SAMUEL BECKETT, THE VISUAL ARTS, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACT SPACES

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David Bennett, B.A.

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David Bennett, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Cóilín Parsons, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the construction of space and its relationship to visual art in Samuel Beckett's short prose. Beginning with the early collection More Pricks than Kicks, Beckett parodies Romantic conventions for portraying landscape and the trope of the wanderer in the stories "Ding-Dong" and "Walking Out." After WWII, Beckett's portrayal of space became increasingly, though never entirely, aligned with the work of abstract painters Bram and Geer van Velde who provide a path beyond traditional modes of representation, as Beckett argues in his essay "The New Object." Additionally, Beckett's portrayal of hesitant movement through a shadowy land in Texts for Nothing intervenes in the aesthetic and political debates that emerged in post-Vichy France. Finally, two of Beckett's later prose works, Imagination Dead Imagine and Lessness, are examined through their relationship to experimental art like conceptualism and chance composition. In these late pieces, the culmination of Beckett's project of creating abstract space is realized in both content and form.
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I explore how Samuel Beckett developed his portrayal of physical spaces from the naturalist Romantic aesthetics of his early short stories and culminating in the strange, closed spaces of his late prose. These closed landscapes, if we can call them that, are often confined and claustrophobic or infinitely vast voids, and even more than the bleak stages of *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, have proven a challenge for readers and critics alike. My aim is to show how the closed space period represents not an abrupt shift, but a development in literary form carefully worked out over the course of many years. Yet my project is not only an exercise in explaining or describing environments. Space, as well as the ostensibly natural world, is imbued with historical, political, and aesthetic stakes too. For the German Romantics like Novalis and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, space and self are participating in the same dynamic process of organic unity they called *Naturphilosophie*; for artists working before, during, and after Vichy France, the portrayal of landscape was loaded with contentious political debates, centering especially around the question of nationalism. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, Beckett was an active participant in these historical and contemporary debates.

For Beckett, politics and aesthetics were interlinked, leading him to reject both traditionalism and nationalism in ways that have hitherto been underexplored. Beckett demonstrates the shortcomings of previous approaches to the portrayal of space and nature, as in his acerbic parody of Romanticism in the early short story collection *More Pricks than Kicks*, but he also forges a new alternative to representation, which borrows from and extends the techniques of the visual arts. This borrowing, articulated most forcefully in essays like “The New Object” that defend the work of painters Bram and Geer van Velde, culminates for Beckett in the abstract, closed spaces of his late short prose like *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Lessness*. 

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Yet this trajectory is never ascendant, transcendental, or teleological. While we are often confronted with Beckett as the poet of nothingness or being, tirelessly investigating the paradoxes and aporias of the self, my thesis reveals a more occasional and hesitant Beckett. In *Texts for Nothing*, for example, we see not a triumphal artist riding high on the success of *The Unnamable*, his acclaimed previous work, but a Beckett wrestling in the mud with his portrayal of space: revising, restating, and going back and forth over changes across multiple drafts. By understanding Beckett’s process and interests through manuscripts and letters, we gain a clearer insight into the problems of figuration that occupied him. Indeed, upon closer examination, much of the darkness that we associate with Beckett’s work appears not as metaphysical pessimism, but as carefully chosen and applied *chiaroscuro*; a word useful for both its association with painting, the techniques of which Beckett learned from, and for the way it describes the formally constructed interplay of light and shadow. Understanding the formal qualities of Beckett’s portrayal of space, such as the careful geometry of *Imagination Dead Imagine* and the chance operations of *Lessness*, are of prime importance for revealing their political and aesthetic implications.

Despite my focus on understanding Beckett’s formal construction of space, my thesis is also concerned with how the human subject appears and interacts with natural and built environments. The figure of the wanderer appears and recurs throughout my thesis, but with an increasingly diminished presence as my chapters progress. Belacqua, the protagonist of *More Pricks than Kicks*, is a parodic imitation of the Romantic wanderer, the subject of paintings like Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Wanderjahre*. As theorized by Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, the wanderer is a supremely egoistic figure who helps nature develop teleologically as an ordered system. Beckett, as revealed by his
letters to Thomas MacGreevy that are discussed in chapter 1, found this sort of anthropomorphism revolting. Thus, in the picaresque *More Pricks than Kicks*, we read in Belacqua an outsize caricature of the propulsive, *telos*-oriented motion that kept the Romantic wanderer perpetually on the move. Yet as Beckett began to develop what I consider to be his affirmative project – the development of abstract space – he jettisons the centrality of the human subject who attempts to remake the world in its own image. In *Texts for Nothing*, the imperative to get on the move remains, but each of the thirteen prose pieces features a wandering figure unable to set out, and a landscape that bears increasingly little relation to the ostensibly natural world. When we reach *Imagination Dead Imagine*, space itself becomes the central guiding protagonist, and the human figures contained in a vault drifting in infinite vastness become only one set of surfaces among many. As I chart the diminution of the wanderer figure over the course of Beckett’s *oeuvre* and the increasing importance of the visual arts as a wellspring of inspiration, new and abstract kinds of narrative, like the stochastically composed world of *Lessness*, begin to emerge without the aid of traditional human subject. As frenetic movement in motion in the early stories gives way to paralysis in *Texts for Nothing* and eventually complete stillness in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Lessness*, the abstraction of Beckettian space concomitantly increases.

In the field of Beckett criticism, my work joins with other authors interested in studying Beckett’s relationship to the visual arts. Tim Lawrence’s *Samuel Beckett’s Critical Aesthetics* and David Lloyd’s *Beckett’s Thing* both help unpack Beckett’s notoriously difficult and enigmatic critical writings on literature and the visual arts. Lawrence’s account, almost archaeological in its precision, demonstrates Beckett’s indebtedness to certain philosophical accounts of aesthetics, especially those of Schopenhauer and Kant. Lloyd, on the other hand,
argues for the uniqueness of Beckett’s aesthetic thought, one distinct from other touchstones of twentieth century aesthetics like Heidegger. I share with Lawrence an emphasis on the genetic components of Beckett’s thought, although I pay more attention to artists, thinkers, and movements (like Romanticism and Vichy-era tricolor school) that Beckett rejected rather than those he drew from. In general, my approach differs from both by viewing the Beckett as artist through the prism of politics, and vice versa; I help demonstrate how what seem like primarily philosophical or artistic debates are in fact deeply political.

