

Dish and Pot:
Scatology and Liminal Space in Samuel Beckett

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the School of Communication
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

By
Keegan Bradford
1 December 2014

Acknowledgments

I wish to express the deepest gratitude to:

Dr. Prior, a lifelong mentor and model of a Christian thinker, writer, and teacher;

My mother and father, for loving truth, beauty, and hard work;

Raquel Harmon, whose constant support and encouragement made this project possible;

Liz Cook, Jon Smalt, Katie Smith, and all of my peers and friends in the English program at

Liberty University who set a high bar for academic excellence;

Ms. Pat, for her kind gifts of coffee.

Chapter One – Introduction – Scatology, Liminality, and the Failure of the Body

Shit is central to the human experience. St. Augustine of Hippo is famously credited with the epigram, “Inter faeces et urinam nascimur.”¹ The phrase serves as a reminder of the inescapable scatological components of humanity: “Between shit and piss we are born.” Life begins amidst points of excretion, and excretion is a function essential for life to continue. Literature, serving as it does as a mirror of life, has not neglected to address this excrement. The study of excrement is termed scatology, and literature across cultures and periods of history is rife with examples of excrement used as a serious, symbolic image. In his *Inferno*, Dante portrays sinners submerged in a ditch of feces to express the filthiness of their transgressions. Yeats uses the oddly prescient “Crazy Jane” to bluntly remind the priest who criticizes her for her scandalous lifestyle that the spiritual life cannot be separated from the physical one. Passion, as well as the base and the physical, are essential components of life; Crazy Jane cautions the priest not to forget that “Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement” (15-16). Jonathan Swift uses excrement as a tool for satire; scatological images correct the pride of those who would elevate themselves or others by reminding them of their shared base physical necessities—even Celia shits.²

Samuel Beckett, the Irish author and expatriate who spent the most prominent portion of his career writing plays in French, makes liberal use of excrement throughout his body of work. Critics have noted the comic effects of Beckett’s use of scatology in an often bleak body of work. However, the scatological elements of Beckett’s work are not a deviation from Beckett’s absurdist goals, but an essential part of Beckett’s depiction of the human condition. In many ways, scatology is a more significant unifying feature of Beckett’s writing than his heritage or

¹ Although this phrase is commonly credited to Saint Augustine, St. Odo of Cluny, the medieval abbot and Catholic saint, is also often attributed with this quote.

² “The Ladies Dressing Room”

immediate cultural surroundings. Born to a Protestant family and raised in Ireland, Beckett showed little interest in either element of his religion or his nationality. His work is neither very Protestant nor very Irish. Beckett's early work, such as *More Pricks than Kicks*, is often set in Ireland, and he owes an early poetic debt to his friend James Joyce,³ but Beckett's later work sheds any such semblance of Irish-ness. His writing is bleak, set in nondescript, borderless lands populated by vagrants and aimless wanderers, avatars instead of characters, addled mouthpieces spouting barely intelligible nonsense. The set design of Beckett's plays is plain to the point of barren: in *Waiting for Godot*, the set description consists only of three elements: "A country road. A tree. Evening" (11). *Endgame*'s curtain lifts on even less: "Bare interior. Grey light" (92). All extraneous details have been removed, leaving only the skeletal plot and setting. Beckett's work, at almost every level, seems consumed with eliminating.

Beckett was one of the most prominent members of what became known as the Theatre of the Absurd, a movement comprised of European playwrights in the 1950s. Martin Esslin gave the movement its name in 1961 in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, although he stressed that "the dramatists whose work is here discussed do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement" (22). Instead, Esslin grouped dramatists under the umbrella term by emphasizing their shared attitude that "certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions" (23). This disillusionment is a hallmark of Beckett's writing—disillusionment with traditional modes of art, with the assurances of religion, and with the communicative properties of language.

³ The extent of Joyce's influence has long been a source of debate. Anthony Uhlmann's essay "Samuel Beckett and the Occluded Image" operates under the assumption that much of Beckett's work is shaped by a struggle to escape from under Joyce's influence.

Esslin argues that Beckett's writing contains few definite assertions or declarations of meaning because his work "has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images" (25). Esslin's description of Beckett's stage images applies beyond his plays as well. The images Beckett uses in his novels and short fiction similarly present readers with an absurd world in which, as Vladimir says in *Waiting for Godot*, there is "[n]othing to be done" (11). All of Beckett's works occupy the same universe where the characters' actions are so futile that the only appropriate response is not to rage against the absurdity but to resign oneself to the absurdity.

Esslin's description of "an integration between the subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed that separates the Theatre of the Absurd from the Existentialist theatre" accurately captures the important nuances in Beckett's work (25). Beckett's absurd subject matter is presented in fragmented, often absurd forms, unlike the more formal work of the Existentialists. Although Beckett's views may have links to Existentialist thought, Esslin warns that "we must not go too far in trying to identify Beckett's vision with any school of philosophy" (61). Beckett never espoused Existentialism, and the Theatre of the Absurd is not synonymous with Existentialism, despite similar philosophical underpinnings. Existentialism may represent an absurd universe, but it seeks to provide the human response to such absurdity.⁴ Beckett's work, like much of the Theatre of the Absurd, does not. It revels in the absurdity of its form and content. Beckett's characters are impotent, unable to enact change or assimilate into society, excluded from community and order. At numerous points in the interminable back and forth of Vladimir and Estragon, one or the other says, "I'm going," but this proclamation is invariably followed by inaction, or even a blunt, sardonic stage direction: "*He does not move*" (14). In

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion of "The Look," the anxiety of recognizing oneself as an object in the consciousness of others, is startlingly similar to my own use of Lacan in analyzing Beckett's scatology, but Sartre ostensibly sought to prove the existence of free will, a concept that Beckett seems—at the very least—skeptical of.

Beckett's absurd universe, his characters see the absurdity and the horror of their situation, but even their intention—their will—produces nothing: no action, no change. Ultimately, there is “[n]othing to be done” (11).

Beckett's scatology is a motif that runs throughout the body of his work. It is not the primary theme in any individual work, but is instead a persistent discourse that emerges over and over, gaining significance across the breadth of Beckett's oeuvre. Beckett's catalog is one notable for its consistency of tone and theme; however, scatology has not been examined at length as an essential symbolic component of his work. Because scatological images are a recurring motif and not a sustained theme in specific works, I will be using a wide variety of Beckett's works to fully examine and explain Beckett's use of these images as opposed to individual close readings of Beckett's texts. I will move quickly between Beckett's texts for the purposes of illustrating the pervasiveness of this motif as well as its consistent use throughout Beckett's catalog. In the course of my argument, I will refer to the plays *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Rough for Theatre I*, *Rough for Theatre II*, *Embers*, the novels *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Murphy*, *Malone Dies*, *Molloy*, *The Unnamable*, the play for radio *Embers*, and works from the collection of short prose pieces *Stories and Texts for Nothing*.

Scatology in Beckett does not provide temporary comedic relief from the bleakness of his characters' situations, but is instead a further expression of this absurdity. It is through scatology that Beckett expresses his characters' absurd internal condition; not only is the world around them absurd, but their relationship to their own being, how they understand and perceive themselves, is also fractured and absurd. Vladimir's lament that there is nothing to be done extends to the excremental failures of Beckett's characters; they are not in control of their own excretory functions. Beckett's scatological images function to illustrate the alienation of

Beckett's characters' absurd condition. In *Molloy*, the eponymous main character refers to his "arse-hole" as "the true portal of our being" (74), one of many clues with which Beckett that point to the significance of the scatological image. Excrement appears frequently in Beckett's work, often due to the failure of his characters' excremental functions. Yet a breakdown of biological functions does not merely serve as an opportunity for crude humor in Beckett's work, but is a symptom of the breakdown of Beckett's characters' definition of self. Anthony Uhlmann uses the philosophy of Arnold Geulincx to come to the conclusion that, in Beckett's universe, "we do not understand how even the simplest movement of our own body is accomplished . . . if you do not know how to do something, if you do not have full control over it, you cannot in fact be said to do that thing" (90). Beckett's characters' inability to understand and control their own biological functions demonstrates a breakdown in identity common to all Beckett's characters. The complications of normal excretory functions—diarrhea, constipation, and painful urination, for instance—parallel Beckett's characters' inability to determine their own course, to move of their own volition. Their nonsensical dialogues, as well as their inability to move, to leave, or to find any resolution to their stories align with this breakdown in excretory function.

Beckett's absurd language, circular dialogue, and emphasis on the play of language through puns and double entendre mirror the function of scatology in his works—the excess of excrement and the excess of language each express an ill-defined element of Beckett's characters. In the final novel of Samuel Beckett's trilogy, *The Unnamable*, the eponymous main character whose monologues, musings, and diatribes comprise the entirety of the work bemoans his inability to harness the communicable properties of language: "...it's like shit, there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word, one has only to seek, seek in vain, to be sure of finding in the end, it's a question of elimination" (*Three Novels* 368). The Unnamable is himself a

symptom of this struggle to find the right word; there does not seem to be a right name for him, a right word that would locate him in a linguistic system. Location in a linguistic system is representative of existential location: naming includes placement in a system of relations to other named objects. The Unnamable's lack of a name stems from a larger problem: the overwhelming inability of Beckett's characters to find the right word. In *Rough for Theatre II*, Bertrand abruptly breaks off reading one of his reports to cry, "Shit! Where's the verb?" (243). His sentence is missing the main verb and, unable to find the right word, Bertrand can only produce "shit." Similarly, because the Unnamable cannot find the correct word, he turns instead to logorrhea, pouring forth words in a way that defeats easy comprehension. In this way, his words are "like shit"; something to be expelled, to be eliminated.

Liz Barry refers to this profusion of meaningless language as a "purgation of self" which is "given image and form in Beckett's work through the use of scatology—the body excreting itself. Familiar metaphors of writing as the excretion of waste or as sexual issue rebound on Beckett's narrators, and threaten their integrity as body and mind become leaky and uncertain containers" ("Beckett, Bourdieu, and the Resistance to Consumption" 39). Scatology, like the logorrhea of Beckett's characters, is, for Barry, a "purgation of self": an eliminative process defined by what is being removed. However, the term "purgation" connotes a cleansing process—eliminating waste constitutes a purge that theoretically should lead to purification. Beckett's scatology lacks such a purgative element. Because the scatological process repeats itself endlessly, it never arrives at a final conclusion. The body does not purify itself by eliminating waste; as waste is eliminated, the body is already digesting food into more waste that will need to be excreted. Elimination is a function that must recur for life to continue, but not one that is truly completed—it is a perpetual process. The lack of purification or resolution through

excremental functions parallels the lack of resolution in Beckett's absurd universe. Beckett's scatology simultaneously evokes the comic and the grotesque—that which produces horror—and creates a universe characterized by hilarious incongruence and terrifying purposelessness.

Beckett's scatological images are an essential component of Beckett's depiction of a universe where humanity is trapped in liminal space. Victor Turner's essay "Liminal and Liminoid" provides the foundation for my understanding of what I have termed "liminal space" in Beckett's work. Liminal space is what exists between two poles, the threshold that demarcates two distinct states. Turner terms his work "comparative symbology," which is distinct from strict linguistics because symbology "has much to do with many kinds of nonverbal symbols in ritual and art" (54). Ritual and drama provide Turner with useful examples for his study, as "ritual performances" cause an individual to "'travel through' a *single* rite or work of art" (56). Both a work of art and a social ritual cause the individual to pass from one state to another, to endure a *passage* of some kind. When experiencing a work of art—viewing a painting, reading a novel, etc.—the person experiencing the art separates from himself, enters the world the artist has presented, and completes the process by reconciling the meaning contained within the art to his own experiences. The person experiencing the art undergoes a passage through the artist's vision. A social ritual marks a defined point of separation from a previous state and entry into a new state—a bar mitzvah that marks a boy's entrance into adulthood, for example.

In order to define the liminal, Turner cites the work of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep who developed three stages of a rite of passage. The individual passes from separation—a departure from a previous state—to a stage of transition, called "margin" of "limen" by van Gennep (57). This period of limen is "a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few . . . of the attributes of either the preceding or the subsequent profane social

statuses or cultural states” (57). The subject passes through liminal space in its journey from separation from a previous state to a “re-aggregation”⁵ or ‘incorporation’ [which] includes symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society” (57). This liminal space is depicted in Turner’s analysis as “a threshold which separates two distinct areas, one associated with the subject’s pre-ritual or preliminal status, and the other with his post-ritual or postliminal status” (58). Liminal space, then, is a transition, a threshold, not a place of residence but the space between two states.

This understanding of liminality and the ritual process is essential to a complete view of Beckett’s scatological images. The digestive and excretive processes of the human body form a biological liminal space marked by neither definite ending nor beginning. Food is eaten and excreted, but as long as it resides in the body, its existence is repressed and unacknowledged. The byproduct of elimination, scat, is never recognized as being the consummation of a biological process because the digestive process does not truly begin and end; instead, it is continually occurring. Scat is also never fully acknowledged as belonging to the “ritual subject”⁶—what was once biological material comprising the subject has now become an object, distinct from the subject despite its residence in the body. Therefore, whatever resides within the body during this digestive process must be repressed out of the subject’s mind, or it would produce revulsion. The process signifies a continuous liminal space—a threshold that, if fully acknowledged, brings horror. There is no true separation or aggregation in the process from

⁵ Turner uses the terms “aggregation” and “re-aggregation” interchangeably in his explication of van Gennep’s definition of rites of passage; “re-aggregation” merely emphasizes the subject’s previous state as aggregated into a structure that it must separate from. Both words are equivalent with “incorporation.” For clarity, I will use “aggregation” to describe that stage that marks the subject’s completed progress through the rite of passage.

⁶ Turner’s term for a subject undergoing the transition from separation to aggregation by passing through liminal space.

ingestion to excretion, merely (in the words of Beckett's narrator) "Dish and pot, dish and pot" (*Malone Dies* 179).

