*, explicit, or local meaning, and that there is no *deep*, implicit, or overarching meaning behind it. Although Cavell

does not use these terms, I would characterize the innovation of his approach as looking for depth on the surface, which reveals how Beckett parodically inverts surface and depth. By hiding the literality of certain lines and estranging the ordinariness of the domestic scene, Beckett transforms surface significance into implicit significance.

Even if *Endgame* has no definitive deep or overarching meaning, in the sense that it is always open to various interpretations, the act of criticism entails making claims that gesture toward such meaning. Cavell's *Endgame* essay is primarily a work of literary criticism, and like much of his other critical work, it self-consciously flirts with over-interpretation. Although this chapter is mostly concerned with the approach he proposes in the opening and closing of the essay, it may be helpful to provide a few of the main critical insights he makes in the body. Written in the sixties, the essay is keenly attuned to the anxiety surrounding the possibility of nuclear warfare. Cavell is sensitive to how Beckett's light, comic, repartée-style dialogue can precipitously strike one as deeply serious, just as our daily life might suddenly be interrupted by the thought of the Bomb. Thinking about world destruction, Cavell dives into a long consideration of the Biblical flood story as an intertext for *Endgame.* Just as Noah's family might have questioned God's reason for destroying humanity, Nagg's family questions the reason for their being spared from destruction—humanity's ripeness for destruction is taken for granted. Additional allusions to Christ suggest that the play does not know if it is in the Old Testament or the New Testament, and thus it is uncertain if salvation is to come or has already past. This brings us to what, for Cavell, is the main goal of the play, "dismantling Eschatology" (149). The only way to undo the curse of having been spared from destruction is to cease waiting for salvation (hence the essay's title, "Ending the Waiting Game"). Although I do use some of the

same examples that Cavell draws on to support his critical claims, my main interest is in his approach to the material. The point, in this section, is to use Cavell's approach in the essay to address the question: What does it mean to do literary criticism with a text, like *Endgame*, that seems to resist the endeavor?

Attempting to approach *Endgame* with the intent of writing criticism can seem like a lost cause, since the play consistently trips itself up. But if Beckett were simply obscuring surface meaning for the sake of being obscure, *Endgame* would be a fraudulent text, mere obscurantism. Fraudulence, as it relates to art, speaks not only to whether a piece is good or bad, but also questions whether something counts as art at all. For Cavell, the "threat of fraudulence" becomes "endemic to modern art" over the course of the nineteenth century ("Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*" 176).[3] Before this development, we cannot imagine the consumers of music, painting, literature, and theater asking whether or not the object in question is "genuine art" (176). The threat of fraudulence affects both the producer and the consumer. From the consumption side, we would be fraudulent spectators if we celebrated *Endgame* just for its extraordinary surface appearance. Cavell claims that he felt compelled to write about the play "once the methodological route to it opened for me" ("Ending" 115, fn. 1), that is, once he could justify *Endgame*'s claim upon him as a non-fraudulent text. We might characterize his basic approach as asking of a given line either "what might this mean in an ordinary context?" or

---

[3] Cavell's *Endgame* essay does not yet discuss the play in terms of fraudulence, a concept that first emerges in this Kierkegaard essay, written shortly thereafter. The connection between the discussion of art and religion here is that we now often read Kierkegaard's religious writings through an aesthetic lens because modern art has come to be "understood in categories which are, or were, religious" ("Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*" 175).

"what does this literally mean?" These questions are fruitful for *Endgame* in particular because they persist despite the resistance that the play's surface extraordinariness throws up.

Although we often take the literal meaning as that which lies on the surface, Beckett parodies literal meaning by inverting surface and depth, turning surface literality into a joke, and using hidden literality to complicate the surface meaning. In *Endgame, surface* literality becomes a punchline, for instance, after their unanswered prayer, Hamm exclaims, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" which is funny because Jesus is literally a bastard (E 55). Although he does not highlight the inversion of surface and depth, Cavell tends to emphasize "*hidden* literality," lines that do not obviously present an alternative literal reading, whose purpose is to "undo curses" and "unfix clichés and idioms" ("Ending" 119 and 120). In contrast to the previous example where the literalization pokes fun at God, an instance of a hidden literalization would read taking God's name in vain as an implicitly sincere expression. For instance, when Clov finds a flea, Hamm says, "Catch him, for the love of God!" (33). If Hamm is sincere about dismantling eschatology, then the use of 'God' is not in vain—those who love God must prevent the possibility of humanity evolving again. If the curse is a parodical use of God's name, the hidden literalization undoes the curse by being a parody of a parody. It does not reinstate faith in the divine, but is an expression of despair in the face of the temptation to faith. As Cavell claims, if "positivism said that statements about God are meaningless; Beckett shows that they mean too damned much" ("Ending" 120). Logical positivism's search for meaning that is entirely on the surface is a vain endeavor, but so is the attempt to deny the primacy of surface meaning. A parody of a parody is not like a double negative that reasserts a positive assertion; instead, it

acknowledges surface meaning while at the same time expressing frustration at the unavoidability of that meaning.

Beckett's parody of linguistic meaning on the textual level has a correlate on the dramatic level, as seen in the extraordinary family represented on the stage. The shift from textual to dramatic parody brings with it a shift in the sense of 'meaning.' Hidden literality parodies the linguistic 'meaning' of a given line, while the dramatized strangeness of the family parodies 'meaningful' relationships. If relationships lack meaning, then they also lack a reason for staying together, and yet, as with ordinary relationships, these couples feel the imperative to stay together. Ordinary couples are not literally stuck together, since relationships do end. But the couples in *Endgame* who are eternally stuck together in their dramatic world express the *feeling* of the unavoidability of the ordinary relationships in which we currently find ourselves.

In its expression of the desire to escape meaningful relationships, *Endgame* puts the will to the extraordinary in dialogue with the ordinary. In a later lecture (1986), Cavell asserts that for Beckett "the extraordinary is ordinary," in contrast to Chekhov "for whom the ordinary is extraordinary" ("The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" 167). He does not explain the contrast, though I take it to be a difference of surface appearances: the uniqueness of the dialogue of both figures depends on an interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary, but with Beckett, the extraordinary is on the surface. For David Rudrum, the gesture of interpreting *Endgame*'s extraordinary quality within the context of the ordinary "might reasonably be expected to stave off the threat of skepticism, but I find it does rather the opposite" (Rudrum 545). The reason that reading within the context of the ordinary drives us deeper into skepticism is the same reason that OLP does not decisively repudiate skepticism—they are two sides of an argument that has

no resolution. Like sparring domestic couples, neither would be the same without the other, so they are stuck together.

This picture of two sides stuck together with no sign of resolution describes the relationship between a spectator/reader and the play, the one side taking up the invitation to interpret while the other plays the game of attempting to retract the invitation or negate the possibility of interpretation. *Endgame* figures the game of invitation and retraction from the very beginning: after Clov raises the curtain on Hamm, the latter immediately commands to be covered again ("Go and get the sheet" [E 5]), and just as quickly changes his mind ("No!" [E 6]). To illustrate the interplay of interpretation further, we might borrow James Acheson's reading of *Endgame* as a game of chess between Beckett and the spectator, and say that "checkmate occurs when we recognise that the play is deliberately designed to resist even the most ingenious of explications" (Acheson 33). In chess, checkmate means that the king has no possible moves to escape the opponent's attack. To say that *Endgame* checkmates the spectator means that, after several rounds of exchanges, all potential routes for meaning have been closed off. Where Acheson seems to conclude that *Endgame* leaves the spectator in checkmate (Acheson 43), I would interpret Cavell's position to indicate that the play ends in a draw. In chess, a draw occurs when neither side can potentially achieve checkmate to end the game, and it ends either by an agreement between the two sides, or by the conventions of the game (such as the threefold repetition of the same configuration of pieces).[4] As with the relation between Hamm and Clov, the relation between spectator and play does not come to an end with a decisive victory of one

[4] Productions of *Endgame* can visually underscore the repetitions of configurations and movements to indicate that by the end, the play deserves to be called a draw.

over the other. Instead, it ends by convention: *Endgame* goes on for a reasonable length of time and then ends with a curtain.[5]

The spectator avoids definitive checkmate because local insights about *Endgame* give us room to move and offer potential points of access. Some of these local insights, which seem to give the text a sense of meaning, are precisely the kinds of things that could be included in the footnotes, or in the program to accompany a production—that is, bits of information that seem more or less trivial. However, Cavell focuses on a few observations that he attempts to extend beyond local or trivial import, calling them "keys" to the play's interpretation: "'Endgame' is a term of chess; the name Hamm is shared by Noah's cursed son, it titles a kind of actor, it starts recalling Hamlet" ("Ending" 115). In line with these "keys," Cavell also draws out further references to Shakespeare (such as the nod to *Richard III* in Hamm's "My kingdom for a nightman!" [E 23]), and the Bible (such as Hamm being Noah's son Ham). Picking up on these references is nothing new; in fact, part of the strategy of the play is that any moderately educated spectator will pick up such bread crumbs. What is unique is his application of what I have above called his approach of reading either literally or within the context of ordinary language and ordinary domesticity. What this approach accomplishes is not a taming of the intertextual material; instead, the approach reveals the play's parodic effect, showing how easily trivial bits of cultural knowledge can seem to take on great importance, possibly informing a spectator's entire interpretation.[6]

---

[5] Though Beckett remarked to director Alan Schneider that he added the short mime play *Act Without Words* because *Endgame* was "too short (one hour and a half) to provide a full evening's agony" (Beckett in *No Author Better Served* 16).

[6] For Nell, in contrast to Nagg, there is a non-trivial difference between whether sawdust or sand fills their bins: "It is important" (E 17). Little else seems to matter for her. Relationships can hinge on such apparently trivial details.

The characters themselves, particularly Hamm, explicitly parody intertextual material, denying a connection both to the spectator and to the desolate outside world they have forsaken. A parody of an intertext is, according to Gérard Genette, a textual transmission that takes up "a familiar text literally and [gives] it a new meaning" (*Palimpsests* 16). Even if we have not directly read them, Shakespeare and the Bible constitute part of the culture that defines us, and thus are sources for what Cavell might call the totalitarian success of meaning ("Ending" 117). We are not free to say, "My kingdom for an X," without referencing Shakespeare. Even in a world where culture has been reduced to rubble, Hamm cannot fully escape the Bible, in spite of his blatant parody of its doctrine. For instance, within one of his narratives, he says to his suppliants, "Lick your neighbor as yourself!" (E 68) ["Léchez-vous les uns les autres" (F 89)]. Hamm's remark is a perversion of a central Christian commandment: "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22: 37).[7] Even as he ignores the commandment by sending his suppliants away, Hamm necessarily brings the commandment to mind, for the logic and phrasing of the line do not make sense apart from the Biblical allusion. Hamm's strategy for parody is to explicitly literalize the Biblical verse and turn it into a joke, interpreting the word 'love' in the most direct and physical sense—as sexual love. By replacing *agape* (love as charity) with *eros* (erotic love), Hamm wants to avoid the fact that the love that others seek, in the form of material salvation and spiritual companionship, is something that he *can* provide and yet is *unwilling* to provide. He

[7] The French parodies a slightly different source, Jean 13 : 34, "Comme je vous ai aimés, vous aussi, aimez-vous les uns les autres." The shift in the source is of significance, since Jesus is here putting himself in the position of a loving God. Hamm in the French omits the "as I have loved (or licked) you" clause that should precede the quote.

conveys this attitude with a gesture that is at once an acknowledgement and an avoidance—Yes, I know the Bible, but I choose to suppress my knowledge and not act upon it.

A seemingly small, local insight, such as the explication of an intertext, when combined with a method for reading, can yield critical, non-trivial insights. Seeing the act of taking God's name in vain as a hidden literalization situates the characters, for Cavell, as forsaken Biblical figures. As mentioned above, hidden literality inverts linguistic surface and depth, with the result of both undoing an idiom and reinstating its underlying, literal significance. When Clov is looking through his glass out at the sea, Hamm asks if he sees any gulls, or if there is anything coming on the horizon, to which Clov responds, "What in God's name could there be on the horizon?" (E 31) ["Clov: Mouettes ! … Mais que veux-tu qu'il y ait à l'horizon ? (45)].[8] In this context, the most obvious interpretation of Clov's use of God's name is not the literal one—given Clov's apparent frustration, we are more likely to interpret the line as his taking the name of God in vain.

If we combine one of Cavell's "keys to interpretation" and his suggestion that we try to read the lines literally, Clov's response yields a different meaning. If Hamm stands in for the Biblical Ham (son of Noah), then the inhabitants of the shelter are the last remnants of the human race. Instead of looking for a dove, Hamm asks about the gulls. The direction for Clov's line says that he is "*exasperated,*" suggesting that it is simply a curse. But it can also be taken as a sincere

[8] Cavell's particular point does not work directly in the French, which does not invoke God here. But the effect is replaced with a pun on the word "mouettes" in the previous line, which Beckett translates as "gulls," but it can also be a kind of boat. Thus it is not a literalization, but it does convey a similar point as asking if there is a messenger of God on the horizon—it asks if there is a means of salvation in the form of a boat. In revising himself via the later English version, Beckett finds an acceptable substitute, but also makes the line more complex by adding the possibility of hidden literality.

question about what kind of messenger God will send to save them. With this interpretation, Hamm remains ambivalent—his professed wish that things come to an end conflicts with his demonstrated desire that each day be the same. Since the characters have given up hope that God will deliver them from their ark, their daily ritual has devolved into looking for signs of deliverance and expecting none. This deeper ambivalent structure only comes out with the combination of a local insight and the method of interpreting literally.

The structural ambivalence of *Endgame* emerges more clearly in the process of reading it, or in reflecting upon it after a performance, which provides the critical distance necessary for literary criticism. Applying a method of interpretation means taking a step back to deliberate, draw out implications, and find depth in what seem like surface features. With some critical distance, we might focus on a particular line, taking it out of context, without worrying about making it fit into the performance of the scene. In performance, the lines in context may dictate a certain intuitive delivery,[9] which will close off certain interpretations. Cavell suggests that Hamm's line, "you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" (E 53, and repeated on 68), intuitively emphasizes "that," but that if we emphasize "cure," the line implies, "perhaps there is something else for it—if we could give up our emphasis upon cure. There is faith, for example" ("Ending" 129). It is hard to imagine a production that would do as Cavell suggests here, since it is only one line, and an eccentric emphasis to make a specific critical point would throw off the flow of Hamm's speech. The two possible readings, one more amenable to performance and the other almost exclusively possible in criticism, emphasize different sides of Hamm's ambivalence. The

[9] An actor is of course free to go against their initial intuitive delivery (how it might come out on a cold reading), which may even be a deliberate acting strategy, though its effect is predicated upon the intuitive delivery.

emphasis on "that" encourages Hamm's interlocutor to give up and put and end to it, while the emphasis on "cure" encourages them to carry on. A minor shift in emphasis turns Hamm from harsh to charitable.

The difference between the proximity of the spectator to the performance and the distance of the literary critic can produce an aspect shift, making a text seem either ordinary or extraordinary—with *Endgame,* distance brings the ordinary perspective into focus.[10] The world of the play on the surface is quite extraordinary. But for Cavell-as-critic, we need not take too much of a step back to see that beyond this surface they are recognizable as a family. He qualifies them as "not just any family perhaps, but then every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way—gets in its own way in its own way" ("Ending" 117). We might take him to imply that ordinary families are unhappy families, and the Nagg family is different from our own only in degree and not in kind. Or perhaps the only real difference is that they are in extraordinary circumstances (which might approach post-apocalyptic realism). Cavell concludes that this aspect shift is vital to the interpretation of the play: "to miss the ordinariness of the lives in *Endgame* is to avoid the extraordinariness (and ordinariness) of our own" ("Ending" 119). The difference between us and them is that our lives seem ordinary on the surface, and theirs only gains this aspect with critical distance. Beckett's inversion of surface and depth invites us to consider our lives as extraordinary at a remove.

Beckett's inversion of surface and depth does not simply conflate the categories of ordinary and extraordinary; instead it reveals that an act of acknowledgement or avoidance (as

[10] Criticism can also go in the other direction, for instance, over-interpreting an inane drawing room comedy to bring out its extraordinary qualities.

opposed to knowledge or ignorance) *produces* the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary. I am adapting here a concept that Cavell develops in a later article, "Knowing and Acknowledging" (1966),[11] where he specifies that "acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge" in that it requires "that I *do* something or reveal something" (257). If a spectator feels that *Endgame* is extraordinary, this reveals something about them. That is, the world of *Endgame* does not appear extraordinary because it is unknown—if this were the case, the experience would be one of learning something new about an unexplored territory. Instead, the effect depends upon defamiliarized but nonetheless familiar territory, a place that in a certain mood we might wish to avoid. Cavell's claim does not imply that there is no difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary; and not necessarily that the line is blurry, or that the one depends on the other. I take him to say instead that the ordinary is a matter of recognition or acknowledgement.

Acknowledging another means entering into a form of conversation with them, sharing a language and a world with them, and the challenge of *Endgame* is finding a way for the spectator to enter the conversation. Part of *Endgame*'s extraordinary quality derives from its manner of dialogue, which Cavell claims sounds extraordinary even though it "imitates … the qualities of ordinary conversation among people whose world is shared" ("Ending" 119). Even if we do not quite share a world with these characters, their exchange strikes us as uncanny (and the uncanny feeling is a step toward acknowledgement) because so much of our idle chatter sounds like bits of rehearsed dialogue. A euphemism for idle chatter is 'talking about the weather,' a figure of

---

[11] This article marks a vital turning point in Cavell's thought toward the interpretation of philosophical skepticism, and it contains the germ of *The Claim of Reason* (1979).

speech that is literalized the play: “Hamm: What’s the weather like? / Clov: As usual” (E 27). The question is so generic that a substantive response is not necessary. The point of asking is not to *know* something, for Hamm knows the probable answer, but rather to get Clov to *do* something, to engage in the routine. Hamm wants acknowledgement for the sake of acknowledgement. The desire for acknowledgement drives our ordinary ‘talk about the weather’ as well, but this scene in *Endgame* conceals this ordinary purpose by amplifying the routine to include not only a conversation, but an entire ladder and telescope bit, which upstages the conversation.

The more obvious approach to concealing the ordinary quality of conversation would be to downplay it, but instead *Endgame* conceals and distorts the ordinary surface by amplifying it, which hides the ordinary in plain sight. When telling a story, or a joke, you adopt a raconteur voice; when making small talk, if you do not keep up your end of the conversation, you are sternly reprimanded (as if a director were shouting at you). Combining the rehearsed feel of mundane conversation with the imperative to participate in the conversation, Hamm prods Clov to make small talk about how he is progressing with his story (or his “chronicle”), and when Clov fails to fill his role, Hamm yells, “Keep going, can’t you, keep going!” (E 59). When we feel the social imperative to engage in idle chatter, we rarely find it humorous, but here, Hamm magnifies a normally implicit social imperative and thereby shows how ridiculous it is. The imperative to idle conversation is fairly superficial in that a degree of disingenuousness is acceptable, since it is perhaps the lowest degree of acknowledgement of another. But for Hamm it takes on a great deal of importance, as if continuing their superficial exchange indefinitely were the deepest kind of connection he could imagine.

The scripted-sounding dialogue contrasts with Hamm's story, which presents itself as spontaneously generated, as a work of Hamm's own creation, but even the story reveals itself to be an appeal for acknowledgement from Clov. Indeed, Hamm's story takes on a dialogic quality, suggesting that having another there to receive it and reciprocate is the purpose of the story. The particular story that Hamm keeps returning to appears to be about how Clov came into his custody as a child.[12] It is the story of how the dialogue between Hamm and Clov began, including an exchange between Hamm-as-narrator and another whom we might take as Clov's father. Although Clov's voice does not emerge in the story itself, he interestingly works his way in, as the story creation process becomes a collaboration between the two. As Hamm reaches the stopping point of his story, Clov picks up Hamm's conversation-prodding line from earlier, "Clov: Keep going, can't you, keep going!" (E 61), reinforcing the connection between story and conversation. Clov even makes substantive contributions to the story: "Clov: What age? / Hamm: Oh tiny. / Clov: He would have climbed the trees. / Hamm: All the little jobs" (E 60–61). As Clov grows, he goes from climbing trees to climbing ladders, along with other "little jobs," but his implicit big job is to be an interlocutor and listener, providing Hamm the acknowledgment that he needs but does not want to admit that he needs.

Hamm's ambivalent position, divided between wanting to go on and wanting to end, appears in the fact that the story about Clov stops abruptly, without coming to a proper end, which has the effect of indefinitely suspending the status of his listener. When he reaches the point in the story at which Clov has grown up, supposedly nearing the present, Hamm says,

---

[12] Beckett confirms this point in his correspondence with Schneider, where he unequivocally says that Hamm's story "may be regarded as evoking events leading up to Clov's arrival" (Beckett in *No Author*… 22–23).

"That's all. I stopped there. / … Clov: Will it not soon end? / Hamm: I'm afraid it will" (E 61). The apparent reason for stopping is that Hamm has simply run out of steam, but here going on means going toward an end. His verbal response to the idea of an end colloquially means that it would be unfortunate, but we might also de-colloquialize the response, and emphasize that he is "*afraid*" of an end (this interpretive route is also open in the idiomatically equivalent French, "J'en ai peur" [F 81]). Since his story supposedly recounts the beginning of his relationship with Clov, perhaps he fears that bringing it to an end means bringing the relationship to an end. Not only will he have nothing more to tell about their relationship, for no new narrative material is generated, but more importantly, he will have no one to tell it to. There is also the possibility that Hamm might physically die without Clov, but here the end of the relationship bears more weight. We might see their relationship, as Cavell does, as an ordinary relationship "in which both partners wish nothing more than to end it, but in which each is incapable of taking final steps because its end presents itself to them as the end of the world" ("Ending" 118). The ambivalence between wanting to go on and wanting to end comes out in Hamm's ambiguous use of 'afraid': he is both colloquially 'afraid' that the story will end, and more seriously 'afraid' that their relationship will. The only extraordinary element of their relationship, on Cavell's reading, is that the sense of 'the end of the world' that accompanies the figurative 'death' of a relationship in this case also has the potential correlate of physical death.

