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AUTONOMY AND PRIVACY IN WITTGENSTEIN AND BECKETT

IN HIS TELLING OF *Diana and Actaeon*, Ovid describes Actaeon's human soul, lodged in the body of a stag. It is about to be ripped apart by his own hounds, Diana's vengeance for his having seen her naked. Deprived of human tongue, he can express nothing of his human fright, or of his sense of being wronged. In Chapter Two of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, Proust's narrator is just about, at long last, to kiss Albertine for the first time:

. . . I believed that there was such a thing as knowledge acquired by the lips; I told myself that I was going to know the taste of this fleshly rose, because I had not stopped to think that man, a creature obviously less rudimentary than the sea-urchin or even the whale, nevertheless lacks a certain number of essential organs, and notably possesses none that will serve for kissing. For this absent organ he substitutes his lips, and thereby arrives perhaps at a slightly more satisfying result than if he were reduced to caressing the beloved with a horny tusk. But a pair of lips, designed to convey to the palate the taste of whatever whets their appetite, must be content, without understanding their mistake or admitting their disappointment, with roaming over the surface and with coming to a halt at the barrier of the impenetrable but irresistible cheek.¹

These images represent what we might call the phenomenological truth, if not the ontological truth, of Cartesian Dualism: not only is it abstractly imaginable for philosophical purposes, there are moments in human life when it really does seem as if our corporeal equipages are inessential to us—that they are possibly exchangeable, as in Actaeon's case, or disconcerting impediments to our real interests, as in trying to kiss our Albertines.

Cartesian Dualism, at least for Wittgenstein and for Beckett, was not simply a theory, an intelligible doctrine that might decisively be refuted, overcome, left in the past alongside alchemy and vitalism. It was a picture, or perhaps jumble of pictures, that is repeated to us time and again, if not precisely by our language, then certainly by our art, religions, folk theories, morals. And if that is so then the picture must, in some sense, be faithful—if not to our actual metaphysical situation, then to ourselves as we seem to ourselves, and thus to our phenomenological situation, to what it is like to be a conscious human being. The picture, as exemplified in all those cultural forms, expresses—perhaps we should say constitutes—our understanding, or at least our *image*, of ourselves. Whether or not Cartesian Dualism admits of formulation as an articulate theory, it enters into human life substantively not only as such a theory but as a creature of the imagination—and this not merely in the superficial sense in which imagination is an idle pastime, but in something like the Kantian sense of imagination, that which delivers reality as intelligible in the first place. Its evil cannot be exorcised by refutation or even persuasion, but only by something like a shift of aspect, “seeing things aright,” as for Wittgenstein, or by discovering new images, new expressions or literary techniques, as for Beckett.

I will try to accomplish two things. First, I will try to explain, from a logical or metaphysical point of view, what Wittgenstein and Beckett saw as being troublesome in the Cartesian conception of the mind. I shall take much for granted: that Beckett and Wittgenstein were, in fact, deeply and unremittingly concerned with the question of what is wrong with that conception of the mind; that the central logical problem with it can be boiled down to a point that I credit to Kant; that either Wittgenstein or Beckett, despite their antipathy to conventional philosophical argument, can fairly be regarded as addressing a theoretical concern of the kind that more conventional philosophers straightforwardly argue about. I shall sum up this convergence by saying that both Beckett and Wittgenstein were *descriptive phenomenologists*. Second, the more difficult part: to explain more fully why it is so peculiarly

worthwhile to discuss the work of an artist alongside that of a philosopher. The answer is that for both figures, some of the deepest substantive questions are inseparable from, or even identical to, questions of technique or literary form. The literary is not so easily distinguished from the philosophical, the formal not so easily from the substantial. This is not an idea that is often taken seriously, or even considered, in analytical philosophy—my tradition—but where issues phenomenological are concerned it seems to me to be inescapable. Nor can analytical philosophy afford to be too confident of the distinction between the conceptual and the phenomenological, the logical and the psychological as Frege so imperiously put it. In any case, a satisfactory discussion of these issues will have to touch on cultural currents of which our understanding is often obscured by the popular accretions of such terms as “modernism” and “postmodernism.” Inevitably, I will have to map these labels onto the discussion—not merely so as to indulge the strange fascination they exert, but to encourage the thought that the literary and formal issues really do embody certain metaphysical and ethical concerns in a way that may be irreplaceable.

I. Art and Philosophy

Descartes, according to the legend, is the epoch-making modern philosopher. And if by Modernism we mean an essentialist vision of cultural forms as absolute, autonomous, and intrinsically meaningful—a tradition in which as young men both Wittgenstein and Beckett were thoroughly steeped—then both Wittgenstein’s later works and Beckett’s represent something like its attempted last rites.² Each figure came to find that vision unsustainable, as not ultimately fully intelligible. Each figure moved—though certainly more explicitly and willingly in Wittgenstein’s case—towards a world of perspectivism, interdependence, fluid boundaries and contingency. You have to get off your modernist high horse, kick away your modernist ladder; but by doing so you fall to the ground with a distinctly material thud: there is, as a late Beckett mouthpiece puts it, “nothing but life for the living”; what must be accepted, as Wittgenstein put it, are *forms of life*.

It is true that Beckett denied that he was propounding a philosophy. He said: “. . . art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear.” And: “When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I

don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess."³

It might immediately be asked, then, whether it is not wrongheaded to try to extract philosophy from Beckett—and more specifically, to align him with Wittgenstein, who once said that our aim in philosophy is *complete clarity*. But there is a reasonably good answer. Beckett's aim is to describe what is in front of him, to say How It Is. How is it, then? It is simply a mess. What, exactly, is a mess? The *world*? Were the avenues of the 14th arrondissement not sufficiently tidy? No, what is more conspicuously and urgently a mess is the inner condition of Man (after all, in what sense could the world be a mess if all was well with the inner condition of Man?). But if that is a mess, then what prevents the artist—or the descriptive phenomenologist—from describing it clearly? If the artist's task is to describe what is before him, then why in the world does he not strive to make it clear?