Beckett's scatological images are significant because they depict the human experience itself as liminal. Because excrement is an essential biological component of humanity, humans are characterized by this liminality. The breakdown of excremental functions in Beckett's characters depicts human being as ill-defined. When Beckett's characters lose control of their excremental functions, their existence as defined, discrete beings comes into question. In *Endgame*, when Hamm envisions an escape from their small, gray room via a raft floating down the river, he imagines that they may meet "other . . . mammals!" (109). Hamm is aware that the word is not right, but he lacks a word to describe himself and Clov—his refusal to use the word "human" reflects his understanding that they cannot be accurately classified as such. In some way, they fall short of the designation of discrete human beings. Hamm is able to speak to their biological nature, but not their nature as unique selves. His failure to classify the characters in *Endgame* as human reflects an acknowledgement of the breakdown of a fundamental aspect of humanity. As Beckett breaks down the borders between his characters' inner and outer selves, the agonizing, absurd threshold they reside in becomes increasingly apparent. The scat that appears in Beckett's work despite his characters' best efforts provides a motif that continually forces their inherent biological liminality to the center of his works.

This liminality that breaks down the borders between Beckett's characters' inner and outer selves illustrates the fundamentally compromised nature of these characters. In his book *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Mark Johnson defines the body as a container—that which erects a border to separate inside from outside:

Our encounter with containment and boundedness is one of the most pervasive features of our bodily experience. We are intimately aware of our bodies as three-dimensional containers into which we put certain things (food, water, air) and out of which other things emerge (food and water wastes, air, blood, etc.). From the beginning, we experience constant physical containment in our surroundings (those that envelop us). We move in and out of rooms, clothes, vehicles, and numerous kinds of bounded spaces. We manipulate objects, placing them in containers (cups, boxes, cans, bags, etc.). In each of these cases there are repeated spatial and temporal organizations. (21)

One of the primary ways in which humans encounter their own biological nature is through boundedness—the way the body contains food and water waste matter. Beckett's characters suffer a breakdown of this essential biological function. Their excretory functions are not the ordered process that characterizes biological functions, but are instead painful, irrepressible, uncontrollable, and ultimately messy. Beckett's characters are biologically liminal, unable to resolve their biological process in the normal fashion, and continually plagued by excretory failures.

This biological liminality reflects humanity's ontological liminality. In an absurd universe, humans come from uncertain origins and move toward an ending that promises no resolution or consummation. In a traditional religious ontology, the end of humanity (death, the end of the world) is marked by consummation: redemption or damnation, as the case may be. In this eschatology, the liminal aspect of human nature eventually finds resolution—aggregation into an eternal afterlife. Beckett denies such an end or resolution to his characters. He forces them to exist in suspension, unable to move forward or backward. The breakdown between inner

and outer selves as suggested through scatological images emphasizes those characters' inability to actualize and move toward an ontological resolution. In Beckett's universe, to be human is to be painfully held on a threshold between the ambiguous poles of birth and death with no clear reference points for making sense of the universe.

There is a temptation to label Beckett an existentialist due in part to hopelessness of his absurd universe, but scatology as an assertion of liminal space rejects the existentialist label. An existentialist response to an absurd universe necessitates a *response* of some kind—what does man do in the face of an absurd universe? Beckett's response is: nothing. In an absurd universe, man has no significant response available to him. No matter what his actions might be, his actions are insignificant. Beckett's characters have no recourse to any action that might bring a kind of consummation or resolution. Beckett does not deny morality; he denies the possibility of morality. There is no moral response to be articulated in a universe where any response mankind can muster is inconsequential. Morality depends on the significance of individual human action; Beckett denies this significance. Beckett's characters' insignificant actions illustrate their perpetual entrapment in liminal space.

Scatology is the force that repeatedly pushes this liminality to the center of the audience's attention. The failure of Beckett's characters' excremental functions signifies a failure of resolution that reflects the larger lack of conclusion in their stories. Beckett's characters are biologically and ontologically trapped in liminal space. They will not find meaning in their universe. The question of Godot's return is irrelevant—they could not move toward resolution if a resolution was offered to them. If Godot returned, he would find “leaky and uncertain containers” instead of beings with the ability to self-actualize. In this way, Godot's very existence is irrelevant.

Because Beckett's scatology reinforces the idea of human nature as liminal, his works—primarily *Waiting for Godot*, where two tramps wait under a tree for a Godot that never appears⁷—seem to critique the idea of a divine being by mocking not its impotence, but the inconsequence of its existence. Beckett's plays, novels, and short stories seem to revel in their denial of a divine presence.⁸ We laugh at Vladimir and Estragon's foolishness in continuing to wait for Godot, even as we feel the heavy pain of resonance in our own lives, waiting for what we cannot be sure will come. The absence of divine presence in Beckett's absurdist works flatly insists that the world presents too much horror and incongruence to support the idea of a divine structure. Such an intense absence should be particularly troublesome to a Christian audience—Beckett's denial of a divine presence is in many ways more complete and despairing than existential or atheistic denial of divine presence. Nietzsche declares that God is dead; Beckett shrugs and says the question of God's life or death does not really matter. In a letter, Beckett refers to this belief that the universe is cut off from a God, regardless of His existence or nonexistence:

There is an end to the temptation of light, its polite scorching & considerations. It is food for children and insects. There is an end of making up one's mind, like a pound of tea, an end of putting the butter of consciousness into opinions. The real consciousness is the chaos, a grey commotion of mind, with no premises or conclusions or problems or solutions or cases or judgments. (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett* 546)

This chaos forms the basis of Beckett's poetics. Humanity is unmoored from Christian teleological understandings of the universe, and all that is left is the "grey commotion of the

⁷ Beckett denied ad infinitum that Godot represented God, but the nominal inclusion of a character who is viewed as some type of savior by the play's other characters but who never shows up has obvious religious connotations.

⁸ This includes not only a deity, but any concept of an afterlife or, even, a better life to ascend to.

mind.” This commotion in Beckett’s work is not just internal. Language in Beckett is confused and chaotic, and what might be termed the “excremental commotion” of Beckett’s characters further reflects the fruitlessness of “premises or conclusions.”

A Christian understanding of Beckett’s work requires an analysis of what devices Beckett uses to create a world void of divine presence. Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva complicate the relationship between the subject and the object, emphasizing the ultimately unknowable nature of the other and, therefore, our inability to engage in relationship with the other. Due to the Freudian psychology that represents the central methodology connecting my critical lenses, I will be employing a predominantly psychoanalytic approach. Freud’s descriptions of the ego, the id, and the super-ego and their associated functions in moderating conscious, unconscious, and pre-conscious desires informs my analysis of Beckett’s characters as compromised beings. The failures in their excretory functions bespeak a larger breakdown in the boundaries between the inner and outer self.

Lacan’s language studies connect the logorrhea of Beckett’s characters to the failures in their excretory functions. In Lacanian theory, the subject defines itself according to objects. Lacan’s mirror stage of development describes the moment when the subject comprehends its own image as object, something distinct from its ego. The dissonance between the subject as subject and the subject as object is further complicated by the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifier is not a constant feature in Lacanian theory, but is instead a composed of a wealth of signifiers that give way to one another in turn. Meaning in language is not fixed, but is ambiguous by its nature. Lacan argues that the unconscious is structured like language and, therefore, is subject to the same ambiguity as language. A subject needs an object in order to define itself. Because Beckett’s characters are compromised containers, they suffer

dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object and are therefore unable to define themselves.

Kristeva uses the term “abject” to describe the space beyond Lacan’s relationship between subject and object. The abject is an absence instead of a presence and, in this way, constitutes a liminal space. The abject is necessarily repressed, particularly in a scatological sense, in order to prevent the horror and nausea of a breakdown between subject and object. The scatological images in Beckett foreground the abject by depicting a breakdown of the borders that shore up the self.

Such an understanding of the self as indefinable and unknowable frustrates a Christian understanding of the Incarnation (a divine Other permanently taking on human flesh in order to reconcile humanity to Himself). If Beckett’s characters are unable to know themselves, they are unable to interact with other beings in a way that conclusively assures the transmission of meaning and mutual understanding. God’s embodiment in human form for the purpose of interacting personally with humanity is meaningless if humanity lacks the ability to interact with Him. The scatological elements in Beckett’s work force Beckett’s characters into a world of eternal liminal space. The breakdown of their excremental functions indicates the ill-defined natures of their selves. This lack of self-definition prevents Beckett’s characters from aggregating into a social order or into a larger symbolic order; an order relies on defined, discrete components that it organizes. Beckett’s characters cannot achieve resolution to their stories. There is only the endless threshold where everything is held unwaveringly until it produces horror.

Chapter Two: Beckett and Freud: Excrement, Repression, and Denied Endings

In Act 1 of *Waiting For Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon lay one of their frequent arguments to rest by embracing, but the embrace is cut short by Estragon: “You stink of garlic!” he accuses Vladimir (18). Vladimir explains that the garlic is “for the kidneys” (18), whose condition causes him to frequently flee the scene in order to urinate. Later, Vladimir calls Lucky's forced, joyless dance “The Hard Stool” (39), a double entendre that references one of Pozzo's many possessions that Lucky is forced to carry, as well as constipation. Pozzo assures Vladimir and Estragon that Lucky “used to dance the farandole, the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango, and even the hornpipe. He capered. For joy. Now that's the best that he can do” (39). Lucky's lackluster dance bespeaks restricted motion, much like someone who is “stopped up.” When Lucky erupts into speech, the nonsensical deluge that pours forth recalls nothing so much as diarrhea.

Beckett's characters are constantly trapped in a losing battle with their excretory functions. Attempts at repression are confounded by the body's recurrent excremental failures. Beckett's characters experience isolation from others due in part to their socially unacceptable excremental situations; however, the untimely appearance of excrement points to a deeper isolation in Beckett's characters. What should be contained within the body never stays completely contained,⁹ pointing to a failure in one of the body's primary functions: the separation of what is inside from what is outside. Vladimir's kidneys fail him, causing him to run to the wings to relieve himself; Lucky's enforced silence erupts into uncontrolled, disturbed ranting. Bladders fail; long periods of silence are broken by nonsensical diatribes—the aforementioned logorrhea that turns these characters into, in the words of Liz Barry, “leaky and

⁹ Even in Beckett's works that lack incontinent characters

uncertain containers” (38). Both actual excrement and the profusion of useless language point to cracks in their containers.

Barry derives this concept of body as container from Mark Johnson who, in his book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, explores the concept of the body as a discrete entity with an interior and an exterior defined by a boundary. He describes how objects¹⁰ move “from the exterior of a container across or through its boundary, finally coming to rest in its interior” (138). The body’s ability to define the world by separating it into internal and external categories is essential to the biological functions. Johnson notes this to be true of mental functions as well: he argues that “‘body’ and ‘mind’ are not two separate things, but rather are abstractions from our ongoing continuous, interactive experience” (140). The “container” that Johnson is describing encompasses both biological and mental functions.

When a body becomes a leaky container, it is no longer discrete and, as a compromised entity, is unable to locate itself in the surrounding world. Barry states that this breakdown of bodies as containers “seems to expose a situation, familiar to modern thought but devastating in its implications for Beckett’s isolated character, in which it is not an immediate and direct understanding of the world that allows us to interpret it, but instead the correct affiliation to the prevailing customs of interpretation” (32). The universe that Beckett creates in his works has no comprehensible framework to guide his characters’ understanding of this universe. Instead, his characters are uncertain of their place in this universe, unable to orient themselves in a society from which they have been excluded. Barry states that “[p]hysical incontinence correspondingly becomes a sign of the failure of this container and a profound indication of marginalization” (35). The failure of the body as a container is a failure of biology, propriety, and the ability to

¹⁰ Here, “objects” refers to literal objects such as food that passes from the exterior into the interior of the body, but also encompasses the transmission of language and, therefore, communication.

locate oneself in a social structure. His characters' inability to incorporate themselves into whatever mode of society exists in a given work reflects their own internally compromised states.

This definition of the body as an inside and an outside with a boundary between the two recalls Turner's definition of liminal space as comprised of three distinct segments: separation, margin (liminal space), and aggregation. Separation and aggregation are only possible when clear boundaries exist. The breakdown of clear boundaries between the inner and outer selves of Beckett's characters—as implied by their break with society—indicates the breakdown in the process of clear separation and aggregation. Barry argues that Beckett's characters are social outcasts because of a fundamental collapse in their identities:

[T]he extreme of individuality that comes from being outside social habits goes so far in Beckett's characters as to constitute the lack of any perceptible boundaries of self. The taboos are no longer in place that would protect the body from its 'other,' that is, from the waste products that are evidence of its fearful interior and its own incipient mortality, its capacity to become itself waste . . . What seem initially to be simple bad habits in fact point towards a collapse of identity itself.
(36-7)

Beckett's characters cannot aggregate into society because they have suffered a collapse of their own identities, rendering them unable to interact meaningfully with other beings. Rubin Rabinovitz states, "The self for Beckett's narrators often is a membrane-like divider that separates physical and mental reality and sometimes permits objects to slip from one realm into the other" (40). A "membrane-like divider" is not truly a divider at all, but a thin, futile attempt at organizing the self into discrete categories. Physical and mental realities are not stable for

Beckett's narrators due to the lack of established boundaries. To be located within a system, an object must itself have defined boundaries. Because Beckett's characters are themselves not discrete beings, they cannot locate themselves in the surrounding universe, and are therefore unable to find resolution in their narratives.

Beckett's characters are leaky containers in both their language and their uncontrolled excretory functions. Vladimir is on a constant quest to repress his erratic bladder that threatens to betray him. Lucky is a visibly repressed being, burdened by Pozzo's belongings and beaten at Pozzo's whim. When the slightest opening is presented for Lucky to speak for himself, the words that pour forth are unstoppable flood of meaningless language, useless and foreign in the way that the words proceed from the subject with no apparent control or direction. Beckett's use of ambiguous, circular language has long been a major component of critical understanding of his absurdist technique—the profusion of language such as Lucky's speech exists to emphasize the limitations of language. In this way, language and excrement are comparable: both are irrepressible functions that accumulate no meaning even as they pile up.