Writing literary criticism on *Endgame* can seem to kill it, turning it into a lifeless object of inquiry instead of a living text with which the reader/spectator negotiates meaning in a running dialogue. The temptation of criticism is to turn literary texts into objects of *knowledge,* whereas the tendency to push back against criticism treats literary texts more like people, the

objects of *acknowledgement* instead of totalized understanding. Cavell is sensitive to this dual attitude in his critical work. He makes claims about *Endgame* that purport to be true, but whether or not we as readers of critical writing accept them as true hinges on an act of acknowledgment. The critic is a mediator, suggesting a path of possible acknowledgement. But acknowledgment is significantly fragile, as both literary texts and the minds of other people can suddenly appear mysterious and opaque. In his later work on philosophical skepticism, Cavell retains something of his attitude as a critic, since he describes the opposing positions of skepticism and OLP, though he does not definitively take a side. His main insight is that the two sides define each other and are stuck in an impasse. They represent opposing sides of the philosophical mind that remain irreconcilable. The same might be said of modern attitudes toward literature, where an individual can feel simultaneously or alternatively that a text is meaningful and yet meaningless.

2. The Divided Skeptic: The Impasse Between the Two Sides of Skepticism

The relationship between Hamm and Clov resembles the two sides of philosophical skepticism (skeptic vs. anti-skeptic) in that it is fated to remain in a perpetual impasse. Figuring the relationship as a chess game, as with the relationship between the reader/spectator and the text, the outcome is a draw, which in terms of a philosophical debate translates into an impasse—no one is defeated, but no one is fully satisfied. Cavell describes such conflicting philosophical positions as being like "friends who have quarreled," and are able to "neither tolerate nor ignore one another" ("Must We …" 2). The *inability to ignore* is the defining feature of this impasse. The last lines exchanged between Hamm and Clov convey this inability, tinged with passive

aggressiveness: "Hamm: I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your services. / Clov (*turning, **sharply***): Ah pardon, it's I am obliged to you. / Hamm: It's we are obliged to each other" (E 81, emphasis mine) ["Hamm: Je te remercie, Clov. / Clov (*se retournant, vivement*[13]): Ah pardon, c'est moi qui te remercie. / Hamm: C'est nous qui nous remercions" (F 107)]. What looks like an act of civility turns into civil one-upmanship, with Clov's stage direction indicating a degree of disingenuousness or at least forced civility. The ambivalent sentiment of the exchange is more apparent in the ambiguity of the French term—while 'remercier' means 'to thank,' it can also mean 'to fire or dismiss.'[14] So while each claims to have the authority to dismiss the other, in the end, "nous nous remercions" means that both and neither do.

Hamm and Clov's are unable to ignore each other or dismiss each other, as with the skeptic and the anti-skeptic, because their identities are intertwined—neither would be what they are without the other. Part of Cavell's unique contribution to the interpretation of philosophical skepticism is that he conceives of skepticism more capaciously than the previous philosophical tradition, encompassing both sides and the ground that defines them. The philosophical tradition often characterizes skepticism as the claim that we cannot have knowledge of the existence of the world, but for Cavell it is "any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge," a definition which includes the anti-skeptic (*The Claim of Reason* 46). Anti-skepticism, or philosophical realism, encompasses a range of philosophical positions that reassert our ability to know, or at least our right to claim to know. While anti-skepticism might defend common sense or ordinary beliefs, it is inseparable from skepticism because it puts forward

---

[13] The French "*vivement*" also suggests a quick and curt delivery.

[14] It perhaps collapses the sentiment, 'thank you, but your services are no longer necessary.'

philosophical *reasons* for those beliefs. Cavell's point here is to distinguish the discourse that informs both skepticism and anti-skepticism from ordinary language, for within the scope of our ordinary, everyday concerns, the question of our knowledge of the world's existence simply does not arise, and thus we do not need reasons to defend it. In this sense, even though the skeptic and anti-skeptic are opposed, they are made in each others' image.

This relationship pictures what in Beckett literature is called a pseudo-couple, a term that appears in *The Unnamable* in reference to Mercier and Camier, who appear together and form a unit. I take the 'pseudo' to mean that although there are two of them, they are not actually separable, as is the case with Hamm and Clov who go together like a hammer and nail (Fr. *clou*). Clov does spend a significant portion of the play in his kitchen, but separated from Hamm, from the perspective of the spectator, he may as well not exist. When asked what he does in his kitchen, Clov says, "I look at the wall" (E 12), as if he had nothing to do without Hamm commanding him. Although Cavell's *Endgame* essay does not discuss philosophical skepticism (which is a later development in his work), I suggest that the impasse that joins and defines Hamm and Clov on the interpersonal level invites reading their relationship as a figure for both other-mind and world skepticism.

In the first instance, the impasse between the pseudo-couple Hamm/Clov represents the problem of skepticism of the world, which posits a divide between the intellect and the senses. The skeptic doubts that we can know the world on the ground that our senses fail us.[15] Being blind and immobile, Hamm depends on Clov to peer out the windows and report on what is

[15] More on the strangeness of 'the senses' as ground for doubt in chapter 2.

happening in the world. The privileged sense for knowing the outside world, in this play, is sight, since what matters most to Hamm is whether anything has changed or whether anyone is coming. It is important that neither the spectators nor the other characters can see through the windows—only Clov knows what he sees. His knowledge of the external world is his main bargaining chip in the game. As part of his strategy for keeping this advantage, he always claims that he sees nothing ("Zero … zero … and zero" [E 29]), that nothing has changed, and that the world is exactly as we would imagine it to be—"Corpsed" (30). How can one doubt the senses if they are so consistent?

In order to keep the game with Clov going, Hamm must find a reason for doubt, calling Clov's abilities into question. Hamm's strategy to keep this game going might elucidate some of his otherwise opaque comments. When Clov says he needs the ladder to look through the window, Hamm responds, "Why? Have you shrunk? … I don't like that" (28). And when Clov claims to need the telescope, he responds, "This is deadly" (28). The point of all this business is to make Clov doubt, to get him to think that if at one point he needed neither the ladder nor the telescope, perhaps his degrading senses are no longer reliable. Perhaps the entire time he has thought he has seen nothing, he has only been staring at a blank wall, as he does in his kitchen, or his sight has gone no further than the window. The fact that only Clov can see out the window is both an advantage and a disadvantage—there is no one to either confirm or deny his report.[16] Hamm perpetually defers the end of this game by testing Clov in an area in which he can neither prove himself nor be disproven.

---

[16] The only other potential inhabitant of this world might also be a product of Clov's visions, which supplement his failed senses. When Clov claims to see a "small boy," Hamm immediately doubts that the boy actually exists (E 78).

Other-mind skepticism is more complicated because the division is not between the intellect and the senses (as with world skepticism) but between one's inner life and the inner life of another, wherein our bodies are not expressions of inner life but *barriers* to the knowledge thereof. To contrast with the *philosophical* sense of other-mind skepticism, it may be helpful to consider the ordinary-life version of the problem—that others may be feigning or suppressing behavior, or that we may misinterpret their behavior. As an instance of an ordinary (i.e. *non*-philosophical) other-mind problem, Nagg asks Nell, "Are you crying again? / Nell: I was trying" (E 20). Without being able to see her clearly, Nagg is able to intuit that Nell should be expressing her sadness in this moment, like clockwork. Nell is not exactly suppressing her sadness, but she is nonetheless failing to express it, creating a disjunct between inner and outer. In a related instance, when Clov checks on Nagg for the last time, he reports, "He's crying … / Hamm: Then he's living" (E 62). Here Hamm intentionally misinterprets the significance of crying. It is not false to say that crying is a sign of life, but since *any* behavior is a sign of life, Hamm's remark trivializes the problem of interpreting the pain of another. Although these two examples are a bit strange, they nonetheless resemble the *types* of other-mind problems that enter into our ordinary, daily set of concerns.

Endgame goes beyond these ordinary other-mind problems to the philosophical other-mind impasse by both illustrating the means out of the impasse, and also parodying the means. The problem is not only that I cannot *know* another mind, but also that I cannot *be* another mind and *have* its thoughts and feelings. On the two extremes of this philosophical problem, the skeptic/anti-skeptic pseudo-couple takes the form of the solipsist on the one hand, who maintains that all other minds are simply of the solipsist's own creation, and the behaviorist on the other,

who addresses the problem by maintaining that all we can know of others is their outward behavior. These two positions cannot satisfy each other because they both take the problem of our radical separateness to be a problem of knowledge. When Hamm suspects Clov has left him, he takes up the position of the solipsist: "All kinds of fantasies! That I am being watched! A rat! Steps! … like a solitary child who turns himself into other children, two, three, so as to be together" (E 70). One might read this speech as Hamm suggesting that the entire time he thought Clov had been watching over him and walking about the shelter, it had only been in his head. But he quickly snaps out of this solipsistic reverie as soon as Clov enters again, falling back into their habitual mode of conversation (even asking him to look out the window yet again [E 72]). This scene illustrates a means out of the skeptical impasse—acknowledging another by engaging in ordinary discourse, or at least discourse that counts as ordinary for these characters.

Hamm and Clov's ordinary discourse brackets the skeptical impasse because in it they cease to see their ontological separateness as a problem of knowledge. Cavell first begins to examine this way out of other-mind skepticism in "Knowing and Acknowledging" (1966), where 'acknowledging' names our ordinary, non-philosophical relation to other minds. The distinction emerges in response to the problem of whether one can know another's pain. Taking 'knowledge' to mean 'certainty,' the skeptic denies that they are entitled to say, "I know she is in pain," on the ground that certainty would require that they actually *have* the other's pain, which would negate their ontological separateness. The anti-skeptic forms a pseudo-couple with the skeptic, since they too maintain that 'knowledge' means 'certainty,' but they accept pain-behavior (observable expressions of pain) as certainty enough. For Cavell, the way out of the impasse is to say that we do not know (are not certain of) but acknowledge the pain of another, which both respects the

separateness of the other and retains the concept of 'pain.' We acknowledge by responding to the pain of another—the emphasis is on *doing* rather than knowing. Carrying on a dialogue with another is an act of acknowledgment that brackets the question of knowledge of other minds. Cavell's approach does not pick sides between the skeptic and the anti-skeptic (the epistemological question of certainty remains open), but highlights that our ordinary interaction with another demands that we acknowledge their pain anyway.

Within the diegetic world of the play, the dialogue between Hamm and Clov indicates that they at least appear to acknowledge each other, bracketing the skeptical impasse via their ordinary interactions. But considering the theatrical relationship between an actor and their character opens the possibility for a parody that displaces sincere acknowledgment. Discussing the different modes in which an actor's body may appear, David Graver claims that "a large part of theater's craft and appeal involves altering the natural link between appearances and sensations" (Graver 232). The actor's body can express something it does not feel in the name of a character, which in a non-theatrical context would be straight-forward insincerity. The ontological separateness of actor and character precludes ordinary insincerity, while at the same time generating a specifically theatrical insincerity because ordinary acknowledgement is impossible. The actor's acknowledgment of their character is always displaced. In our ordinary interactions, imitating the pain of another, or expressing it on their behalf, would not be acceptable as acknowledgement.

In the theater, an actor imitating pain-behavior counts as a displaced acknowledgment because there is no ontologically real other who is being imitated/acknowledged. Consider the linguistic expression of pain (which counts as pain-behavior) in Hamm's opening lines: "Me—

(*he yawns*)—to play…. Can there be misery … loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now?" (E 2). Even as Hamm seems to announce himself as a player, we might turn his question back on the actor that is playing him and ask if now, in the moment of his performance, the actor knows or acknowledges Hamm's misery. The actor cannot *know* Hamm's pain in the epistemologically strong sense of *having* Hamm's pain, since they are not one and the same person. And the actor cannot acknowledge Hamm's pain as he would the pain of another in ordinary life, for he is playing the role of Hamm. But he does acknowledge Hamm in a displaced theatrical sense by performing his misery.

Endgame introduces the actor's displaced acknowledgement of their character into the relation between the characters themselves. Hamm and Clov as *characters* respond to each others' pain the way an *actor* might approach the role of Hamm or Clov with regard to their pain. To specify, they are not (necessarily)[17] pretending to be in pain themselves, but they take on the expression of the other's pain as if it were just a routine with the roles switched. Displaced theatrical acknowledgement, when brought into the relation between two characters who are ontologically equivalent, inverts who is justified in expressing whose pain. An early exchange runs as follows:

> Hamm: I've made you suffer too much. (*Pause.*) Haven't I?
> Clov: It's not that.
> Hamm (*shocked*): I haven't made you suffer too much?
> Clov: Yes!
> Hamm (*relieved*): Ah you gave me a fright! (E 6–7)

[17] They might also be pretending to be in pain themselves, or at least, as Hamm's yawn suggests, exaggerating their own pain. In our ordinary relations, if the pain-behavior of another seems feigned or exaggerated, acknowledgement means giving them the benefit of the doubt, as most of us are inclined to do.

Hamm's first line would not normally be taken as a statement of fact, but rather a formulation that has the shape of a statement of fact while serving a different purpose, for instance, serving as a confession or a plea for forgiveness. One source of humor, for Cavell, is when "the normal implications of language are defeated" ("Ending" 124), and in this case, the implication that Hamm's line was a confession turns out to be wrong, since the rest of the exchange reveals that he meant it, after all, as a statement of fact. A confession would constitute an ordinary acknowledgement, but Hamm's line instead expresses Clov's pain. The statement of fact *should* come from Clov's perspective, and be formulated, 'You (Hamm) have made me suffer too much,' and this would constitute linguistic pain-behavior. With Hamm's displaced acknowledgement of Clov, he casts himself as Clov as a sufferer.

Clov's own displaced acknowledgement resembles Hamm's in that it signifies the performance of pain where it is not ordinarily justified. After a series of "there's no more X" lines, and after three times responding that it is not time for Hamm to take his pain-killer, when the time finally does come, Clov replies, "There's no more pain-killer" (E 71). This line could be an acknowledgement of pain, expressing remorse and empathy, but Clov undercuts the acknowledgement by equating it with all the other inventory reports—it is merely part of his role as a servant. Although the role of servant in ordinary life is not a theatrical role, it becomes theatricalized in the case of Hamm and Clov because his service is mostly ceremonial. Requesting pain-killer is linguistic pain-behavior because it indicates to another that one is in pain. But notably, Hamm only asks if it is *time* for his pain-killer, suggesting that the routine is what matters and that any actual pain is only coincidental. Clov is not just a servant, but acts as

part of Hamm's senses (as with the above world skepticism case), the sense that tells him when he is in pain by indicating when it is time for pain killer. But this role precludes Clov from any interest in acknowledging Hamm's actual pain.

The parodic, displaced acknowledgement that Hamm and Clov offer does not land them back in the impasse of other-mind skepticism, but it does leave them in an impasse. That is, they are concerned neither with acknowledgement nor with knowledge of the other's inner states—Clov cannot even be bothered to lift up Hamm's lids to examine his eyes, to peep through the windows to his soul (E 3–4). They are concerned only with the routine, and as a pseudo-couple they are stuck in an impasse because it is the routine that mutually defines them.

3. *Endgame*'s Attempt to Break the Dramatic Fourth Wall

Endgame plays with the fact that dramatic theater creates its own kind of impasse, wherein spectators and characters define each other by their mutual inaccessibility. This impasse ends as abruptly as the performance does. Although they share the same literal space, spectators and characters are in ontologically different worlds, where the former can perceive the latter, but not vice versa. An actor, who is in the same ontological world as the spectators, might make gestures on behalf of their character toward bridging this gap, or a play might itself aspire to bridge the gap, but such aspirations (like aspirations toward meaninglessness) are bound to fail. If bridging this gap *seems* possible, it is only because another is much more readily bridgeable—that between actor and spectator, breaking the fourth wall. Because there is no term to designate the spectator/character gap, I will stretch 'fourth wall' to apply here as well, distinguishing

between a *performative* fourth wall and a *dramatic* fourth wall.[18] Although *Endgame* occasionally breaks the performative fourth wall, its more persistent concern is the attempt and failure to break the dramatic fourth wall.

The attempt to break the *dramatic* fourth wall is a central modernist concern that productively emerges from the response to the more-or-less formal institution of the *performative* fourth wall in realist theater. After the advent of realist theater, some critics retroactively claim that for the ancients there was no barrier between stage, orchestra, and auditorium. Susan Bennett claims that it is only in the seventeenth century with the institution of footlights that "there is a move towards separation of fictional stage world and audience" (*Theatre Audiences* 3). However, I would claim that there was always a separation between fictional stage world and spectators, and that the footlights only delimit the spectators from the performance space, physically discouraging interaction with the performers—it merely reinforces the performative fourth wall. This delimitation reaches its pinnacle with the realist fourth wall, where actors concertedly attempt to ignore the spectators, and scenes are blocked as if they were not there (notably with backs toward the auditorium). There may be characters

[18] I call it the dramatic fourth wall because it is more deeply constitutive of dramatic theater as such. Teaching a theater-goer about fourth wall breaks is not so much to teach a new concept, but to give an existing concept a name: the response is less, "now this moment is intelligible to me," and more, "so that's what that's called."

written specifically for this type of performance, but such characters are not qualitatively (ontologically) different from other dramatic characters.[19]

When the performative fourth wall is more fluid, outside the bounds of strictly realist theater, characters can appear to also break the dramatic fourth wall, as with asides and soliloquies, but such gestures *depend* upon the wall remaining unbroken. When a villain reveals their sinister plot, they do so *because* they are alone in their world (hence soliloquy). If the spectators were able to intervene and stop them, they would keep the plot to themselves. And when a servant makes a comic aside about their master, they do so *because* the spectators cannot denounce them. These performative wall breaks work dramatically because of the integrity of the dramatic fourth wall.

The modernist response to realism opened up new possibilities for performance, but also for the development of new dramatic ideas and experimentation with the dramatic fourth wall. The performative fourth wall can be broken in a variety of creative ways because there are various and shifting conventions that distinguish performers from non-performers. Depending on the particular spectator and the performance, a performative break can be amusing, distracting, disturbing, invasive, etc.[20] Beckett is less interested in this form of experimentation (challenging

---

[19] Performance art is a tricky case because it is often non-dramatic in that it is not dialogue-based, and thus lacks dramatic characters. The performers may not be themselves as they are in real life, but they are themselves as performers. The absence of dramatic characters is particularly clear when a performance involves physical harm, as if the performer were saying, 'see, this is my blood.' The pain belongs to and is expressed by the performer. And here individual spectators might be tempted to actually intervene, acknowledging the suffering performer.

[20] Modernist spectator interaction is often meant to unsettle in a productive way. In an overview of such performances, Helen Freshwater says: "Most of the performances I describe below were darkly disturbing, were realized through manipulation or coercion, and sometimes provoked alarming responses from their audiences. Nevertheless, the unease and anxiety they played with may be considered central to their effect" (*Theatre and Audience* 62).

the performer/non-performer distinction), and more interested in playing with the fragility and ephemerality of character in the failed attempt to break the dramatic fourth wall. Breaking it would entail acknowledging another, entering a shared world with them, but dramatic characters do not have the capacity to receive our acknowledgment because they are not complete others.

Beckett figuratively represents in *Endgame* the ontological separateness of dramatic characters in the form of Hamm's dog, which Hamm knows cannot perform the actions of a real dog, but for the wrong reasons. When Hamm asks Clov for his dog, Clov responds that "he isn't finished" (E 40), for he lacks a leg, a sex,[21] and a ribbon, but Hamm wants him nonetheless. In this play, we have characters who are missing their legs, are incomplete, but still serve as characters for one another. Even if they were more fully 'fleshed out' and tied with a ribbon, they would never be 'finished,' and never fully human. What makes up for the dog's incompleteness is that Clov props the dog up to allow Hamm to interact with him. And when Hamm asks, "Is he gazing at me? … As if he were asking me to take him for a walk?" (E 41), Clov is the one who animates the gaze. Hamm thinks that the dog could serve its purpose if only it were finished, if it could stand on its own four legs and gaze at him longingly. After all, he does not necessarily want to take the dog for a walk, he only wants to feel *as if* the dog wanted him to go for a walk. Like the dog supported by Clov, an actor can performatively break the fourth wall and return the gaze of a spectator, but a character can only gaze blankly through glass eyes.

Playing with the dramatic fourth wall feels like a philosophical gesture not only because it invokes other-mind skepticism but also because it invites the spectators to redefine their

---

[21] This sounds less strange in French (F 56), since 'le sexe' is simply the word for 'genitalia.'

position. Breaking the *performative* wall can feel violent because it *forces* the spectators into a new position, sometimes into performers, or more vaguely into 'participants.' The example of the dog above does no such thing. Instead, it poses the question, 'what does it mean to be a character?' and with that the corollary, 'what does it mean to be a spectator?' with neither party ceasing to be character or spectator. In this sense, *Endgame* as a play (as opposed to its individual characters) acknowledges the spectator, and while it does not fully deny them the status of spectator, it does invite the reconsideration of the conceptual space wherein spectator and character define each other.

Instead of breaking the performative fourth wall by bringing an actual spectator onto the stage, *Endgame* simultaneously challenges and reinforces the dramatic fourth wall by representing performance and spectatorship within the text of the drama itself. *Endgame* represents moments of quotidian theatricality, when an interlocutor stops to attend as someone tells a joke or a story. These moments are uncanny on stage because we recognize a character who is in a position similar to our own, but who is nonetheless in a different ontological world. When the characters become performers for each other, they might also break the performance for each other, but the characters do not break their performance for those in the auditorium. After Nagg delivers the punchline of his trousers joke, the stage direction says, "*Pause. He looks at Nell who has remained impassive, her eyes unseeing, breaks into a high forced laugh, cuts it short, pokes his head towards Nell, launches his laugh again*" (E 23). Nagg breaks the performative fourth wall between himself and Nell as he nudges her, looks at her, and attempts to prompt laughter, but he has no parallel gesture for the spectator. The performer playing Nagg might pause for laughter from the auditorium, but Nagg responds only to Nell.