The answer lies in the reflexive character of phenomenology. When the subject is concerned with an external phenomenon, the thing has its self-sufficient nature. Subjective consciousness strives to adapt itself to it, to represent it exactly by reflecting it. The ideal of perception is that a subjective state should be perfectly clear and exactly determinate, precisely as the object is determinate in its self-sufficient nature. Failure, imperfection in this respect is either indeterminacy, confusion, vagueness in the subject, or outright error, where determinate bits of the perceptual state positively misconstrue the object. But things are different when we consider the subject's attention to itself. This is not, for Beckett anyway, because consciousness in itself is merely an empty passivity, so that its attempt to perceive itself must coincide with the empty canvas that depicts itself. On the contrary, it is of the essence of consciousness to be filled with sound and fury of its own making. The problem rather is that the subject's confusion about itself thereby infects itself: However the situation came about—thanks to Godot, or Pim, or to whom or whatever—our ideas are confused, inadequate, and pained. But consciousness—the state of the subject as it is for the subject—is *objectively* nothing but what it is *subjectively*. It is nothing but what it seems; *esse* is *percipi*. Thus if we are subject to painful and confusing ideas about what we are, then it is hard to see how we could progress beyond that confusion. Not only is there no procedure for distinguishing appearance from reality, they are ontologically fused: if

consciousness is necessarily self-consciousness, then confusion in one is necessarily confusion in the other. Where it reflects itself, confusion in its object is confusion in itself.

Thus the driving concern of Beckett's characters, so often remarked in the critical literature, to unlearn history, even to unlearn their language, is largely an attempt to overcome a metaphysics of the self that is not only both tragic and unendingly seductive, but confused. Beckett's drive towards new literary and dramatic forms is a drive towards new models of the self—not merely a less tendentious or less factually incorrect understanding of what it is to exist, but a clearer one, that will not generate unsatisfiable or incoherent aspirations.

Beckett's disavowal of philosophical purpose is thus misleading, perhaps even disingenuous. Wittgenstein, for his part, sought to attenuate the ambitions of philosophy, drawing it inwards, closer to Beckett's aim of describing what is before him. Indeed if by "philosophy" we mean philosophical theory, explanation, or analysis, then it is not stretching things too far to say that Wittgenstein also claimed not to be propounding a philosophy: "One of the greatest impediments for philosophy is the expectation of new, deep/unheard of elucidations" and "[The right method] simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything—since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain."⁴

Such is what I called Wittgenstein's descriptive phenomenology. It is central to the later Wittgenstein's outlook that philosophical progress is not generally to be achieved by means of doctrines or proofs. We have to overcome our propensity to generalize, to theorize. Instead we should "look and see"; we should try to "see connections." Wittgenstein's use of perceptual vocabulary in conveying this characterization of philosophy is essential: the enemy is not a theory but a picture, something that needs not refuting but dispelling, exorcising, painstaking deconstruction. Wittgenstein did not explicitly avow that this was to be effected by art, let alone that the clarity aspired to by philosophy might be provided by works of art. It is difficult, however, to know what to make of Wittgenstein's having held that we might command a clear view of "our language," or our forms of life. He certainly did see that that view might itself be infected by that which "our language repeats to us inexorably" (*PI*, pp. 111, 115); but further, it did not escape him that what there is to see will not only be vastly, imponderably more complex and ramified than the primitive language-games described in the early

sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but it will often have the character of art: forms of life will consist not merely in practices—as if these were mere behavior-patterns—but in story-tellings, metaphors, responses to symbols that simply have no adequate “neutral” description, as if we could understand those forms of life—command a “clear view” of them—without entering into them subjectively, that is, without knowing what it is like to take part, to *believe* in them.⁵ Thus insofar as Wittgenstein had positive ambitions for philosophy they are problematic on their own terms; the remaining philosophical iconoclasm, in matter and method, was thoroughly congenial to Beckett.

II. Descartes

From the start, when Beckett gave Descartes’s name to the hero of his first published poem, Cartesian themes, quandaries and tropes were ubiquitous in Beckett’s works, most thoroughly perhaps in the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*.⁶ Indeed Beckett explicitly aligns himself with that peculiarly French intellectual tradition in which the most delicate ratiocinations are conducted in bed—a tradition notably exemplified not only by Descartes but by Beckett’s other French hero, Marcel Proust. From Descartes’s bed, we are given to understand, issued the *Meditations*, the *Discourse*, the *Passions of the Soul*. From Proust’s—a kind of magic carpet, flying nocturnally through time—issued his colossus of memory and imagination, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Beckett’s characters—his later ones especially—apply the same method. Malone and Watt, for example, think to us primarily from their beds. The narrator of *How It Is* lies face down in the mud, but that is his bed, too, for he has no other. When not literally in bed, Beckett’s heroes live immobilized, or nearly so, far from the world, where thought is not importuned by perception, where consciousness can breathe of itself, seek its basis. Murphy, said to have “felt himself split in two, a body and a mind,” recalls Descartes’s stove-heated room, with his retirements for meditation to his overheated garret (ending in disaster: connected to the lavatory pull-chain, the heating system explodes, consuming Murphy in a sort of Cartesian conflagration).⁷ But Beckett’s heroes are beset every moment with the actual impossibility of the Cartesian escape: the body—in the form of pain, pleasure, and the tribulations of effort—will not stop intruding upon the anchorite’s sanctuary.