By emphasizing the political Beckett, I am in conversation with another strand of Beckett criticism. After the publication of Beckett’s letters and the increasing availability of archival material like letters and manuscripts, the image of Beckett as aloof high modernist has been rendered increasingly untenable. Two recent accounts of the political Beckett have proven especially generative for my thesis: James McNaughton’s *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* and Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination*. McNaughton shows how the very vocabulary of wartime and politics, including Beckett’s critical redeployment of the jargon of totalitarianism, appears in his fiction. By demonstrating the calculated way that Beckett transforms the language of political contexts (such as his travels through Nazi Germany from 1936-37) into the language of fiction, McNaughton offers a valuable way of conceiving of the inextricability of literary form and politics that builds from Theodor Adorno’s insights. While nevertheless paying close attention to Beckett's fiction and drama, Morin revises our approach to considering Beckett as a political individual. Far from an apolitical aesthete, Beckett consistently engaged in political activism. These activities included his extensive involvement in petitions for political causes that began while still a student at Ireland and continued until his death, as well as his translations of the Surrealists, his work with UNESCO, and his one word contribution to
Both Morin and McNaughton are perhaps the closest analogues to my approach in this thesis, but my argument emphasizes the aesthetic and formal qualities of the political even more than the directly referential. Indeed, by looking at the gaps, fissures, and absences in Beckett’s portrayal of space, we can gain a clearer picture of the aesthetic and political importance of Beckett’s developing abstraction. As Cóilín Parsons puts it, “in Beckett's work […] disavowal always means embracing, and abstraction is always haunted by the traces of the concrete.”

In this thesis, I choose to focus on the more overlooked aspects of the Beckett canon – the short prose and essays – to demonstrate Beckett’s move toward abstraction. The short prose has received a relative dearth of attention when compared to Beckett’s plays and novels, and especially early works like *More Pricks than Kicks* that seem to be Joycean juvenilia. Yet even here, at this very early stage, we see both the aesthetic motivation and beginning of Beckett’s long march towards abstraction. In revealing the shortcomings of Romantic approaches to figuration, landscape, and the natural world, the wheels are set in motion for Beckett to develop alternative modes of representation. More than plays or novels, Beckett’s short prose functions as a laboratory for experiments in form, experiments prompted by Beckett’s careful study of then-contemporary artistic developments. These unique texts are worth studying for their strange style and evocative, haunting imagery alone, but they do more than make for engrossing reading: *Texts for Nothing, Imagination Dead Imagine,* and *Lessness* offer new ways of conceiving space and the place of the human subject in fiction. Moreover, they allow us to trace the often careful and tentative development of the principles of abstraction across Beckett’s career, registering in aesthetic form the effects of exile, war, and friendships, both artistic and personal.
Along with emphasizing overlooked texts, my reading practice tends towards what Derek Attridge calls “minimal interpretation”: “To this conception of the work I want to add a preference for minimal over maximal interpretations – a resistance, in other words, to the generation of allegorical or symbolic readings, to searches for hidden meanings, unconscious ideological biases, or ingenious polysemy. If such complications of meaning are to be adduced, I believe it should only be after an attempt has been made to read as literally as possible.” My application of minimal interpretation is not as rigorous or strictly textual as Attridge’s approach, but I do attempt to throughout this thesis to err on the side of description rather than the uncovering of symbolism or, far worse, the imposition of totalizing readings. To totalize would be to overlook the specificity of individual works and the unique circumstances and shifting interests that prompted their composition. In order to do justice to Beckett’s occasional practice, I instead attempt to layer connections to show the development of the abstract spaces in Beckett’s texts. I am interested in affinities, intertexts, and homologies of structures more than definite comparison or paving over the paradoxical formulations so central to Beckett’s literary practice.

Similarly, my use of archival material like manuscripts and letters is intended not as the revelation of a cryptographic key to Beckett’s enigmatic vaults and voids, but in order to productively heighten the ambiguity inherent in their construction. As Paul Sheehan reminds us, “There is something especially alluring about a modernist archive. Because so much modernist writing is cryptic, allusive, enigmatic and opaque, often skirting the outer edges of ‘readability’, the exposition of textual variants […] paratextual documents […] and unfinished, abandoned

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and / or preparatory works, carries with it a promise of elucidation.”⁴ My use of archival materials attempts to resist the urge to view them as an index of unmediated access to truth. While I draw from Beckett's notebooks, letters, and drafts, including work still only housed in physical libraries like Trinity College Dublin, I view these sources as being just as mediated and audience dependent as anything Beckett published during his lifetime.

Chapter 1 explores Beckett’s parody of Romanticism in his 1934 short story collection *More Pricks than Kicks* through its dismantling of key components of Romantic Naturphilosophie, especially its telos of an ordered, self-developing universe in communion with human beings. The manic, propulsive energy of the protagonist of these stories, Belacqua, carries him across pseudo-naturalist Irish environs, wherein he is beset by the contingency of a disordered natural world that consistently remains unintelligible to humans. I interpret Beckett’s figuration of a Romantic but estranged landscape through his letters expressing disgust for the anthropomorphism of Romantic landscape artists, and his valorization of painters like Cézanne who sought to defamiliarize any easy identification between nature and humans. Additionally, I posit the Romantic figure of the wanderer, who ostensibly is developing towards ever-greater unity with nature and internal self-development, to demonstrate how Beckett carefully reworks these tropes in the figure of Belacqua with a critical eye. However, Beckett’s rejection of Romanticism was not total: he valued the “minor” strain of Romanticism exemplified by the work of Caspar David Friedrich, whose landscapes I read as emphasizing the alienation and dislocation of the human subject within the natural world.

Chapter 2 is concerned with prose written almost 20 years after *More Pricks than Kicks*: the enigmatic essay “The New Object” and the thirteen short fiction pieces in *Texts for Nothing*.