Both Nagg and Nell in their capacity as listeners prove to be bad models for theatrical spectators and thus highlight our difference from them. During the joke, Nell is unresponsive and detached. We might place her at an even further ontological remove, since she is less present to the other characters than she is to her own memories, a detachment that segues into her death after her last line: "Desert!" (E 23). When the tables are turned and Nagg becomes a listener, he seems more engaged than Nell, but he only agrees to listen to Hamm's narrative in exchange for a sugar plum. We might see Nagg here as a representation of a theater-goer who has certain expectations of what they should get in exchange for their attendance—perhaps catharsis, diversion, a moral to the story. And yet, Nagg is not surprised when he does not get his promised reward ("It's natural" [E 56]), as if he has come to expect all promises to be empty. The justification seems to be that he sees no other alternative ("one must live with the times" [E 56]), but we might also take this line more literally and see it as a comment on his contrast with Nell as a failed listener. Although Nagg claims he was not really listening to Hamm's story, at least he was *present* for it, since he is "with the times," unlike Nell who is lost in the past. With this remark, he also differentiates himself from the spectator, for unlike us, he is ontologically in Hamm's presence *and* in Hamm's present. Being at a further remove, the spectator stands no chance of getting a reward from Hamm, but at least we live in a world where there are still sugar plums.

These representatives of quotidian performance and spectatorship allow for performative fourth wall breaks within the context of the drama. Such breaks also put pressure on the dramatic fourth wall, but ultimately reinforce the characters' separateness. Beckett also more subtly plays with the dramatic fourth wall by parodying the primary means of purportedly breaking it—asides

and soliloquies. As noted above, dramatic texts that give characters asides and soliloquies only *seem* to break the dramatic fourth wall, but actually depend upon characters remaining ontologically separate from the spectators. In *Endgame,* Beckett undercuts what appear to be asides and soliloquies by motivating them within the drama itself, as if to say that he is not even trying to break the dramatic fourth wall, knowing the futility of such an endeavor.

Endgame's most prominent apparent break of the dramatic fourth wall shows how the characters and the spectators can experience the same action in different ways. When Hamm commands Clov to use his telescope to survey the landscape, he first turns the telescope in the direction of the auditorium and declares, "I see … a multitude … in transports … of joy" (E 29). Although this sounds like an acknowledgement of the spectators, Clov immediately undercuts the acknowledgement by turning it into a joke: "now that's what I call a magnifier…. Well? Don't we laugh?" (E 29). The joke should be funny for the two different parties for two different reasons. The characters should find it funny because the telescope transforms a blank wall into a multitude of people. The spectators should find it funny because the telescope appears to see through the dramatic fourth wall (and potentially transforms their boredom to joy).

Endgame's parody of direct address via Clov's joke shows the difference between the performative and the dramatic fourth wall. With this gesture, we would say that the actor playing Clov effectively breaks the performative fourth wall. If it arouses laughter from the spectators, then we would also say that it is a felicitous example of the vaudeville gag of addressing the spectators to get their attention, to wake them up. However, this instance is different from the basic gag in that it is also motivated within the drama since it is an attempted joke between the characters Clov and Hamm. Both characters know there is only a blank wall. Clov tries to

pretend it is something it is not, an auditorium, and Hamm does not get the joke. The apparent acknowledgement becomes parody because both characters are effectively blind to the spectators.

Along with particular moments of apparent spectator address, *Endgame* incorporates ongoing features that play with both the performative and the dramatic fourth wall, particularly the concept of acting itself. Cavell suggests that Beckett "never lets [the spectators] forget that those on the stage are acting, and know they are acting" ("Ending" 157). He does not offer any examples, nor does he specify if "those on stage" refers to the characters or the actors. I would suggest that both actors and characters know they are acting, and that this is particularly significant for characters. Referring to actors, *Endgame* lends itself to a certain acting style, one that declares itself precisely as an *acting* style, which is an ongoing threat to the performative fourth wall because a spectator might at any moment be struck by the strangeness of the performance. Beckett encourages under-acting, verging on monotony or drollery, and the underlying tension, the threat that the scene might erupt at any moment, draws attention to under-acting as an acting style.

In a stronger sense, the characters present themselves as actors to each other, though this does not effectively break the dramatic fourth wall because they are not presented as actors in *Endgame*. Most notably, toward the end, Clov interrupts Hamm and Hamm retorts, "An aside, ape! Did you never hear an aside before? *(Pause.*) I'm warming up for my last soliloquy" (E 77–78). And shortly thereafter, Clov declares, "This is what we call making an exit" (E 81). In these instances, the characters do not break the fourth wall, but the play itself does. With Hamm, his aside is addressed to the spectators in his mind (in contrast to his chronicle, which seems to

require a real spectator). With Clov, the use of stage language is not to acknowledge that he is an actor, but is a response in kind to Hamm's stage language. The primary sense is less that he is about to leave the stage and enter the wings or the auditorium than that he is about to leave this farce of a relationship, and do so in grand style. Even though we could take these remarks to indicate that Hamm and Clov know they are characters in *Endgame*, it is more accurate to say they know they are playing roles for each other, which reminds the spectators that they are in *Endgame.*

The idea that Hamm and Clov act for each other is polyvalent and indicates some of the entry points that the spectator might have to this play. In a literal sense, the people in front of us are actors, and the play does not hide that fact. Taken as an ordinary domestic scene, the characters do not hide from each other the fact that they are acting, conceding that they belong together, that they are not solo acts. Treating each other as scene partners, they also see each other as characters, which transforms them from robust human beings into flattened entities, designed only for this theatrical routine in particular. This flattening of the human is a symptom of other-mind skepticism, which doubts that there is anything of substance beyond our superficial interactions with others. In a theatrical sense, if the characters are actors, then the game that unfolds between the two does not spill out into the broader diegetic world of this play, nor does it cross into the ontological world of the spectators, but rather begins with the raising of the curtain, and with its lowering, it is finished.

As a literary text, *Endgame* differs from philosophy in that the characters differ ontologically from the author, and thus do not make strait-forward claims on Beckett's behalf. Perhaps Hamm expresses the play's pervasive sense of exasperation when he voices the doubt,

"We're not beginning to … to … mean something?" (E 32), but we cannot simply expand this quote to apply to Beckett and his writing more generally. Nor is the apparent will to meaninglessness equivalent to philosophical skepticism, even if it shares a similar structural impasse. Instead of being voiced by a single character (as would occur in a philosophical treatise), skepticism of the world and of the minds of others emerges in the interaction between the characters, making use of the dramatic medium. The parody of the voice of philosophical skepticism appears more directly in Beckett's novel *The Unnamable,* which as a first-person narrative, more closely approximates the mode of most philosophical writing, where the discursive voice is roughly equivalent to that of the author, with potential appeals to autobiography. As with *Endgame,* the ontological status of literary characters problematizes the process of making philosophical claims. Where *Endgame* re-evaluates and reinforces the division between character and spectator (who are seemingly embodied in the same place together), *The Unnamable* re-evaluates the relationship between a philosophical claim, the object of that claim, and the one who makes the claim.

CHAPTER 2

THE UNNAMABLE'S PARODY OF THE SKEPTICAL RECITAL: CONFOUNDING THE CATEGORIES OF SKEPTICISM

Those of us tempted to pick up Samuel Beckett's *L'Innommable* [*The Unnamable*] are not driven to put it down for lack of a narrative structure or a believable character. We know that what it wants to say, whatever that may be, cannot be said in the ordinary ways. However, if the novel speaks to us, it must bear some relation to ordinary channels of communication, even if that relation is parodic. To specify the particular parodic effect *The Unnamable* has, this chapter will draw on Stanley Cavell's appeal to ordinary criteria in relation to philosophical skepticism, which departs from ordinary doubt/skepticism, but also depends upon it. Beckett's novel likewise departs both from ordinary narrative and ordinary narrative fiction. Ordinary narrative refers to the quotidian practice of telling stories—we tell them to ourselves, to others, about ourselves, about others. What we might generically call ordinary narrative *fiction* is meant to resemble ordinary narrative,[1] except that it is fictive, which means not that it is untrue (since ordinary narratives can also be untrue), but that the author is allowed to *stipulate* what counts as true or untrue in the fictive world. *The Unnamable* parodies ordinary narrative fiction in that the narrator does not posit or stipulate his fictional world as an ordinary authoritative narrator (*qua* god/ creator) would. Instead of stipulating, he poses his world (and his own existence) as a question. Where his words should *constitute* the world he inhabits, his words instead *inquire* into it. In the

[1] As Gérard Genette claims, "heterodiegetic fictional narrative is in large part a mimesis of factual forms, such as history, news articles, and reporting, but this is a simulation whose marks of fictionality are optional and can very well be done without" ("Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," 771).

process of doubting his capacity as a narrator, he slips into moods and formulations that resemble philosophical skepticism, but this also turns out to be a parody given that he confounds skeptical methods and categories.

Although a serious philosophical text could contain parodies (transpositions/distortions) of previous texts, *The Unnamable* does not present its philosophical parodies in the cohesive, assertional way that an ordinary philosophical text would. Any parody potentially raises the question of identification, which, as Cavell says, involves an appeal to ordinary criteria to gain a "knowledge of what a thing is (conventionally) called" (*Claim of Reason* 65). In this case the hypertext (*The Unnamable*) does not seem to be of the same type as the hypotext (*Discours de la methode*)—we would not conventionally call them both philosophy. One might respond that Beckett's narrator simply has his own private, quixotic way of doing philosophy, and that that is what he calls doing philosophy. And his 'philosophic' method might be internally related to his quietistic goal, "Ne plus entendre cette voix, c'est ça que j'appelle me taire" (*L'Innommable* 175) ["Hearing this voice no more, that's what I call going silent" (*The Unnamable* 386)], which parodies the Cartesian *cogito*, whereby ceasing to hear or think he also ceases to be. But because of the distortion of the parodic hypertext, it cannot be seen as another case of the same thing. To deny *The Unnamable* the status of an ordinary philosophical text is only to say that due to the particular *way* that it parodies philosophy, we cannot readily see it as a philosophical text without doing violence to the ordinary concept of philosophy.

We more readily see *The Unnamable* as a literary text, and yet it is difficult to determine its literary genre. The critic Dominique Rabaté sees Beckett's prose texts as a development of the French *récit,* which distinguishes itself explicitly from the novel tradition (Rabaté 44). A novel

presents us with a fleshed-out world, and we are meant to suspend disbelief, immersing ourselves in it. Instead of giving us a believable, self-contained world, a *récit* presents us with a narrator who has a "crise existentielle majeure, qui touche sans nul doute au sujet biographique … qui en rend compte à la première personne, mais selon un débordement à la fois de la subjectivité et de la possibilité même de raconter cette expérience" (42) [major existential crisis, which undoubtedly relates to biographical material, which manifests itself in the first person, but is occasioned by an overflowing both of subjectivity and of the very possibility of being able to tell of such an experience]. Given that this description aptly applies to *L'Innommable,* Beckett might have appended the genre-identifying paratext 'un récit' to the text, as some of his contemporaries did to theirs. Instead, the original printing of the book calls it 'un roman' [a novel], and when Beckett later translated it into English as *The Unnamable,* it was published with his two preceding texts, *Molloy* and *Malone Dies,* under the collective title *Three Novels.*[2] Perhaps Beckett wishes to retain the concept of the novel for the sake of contrast, as if the fully fleshed-out novelistic world were held up beside the shriveled and shriveling world of the *Three Novels.* The sense of parody is stronger when the disparity is greater. Even if Beckett did not explicitly label *The Unnamable* as a *récit,* Rabaté's identifying it as such is useful not only in that it brings out a common literary element in *The Unnamable,* but also reveals an affinity to a certain literary aspect of some philosophical texts.

Among Cavell's unique contributions in *The Claim of Reason,* he recognizes a moment in some philosophical texts that he calls somewhat interchangeably skeptical rehearsal or skeptical

[2] These three novels first appeared in French as *Molloy* (1947), *Malone meurt* (1948), and *L'Innommable* (1949), though the three have not appeared together as one volume in French.

recital, which can feel almost fictional in that the authorial voice comes in as if it were a character performing a part. The opening of an epistemological investigation, at least "since Descartes," often involves "the rehearsal of familiar beliefs," which will then come under question (CoR 131). The rehearsal is a "*non-claim context*," in which the skeptic "*imagines a claim to have been made*," instead of making a full-voiced claim that they will stand by and defend (CoR 218, emphasis in original). Although the claims made are in themselves ordinary, it is the shift in context the makes philosophical skepticism a type of parody of ordinary ways of speaking. And the fact that the skeptic goes on to doubt ordinary beliefs indicates that there was something out of the ordinary about the way in which they emerge. The non-claim context lends both the ordinary beliefs that begin the meditation and the skeptical conclusions that end the meditation an air of fictionality, in the sense that they are stipulated and not meant to survive their context. When the rehearsal and meditation end, we return to our daily lives.

The Unnamable presents us with a skeptical recital in a way that *Endgame* does not. Cavell's use of the terms 'rehearsal' and 'recital' invoke a theatrical image in that they place the skeptic in front of spectators—it is a moment of private meditation made public. The theatrical approach emphasizes the feature of the recital in which "we confront the object in question," and "our announcing this confrontation publicly" (CoR 420). But we might also take Cavell's recital in a way that connects it more to its etymological twin *récit,* foregrounding its narrative component, and especially the fact that it is a first-person narrative. Seeing the skeptical recital as a *récit* shifts the focus away from the object of meditation and the reader/spectator, toward the speaking 'I.' The *récit* sense of recital is more fitting for Descartes's meditation, given that he is less concerned with the existence of the world and of other minds than he is with his own

existence, and once he has established that "*I am, I exist,*" it remains to be seen "what this 'I' is" (*Meditations* 17, emphasis in original). This likewise is the focus of Beckett's narrator in *The Unnamable,* whom we might think of as engaged in an extended skeptical recital, with the narrating 'I' as both subject and object of inquiry.

Taking *The Unnamable* as a *récit* delivered in the first-person, we might expect it to be an ongoing narrative *about* the narrator, and there are indeed moments that can be taken that way. That is, there are vignettes that are narrative in the ordinary sense (either fictional or non-fictional)—a recounting or recital of events, in a particular order, with a sense of continuity of action within a particular vignette. We might even attempt to find connections between the individual vignettes. But as Ackerley and Gontarski quite patly say, "The plot is easily outlined," implying that what little plot can be outlined is of no great significance (Ackerley and Gontarski 599). Taken together, we might interpret these stories as falling under a larger narrative of the narrator's own physical and mental degradation, even if he occasionally forsakes the 'I,' delivering third-person vignettes with the characters Mahood and Worm standing in his place.

However, most of the text between these vignettes is non-narrative in the ordinary sense, disrupting any attempt to form a coherent, over-arching narrative. It does not seem to represent a complete action, which is perhaps the most definitive ordinary criterion for a felicitous narrative. Though we need not project too far from the typical sense of narrative to arrive at one that satisfactorily applies to *The Unnamable* as a whole. When we say that some *thing* has a narrative, we mean that we can give an account of how it came to be what it is, where it is. Bringing this sense back to a person does not necessarily entail that a person's narrative is their personal history, though this may be part of the account. The narrator of *The Unnamable* feels

compelled to give an account of what he is, to give his narrative, which includes dubious bits of personal history: "C'est de moi maintenant que je dois parler, fût-ce avec leur langage" (IN 62) ["It's of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language" (UN 318)]. What really makes it narrative is not the vignettes, but the causal unfolding of one thought into the next, even when he abruptly stops and starts again (which he does frequently).

Instead of depicting a series of outward events, *The Unnamable* narrates the inner process of attempting to give an account of oneself. And though this inner process often resembles or recalls philosophical skepticism, it is not a direct representation of philosophical skepticism, since this is what we find in philosophical treatises. Instead, it is a representation of a representation, ending up somewhat distorted and rearranged after passing through narrative fiction. The skeptical recital contained within a philosophical text is itself a representation of the author as a skeptic speaking in a non-claim context. *The Unnamable* takes up this recital and turns it into a *récit,* that is, turns the non-claim context into a context of narrative fiction wherein the recital pertains more intimately to the narrator, to the extent that it constitutes his account of himself.

Not only does *The Unnamable* parody the ordinary criteria of narrative by turning an account of events into and account of the self, but the type of skepticism that mediates the account of the self is also a parody of ordinary skepticism, which designates a quotidian sense of doubt. The narrator of *The Unnamable* grafts himself onto the tradition of philosophical

skepticism in that, as Ruby Cohn notes, "like Descartes, the Unnamable begins in doubt,"[3] even though his method leads him to comic contradictions, and an insuperable doubt (Cohn 159).

By considering some of the distinctions Stanley Cavell makes in his interpretation of philosophical skepticism in *The Claim of Reason*, this chapter will attempt to look at both the affinities between the traditional skeptic and the narrator of *The Unnamable,* and specify the nature of his parodic departure from skepticism. The first section will consider the sense shared between Beckett's narrator and the skeptic that their respective problematics are unavoidable. The second section develops Cavell's distinction between specific and generic objects in relation to skepticism of the world, specifying that only generic objects interest the skeptic, even though Beckett's narrator finds occasion to be skeptical of specific objects. The third section picks up Cavell's account of passive and active skepticism of the minds of others, and considers how literary characters complicate this relation. Each of the three sections establishes a point of contact with philosophical skepticism that also serves as a basis for its parody of it. Even if parody is not always satyrical, it still raises the question of its seriousness in that we seek to motivate the parody's departure from its hypotexts. If we do not see *The Unnamable* as a serious philosophical text, we might still take it as a serious parody of philosophical skepticism, and ultimately a serious literary text.

[3] Cohn uses "the Unnamable" to refer to the narrator of the text. Instead of following this convention, I will refer to him simply as 'the narrator.'

1. The Unavoidability of the Fundamental Questions of Narrative and Skepticism: "Where Now? Who Now? When Now?"

The key similarity between Beckett's narrator and the philosophical skeptic is not directly the content of what they are saying, but what drives them and how they justify themselves, or rather, the lack of a satisfactory justification. In the case of the philosophical skeptic, Cavell notes that there is something "*not* fully natural" about their grounds for doubt, but with a shift of emphasis he also observes that it is "not *fully* unnatural" (*Claim of Reason* 160, emphasis in original). The sense of the skeptic's justification lies in a curious aspect of human nature that desires to go against human nature, or that denies that humans have a nature. Analogously, we might take one of Beckett's most well-known expressions of his aesthetic theory, from his "Three Dialogues,"[4] and transfer it to the narrator of *The Unnamable,* for whom it is equally true that there "is nothing to express … no desire to express" (in *Disjecta* 139). If he were actually serious about this, why bother attempting to express anything at all? The only response we find in the dialogues is the speaker's authentic sense that the impossibility of expression is coupled with "the obligation to express" (139). The skeptic, beginning from the observation that we sometimes do not know something in particular, precipitously generalizes to claim that we can never know anything whatever. From an ordinary perspective, this generalization seems unwarranted, since we often concede that we do not know something without this threatening our knowledge of

[4] In this much-cited text, a fictionalized version of Beckett discusses three contemporary painters, though it is generally taken for granted that his general aesthetic remarks apply to his views of his own literary texts.

other things. Both Beckett in his writing practice and the skeptic in their meditation cannot help but generalize from certain specific failures. They maintain their belief in the unavoidability of failure, all the while continuing to behave as if success were an option.

The very possibility and tenability of such an apparently contradictory attitude lies in the relation between the author and the voices in their texts. In a skeptical recital, the author of the philosophical text may not be speaking directly, and yet cannot be dissociated from what is said. Descartes is not equally present in every instance of the 'I' in his texts, but at no point is the 'I' not Descartes. Cavell stands at one further remove, for he is interpreting skepticism and situating it as a voice in the philosophical tradition, even if in the process of defending skepticism as "not *fully* unnatural," he also embodies that voice to some extent (CoR 160). This seemingly contradictory relation comes out more clearly in fiction, where the conventional distinction between author, narrator, and character is a given. The rhetorical situation of a philosophical text would normally be placed closer to autobiography (a type of factual narrative), where there is no distinction, i.e. where author = narrator = character. Challenging the distinction between fictional and factual narrative, Genette describes what he calls "autofiction," wherein "a narrator identified with the author produces … a homodiegetic fictional narrative" ("Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative" 767). With autofiction, the author speaks from within the text (homodiegetically) as a fictionalized version of themselves. This liminal textual mode extends to both a philosopher like Descartes and an author like Beckett, who emerge to a certain extent in the voices of their texts.

Without fully equating Beckett and his narrator, we can see how the basic problematic expressed in the "Three Dialogues" above transfers to the narrator of *The Unnamable,* who poses

for himself the unavoidable questions of narrative fiction, finds that they cannot be answered, but continues to attempt to answer them nonetheless. The narrative opens with these fundamental questions: “Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant? Sans me le demander. Dire je. Sans le penser. Appeler ça des questions, des hypothèses” (IN 7) [“Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that” (UN 285)]. In ordinary narrative fiction, these questions would not need to be explicitly posed. The sense of ‘ordinary’ here covers both realist fiction and the portion of modernist fiction where it is taken as a convention that the author or narrator can make stipulations about their world, claims that are not falsifiable outside the text itself. Even in the case of an unreliable narrator, this convention still stands. That is, as part of the ordinary function of fiction, the author can either directly posit the where-when-who, giving each a proper name, or omit to do so entirely, proceeding as if these elements were understood. Any narrative, ranging from realistic to fantastic to experimental, could unfold without us ever knowing the name of the protagonist or the setting of the action. Whether or not the questions are explicitly answered, what is important is that they not emerge *as* questions, for this could only serve to disrupt the action.