Language stripped of its ability to communicate is mere waste, no better than the excrement that abounds in Beckett's work. Beckett strips language of its significance in order to isolate his characters. Just as their uncontrolled excretory functions alienate them from society, their nonsensical language negates their attempts at communication and meaningful connection with other characters. Beckett titled one of his collections of short fiction *Fizzles*, a word without obvious connotations in English, but the work's French title, *Foirades*, can be translated loosely to mean “wet farts.” The title intimates the existential difficulty of the creative process when language dissolves into meaninglessness—the joke is that short pieces that comprise the collection may as well be a crass explosion of gas for all the meaning they can truly contain or

express.

Comparing language to mere flatulence complicates a Christian understanding of language as God-given. In Christian tradition, speech is what sets humans apart from animals, one of the defining elements of being made in the image of God.¹¹ A fart superficially mimics the form of speech—air audibly leaving the body—but is literally an inversion of speech in that it comes from the opposite end of the body with none of the communicable meaning. In his essay “Beckett’s Atmospheres,” Steven Connor discusses the significance of farts in Beckett as “an example of bodily quasi-speech, an inversion of the logos, or breath of God” (61). Connor references the Catholic practice of sufflation in which a priest blesses something by blowing on it. Farting perverts this holy breath and also makes a mockery of the significance of language. A fart is soundless speech, air leaving the body in a truly wordless, meaningless fashion. It resembles the spoken word without fulfilling its communicative function. Throughout Beckett’s work, excremental functions provide an image that captures the fruitlessness of all communication. Meaningless language and excrement alike burst forth at inopportune moments despite Beckett’s characters’ attempts at repression.

The idea of repression features famously in the work of Sigmund Freud. By interpreting dreams, linguistic free associations, and the potentially hidden impulses from which they arise, Freud laid the foundation for the field of psychoanalysis. Freud divides the mind into conscious and unconscious zones, but notes that “a state of consciousness is characteristically very transitory” (*The Ego and the Id* 2). An idea can be latent—currently unconscious but capable of becoming conscious. Latency complicates the conscious/unconscious binary by creating two types of unconscious states—“the one which is latent but capable of becoming conscious, and the one which is repressed and which is not, in itself and without more ado, capable of becoming

¹¹ Genesis 1:27

conscious” (2). Therefore, a third designation must be made between conscious and unconscious: the preconscious. The preconscious idea, the state of latency, exists because potentially conscious ideas are being repressed.

This repression stems from the operations of the super-ego, one of the three categories of the mind that govern mental activity. In *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, Freud specifies the nature of these three categories. The id is the home of unconscious impulses. The id “expresses the true purpose of the individual organism’s life,” seeking to satisfy “its innate needs” (5)—these needs, much like the id’s impulses to satisfy them, are not generally consciously acknowledged. The super-ego consciously evaluates the social and moral implications of the id’s impulses, while the ego moderates between the super-ego and the id. Freud explains, “Conflicts between the ego and the ideal will [the super-ego], as we are now prepared to find, ultimately reflect the contrast between what is real and what is psychical, between the external world and the internal world” (*The Ego and the Id* 26). The goal of these mental drives is to distinguish the internal (mental) life from the external world. When the ego becomes aware of impulses that are socially unacceptable,¹² “it either acquiesces in them or tries to fend them off by the process of repression” (19). An inability to repress the activity of the id results in socially unacceptable behaviors that ultimately ostracize and isolate.

Beckett’s characters’ inability to control their excretory functions prefigures their inability to repress the activity of the id; their inability to moderate these functions literally prevents these characters from entering into society and indicates their ultimate isolation. Again, this excrement provides a parallel to Beckett’s empty language that seems to stem from characters’ unfiltered id. In his essay “Beckett and Freud,” Raymond T. Riva compares Beckett’s

¹² “Socially unacceptable” here connotes manners and an understanding of decorum, but also deeper concerns of acting in ways that society deems morally aberrant or worthy of censure.

“essentially symbolic language, one which is quite capable of communication while seeming to say nothing and of going nowhere” to “the language of our repressed and sublimated selves; the not-yet-civilized children we once were, and yet are in our unconscious id” (121-22). Beckett’s characters speak from their unrepressed id, pouring forth empty words in the same way that they fail to repress excremental functions, each of which isolates them from society.

The perpetual deferral of the death desire is symbolized by Beckett’s characters’ relationship with excrement and their perverted digestive temperament that refuses them the normal incorporation of nourishment. Freud’s description of the death desire includes a description of how eating requires the destruction—death—of an object before nourishment can be incorporated, but Beckett’s characters are unable to incorporate food in the normal way. As compromised containers, they do not have a firm boundary through which object—food—becomes subject—nourishment. The digestive process is described as a cycle as endless and fruitless as Beckett’s stories with their endlessly deferred endings, or the system of language itself. In *Malone Dies*, Malone expresses the whole of existence as far as he is concerned: “What matters is to eat and excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles” (179). There is nothing to existence but the endless repetition of eating and excreting. This digestive process is marked by its two opposing terms—eating and excreting—but the process itself is always liminal in nature. While within the human body, the food being digested is neither object nor subject. Its progress through the body resembles Turner’s description of the “passage from lower to higher status” as “through a limbo of statuslessness [limen]. In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable” (361). Turner’s concept of aggregation (here: “higher status”) is, of course, ultimately unrealizable for Beckett’s compromised characters. Instead, the liminal space between these two poles characterizes the space between

dish and pot.

Freud states that “the act of eating is a destruction of the object with the final aim of incorporating it” (6), but Beckett’s compromised characters either lack anything of substance to incorporate or, through their uncontrollable excremental functions, seem unable to incorporate what is available to them. Molloy has a fixation with sixteen stones that he derives a kind of childish, Freudian pleasure in sucking, but Riva believes that this fixation goes beyond Freudian desires and indicates “a desire (or even a subconscious attempt) to regress further, to total non-being . . . [b]y sucking inanimate objects, perhaps, I may come to resemble them” (124). Riva sees Molloy’s sucking stones as a “totally unconscious and equally unknowable desire to return to an inorganic state” (124); Molloy describes how the stone “appeases, soothes, makes you forget your hunger, forget your thirst” (*Three Novels* 22). Beckett’s characters are unable to incorporate nourishment and, in many cases, seek oblivion as the answer to their insatiable hunger.

Excremental functions, as a parallel to the hollowness of language, reflect this malnourished situation. Barry addresses the narrator in *The Unnamable* whose “mouth may be described as ‘speech-parched,’ never having enough, but he envisages a time when he might let it fill with ‘spittle’ (Trilogy, 32), an ‘empty’ substance that might replace the vomit of social discourse. Ultimately this too gives way to the ‘odourless wind’ of a body that is emptied, that feeds only on itself” (39). The body, deprived of nourishment, begins to feed on itself, producing farts like so much useless language. As compromised containers, Beckett’s characters fail to incorporate nourishment internally just as they fail to be incorporated into a macrocosmic structure. Both of these failures of incorporation are given form through excrement and excremental functions: farts replace speech, urination is painful and no longer under the character’s control, and shit accumulates in place of meaning. Beckett’s characters seek to escape

their hunger through a return to inorganic material, but their compromised containers collapse in on themselves, trapping them in liminal space.

One of Beckett's leakiest and most uncertain containers is the main character of "The Expelled." Beckett originally wrote this work in French and later translated it into English. Linda Collinge-Germain discusses the significance of the work's original French title: "The title of the story 'L'expulse' conjures up notions of exclusion, uprooting and even more archaically, of birthing. It implicitly suggests two territories, one to exit and one to enter into. The space between two such territories is a 'discomfort zone' in its lack of landmarks" (2).¹³ "The Expelled" is a noun phrase with two meanings that reinforce one another: "The Expelled" refers to both the narrator himself and the excrement that his body involuntarily expels. Both the narrator and his bodily waste find themselves in a place between residences, somewhere beyond separation without the possibility of aggregation. The title indicates a being ejected from his previous state of existence, one who has not yet arrived at another definite state of being—existing only in liminal space.

The story opens with the unceremonious ejection of the unnamed narrator, leaving him firmly outside any place of residence, and ends with the narrator still unsure of his location. Lying on the sidewalk, he looks back at the door that characterizes the home he left as a kind of womb. The door is green, an obvious symbol of new life, but it also has a series of vaginal characteristics: "a hole . . . and a slit for letters, this latter closed to dust, flies and tits by a brass flap fitted with springs" (*Stories and Texts for Nothing* 12). The ejection from the home is, in a sense, the narrator's first true birth because the town—what he calls "the scene of my birth" (13)—is foreign to him. Although he says that "[n]ow and then I would go to the window, part the curtains and look out," he always "hastened back to the depths of the room, where the bed

¹³ "Cultural In-Betweenness in 'L'expulsé'/'The Expelled' by Samuel Beckett."

was” (13). However, that return to the interior is now impossible. The interior of the house was a kind of womb in which he refused separation, but to which, once ejected, he cannot return.

After separating from the home, the narrator’s journey is aimless and provides no hope of a conclusion: he will not find a way to assimilate back into society nor encounter a place to rest. His journey is denied any form of aggregation. At the story’s close, he extricates himself from the cab in which he attempts to sleep¹⁴ and heads toward the rising sun, realizing, “I did not know where I was” (*Stories and Texts for Nothing* 25). He is unable to locate himself, either literally or existentially. He says, “I would have liked a sea horizon, or a desert one,” but instead defines his days by acknowledging their purposeless wandering: “When I am abroad in the evening, I go to meet the sun, and in the evening, when I am abroad, I follow it, till I am down among the dead” (25). While the narrator may be implying that he may join the dead, his uncertain location—in other words, his liminal existence—and his aimless “journey” indicate that he will not himself find his own resting place. If he walks toward the sun when it rises, at noon the sun will peak and then begin to descend and he must follow the sun back the way he came. The path he describes will never lead anywhere, much less down to the dead, but will instead occupy him in an uncomfortable, endless “journey” back and forth over the same patch of earth. His circumstance, trapped on the threshold between uncertain origins and an uncertain destination, is the liminal existence that most of Beckett’s characters find themselves trapped in.

The narrator’s liminal existence, trapped between separation and aggregation, is seen not merely in the endless journey, but also in the eternal drip down his leg. The narrator recounts the nature of his affliction: “I had then the deplorable habit, having pissed in my trousers, or shat there, which I did fairly regularly early in the morning, about ten or half past ten, of persisting in going on and finishing my day as if nothing had happened . . . till bedtime I dragged on with

¹⁴ His inability to sleep is another symbolic denial of the Freudian death desire.

burning and stinking between my little thighs, or sticking to my bottom, the result of my incontinence” (14). This incontinence produced in him a peculiar, wide-legged gait that he thought would “put people off the scent” (14), both figuratively and literally, but of course did neither. The narrator is aware of his filth—he knows that shortly after ejecting him from the home, the inhabitants would “close the window, draw the curtains and spray the whole place with disinfectant” (12). He here implies that those who forcibly removed him from the home (of which we know little besides its nature as a place of residence wherein the narrator is unwelcome) have rejected him at least in part due to this filth.

His rejection from society due to his uncontrolled excretory functions reflects his own identity as a compromised container, unable to assimilate because he himself is not a discrete entity. His inability to locate himself in the world around him recalls Barry’s insistence that Beckett’s characters cannot interpret the world as it appears but must base their interpretations on “correct affiliation to the prevailing customs of interpretation” (32). In “The Expelled,” the narrator is not only symbolically removed from society in the opening lines, but is rejected as a possible member of society throughout. He walks down the street because he states, “The widest sidewalk is never wide enough for me” (15). His peculiar gait, stemming from his incontinence, does not fit within socially designated boundaries. A policeman orders him to walk on the sidewalk and then, after many near accidents with other pedestrians, another policeman orders him back off the sidewalk, stating that “the sidewalk is for everyone” (16). The narrator realizes that “it was quite obvious that [he] could not be assimilated to that category” (16). The curb forms a social boundary that creates two categories: on the sidewalk and off of the sidewalk. Cars belong in the street and pedestrians—“everyone”—belongs on the sidewalk. Because the

narrator does not belong on either side of this barrier, he is trapped in the liminal, transitory space between socially designated categories—in other words, no place at all.

The narrator raises his eyes “to the sky, whence cometh our help . . . where you wander freely, as in a desert” but concludes that such searching “gets monotonous in the end” (13). Scanning the heavens for a sign of respite is fruitless and, in the end, exactly as monotonous as the aimless journey with one’s gaze focused down on the earth. Even the endless expanse of the heavens provides only the promise of aimless wandering through a desert that recalls both the plight of the Israelites, punished by their God to remain nomads in the desert for forty years, and the narrator’s own circular journey from sunrise to sunset. Paul Davies refers to this isolation even in nature as “abstraction from the biosphere,” which he claims is a kind of hell for Beckett’s characters (76).¹⁵ Society does not provide a residence for Beckett’s characters, but there is no solace in nature, either. There is no home in the sky for the narrator of “The Expelled”; there is no home at all for him. Barry argues that the narrator “is uncouth in terms of social behaviour, but further than this, the very language of everyday living throws him out, unable to assimilate him to its categories. His uncouthness, as the etymology of the term suggests, renders him unknowable and monstrous” (36). He is unable to assimilate into society due to his grossly compromised container of a body, no longer a discrete entity but a fundamentally compromised being. His desire for death is thwarted and he cannot even reincorporate back into inorganic material. He is horrifically, eternally trapped in liminal space.

Although Beckett’s compromised characters are denied a place of residence and, therefore, an opportunity for aggregation, the Freudian death desire momentarily appears to present a hope of resolution; oblivion does not require incorporation into a social structure. However, Beckett denies his characters death, denies endings to their stories, and keeps them

¹⁵ “Strange Weather”

trapped in liminal space without end. Victor Turner states that when a subject reaches the consummate state of aggregation, “[t]he ritual subject . . . is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions” (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 349). We have seen that Beckett’s characters never enter into a relationship with society that involves clearly defined rights and obligations.