After Beckett survived WWII as a member of the French Resistance, his sense of ethical and political responsibility became even more focused from the general dismissal of Romantic aesthetics. In “The New Object,” Beckett defends the abstract artists who compromised the Paris School, and especially the work of Bram and Geer van Velde – a defense with consequences for more than art. Alongside “The New Object,” I unfurl the history of the linkages between politics and art before, during, and after Vichy France, casting Beckett’s defense of the van Veldes in an entirely different, and politically salient light. The rejection of “French School” naturalism and even the style of the Surrealists with whom Beckett was relatively friendly represents a choice against rival nationalisms and for a more internationalist abstraction. Yet putting the lessons learned from the enigmatic “The New Object” into practice is a perhaps impossible endeavor, and Texts for Nothing, composed soon after the essay, demonstrates the difficulties involved in generating new forms of landscape figuration. From multiple drafts filled with revisions and the content of the stories brimming with hesitation and indecision, we see Beckett at work generating nonreferential spaces. Rather than journeying, as in More Pricks than Kicks, the wanderer figures becomes nearly immobile, desiring to move and seeming unable to do so in a landscape rendered increasingly abstract.

Finally, chapter 3 examines the culmination of the processes of abstraction that were begun in Beckett’s work during the interwar and postwar periods. I both draw from and challenge Pascale Casanova’s account of Beckett’s subtractive abstraction in order to demonstrate the many facets of abstract space as it appears in the late prose. Beckett’s human subjects are portrayed now as entirely immobile and barely, if at all, conscious. Rather than a focalizing protagonist, they become compositional tools among others. Indeed, form itself comes to take on paramount importance in the development of literary abstraction. In Imagination Dead
Imagine, abstraction is achieved, perhaps counterintuitively, by being grounded in geometric precision, presenting an analogue to incipient developments in conceptual art. In Lessness, Beckett uses chance operations to compose the remarkable text, generating a stochastic abstraction that not only portrays its strange, alien spaces in content, but *enacts* space by allowing the reader to join in the creation of its world.
CHAPTER 1. WANDERING THROUGH THE ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE

In this chapter, I explore how landscape and nature are figured in the early work of Samuel Beckett. Drawing from his letters and notebooks, I explore the remarkable way that two of Beckett’s early short stories – “Ding-Dong” and “Walking Out” – reject, modify, and parody elements of German Romanticism in particular, and Romantic tropes more generally in their evocation of a “nature” that continually evades anthropomorphic, humanized representation. The character of Belacqua, the ill-fated protagonist of the 1934 collection of short stories More Pricks than Kicks in which the stories I discuss were originally published, is an especially important figure in this discussion. Not only does he navigate the landscape of Ireland, a place for which Beckett felt great personal ambivalence, but he parodically embodies the happy cohabitation of man and nature that was central to the Romantic concept of organic unity. What emerges from Beckett’s work during this period is a pointed critique of the Romantic conception of nature, one that is remarkably negative and pessimistic even as it is deeply funny and frenetic. I explore how Beckett’s skepticism towards the central tenants of the Romantic ideological apparatus known as nature is woven through two deeply interlinked threads: landscape painting and German Naturphilosophie, particularly as articulated through Friedrich Schelling and Novalis. I argue, both in this and subsequent chapters, that interactions with painting and philosophy (often as philosophical critique rather than affirmation) also structure much of Beckett’s approach to composing literature. Beckett’s short prose often functions as a sort of testing ground for deploying, experimenting with, and often discarding certain techniques and methods of figuration.5 In order to show the layering of painting, Naturphilosophie, and literary concerns, this chapter makes frequent use of Beckett’s archival materials, including notebooks.

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5 One of the early articulations of this now-commonplace claim was by Robert Cochran in his 1991 A Study of the Short Fiction.
and letters, to both illustrate and examine his practical and theoretical aesthetic concerns with regards to Romanticism. Rather than serving as a resolution to questions raised by Beckett’s fiction, Beckett’s letters and notebooks instead raise challenging and difficult questions for painting, literature, and the limits of representation generally. My hope is that the amplification of ambiguity will result in a more complex, rich, and multifaceted investigation into an underexplored area of Beckett scholarship.

Yet my analysis in this chapter also has implications beyond the occasionally hermetic and inward-looking world of Beckett studies. Beckett himself was a part of a much larger trend in world literature that, for several varying and even conflicting reasons but often under the banner of modernism, rejected some or all of its Romantic inheritance. However, the mechanisms of this disidentification are often murky if given as a pronouncement rather than carefully demonstrated. It is not enough to gesture at the obvious formal differences of Beckett’s oeuvre to English or German Romantic literary production in order to demonstrate a schism; one could place Beckett as the inheritor of a darker and more melancholic Romantic tradition, like that of Hölderlin, Keats, or Georg Büchner’s Lenz. What I would like to demonstrate instead, through both close readings and the assemblage of archival materials, is the logic of questioning core assumptions of Romantic figuration that unites Beckett’s fiction from his earliest to last publications and places him conversation with a less triumphal and more reflexively self-critical

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6 Beckett’s letters were often quite carefully curated. James McNaughton’s Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath dedicates an important chapter to Beckett’s personal writing while in Nazi Germany, noting that his diaries “disclose a growing awareness that aesthetic decisions engage the narrative challenges presented by shoddy histories and ideological propaganda” (60-61).

7 For example, the “make it new” credos of various movements like Dada, Surrealism, and Futurism.

8 See, for example, Tine Koch’s 2010 article “Searching for the Blue Flower: Friedrich Schlegel’s and Samuel Beckett’s ‘Unending Pursuit’ of ‘Infinite Fulfilment.’ Less all-encompassing alignments (most notably in the Romanticism edition of Samuel Beckett Today) have been present since at least Robert Cochran’s 1991 A Study of the Short Fiction, in which he remarks: “Romantic? Samuel Beckett? The term is too large, perhaps, too loaded with varied and even contradictory meanings. But one could do worse” (xiii).
strain of Romanticism, best exemplified by the work of Caspar David Friedrich. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate the evolution of Beckett’s post-Romantic framework for fiction, one that parallels developments in the art world that lead increasingly to abstraction.

While Beckett’s work is peppered with oblique references to Romanticism, archival resources offer a more cohesive and sustained insight into his research into German Romanticism. In his biography of Beckett, James Knowlson recounts a curious anecdote about Beckett’s sojourn in Germany from 1936-1937: "After a stay in Berlin that had to be extended because of illness […] he stopped off in Weimar to take detailed notes on the houses of Goethe and Schiller."

While Beckett’s detailed study of the visual arts is widely known, Beckett’s interest in studying the houses of the *Sturm und Drang* authors is perhaps an even more apt metaphor for the almost scientific exactitude of his interest in the architectonics of Romanticism. In a study of Beckett’s relationship to Romanticism in the 1930s, Mark Nixon points out that Beckett “took extensive notes on German Romantic thinkers from Wilhelm Windelband’s *A History of German Philosophy*, on German Romantic writers and their texts from J.G. Robertson’s *History of German Literature* in Spring 1934.”