Since these questions do appear *as* questions to the narrator, they prevent a proper narrative from developing. After posing these questions, the narrator immediately responds, “sans me le demander” (IN 7) [“unquestioning” (UN 285)], suggesting that they appear without properly being posed. With this act, the narrator disowns the questions, attempting to distance himself from them. However, they remain there unmoved, for they are forced upon him. Finding them unavoidable, he then attempts to tame them by renaming them, calling them instead “des hypothèses.” This is no better, for hypotheses in the realm of inquiry serve essentially the same

function as the fundamental questions of narrative do for narrative. Breaking up the term we see that hypo- (below) thesis (to place) is that which we posit as a foundation on which to build an inquiry.[5] In this instance, what should be a foundation stone instead becomes a stumbling block.

The way in which the narrator gets caught up on these fundamental questions mirrors Cavell's account of how the skeptic gets caught up on ordinary life and language. We can be sure that Beckett at this point would not have read Cavell, who did not publish anything until more than a decade after *The Unnamable*. Their relation, at this level of my argument, is neither one of direct influence nor of sympathy on the topic of skepticism. Instead, they are both conscious that their language departs from the ordinary forms of meaningful communication in their respective realms of philosophy and literature, and yet they both ask to be taken seriously, stressing the unavoidability of their position. And they both offer their case for seriousness at one remove: Beckett for why we should take his narrator seriously, and Cavell (not as a skeptic but as, say, a historian, critic, or anthropologist of philosophy) for why we should take the skeptic seriously.

In *The Claim of Reason,* Cavell takes the philosophical skeptic as his object of inquiry partially in an attempt to account for why such a creature exists, since from an ordinary perspective, skepticism can seem anti-human. Cavell does not provide an unqualified argument in favor of skepticism, but rather offers an apology for skepticism that shows the perspective from which it is reasonable. The motivation for such an apology, the sense Cavell has that the onus lies with the skeptic, comes from the twentieth-century philosophical tradition of ordinary language philosophy (OLP), which maintains that the skeptical tradition has misappropriated

---

[5] There is another relevant though obsolete sense of the word 'hypothesis' from classical antiquity—it refers to the preface of a Greek tragedy, written by an ancient scholar, wherein the plot of the play is given (Brown 109).

certain ordinary words, such as being, existence, self, identity, doubt and even the word 'skeptical' itself, which normally have very clear meanings for us in our everyday speech. Given that the ordinary meanings are primary, the burden of proof lies with the skeptic, who must justify using such words in a projected sense. Instead of using these ordinary words as tools for communication, the skeptic undermines their utility by seeing them as problematic concepts. Once they become the object of a philosophical question, they cease to be words proper.

Although we tend to be more flexible in how language is used in literary texts, the ways in which literary language departs from more quotidian language does not usually compete with or negate quotidian language. A new sense/use of a word might even enrich or expand its older sense, and new grammatical forms might find their way into common parlance. Within the realm of what we might call ordinary literary language, literary innovation usually adds to the existing systems of signification, reverberating throughout the tradition. The primary literary innovations of *The Unnamable,* however, do not project in that direction. Instead of adding to and expanding ordinary literary language, *The Unnamable* threatens its ability to function as literature. Its questioning of the narrative "I" is in direct competition with the ordinary narrative use of "I," and there is only room for one or the other. One cannot sensibly express the impossibility of literary expression.

The radical doubt of Cavell's skeptic is likewise a departure from ordinary doubt in such a way that it threatens ordinary doubt,[6] and here the question arises as to whether or not this projection is reasonable. Cavell's response in *The Claim of Reason* is that when radical skeptical

[6] More on this in section 2.

doubt presents itself to us, it is "fundamental and hence without foundation…. Everything depends upon what we find our consciousness to depend upon" (CoR 137). Perhaps at one moment, we find a previous state of mind to be unreasonable, but in its moment it had its reasons. Our consciousness is on shifting ground because it often depends upon "the acceptance or rejection of a stretch of ordinary speech, sometimes by the recognition of a picture or fantasy, sometimes by a fresh example" (CoR 138). The problem for the skeptic then becomes justifying why the grounds for doubt are reasonable "here and now" (CoR 139). The narrator of *The Unnamable* must also justify why the questions "where now?" and "when now?" lead to the "who now?". Taking on a burden of proof analogous to that of the philosophical skeptic, the narrator is also faced with the problem that his fundamental questions create an incoherent context, one that is not fully imaginable.

As a definitive cure for skepticism, OLP invites us to take the words that skeptical language distorts, and imagine them within the context of an ordinary claim, thereby restoring our language, as it were, to its natural habitat. It is at this juncture that Cavell admits that OLP shows skepticism to be not fully natural, but insists that it is also not fully unnatural (CoR 160 and 191). That is, although we *can* imagine a situation to re-naturalize skeptical language, the skeptic feels this is impertinent because it *changes their situation,* one that was forced upon them by the nature of their problem (154). The feeling that both the problem and its situation are forced upon us, although in a way 'denying' the human, also indicates that it is not wholly unnatural, or as Cavell likes to paraphrase a Nietzschean sentiment, "nothing is more human than the wish to deny one's humanity" (109). Once one has been initiated into this line of thought, or stumbled upon it 'naturally,' it is difficult to shake indefinitely—at an unexpected moment, when we feel

comfortable with our own humanity (and that of others), it sneaks up on us, and forces itself upon us once more. The inverse of this, however, also holds, that skepticism vanishes just as quickly as it appears, and its conclusion does not hold sway outside of its situation.

Beckett's narrator not only finds the skeptical situation forced upon him, but he is entirely defined by it, such that he cannot get outside of it, for he would cease to be what he is. In a sense, all characters are confined to their own pages, but we are free to imagine them outside of the scenes that are directly represented, and sometimes this is necessary to get a more fully fleshed-out picture of them. An author might invite us, explicitly or implicitly, to think about what a character was like before the story, or imagine what goes on behind the scenes. For a narrative to function, it often takes for granted that we *will* fill in certain gaps in *certain* ways (or a certain range of ways) in order to carry on. This is what it means to have a shared form of life in which 'fiction' exists, and it determines the degree to which a particular fictional text is legible to us.

With the narrator of *The Unnamable,* however, this freedom of imagination does not have the same sense, for the gaps are not proper narrative gaps in that we cannot sensibly fill them in, and any attempt to do so is impertinent, since it in no way progresses or sheds light upon the text. The narrator says of the voice that comes to him, the voice that is his own though he attempts to disavow it, that there are "Des trous, il y en a toujours eu, c'est la voix qui s'arrête, c'est la voix qui n'arrive plus" (IN 136) ["Gaps, there have always been gaps, it's the voice stopping, it's the voice failing to carry to me" (UN 362)]. The point about gaps in the voice responds to the thought that nothing about his situation changes (or if it does "on oublie," one forgets, a line not in the English text). The fact that nothing changes in the gaps suggests that the narrator's entire existence corresponds to the voice—after it stops, it picks up exactly where it left off.

The Unnamable thus restricts what it means for a fictional text to be an imaginative text, since it does not invite us to fill in the gaps the way we would with an ordinary narrative. The narrator simply has no coherent background and it would be unhelpful if we tried to provide him with one. However, the narrator takes upon himself this particular role of the reader of an ordinary narrative—he attempts to *read himself,* working with the nebulous details he is provided, and attempting to fill in his own gaps. He encounters problems when he begins to conflate his role as reader with his role as author, when he speaks of the characters that are the creations of his own imagination as if they were himself.

In the opening paragraphs of the text, the narrator keeps promising that he will begin to speak of himself, as opposed to speaking of the fictional characters from Beckett's previous texts, which also seem to be creations of the narrator's imagination. Then at the opening of the long, single block of text that constitutes most of the text, the narrator begins more earnestly to speak of "I, of whom I know nothing" (UN 298). Now taking himself as an object of inquiry, he finds, or declares, that his relationship to himself is not one of knowing. He soon goes on to say,"I invented love, music, the smell of flowering currant, to escape from me. Organs, a without, it's easy to imagine, a god, it's unavoidable, you imagine them, it's easy, the worst is dulled, you doze away, an instant" (UN 299). He makes speaking of himself synonymous with inventing or imagining a world for himself, but it is at the same time an escape, for by directing attention toward the world, god, and others, he takes a break from his self-reflection. It is easier to *imagine* a world than to *know* oneself. The narrator suggests the general skeptical possibility that everything we experience could be of our own creation, imagined for our amusement. What

other purpose could the smell of flowering currant serve? He describes this skeptical mindset as comforting and easy—the most natural thing in the world.

While at times the narrator wants to suggest that his world is all of his own imagining, he also often expresses the opposite, or inverse sentiment, that what he imagines or perceives is forced upon him from the outside. As the text progresses and the narrator continues to attempt to speak of himself, the presence of the 'they' becomes more marked and ominous. His use of 'they' carries the sense not simply of 'others,' as in any other people whoever. Instead, 'they' are others who have some special design for the narrator, as if they were agents of God, or perhaps the minions of Descartes's evil demon, since the narrator has the sense that they are trying to trick him: "this hell of stories … always the same old trick" (UN 373). At times, the use of 'they' also has the sense of 'humanity in general,' but only inasmuch as humanity has a claim on us and is forcing itself on us. These senses bleed into each other to paint a picture of the 'they' as a threat, instead of as innocuous self-sufficient beings similar to the narrator himself (by empathic projection, we think of other minds as fundamentally similar to our own). At this point, the narrator begins to doubt whether his way of imagining the world emerges from his own mind or whether 'they' foist it upon him: "Les images, ils s'imagine qu'en forçant les images ils finiront par m'y emberlificoter" (IN 97) ["Images, they imagine that by piling on the images they'll entice me in the end" (UN 339)]. "Emberlificoter" might be somewhere in between Beckett's English rendering "entice" and the harsher "ensnare," since it could rather innocuously mean to persuade someone to your point of view, or more malevolently to catch them in a trap. The images are forced upon him until he is tricked into accepting them as his own. Being tricked into accepting their images and stories is like being born into their world. When what we imagine

corresponds to what they imagine, we have what Cavell (following Wittgenstein) would call a shared form of life, that which the skeptic purportedly wishes to deny.

The narrator vacillates from one pole to the other, on the one hand, feeling that everything is entirely of his own creation, and on the other, feeling that everything is entirely of 'their' creation. Each pole is a variety of skepticism, ranging from solipsism to a radical conventionalism (or behaviorism). From an ordinary perspective, this polarity does not exist, since the question of how we know the world exists never emerges in the first place. The narrator shifts between these two sides of skepticism seamlessly, at times feeling like he is the author of his own world, at others feeling like nothing more than a character (even though ordinary characters do not feel like characters). Each mood seems to depend on what he finds his conscious to depend upon, whether a stretch of discourse focuses on his image of himself, or his image of others, or some confused mix of the two when he feels that it is the others who want him to speak of himself.

A revised version of this confused mix emerges toward the end of *The Unnamable*, where instead of confusing himself with 'them,' the narrator confuses himself with 'him,' who we might take to be Samuel Beckett.[7] In one of the long, multi-page sentences that abound toward the end of the text, the narrator claims, "I can only speak of me, no, I can't speak of anything, and yet I speak, perhaps it's of him … I don't know who it's all about, that's all I know" (UN 397). The narrative can begin to conclude as it comes full-circle, giving it a kind of narrative arc, since by returning to the "Qui maintenant?" the narrator begins again to feel like a character who

[7] The return of references to Beckett's earlier texts suggests as much.

confuses himself with his author, and vice-versa. We can most sensibly read this long sentence[8] if we imagine Beckett as an author in the process of writing: “moi je suis loin, vous entendez, il dit que je suis loin, comme si j’étais lui” (IN 192) [“I am far, do you hear him, he says I’m far, as if I were he” (UN 396)]. This series of phrases only works if there are two voices vying with each other over who says what. As it stands, the claim “I am far” cannot be seriously made by someone in the here and now. It does, however, work as a citation in indirect discourse, wherein the “I” refers to the speaker doing the citing and not the person who is cited. Since *The Unnamable* eschews quotation marks entirely,[9] direct citation is ambiguous, although there are subordinating conjunctions that indicate indirect citation. The French is clearer in this sense, since it does have a subordinating 'que,' which could be supplemented in Beckett's English translation to make it more clearly an indirect citation: "he says *that* I'm far." The wrong rendering would make it direct by adding quotation marks: "he says, 'I'm far.'" The possibility in English of eliding the 'that' in indirect speech provides the possibility for this fertile ambiguity (the French would sound grammatically incorrect with the 'que' omitted). In this case ambiguity is a virtue, given that what is at stake for the narrator here is the possibility of confounding direct and indirect forms of speaking.

The narrator points out this possibility as a defensive move against his author. Typically, we would not see a fictional text as a citation of the author—we would not place hypothetical

---

[8] This single sentence includes both the previous quote and the following, although they are separated by two pages in the French and one page in the English (due to different print formatting).

[9] The text does establish something of a norm wherein a capitalized word after a comma typically indicates the beginning of a direct quote. However, this norm is of little use in the English version of this passage, given that the first person pronoun is always capitalized in English.

quotation marks around the whole text of *The Unnamable* and tag it with the proper name 'Samuel Beckett.' But we might imagine Beckett in the process of writing and being struck with this as a real threat, that the reader might take the words of the narrator as the words of the author. In the face of this *extra*-ordinary threat, he wants to distance himself from his narrator by having him say "I am far."[10] But the narrator can throw this right back in the author's face by noting that, after all, it is the author who has been speaking this whole time. In his offensive move against the narrator, the author must speak "comme si j'étais lui" (IN 192) ["as if I were he" (UN 396)]. By pointing this out, the narrator substantiates the author's otherwise unreasonable fear that the 'I' and the 'he' might be conflated. The fundamental questions of fiction, raised in the opening of this narrative, come to a head here. Where: here and far. Who: narrator and author. When: now (the present tense of the narrator) and then (the past tense of the author).

We might further complicate the 'who?' by considering our role as readers, and how a reader might relate to either a philosophical or a literary text. Above I claimed that *The Unnamable* limits the reader's ability to imagine in some of the ways that are pertinent to ordinary narrative fiction. But as we have just seen, it also expands our ability to imagine in a different direction, in that we often *must* imagine the author as present in the text, or as in the process of composing it. Perhaps this fictionalizes Beckett-as-author, but it is a fictionalization that brings him closer to the philosopher, for in a philosophical text we imagine the philosopher making the claims and directing them to us—we create a dialogue with the skeptic-as-character. Some philosophical

---

[10] Beckett also had another strategy for dealing with this threat outside the text. Patrick Bowles, who collaborated with him on his translation of *Molloy,* reports that "he talks of his books as if there were written by someone else" (Bowles loc. 1158)

texts (such as parts of Cavell) embed the dialogue more directly, with multiple voices in different registers, and we are invited to inhabit any one of them. Whenever we find a philosophical text compelling, we find ourselves inhabiting it, imagining ourselves in the philosopher's place. It is hard to say that we *choose* to find a text or a philosophical claim compelling. Instead, we find that when something does compel us, it is unavoidably so—it is a force imposing itself on us from the outside that we nonetheless internalize and make our own.

2. Skepticism of the World:

Beckett's Narrator Conflates the Skeptic's Generic Objects With Specific Objects

Beckett's narrator comes off as a parody of the skeptic in that he conflates the skeptic's distinction between specific and generic objects. The distinction does not correspond to the particular/universal distinction that goes back to antiquity, but is one of the main contributions of *The Claim of Reason* in its attempt to account for philosophical skepticism. It designates not two different *types* of objects in the world, but rather indicates "the spirit in which an object is under discussion" (CoR 53). Saying that the skeptic meditates on a generic object does not mean that they want to know the essence or form of the object (this is closer to treating it as a specific object). Instead, with skepticism of the world, the skeptic approaches an object generically when it stands in for any-material-object-whatever. With ordinary doubt, we are uncertain about the *identity* of a specific object; with philosophical doubt, we are uncertain about the *existence* of the material world in general. We have knowledge of specific objects based solely on convention—we all agree to assign the same name to an object that has certain features—and gaining a

knowledge of such conventions is what we ordinarily call an education. Beckett's narrator parodies skepticism because he doubts specific objects (his knowledge of human convention) in a similar spirit in which a skeptic would doubt generic objects (their knowledge of the material world).

In order to illustrate the distinction between specific and generic objects, Cavell draws on an example inspired by J.L. Austin, casting the scene of ordinary, reasonable doubt as a dialogue:

> Claim: There is a goldfinch in the garden.
> Request for Basis: How do you know?
> Basis: From the red head.
> Ground for Doubt: But that's not enough; woodpeckers also have red heads.
> [Conclusion: Then I do not know if it is a goldfinch or not.] (CoR 132)[11]

In this case, the object of doubt is a specific object, a goldfinch, the type of thing that has certain marks and features that identify it by convention. Knowing what a specific object is means being able to identify it by its marks and features. If an ordinary doubt arises in this situation, it is for two possible reasons: either we have not been adequately *trained* to identify the marks and features, or we are not in a good enough *position* to judge this particular object due to the circumstances (e.g. it flew away before I could get a good look). In either case, there are clear ways of alleviating the doubt, and we are not warranted in generalizing to apply a skeptical conclusion to all situations. Doubt about a specific object is ordinary as opposed to philosophical because there are non-philosophical ways of resolving it.

---

[11] Although the goldfinch example comes up in Austin's "Other Minds," this schematization of it is Cavell's. The distinction between specific and generic objects is absent in Austin, and this is the basis of Cavell's critique of him.

The point of schematizing the ordinary scene of doubt in this way is to show the relevant steps in the process, particularly the basis and the ground for doubt. The philosophical scene of doubt follows essentially the same steps:

[Claim: There's a table here.]
Request for Basis: How … do I know there's a table here?
Basis: Because I see it. Or: by means of the senses.
Ground for doubt: a) But what do I really see? Mightn't I be … dreaming, hallucinating?
b) But that's not enough. Mightn't it be a decoy?
c) But I don't see *all* of it. The most I see is ….
Conclusion: So I don't know. (CoR 144)

Here we can see that the conclusion is the same as ordinary doubt (which is why we call both doubt), but both the basis and the ground for doubt are a projection away from the ordinary scene. The basis for our knowledge of the world is given as 'the senses,' whereas the ground for doubt is that we can never fully trust the senses. This type of reasoning follows from the fact that the skeptic treats their object as a generic and not a specific object. That is, the identification of the object is not a stake, since it is usually something easily identifiable (a table, an envelope, a bit of wax)—instead, the skeptic uses the object to stand in for any object whatever, or the world in general. So the doubt cannot be chalked up to either inadequate training or non-ideal circumstances for observation.

Part of the sense we get that Beckett's characters are not philosophers but parodies of philosophers relies on the confounding of generic and specific objects and their corresponding criteria. They either apply skeptical bases and grounds for doubt to specific objects (as is the case with Worm below), which is unreasonable, or desire to know the marks and features of generic

objects, which is impertinent. A prominent case of the latter is Beckett's Watt, who has difficulty identifying a pot as a pot. Even though any competent English speaker would know how to identify a pot, Watt feels that *this* particular object he now confronts is in the class of things that "if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance" (*Watt* 81). Uncertain of the marks and features of the object, he wants to appeal to an authority figure, Erskine, who can simply tell him what the name is. Thus Watt is patently *unlike* the skeptic, in that he is "doomed to inadequate training, to hastiness of judgement, to contexts in which the opportunities for checking are poor, and in which the physical conditions of knowledge are crippling" (CoR 133).[12]

On Cavell's account, the skeptic always begins from a best case for knowing, in which "personal training and care of judgement" are irrelevant, since "all you have to know, to achieve knowledge in the philosopher's case, is, one could say, how to talk" (133–34). Watt's problem is that he is unsure if he knows how to talk and wants to be taught how to talk so he can take his place in Knott's household. Where he goes wrong is in assuming that an authority figure can simply tell him how to talk, without seeing that he requires initiation into the forms of life that function within the household, which would give him adequate training. Watt is the embodiment of the Augustinian view of language, which reduces all language acquisition to learning names by ostentation, and his absurdity shows how distant the Augustinian view is from natural language.[13]

---

[12] This is how Cavell feels Austin characterizes the skeptic in "Other Minds." Austin's arguments assume skepticism can or should be alleviated with better training and better circumstances for knowing. Anything beyond this does not constitute what we would ordinarily call 'knowing.'

[13] More on the Augustinian view of language in Chapter 3.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* is as much a descendant of Watt as he is of his predecessors in the trilogy, and perhaps even more so, at least in the degree to which he parodies philosophers. What fundamentally differentiates him from Watt is that instead of desiring and seeking the training that would make him part of a world, he disavows it, or is at least suspicious of it. Perhaps we could say that he does not feel that he has been inadequately trained, that he lacks training, but rather that he *has* been trained and finds this training inadequate (for actually knowing himself and his world). This attitude is possible because he takes a step back to consider his training at his various stages of being, evaluating those who are attempting to train him, and their possible motives for training him.

The narrator invokes painful images of being taught by "Basil and his crew" (UN 295), which seems to refer to his schoolboy days, with Basil as a particularly menacing instructor, who "filled me with hatred" (UN 292). The image of childhood instruction is so painful for the narrator that he represses it, thinking at first that all the "rubbish" he learned was instruction by correspondence, until the specter of Basil's face re-emerges, with eyes like cinders. The process of instruction is one in which the narrator is de-natured, "he changed me a little more each time into what he wanted me to be" (UN 292). Being conscious of this process, the narrator feels he has gotten beyond it, made it something from his ill-remembered (or ill-imagined) past. All that remains are a few "blessures insignifiantes" (IN 19) ["insignificant wounds" (UN 292)], which in the French suggests that they are not only non-substantial, but they are also non-signifying—the lessons learned no longer have meaning.