However, Freud’s discussion of the interaction between the love instinct—Eros—and the death desire seems to provide a hope for a reincorporation of a sort. Freud states that “[t]he aim of the first of these basic instincts [Eros] is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus—in short, to bind together; the aim of the second, on the contrary, is to *undo connections* and so to destroy things . . . the final aim of the destructive instinct is to *reduce living things to an inorganic state*” (*An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* 6, emphasis added). The death instinct, by forming an oppositional mirror image of the love instinct, presents a possibility for a kind of reincorporation: a return to “an inorganic state,” the state before ejection from the womb, a state of rest in death.

The potential for rest through a return to an inorganic state, however, is an illusion. Beckett denies his characters endings through the circular plot structures. Stories often end exactly where they began, in the same physical location with the characters in the same situation they were in at the story’s beginning. Act I of *Waiting for Godot* ends with Vladimir and Estragon talking to a boy about Godot’s return; after another full day of waiting, Act II ends with an almost identical conversation. Both times, the act closes with the stage direction, “*They do not move*” (52, 88). Nothing has changed, and nothing will change. They are fixed to a place of

hopelessness from which they are unable to move. *Endgame* lowers its curtain on Hamm who “remains motionless” (134). *The Unnamable* ends with the declaration that continued motion in this circular system is both impossible and inevitable: “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (407). In the radio play *Embers*, Henry expresses frustration at his wife’s tendency to not complete her thoughts. He says, “Drive on, drive on! Why do people always stop in the middle of what they are saying?” (102). He does not receive an answer because there is no end to drive on to. His wife, like many of Beckett’s characters, stops speaking because she realizes the futility in continued speech. They will only continue to circle, unable to escape their absurd situation.

Beckett’s characters long for an ending to this cycle but such an ending never arrives. Few of Beckett’s characters actually ever die. Riva argues that Vladimir and Estragon are, in fact, waiting for death, but a death that will not come: “The white-bearded Godot who never arrives seems to be the very fact of death itself; always awaited with a certain amount of anticipation, yet never quite arriving” (125). From within their grey, bare room, Hamm states, “Outside of here it’s death” (*Endgame* 96); however, neither he nor Clov definitely leaves the house. At the play’s end, Hamm sits alone in the room and says to the empty room, “Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended” (133). The story, however, is not over, despite what Hamm says. The audience (like Hamm) does not know if Clov has left or is merely in the other room, and Hamm is not dead nor changed, he merely remains.¹⁶ Molloy refers to decomposition as “tranquility” (*Three Novels* 21), or a kind of peace that he is unable to find in life. However, he admits, “To decompose is to live too, I know, I know, don’t torment me, but one sometimes forgets” (22). Molloy expresses how the living and dying are similar in their entropic nature, but the decomposition of life is what Connor calls “a

¹⁶ His description of his handkerchief as “Old stauncher” calls forth associations with the word “staunch” which reflects his own definite lack of motion, but also a variant of the word “stanch” which means to stem the flow of blood.

Beckettian pattern of ‘leastening’ or progressive diminishment,” which results not in aggregation but, instead, “a deferral of ending” (128).¹⁷ Death will not arrive for Beckett’s characters.¹⁸

Beckett’s use of excrement forces this deferral of endings to the center of his work because the excremental process is, like Beckett’s absurd universe, liminal in nature. Paul Sheehan argues that “Beckettian space is liminal space, the difference between self and unself. Beckett’s thresholds are not access points or any other marker of transience. They are rather non-spaces of attempted habitation, sites of enforced residence . . . they signify the step not beyond. The invitation to cross the lower limit implied by a threshold is revoked” (185). Beckett’s characters take up an enforced residence in the threshold of liminal space and are denied the step through the threshold into the next stage. Ronald R. Thomas¹⁹ states that “Beckett’s hapless travelers” are on a journey that “keeps circling back upon itself and beginning again, extending the end of the line a little further” (386). It is in this endless deferral of endings that Beckett denies his characters even the reincorporation of the body into inorganic material.

¹⁷ “Voice and Mechanical Reproduction”

¹⁸ Many critics have addressed the issue of entropic “endings” in Beckett that actually deny the possibility of a conclusive ending; some notable essays on this topic include “Lucky’s Energy” by Jane R. Goodall, “*Qu’est-ce que c’est d’après* in Beckettian Time” by Stephen Baker, and “‘You know the story’: scatology and the interrupted laugh in Beckett, with apologies to the Mau-Mau sketch” by David Wheatley.

¹⁹ “The Novel and the Afterlife: The End of the Line in Bunyan and Beckett.”

Chapter Three: Beckett and Lacan: The Other and the Receding Signified

The bilingualism of Samuel Beckett's work plays a central role in how we are to interpret his use of fragmented language, and how that language depicts Beckett's characters as broken containers. Beckett's oeuvre has a diverse origin story. As a native Irishman, he began writing and publishing in English, but by the time he was producing many of his most famous works, he was living in Paris and writing his works first in French before translating them back into English. Some critics place the impetus for the shift of language in the influence of his friend James Joyce and Beckett's fear that he might never write himself out from under that influence. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Belacqua muses tellingly, "Perhaps only the French language can give you what you want" (48). Purportedly, Beckett's reason for shifting from English to French was to write without the wealth of connotations inherent in writing in one's native tongue. By using French rather than the language he grew up using, Beckett was able to approach the language as a tool to be used for his art rather than an unconscious tool used automatically in all communication. By the twilight of Beckett's career, he was once again writing and producing in English, but still translating his works into French. This bilingualism is an essential component of Beckett's catalog—his works exist in both languages, not just for his readers, but for himself as translator. By using both languages, Beckett demonstrates his fundamental belief in the nature of language as unfixed, dependent on context, association, and personal interpretation, and therefore fundamentally compromised.

In his essay on Beckett's bilingualism, Lance St. John Butler argues that Beckett's translation of his own work is further proof of the "radical incommensurability of languages" (115). Although Beckett translated his own works between French and English, he took such liberties with lexical and grammatical nuances that the translation is liberal rather than exact.

However, Beckett's own playfulness with language is not the source of this incommensurability according to Butler. Instead, Butler says, "Beckett merely points up, in his attempt at the impossibility that is translation, the impossibility of all communication, and if his texts in different languages differ it is, paradoxically, because only by differing can they hope to be at all the same" (116). Beckett shows us something by utilizing both English and French, beyond the evolution of his style. He makes additional adjustments to the language beyond what a strict translation would require, emphasizing the essential gap between English and French. These quirks in translation suggest that this gap is present in all communication, not just that from the one that opens up between one language and another. By translating his works between French and English, Beckett demonstrates one of his own fundamental principles: the impotence of language.

Raymond Federman, a friend of Beckett's and author of many articles about Beckett's use of language, cites one of Beckett's favorite quotes that Federman believes defines Beckett's poetic. St. Augustine's declaration, "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved, Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned" fascinated Beckett. In a lecture later published as "The Imaginary Museum of Samuel Beckett," Federman says, "Beckett said to me: It is not the meaning of this sentence that interests me, it is its shape, its movement. It has perfect symmetry, the way it cancels itself. And suddenly I realized that it was not the meaning of words that really concerned Beckett, but the shape of language" (160). Beckett's interest in language stemmed less from its ability to communicate but, in fact, the opposite: language's ability to make a pleasing shape that does not intend to communicate.²⁰ Federman points to the postscript affixed to the end of *Watt*, "*No symbols where none intended*" (qtd. in Federman 156), as further evidence of his

²⁰ Beckett's self-described interest in language as mere shape is obviously, on some level, facetious, because of all Beckett's meaningless language accumulates into quite a significant statement about language and human nature—in fact, this is a fundamental tenet of this paper.

view. Federman wryly suggests that Beckett does not imply symbol anywhere, and rather is playing with the shape of language.

Butler is suspicious of such attempts to define a driving poetic for Beckett's work. Federman states that the "aim of such a study would be not merely to note differences or variants, but to arrive at an aesthetic of bilingualism or self-translating, or better yet to arrive at a poetics of such activity" (qtd. in Butler 116). Butler believes such a study is, at best, limited because "[t]he notion of 'arriving' hardly seems possible any longer" (116). Butler sneers at an attempt to pin down and dissect Beckett's style in order to find its central poetic. We arrive at a fruitless circle: is Beckett's constant subversion of meaning in itself his central claim? Is defining a "central claim" a violation of Beckett's approach? Butler argues the latter; Federman the former. In either case, Beckett's language is designed to frustrate, an obverse embarrassment of riches that results in a dearth of meaning.

Language in Beckett is not fixed, but a fluid array of associations and wordplay that seems to communicate less the more it accumulates. This uncertainty of language stems from the unconscious mind and the desires and drives that originate out of it. The work of Jacques Lacan takes Freud's assertions regarding the unconscious mind, its associated desires, and applies these ideas to semiotics and the nature of language. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan insists that "*the unconscious is structured like a language*" (20); although a function of language like syntax is pre-conscious, "what eludes the subject is the fact that his syntax is in relation with the unconscious reserve. When the subject tells his story, something acts, in a latent way, that governs this syntax and makes it more and more condensed" (68). Much of Freud's work analyzes the mind's tendency to condense, to link ideas despite gaps in conscious understanding. The psycho-analytic practice of dream interpretation and associations

relies on desires or behaviors standing in for previously unrealized connections within the mind. Lacan compares this function of the mind to metonymy, a figure of speech that substitutes a thing with a related thing—“Hollywood” standing in for “the film and entertainment industry,” for example. The unconscious mind connects ideas in this way, relating one image to another without a direct obvious link. The structure of language is thus essential to the functioning of the unconscious.

Freud’s understanding of how the unconscious mind of the subject relates to objects provides Lacan with a basis for providing language with agency. Lacan states, “Nature provides—I must use the word—signifiers, and these signifiers organize human relations in a creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them” (20). Signifiers as elements of language shape the way in which a subject interprets his experience, and language is thus essential to any understanding of experience. Language belongs to the symbolic order, separate from Lacan’s idea of the real—raw, undifferentiated experience. Human relations are not merely communicated in language, but shaped by language. In short: “Everything emerges from the structure of the signifier” (Lacan 203). It is the interpretation and organization of events, not the only events themselves, that characterizes human comprehension of experience. Similarly, the definition of the self stems from “the dialectic of the advent of the subject to his own being in the relation to the Other . . . the subject depends on the signifier and that the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other” (205). In other words, a concept of the self relies on a concept of the Other—the not-self. Self-definition in the conscious realm rests on the unconscious functioning of the mind, a function tied up with structure of language.

As the primary device for self-definition and understanding the unconscious, language presents numerous problems in the relationship between the subject and the signified. Lacan

argues that the processes between the subject and the Other are not fixed, but circular. Because “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier” (207), the process of defining the Other involves a reduction of external objects to signifiers: “The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as a subject” (207). Something that is Other—a foreign object—for the subject is its own subject, but must be reduced to a signifier in order to relate the original subject. In this way, a subject must experience the external world in a fundamentally personal way. Any manner of interpreting the external world that relies on personal perception rather than external factors is necessarily ambiguous.

Lacan distills this difficulty in defining the referents that constitute a signifier through the image of a necklace linked through another necklace: a chain without conclusive end. Although language indicates meaning, that meaning does not subsist in the language. Lacan references the poetic nature of language and how this informs his chain: “What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a langue, to use it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says” (“The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud” 155). Because language, through devices like metonymy, can signify a multitude of things apart from what is literally referred to, the chain of signifiers turn language from concrete representation into ambiguous references. Lacan states that “we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning ‘insists’ but that none of its elements ‘consists’ in the signification of which it is at the moment capable,” and for this reason, “[w]e are forced,

then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (160). The chain of signifiers buries the signified, creating myriad complexities and gaps in language that prevents the signifier from resolving. Because these signifiers do not resolve, language itself constitutes a liminal space in which Beckett’s characters are trapped, unable to communicate with one another or to adequately define themselves. If the unconscious is structured like language, Lacan’s chain of signifiers presents both complications in language as communication and language as the vehicle for defining the self. Beckett understood these fundamental limitations of language and the problems these limitations present for his characters. Beckett’s bilingualism represents a catholic hostility toward language that compares attempts at communication to so much scat.

Linda Collinge-Germain argues that Beckett’s choice to write in a foreign language is an essential component of his work. The foreignness of his language is a statement on the nature of language itself. She states, “For Beckett, as several critics have remarked, choosing a foreign language in which to write is a catalyst for a reflexion on the arbitrary nature of the sign, an opportunity to explore more fully the notion of language, what it means to use language, to communicate, to write a story” (Collinge-Germain 2). Beckett’s glib title *Fizzles* no longer seems like a self-deprecating crudity, but a significant commentary on the difficulty in communicating with such a broken vehicle as language. When language breaks down into a chain of more or less arbitrary signifiers, communication resembles nothing so much as a wet fart, an empty echo in liminal space.

The circularity of language in Beckett’s emphasizes the ambiguousness of language. His writing is rife with puns and double entendres, repetition, and contradictory statements, expelling a kind of waste that accumulates senselessly. The narrator in *The Unnamable* declares, “. . . shit,

there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word, one has only to seek, seek in vain, in order to be sure of finding it in the end, it's a question of elimination (359). *The Unnamable*, like the rest of the trilogy, is comprised primarily of lengthy monologues. The narrator in *The Unnamable* sifts through an abundance of language to find the right word, only to conclude that the word he is searching for is "shit." This sardonic declaration is an acceptance of the futility of the task. In the end, language, like excrement, is expelled from the body as waste. Beckett follows Lacan's chain of signifiers and finds language itself lacking, insufficient for its purported task.

This breakdown in the function of language leads to difficulties in defining the self, another dilemma faced by Beckett's characters as broken containers. *Krapp's Last Tape* finds the play's main character reflecting on his life as it is documented in his tapes. Julie Campbell examines the semantic resonances of the "crap" that we hear in Krapp's name. The semantic Krapp is connected to the Latin word "crapula," and further with "crapulence," or "gross intemperance" (64). The Dutch word "krappe" means "to pluck off" or "to cut," and the antiquated French word "crappe" translates as "siftings"; both the French and the Dutch, according to Campbell, refer to the end of Krapp's life as he composes his last tape (63). A sifting happens as Krapp replays his tapes. He is searching for something in his tapes, as evidenced by his detailed ledgers of the tapes. Not only is he replaying them, creating an interaction between his past self and his present self, but he is consulting ledgers that he made after listening to these tapes at some intermediate period: three different Krappes are therefore involved in this play at any given time. However, his repeated searches produce no returns. All Krapp finds in his own words is waste to be discarded.