Beckett also plays with Descartes’s question of whether it is God that

oversees and supports the world we take in with our senses, and not something less beneficent: “The essential thing is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line, as long as there are waters and banks and ravening in heaven a sporting god to plague his creatures” (*The Unnameable*). This fear of the possible malevolence of unseen powers ultimately takes a nontheological, and seemingly unanswerable form.

At the center of these sorts of concerns is Descartes’s conception of the mind-as-inner-sanctum, a separate sphere *within which* the distinction between subject and object continues to hold. In characterizing this conception I do not, as is perhaps more customary where matters Wittgensteinian are in view, emphasize the purported privacy of the Cartesian. Rather I emphasize what I shall call *Epistemological Platonism*: intentionality—that is, thought, perception, judgment and so forth—is conceived fundamentally as a relation between a judging subject and an intentional object—an *idea* in the terminology of early modern philosophy. Crucially, the content of a thought or perception is all in the object, the idea. The judging subject, on the other hand, is the seat of *volition*. The judging subject is the willing subject, and indeed for Descartes judgment is precisely an exercise of the will. This logical independence of subject and object implies that the will, as Descartes puts it, is infinite: whatever the content of a thought or perception, it is always possible in principle for the thinking subject either to accept or reject it. One might infer that this logical independence implies metaphysical independence: that subject can exist without object. Descartes denies this on the ground that the existence of the self is identical with its thinking; if every thought must have some particular content then subject implies object. But it is hard to see what right Descartes has to this denial, and here is a tension which Beckett will exploit.

III. Kant and Wittgenstein

A straightforward way of introducing Wittgenstein’s central critique of this conception of the mind is by posing a certain “third man” dilemma that we can associate with Kant as surely as with Wittgenstein. If the will, the judging subject, is what *decides* with respect to a given idea—yea or nay, true or false, act or refrain—then does it decide according to standards, or not? If the answer is that it doesn’t, then it is hard to see how the will could be anything but an irrelevance: the will would be nothing to which rational or ethical praise and blame might

appropriately be apportioned. On the other hand, if the judging subject does apply standards—if it acts according to rules—then it looks as if the subject is nothing but a homunculus, a self-contained cognitive agent in itself. The mind has been explained only by presupposing a mind, and the question of the essential structure of the mind has simply not been addressed.

The subject-object conception of the mind is thus something of a nonstarter. But there is another difficulty which affords more actual insight into what is wrong with it. This is the well-known problem of the Unity of Judgment, which makes itself felt in various ways in Wittgenstein's works, arising at the outset of his philosophical life, in his criticisms of Russell's theory of judgment.⁸ Suppose I am considering whether to make a certain judgment, whether or not to take things or the world to be thus-and-so, a certain way. Even the simplest judgment is complex—I can judge that the table is round, but I cannot just judge that the table. So I must be wondering whether or not the object before me is F—round, or snub-nosed or whatever (note it does not matter whether this object be public, private, or abstract). So there are two ideas before me; my question is, does this object fall under the concept-F? Does it fit the rule for being F? I am conscious of two things—the object and the concept—and I am asking whether the one fits the other. If I am to answer that question, however, I must make *judgments* about the object and concept—I must, so to speak, look to see whether the tabs in the object are such as to fit the slots which I perceive to be in the concept. So in order to make the original judgment, I must make further judgments about these items. But if that holds for *any* judgment then evidently the game can never get started. I cannot make any sort of judgment without antecedently having made another, which is evidently absurd. It does not help if we characterize the relation between the mind and the object or predicate of a judgment as perceptual: perception is itself a judgmental act, since it consists in taking its object to be a certain way.

In order to stop this regress, there must be a layer or type of judgment wherein the items of judgment are somehow not subject to misrecognition. And both Descartes and Russell might be thought to have satisfied this requirement by the supposition that some cognitions are completely transparent. Some acts of recognition of concepts and objects are such that misrecognition does not occur: the ideas are clear and distinct, or one is directly and hence infallibly acquainted with them. But this is to misconceive the problem as epistemological rather

than metaphysical or logical: so long as it is logically necessary that the objects of a judgment must first, in a separate cognitive act, be apprehended—*recognized, identified as such-and-such*—then no assurance that the act of apprehension is veridical can stop the regress, can explain how judgment begins at all. Every judgment presupposes another, and judgment itself is being explained only by presupposing it. The absurdity of this is doubly acute because it shows that epistemological platonism is incoherent as an account of intentional consciousness or awareness itself, of how it is possible that the mental contents requisite for any act of judging, thinking or believing should figure in consciousness at all. What the regress problem shows is that, however it is that thought or judgment comes into being, it cannot be such that its intentional constituents are themselves required, in separately conceivable cognitive act, to be *apprehended, recognized, identified* as being objects of such-and-such a kind. For all such acts presuppose some sort of cognition or perception of the object, the very thing we set out to explain.

To cut a long story short, the correct inference to draw is that Epistemological Platonism is false. The mind does not come by its contents from without, as if the mind were one thing, and the universe of possible thought-contents another, a kind of intentional field in which it moves. It could make nothing of such things unless it were already thinking, already possessed of thought-contents in terms of which to make those things intelligible. Intentional consciousness must, as Kant put it, be *spontaneous*. Even at the most basic stratum, consciousness cannot be simply a form of receptivity to content-bearing objects which are metaphysically independent of the thinking subject. Rather the determination of content must be a mode of the *activity* of the subject, an activity that is both essential and intrinsic to it: Consciousness most fundamentally comprises acts which *engender* its content, not a subject-in-relation-to-objects which supply its content. This act, of course, is the act of judgment, the act of taking things to be thus and so. If thought were not spontaneous in this way, then nothing entering the mind would be thinkable; it would “be nothing to me,” as Kant so concisely put it.