Nonetheless, like many things that are repressed, these "blessures insignifiantes" crop up when least welcome. Attempting to again speak of himself, he says he will pick up years later,

after a long silence, but then is troubled by this concept: “Years is one of Basil’s ideas. A short time, a long time it’s all the same. I kept silent, that’s all that counts” (UN 302). Even though it is not a material object, a year can be thought of as a specific object, given that it has a very clear definition set by convention. As such, it is unlike the generic object of philosophy, time in general. Generic time is the type of thing that becomes more perplexing the more we think about it, although outside of a skeptical meditation it is perfectly transparent to an ordinary language speaker. If we have something like the ordinary concept of time, a year is something that can be easily defined and accepted. The concept ‘year’ seems to forcibly interrupt the narrator’s meditation upon himself and his silence. Perhaps this strong reaction derives from the association between ‘year’ and the hated Basil. But more likely, as a specific object it has no place in his meditation, and further, the reason Basil is so hated is that he forced such impertinences on him in the first place.

Meditating on a generic object brings into question who we are in relation to our concept of that object—it is a ‘qui?’ that we cannot answer with a proper name or any specific aspect of our identity. Answering the ‘qui?’ in terms of the latter is merely an act of memory. The narrator remarks how his “lack of memory” (UN 331) had always been what had impeded his childhood development. Here he invokes another image from his (or Mahood’s) schoolboy days: “Pupil Mahood, repeat after me, Man is a higher mammal. I couldn’t” (UN 331). Not only is young Mahood unable to give the definition of a mammal from memory, he is also unable to repeat a basic proposition about mammals. Is his memory so bad that he cannot remember what he has just been told? His inability comes more from his resistance to defining himself (along with the rest of humanity) in terms of some conventional taxonomy: “what the hell could it matter to

pupil Mahood, that man was this rather than that?" (UN 331). Humanity must be something more than a bundle of features or a binomial nomenclature, otherwise anyone who was able to memorize all the features would know the nature of humanity entirely. In this sense, what Mahood's instructor might think of as the denial of the human, or refusal to learn what he takes the human to be, could in fact affirm the human. This move parallels the skeptic's denial of the ordinary, invoking again Cavell's Nietzschean sentiment that nothing is more human than denying the human. This is not so much to say that humans are *not* higher mammals, but that for certain considerations, it does not matter that they are.

At this juncture, after considering the taxonomic classification of man, the narrator introduces a new character that he baptizes Worm, since he seems to have reached a dead end with Mahood. He claims that while Mahood resembles his predecessors (presumably the characters of Beckett's earlier texts), Worm is "le premier de son espèce" (IN 84) ["the first of his kind" (UN 331)]. "Espèce" implies not just 'kind' but more directly 'species,' and if he is unique to Beckett's cast of characters, we might go as far as to say that he is *the* unique member of his species. But as with Mahood, and possibly the others, the narrator invokes him to provide a narrative of his own development. Although he is the last to appear, Worm is at the most primitive developmental stage, since the narrator barely recognizes himself in him: "Worm to play…. To think I saw in him, if not me, a step towards me! To get me to be he, the anti-Mahood" (UN 339–40). The narrator uses Worm as he does Mahood, to get a better perspective on himself, and yet he is the anti-Mahood in that Worm provides a view from the opposite vantage point, that of an object, or at least something patently non-human.

As with Mahood, the narrator focalizes on Worm, but does not quite fully inhabit the latter as he does the former; that is, he never really speaks as Worm, for Worm cannot speak. And unlike with Mahood, in the stretches of text focusing on Worm, 'they' are much more present, and the narrator seems to have better access to 'them,' often seeming closer to 'them' than to Worm. Although Worm is sometimes taken as a subject for instruction, more often he is an object for investigation. Instead of being taught about certain specific objects as was the young Mahood, Worm is taken as a specific object himself, which is why it feels like the narrator is taking sides with 'them.' Worm's topography is the inverse of the ambulant, elderly Mahood—he is enclosed in a space with a single peephole, which his observers take turns peering through as they circle the enclosure.[14] Like natural scientists, they observe his features, a mass of flesh with a single equine eye, and note his responses to different stimuli such as different lights. But unlike with an ordinary specific object, say, a goldfinch, the narrator can come to no clear conclusion as to what Worm is. Even under ideal circumstances for observation, we still come to the same conclusion as the skeptic—we cannot know.

However, the narrator is not exactly like the skeptic in this case, since his skeptical conclusion is not drawn via the skeptic's bases. Instead, we arrive at the conclusion via the basis of ordinary language philosophy: marks and features that identify (or fail to identify) the object. Ordinary criteria are not to blame here, since if there really were a creature like Worm, we would create an agreed-upon name for it and generate some conception of it so as to fit into our world view (i.e. if it were real it would generate its own grammatical criteria in our language). The

---

[14] Earlier, Mahood had gone in circles around his family, who were walled into a building with a single outlet for observing him.

narrator goes part way and gives him a proper name. But what the narrator wants runs deeper than that: not to think of him as a generic object instead of a specific object (which would not make sense in this case), but to think of him as another mind, however inchoate. This move creates an additional problem for the narrator, since he is also tempted to identify himself with Worm, or see Worm as himself at a more primitive state, a possibility contingent upon both being fictional characters instead of actual minds.

3. Skepticism of the Minds of Others:

Beckett's Narrator Treats Fictional Characters as Objectified Minds

The case of skepticism of the minds of others poses a special problem for the narrator of *The Unnamable* because he is a character dealing with other characters, and the sense in which he can be said to 'know' other characters is different from how we 'know' other people. Ordinary characters, in their capacity as agents within an ordinary narrative, are meant to be thought of as if they were human. But the narrator realizes that outside the context of an ordinary narrative, they might be taken as merely objects. When invoking the characters from Beckett's earlier texts, the narrator does not speak of them as if they were people, but refers to them, on at least three occasions, as 'puppets' (pantins/fantoches). This conveys what Cavell would call active skepticism of the minds of others, wherein we doubt whether we can know if the things that appear to be human are actually human. Even if we grant them some form of humanity, other-mind skepticism also has a passive side: we can also doubt that their inner life resembles our inner life, and that they can actually know our mind. Beckett's narrator also experiences passive

skepticism, doubting that he can be known, though in a modified form. His moments of passive skepticism emerge most clearly when he speaks of himself as Mahood, that is, as a character, wherein there is a greater sense that he too might simply be a puppet with thoughts and words that are not his own.

Part of what instigates skepticism of other minds is the fact that there are things that resemble humans that are not in fact humans, such as puppets, statues, paintings, and dolls, which we in some sense see as human. Puppets stand out in this class, because humans have a role in animating them, giving a stronger impression that there is some trace of life in them. In his later career as a theater director of his own dramatic texts, Beckett references Heinrich Kleist's text on marionettes to describe the grace and economy with which his actors should move.[15] Though the more germane touchstone here would be Hoffman's fantastical short story, "Der Sandmann," since the point of these puppets or automata is that they trick us into thinking they are real. Or rather, we *want* to think they are real. We are willing to look past their somewhat un-human movements because they satisfy an element of our fantasy of the minds of others, the possibility of knowing them completely. Cavell explicitly references "Der Sandmann" in "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," where he sees philosophical skepticism emerge in literary texts "in uncounted other guises" (155). In the case of the automaton Olympia, skepticism comes in the guise of the uncanniness we feel at our "inability to distinguish the animate from the inanimate" (155). The example of the automaton also emerges in *The Claim of Reason* as a special test-case for skepticism of the minds of others. It functions like a puppet in that it is also

---

[15] Particularly in his 1971 German production of *Happy Days,* and his 1976 tele-play *Ghost Trio* (Knowlson 517 and 558).

animated, except that where we can distinguish a puppet from a human, Cavell posits a perfected automaton that is externally indistinguishable from a human.

Literary characters are the inverse of perfected automata. For the sake of Cavell's argument, a perfected automaton would "have all the characteristics of a human being *save one,*" presumably, actually having a human mind (CoR 403). That is, they would resemble humans in all *outward* characteristics, including human behavior, making them entirely indistinguishable from the outside (and here the outside includes the 'inside' of the body—an autopsy would also be inconclusive). A literary character, on the other hand, we already know *not* to be an actual human in that it is made of language. Characters and automata are representations of humans (as are dolls and statues), but of a fundamentally different kind, since the intent of their creation is different. With the automaton, the intention is that you see it as a human. With the character, it is not meant to trick us—we willingly allow ourselves to be tricked. We know very well that it is not a person, and yet think of it as one. We might say that an automaton is all body and no mind, while a character is all mind and no body. However, a perfected automaton will behave *as if* it had a mind (we have no way of knowing if it really has a mind beyond its behavior). And when we imagine a character, we also imagine it to have a body, or rather, in its fictional world it has a body.

In saying that a character is all mind, I mean they are all words, and words are only words (as opposed to just phonemes and graphemes) within a mind—a character might be said to exist entirely in the mind of a reader. If we are granted access to a character's inner monologue, can we be said to know that mind perfectly? If we know a character's mind perfectly, it is perhaps only in the sense that we can know, for instance, a doll perfectly. Cavell poses the question: "Do

I know more about dolls and statues than I know about humans beings?" (CoR 403). The ground for this suggestion is that such objects are completely fabricated, and we thus theoretically "know everything that has gone into them" (403), whereas even though we may know a great deal about humans, there is always a remainder. A character is like a doll or a puppet in the sense that we know everything that went into it, for it is all there on the page.

Beckett's narrator's attitude towards his puppets is fundamentally ambivalent, since they are both necessary and unsatisfactory. They first appear almost as a response to his solipsistic mood: "I shall not be alone, in the beginning…. I shall have company. In the beginning. A few puppets" (UN 286). The significance of them being puppets is that we as readers animate them—it is *our* hand inside making them move and *our* words that we put in their mouths. Perhaps the narrator realizes that as such, they are not real company, since he says that hopefully they will only be present in the beginning of his narrative, and "then I'll scatter them, to the winds, if I can" (UN 286), since he would rather be alone than have false company. We might understand his qualification, "if I can," in terms of what follows, where he further wonders what his attitude should be toward things, since puppets are somewhere in the class of things, things similar to myself: "Where there are people, it is said, there are things. Does this mean that when you admit the former you must also admit the latter?" (UN 286). He delivers the first clause of this quote as if it were a bit of common wisdom, and yet it has the philosophical force of logical necessity—part of what it means to be human is to interact with things. In a passive sense, this could simply be a nod to phenomenological intentionality, that consciousness is always consciousness of some*thing.* Though people and things might go together in a more active sense, in that we always see a bit of ourselves in things, and may wish to animate them. It is in this more active mood that

the second clause of the quote suggests itself to the narrator, even if only in question form. The existence of things like puppets might necessitate the existence of people, those who created them in their own image. People seem to need puppets, we need to project ourselves onto others, but recognizing them as puppets does not satisfy our need for genuine company.

These particular puppets have special significance for the narrator, since they are creations of previous Beckett prose texts and continually appear to him, presenting themselves for comparison to himself. If we occasionally hear the voice of the author in the voice of the narrator, as we are sometimes invited to do, these scenes present themselves as a fictionalized version of Beckett-as-author haunted by his previous texts and trying to find ways of going beyond them, hence his wanting to sweep away the old puppets. They were failures in that they could never speak on their own, "I think Murphy spoke now and then, the others too perhaps, I don't remember, but it was clumsily done, you could see the ventriloquist" (UN 342). Here Beckett as ventriloquist resembles Cavell's fictional craftsman, working to perfect his automaton, who after nearly convincing us that it is a real human body, removes the automaton's hat to show a fake head "with, as a joke, a couple of glass buttons for eyes" (CoR 404). This is perhaps an inside joke, between Cavell and his fictional craftsman, since it seems they both have also been reading "Der Sandmann," where the last part needed to complete the automaton is a pair of eyes. Significantly, the voice does not seem to matter much, since we might interpret a few sighs however we wish. And with Beckett, the problem is *seeing* the ventriloquist (seeing his mouth move), and not with hearing his voice.

The metaphor of the author-as-ventriloquist also calls for a metaphorical sense of seeing and hearing, since when reading a text, the author is neither seen nor properly 'heard.' When

reading, we can never really hear any voice other than our own, even if we allow ourselves to believe the author or a character is speaking. The figurative sense of 'seeing' the ventriloquist would be 'recognizing' the author, since we often use 'I see' to mean 'I understand or recognize.' This type of recognition strikes us as a joke because it is as if the ventriloquist were not even trying to keep his mouth from moving, all the while insisting that it is the puppet who speaks. The humor emerges from a certain anxiety we have that connects our skepticism of the world and our skepticism of the minds of others. We readily admit that we *know* the puppet/character is not an actual person, because in seeing the ventriloquist we have an account as to why we might take the puppet for a person. But in the act of attributing his words to the puppet/character, we are struck with the fact that the ventriloquist might simply be a more convincing puppet. This leads either to regress or circularity: a regress that could only end with something like Descartes's evil demon as the master ventriloquist, or a solipsistic circularity in which the master ventriloquist is oneself. The metaphor of the puppet shows the way in which confusing the author for the character might lead to skepticism of the minds of others in which we take people to be merely things.

Beckett's narrator manages to use this confounding of people and things to his advantage —his active skepticism of the minds of others allows him to see his characters as the things that best constitute his world. He finds himself in a strange dantesque space, his own personal hell, in which his *contrapasso* is to be perpetually uncertain about his surroundings: "what I best see I see ill" (UN 291). The only thing that breaks up the monotony and indistinctness of his surroundings is when a character passes in front of him, as they do periodically, like planets around the sun. The most prominent of his planets, Malone, was the protagonist of the novel

immediately preceding *The Unnamable.* Only, he is not sure if it is Malone. If we rearrange his inquiry, breaking it down into Cavell's model of skepticism of the world, as outlined above, we see that although it fits well, it confounds the distinction between world skepticism and other-mind skepticism.

> Claim: Malone is there
> Request for Basis: [How do you know?] I am almost sure it is he
> Basis: The brimless hat seems to me conclusive
> Ground for Doubt: Perhaps it is Molloy, wearing Malone's hat
> Conclusion: But it is more reasonable to suppose it is Malone, wearing his own hat.
> (UN 286–287)

We should notice here that the narrator proceeds not as if Malone were a person, but as if he were an object, and notably a *specific* object (as opposed to a generic object). The point of this investigation is merely to identify him, not to determine if he has a human soul. We see this from the type of basis provided above, which offers a mark/feature instead of the type of basis that a skeptic would provide for a generic object (e.g., How do you know? By the senses). This particular criterion should be conclusive, since, unlike with the putative goldfinch's red head (which could also belong to the wood pecker), this hat is unique, definitive of the species 'Malone' for the narrator. However, this scene then parts ways with the ordinary scene of doubt since the ground for doubt is different—it is not that the feature itself is inconclusive, but that it is detachable. The hat is not intrinsic to Malone, not a real feature. Indeed, it is its own separate specific object with its own distinctive feature (brimless-ness), and has a special status as the narrator's "premier objet," the first object to merit his attention in this text.

Even when given a serious ground for doubt the narrator nonetheless settles on identifying him as Malone, suggesting that his interest in his environment takes the form of neither a skeptical nor an OLP investigation. Indeed, he often comes across as a parody of a skeptic because he combines elements of both, as if no one had taught him how to be a proper skeptic or a proper speaker of ordinary language. Perhaps he cannot be a proper skeptic because he does not have the right kind of object for skepticism: he sees Malone neither as an ordinary person nor as an ordinary object, but as a not-so-three-dimensional character. He always sees Malone pass before him at the same distance, in the same direction, in profile, and only from the waist up: "he stops at the waist, as far as I am concerned" (UN 286). His view of Malone is as if he were reading about him in a book—always viewed from the same perspective, following the same course of action with each repeated reading. When he is in view, we see him in his entirety, and not only does he not have a lower half (Malone never made use of his legs in his own novel), but he also lacks a backside, for like the dark side of the moon, whatever the narrator does not see might as well not exist. This literalizes one of the ways Cavell characterizes the skeptic, as someone who lives in a world "in which all our objects are moons" (CoR 201), when our ground for doubt is that we cannot know an object without *seeing all of it.* The narrator's literalization of Malone as a thing seen from only one direction parodies the skeptic's the ground for doubt, since with Malone there is in fact nothing more to see.

The literalization does not refute the skeptic's position; instead, it removes the unnaturalness in the skeptic's grounds (which is nonetheless an important feature of its philosophical function). In a literary context, it is fully natural that what should be an active recital of skepticism of the minds of others turns into a kind of parody of an investigation into a

specific object. Since in life we have knowledge of others only through empathic projection, wherein we assume that creatures who resemble us also have a similar inner life, the fear is that we might project inappropriately. But with a character, it is automatically the case that there is "nothing (of the right kind) empathically to project with, or rather upon" (CoR 422). We still project, but realize that there is nothing else there *but* our projection, no actual 'other mind' behind it, like casting our own shadow onto a blank screen.

The role of the narrator is to mediate between the reader and the other characters, even if his narration often takes the form of a parody of the depiction of the skeptic in philosophical texts. Strangely, like a reader, the narrator also projects himself into the other characters, but in a much more robust sense than a reader ever would, to the extent that he confuses himself with them, particularly in the case of Mahood. He represents this confounding of the teller and the told with the image of a thing and its shadow, or a container and its contents. Speaking as Mahood in his jar-stage,[16] he remarks, "car tantôt je me confonds avec mon ombre, tantôt pas. Et tantôt je ne me confonds pas avec ma jarre, tantôt si. Ça dépend, de comment nous sommes lunés" (IN 88) ["For sometimes I confuse myself with my shadow, and sometimes don't. And sometimes I don't confuse myself with my jar, and sometimes do. It all depends what mood we're in" (UN 334)]. A pun gets lost in translation, since "lunés" refers both to his mood and the manner in which the moon casts its light. The confluence of feeling a bit lunatic and the moon casting its rays just right could lead to him confusing himself with his own shadow, a projection

[16] In one of the text's narrative vignettes, the narrator-qua-Mahood finds himself planted in a jar in front of a restaurant. As John Fletcher discovered, this image has a real referent in a restaurant near where Beckett used to live in the 15th arrondissement of Paris. The restaurant Ali-Baba was decorated with a thief in a jar that held up the menu (Fletcher 184–85).

of himself. And the mood might just pass with the clouds. However the chiastic structure of this passage suggests that in the first and last instance, he remains confused.

Whereas before the narrator had exercised *active* skepticism of the minds of others by seeing them as things, now that he has projected himself into one of the characters, he exercises *passive* skepticism and worries that others will see *him* as a thing. Here Mahood's jar takes on additional significance as a figure for *res extensa,* the bodily side of Cartesian dualism. The vessel of clay has strong biblical connotations, referring to the brittle human body that temporarily houses the human soul. Descartes would urge us not to confuse ourselves with our vessel, our jar, since the soul is the eternal part of our dual existence, and thus the true human essence. Mahood, now a quadriplegic, finds himself in a jar as a temporary resting place while he awaits death. His true self is hidden in the jar, as in the passive recital, where the skeptic finds that their body gets in the way of others actually knowing their mind. Just as others' bodies wall the skeptic out, the skeptic's own body walls the skeptic in.

Walled into his jar, Mahood's primary concern is what the passersby can know of him. He might be little more than a landmark, raised up on a pedestal, supporting the menu for a restaurant across the street. But even in this capacity, he is at least better than a "chef in cardboard, pot-bellied in profile and full face wafer thin" (UN 322). He contrasts himself here with how he had previously seen Malone, as a one-dimensional character that only appears human from the proper perspective. But even as a fleshed-out human being, the customers do not address him directly—at best he overhears their conversations about the menu. He is convinced that at least the proprietress of the restaurant, whom he variously calls Madeleine and

Marguerite, is aware of his existence, since she feeds him leftovers from the garden and periodically changes his soiled sawdust.

The narrator/Mahood might quell his passive skepticism if someone were to respond to his pain-behavior, since being in pain is a characteristic not of all things, but only things that we take to have an inner life.[17] However we cannot tell what would count as pain-behavior for Mahood, since he does not speak or emit sounds, or express anything with his body. The most he can do, from what the narrator describes as his range of motion, is extend his head out of or lower it into the jar, and make his eyes bulge. It cannot be clear to an outsider what any of this behavior would signify. Nonetheless, Madeleine/Marguerite is able to deduce when he might be in pain, since she always covers him with a tarpaulin when it snows. Mahood must interpret this as evidence that she knows his pain, given that it occasions his first acquaintance with tears, tears of gratitude (that no one else can see and mis-interpret as pain-behavior since he is now totally covered by the tarpaulin).

For Cavell's passive skeptic, a response to pain-behavior is not conclusive evidence that the other knows their pain, since they may not be responding out of empathy. There is always the possibility that "pain-behavior is biologically painful to behold, so beholders of it do what they can to diminish it," as is the case with a parent's response to an infant's cry—it is bothersome so they do what is necessary to make it stop (CoR 444). But Mahood displays no clear pain-behavior that might be painful to behold. Instead, the narrator again confounds types of skepticism, reasoning that Madeleine/Marguerite treats him as a human *because* she sees him as

---

[17] Pain is a favored topic not only for Cavell, but also other philosophers who are in conversation with Wittgenstein about the privacy of our sensations, since it is a sensation that has fairly clear forms of expression.

an object, a specific object that serves to identify a place. Perhaps she only feeds and covers him to prevent him from dying, so he will go on being a landmark for her restaurant. Mahood gets the impression that he represents "for her a tidy little capital and, if I should ever happen to die, I am convinced she would be genuinely annoyed" (UN 323). And yet, he speculates that after he does die, she will dispose of him and keep the jar, apparently in his memory, but this could also insinuate that she does not really need *him* for the landmark, just what encases him. He could just as easily be replaced by a pineapple perched atop his jar.