He replays his tapes, stopping them at intervals to interject his current perspective

alongside the voice of his past issuing from the recorder. His reinterpretations emphasize the mutability of language that stems from its ambiguous nature. He plays the tape that recounts a physical encounter with a woman in a boat, and the images are sensual and meditative—his hand on her breast as the water moved under the boat. Upon shutting the tape off, Krapp recalls his youthful perspective: “Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes. (*Pause.*) Could I? (*Pause.*) And she? (*Pause.*) Pah! (*Pause.*) Fanny came in a couple of times. Bony old ghost of a whore. Couldn’t do much, but I suppose better than a kick in the crutch” (222). Breasts and water, both images of life, have become the image of a bony old ghost, a husk of what he once believed. Although the events remain the same, the language Krapp uses to describe them changes, which reshapes that experience. The tape, played years later, no longer communicates the same content.

Krapp’s fixation with the tapes, which he collects and fastidiously records in ledgers, parallels the retentiveness of his own body’s constitution. This intemperance is manifested in Krapp’s constipation. He refers to his own “[u]nnattainable laxation” right after he notes his “[f]lagging pursuit of happiness” (218). The two are connected for Krapp—the failure of his excretory functions parallels not only his waning happiness, but his waning *pursuit* of happiness. Much like laxation, happiness seems increasingly unattainable. As Krapp ages, his desire to attempt to regulate both laxation and happiness fades because it becomes increasingly clear that relief—in either sense—will not come. His first selected entry in his ledger refers to a “[s]light improvement in bowel condition,” but when Krapp plays the tape in question, his 39 year old self says, “Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty restrained a fourth. Fatal things for a man with my condition” (217). The bananas clearly exacerbate Krapp’s digestive problems, but he is unable to resist, fixated as he is on the very object that feeds his

problem.

Both the tapes and his constipation are images of waste that Krapp cannot let go of; the comparison of the tapes to constipation connects language with excrement. On one hand, a spool that contains Krapp's recorded word, language; on the other, a banana that further complicates Krapp's digestive complaints. Campbell references the idea that spool "is a near homophone of 'stool'" (69), drawing the two images even closer together. The tapes illustrate Krapp's inability to truly change (his sexual exploits as well as his banana obsession are documented consistently across years of his life) and his inability to reconcile with the various versions of himself. Krapp records these tapes, keeps ledgers of the information contained in the recordings, and continually replays the tapes in an effort to draw something from them, but they provide him only with a sense of alienation from his previous self. The language he now uses no longer resembles the way he once spoke of events: the chain of signifiers that he attempts to exhaustively detail through both the spoken and written word do not culminate in any understanding. Krapp is unable to even know himself. Clinging to the tapes is merely a form of stockpiling waste. His clogged bowels speak to this same intemperance.

Lacan discusses this fixation on objects as an element of Freudian psycho-sexual development; an object, as it forms an Other to the subject, directs desire in the subject. Lacan refers to "this privileged object" as "that object around which the drive moves . . . the *objet a*" (257). The *objet a* represents the gaps in the subject's attempts to assign itself a signifier. Because the subject must also recognize itself as signifier, and because the signifier necessarily includes an endless chain of signifiers, the *objet a* provides desire that allows the subject to orient itself. Lacan states, "The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off" (103). In Krapp's case, his tapes represent parts of

himself that he has separated off in order to orient and preserve his identity. This attempt is, of course, futile.

Although Krapp is on his last tape, the play does not end with Krapp's death or even the click of the tape stopping its recording. The play's final stage direction reads, "*The tape runs on in silence*" (223). Krapp, like so many of Beckett's characters, is denied an ending. His inability to find resolution is not arbitrary, however; Lacan's argument that the unconscious is structured like language explains Krapp's inability to accurately conceptualize himself. Krapp attempts to define himself in relation to a unique Other: the previous versions of himself. As Lacan states, the subject depends on the signifier. However, because these past versions of Krapp are unknowable, this version of himself is subject to reinterpretation and even direct contradiction to the elderly Krapp. He frequently begins to ask himself a question about his previous self, but these musings are interrupted with a pause, a break where language ceases to be useful. Krapp begins to muse but cuts himself off, leaving the thought unresolved and the question itself uncertain: "Sometimes wondered in the night if a last effort mightn't—(*Pause.*)" (223). What was once the subject, his own self, has become a chain of signifiers that points to various things to the elderly Krapp but that ultimately only emphasize the gaps in Krapp's own consciousness. Krapp is not a leaky container but is nonetheless a broken one; his constipation points to a breakdown in his excretory functions. He is unable to expel what rightly must be expelled and, therefore, unable to achieve resolution.

His inability to define himself represents a breakdown of his inner and outer selves—what he thinks and what he says. Krapp's failed interpretations and, therefore, failed reinterpretations of himself, presumably carried out repeatedly through his life, illustrate this breakdown, forcing him to respond to his own recorded words as if addressing a separate being.

He cannot coalesce these versions of himself into a clearly defined whole. In contrast, the bananas have a clear distinction between their inside and outside—the peel. Krapp takes great pleasure in the process of peeling the banana, even stroking it before peeling, but he immediately discards the peel on the floor and, moments later, “*He treads on skin, slips, nearly falls, recovers himself, stoops and peers at skin and finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over the edge of the stage into pit*” (216). Presumably, this has happened before and will continue to happen. The peel is something Krapp fails to recognize as signifying his own fractured relationship between inner and outer selves—although the sign is there, he merely slips on it. Campbell compares Krapp’s “sour cud and the iron stool” to Malone’s “dish and pot”: “[I]n *Krapp* these poles . . . become ill-distinguished, reversed: the banana and the faecal ‘stick’ become a composite symbol and as such interchangeable” (68). As Krapp stands motionless, banana in his mouth, excruciatingly constipated, his digestive processes have, like so many of Beckett’s characters, broken down. His body is not a discrete container but is a liminal space where food is trapped and becomes waste. Although this production of waste is an essential function of all bodies, Krapp’s inability to pass the waste reflects his entrapment within liminal space. His body confounds its own essential functions.

Beckett’s characters are ultimately alienated from themselves. The breakdown of the inner and outer selves, reflected in the breakdown in excremental functions and paralleled in the limitations of language, prevents Beckett’s characters from extracting meaning from their situations. In his article “Descartes, Lacan, and ‘Murphy,’” Thomas J. Cousineau states that the assimilation into a social order is a form of Freud’s death desire:

The self . . . will harden its self-boundary by striving to become a self recognizable within the social order. This description of the stages through which

the self betrays its original limitlessness leads to a reformulation of the death wish, which, according to Lacan, is fulfilled through those successive acts by which the self sacrifices its subjectivity and achieves its own suicide through identification with its image and conformity to desires emanating from the social order. (227)

This assimilation into a social order necessitates a loss for Lacan, an alienation of the self from the real. Cousineau states that Beckett's characters, however, detach from the real but are unable to assimilate into society, suffering a loss on both sides. They are trapped in between the two poles. This inability to correctly perceive the self or to communicate with a larger social order stems from the futility of self-definition when that definition relies solely on an unconscious structured like language—a created order apart from the real. Beckett's characters are again trapped in liminal space, forced to use a system of language that fails to shore up boundaries between the self and the other, but rather obfuscates meaning through a chain of signifiers. This broken system of language is distinct from the normal function of language through its inability to resolve or reach a satisfactory interpretation.

The inability of Beckett's characters to define themselves according to the Other reaches a poetic zenith in *Murphy*. Cousineau states, “Divorced from both the real, which precedes the formation of individual identity, and from the symbolic, where identity is modified by the mediation of language and the intersubjective experience which it permits, Murphy is alone with his idea of himself, a phantasized image which he invites to share his solitude” (229). Murphy believes himself to be a discrete body and mind, a subject with clear boundaries. Murphy believes that “his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body” (109). Yet, as Lacan demonstrates by

comparing the unconscious to ambiguous language, the mind is not a closed system, but one that relies on a chain of associations to function. However, Murphy believes himself to be in full control of his own being, having made clear distinctions between the body and mind, believing his own perception of himself to be accurate.

Despite his confidence, Murphy himself knows that “his memory was so treacherous that he did not dare” commit anything to memory (75). When he drinks his tea too hurriedly, he erupts into uncontrollable belching (82). Both body and mind are compromised, but Murphy persists in his belief that he is comprised of discrete systems. He even acknowledges his confusion about the interaction between his body and mind:

Thus Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently, otherwise he could not have known that they had anything in common . . . Perhaps there was, outside space and time, a non-mental non-physical Kick from all eternity, dimly revealed to Murphy in its correlated modes of consciousness and extension, the kick *in intellectu* and the kick *in re*. But where then was the supreme Caress? (109)

Because Murphy finds no solace in idea of a consciousness outside of the split he has made between his body and mind, he denies the existence of such a consciousness. Even outside of space and time, Murphy astutely observes, there could be no supreme Caress.

Despite Murphy’s endeavors to conceive of himself as subject, his role as signifier in community with others is constantly in question. He asks Celia a yes or no question, what he refers to as “the eternal tautology” (41). She responds with yes, he with no, and it is unclear—as with many conversations between Celia and Murphy—if they are actually addressing one another. When pressed to describe Murphy, Celia replies, “Murphy is Murphy” (17). He lacks

relation to the world around him and, therefore, does not fully reside in this world, but in liminal space somewhere between his own mind and the external world. Murphy revels in his isolation, finding his greatest peace by tying himself tightly to a chair and rocking back and forth in an attempt to completely clear his mind—motion with no result, fully and only a body. This rocking would produce “the freedom of that light and dark that did not clash, nor alternate, nor fade nor lighten except to their communion” (9). Later, Murphy is described as having “perhaps the best [night] since nights began so long ago to be bad, the reason being not so much that he had his chair again as that the self whom he loved had the aspect . . . of a real alienation” (194). Murphy takes pride in his isolation because existing in society requires an alienation of the self from the real, a separation that Murphy would not accept.

By insisting that his mind and body are discrete categories that he is in control of, Murphy perpetuates a kind of Cartesian dualism. Cousineau argues that the solace Murphy takes in perceiving his body and mind as discrete containers is a mistake because Descartes assumes “that the ‘I’ who thinks is primordial and underived, when in fact, if Lacan’s theory is correct, it is, rather, the end-result of a process of alienation” (226). Murphy’s dichotomy of mind and body ignores the unconscious mind, the structure that is shaped like language and, therefore, contains cracks and gaps. Catherine Russell states, “Alienation, for Lacan, consists in the divided nature of the subject who is ‘condemned’ to a displacement through discourse into the field of the Other. Meaning is conditional on its being received or understood, and so the subject as signifier, in order to represent itself, disappears as subject” (26). In order to represent itself in a symbolic order, the subject must become signifier to communicate and, therefore, fades from the realm of being. Lacan terms the fading of the subject “*aphanisis*,” arguing that a subject cannot simultaneously occupy the realms of being and meaning (211). Because Murphy denies this

divided nature, he must seek solace in his isolation, within his own mind, to preserve his ideals. Cousineau says, “The abuse to which [the narrator] subjects Murphy serves as a vehicle through which he registers his suspicion that, as attractive an option as Murphy’s retreat into his mental world may be, it represents in some way a misconception of reality” (225). Murphy’s conception of the discrete separation between his body and mind is a cruel joke, further emphasizing the fundamentally broken barrier between the inner and outer selves as described by Lacan’s *aphanisis*.

Murphy, like many of Beckett’s characters, assumes that incorporation into death will provide the solace he seeks. When he rocks in his chair, his “breath was not perceptible” (2); as Murphy retreats into his own body, he approaches a death-like state. He describes his infancy only to return to the matter of death: “With what sorrow he recorded that of all the millions of little larynges cursing in unison at that particular moment, the infant Murphy’s alone was off the note. To go back no further than the vagitus. His rattle would make amends” (71). Murphy believes that his death rattle will put the sour note right, that he will find harmony in the universe through annihilation. And unlike most of Beckett’s characters, Murphy does indeed die. However, the treatment of his ashes depicts the ultimate futility of Murphy’s desires. Cooper throws the packet of Murphy’s ashes in a barroom brawl, and “[b]y closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon” (275). Far from the discrete containers Murphy believed his body and mind to be, they mingle in death along with one ingredient that he never acknowledged: his soul. Although the soul is often referred to sardonically in Beckett—what use is a soul in an absurd universe?—the soul here at least figures the unacknowledged unconscious aspect of Murphy’s being. Murphy’s strict dichotomy of body and mind neglects his unconscious being and, therefore, is a delusion rather than an accurate

conception of his self. His remains come to their final rest in “the spit, the vomit” of the barroom floor (275). And there we leave Murphy.

Chapter Four: Beckett and Kristeva: “The Terror That Dissembles”

As described by Lacan, the subject—I—is defined in relation to the object—the Other. The process of *aphanisis*, the fading of the subject in order to occupy the realm of meaning, describes a liminal space between the realm of being and the realm of meaning. This process by which the subject transitions to the realm of meaning requires the subject to represent itself as Other—as object. Lacan defines the developmental stage in which the subject comes to identify the self as object as well as subject as the mirror stage. This schism within the ego shapes the subject’s relationship to objects and provides the foundation for the tension between the subject as subject and the subject as object. When the subject recognizes its reflection as something other than itself—an object—it recognizes that the self that others perceive is distinct from the ego. In Lacanian theory, this separation of ideal self—ego—from the self that others perceive as object creates a liminal space.