For Wittgenstein as for Kant this also explains a more subtle mistake that Descartes makes about the existence and nature of the self, sometimes known as the Cartesian Illusion. It seems inevitable that the thinking self is necessarily capable of recognizing itself as itself, and that it bears a specially intimate relationship to its own ideas. But, as Kant

put it, what this indicates is not the necessary substantial unity of the thinking subject, but the necessary *formal* unity of the mind as a whole, comprising its contents as well as its agency.⁹ Insofar as the self is something revealed to us in that way, in actual consciousness, the identity of the self is really what Kant calls the transcendental unity of apperception—the fact that all my representations are necessarily united in one consciousness—not the permanence of a selfsame object which is something other than a representation. That thoroughgoing relatedness of representations, and not a special relation between subject and object, is what constitutes the necessary fact that there is something in common throughout all of my experiences, and thus explains the special access I have to my own ideas. It follows that mental content is neither logically nor metaphysically independent of the essential conditions of the existence of a subject. The content of a mental act is not an object to which a metaphysically independent subject bears a relation of inner perception or acquaintance, but a feature or mode of the act. Concepts are not objects which enter into the understanding like images on a screen, but rules of understanding—or as it might be put, ways of judging, species of cognitive action. And this suggests that questions about the existence of the subject—existential questions—cannot in the end be divorced from the question of how mental content is determined, of how it comes into being at all. Here is another point which will loom large in Beckett.

If ideas are not objects which somehow intrude upon the subjective stage then we need another kind of story of how the mind comes by the materials in terms of which it thinks. Notoriously, Kant's answer is less than transparent, as is his conception of what is responsible for the unity of the understanding in the first place: Kant's assignment of such powers to the unseen machinations of transcendental synthesis concedes too much to Descartes besides being unexplanatory. The genius of Wittgenstein's later philosophy lies partly in his willingness to look outside the mind in considering such questions, to the context in which it is embedded. And insofar as such a question is answerable, Wittgenstein's answer is well-known. The bedrock of thought is mastery of human practices, of forms of life.¹⁰ These infuse consciousness with its content by their being the sorts of actions they are, in the particular circumstances in which they take place (perhaps even by our having the sorts of purposes we do in interpreting them). Consider Wittgenstein's builders of §2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. If we say, of one of the builders who responds correctly when we say "Slab!," that he understands

what we have said to him, then that is not, of course, incorrect. What is unjustified is the reification of the idea of understanding, the supposition that there is some further and univocal question we are asking when we ask, of someone who has mastered such a practice, whether he understands the words. The temptation to reify the concept of understanding grows with the complexity of the language-games we have in view, but it is easiest to see how utterly gratuitous it is in the simplest cases. Our builder has incorporated his response to "Slab!" into a form of life; if, instead of insisting that such mastery must be explained by some underlying mental process—by apprehension of the concept *Slab* perhaps—we regard it as basic in the order of explanation, then we can see how the spontaneity that must lie at the basis of thought and speech is possible. For there is nothing in the idea of a creature's having learned a practice—how to fetch slabs, how to recite words, how to add figures and so on—which evidently presupposes the idea of a self-conscious willing subject. We can almost literally see how it is that slabs and so on must enter into an explanation of what the creature is doing. Wittgenstein is not, in the reductionist sense, a behaviorist; still, for Wittgenstein, speech and action are presupposed by thought, and at the most basic level cannot be explained by it. Or, rather, if we wish to follow Wittgenstein still more closely in putting the point as a point about the basis for certain mentalistic descriptions of things, and not as something metaphysical, we can say that the sense of mentalistic discourse depends on that of discourse about speech and action, not vice-versa (see *PI*, §§ 155–56). Mastery of the slab-practice is what begins to make mentalistic description intelligible. For Wittgenstein, the necessary formal unity of the mind is supplied by our immersion in forms of life, practices, language.

So there is the most general point I want to take from Wittgenstein: that the foundation of thought is not to be found in some fundamental type act conceived purely mentalistically, but rather in our immersion in forms of life, language-games, practice. That much I assume is familiar. What is perhaps less familiar, but which will be most important when we turn to Beckett, is that our mastery of practices be responsible for what Kant called the spontaneity of thought, of intentional conscious existence. Kant and Wittgenstein are united in holding that nothing like Epistemological Platonism, as an account of the basis of cognition, could be true, and that understanding must consist most fundamentally of spontaneous activity rather than receptivity. For Kant, of course, this action—the type of act in virtue of which consciousness

is organized and made intelligible—was the act of judgment. Wittgenstein's advance beyond Kant was to argue that only something which is not itself a species of mental act could play this role, and that this could only be the mastery of practices.¹¹ Further, this suggests that the very notion of a "mental act" is not so clearly bounded as one might have supposed, again a point that emerges in Beckett, most acutely in his last works.