Despite what the copiousness of his notes might suggest, Beckett’s relationship with Romanticism was a great deal more fraught than this rather distanced overview suggests. Beckett’s philosophical manuscripts from this period, housed in the Manuscripts Library of Trinity College Dublin, are indeed mostly affectively neutral summaries and quotes of the ideas of the thinkers he

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9 From the “classico-romantic” scene that closes the early story “Draff” to the “night that Kaspar David Friedrich loved” in *Malone Dies* to the “stress of that storm” (*Sturm und Drang*) of “Imagination Dead Imagine.”

10 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* (Grove Press, 2004), 273.

11 Beckett’s friendship with the painter Jack B. Yeats is perhaps his most well-known artistic appreciation. For a detailed study of Yeats’s influence on Beckett’s writing, see the first chapter of David Lloyd’s *Beckett’s Thing*.

encounters, from the pre-Socratics to the late 19th century. Yet, late in the manuscript, he does reveal some hints of dissatisfaction in an extended discussion of Schelling, one of the primary theoretical forces behind early German Romanticism. Beckett summarizes Schelling’s work as “Nature as an objective System of Reason” with a “final goal,” and emphasizes that Schelling conceived of “Nature as organic unity.” But to this prototypical Romantic notion, Beckett contrasts the resurgent force in the 19th century of “mechanical explanation[s],” which makes Naturphilosophie seem like “a bit of teleological excess.”

The excesses of Romanticism, its almost totalitarian conjugation of all life under a dominant, “objective” system of reason, offers a telling foreshadowing of Beckett’s method in “Ding-Dong” and “Walking Out.” In both stories, Beckett offers a vision of nature and a cosmos devoid of plan, foregrounding the vagaries of chance and contingency rather than “final goals.” Beckett found grounds to object to the Romantic framing of nature and space in both German philosophy and art. Mark Nixon remarks that “On the whole [Beckett] thought that German Romantic painters were hopelessly mired in sentimentality, and in his diary notes how he regarded their work ‘with loathing.’” Writers fared little better, as Nixon points out the “mocking tone voiced through the use of an excessively sentimental strand of German romanticism in Dream,” a reference to Beckett’s unpublished first novel Dreams of Fair to Middling Women, portions of which would eventually be reformed into the collection More Pricks than Kicks. Yet Beckett’s objections to Romanticism went far beyond rejections of maudlin sentiment. What Beckett found particularly repugnant in the Romantic worldview, what

13 Matthew Feldman and Steven Matthews are the editors of Samuel Beckett’s Philosophy Notes, due in 2020 from Oxford University Press.
15 Ibid.
he dwelled on at length during the 1930s in letters to his correspondent Thomas MacGreevy, was
the Romantic conception of nature as object of aesthetic representation, especially in landscape
painting. This “loathing” can be seen in a letter to MacGreevy where he describes the landscapes
of the English Romantic artist John Constable as containing a vision of nature that “shelters or
threatens or serves or destroys, his nature is really infected with ‘spirit,’ ultimately as humanised
& romantic as Turner's was & Claude's was & Cézanne’s was not.”

Beckett’s verbs here – sheltering, threatening, serving, destroying – are the shadows of an unnamed subject: the
perceiving human, for whom nature can only serve as its own egotistical reflection, as an object
that exists for use. Beckett’s disdain for Constable, JMW Turner, and Claude Lorraine is set off
by his relative enthusiasm for Paul Cézanne, whose nature is not “humanised & romantic.” In
another letter to MacGreevy, sent in 1934, the same year in which More Pricks than Kicks was
published, Beckett develops his admiration for Cézanne:

Cézanne seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a
strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever.
[…] How far Cézanne had moved from the snapshot puerilities of Manet & Cie
when he could understand the dynamic intrusion to be himself & so landscape to
be something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of
atoms, not so much as ruffled by the kind attentions of the Reliability Joneses.

What Beckett valued in Cézanne’s figuration of the landscape was something quite distinct from
the anthropomorphizing gaze of Romantic art: Cézanne’s brushstrokes render the Provençal
countryside and mountain ranges as something entirely removed from the projection of human

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passions and emotions. The “incommensurability” of landscape with “all human expressions whatsoever” is a powerful severing of the pathetic fallacy that Beckett saw as underlying Romantic artistic expression, the rejection of what Chris Ackerley describes as the “unqualified relationship between the perceiving subject and that which is perceived; a distrust which [questions] knowledge of the self as mediated through representation.” While this mistrust of “perceiving subject and that which is perceived” has important ramifications for a host of philosophical, ethical, and political issues, my interest for now is in reference to two questions: first, can Beckett’s theoretical critiques of Romantic figuration of nature be read in literary works like *More Pricks than Kicks*; and second, is there anything to be salvaged from Romanticism from Beckett’s account?

I will begin by exploring the immediate context of Beckett’s works in the 1930s, where I believe that Beckett’s parody of Romanticism in general and Romantic visions of nature in particular can be best examined through his use of the wanderer, a staple trope of German Romantic literature. The richly polyvalent wanderer figure appears throughout *More Pricks than Kicks*, but two stories in particular – “Ding-Dong” and “Walking Out” – offer an especially lucid account of how Beckett inverts or negates Romantic arguments about the intertwining of wandering and nature into a freewheeling, parodic literature of estrangement between humans and the nature they appear to be allied with. Finally, I will examine the limitations of Beckett’s critique of Romanticism by turning to the landscape art of Caspar David Friedrich.

In the German Romantic tradition that Beckett carefully studied, the figure of the wanderer was an image central to aesthetic and moral philosophy (which was in many respects the same for thinkers like Novalis and Schelling), as well as literature and the visual arts, a figure

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deeply related to the concept of *Naturphilosophie* that underlined the Romantic project.