In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva seeks to describe a liminal space found not in the interaction between the subject and the object, but outside of both the subject and the object. Kristeva describes another type of liminal space—the abject. She describes the abject as that which exists outside of the interplay of subject and object:

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. (1)

The abject complicates the relationship between subject and object by being neither subject nor object—the abject is that which exists outside of the boundaries we have established in order to define subject and object. The abject is not an object as we understand an object, a thing with boundaries that gives it shape. The character of the object allows a subject to define itself in opposition to the object. An object shores up the boundaries of the subject by figuring what the subject is *not*. An object is not-subject in the same way that the subject is not-object. The abject is neither.

Although Lacan's chain of signifiers complicates the relationship between subject and object by imbuing that relationship with ambiguity, Kristeva preemptively eliminates the possibility that the abject exists within Lacan's chain of signifiers. What Kristeva terms the "ob-jest" parallels Lacan's description of the chain of signifiers, but the ob-jest is distinct from the abject. Lacan's description of "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (160) is very much like the quality of the ob-jest that Kristeva calls "an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire" (1). Kristeva rejects this ceaseless fleeing as indicative of the abject because this flight, much like the relationship of the signifier to the signified, still provides a framework for existential location that shores up the boundaries between subject and object. The relationship of the signifier to the subject, although a complex one, still allows the subject to define itself in terms of the object. The I is not the Other, and vice versa. The Other may be unknowable, but it still provides a frame of reference that defines the self according to boundaries: what constitutes the subject and what does not. Even as the chain of signifiers recedes into ambiguity—as demonstrated both in Beckett's meaningless language and his characters' unstable states of mind that prevent the self from being fully knowable—it still serves as an object that provides the self with a framework for definition.

In a Lacanian understanding, the symbolic order is characterized by the object which directs desire. The subject defines itself in terms of not-object, but seeks reconciliation with that object. Lacan's mirror, the distinction between the subject as subject and the subject as object, provides a framework by which the subject defines itself. This distinction between the ego and objects orients the subject in relation to these objects. We see this attempt to define the self in opposition to objects in Krapp's fascination with spools and ledgers. Lacan argues that "it is in the object to which the opposition is applied in act . . . that we must designate the subject. To this object we will later give the name it bears in the Lacanian algebra—the *petit a*" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 62). The *petit a* is that which the subject defines as being separate from the self and, therefore, seeks to be reconciled with this object. However, Kristeva asserts that this ordering of desire vis-a-vis objects is dissolved in the abject. The abject deconstructs the ego's ability to reconcile itself according to an Other:

And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object *a*, bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. (Kristeva 9)

The abject does not direct desire but marks a space where desire fails. Without a functional relationship between subject and object, the subject has nothing with which to orient itself. The subject is not merely subsumed into a chain of signifiers in order to communicate meaning, as Lacan suggest, but instead forfeits its own existence, alienated from the symbolic and social orders alike.

Thus, alienation is an essential element of the abject—that which exists outside of a symbolic order. Kristeva defines symbolic order as “the dependence and articulation of the speaking subject in the order of language, such as they appear diachronically in the advent of each speaking being, and as analytic listening discovers them synchronically in the speech of analysands” (67). The subject depends on the order of language for definition and expression; as Lacan says, the unconscious is structured like a language. The abject confounds this relationship between the subject and the order of language. Kristeva describes the abject as “a place where meaning collapses” (2). She explains that the abject is not merely a void or a complete absence: “[The abject is n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (2). The abject is what has been separated from the symbolic order of subject and object.

Beckett’s characters uniformly embody this alienation. The characters of *Endgame* are claustrophobically trapped within a bleak house, cut off from the world around them. Even the world outside promises no hope of renewal or change. Hamm suggests, “But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it’s still green. Eh?” (111). He continues to hold out hope for something beyond the hills. He tells Clov, “Perhaps you won’t need to go very far,” but Clov only responds, “I can’t go very far” (111). Hamm, trapped as he is within his chair, views Clov’s mobility as their last hope of finding something green. Clov, however, knows better than to even embark upon such a quest: there is nothing to be found. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon are forced to wait in a nondescript, alien landscape where the hope of anyone’s arrival, much less Godot’s, seems laughable. Murphy is radically excluded from all forms of community throughout *Murphy*. He is

also alienated from himself, demonstrating yet another failure of the container. He responds to the struggle of maintaining one's self-conception in the face of abjection by "straining his eyes for the speck that was he, digging in his heels against the immense pull skyward" (25). Murphy tethers himself to his rocking chair in part because he is receding from himself—he is unable to hold himself as a fixed being in his own mind. However, even this rocking fails to return him "the brightness of the firmament"²¹ as he desires (14). He is obstructed at all attempts at aggregation. He is trapped in abjection, unable to incorporate into the symbolic order and unable to reconcile the disparate elements of his self. Murphy, like all of Beckett's characters, is fundamentally alienated.

The object does not belong to Lacan's understanding of a symbolic order because the object is, as Kristeva says, a "jettisoned object" which has been rejected from the symbolic order (1). When acknowledged, the object produces horror through its dissolution of the ordered relationship between subject and object. Because the jettisoned object is an unnamable object, it does not provide a way for the subject to orient itself but instead opens up a yawning lack of meaning as it fractures the symbolic order. The object, when experienced, produces horror and revulsion due to the breach of the symbolic order. Kristeva describes the object as "a terror that disassembles" (4). The object presents a lack of distinction between subject and object. When the subject is stymied in its quest to separate from one order and aggregate into another, the resulting entrapment in liminal space produces horror. The subject itself lacks a framework for self-definition. Kristeva states that "the non-constitution of the (outside) object as such renders unstable the ego's identity, which could not be precisely established without having been differentiated from an Other, from its object" (62). The ego—and, by extension, the conscious

²¹ "And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so" (Genesis 1:7 *King James Version*). Murphy's alienation extends to a divine order; if such an order exists, Murphy is prevented from incorporating into it.

self—is shaped by its relation to an Other, but the abject, as a jettisoned object, provides no such differentiating framework. Kristeva states, “The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being” (5). In the breakdown of subject and object, the self is an unstable concept, no longer able to be certain of its relation to objects that are not knowable. The abject signifies a border between a knowable order and that which lies beyond: “a terror that dissembles.”

This terror dissembles the symbolic order, forcing Beckett’s characters into the threshold of liminal space. In a Lacanian understanding, the subject’s desire for aggregation is driven by objects that provide definition for the subject by opposing the subject. However, Beckett’s characters are prevented from arriving at the structure that the relationship between subject and object provides. According to Kristeva, abjection prevents the definition of the self that the defined relationship between subject and object would provide. Rather than being directed into aggregation by object desires, Beckett’s characters exist outside of the frameworks of the social order due to their abjection. When these characters are forced to face this abjection, “it means that there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*” (Kristeva 6). When the relationship between subject and object breaks down, the subject is excluded from the social order.

Beckett’s outcasts, radically excluded from society by their dysfunctional excremental functions, possess an existence based on exclusion, not the inclusion that comes with aggregation. They stare into the abject, both drawn toward the annihilation that the abject represents and repulsed by the horror that the abject holds. Kristeva states that, instead of drawing the subject into assimilation with a social order, “the abject simultaneously beseeches

and pulverizes the subject” (5). The abject dramatically beseeches and pulverizes the characters in *Endgame*. These characters are some of Beckett’s most radically excluded: Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are trapped within a small house, unable to go outside, uncertain if anyone else besides them is still alive. The characters in *Endgame* are thus all trapped in abjection, a liminal existence cut off from anything beyond their own bare room. Hamm tells Clov, “Outside of here it’s death” (96), and that nature “has forgotten us” (97). When Clov looks through the telescope at the barren world outside, he repeats “Zero . . . zero . . . zero” (106). Hamm and Clov are both drawn to the world outside, but every fresh examination of the horizon shows another zero. The outside world beseeches and pulverizes them, attracting them even as it dissolves their hope of aggregation.

The abject alienates the characters of *Endgame* from the world outside their house, just as it alienates these characters from a functional knowledge of themselves according to the relationship between subject and object. The dissolution of the borders between subject and object has alarming consequences for the subject’s relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind. Lacan’s understanding of objects that shape desire is founded in a Freudian conception of the unconscious where the ego moderates the impulses of the id. The id produces impulses that, despite the subject’s lack of awareness of their origins, drive behavior—the son’s desire to be reconciled to his mother after the separation of birth, for example. The ego moderates these impulses in order to ensure the subject’s ability to assimilate into a social order, repressing socially unacceptable impulses and making the subject aware of social taboos: violations of the order. This violation presents itself most clearly as that which is “unclean.” Rituals of excretion and elimination and incest are two traditionally “unclean” categories that Kristeva discusses. Both excretion and incest are unclean (albeit in different ways) because they

breach the social order. By defining what is unclean, the subject has a means by which it preserves its assimilation to the social order. Ritual processes allow the subject to preserve these boundaries, separating itself from the abject despite the contradictions present when the subject necessarily encounters the abject.

Turner describes the ritual process as an essential component in locating oneself in a social order. He states that “each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and *communitas*, and to states and transitions” (361). Using the study of indigenous tribes as his framework, Turner argues that rites of passage—liminal experiences that mark the stage between separation and aggregation—are essential components of placement within a social order. Turner argues this process of passing from one state into another through rite “is almost everywhere held to sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses and dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency” (372). These rites of passage have sacred connotations because they exist between or outside of established states, creating an otherworldly statelessness. The rites of passage reinforce the states on either side of the passage—the existence of the passage holds the two states together. They reinforce the social order, so when the completed passage through a liminal rite is disrupted, the resulting dissonance is unholy, unsacred, and unclean.

For Kristeva, uncleanness presents a significant connection between the violation of the social order and rituals of eliminating waste. She notes that “in a large number of rituals and discourses involved in making up the sacred—notably those dealing with *defilement* and its derivations in different religions—[there is] an attempt at *coding* the other taboo that the earliest ethnologists and psychoanalysts viewed as presiding over social formations” (58). Kristeva argues that uncleanness is a violation of both a sacred order and a social order. In primitive

cultures, the two are not wholly distinct: the social order is intimately tied up with religious practices. However, even in a more modern culture such as Beckett was writing in, “defilement” violates both sacred and social orders. A rite of passage that ends not in aggregation but in entrapment in liminal space is defiled, robbed of its ultimate purpose. The result of such defilement is abjection, a state that defies the subject’s modes of framing existence and produces terror and revulsion.

Where does the subject encounter the object? Kristeva finds the uncleanness that violates the ritual process in excrement. The presence of excrement creates complications in the subject/object relationship. As long as excrement resides within the body, it is constituent with the body, making up an element of the subject. Once it is expelled, it is object, other, and is no longer recognized as ever having been an element of the self. Excrement fascinates and repulses—it simultaneously “beseeches and pulverizes the subject” (Kristeva 5). The fascination with excrement is particularly strong in childhood, as the young self learns to define itself in terms of its own eliminative functions—Freud’s anal stage. The opening lines of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* find young Belacqua in a frenzy of youth, pedaling his bicycle “faster and faster, his mouth ajar and his nostrils dilated” (1). In the midst of this childish joy, Belacqua notes with pleasure “the black fat we rump of the hoss. Whip him up, vanman, flickem, flapem, collop-wallop fat Sambo. Stiffly, like a perturbation of feathers, the tail arches for a gush of mard. Ah . . . !” (1). Although the excrement in question is repulsive and would produce revulsion if encountered at any close distance, the defecating horse fascinates young Belacqua; the joy of riding his bicycle is not dampened by the sight, but possibly enhanced.

In “A Rump Sexuality,” Paul Stewart examines the numerous significant connections between the defecating horse and Freudian sexuality. Stewart compares the image of the

defecating horse to the childhood delusion of anal birth, or the belief that children are born from the mother's anus: "[T]he Freudian possibility of anal birth creates an analogy between procreation and defecation which is itself suggestive of why reproductive sex is best avoided; not only does birth entail one's first taste of the shit, but one is born as shit" (264). An infant constitutes part of the mother's body until the time comes for it to be excreted, at which point it separates from the mother's womb, passes through a liminal rite of passage, and aggregates into the larger world as a distinct object. In this way, the birthing process parallels excretory functions—an element of the subject is excreted and becomes object. The concept of anal birth is a collusion of the two processes, fusing two parallel images into a single concept of the subject as waste. The Freudian conception of anal birth takes the breakdown of the relationship between the subject and the object and compares the subject to the waste it excretes. Belacqua's fascination with the defecating horse stems, according to Stewart, from the collusion of birth and defecation—the human body as waste to be excreted.

Molloy, like Belacqua, is fixated both on bicycles²² and anal excretions. The delusion of anal birth persists in Molloy, who reminisces on "her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct" (*Three Novels* 12). Molloy describes this as his "[f]irst taste of the shit" (12). Presumably, he experiences this taste of shit for the rest of his life. Stewart states that "the foetus and the child that is Molloy are both waste material to be flushed away and both waste material which do not recommend repetition" (265). When the subject is faced with the abject, it becomes unable to define itself according to aggregation into a symbolic order. It becomes trapped in liminal space. Barry references the alienation of Beckett's characters from social structures, stating that "[t]he taboos are no longer in place that would protect the body

²² Bicycles provide Stewart with ample grounds to discuss autoerotic pleasure and masturbation, which is also another example of waste—fertile biological material that is not used for reproduction but merely discarded.

from its 'other,' that is, from the waste products that are evidence of its fearful interior and its own incipient mortality, its capacity to become itself waste" (36). Molloy is trapped in this abjection. The breakdown of the relationship between subject and object as depicted by the presence of waste symbolizes Molloy's broken self. He is born as shit into shit, and he will remain in the filth. He refers to his "arse-hole" as "the true portal of our being" because it provides "a link between me and other excrement" (74). Molloy here recognizes himself as waste, and the arse-hole forms the true portal of his being because it elucidates his absurd relationship to his own waste. Molloy, like so many of Beckett's characters, is a fundamentally compromised container, lacking a suitable barrier between his inner and outer selves, between his conscious mind and unconscious impulses. This failure is given form through his misunderstanding of excretory functions and birth. The symbolic order has broken down, entrapping Molloy in abjection: liminal space.