Since Madeleine/Marguerite has ulterior motives for treating Mahood as a human, he fantasizes about others acknowledging his existence, others who would gain no benefit from him. He imagines a scene in which a man accompanied by his fiancée stops and exclaims, "Oh I say, this man is ailing, we must call an ambulance!" (UN 336). In order to ensure himself that the man is not merely hallucinating, Mahood imagines that the fiancée also notices him, adding, "You are right, my love, he looks as if he were going to throw up" (UN 336). Again, the determinate criterion for them knowing he is a human, another mind, is that they know his pain. They need not *feel* his pain (having the same pain is the strong sense of knowing another mind), but merely deduce from some outward sign that gives them reason to believe that he is in pain, and therefore exists.

Although there are strong similarities between the jar-bound Mahood and Cavell's skeptic, as with the other examples, this is accompanied by an asymmetry introduced by the literary context. Mahood wants his existence acknowledged by others so he can move on and cease to exist; like other literary characters, he wants to properly make his appearance before bringing his chapter to a close. The point of passive skepticism for a real person is not to

establish one's existence. Being a conscious mind, like a good Cartesian, we presuppose our own existence, and if anything would tend toward solipsism, affirming that *only* the self exists. Instead, assuming that other minds also exist, we want to be known and share our inner life with others. Being a character, Mahood is justified in presupposing that he does not exist, and in inventing another cast of characters to validate himself.

Beckett's relation to his narrator is like the narrator's relation to Mahood; each is a fictitious construct of another mind that plays a part in the *récit,* in the attempt to recount an aspect of one's own mind. In *The Unnamable,* this process leads to an infinite regress, the sense that each new character must create another character to more faithfully resemble its own creator. Cavell's skeptic finds themselves in a different kind of trap, a fundamental ambivalence that leads to the simultaneous affirmation and denial of the ordinary. One way out is to take the path of ordinary language philosophy, but this path is blocked to the skeptic for they feel their situation is forced upon them. What Beckett offers with his parody of philosophical skepticism is not a different way out, but a different manifestation of a similar problem, a new way to deny ordinary criteria, and thus one's own humanity. Perhaps this way is not more intellectually satisfying, since it also does not lead to a definitive conclusion. Beckett's parody of skepticism offers a different and more sublime sense of not being able to come to an end.

CHAPTER 3

THE FLIGHT FROM HUMANITY AND THE FAILED FANTASY OF A NEW FORM OF LIFE IN *HOW IT IS*

As he was beginning work on what would become *Comment c'est* (*How It Is*), Samuel Beckett wrote to A.J. Leventhal that he was "struggling to struggle on from where the Unnamable left me off, that is with the next next to nothing" (qtd. in Knowlson 413). If *The Unnamable* led Beckett to a dead end, to "next to nothing," the question then becomes how to pick up and go on from there. For Bruno Clément, both novels deal with the same problem, the chaos of the universe (Clément 113). The difference between them is on the formal level: *The Unnamable* gives us "choses en mal d'ordre" [things lacking order], whereas *How It Is* gives us "l'ordre en mal de choses" [order lacking things] (114).[1] Formal innovation allows Beckett to go on: he goes from the long block of text that constitutes most of *The Unnamable* to the paratactic fragments of *How It Is*. Bracketing these formal differences, Alain Badiou claims that there is a stronger sense of progression from the earlier novel to the later if they are read in terms of the philosophical concerns behind them. For Badiou, *The Unnamable* finds Beckett in a moment of crisis as a result of being under the sway of "le terrorisme cartésien" (Badiou 38) [Cartesian terrorism]. It is only with *How It Is* that Beckett gets beyond this crisis due to the advent of "la voix de l'autre (qui interrompt le solipsisme)" (38) [the voice of the other (which interrupts the solipsism)]. For Badiou, the introduction of the outside voice and the encounter with another

[1] Clément borrows this phrasing from a review Beckett wrote on the painter Henri Hayden: "Etrange ordre des choses, fait d'ordre en mal de choses, de choses en mal d'ordre" (*Disjecta* 147).

(Pim) in *How It Is* are more significant than formal innovation for enabling Beckett to overcome his conceptual impasse.

As argued in the previous chapters, Beckett offers a parody of skepticism instead of a straightforward account of it—here we shall maintain that *How It Is* furthermore parodies the *solution* to skepticism. The narrator's flight from the outside voice (and by association, from humanity) provides a literalized image of the trajectory of skeptical thought, while the attempt to form a new language with Pim and the fantasy of a new species defined with mathematical precision parodies the solution to skepticism. Keeping up the spirit of both *The Unnamable* and *Endgame, How It Is* draws on the content of the skeptical tradition, without arguing for or against it. Beckett's creative dilemma after his previous texts resembles the skeptic's dilemma, say, Descartes caught mid-mediation, knowing next to nothing, and his way of moving on in *How It Is* ends with a narrator who seems to know everything about his new species, with an optimism and confidence that parodies philosophical certainty.

Where *The Unnamable* presents a sustained skeptical recital that could continue indefinitely, *How It Is* figures philosophical skepticism as more of a process, wherein one form of life replaces another, and radical doubt ultimately concludes in parodically exaggerated certainty. We find the narrator transitioning from his previous life up above into his new life in the mud, a process that involves the "loss of species" (HII 427). He seems to still be "hanging on by the fingernails to one's species" at the beginning, indicating that he is far removed though not quite severed from humanity (HII 426). Beckett is using "species" here in a special sense, for the narrator clearly still has a human body, and it is not normally the case that an organism can switch from one species to another. This "species" has more to do with identity, how one

conceives of oneself in relation to others. To clarify Beckett's narrator's conception of his loss of species, it is helpful to adopt a distinction Cavell makes between the biological sense and the ethnological sense of 'form of life,' the former separating humans from animals, and the latter separating different groups of humans from each other ("Declining Decline" 41). When Beckett's narrator speaks of losing his species, it is in the ethnological sense, since he seems to remain biologically human. The germ of this species-transformation process already appears in *The Unnamable* with Worm, a seemingly non-human character about whom the narrator speculates, "if I am not yet Worm, I shall be when I cease to be Mahood" (UN 331–32). *How It Is* enacts this process and stretches it out over the course of its three parts, wherein the narrator attempts to first become less human and then adopt a new species altogether in his encounter with Pim. The skeptic departs from humanity, isolates themselves in their philosophical study, but only to return to full companionship with the same species, essentially unchanged. *The Unnamable* more directly parodies philosophical skepticism, the time spent in isolation. *How It Is* focuses on the sentiment behind it that motivates the withdrawal and the return, but with a revised return, as if the withdrawal left the skeptic forever changed.

Since it is unclear that Beckett's narrator ever effectively achieves the loss of his species and the reestablishment of a new ethnological species, I will refer to it as his 'fantasy' of the loss of species, on analogy with what Cavell calls Wittgenstein's fantasy of private language. In *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein[2] often entertains a form of other-mind skepticism,

---

[2] Andre Furlani suggests that Beckett was studying Wittgenstein's later philosophy during the period he was composing *How It Is.* He cites two unpublished letters to Barbara Bray, one from 1958 when he was reading David Pole's book, *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein,* and then another from 1962, when he re-read the book (Furlani 12). He also notes that Beckett had a copy of Cavell's, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (25).

often referred to as the private language argument, which seems to end by reaffirming the publicness of language. But in Cavell's interpretation, other-mind skepticism is always a standing threat behind Wittgenstein's private language argument: "its point is to release the fantasy expressed in the denial that language is something essentially shared" (CoR 344). The fantasy of private language is thus essentially the denial of shared forms of life, a fantasy of the loss of ethnological species. However, for Wittgenstein and the other-mind skeptic, such a fantasy always ends with the reaffirmation of shared forms of life.

Beckett's parody of the three-part skeptical journey (shared form of life > fantasy of private language > reaffirmation of shared form of life) adds a new element in that the narrator imagines he can create a new ethnological species. His journey begins in Part 1, as he flees his previous ethnological species, and attempts to strip himself down to just the biological. This takes the form of the inverse of an Augustinian confession—instead of confessing his shared faith with his species, he distances himself from his own words, which seem imposed from the outside by a God-like voice. In Part 2, when he encounters Pim, a creature biologically similar to himself, he imagines that this biological similarity can serve as the basis for the creation of a new ethnological species. His fantasy seems complete in Part 3, when he imagines an entire system of creatures in the mud who are like himself, as if he had successfully created a new species. However, he finds himself alone, unable to verify if his fantasy adequately describes reality. Thus his version of the return to ordinary life, or the recovery of a shared form of life, takes the form of the inverse of the skeptic's fantasy. Instead of a fantasy of private language, it is the fantasy of a perfectly public language. His reasoning is quasi-mathematical, employing large numbers as if they validated his system. The most prominent feature of this final part of the text

is the confidence with which the narrator reasons—his confidence imitates that of the skeptic returning to shared forms of life, and yet it is clearly a continuation and exaggeration of his previous fantasy.

1. The Journey Away From Memory and the Human Species—

Part 1 of *How It Is*

The opening of *How It Is* finds the narrator stuck between two different species and between two different understandings of the concept of 'species'—he is in the process of departing from the one and crawling toward the other. Namely, he is distancing himself from his previous life "above in the light" (HII 412),[3] and moving toward his life below "with Pim" (HII 411). The distancing process would be complete if he could see both the memories of those above and the voice that conveys the memories as mere images and words imposed from the outside, and thus as not really his own. And he would more fully initiate himself into the species below if he could take the cycle of "before Pim with Pim after Pim" as how it is, always was, and always will be. But before shifting from one species to another, in Part 1, the narrator must first shift his conceptualization of species from ethnological to biological. The narrator denies the human capacity of voice and image recollection, and instead concerns himself with the present state of his body, particularly his hands. The transition from defining his species in terms of language and culture (ethnological sense) to defining it in terms of his body (biological sense) is

[3] The English Grove Press edition of *How It Is* bundles it with *Three Novels*. *How It Is* begins on page 411 of that edition.

a process of paring down in order to rebuild, for the biological sense is more basic. In reducing himself to just a body, the narrator effectively loses his identity, and risks becoming like Worm, the sole member of his species defined only by his body.

The body serves as a basis for a species only in relation to other similar bodies, and since he is cut off from other bodies in Part 1, the narrator finds himself in a second infancy, aware of his body but unaware of its relation to others. In his analysis of *How It Is,* Eric P. Levy claims that "to lose species is to lose individuality; for a particular (individual) requires a universal (species)" (Levy 85). Since the concepts of 'individual' and 'species' depend upon each other, even if the narrator imagines his body to be unique, as Worm's is, he cannot truly conceive of himself as an individual. That is, his sense of uniqueness does not actually constitute an identity. The narrator in Part 1 is in a peculiar form of infancy, for like an infant, discovering his individual identity means discovering not only his body but also, and especially, its separateness from similar bodies (before going on to establish a shared language with other bodies). But unlike an infant, he must also forget the purportedly false language and false memories of his life above.

How It Is, like *The Unnamable,* leverages the fundamental features of first-person narrative fiction for its own purposes—it puts in question the relationship between the speaking "I," and its language and memories. In a first-person narrative, unless given a *specific* reason for doubt, we assume that the narrator is speaking for themselves and about themselves. Beckett's narrator explicitly gives us such a reason, denying both the memory images that he describes and the language itself that he uses to describe them. In the text's first line, the narrator says, "… I quote … I say it as I hear it" (HII 412). Presumably, the entire account could be taken as a

quotation, since this refrain appears throughout, but it is particularly prominent in Part 1 in connection with his memories. Anthony Uhlmann suggests that the narrator of *How It Is* "mimics the reader," in that he "relates the story as it was told him rather than claiming to bear witness," which has the effect of undermining "the very foundations of identity (whether social or personal)" (Uhlmann 140). I would extend this point further toward the skeptic's fantasy and say that the narrator is more distant than a hypothetical reader in that he places himself outside the human species. Even though a reader is not apt to confuse themselves with the narrator of a text they are reading, they at least putatively *understand* what is being said, and even have the capacity to *imagine* that they are in the narrator's position.

Beckett's narrator suggests that his words are just bare repetition, as if he were parroting back sounds, giving an account for how he can *appear* to partake in humanity's shared form of life without actually doing so. The second line of the text gives us, "voice once without quaqua on all sides then in me" (HII 411). Characterizing the outside voice as "quaqua" suggests that it is senseless, just a string of phonemes that the narrator mechanically repeats, even the portions that seem self-aware, such as "I quote." Here the narrator appears as an infant who mimics the sounds it hears without yet attaching sense to them. It is only after a "vast stretch of time" (HII 412) that the narrator internalizes the outside voice (it enters "in me"), which we might take to mean not only that he identifies the voice as his own, but also that he understands what it says. However, this apparent internalization of language accompanies "the beginning of this life" (HII 412) and is never completed, since even by the end he still has the impression that his words are citations from an outside voice.

The problematization of the relation between the speaking "I" and the words spoken connects Beckett's narrator to the divided skeptic, whose words seem forced upon them, separating them from the shared forms of life of the rest of humanity, with the difference that the skeptic owns their words, at least for the duration of the skeptical recital. In both, the discourse is polyvocal, but where the skeptic owns the division, the narrator strives for univocity. In his analysis of Wittgenstein, Cavell hears a persistent temptation to skepticism, a voice that is never fully silenced. Although serving different purposes, Cavell finds that "philosophy has employed the same literary genres as theology," namely dogmatics, confession, and dialogue ("Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" 70). In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein reconfigures these genres:

> Inaccessible to the dogmatics of philosophical criticism, Wittgenstein chose confession and recast his dialogue. It contains what serious confession must: the full acknowledgement of temptation … and a willingness to correct them and give them up…. (The voice of temptation and the voice of correctness are the antagonists in Wittgenstein's dialogue.) In confessing you do not explain or justify, but describe *how it is* with you. ("Availability" 71, emphasis mine)

When Wittgenstein makes the case for private language, it is not just a straw man interlocutor in the dialogue, but a confession of the temptation to other-mind skepticism. He owns both sides of the dialogue because it describes how it is with him at different moments. Beckett's narrator both confesses and disowns his confession—the description of how it was disrupts his fantasy of the purity of his description of how it is.

Confession in a literary context is different from philosophical or theological confession since it is not ascribed to the author, and Beckett's parody of confession exploits this difference

in that his narrator wants to claim that his confession is fictional. James Olney suggests that Beckett's prose fiction "rejects those conventions of narrative that we might think of as Augustinian," wherein there is "no distinguishing of memory from self" (Olney 868 and 871). I would prefer to say that *How It Is* inverts rather than rejects the Augustinian model,[4] since the *Confessions* has the peculiar quality of making God an interlocutor, the rhetorical receiver of the confession, whereas Beckett's narrator claims the God-like outside voice dictates the confession. The narrator's "I say it as I hear it" in this sense parodies Augustin's claim, "you [my God] hear nothing true from my lips which you have not first told me" (*Confessions* X. ii). Since God knows all and cannot lie, the memories and words Augustine receives from Him establish a firm sense of self. But the narrator's outside voice does not imply the authority of an all-knowing deity, and could be simply the voice of inspiration that a literary author hears, prompting them to speak of how it is or was with another—to confess for another. He is not really divided the way a skeptic is, since he disowns the voice of correctness that would lead back to ordinary language and a shared form of life with humanity.

The act of confession both reveals a shared form of life and reinforces it, since it is addressed to and received by others of the same persuasion, but the narrator's confession seems to be addressed to no one. When Augustine confesses, "not what I was but what I am now," it is not only to God, but also to his fellow believers, "conjoined with me in mortality, my fellow citizens and pilgrims, some who have gone before, some who follow after, and some who are my

[4] Elizabeth Barry claims that Beckett's "debt to St. Augustine is often cited but not yet completely understood" (Barry 72) (her own work focuses on Augustine and the *Three Novels*). Knowlson reports that "before writing *Dream*, Beckett immersed himself deeply in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine," (Knowlson 114) and there are recent studies on the impact of Augustine on *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (e.g. Bellini, "He Tolle'd and Legge'd" [2015]). But there are no extended studies of Augustine and *How It Is*.

companions in this life" (*Confessions* X. iv). When the narrator attempts to say how it is in his present condition, the description is from an outside perspective and focuses on his body: "the quiver of the lower face signifying I am saying have succeeded in saying something to myself" (HII 440). The narrator's attempt at speech does not amount to a confession because it is neither to God nor to others, but only to himself, so it is not a means of connecting him to a brotherhood of believers, a species in the narrower ethnological sense. The movement of the lower face could serve a purely biological function, such as breathing or taking in water from the mud,[5] as is the case elsewhere in the text, but here he specifies that the movement signifies speech. The capacity for speech separates humans from animals biologically, and sharing forms of language unite groups of humans together ethnologically, making them, as it were, of the same confession. In Part 1, the narrator is not quite among the speechless animals, but he is caught between species, for his speech is only to himself—no one else shares his confession.

Even though he is physically cut off from the species that is above in the light and can no longer converse with or confess to them, before being initiated into the species that is in the mud, the narrator must more fully negate the images from above. He often conflates images, memories, and words, talking of them more abstractly as that which connects him to the previous species ("I clung on to the species we're talking of the species the human saying to myself brief movements" [HII 443]). What he calls 'images' (made of words, posing as memories) have the most positive content and stand in need of negation. The strongest and most elaborate images couple the narrator with women at different stages of his life, notably, him as a child with his

[5] Throughout Part 1, the voice/memories/images appear when the "panting stops" (HII 411), and the mouth opens repeatedly for the tongue to loll in the mud and quench his thirst (HII 412).

mother, and him as an adolescent with his girlfriend. These images are the most threatening to his desired break with the species above because they remind him of how he came into the species (birth and instruction from his mother), and remind him of his ability to propagate the species (reproduction and rearing with his girlfriend).

The narrator imagines his mother as an anonymous representative of her species who ultimately fails to convey the conventions that would initiate him into the form of life of her species. The image is of himself as a child and his "mother's face I see it from below it's like nothing I ever saw" (HII 418).[6] For this last phrase, the French has, "il ne ressemble à rien" (Cc 19), speaking of the mother's face. Both versions suggest on the surface that her face is unique. But taken literally, the English implies that the image presents the narrator with a face he has never seen before, a picture of an unknown woman, while the French opens the possibility that there is no face there at all but only a blank image. In both languages, the image of the mother lacks any specific description, despite the vivid invocation of the parerga surrounding the scene. The mother's face should be the child's introduction to human physiognomy, it should define his own biological species, but in his attempt to distance himself from the species, it turns up blank.

In sexual reproduction, the mother de facto reproduces another biological human, but she is also tasked with initiating him into a shared form of life, imparting her language and customs, but the narrator's image is of a failed scene of instruction. The faceless mother is teaching the child to recite the Apostles' Creed (which, among other things, confesses a belief in the resurrection): "on my knees whelmed in a nightshirt I pray according to her instructions" (HII

[6] This image is based on a photograph from Beckett's childhood, where he is pictured kneeling on a cushion on his veranda by his mother (Knowlson 413–14).

418). After the mother recites a portion of the prayer, her eyes "burn down" on the child, who looks up at her and "repeat[s] awry" (HII 418). This scene of instruction pictures an anonymous authority figure who imposes a convention on the child. Even worse than repeating mechanically the quaqua that he hears in the mud, he cannot even recite the prayer correctly. The prayer as a form of confession should unite an ethnological species, a group of fellow believers who mean the words they are given to say. The religious version of the skeptic might definitively deny the religious creeds they were taught, never returning to the stretches of conviction they once felt. But the narrator's denial of this scene is more fundamental, more similar to philosophical skepticism, since he wants to imagine that he never got the words right in the first place. If different groups of humans can offer different confessions, he was never in a position to make any kind of confession whatever. In his current situation, doomed to an eternal cycle with no hope for resurrection back into the species, the narrator has no use for prayers and confessions, or the language that makes them possible.

In a scene of adolescence, the narrator invokes the image of a mother replacement, a girlfriend, but the scene devolves into a parody of the self-completion that romantic love promises by literalizing her as his 'other half.' He sees himself at sixteen with a girlfriend and a dog, having a picnic on a spring day. Instead of being two humans interacting and conversing, the narrator pictures them as complimentary parts of the same organism, functioning in unison: "we are eating sandwiches alternate bites I mine she hers and exchanging endearments my sweet girl I bite she swallows my sweet boy she bites I swallow" (HII 430). We might see this exchange as mechanical, but it is also a reduction of the social to the biological, inasmuch as bodies are machines. Although the mouth is used both for speech and eating, here speech is

simply what the mouth does automatically when not eating. The words that constitute the exchange of "endearments" are more similar to the sandwich than they are to words used for conversation—they are simply repeated, passed back and forth, words for consumption and not food for thought.[7] The couple form a single organism in which the two mouths serve to complement each other, alternating between these two biological functions of the mouth.

The literalized image of the significant other as 'other half,' forming a single body, does not imply that the narrator has an intimate knowledge of her, since he conceptualizes his relations to the girl in terms of skeptical dualism, denying a connection between body and mind. As the boy and girl walk along together with the "mingling of hands," they move as a single unit, "the same notion at the same instant Malebranche less the rosy hue the humanities I had" (HII 430). With this last phrase, the narrator speaks of his education in the humanities, in this case, the Cartesian philosophy of Occasionalism. Beckett's source[8] on Occasionalism and Malebranche, Wilhelm Windelband, tells us that "in the anthropological field … the mind cannot be the cause of the bodily movements—no one knows how he sets to work even but to raise his arm" (Windelband 417). As strict Cartesian dualists, Occasionalists maintain that the mind cannot cause the body to move—it only seems to do so because God provides the occasion for motion. The "rosy hue" that the narrator finds in Malebranche perhaps refers to the suggestion that God also gives us the *impression* that we cause the motion; he gives us an idea of the world that is "much richer and more beautiful than the actual corporeal world itself" (Windelband 417).