Frederick Beiser describes the organic conception of nature (in contrast to the mechanistic one of, say, Descartes, for which Beckett had a greater affinity) espoused by the Romantics along the following lines:

> Living force first [manifests] itself in the most simple forms of matter; it then passes through the more complex minerals, vegetables, and animals; and finally it ends with the most sophisticated forms of life […] Such self-consciousness is nothing less than the highest organization and development of all the powers of nature. This means that the artist’s or philosopher’s awareness of nature is also nature coming to its self-awareness through them.21

Romantic *Naturphilosophie* thus creates both a hierarchical schema, one with “the most sophisticated forms of life” or humans at the top, and a unifying one: humans are inextricably bound up in nature, as the same animating force active in them is also active, at least on some level, in rocks and trees. The artist who paints a tree is thus helping nature, of which she is part, come to “self-awareness” of the unified state of human beings and the natural world: everything is partaking in the same “living force.” In much the same way, literature (especially in the form of the *Bildungsroman*) creates a developmental narrative, one culminating teleologically in greater unity between human beings and nature. The wanderer figure as the literary means of representing *Naturphilosophie* thus becomes a powerful metaphor for an entire cosmology. As Andrew Cusack puts it:

> In the hands of the Romantics, the motif of the wanderer in literary and visual artworks lends expression to a particular kind of teleological thinking that

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originates with the new philosophy of nature. [...] this philosophy assumes that both nature and the self develop in accordance with their own internal logic, and that these processes are intimately connected - nature's progress toward an ever more ordered state being matched by man's progress in knowledge. Anticipated is a point at which the laws of nature become transparent to man. This narrative of development in accordance with an internal principle can be regarded as the foundational myth of Romantic science. It formed the basis of the assumption that both man and nature are endowed with mind (Schelling’s Weltseele), out of which grew the idea of the intelligibility of nature as cosmos, as an ordered system. 22

The wanderer participates in two sorts of development: internal and self-directed, as in the traditional Bildungsroman, and external and nature-oriented: the understanding of nature “as an ordered system,” one that is intelligible, explicable, and culminating teleologically in a utopia of transparency, where the division between self and outside nature has been fully overcome. In Beckett’s parodic early fiction, he uses the teleological motion of directed wandering in both “Ding-Dong” and “Walking Out” to skewer the Romantic view of nature by deploying the tropes of the wanderer figure, but stretching its proportions to comedic excess and explicitly severing the connection between human beings and the natural world with which they seek to identify.

Few descriptions of the hapless protagonist of More Pricks than Kicks, Belacqua Shuah, can resist describing his relentless predilection for motion. Flitting from romantic encounter to encounter, marriage to marriage, and traipsing about both the city of Dublin and its countryside, Belacqua is the inverted double of his literary forebearer, the Belacqua of Dante’s Purgatorio who lies motionless under a rock, trapped by indolence between heaven and hell. While for

22 Andrew Cusack, The Wanderer in Nineteenth-Century German Literature: Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism (Camden House, 2008), 84.
Dante this in-between space is purgatory, for Beckett it is Ireland. In perhaps the most sustained engagement with Belacqua’s relentless movement, Paul Ardoin points out the comedic potential of the character according to Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter: “Bergson sees in comedy ‘some-thing mechanical encrusted on the living’, and Belacqua becomes a sort of perpetual motion mechanism, an –ism encrusted on an idea.” While Ardoin uses Belacqua’s “perpetual motion” to critique Deleuze’s systematized reading of Beckett, I am interested in exploring how what Ardoin later calls Belacqua’s “paralysis in motion” interacts with the teleological motion of the wanderer figure from Romanticism. In the almost plotless “Ding-Dong,” Belacqua loafs about Dublin, observes homeless people and “proletarians” going about their day, before finally stopping at a pub where he has an awkward encounter with a woman hawking unusual wares – seats in heaven. “Ding-Dong” is also one of the few stories in More Pricks than Kicks that is not primarily focalized through Belacqua. In the first half of the story, the narrator describes how his “sometime friend Belacqua” in “last phase of his solipsism” believes that “the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place” (31) and come back “transfigured and transformed” (32), only to begin the cycle again. Belacqua’s wandering is not determined by either location or destination: “as for sites, one was as good as another, because they all disappeared as soon as he came to rest in them” (31). Belacqua’s overwhelming egoism renders each “site” utterly homogenous: space becomes, in Belacqua’s

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23 Many authors have grappled with Beckett’s connection to Ireland, perhaps most comprehensively in the Seán Kennedy edited volume Beckett and Ireland. While living in London circa 1934, Beckett wrote to MacGreevy what reads like a summary of his ambivalent thoughts about Ireland: “Sometimes I long for those mountains and fields, which I know so well, and which create a completely different calm from the one associated with this coarse English landscape. If only Dublin were unfamiliar, then it would be pleasure to settle somewhere nearby” (Collected Letters vol. 1, 205).


solipsistic conception, only ever a reflection of him.\(^{27}\) It is this very conception, the “anthropomorphic insolence” that Chris Ackerley identifies, that Beckett also attacks in Romantic landscape painting.\(^{28}\) The narrator further elaborates upon Belacqua’s homogenized conception of space: “his contrivance did not proceed from any source of discrimination between different points in space, since he returned directly [...] to his point of departure” (32). Boomeranging from indistinct point A to B and back to A, Belacqua’s recursive wandering resembles, as if from a remove, the concept of Wanderbericht in German Romanticism, which Cusack describes as “an account of an actual journey undertaken on foot” or, literally, a wandering report.\(^{29}\) Cusack describes how for “the bourgeois wanderer embarked on a pedestrian tour, the path is naturally of great importance, as are the surroundings.”\(^{30}\) Beckett subverts readerly expectations: rather than stylized or descriptive accounts of the spaces that Belacqua walks through, his protagonist’s undifferentiated wandering is severed from the practice of noticing or observing space, or even finding “grounds for his favoring one direction rather than another” (33). If the Romantics were convinced, as Cusack puts it, that “the practice of wandering is essential to the maintenance of psychic health,” Belacqua’s nomadism is described as “an anxiety to keep on the move” and “distress at finding himself brought to a standstill” (35), undoing any salutary benefits inherent in the wandering.\(^{31}\)

My aim here in counterposing Romantic wanderer tropes and Beckett’s parodic inversion of them in More Pricks than Kicks is not simply an exercise in juxtaposition; rather, I think it

\(^{27}\) Beckett’s notebook on German philosophy remark that Schelling’s concept of the organic unity of nature is “the ego in the process of becoming.” Manuscript “Samuel Beckett reading notes,” by Samuel Beckett, c.1926-1936, MS 10967, page 246, Manuscripts & Archives Library, Trinity College Dublin.