The abundance of biological waste in Beckett's work produces the mixture of fascination and revulsion that parallels Kristeva's description of the abject. Kristeva illustrates the human response when faced with the abject: "Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck . . . The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them" (2). Excrement fascinates even as it repulses, a biological function that figures a breakdown in the subject's boundaries of self. Kristeva suggests that excrement, when viewed as an element of the body's inside that passes out of the body, presents a breakdown of the inner and outer self as well as the relationship between subject and object:

The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self" but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its "own and clean self." (53)

Excrement constitutes part of the subject, but when expelled, it is denied relation to the subject except as a jettisoned object. The body is faced with itself turned inside out, grossly poured out in a fundamental defilement of the self and the borders the self erects in order to define itself. The unclean subject is a subject that lacks a defined self. The "dejection of its contents" produces revulsion in the subject. The erasure of borders is the abject—an undefined self cannot orient itself according to the symbolic order. The only response when faced with the abject is spasms, retching, and nausea: defensive mechanisms the body unconsciously mounts against the dissolution of its borders.

The body reacts against the abject because the abject literalizes the breakdown of the border between the inner and outer selves, as well as the border between subject and object. Kristeva compares excrement to overt signifiers of death, stating, "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (71). Excrement represents a danger to identity, the loss of self in abjection stemming from the loss of a definable Other in order to shore up the boundaries of the self. Trapped in liminal space, Beckett's characters are faced with reminders of death but are denied aggregation out of their current existence into a potential existence after death. Hamm complains that "[t]he whole place

stinks of corpses” (47). This odor, like the stench that follows the excrement-caked narrator of “The Expelled,” connotes decay, a decomposition of the body. This stench of decay is everywhere in Beckett’s work. In *Rough for Theatre I*, A.’s proclamation, “It’s the same stink everywhere” (231), may well be referring to this stench of decomposition that permeates Beckett’s universe. Hamm recognizes that their enclosed room is filled with premonitions of the death that awaits them outside. Hamm tells Clov to put him in his coffin, but Clov replies, “There are no more coffins” (*Endgame* 130). Hamm cries out, “Then let it end!” (130), but it does not end. The title of the play becomes a cruel joke—the characters in *Endgame* are moving only towards the inevitable stalemate, as they always do, as they must do.

Nell delivers what could well be a thesis for much of Beckett’s humor when she says, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness” (*Endgame* 101). Beckett’s scatology is indeed humorous, and the jokes produce laughter (both from the characters and from the audience), but not a laughter that signifies identification with the characters. Laughter in Beckett further alienates his characters due to abjection. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir’s abrupt exits from the stage to painfully urinate are played up for laughs, but his failing excretory functions bespeak a failure of the container—a breakdown of the self. Kristeva describes laughter in the face of the abject as “the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death. And yet, if there is a gushing forth, it is neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime, nor enraptured by preexisting harmony. It is bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened” (205-6). Laughter often stems from aberration, a deviation from the expected or a dissonance in existing harmony, and its joyous peals speak to the knowledge that the aberration will be set right: to laugh is generally to affirm that there is an order that will be returned to. Laughter in Beckett contains no such hope. The “gushing forth” of laughter that Kristeva describes is devoid of mirth

and, instead, seems like another crack in the container. After Nag's single phrase of prayer, he orders them to wait, but after a brief pause announces, "Nothing doing!" (119). Hamm replies, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (119). The moment is humorous, a joke about their puerile concept of prayer and their outrageous expectations for immediate relief. But the laughter from the audience is not joyous; there will be no return to order in *Endgame*. These characters will remain in their isolation. Anguished laughter pours forth, not from conscious joy but from unconscious fear, an automatic response to an absurd universe.

This anguished laughter constitutes what Kristeva calls the "laughing apocalypse . . . an apocalypse without god" (206). The laughter of Beckett's characters is the only response they have to their abjection: it is a recognition of the absurdity of their condition. Beckett's characters, stymied in their death desires, fundamentally compromised and trapped in liminal space, and facing the horror of abjection, seem to have nothing to hope for but a divine intervention. Beckett's characters talk often of God, but even they know the futility of such hopes. While listening to his tape, Krapp's younger self laughs at the idea of "[c]losing with a . . . yelp to Providence," and the aging Krapp joins in this laughter (218). However, neither laugh is joyful: younger Krapp laughs at the foolishness of yelping to Providence, and his older self laughs with the added mordant bitterness of a lifetime that validated that skepticism. Providence would not answer, even if Providence were there to answer. In *Endgame*, the characters react even more viscerally to the idea of a divine presence. Hamm says, "Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough . . . But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!" (*Endgame* 108). Hamm cannot imagine what a savior might do if he was to return; the "rational being" would merely observe. He would be fundamentally unknowable—he would be a receding signifier, an

Other that disappears in the face of abjection. The only thing worse than such a scenario, in Hamm's mind, is the horrific prospect of humanity beginning all over again. It would merely dissolve once more into filth.

If only Godot would return, one thinks, the waiting would not all be for naught. Yet Beckett denies his characters even this. If God were to descend into one of Beckett's desolate landscapes, he would not find flawed beings in need of salvation; he would find broken containers, isolated from social structures, no longer discrete subjects with clear boundaries between their inner and outer selves—their conscious and unconscious minds. He would find a “laughing apocalypse” populated by excrement soaked fragments of people that have begun to become indistinguishable from their own waste. An apocalypse marked by abjection, the absence of definition that shores up existence, is not an apocalypse that will end in restoration. There was never anything to restore. Kristeva sees “the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life . . . It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (4). When the subject can no longer protect its own definition according to its relation with external objects, there is no final rest to aggregate into.

One of Beckett's narrators describes himself as “[a] carcass in God's image” (*Stories and Texts for Nothing* 108), and God is just that for Beckett's characters: a carcass, a corpse, further evidence of the abjection in which they are mired. Clov asks Hamm if he believes in the life to come; Hamm responds, “Mine was always that” (116). There will be no life to come because Hamm's life has not yet come—he is not a discrete being, capable of assimilation into a symbolic order. But of course, Beckett's characters have known this all along. “The end is in the

beginning and yet you go on,” Hamm says (126). The end has been clear from the beginning: there is no end, and yet they go on: “Nothing to be done” (*Waiting for Godot* 11). As Kristeva says, it is “[m]usic, rhythm, rigadoon, without end, for no reason” (206).

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Not With A Bang, But a Fizzle

Augustine's reminder that "we are born between shit and piss" has, for Augustine, explicitly theological implications. The origins of human life so close to excrement serves as a reminder of our fallen nature; we are humans born into sin, inherently fallen and in need of salvation. The lament of the psalmist, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5 *New International Version*), is a proclamation of truth that applies to all human: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 *NIV*). A Christian teleology has an answer for these laments in the person of Christ, who came to forgive and redeem His fallen people. In a Christian understanding of the universe, the sick are healed, the broken are mended, and all are reconciled to Christ.

In Gene Edward Veith's *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature*, he analyzes the reconciliation of Christian teleology in literary terms. Veith frames his discussion using Dante's definitions of comedy and tragedy. The distinction between the two forms lies in the beginnings and endings. Veith sets out the simple definitions of the two: "A tragedy, according to Dante, is a story that begins in joy but ends in pain. A comedy, on the other hand, is a story that begins in pain, but ends in joy" (102). Despite the fact that one moves from pain to joy and the other from joy to pain, "Both comedy and tragedy deal with the extremes of human experience, and both put suffering and joy in relationship to each other" (103). In other words, suffering and joy are equally essential elements of comedy and tragedy—any story with a resolution must have both.

Although Beckett's works indeed emphasize the pain in life, from the physical discomfort of Vladimir's bladder difficulties to Murphy's fundamental alienation, his stories are not tragedies as Veith would define them. Building from the writings of Aristotle, Veith states

that, in a tragedy, “The ending must seem fair” (106). The fairness of the ending has much to do with the sense of justice in a story: the character must be noble enough to earn sympathy but must also have a flaw that validates his or her downfall. Beckett’s characters do not possess the characteristics of Veith’s understanding of tragic heroes. The narrators in Beckett’s fiction are not admirable or sympathetic. Vladimir and Estragon are frustratingly unable or unwilling to move from their endless vigil for Godot, but also lack the capacity or the will to help Pozzo when he appears to them suffering and lost. Although Beckett’s universe seems to prevent these characters from significant action, the world that these characters inhabit does not validate their behavior, but merely parallels their absurdity. They are not self-controlled beings capable of meaningful action—and the failures of their excremental functions point to this lack of self-control—but are instead compromised containers.

In addition to lacking the qualities of tragic heroes, Beckett’s characters do not inhabit tragedies as Veith defines them because their stories do not offer the joy necessary to counterbalance the pain and give it meaning. Beckett’s narratives do not begin in joy and progress to suffering; they move from suffering to suffering. Some stories, like “The Expelled,” begin with accounts of rejection from community, the moment when the characters are forced into liminal space. Others, like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, begin *in medias res*—in the midst of their interminable suffering. Veith argues that those who “expect life to end in the nothingness of death are assuming a tragic ending” (103). However, this “nothingness” is expected to follow the joys of life intermingled with the pain. Beckett’s characters do not have joys to mix with their pain. The obliteration of life with no promise of anything to follow is a story that ends in pain. However, it is still a story that ends. Beckett’s stories deny their characters endings.

What both the tragic and comic understandings of life have in common is an ending. Whether a joyous ending or a sorrowful ending, both versions find an end. Beckett's works lack such a definite ending. His characters, trapped in liminal space as they are, have no hope of resolution. The emptiness of oblivion becomes tempting in the face of the alienation of abjection, but even the Freudian death desire is frustrated. Beckett's work cannot be said to have a "tragic" ending because "[t]ragedy causes us to feel pity . . . This feeling is a manifestation of love" (Veith 107). We do not pity Beckett's characters—Beckett implies that their suffering is the suffering that we all experience as fundamentally alienated people, but these stories preclude the possibility of sympathy for Beckett's characters. Their futile actions and absurd speeches are an image of abjection, of the waste of human existence. They are images of our deepest fears of a meaningless universe. Even tragedy produces a love for the characters through the sorrow of their downfall. Beckett's characters are not tragic, but absurd, unlovable because they are, in some fundamental way, un-human. A tragedy implies that some system has been violated. Tragedy relies on the hope of comprehensible order—an individual story may end in tears, but it indicates a larger system of justice that provides the hope, at least, of resolution.

Beckett's universe does not reflect these hopes. Augustine says, "A person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature" (*On Christian Teaching* 47). This creates complications for the Christian searching for God's truth in Beckett's universe where a divine presence is conspicuously absent, hope is replaced with despair, and everything that happens seems to be purposeless and devoid of meaning. Beckett's commentary on human nature through his use of scatological images is particularly horrific for a Christian audience because these

scatological images suggest that the human condition is so fundamentally compromised that assimilation into a symbolic order—a subject interacting with a divine Other—is impossible.

Beckett does not definitively deny the existence of a divine presence, but instead questions the efficacy of a divine being when humans are so fundamentally compromised. In “Blind Waiting in Samuel Beckett,” Charles Courtney asserts, “It is clear to me that [with *Waiting for Godot*], as with the later *Endgame* (1957), Beckett not only had the Bible in mind, but was deeply familiar with it” (396). This much is abundantly clear in Beckett’s writing, which also contains explicit references to God, although exactly what kind of God is being referred to is debatable. The references to God in Beckett’s work do not express a longing for the salvation that a divine being might bring, but despair at such a possibility. If we can, for a moment, discount Beckett’s rigid insistence that Godot does not represent God, the failure of Godot to appear might, at least in part, symbolize the failure of religion. However, this failure is not due to the non-existence of God—Beckett does not affirm nor deny the existence of God. Instead, Beckett’s images conjure a universe in which, it is implied, if God showed up, the salvation He offers would not apply to or affect Beckett’s characters. These characters are compromised containers, essentially liminal and unable to define the self. A divine being is Other, distinct from humanity. If the subject cannot define the self, the subject has no framework with which to approach the Other. Godot could walk into the last pages of *Waiting for Godot*; God could crest the horizon line that beseeches and pulverizes Hamm and Clov; a savior would find only beings with no clear division between their inner and outer selves. Scatological imagery in Beckett literalizes the breakdown of inner and outer self and, further, the breakdown in the symbolic order of subject and object relations. It is this breakdown of the symbolic order that eliminates

the possibility of divine intervention—the beings that a savior would find are not discrete entities. There would be nothing to save.

Beckett's scatological images as seen through the writings of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva reinforce the deluge of circular, meaningless language in Beckett's work. These images depict a literal breakdown of division between the inner and outer self; the excremental functions that keep waste biologically discrete from the subject have failed. Freudian psychoanalysis explains how the ego moderates the unconscious impulses of the id, but Beckett's characters lack this distinction between ego and id. They seem to be all id—unrestrained language pours forth and accumulates like waste. Similarly, the breakdown of excremental function suggests characters whose very biology is liminal, not marked by completed rites and excremental functions, but a collapse of the container. Also, the failures of excremental functions prevent Beckett's characters like the narrator of "The Expelled" from entering into society and participating in the social order. This breakdown of the normal passage from separation to aggregation illustrates these characters' entrapment in liminal space.

Further, these scatological images demonstrate a breakdown in the subject's ability to enter into a symbolic order with the Other. Lacan describes the relationship of the signifier to the signified as "an incessant sliding"; the accumulation of signifiers buries the signified in the expression of meaning. The mirror stage marks the point at which the subject recognizes itself as signifier and not just signified, as object and not just subject. In order for a subject to occupy the realm of meaning and interact in the symbolic, it must fade from subject into object. Beckett's profusion of absurd, near-meaningless language and the corresponding scatological images demonstrate the inability of Beckett's characters to relate to the Other. If the subject cannot relate to objects, it has no basis for a definition of the self. Again, the similar function of language and

excrement in Beckett's work demonstrates a collapse of Beckett's characters' inner selves. Trapped somewhere between subject and object with no basis for self-definition, they cannot move through liminal space in order to aggregate into the symbolic order.