IV. Beckett

There is another tale from Ovid, *Echo and Narcissus*, in which several of our themes converge. As punishment for having spoiled her plan to expose one of Zeus's infidelities, Hera reduces the nymph Echo's capacity to speak to the mere ability to repeat the words of others. Echo falls in love with Narcissus, the beautiful and conceited son of a river-god and a nymph, but he cruelly disdains her. Her grief dissolves her, leaving nothing but her voice. Aphrodite punishes Narcissus for this, making him fall in love with his own reflection in a pond, which dissipates whenever he tries to embrace it. In the end, whereas Narcissus is left to pine for an ungraspable apparition of himself, Echo is reduced to nothing but a voice which can express nothing of its own.¹²

I extract two closely intertwined themes to locate in Beckett. First, the elusiveness of the self. Much of Beckett's writing is about the search for something that is authentically the self, absolutely one's own, along with the baffling realization that there is no such thing: the Cartesian image of the self, the object of Narcissus's desire, is not merely empty but unreal. To love only that is death, and for good reason: it depends upon a metaphysical illusion, it is like the snake that swallows itself. Second, the theme of the voice, the search for an authentic voice, for a voice of one's own, along with the baffling realization that there is no such thing; we are like Echo doomed to repeat the words of others. This realization makes itself felt again and again in Beckett's work, most comically in the form of the parrot of *Malone Dies*: a fleeting character whom Malone calls Jackson tries to teach his parrot to say *Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*—already nearly enough an expression of Beckett's philosophical worry about language—but the beast only manages the first three words, thereby paradoxically telling the truth about itself (or "the celebrated restriction was too much for it," as Malone says). For the conclusion that Malone is driven towards is precisely that the verbal stream is not so much the product of wilful

action as it is something that happens of its own accord, impinges adventitiously upon consciousness like perception itself—something that one suffers, just as one suffers events in the external world (of words: “I say them as I hear them,” says the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said*¹³). Hardly a more disturbing hypothesis can be conceived than that we should be alienated from the verbal stream, what we are pleased to call our thoughts. It is inevitable then that Malone, the ostensible narrator of *Malone Dies*, should gradually simply lose interest in telling stories as being beside the point. The sense to be made of the world is no more a credit to us than the world itself.

Consider then the play *Not I* of 1972. On a darkened stage, a face is visible high above stage left, illuminated to reveal only the mouth. Stage right, towards the rear, stands a vaguely female figure: the “auditor.” The mouth speaks, narrating in some fractured way a life, an existence. The speech is manic, its animating principle elusive, but the subject it keeps returning to is the act of speaking itself:

but the brain still . . . still sufficiently . . . oh very much so! . . . at this stage . . . in control . . . under control . . . to question even this . . . so it reasoned . . . she realized . . . words were coming . . . imagine! . . . words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize . . . at first . . . so long since it had sounded . . . then finally had to admit . . . could be none other . . . than her own . . . and now this stream . . . not catching the half of it . . . not the quarter . . . no idea . . . what she was saying . . . imagine! . . . no idea what she was saying . . . till she began trying to delude herself . . . it was not hers at all . . . not her voice at all . . . then suddenly she felt . . . gradually she felt . . . her lips moving . . . imagine! . . . her lips moving . . . as of course till then she had not . . . and not alone the lips . . . the cheeks . . . the tongue . . . in the mouth . . . all those contortions without which . . . no speech possible . . . and yet in the ordinary way . . . not felt at all . . . so intent one is . . . on what one is saying . . . the whole being . . . hanging on its words . . . her voice alone . . . but this other awful thought . . . all this . . . all that . . . steady stream . . . straining to hear . . . make something of it . . . and her own thoughts . . . make something of them . . . mouth on fire . . . stream of words . . . in her ear . . . practically in her ear . . . not catching the half . . . not the quarter . . . no idea what she’s saying . . . imagine! . . . no idea what she’s saying . . . and can’t stop . . . no stopping it . . . and the brain . . . raving away on its own . . . trying to make sense of it . . . or make it stop [abbreviated].

The voice remains stubbornly third-person. Each time it revisits the question who is speaking, it reasserts the third-person—brutally, in the

clings to the labours of men that as a result of the labours unfinished of Testew and Cunard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown that as a result of the public works of Puncher and Wattman . . .

It is like some scrambled ticker tape of the whole of Western Learning discovered accidentally in a postapocalyptic age. Technically speaking, *Waiting for Godot* is a very different beast from *Not I*, and even from *Endgame*. Like *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Not I* attempts to effect on stage the almost catastrophic interiority of the great novels of the Trilogy, towards which in retrospect we can easily see the earlier prose works as having moved.¹⁵ By contrast, *Waiting for Godot* remains stubbornly on the surface; Didi and Gogo love nothing better than to run through familiar courtesies and customs of speech and action. But they cannot help but feel that that is all a distraction from the waiting, the hope for something *else*, something *other* than conversations, customs, forms of life. Thus although the play in one sense consists of a series of slapstick vignettes, and contains no speech expressing the inner condition of man, the play's real theme, appropriately enough, is tacit: it is all about an inner silence that will not be appeased, that is willing to subordinate all that to a longing that it cannot even formulate. The philosophical pathos is very much that of the auditor of *Not I*—one is tortured by the apparent gulf that separates the real focus of conscious being from the contents of life or of the mind.

The spectre of the voice as alien and automatic is canvassed less elegantly but in more phenomenological dimensions in the third novel of the trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*. It begins: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I. Say I." The book is about the question what does it mean to say I—and once again, the relationship between self and voice. Some fragments:

I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.

I shall never be silent. Never.

This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says

It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I can't prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine, since there is no one but me.

This theme is pursued largely by identifying various voices as those of the heroes of his novels—Belacqua, Watt, Murphy, Malone, Molloy—and then those of unprecedented figures who appear only momentarily, like passing fish in some murky aquarium. The narrator resists a seemingly external demand to call these voices his own:

I'll call him Mahood . . . it is his voice which has often, always, mingled with mine, and sometimes drowned it completely . . . I don't know whether he's here now or far away . . . his voice continued to testify for me, as though woven into mine . . . then my voice, the voice, would say, That's an idea, now I'll tell one of Mahood's stories, I need a rest. Then refreshed, set about the truth again, with redoubled vigour. To make me think I was a free agent. But it would not be my voice, not even in part.