\(^{29}\) Andrew Cusack, The Wanderer in Nineteenth-Century German Literature: Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism (Camden House, 2008), 120.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 121.
strikes at the heart of the distinction between Beckett’s still-tentative reworking of nature and the teleological conception of his Romantic inheritance. The manic energy that propels “Ding-Dong” and other stories in the collection is not only a result of Beckett’s dense allusions and esoteric diction: instead, it turns the “development in accordance to an internal principle” that Cusack notes as the hallmark of Romantic science on its head. Belacqua’s “internal principle” is instead a directionless peripeteia through a series of equivalent points, a distorted, egoist mirror of the Romantic wanderer. The problem of movement pertains to more than Belacqua as subject: Beckett’s figuration of space stands in stark contrast to the natural world of Romantic thought, one developing towards self-consciousness. The ending of “Ding-Dong” reflects a parodic understanding of this self-organizing idea. After wandering around Dublin, Belacqua sits at a bar “anxious to get on the move and quite as hard put to it to do so” (36) and encounters a hatless “gentlewoman of the people” (37) who solicits him to buy “seats in heaven […] tuppence apiece” (38). After Belacqua declines her offer, she begins to spin her arm and declare that “Heaven goes round […] and round and round and round and round and round” (38). A later attempt by Belacqua to question the veracity of her wares is rebuffed with another round of “Heaven goes rowan an’ rowan” (39). In this comedic scene, Belacqua’s own purposeless wandering is reflected in a cosmos that is equally undirected, going “round” endlessly on its axes. Echoing Beckett’s comments on Cézanne’s “unintelligible arrangement of atoms,” “Ding-Dong” contrasts the intelligible Romantic natural order with a world of undirected movement where the disappearance of the specificity of place on a local level is reflected in an infinite orbiting on a cosmic one that never comes to rest.

Much like Belacqua himself, More Pricks than Kicks keeps on the move. The narrative arc begun in “Ding-Dong” finds a partial culmination in the bitterly ironic story “Walking Out,”
where Belacqua’s anxiety about motionlessness finds an unlikely resolution in the very stasis he attempts to avoid. In the letter to MacGreevy in which Beckett contrasts Cézanne to other “humanised & romantic” landscape painters, he cites one specific image to make his point: Jacob van Ruisdael’s *Forest Scene* (fig. 1), where the figure of a couple enters an inviting and idyllic woodland locale. Beckett puts the retreat of nature as an object of representation in historical terms, writing about Ruisdael’s picture that: “there is no entrance anymore nor any commerce with the forest, its dimensions are its secret & it has no communications to make.”32 Nature, if it once existed, has long since ceased to be intelligible in anthropomorphized terms to human beings, and both painterly and literary representations must reckon with the receding landscape. It is in a similarly uncommunicative and secretive forest, one where misunderstanding and occluded perceptions stand in contrast to the reverie of the pastoral scene, that the action (or inaction) of “Walking Out” takes place. Instead of the idyllic domesticity in Ruisdael’s painting, Belacqua is now unhappily betrothed to a woman named Lucy, and makes frequent sojourns to the woods ostensibly for “sursum corda” or spiritualized “private experiences” (98) of the sort that wandering, under the directed Romantic schema, was supposed to provide. His real reason, as Lucy suspects, is far more voyeuristic. When Lucy encounters him in the woods while she is riding a small horse, they agree to take two separate trails to meet at a gate that stands at the entrance to the forest, but mishaps abound. Belacqua spies on a German girl and her male lover, the latter of whom chases and beats him, and Lucy, riding atop her horse on a road, is struck by an unseen automobile and becomes handicapped. As with “Ding-Dong,” motion – or in this case, its abrupt curtailment – is of central importance. John Pilling describes “Walking Out” as a story in which “Forward movement has been stalled, or wished away, in a trajectory which is all ‘out’

Indeed, while the Belacqua of “Ding-Dong,” with his overwhelming desire for ceaseless motion, is present in “Walking Out” (much to the chagrin of Lucy), the story parodies the purposive motion of the pastoral or the Wanderjahr modes with which Beckett was familiar. Beckett begins the story with a description of the woods that would not seem out of place in any bucolic scene: “the larks were singing, the hedges were breaking, the sun was shining, the sky was Mary’s cloak, the daisies were there, everything was in order” (93). The Romantic cosmology that is intact from the outset of the story, one in which “everything was in order,” becomes tragicomically subverted within the woods, whose “secret dimensions” spell disaster for human denizens operating under the illusion of nature’s intelligibility. Indeed, moments before Lucy is struck by an automobile, the narrator informs us that “She saw nothing of the wood, the root of all the mischief that loomed directly at some little distance before her, its outposts of timber serried enough to make a palisade, but not so closely as to screen the secret things beyond them” (100). Not only are the “secret things” the fateful car that Lucy does not see, but they are also something fundamental to the structure of nature, something that is estranged from the observing humans who think themselves one with it. Beckett here uses the “secret things” concealed by the woods to counterpose a mechanical version of nature, one derived partly from Descartes, to the organic nature stressing holism and unity espoused by Schelling and other Romantics. Beiser sets up the distinction nicely: “according to the mechanistic tradition, nature consists in a plurality of independent things […] one body acts on another by impact - by striking against another body and changing its position.”

33 John Pilling, In a Strait of Two Wills: More Pricks than Kicks (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 46.
34 Especially with that paradigmatic example of the Wanderjahr, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship. Mark Nixon notes that “Beckett’s engagement with Goethe in the 1930s was profound; in all of Beckett's notebooks of the thirties, no literary writer, German or otherwise, is accorded as much space” (Beckett’s German Diaries 65).
35 Frederick Beiser, The Romantic Imperative The Concept of Early German Romanticism (Harvard University Press, 2006), 85.
stages the mechanistic drama of nature quite literally, with the impact of the automobile on Lucy’s horse being allowed by the very woods that the Romantics and pastoralists had seen as a shelter and nurture for human minds, souls, and bodies.