Kristeva describes the liminal space beyond the relationship between subject and object relations: the abject. The abject has no object that opposes and, therefore, defines it—the abject is the horror in the face of the dissembling of boundaries that shore up our existence. Scat provides an image for this abjection. The body, when faced with excrement, is faced with its own decay. The breakdown of excremental function and the uncleanness and defilement that breakdown entails marks an interrupted progression through liminal space. The failure of the excremental process to resolve foreshadows the larger inability of Beckett's characters to aggregate into the symbolic order.

Because Beckett's characters are unable to incorporate into the symbolic orders, the existence of a divine presence does not promise a resolution to their stories. Beckett's universe resembles the one described by the narrator of Thomas Hardy's "Hap":

If but some vengeful god would call to me
 From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
 Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
 That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!" (1-4)

Hardy's narrator is waiting not for a savior, but a "vengeful god" whose evil purposes would give the narrator's suffering order and comprehensible meaning. He could die, "Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I Had willed and meted me the tears I shed" (7-8). However, this is not the case: "These purblind Doomsters had as readily strewn / Bliss about my pilgrimage as pain" (13-14). There is no divine hand that guides events. Both bliss and pain are seemingly

random and, therefore, absurd. Even a vindictive god would provide a type of order. Beckett's universe similarly lacks order or any discernible divine presence. Unlike Hardy's narrator, however, Beckett's works do not bemoan the lack of a divine presence. Instead, the failure of excretory function in Beckett's works preemptively thwarts the efforts of divine presence, so God's existence or non-existence is, at most, unimportant.

It is not God's failure to appear that gives Beckett's work its darkly absurd quality, but the implication that if God did appear, He would be unable to affect any change. Murphy describes that, "Left in peace, [the patients in the hospital] would have been as happy as Larry, short for Lazarus, whose raising seemed to Murphy perhaps the one occasion on which the Messiah had overstepped the mark" (180). Murphy feels that the gift of resurrected life is not much a gift at all. Murphy identifies with these psychiatric patients, feeling that if he and the mentally disturbed alike were simply able to enclose themselves within their own mind and isolate themselves from the world, they would find peace. Murphy seems to imply that a resurrection is only as significant as the life one is resurrected into. He either unconsciously ignores or consciously dismisses the concept of being resurrected into a higher existence beyond the visible universe. The symbolic order is so fractured in Beckett's work that his characters' are unable to fully recognize the concept of an afterlife different than the current one, or like Hamm in *Endgame*, can only imagine such a concept with horror.

Throughout Beckett's work, the suggestion of a divine presence never points to the possibility of restoration or reconciliation into a comprehensible order. David Toor refers to one of the most prominent "theological ironies" in *Waiting for Godot*: the two boys (or perhaps one boy appearing twice) who tend the sheep and the goats. Toor states, "In Beckett's ironic picture of the God of modern man—if Godot be—it is the keeper of the goats, in Christian tradition

representative of vice and evil, who is well treated by the master, while the keeper of the sheep, the boy's brother, is the one who is beaten and mistreated" (1). If Godot has any religious significance, he is a perverse version of the Christian God; Godot intentionally mistreats the keeper of the sheep, an animal symbolic of God's chosen people. Beckett clearly does not use Godot as a simple stand-in for Christ. However, Godot has religious resonances that are impossible to dismiss: his return would, at least according to Vladimir and Estragon's belief, provide resolution to their story. His return would bring their salvation.

Courtney posits that when Pozzo appears in Act II "blind, needy, and reduced to being 'one of the least'" (397), Pozzo is the Godot that they are waiting for, one of the people Christ refers to in Matthew 25:40 when he says "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (*King James Version*). According to Courtney, if they were to reach out to Pozzo, they would have achieved the transformation of circumstance that they are waiting for. If this is the case, then "Vladimir and Estragon are presented with the opportunity to become sheep" (339)—they could, in theory, become like followers of Christ. They do not "get it" because their "'getting it' will require that they, not someone or something else, change" (339). They are waiting for something that will not come because what will affect the change they seek is an internal change, not an external one.

Courtney's analysis assumes that Vladimir and Estragon, even if just in the small ways as how they reach out to Pozzo, are capable of change. He believes that the two are beings capable of acting in ways toward the other characters that would change the narrative, potentially reaching a conclusion beyond their eternal waiting game. However, this assertion includes an assumption that Vladimir and Estragon are distinct from Pozzo and Lucky in their roles in the story. Vladimir and Estragon represent those on a journey to find meaning, and Pozzo and Lucky

are the people they encounter along the way that grant them opportunities to enact change, to develop and change as characters. This reading of *Waiting for Godot* has more in common with *Pilgrim's Progress* than the actual plot of the play warrants, however. *Waiting for Godot* gives us no indication that Vladimir and Estragon are any different from the other characters that inhabit the play. Even though the relationship dynamics are different—Vladimir and Estragon are friends while Pozzo and Lucky have a servant and master relationship—it becomes increasingly unclear who is more interdependent: Vladimir and Estragon or Pozzo and Lucky. All four characters share the experience of being compromised containers.

Lucky's speech is indicative of his nature as compromised container and, on a larger scale, the shared broken relationship between all of the characters' inner and outer selves. In a passage typical of the entire lengthy monologue, Lucky begins by formulating his speech like a philosophical argument: "Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown..." (44). The idea of a personal God appears here, interspersed with the interjection "quaquaquaqua." Lucky's language is, as previously discussed, a logorrheic deluge that treats words like so much waste to be expelled. Qua is a term used in logical and philosophical argument to mean "the capacity of being." It is striking, then, that Lucky's language breaks down so sharply on "qua," turning it into an absurd stutter. The "capacity of being" becomes a tic or a trill. "Quaqua" is also a malapropism for the French "caca" (Atkins 430). The "capacity of being" becomes shit as in Lucky's explosion of unrestrained id-speech.

In his analysis of Lucky's speech, Anselm Atkins divides the speech into three distinct sections, each with its own version of a (admittedly fractured) syntactic structure. Atkins states that "Part I is the unfinished protasis of a theological or philosophical argument presented geometrically: *Given*. . . . It breaks off before the apodosis can be supplied. Note that the existence of God is hypothetical, a mere postulate: If God exists, then . . ." (427). "Part I, then, deals with the decline and demise of God" (427). Lucky's argument never resolves, and the play's closest expression of direct theological argument dissolves because it does not matter. God's existence is immaterial, and all attempts to argue God's existence are as meaningless as Lucky's intensely fragmented, nonsensical diatribe. Atkins notes that "[t]he attributes of the personal God of religion, who is 'uttered forth' in revelation, are here mixed with those of the God of speculative theology and philosophy, whose 'existence' must be discussed. The two Gods appear to be contradictory" (430). Lucky's attempt at logical argument breaks down as he encounters inconsistencies in his versions of God. His argument, like most of Beckett's narratives, does not resolve, but trails off, unfinished because there is no end: there is no resolution to achieve.

As the narrator of *The Unnamable* says, "shit, there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word, one has only to seek, seek in vain, in order to be sure of finding it in the end, it's a question of elimination" (359). Throughout his body of work, Beckett uses scatology as a motif that parallels and reinforces the failures of communication. In this way, scatology is the image of the broken human condition, the collapse of the discrete elements of the self, and the dissolution of borders between the subject and object that allow self-definition and interaction within a symbolic order. The abjection that Beckett's scatology incorporates into his works represents many of our deepest, most fundamental fears. Can we be known? Can we know ourselves?

Beckett's work has fascinated and haunted readers in part due to his refusal to answer these questions. His characters are unmoored, undefined, and radically alienated. Beckett's characters, grotesque as they are, look a little more like us than we are comfortable admitting.

Although Beckett's work has haunting implications for all readers, the experience of reading Beckett produces a particular kind of horror for the Christian. A Christian understanding of the universe has resolution at its center. The figure of the crucified Christ represents the salvation of a broken people and their reconciliation into His divine order—that which is dead will not stay dead, and that which is wrong will be set right. The Bible as a narrative work has firm aggregation at its end with the Book of Revelation and the description of God's people finally entering into His kingdom. Beckett, although he does not deny God, denies this ending. Through his scatological images, Beckett paints humanity as fundamentally compromised, beyond saving, unable to achieve resolution. Beckett's language-as-waste also contradicts a Christian teleology. John 1:1 states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*NIV*). The Bible declares that followers of Christ are people of the Word; Beckett strips the word of its significance. The Bible declares that Christ will come again to save his people; Beckett asks if it isn't a bit cruel to make someone do this all over again. We are not people of the word, Beckett insists, but people of the fizzle, the *foirade*.

Beckett's absurd universe entraps his characters in liminal space. Their excremental functions do not resolve; their stories do not resolve. For the Christian reader, this lack of resolution is the natural consequence of the unmooring of language from meaning, of humanity from the symbolic order. Reality itself becomes unknowable. During his time at the hospital, Murphy describes his frustrations at the shortsightedness of the doctors who assume that a patient's relationship to outer reality defines their stage of the healing process. In Murphy's

mind, this reliance on outer reality is unstable because outer reality itself is unstable: “The nature of outer reality remained obscure. The men, women children of science would seem to have as many ways of kneeling to their facts as any other body of illuminati. The definition of outer reality, or of reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer” (*Murphy* 177). Beckett here describes a world without an active divine presence, one where the definition of reality depends on who is defining it. The Christian reader, when staring into the abjection of Beckett’s absurd universe, sees a picture of what happens when we are denied endings—we drift into utter alienation, language dissolving until it fades away into silence, and only one sound is left echoing into the abyss: a wet fart.

Works Cited

- Atkins, Anselm. "Lucky's Speech in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot': A Punctuated Sense-Line Arrangement." *Educational Theatre Journal* 19.4 (Dec. 1967): 426-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Sept. 2014.
- Barry, Liz. "Beckett, Bourdieu, and the Resistance to Consumption." *Modernist Cultures* 2.1 (Summer 2006): 31-41. *ProQuest*. Web 14 Mar. 2014.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993. Print.
- . *Embers. Samuel Beckett: Collected Shorter Plays*. New York: Grove Press, 1984. 91-104. Print.
- . *Endgame. Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006. 89-134. Print.
- . "The Expelled." *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. New York: Grove, 1994. 8-25. Print.
- . *Fizzles*. New York: Grove, 1976. Print.
- . *Krapp's Last Tape. Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006. 215-23. Print.
- . *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. Ed. Martha Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Daniel Gunn. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.
- . *Malone Dies. Three Novels*. New York: Grove, 2009. 173-281. Print.
- . *Molloy. Three Novels*. New York: Grove, 2009. 3-170. Print.
- . *Murphy*. New York: Grove Press. 1957. Print.
- . *Rough for Theatre I. Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006. 227-33. Print.

- . *Rough for Theatre II. Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006. 237-49. Print.
- . *The Unnamable. Three Novels*. New York: Grove, 2009. 285-407. Print.
- . *Waiting for Godot. Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006. 11-88. Print.
- Butler, Lance St. John. "Two Darks: A Solution to the Problem of Beckett's Bilingualism." *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 3 (1994): 115-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Sept. 2014.
- Campbell, Julie. "The Semantic 'Krapp' In *Krapp's Last Tape*." *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 6 (1997): 63-72. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Aug. 2014.
- Collinge-Germain, Linda. "Cultural In-Betweenness in "L'expulsé"/"The Expelled" by Samuel Beckett." *Journal of the Short Story in English* 52 (Spring 2009): 105-111. *OpenEdition*. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.
- Connor, Steven. "Beckett's Atmospheres." *Beckett After Beckett*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann. Gainesville: U of Florida, 2006. 52-65. Print.
- Courtney, Charles. "Blind Waiting in Samuel Beckett's *Godot*." *Sewanee Theological Review* 52.4 (2009): 396-400. *ProQuest*. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.
- Cousineau, Thomas J. "Descartes, Lacan, and 'Murphy.'" *College Literature* 11.3 (Fall 1984): 223-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Sept. 2014.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961. Print.
- Federman, Raymond. "The Imagery Museum of Samuel Beckett." *symplokē* 10.1-2 (2002): 153-72. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 May 2014.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. Ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1962. Print.

- . *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. James Strachey. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010. Print.
- Hardy, Thomas. "Hap." *Poetryfoundation.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Oct. 2014.
- Johnson, Mark. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2008. Print.
- . *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia UP. 1982. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud." *Écrits: a Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1977. 146-78. Print.
- . *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. Print.
- Rabinovitz, Rubin. "Time, Space, and Verisimilitude in Samuel Beckett's Fiction." *Journal of Beckett Studies* 0.2 (Summer 1977): 40. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 May 2014.
- Riva, Raymond T. "Beckett and Freud." *Criticism* 12.2 (Spring 1970): 120-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2014.
- Russell, Catherine. "The Figure in the Monitor: Beckett, Lacan, and Video." *Cinema Journal* 28.4 (Summer 1989): 20-37. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Sept. 2014.
- Sheehan, Paul. "Births for Nothing: Beckett's Ontology of Parturition." *Beckett After Beckett*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann. Gainesville: U of Florida, 2006. 177-86. Print.

Stewart, Paul. "A Rump Sexuality." *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 18 (2007): 257-69.

JSTOR. Web. 10 Sept. 2014.

Thomas, Ronald R. "The Novel and the Afterlife: The End of the Line in Bunyan and Beckett."

Modern Philology 86.4 (May 1989): 385-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Aug. 2014.

Toor, David. "Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*." *The Explicator*. 29.1 (1970): 1-2. *ProQuest*. Web. 8

Oct. 2014.

Turner, Victor. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative

Symbology" *The Rice University Studies* 60.3 (1974): 53-92. *Rice University Digital*

Scholarship Archive. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

---. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982. Print.

Uhlmann, Anthony. "Samuel Beckett and the Occluded Image." *Beckett After Beckett*. Ed. S. E.

Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann. Gainesville: U of Florida, 2006. 79-97. Print.

Yeats, William Butler. "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop." *Poetryfoundation.org*. N.p., n.d.

Web. 20 Oct. 2014.