---

[7] Their 'conversation' constitutes what Austin might call a phatic act, using the mouth to produce sounds that fall within the range of phonemes used for speech, but they are not necessarily used to signify (*How To Do Things With Words* 92). A parrot is capable of a phatic act.

[8] Ackerly and Gonstarski often refer to Windelband as a source for Beckett's philosophical material, observing that Beckett "took extensive notes from him" (Ackerly and Gontarski 647).

In his parody, the narrator asserts the Occasionalist idea that there is no connection between his mind and the motion of the romantic couple's composite body, but denies that God gives him the impression that the narrator causes the motion. His training in the humanities has ultimately taught him to deny humanity, since the parody of Occasionalism in this image implies that there is no actual connection between these two minds and these two bodies, meaning that they can neither biologically nor culturally reproduce their species.

While expunging the images from above and distancing himself from his ethnological species, the narrator simultaneously attempts to grasp his new world below, favoring the biological sense of species. The biological sense is logically prior to the ethnological sense, and the narrator must begin there by necessity, since he is alone in Part 1 and has no one with whom to form a culture. He describes how he uses his limbs to move along the ground, how he consumes the food in his sack, but most importantly he fixates on the movement and location of his hand. Instead of thinking of humans as rational animals, capable of a shared language and culture (an ethnological definition), in the first instance the narrator focuses on a vital feature of human anatomy, the hand and its opposable thumb (a biological definition).[9] He imagines that his right hand "will go some day on its four fingers having lost its thumb … close my eyes … and see how it throws its four fingers forward like grapnels … it moves away" (HII 428). In this fantasy, a metonymic image for the fantasy of the loss of species, the part of himself that he recognizes as still human leaves him behind. Even as it stands, his right hand lacks the most

[9] When Cavell distinguishes between the ethnological and biological senses of species, he specifies that the latter concerns itself with 'higher' and 'lower' creatures. For humans as 'higher' creatures "the romance of the hand and its apposable thumb comes into play, and of the upright posture and of the eyes set for heaven; but also the specific strength and scale of the human body and of the human senses and of the human voice" ("Declining Decline" 42).

important part, the thumb, which facilitates using tools and writing (though he later specifies that he has the "stump of the thumb" [HII 446]). Physically separated from the species above, the narrator's rediscovery of his hands and their uses serves as the foundation for his discovery of the species below.

As a philosopher might do, the narrator takes a marked interest in his hands—they are always literally near at hand and yet do not seem to be fully within his figurative grasp. In Part 1, Beckett avoids using the word 'grasp' to mean 'understand,'[10] which actually emphasizes the sense that the narrator is figuratively attempting to 'grasp' something about how things are with his persistent preoccupation with his hands. While one hand is clutching the sack that holds his food, he will often turn to his other free hand and "draw it to my face it's a resource when all fails images dreams sleep food for thought" (HII 417).[11] Translating the French "matière à réflexion" (Cc 17), the English version adds a figure of speech, "food for thought" (417), which draws a connection between two roles that the hand can play for the narrator. The free hand dips into the sack to bring literal food to the mouth, but it also serves as a feast for the eyes, and thus, for thought. It is the part of one's own body that is most readily visible and subject to meditation, enabling us to either affirm or deny the thought, 'this is me.' Although the narrator often doubts

[10] Though in Part 2, he does question whether or not Pim has "grasped" (HII 461) ["saisi" (Cc 87)] what he has just carved in his back with his fingernail.

[11] This line seems to combine two salient images from Augustine about memory. He says of unwanted images, "with the hand of my heart I chase them away from the face of my memory" (*Confessions* X. viii); and that "memory is, as it were, the stomach of the mind" (X. xiv). In Part 1, as we saw above, the narrator makes it his point to drive away unwanted images from the face of his memory.

the voice and the images, he never seems to doubt that his hand is his own[12]—it becomes his form of *cogito,* for it is his "resource when all fails" (417).

Even though he does not doubt that they are his hands, he parodies both the skeptic's doubt and the anti-skeptic's solution in two related ways: the comfort he finds in his hands is more physical than intellectual, and his attempt to intellectualize his hands leads to a conflation of their literal and metaphorical significance. In a moment of repose, he suggests, "one must always try and see what the hands are up to … the right I close my eyes … opening and closing in the mud opening and closing it's another of my resources it helps me" (HII 428). Beckett avoids saying here that the hand is "grasping" the mud,[13] and instead simply describes the grasping motion (earlier he called the motion a "flutter" [HII 417]). In this moment, the hand is not a "resource" in the way it normally would be—it is not used to effectively grasp tangible objects. And yet it is also not an intellectual resource, the object either of skeptical doubt or anti-skeptical proof. Instead, the grasping motion serves only to self-soothe, the way an infant might open and close its hand in the air. This physical motion is a resource for the narrator's self-understanding at the level of the simple description of his physical state, but he additionally associates his hand with language, suggesting the figurative use of the hand grasping at words.

---

[12] He displays the certainty of the anti-skeptic G.E. Moore: "I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'" (Moore 165–66).

[13] Claiming that the roles of the narrator and Pim are "masculine" and "feminine" respectively, Badiou observes, "il est vrai que Beckett se garde de prononcer ces mots" (Badiou 56) [it is true that Beckett avoids using these words]. In this case and in the case of 'grasp,' the avoidance is conspicuous, suggesting that the narrator wants to deny, or avoid confessing, something about how it is with him.

Both the grasping motion of the hand and the narrator's repetition of the voice that conveys memories from above hover between sense and senselessness. As the voice from above becomes unintelligible, the narrator appropriates his hands, which serve as the basis for the possibility of a new language. An outside observer might interpret the hand movement either as an attempt to grasp at something or to express something, while leaving room for doubt that this movement is purely mechanical. The connection between his hands and the possibility of language becomes more apparent with the narrator's expression of a double failure: "my hand won't come words won't come no word not even soundless I'm in need of a word of my hand" (HII 420). He does not say what he needs his words or hands for, but the sense that they might have a purpose emerges with their failure. The possibility that hands and words might grasp the world comes out in a figure of speech: imagining himself wrapped around his sack, the narrator asks, "what insect wound round its treasure I come back with empty hands" (HII 425) ["je reviens les mains vides" (Cc 29)]. It is telling that Beckett retains this figurative use of hands in both languages. It shows that the narrator, in thinking of the insect, also has in mind his characteristic gesture of dipping his hand into his sack. When he dips his literal hand into his bag, it astonishingly always comes back with a can of food, but when he figuratively dips into his treasure trove of memories for a word or image, it comes back empty. This disparity emblematizes the trajectory of his journey in Part 1, the words and memories from the previous life vanish between his fingers, while the bare physicality of how it is remains predictably consistent.

As the narrator flees the shared form of life with his pervious ethnological species, he wants to figuratively come up empty handed as he grasps for memories, since he wants to focus

on the purely physical or biological. His journey proves fruitful in Part 2, when he is surprised to encounter a species biologically similar to himself: “the hand dips clawing for the take instead of the familiar slime an arse two cries one mute end of part one” (HII 444). He was distracted in his journey by grasping at false images of a life above and “hanging on by the finger-nails to one’s species” (HII 426). In the act of forsaking his past species, releasing his vain grasp, the narrator hopes to realize his future self and join the species down below.

2. The Narrator Attempts to Establish a New Ethnological Species With Pim Through a New Shared Language—Part 2 of *How It Is*

When the narrator encounters Pim, he can finally leave behind his preoccupation with the ethnological species up above, since he now has a biologically similar blank slate with the potential to be part of a new ethnological species. He must first verify that he has indeed found a “fellow-creature,” someone biologically similar to himself. His first contact is with Pim’s right buttock, from which he runs his “stump of thumb on spine on up to the floating ribs that clinches it” (HII 447). Along with verifying Pim’s biological humanity, the narrator also discovers “a testicle or two the anatomy I had” (HII 448). This last phrase echoes the earlier exclamation, “the humanities I had” (HII 430), which follows an instance of him putting his education into practice, but here “anatomy” designates both an academic subject (like the humanities) and also

the narrator's own body.[14] The narrator has the same anatomy as Pim, which makes Pim the appropriate candidate for initiation into a new shared form of life.

Even though they cannot biologically reproduce with each other, sharing a biological species serves as the foundation for establishing a shared form of life (a set of conventions that constitutes a language) that is unlike any other ethnological species up above. After a period of instruction, the narrator does appear to succeed in establishing a set of conventions that is unique to the two of them. However, the set of new conventions that defines their relationship opens the possibility for discontent from both ordinary language and skeptical perspectives. On the one hand, the success of their new 'language' is contingent on the fact that they both already possess fully-developed, though different, languages (and thus they are not actually separated from their ethnological species up above). On the other hand, the language they now share is as susceptible to other-mind skepticism as any other language, since apparently successful communication does not guarantee that it has the same significance for both parties—the shared sense of species may only be skin deep.

The narrator's apparent success in instructing Pim is not as radical as he would like, since it is based upon their pre-existing shared capacity for language. This linguistic connection to the species above spoils the narrator's fantasy that he has attained an ethnologically non-human state, so he treats Pim's language as if it were bare, biological behavior. Even though the narrator at first finds Pim unintelligible, it is clear that he already has a language: "I can't make out the words the mud muffles or perhaps a foreign tongue perhaps he's singing a lied in the original [i.e.

---

[14] This double sense is also present in the French, "l'anatomie que j'avais" (Cc 67). The resonance with 'the human' is absent from the earlier exclamation, "les lettres que j'avais" (Cc 37), but the French discipline "les lettres" emphasizes language as the defining human trait.

German] perhaps a foreigner" (HII 449). However, instead of attempting to establish a common ground between his English/French and Pim's German, the narrator attempts to get through to him with physical prodding: "first lesson theme song I dig my nails into his armpit" (454). It is only after a "vast stretch of time" (456) that he manages to get Pim to consistently match the stimulus (fingernails in armpit) with the proper response (song). Pim's song is presumably the unintelligible lied he found him singing, but the content of the song at this level matters less than the fact that it is a consistent response to a certain stimulus. That is, instead of taking language as language, the narrator equates it with any other kind of behavior. It might as well be an automatic, non-introspective nervous response. In this sense, the narrator seems like a simplistic behaviorist,[15] reducing ethnological behavior to biological behavior—having a language is no more evidence of higher consciousness than any other kind of behavior (say, wincing in pain).

Nevertheless, working from these basic biological responses, the narrator hopes to build something more complex and make the responses systematic, giving the impression that they are 'communicating,' that Pim 'understands' the narrator's desires. After much instruction, the narrator establishes a range of different stimulus/response combinations: "one sing nails in armpit two speak blade in arse three stop thump on skull four louder pestle in kidney / five softer index in anus six bravo clap athwart the arse seven lousy same as three eight encore same as one or two as may be" (460). Each stimulus is of course a form of torment, which only seems like a

---

[15] Here he contrasts with OLP and Wittgenstein in particular, for whom language is shared and public, but not in any reductively empirical way. Wittgenstein has a more complicated relationship to behaviorism. He invokes an imaginary accuser: "'Are you not really a behaviorist in disguise? Aren't you at bottom really saying that everything except human behavior is a fiction?'—if I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction" (PI § 307). Point being, if an inner state lacks an intelligible form of behavior, expression, or description, then it might as well not exist for others—it is not part of our shared grammar.

necessary first step in communication because the narrator denies that they antecedently belonged to an ethnological species, and thus possess a natural language. He emphasizes instead the biological human capacity to feel pain and to adapt to an environment so as to avoid pain. These two capacities combined provide the possibility of developing a shared form of life that bypasses the fact that they each came to maturity in a culture. That is, the narrator treats Pim as if he were lacking a mother tongue, as if he were a human infant that he is about to instruct or initiate into his first language.

With the narrator's instruction of Pim, Beckett draws on a particular strain of the philosophical tradition that invokes the image of a hypothetical pupil (a child or infant) to consider the problem of how we come to learn or understand anything at all, and how we share knowledge (overcoming other-mind skepticism). Cavell finds this strain surprisingly rare in philosophy, but sees what he calls the "scene of instruction" as a vital component of both Wittgenstein's and Augustine's thought. The prime example of a scene of instruction is the oft-cited turned spade section, where in response to the question, "How am I able to obey a rule?" the instructor ultimately hits bedrock and says, "This is simply what I do" (PI § 217). At a certain point, reasons run out, and we settle upon our agreement in shared forms of life. For Cavell, "the good teacher will not say, 'This is simply what I do' as a threat to discontinue his or her instruction, as if to say: 'I am right; do it my way or leave my sight,'" but they will offer themselves as "the representative of the community into which the child is being … invited or initiated" ("Argument of the Ordinary" 72). Beckett's narrator is of course a bad teacher, since he forces himself upon Pim, and he is not really a representative of some pre-existing community, but the self-fancied creator of a new one. As the narrator digs deeper into Pim's flesh, he does not

seem to reach bedrock, a place of agreement between the two, nor does he manage to dig into his soul. Pim leaves before the narrator can be certain that he actually got through and established a new language.

The scene of instruction in Wittgenstein often involves the learning of simple mathematical operations, but Beckett's narrator is specifically interested in how a non-speaking, human-like being learns language, as is Augustine. What Cavell identifies as the "scene of instruction" in Wittgenstein occurs in his response to the Augustine quote about language acquisition that opens the *Philosophical Investigations,* and he further claims that this scene "haunts the *Investigations*" as a whole ("Argument of the Ordinary" 97–98). The moral of the scene of instruction is that "explanations come to an end somewhere" (PI § 1), meaning that when we eventually hit the bedrock of shared forms of life, explanation becomes impossible. The examples in Wittgenstein of math and invented language games are meant to make us dissatisfied with *explanations* for language—they convey a sense of the mystery of how we come to learn or understand anything at all. In teaching a first language, we do not really know *how* it occurs, and we effectively teach much more than we could ever intend; indeed, children learn language even in the absence of any deliberate, formal system of education. In Augustine's account, Cavell is particularly struck by how "isolated the child appears, training its own mouth to form signs (something you might expect of a figure in a Beckett play[16]), the unobserved observer of culture," giving the impression that language is not so much taught as "stolen" ("Argument of the Ordinary" 99). In *How It Is,* the narrator breaks Pim's isolation, and attempts to be an

[16] Cavell does not name any particular plays, but *Not I* comes to mind, since the disembodied mouth seems to speak automatically, or perhaps not even properly 'speak,' but perform phatic acts that might be taken as speech.

instructor with absolute control over what is taught, for he has created the language, but he seems to be forcing on Pim stolen goods that Pim neither wants nor needs.

The problem with the narrator's approach to language reflects and inverts the problem of Augustine's account of language acquisition: whereas Augustine thinks of infants as if they had already acquired a first language, the narrator thinks of Pim as if he had no first language. Admitting that he does not actually remember his infancy, Augustine claims to be able to say how it was with him by observing other infants, and speaks as if he were in their position (*Confessions* I. vi (8)). He says that he gained an awareness of a barrier between himself and others, "for my desires were internal; adults were external to me and had no means of entering into my soul," and that there was "no real resemblance" between his desires and the signs in his possession (I. vi (8)). On his "path to the present," the overcoming of this barrier is something of a mystery—he received no "formal teaching," which he would have not been in a position to receive (I. viii (13)). Instead, Augustine claims that he would hear the names people gave things as they interacted with them, and after a period of time, began to associate names and things (I. viii (13)).

How It Is reenacts but also inverts this scene: the narrator describes the scene of instruction from the perspective of the instructor (instead of the learner), and it is *his* desire that he wishes to force through the barrier. Both parties seem to already have access to full-blown language,[17] and even though these are different languages, it should at least serve as a basis for the "formal teaching" that Augustine lacked. Instead, the narrator treats Pim as if he were an

[17] For Wittgenstein, "In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown" (PI § 120).

infant—he invents new signs that bear no real resemblance to his desires, that is, they are conventional and not natural signs, just as the names that Augustine learns. Even though the signs they establish are not exactly names, they are learned like names, through correspondence, and can function independent of a larger grammar. A single sign from the sender conveys a discrete desired response from the receiver. The relation between sign and desired response can be learned by association over a period of time.

By erasing the distinction between first- and second-language acquisition, Beckett's narrator provides a somewhat distorted picture of language, as does Augustine thinking of his hypothetical infant self as already in possession of a first language. What Wittgenstein calls Augustine's "peculiar picture of human language" (PI § 1) serves as the basis of the narrator's view of language, and is a model for the peculiarity of the narrator/Pim language. The language that they end up creating resembles similar language-games in Wittgenstein, since it is simple and serves to illustrate a point. The point of Wittgenstein's analogy between language and games is not that they are amusing, but that they are self-contained, and that no one example or even set of examples gives a fully satisfying account of what a game is. Wittgenstein's language-games and the narrator/Pim language-game offer only a partial, and potentially misleading, view of language, and they are illuminating because they are unsatisfactory.

The narrator/Pim language-game is particularly similar to Wittgenstein's first example in PI § 2, which is explicitly formulated to reflect Augustine's picture of language. It is an attempt to imagine a language for which Augustine's account would be accurate: there are two builders who use four words (block, pillar, slab, beam) to indicate that they want the other to go and fetch said item. It is important that it is conceived as a *complete* language, and that these two

individuals have no other use for communication. As Gary Kemp observes, just because the builder "has incorporated his response to 'Slab!' into a form of life," does not "presuppose the idea of a self-willing subject" (Kemp 174). Instead of showing that language enables us to express ourselves and our wills, the § 2 language-game pictures it as a practice imposed from the outside that brackets the importance of understanding—if the response is automatic, they do not need to take the other's will into consideration. Kemp extends this point to Beckett, whose "writing is about the search for something that is authentically the self, absolutely one's own, along with the baffling realization that there is no such thing" (Kemp 175). Without denying this point, I would modify it in the case of *How It Is*, where the search for the self is mediated by the search for a species. The narrator's creation of a builder-like language-game is part of this search. The absurdity of the language-game shows that the attempt to establish an authentic language with another is self-defeating, because it must be imposed from the outside, and because it is overly narrow and thus not definitive of life as a whole.

In a vain attempt to encompass a more capacious range of the possibilities for their life together, the narrator introduces a range of different signs/stimuli. As listed above, the "table of basic stimuli" that the narrator trains Pim to respond to contains six different entries (eight in total but two of them are the same stimulus with a slightly different significance), and like the § 2 language, we might conceive of them as commands or expressions of desire (they indicate what the sender wants from the receiver). However, they are also more complex than § 2, for they correspond to qualitatively different kinds of response. The first two stimuli resemble the words of the § 2 language, since they are two arbitrary signs (nails in armpit, blade in arse) that call for the 'interlocutor' to produce something specific (singing, speaking). The next three (thump on

skull, pestle on kidney, index in anus) pertain to modifications of the thing produced (stop, louder, softer). The remaining stimuli (clap athwart arse and repeated applications of previous stimuli) are not quite commands, but in a sense are expressions of desire in the form of judgments of value (bravo, lousy, encore). To account for the possibility of qualitatively different kinds of sign use, Wittgenstein also expands his basic builder language-game (in § 8) by adding numerals, pointing, and color samples. The point of the expansion is to show that different types of language use are learned in different ways, but also to show that simply multiplying categories of use does not give a robust picture of natural language. For Beckett's narrator as well, the progress he makes in training Pim ultimately falls short: "orgy of false being life in common brief shames … what a hog's wallow pah not even not even" (HII 459). For the vast stretch of time that they have spent together in the mud, they may as well have been two wallowing hogs, and that is how their interactions would appear to an outside observer. Like the builders, to human observers they appear to be not fully human in this narrow interaction since they do not achieve anything like a robust natural language.

The narrator himself posits a pair of 'outside' observers, Kram and Krim (though they are indeed within the text itself), and he imagines that they are studying him, as if to justify his reflections on his own activity and his interactions with Pim. Kram serves the role of "witness," bending over the couple and dictating his observations to his scribe, Krim, who is perhaps Kram's son or grandson, learning the family trade (HII 468). J. E. Dearlove suggests that "their transcript is the book we hold and read" (Dearlove 161), which is a provocative suggestion, but it deprives the narrator of an element of reflection. The text consists of the narrator's same paratactic inner monologue, and only occasionally shifts into a certain quasi-scientific

descriptive mode, and even here it is not the observations of the outsiders themselves, but rather what the narrator imagines an outsider might be able to observe of him.

The main stretch of his reflections on the observers has a progression that culminates in a fantasy of his own opacity to others, to those not of his species. At first it seems as though they are biologists studying a new species, which should yield clear and objectively true results. They record his migration habits ("ten yards one hour forty minutes six yards per hour"), his feeding habits ("struggles to open tin long struggles"), his sleeping habits ("slept six minutes breathing fitful set off on waking"), and his hibernation ("end of seventh year of stillness") (HII 468). They then seem to be ethnologists, having encountered a member of a rare tribe, who has primitive language capacities, which they manage to record, "catching a few scraps Pim Bim proper names presumably" (HII 468). But ultimately, the narrator appears as a super-human, or a personification of humanity in general, who outlives and escapes the comprehension of at least thirteen generations of observers. Their science then would be the study of man, which goes through various trends from generation to generation, such as adopting the convention of keeping three different-colored notebooks to record observations of his body, mutterings, and comments ("blue yellow and red respectively" [HII 469]), only to later drop the convention entirely. This science most closely resembles philosophy, which has a history and undergoes changes, but ultimately makes no progress, with each generation inheriting the same set of problems about the same incomprehensible creature.