Neither does Belacqua emerge from secretive woods unscathed. After waiting for Lucy to emerge, he goes into the forest and spots a German girl and the “Tanzherr,” a character that seems to epitomize a warmongering Germanicism more akin with Otto von Bismarck than Schlegel. Rather than voyeuristically peeping, however, as is his apparently usual habit, Belacqua finds himself “staring vacantly into the shadows, alive to nothing but the weight and darkness and silence of the wood bearing down on top of him” (102). In this occluded natural scene, a journey through the woods leads not to knowledge of self or world, but to a brutal misunderstanding as the incensed Tanzherr spots Belacqua, chases him, and savagely beats him with a stick. Pastoral gives way to the miserable cruelties of a Hobbesian state of nature, one where the woods hide violence rather than anything resembling Ruisdael’s idyll. Belacqua is left near unconscious and unable to “understand how he reached home crawling rather than climbing over the various hedges and ditches” (103). Not only does this scene prefigure the mode of locomotion Beckett employs in his postwar fiction, such as the endlessly crawling narrator of *How It Is*, but its darkly comic undoing of the wanderer trope strikes at the heart of literary Romanticism.

Indeed, it is worth here pausing to recall the figure of the wanderer, and take stock of where “Walking Out” has left that figure, before finally turning to the story’s ending and seeing what Beckett leaves us with after undermining the teleological, developmental logic of Romantic nature’s unending motion. Cusack, writing about the wanderer in 19th century German literature, describes two key factors that made it such an attractive and omnipresent figure:
The first was the symbolism of walking itself, which in its negative aspect - the refusal of coach travel - implied a critical stance toward civilization [...] the upright gait of the pedestrian had come to stand for the project of self-emancipation and independent thought itself.36

The “critical stance toward civilization” that the Romantics deployed in their preference for walking is ironized by the intrusion of technological civilization into the pastoral in the form of the automobile that severely injures Lucy; the very woods themselves provide cover for the vehicle. Moreover, the “upright gait of the pedestrian” is almost comically subverted by Belacqua crawling home “over the various hedges and ditches,” belying any notion of self-emancipation that could come from walking. And yet what are we to make of the story’s remarkable ending? The narrator concludes with the following passage: “now [Belacqua] is happily married to Lucy [...] They sit up at all hours playing the gramophone, An die Musik is a great favorite with both of them, he finds in her big eyes better worlds than this, they never allude to the old days when she had hopes of a place in the sun” (103). The ceaseless motion that carried Belacqua from “Ding-Dong” to “Walking Out” finds a temporary reprieve as both he and Lucy spend their days indoors, listening ironically to Schubert, the Romantic composer par excellence. The outside, natural world is replaced with “better worlds” of Lucy’s eyes, who now does not have any dream of finding a “place in the sun,” under the sign of a universe that is structured according to the self-governing and self-developing principles of Romantic Naturphilosophie. If, as Jerome McGann puts it, the goal of Wordsworth in poems like “Tintern Abbey” was to “‘see into the life of things’ to penetrate the surface of a landscape to reach its indestructible heart and meaning,” the landscape that Beckett discovers in the pastoral woods

recedes from his subject’s grasp, and his wandering Belacqua finds no meaning from his wandering but a preference for remaining inert and separate from a fundamentally impenetrable nature whose logic and rules no longer have the potential of being transparent to human beings.37

This still life figuration of the cohabitating Belacqua and Lucy, at once bracingly ironic and strangely touching, is a microcosm of the closed spaces of Beckett’s later prose, where “better worlds” are characterized precisely by their stasis, immobility, and lack of contact with any “outside.”

Yet it is still difficult, both for us as readers and even for Beckett as a writer, to know where to go after emerging from Belacqua’s inscrutable woods, which parody both Romantic conventions and James Joyce’s stories.38 In order to gain some perspective (and elevation), I’d like to consider a Romantic visual artist who Beckett did not regard “with loathing”: Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich’s work in some ways epitomizes Romantic thought and tropes, in the sense that his canvases are filled with both wanderers and the grandeur of the natural world, but at the same time stands apart from them, offering a more ambivalent and self-critical view of the Romantic project.39 In particular, Friedrich’s immanent critique points beyond the Messianism of the Romantic system’s potential to change the world.40 Two paintings in particular serve to illustrate what we might refer to, following Beckett himself, as Friedrich’s “minor key” Romanticism. The first is the subdued Two Men Contemplating the Moon (c.1819-20, fig. 2), and

38 John Pilling has pointed out that several in stories in the collection parody James Joyce, especially “Yellow” and “A Wet Night,” the latter of which contains a specific “pastiche of the last paragraph of ‘The Dead’” (*In a Strait of Two Wills* 93).
40 Beiser describes the end goal of organic nature in explicitly Messianic and redemptive terms: “its ultimate aim was to romanticize the world itself, so that the individual, society, and the state would become works of art” (*The Romantic Ideology* 19).
the second is the famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818, fig. 3). Two Men, alongside Jack B. Yeats’s *Two Travellers* (c. 1942) has been identified as a source of inspiration for *Waiting for Godot* due to Beckett’s later comments. While in Germany during his 1936-1937 sojourn, he sent the following letter to MacGreevy after seeing “Two Men” in an art gallery:

“Pleasant predilection for 2 tiny languid men in his [Caspar David Friedrich’s] landscapes, as in the little moon landscape, that is the only kind of romantic still tolerable, the bémolisé [minor key].”

The painting depicts two figures, one leaning on the other, as they observe the moon at the center of the canvas. While relatively small compared to the two men, the dim light of the moon seems to overwhelm both the spectators and the Gothic trees and rocks that make up the foreground. Alice Kuzniar helps us make sense of the strange centrality of the moon in her study of the temporal elements of Friedrich’s paintings: “If focus is drawn to a single element in a painting [...] then this object may be imputed special, hieroglyphic significance. The viewer, however, is caught in a double bind: the lonely image both promises unique import and at the same time its decontextualization inhibits appointing it any informed meaning.” From this perspective, and in the context of our earlier discussions regarding landscape painting, it becomes easier to see what Beckett valued in the “minor key.” The moon, at once a central and spectral sight, remains “decontextualized” in the way Kuzniar describes, alienated from any key.