Having nothing to say, having no words but the words of others.

Before [Mahood] there were others, taking themselves for me . . . what is Mahood doing in my domain, and how does he get here? . . . he has told me what he is like, what I am like, they have all told me that, it must be one of their principal functions.

You think you are inventing, and all you do is stammer out your lesson. It's of me now that I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case.

Stories are records, fictional or not, of lives, of life, of history. They tell us what has happened, what we have done, what we are. Such stories, indeed, purport to *constitute* that supposedly inner logos that is the self, insofar as the self is what Sartre called facticity, something with an intelligible nature: they do not stand apart from it in any attitude of description: "I'm in words, made of words, others' words" (p. 139); "[it] all boils down to a question of words, pronouncing me alive" (p. 66). No wonder Beckett's characters insist that they must "go on," even if there is "nothing to express." Combining this with the predicament of *Not I*, then, Beckett's picture is one of absolute alienation from reality—not only from the external world, but from anything that might satisfyingly or even intelligibly be conceptualized as the self. Insofar as the self can be conceptualized—insofar as stories can be told—the self is not only an adventitious thing, but a fabrication imposed upon us from without, propaganda.

Beckett's exploration of our phenomenological situation thus presents our Cartesian longings and convictions to be as illusory and confused as they are inevitable. There is no absolute foundation or refuge to be found in thought or the self. The ego is dispersed, a mere hubbub of voices with no assurance of truth in them. This disappointment, however, or its elucidation, does not exhaust Beckett the artist. The later prose works aim at least partly at expressing or exemplifying a model of human existence that avoids the quandaries of subject and object, mind and body, inner and outer. In his very last work, the three short and almost unbearably somber sketches entitled *Stirrings Still*, the torments of unseen malefactors have fled, the problematic relation to language, indeed language or thought itself as an explicit concern, have gone. Whereas Beckett had always emphasized the necessity to keep talking, to "express, though there is nothing to express," he now seems to identify the final remnant of being more generally with *action*: "One night or day then as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. First rise and stand clinging to the table. Then sit again. Then rise again and stand clinging to the table again. Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went"

Beckett now seeks reality not in minimal talking but in minimal doing; being is now being embodied, being an agent in the physical world. The late prose works become more formally rigorous than anything he had done before. His model of being is thus purified or pared down; the particular content of action or speech matters less and less, bearing out his 1956 remark that what matters to him is the *shape* of ideas.¹⁶ Perhaps so; perhaps Beckett had won his way to something like a formal conception of being. But if this represents a revelation, it is no deliverance. Such forms cannot be exemplified or instantiated without the participation of the world.

V. Modern and Postmodern

What have to be accepted, Wittgenstein tells us, are forms of life. Although imbibed from without, they are wellsprings of meaning and value: insofar as they constitute the living reality of language, such language cannot without confusion be regarded merely as representing or expressing something ontologically independent of it, something of which we have some foundational kind of perception. Ultimately we act

blind, as Wittgenstein so alarmingly put it.¹⁷ So Beckett's figures recognize that their voices, their stories, are not absolutely their own creations; but they also know—and this is crucial—that nothing could come closer to being theirs (“[this voice] can only be mine; there is no one but me”). Nothing is absolutely their own, but their existence depends on assenting, on carrying on with its blind agency; the dream of absolute autonomous authenticity is impossible. There is no necessity, no Cartesian absolute in which one might seek refuge from sordid contingency from the external world, physical and social. As the detective-figure Moran of *Molloy* sums up the fallacy: “As if there could be anything but life for the living.” The narrator of *The Unnameable* comments: “What puzzles me is that I should be indebted for this information to persons with whom I can never have been in contact.” Such figures recognize their longing for authenticity or unity as a mistake, the mistake of the Cartesian illusion.

Perhaps Beckett and Wittgenstein part company in their ethical reactions to these points. Wittgenstein in effect questions the value of the examined life, the wish for transcendence, transcendent wisdom. He questions the standpoint of judging life rather than living it. Beckett by contrast retains a medieval passion for absolute dignity, for asceticism, independence from the world. He clings to those remnants he can find of Cartesian privilege. As Hans-Joachim Schulz puts it in his superb monograph exploring Hegelian themes in Beckett, “The vanity of his god-like position and of his doubt is too precious to the Beckett hero.”¹⁸ For what else are we to make of the sense of tragedy in so many of Beckett's works, even of outright metaphysical disaster as in *Not I*? I don't think anyone will say that Beckett is simply depressed about the world, about things that might have been otherwise.¹⁹ He is concerned with certain illusions and certain unsatisfiable longings that arise from the very nature of consciousness itself, which it is not able to ignore (to invoke Kant again). This comes very close to the momentous proposition that it is a *necessary truth* that life is a disaster. Here I think Wittgenstein, the philosopher, can be of some help: it is surely part of the language-game of good and bad that only contingent states of affairs can be good or bad. Here the difference between artist and philosopher is plain: Beckett is not interested in being consistent, but in representing the phenomenological situation as it does tend to impress itself upon us. He grips us as he does partly because we share his inability to let go, to repent of Original Sin, to lay down our

(Cartesian) burdens as the Southern Baptists put it. Insofar as the philosopher plays the stern character who pronounces certain responses to be rationally unjustified, he is inauthentic.