Both the narrator's interaction with Pim and his fantasy of the outside observers indicate that he has not satisfactorily established an ethnological species. Even after getting Pim to respond to stimuli as desired, the narrator has a lingering question at the end of Part 2 that he

carves into his back: "YOUR LIFE HERE" (HII 481). After this inscription, the narrator gives Pim a "long pause," as if he expected an account of Pim's life, but the language-game that he has established does not enable Pim to answer. Even if Pim could express himself more robustly and give an account of how he got there and what it is like, it would not satisfy the desire behind the question. He wants to know about Pim's life in order to know about his own life, that is, he wants to understand himself as part of a species. But since they do not actually share a language, they also do no share a life—he lacks a fellow sufferer. The imagined observers supplement this sentiment, since they are studying only the narrator, instead of the narrator and Pim as two of a kind. The results of their study, even if objectively accurate, are of no use to the narrator, since they tell him nothing he does not already know (or at least can imagine). Having a life means sharing it, which appears to be impossible with both Pim and the observers.

3. The State of Abandonment and the Narrator's New Species Fantasy—Part 3 of *How It Is*

When Pim abandons the narrator, leaving him alone again for Part 3, the narrator elaborates a fantasy of what his world would be like *if* he were a part of a larger ethnological species that shared a form of life. His meditation parodies what Cavell calls Wittgenstein's "fantasy[18] of private language" (*Claim of Reason* 347), the temptation toward other-mind skepticism wherein we imagine that our words cannot express our inner lives to others, or vice

[18] Cavell calls it Wittgenstein's *fantasy* of private language instead of the private language *argument* to record the insight that it is part of the temptation to skepticism, that in a skeptical mood we are inclined to think of language as private. Wittgenstein also does not call it an argument, nor does he effectively prove that language is private.

versa. Beckett's narrator inverts Wittgenstein's fantasy of perfect privacy, and instead, in his isolation, imagines that he can perfectly describe his entire species and speak authoritatively for them all. He seems to simply *posit* the features that are definitive of his species as a whole. Instead of a fantasy of *private* language, it is a fantasy of *universal* language. Instead of saying 'I' and 'my,' the narrator adopts 'we' and 'our,' employing what Eric P. Levy calls the voice of the species, the "pure narrator" that lacks "any subjective pole or self" (Levy 9). In his apparent failure to connect with Pim and establish a shared form of life with an individual, he imagines that the moment of encounter repeats itself indefinitely among a vast quantity of hypothetical fellow-creatures.

The narrator's construction of a universal system that defines his species's shared form of life is based on a peculiar sense of retributive justice and a quasi-mathematical procedure that performs no real operations. The concept of justice in its practical application to human relations is often not quantifiable, and it is not subject to a precise mathematical operation, even though such precision might be an abstract ideal. In his fantasy of his new species, the narrator imagines a system of retributive justice that has the potential to be quantified—there is only one crime, and each crime is punished in turn with an identical crime. Keeping track of such a system would amount to simple bookkeeping, but the narrator ennobles his system with considerations of large numbers, as if to draw on the prestige and purity of advanced mathematics. But his system is a parody of both retributive justice and mathematics since he conflates the two senses of "c'est juste" ["correct"]. Retributive justice cannot be so squarely quantified so as to produce "correct" results, and the prestige of mathematics comes from its truths being revealed as a priori, not from

the basic correctness of the tabulation of large numbers. 'Justice' becomes as simple a matter as 'correctness' only when the narrator presumes to speak for the entire species.

In adopting the voice of the species, the narrator does not exactly lose his identity, but rather identifies with the whole species, wherein individual names become fungible, as if they were replaceable by numerals in his retributive justice ledger. Since the novel itself only presents us directly with two embodied characters with names, Bom and Pim, the narrator expands the role of these names to function as positions within his system. This gesture might at first strike one as a confusion of identity: "Bom to the abandoned not me Bom you Bom we Bom but me Bom you Pim I to the abandoned not me Pim you Pim we Pim but me Bom you Pim something very wrong there" (HII 495). Instead of pointing out individuals, the names designate the positions of the individuals in relation to each other at any given time, with Bom designating the tormentor and Pim the victim. Confusion arises, "something very wrong there" (the polar opposite of "c'est juste"), because he does not have a name to designate himself in his present state of abandonment—he is currently outside the tormentor/victim relation.[19] The names only have a use for him in the present because they enable him to reflect on the past and future, and more importantly, they enable him to generalize and fabricate how it is for the whole species. In his solitude and speaking for the species, it becomes reasonable for him to posit, "we Bom … we Pim" (495); otherwise, this formulation would have no sense, for it has no practical application in a particular encounter between two individuals.

[19] Though on the debit side of the ledger since he has just played the part of tormentor.

As the narrator speculates about his place within the 'we,' he begins to introduce numbers to conceptualize the sequence of the species. For David Houston Jones, "the progressive replacement of names with numbers imbues the scenario with a concentrationary horror and threatens the very existence of what is now 'the fragile kind' [HII 511] … 'l'espèce fragile' [Cc 163]" (Jones 57). Since Jones is thinking about *How It Is* in the context of Holocaust testimony, it might be intuitive to connect the narrator's numbers to the identification numbers assigned to inmates at Auschwitz. But notably, the narrator does not treat them as identification numbers, since they are not fixed to particular individuals. He assigns them somewhat arbitrarily, for the sake of illustration, "as for example our course a closed curve and let us be numbered 1 to 1000000" (HII 497). He provisionally assigns himself a number when he narrows the illustration down to four individuals: "let me for example be numbered 1 it's not asking a great deal" (HII 497). He gives himself the liberty of being number 1 because the numbers are not fixed—anyone can claim to be 1 or 1000000.[20] In this capacity of speaking for the species, all potential representatives are equal. As opposed to Auschwitz, instead of dehumanizing, each individual can be exemplary, giving their authoritative account of their strange world.

With the voice of the species, Beckett's narrator takes himself as exemplary, thus pitching his claims in the same register as judgements of value, claims about ordinary language, and the Augustinian confession to and on behalf of fellow believers, which presuppose a shared form of life or ethnological species. Cavell notes that the claims of OLP often take the first person plural 'we,' and that "in general we do not require evidence" for such claims, because we take them as

---

[20] In English, the number 1 resembles the first person pronoun, and saying that there is no difference between 1 and 1000000 is like saying there is no difference between "I" and "we."

definitive for those who can speak intelligibly with us ("Must We Mean What We Say" 14). This claim might sound outrageous, but Cavell finds a precedent for OLP in the Kantian "universal voice" that emerges in moral and aesthetic judgements of value, because in both, "one feels empirical evidence about one's language to be irrelevant to one's claims" ("Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" 95). The universal voice speaks for those who overlap with us in those areas. Beckett's narrator treats his metaphysical sphere as if it were a moral or aesthetic sphere—he does not need to take a survey (nor is he capable of taking a survey) of his fellow creatures in order to speak for them. A numerical majority would be irrelevant since, like Augustine, he speaks to and for those who agree with him. As in Part 1, Augustine's confession returns: "you [my God] hear nothing true from my lips which you have not first told me" (*Confessions* X. ii). Only here, the narrator embodies the God-like proclamation instead of fleeing from it, because he has first reduced himself (in Parts 1 and 2) to a bare biological species, before positing a large quantity of individuals biologically similar and in the same empirical surroundings, placing himself in the God-like role.

The narrator figures this spiritual connection of absolute agreement within the species in physical terms. Remembering his encounter with Pim when there was a "slight overlapping of flesh in the region of the shoulders," he generalizes to imagine all the inhabitants as "glued together in a vast imbrication of flesh without breach or fissure" (HII 516). Based on his present empirical surroundings, he knows he is physically alone and not touching anyone, but in his fantasy of universal language, the remembered physical overlap translates into a spiritual overlap that authorizes his speech in the first person plural.

By the end of Part 3, the narrator imagines that his authority for using the voice of the species comes from a process of un-forgetting, since the outside voice reveals to him, or recalls to memory, his having gone through numerous iterations of the cycle. In Part 1, the outside voice speaks to him of "my life" (HII 411), meaning the life above that he wishes to flee; but in Part 3, it becomes "the voice of us all" (HII 514), which speaks for the species below. The voice might be taken to be that of God, sending a revelation about their world, but it appears to be he "who listens to himself" (HII 515), so it emerges through self-examination. The mode of meditation pictured with difficulty here is one in which self-reflection reveals something about others because it pertains to the life of the species.

As part of the species chain, the narrator feels that he is exemplary (the number 1 or the "I" who speaks for the "we") because he has been singled out to hear the outside voice and recollect previous cycles. The voice appears God-like because it seems to impose itself at pre-ordained moments, "every twenty or forty years according to certain of our figures he *recalls* to our abandoned the *essential features*" (HII 515, emphasis mine) ["tous les quelque vingt ou quarante ans au dire de certains de ses chiffres il *rappelle* à nos abandonnés les *grandes lignes*" (Cc 168, emphasis mine)]. The voice seems more God-like in the French, since the space of time is according to "his figures" instead of "our figures," suggesting that God is more of an outsider. But the narrator takes this as a *recollection*, only this time not as a memory from his life up above, but from the life in the mud, as if he were always already there. If he indeed were always there, then the "essential features" should be obvious and not require proof—he should know the general picture of how his world works because he has gone through the cycle repeatedly. The French idiomatic term "grandes lignes" suggests that the picture he now recalls is

correct in its general outline, though not necessarily in its details. Taken more literally, "grandes lignes" recalls the image of the long chain of individuals, particularly as the narrator imagines them as being all one flesh, a concatenated species. The recollection is both of himself and of the species system in general because in his fantasy of universal language these are necessarily intertwined.

Although the details of the picture are fuzzy (as "grandes lignes" [broad strokes] implies), causing some doubt, there are certain conclusions that he deems satisfactory, particularly related to his conception of justice. The moments of doubt are registered throughout the three parts with the refrain "something wrong there" (412) ["quelque chose là qui ne va pas"], but Part 3 introduces a new evaluative term into his meta-critique—"correct" (496) ["c'est juste" (141)]. Since his reasoning pertains to the procession of the individuals in his world, he figures his doubts as interruptions to this process. Beckett translates the idiomatic French phrase "quelque chose là qui ne va pas," as "something wrong there," which could mean that something is either factually or morally wrong with the picture. Taken literally, it means that something "does not go," which suggests that his thought process stops in its tracks when it can no longer motivate the procession of the species chain. What enables him to continue with his reasoning is what in Part 3 he begins to call "our justice" (494) ["notre justice" (138)]. This term emerges shortly before the narrator starts to deem certain judgements "correct," and although it is obscured in the English, it is more evident that "notre justice" leads to the conclusion "c'est juste." However, this correlation might actually be a *mistake* in his reasoning, for he is essentially conflating different senses or applications of the concept of justice, the factual or numerical on the one hand, and the

moral on the other. The narrator proceeds by positing certain hypotheticals, and ends up creating an ideal world, one in which the moral (how it *ought* to be) defines the metaphysical (how it *is*).

The philosophical difficulty of ethics is usually bridging the gap from 'is' to 'ought,' but in the narrator's fantasy of the species, he can reverse the direction, and begin with an ideal of retributive justice that serves as a basis for declaring how it is. With regard to the institution of punishment, the narrator endorses eye-for-an-eye retribution, where the punishment ought to fit the crime. As Wittgenstein's § 2 invents a language-game that best pictures Augustine's simplistic view of language, the narrator invents a system that perfectly suits the simplest concept of retribution where the punishment is always identical to the crime. "Our justice" enables this system because it proceeds in a precise rotation: "as long as I am with Pim the other with Bem … two by two together vast stretch of time nothing stirring save the tormentors those whose turn it is on and off" (493). For each act of torment, the tormentor deserves to be tormented in kind, but in the narrator's world, the retribution creates the need for further retribution. Since every individual is tormented by the one behind and torments the one ahead in alternating turns ("on and off"), with each iteration, retributive justice is fulfilled while simultaneously incurring a debt that is doomed to perpetuate itself. Indeed, the perfection of the system is that it is self-sustaining and self-perpetuating.

The problem with narrator's reasoning is that it begins with punishment as a paradigm case for justice. Punishment only exists because there is crime, but in an ideal world, neither should exist. For Ewa Ziarek, the reason punishment is a paradigm case is the narrator's obsession with rationality: "the only 'justice' possible in these cruel language games depends on the symmetrical reversal of roles, on the calculated 'proportionality' between suffering and

torment" (Ziarek 185). The crime/punishment duality is what provides the possibility of creating an operation that can be executed so rationally. Whereas the ethical sphere is usually subjective and imprecise, the narrator's desire for a perfectly rational ethics introduces an element that really ought not be. Conflating the perfect 'justice' that is possible in mathematics with the ethical concept of 'justice' only creates a parody of both.

Just as the narrator's rationalized version of justice does not actually create an ethically ideal world, the narrator's version of mathematics does not produce a clear picture of how his world actually is. The frequent occurrence of large numbers in Part 3 lends its proceedings the veneer of mathematical certainty, but the narrator is not seriously performing mathematical operations, just as the mathematical examples in *Philosophical Investigations* are not meant to contribute to the philosophy of mathematics. In both cases, the mathematical examples are not meant to display advanced abilities, but rather to take things in the other direction, since they are very simple exercises. Wittgenstein's basic example for his scene of instruction is not even arithmetic but simple counting, and the point of instruction is to get the child to continue counting on their own, producing numbers they have never heard before. Being able to go on alone into new contexts expresses *confidence* that one has inherited a certain practice, a confidence that, for Cavell, returns the skeptic to ordinary language because it "is directed not to my knowledge of my next step but toward my recovered capacity to take it" ("Argument of the Ordinary" 73). This regained confidence registers a return to the ordinary after a moment of skepticism has stopped us in our tracks—it is less a reassurance of recovered knowledge than of a recovered life.

The confidence that Beckett's narrator places in the correctness of his quasi-mathematical proceedings distorts the kind of confidence we ordinarily have in such shared practices. His confidence rests on the biased sense we often have that what numbers tell us is transparent and that the results reached by mathematical operations are certain.[21] The narrator asserts in a first instance that there are "fifty thousand couples" because "it's mathematical it's our justice" (HII 493). What he calls mathematics here is not an advanced operation, but something basic, the mere assignation of a number. But since the narrator's solitary meditation is not empirical in nature, he is not going around and actually counting the individuals in his world; rather, the number he arrives at is simply posited, though based on his particular conception of justice. What matters is only that the number be even (one-hundred thousand of them, divided into pairs), in order to maintain the tormentor/victim balance, and that it be large, at once depersonalizing the individuals and lending validity to the system. Apart from these general features, there is nothing special about one-hundred thousand, for he later asserts that "there are millions of us and there are three," meaning that there are three that he knows through direct interaction (including himself), and reasons that there must be an arbitrarily large number of unknowns. That the larger number is simply posited suggests that its purpose is not to reach an agreement with another about the actual number.

The narrator's interest in large numbers is less in the quantity than in the sequence, which only has its use in this strange world where social interactions are two-dimensional. The social picture is flattened in that there are only two possible types of interaction (tormentor/victim), but

---

[21] As Wittgenstein observes, "Mathematicians do not in general quarrel over the result of a calculation," but goes on to qualify, "I have not said *why* mathematicians do not quarrel, but only *that* they do not" (PI p. 192).

also in the sense that each individual only ever interacts with two others. The potential use of the sequence is to show how the members of this species know each other: "number 814327 may speak … of number 814326 to number 814328" etc. (HII 499). There is the possibility of a telephone-game effect, wherein rumors of one individual make their way up and down the chain, but the narrator quickly dismisses this idea ("no acquaintance by hearsay" [HII 500]). So there is no actual use for the large numbers, since the contiguity of the numbers is the only feature that matters. For this purpose, the numbers 1 through 4 would suffice, so as to keep the couples even, and posit the possible existence of an unknown individual. This four-number sequence can be memorized, and thus does not count as counting—it closes off the possibility of carrying on to new numbers, just as the narrator's knowledge cannot extend to new individuals beyond his immediate neighbors. By closing off the possibility of actual counting, the narrator deprives his world of the possibility of progress, for there is no new context in which to project. He pictures an infinite loop of perpetual finitude.

In imagining the system of his species, the narrator seems to value the fact that the system is self-contained and self-perpetuating, but this in itself betrays an insecurity. From the beginning, the narrator has been attempting to flee his own humanity and establish a new species. For this to truly be the case, the species must sever all ties with humanity. The language-game that the narrator invented with Pim is supposedly unlike anything that exists among any human ethnological species, but the grounds for its possibility is still based on the human capacity for language. The purity of his mathematical reasoning is something that could exist in nature, independently of any human values, but the very fact that the narrator *cares* about the relative independence of mathematics suggests an interest that is deeply human. The narrator's

vision of a species that erases all ties with humanity is only a fantasy, but it is one that he shares with the skeptic.

References

Abbott, H. Porter. "I Am Not a Philosopher." In *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*, edited by Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Acheson, James. "Chess with the audience: Samuel Beckett's *Endgame.*" *Critical Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1980): 33–45.

Ackerly, C. J., and S.E. Gontarski. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought.* New York: Grove Press, 2007. Kindle Edition.

Augustine. *Confessions.* Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Austin, J. L. "Other Minds." In *Philosophical Papers, Third Edition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

——. *How To Do Things With Words.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Badiou, Alain. *Beckett: L'increvable désir*. Paris: Hachette, 1995. Translated by Alberto Toscano as *On Beckett* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004).

Barry, Elizabeth. "Beckett, Augustine, and the Rhetoric of Dying." In *Beckett and Death*, edited by Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman, and Philip Tew. London: Continuum, 2009.

Bearn, Gordon. "Sounding Serious: Cavell and Derrida." *Representations* 63 (Summer 1998): 65–92.

Beckett, Samuel. "First Love." In *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, edited by S.E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1995.

——. *En attendant Godot / Waiting For Godot : Bilingual Edition.* New York: Grove Press, 1982.

——. *The Grove Centenary Edition Volume II: Novels [Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, How It Is].* New York: Grove Press, 2006.

——. *L'Innommable.* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1953.

——. *Texts for Nothing.* In *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, edited by S.E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1995.

——. *Endgame and Act Without Words.* New York: Grove Press, 1958.

——. *Fin de partie.* Paris: Minuit, 1957.

——. *How It Is.* In *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett: Volume II.* New York: Grove Press, 2010.

——. *Comment c'est.* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1961.

——. "Embers." In *Collected Shorter Plays.* New York: Grove Press, 1984.

——. *Disjecta.* Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 1984.

——. *Samuel Beckett: Complete Dramatic Works.* London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1986.

Bellini, Federico. "'He Tolle'd and Legge'd': Samuel Beckett and St. Augustine: Habit and Identity in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women.*" *Lingue e Linguaggi* 13 (2015): 23–34.

Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences*. London: Routledge, 1997. Second edition, digital printing 2007.

Bowles, Patrick. "Patrick Bowles on Beckett in the early 1950s." In *Beckett Remembering/ Remembering Beckett*, edited by James and Elizabeth Knowlson. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006. Kindle Edition.

Cavell, Stanley. "Ending the Waiting Game." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "An Audience for Philosophy." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "The Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation.*" In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "Music Discomposed." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "Knowing and Acknowledging." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

——. *The Claim of Reason.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

——. *Disowning Knowledge In Seven Plays of Shakespeare.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Updated 2003.

——. "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary." In *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism.* Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1988.

——. "Declining Decline." In *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

——. "The Argument of the Ordinary." In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism. The Carus Lectures, 1988.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Clément, Bruno. *L'Œuvre sans qualités : Rhétorique de Samuel Beckett*. Paris: Seuil, 1994.

Cohn, Ruby. "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett." *Criticism* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1964): 33–43.

——. *The Comic Gamut.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962.

Dearlove, J. E. "The Voice and Its Words: *How It Is*." In *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, edited by S.E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1986.

Descartes, René. *Discours de la méthode*. Paris: GF Flammarion, 2000.

——. *Meditations on First Philosophy.* Trans. [from the Latin] John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Fletcher, John. *The Novels of Samuel Beckett.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1964.

Freshwater, Helen. *Theater and Audience.* Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Furlani, Andre. “Earlier Wittgenstein, Later Beckett.” *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 1 (April 2015): 64–86.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982.

——. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree.* Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doublinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

——. “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative.” Trans. Nitsa Ben-Ari and Brian McHale. *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 755–74.

Graver, David. “The Actor’s Bodies.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (July 1997): 221–35.

Jones, David Houston. *Samuel Beckett and Testimony.* London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.

Kemp, Gary. “Autonomy and Privacy in Wittgenstein and Beckett.” *Philosophy and Literature* 27, no. 1 (April 2003): 164–87.

Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett.* New York: Grove Press, 1996.

Laugier, Sandra. *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2013.

Levy, Eric P. *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction.* New Jersey: Gill and Macmillan, 1980.

Moore, G.E. “Proof of an External World.” In *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Morot-Sir, Edouard. “Samuel Beckett and Cartesian Emblems.” In *Samuel Beckett: The Art of Rhetoric.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1976.

Ogden, Benjamin H. “What Philosophy Can’t Say About Literature: Stanley Cavell and *Endgame*.” *Philosophy and Literature* 33, no. 1 (April 2009): 126–38.

Olney, James. “Memory and the Narrative Imperative: St. Augustine and Samuel Beckett.” *New Literary History* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 857–80.

Pole, David. *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1958.

Puchner, Martin. *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

——. "Afterward: Please Mind the Gap between Theatre and Philosophy." *Modern Drama* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 540–53.

Rabaté, Dominique. "À l'ombre du roman: propositions pour introduire à la notion de récit." In *Le roman français aujourd'hui: transformations, perceptions, mythologies*, edited by B. Blanckeman and J-C. Millois. Paris: Prétexte éditeur, 2004.

Rudrum, David. "From the sublime to the ordinary: Stanley Cavell's Beckett." *Textual Practice* 23, no. 4 (2009): 543–58.

Schneider, Alan and Samuel Beckett. *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider.* Edited by Maurice Harmon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Uhlmann, Anthony. *Beckett and Poststructuralism.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Wasser, Audrey. "From Figure to Fissure: Beckett's *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*." *Modern Philology* 109, no. 2 (November 2011): 245–65.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1953.

Ziarek, Ewa. *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996.