I close with some connections between the foregoing metaphysics and a cultural concern, namely the decline in the last century of Modernism. The concept of Modernism comprehends diverse currents which are in principle separable. In philosophy proper one might think it means the viability of First Philosophy roughly as Descartes conceived it, Queen of the Sciences; but this was explicitly opposed by Carnap, whom one might regard as the ultimate modernist philosopher, so far as analytic philosophers go.²⁰ More to the point would be the characterization of philosophy as genuinely autonomous and uniquely important: that it contains not only a singular kind but a singular *depth* of understanding. Other modernist currents include the autonomy of other cultural forms such as music, the authority of reason, essentialism, atomism as opposed to holism, antihistoricism (Henry Ford's "history is bunk"), scientism and the unity of science, a belief in progress, strict distinctions between art and entertainment or the serious and the unserious, the possibility of an Avant-Garde, a spirit of opposition to the conventional or merely traditional. It is important that both Beckett and Wittgenstein began their careers amidst the golden age of all this.²¹ In many ways Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* was of a piece with this age, even if it was only Carnap and others of his stamp who saw it that way, not Wittgenstein himself. Actual subscription to such ideas, in any case, would have been utterly crude for Wittgenstein, and certainly no one would be tempted to align his post-*Tractatus* writings with any of those views, except for the unique place accorded to philosophy. As for Beckett, aside from his early monograph on Proust, the seeming disciple of Joyce had already done with Modernist ideals when he embarked in earnest on his own creative work. In his very first published story, *Assumption* of 1929, we find him setting up a sort of anti-Stephen Dedalus, who reacts to his own creative urge not with a resolution to forge the uncreated conscience of his race, but with fear and suspicion; indeed, his defences down thanks to not-altogether-welcome nightly coitus, he is summarily killed by what finally erupts from the smithy of his soul.

I suggested that both Beckett and Wittgenstein are interested in the spell cast upon us by certain pictures, certain metaphors or images for the nature of thought, the mind, consciousness. *Not I*, the most arresting example, is a Beckettian image of the mind. If the mind were

really like that, then that would be a deep fact about the mind, about the nature of the interior condition of man. But it is not like that, and *Not I* itself, ironically enough, helps us to see why. For is there some coherent description of what the auditor represents? Of the distinction between the auditor and the chattering mouth? There is not.²² However much it may *seem* as if there were some sort of distinction to be drawn between the content of thought and the pure subject—however compelling Epistemological Platonism may, for certain purposes, seem to be—it is not a coherent conception. Its incoherence is revealed the moment we ask what sort of thing is represented by the auditor: if it really does react beseechingly to the mouth's questionings, if it really does feel, then we are compelled to attribute agency and thought to it, and we are back with the homunculus fallacy (Murphy perhaps propounded a more consistent image: the self as a *mote*, a mere atom or speck). It is almost as if Beckett were saying: *If you would be the absolute master of something, then you will be helpless*. Beckett's characters are sometimes alive to the incoherence of what they can't seem to stop wanting. Not I realizes the voice is hers: it "could be no other." Molloy says "as if there could be anything but life for the living." The *Unnameable* begins with "I, say I . . . Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on." The maneuver is that of the *paradigm case* argument: if philosophy has convinced us that nothing quite measures up to the standard for being an X, then perhaps it has neglected to observe that not only is it normal to call Y an X, it is only the practice of calling Y an X that assigns meaning to X in the first place. It is our calling Y X that makes it so.

The suggestion is that when we try to philosophize or make images that are faithful to the metaphysical idea of the mind-as-inner-sanctum, we end not only in pain but in metaphysical *aporia*. Such is the endpoint of a certain modernist project, one which appropriates that inner sanctum as its special domain, and there finds a special kind of depth that is neither logic nor psychology (its last great hero being Husserl). Thus I think it fair to say that Beckett, in accord with Wittgenstein's "nothing is hidden," ends with a characteristically postmodern *denial of depth*. The rejection of psychic autonomy leaves multiplicity, contingency, immersion in the world, in all its maddening superficiality, with all its inconsistencies. In retrospect, this cannot have been a revelation, a final twist in the plot, to the author of the most uncompromising of critical studies of Proust. Proust, indeed, analyzes character, analyzes minds. But the Proustian question is not What is the actual cause or

reason for this objective fact about this person?; the deeper and more inclusive question is, With what ideas does such-and-such subjectively associate this idea? There is no closure or objective determinacy. There is no fact of the matter about Albertine. Proust is often regarded as the master of depth, but in one crucial respect his message is that there is nothing but shallows—fascinating, shifting layers, but shallows all the same. There are no deep facts answering to the questions we insist on posing in ordinary psychological vocabulary. What was Albertine's real motive in acting as she did? Proust's narrator eventually learns that there is no answer to such a question, but only after years of torturing himself with it. His redemption is to recognize that the indeterminable life-world that throws up such questions is essentially an aesthetic phenomenon—it can only be *justified* as such, as Nietzsche, another great denier of depth, put the point. Albertine, phenomenologically speaking, is a work of art, a locus for our fount of Aesthetic Ideas in the sense of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Yet Beckett pares all this away, the lived appurtenances of human significance—the living flesh, the life-world coursing through the veins of Joycean and Proustean characters; he goes right to the bones, if there are any. Beckett is not interested in any such aesthetic justification or redemption, but he does wish to know *How It Is*—how it is *essentially*. He is interested in a more abstract, hence more readily generalizable representation of our existential situation: the most general forms and dynamics of the subjective life-world. The deflationary conclusion is that there is nothing to be found there beyond the contents of that world in all their multiplicity; at the wished-for level of abstraction, what remains is only the shape of ideas.

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1. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Moncrief and T. Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 31, pp. 378–79.

2. With respect to Beckett see H. Abbott, *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); with respect to Wittgenstein see A. Janik and S. Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).
3. Quoted by Pilling, in P. A. McCarthy, ed., *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), from "Denis Devlin," *transition* 27 (1938): 290; quoted by T. F. Driver, *Beckett by the Madeleine* (Columbia Forum, 1961).
4. L. Wittgenstein, "The Big Typescript," in *Philosophical Occasions*, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 179; and *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), p. 126 (hereinafter *PI*).
5. See Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in *Philosophical Occasions*.
6. S. Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1959). See Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett," in M. Esslin, *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965).
7. See R. Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).
8. See Wittgenstein's letters to Russell in January and June 1913, in Appendix III of *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 2d ed., ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Wittgenstein remained steadfast on this point: the relation of mind to object, of self to world, cannot be that of a distinctive object—the subject—to other objects. In the *Tractatus* this resulted in its celebrated solipsism; in the later work, in the denial of privacy—two sides of the same coin.
9. The argument for this is contained in the Transcendental Deduction.
10. Very roughly, a Wittgenstein-inspired metaphysical assertion of the form *P is a necessary condition of Q* should be understood as *talk about Q is unintelligible unless we assume P*. For an elegant account of why Wittgenstein should not be regarded as a metaphysician—should not, for example, be regarded as posing a philosophical problem in his discussions of private language and rule-following—see Marie McGinn, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 1997).
11. Wittgenstein's notions of language-games and forms of life are needed to close a gap remaining in Kant's account. I have been heavily influenced by Hubert Schwyzer; see Schwyzer, *The Unity of Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
12. See also M. A. Doll, *Beckett and Myth: An Archetypal Approach* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988).
13. S. Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said* (London: John Calder, 1982). Editions of Beckett's other works include *More Pricks than Kicks* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1934); *Murphy* (London: Routledge, 1938); *Watt* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1953); *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956); *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957); *Krapp's Last Tape* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960); *Happy Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962); *How It Is* (London: John Calder, 1964); *Not I* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972); *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973); and *Stirrings Still* (London: John Calder, 1989).

14. Thus the narrator of the trilogy cannot make up his mind whether to identify himself with Malone, Molloy, Belacqua, etc., and perhaps ceases to care, to try to determine what it is to say "I."

15. Technique in the prose works moves away from the illusion of character; voices become more acutely fragmented and depersonalized. In the early works for the stage—*Godot*, *Happy Days*, *Endgame*—the very bodily persistence of the characters, and simple fact that each is played by a single actor, inevitably reestablishes the primacy of character—at least that is the way the audience, inevitably, will take them. But one of the great moments of Beckett's genius was to have unravelled the impression of character even on stage, intensifying his vision by means of live visual metaphor. Seeds of this are visible in the early plays, at least in hindsight. Didi and Gogo's need for each other can be seen as something deeper than the mere human need for the other, about which we have heard before. Hamm's relation to Clov is far more intimate (among the many things it might be taken for is the relation between mind and body, or even ego and reality; Nagg and Nell might be Hamm's mental representations of his parents rather than his parents; this is certainly the most Freud-friendly of Beckett's plays). The tableau of *Happy Days* is perhaps Winnie's mind, not her physical environment. Similar things might be said about *Krapp's Last Tape*. On this reading the physically split self of *Not I* is the culmination of Beckett's search for a stage-enacted simulacrum for *The Unnameable*.

16. J. E. Dearlove, *Accommodating the Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Nonrelational Art* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1981), rightly regards this as a shift towards something *nonrelational*. She says further that *How It Is* marks the turning point from a questioning of identity to a positive identification of the self with a voice. This is not quite correct: the middle-period works had argued too vehemently that no such identification is possible or desirable. Indeed an identification of self with voice, in *How It Is*, would seem the ultimate terror to the narrator. *Ill Seen Ill Said*, along with *Stirring Still*, mark not an identification of self with voice but something like the idea that in the most direct presentation of the human self there is no explicit mention of self.

17. The reader may have expected ". . . act blindly," in accordance not only with grammar but with Anscombe's translation of *PI* 219, to which this refers. McGinn pointed out that the German is actually "Ich folche der Regel blind," not ". . . blindlings"; she suggests that "Blind" is not so alarming as "blindly," but it does not strike me that way. She credits this observation to Eike von Savigny.

18. Hans-Joachim Schulz, *This hell of stories a Hegelian approach to the novels of Samuel Beckett* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p. 50. Schulz's is the closest I have seen to the analysis of Beckett I am setting out. For Hegel, Cartesian ratiocination is a static exercise that cannot develop. Only with the immersion in being, where the distinction between subject and predicate is effectively erased, can there be growth, advancement. Life, being, for Beckett's heroes, would be the death of a subject that is essentially a faculty of negation, a faculty of saying "I am not that"—Not I. Hence the Unnameable: ". . . they want me to be this, that, to howl, stir, crawl out of here, be born, die . . ." (p. 138).

19. Though this seems to be the view of A. Alvarez, *Beckett* (London: Fontana, 1973).

20. See J. Skorupski, "The Legacy of Modernism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 90/1 (1991): 1–19.

21. Also, both their personal lives involved just the events most likely to bring about personal-identity anxieties: Beckett, the bourgeois Protestant Dubliner, lived most of his life in Paris, writing in French; Wittgenstein more-or-less renounced the fabulously wealthy upper-class Viennese society into which he was born, and lived most of his life abroad, especially in England.

22. Compare E. Husserl, in *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. B. Gibson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), § 80 (pp. 232–34).