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41 As James Knowlson puts it: “As they [Ruby Cohn and Samuel Beckett] were looking at Friedrich’s painting *Mann und Frau den Mond betrachtend (Man and Woman Observing the Moon)* of 1824, Beckett announced unequivocally: ‘This was the source of *Waiting for Godot*, you know’” ([Damned to Fame](#)) 418). Based on his earlier notebooks and as Damian Love suggests, Beckett likely confused this nearly identical painting with “Two Men Contemplating the Moon.” Damian Love, “Beckett and the Romantik: The Art of Caspar David Friedrich,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 95.


to deciphering the “hieroglyph” on a semiotic level, and at an impossible remove from the “tiny languid men.” Beckett’s remarks in this letter are important because they demonstrate that his rejection of Romanticism was not totalizing or prejudiced against sentiment. Instead, much “major key” Romanticism was a blusteringly grandiose account of both art and reality. Beckett couches his enthusiasm for the “minor key” in a muted stylistic register, as “predilection” and tolerability, in a manner that emphasizes the qualities Beckett found to be a praiseworthy in Two Men. For Beckett, frustrated desire and the failure to cohere is a more honest stance than the congratulatory intermingling of human and nonhuman that marks the final goal of Romanticism’s organic nature. The deracinated symbolism of the painting, drawing our eye to constituent parts without ever cohering into an intelligible whole, helps form a partial model for Beckett’s later “minor key” experiments in short prose.

On the other hand, a seemingly sure-fire example of “major key” Romanticism is Friedrich’s Wanderer above the Sea of Fog. An example of the Rückenfigur technique that Friedrich popularized, the focus in this scene, in contrast to Two Men, is the human subject perched on a cliff’s edge with his back turned to the viewer, gazing out on a mountain scene. Kuzniar notes that throughout his oeuvre Friedrich portrays “vacancies and boundaries to be overcome or that which prevents closure; his barriers, inhibiting the making of connections, betoken indefinite referential postponement.” Here, it is the horizon itself that forms the “boundary to be overcome,” the line in the distance to which the wanderer will, if the rocky landscape is any indication, be forced to struggle towards. Wanderer explicitly employs the wanderer figure developed at length earlier, and does so paradigmatically, to an even greater

44 Ibid, 87.
extent than literature like Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.

Yet the wanderer in Friedrich is not deployed as either conquistador or surveyor. As John Lewis Gaddis reads it, “The impression [Wanderer above the Sea of Fog] leaves is contradictory, suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of an individual within it.” Yet sublimity and awe are not contradictory with mastery; indeed, they are in some ways predicated on it. The wanderer figure, magisterially encountering the telos of development and the uncertainty of final ends, may not know through which winding paths his journey may lead, but his gaze is firmly fixed on the horizon, the theoretical endpoint of *Bildung*. Indeed, the fog which obscures the realities of the landscape for Friedrich’s wanderer (and the winding, looping, perhaps endlessly circular paths that may be contained within it) enacts the humanizing tendency of Ruisdael’s blithe forests on both a more sublime and self-reflexively critical level. At once concealing and fungible, fog renders the ostensibly natural world the raw material for the all-consuming subject of Romanticism. Yet, and here is the self-critical move, Friedrich’s occluded landscape also reflects the sort of unknowability and incommensurability that Beckett identifies with Cézanne. What Friedrich depicts is the paradoxical tension that upholds the Romantic landscape: it is highly subjective while at the same time attempting to be mimetic. Kuzniar offers us a formulation through which to understand this tension: “on the one hand, landscape painting uses empirical nature as a covering or veil which it then removes to reveal the invisible world. On the other hand, this revelation is self-cancelling, for all intuition of the idea depends on the subject.”

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45 Indeed, as John Lewis Gaddis points out, it is no accident that Paul Johnson (and HarperCollins) selected Friedrich’s *Wanderer* as the cover for *The Birth of the Modern*. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

46 Ibid, 1.

the landscape intelligible exists. It is precisely this unimaginable subject position that Beckett refers to when he describes in his letter to MacGreevy the “only kind of romantic still tolerable.” The word “still” points to the historical decay of both the comprehending/creating subject and the breakdown of the object to be represented, a breakdown Beckett refers to explicitly in pieces like “Recent Irish Poetry.” The world of organic unity longed for by the Romantics is now shrouded by fog, and it is this landscape over which the wanderer gazes in Friedrich’s painting.

As I will more fully explore in the next chapter, Beckett uses the language of “fog” and “mist” on his essay “The New Object” to describe the necessary parameters for modern figuration. Just as the dislocation of the wanderer in Friedrich’s painting from a stable and identifiable landscape is a powerful metaphor for modernity, the fog that will come to thoroughly envelop the mastering subject is a historical phenomenon, one engendered by the twentieth century’s world wars and genocides.

Friedrich’s paintings, situated as they are within the German tradition, are at once a complex denial and acceptance of the Romantic conceptions of nature. Beckett, far more adamant about his denial, engages in a deeply acerbic parody of those very tropes in More Pricks than Kicks. Yet, the parodic nature of the collection – witty and entertaining though it may be – is only the satirical negation of the Romantic nature-object in content, leaving its equally problematic formal structure intact. The trajectory of Beckett’s work after WWII and his time in the French Resistance is an attempt to imagine alternatives, to construct an overcoming of the Romantic impasse in both form and content. This trajectory is not quite what Pascale Casanova provocatively claims is a “progressive detachment from any external determination,” an

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48 Beckett describes this breakdown as “the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again, namely the breakdown of the object, whether current, historical, mythical or spook.” Samuel Beckett, Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment (Grove Press, 1984), 57.
argument that, while generative, reinscribes in Beckett’s *oeuvre* a teleology that his postwar work resists; but the iterative and experimental creation of new forms of art, new worlds, that are not bound by the prison of endless Romantic motion. Paradoxically, this freedom finds its fulfilment in stories that are motionless and seem hermetically sealed, the closed space fiction of the 1960s. If we are to take Emilie Morin’s argument that “the political order to which [Beckett’s characters] belong […] materialises precisely as they struggle through ruins, mud, deserted landscapes, empty rooms, and other residues of a historical horror escaping categorisation” seriously, then we must also understand how these “ruins” and “empty rooms” came to be figured both aesthetically and historically, as a move away from the mimesis of “nature” (either parodically or Romantically) and toward abstraction. But this move occurs only after the world-historical upheaval that occurred between the publication in 1934 of *More Pricks than Kicks* and 1948, when Beckett published “The New Object.”

Figure 1. Jacob van Ruisdael, *Forest Scene*. c. 1655, oil on canvas, 105.5 x 123.4 cm (41 9/16 x 48 9/16 in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, [https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1219.html](https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1219.html)
Figure 2. Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*. c. 1825-30, oil on canvas, 34.9 x 43.8 cm (13 3/4 x 17 1/4 in.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2000.51/
Figure 3. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. c. 1817, oil on canvas, 94.8 × 74.8 cm (37 3/10 × 29 2/5 in.), Alte Nationalgalerie, Germany, [https://www.artsy.net/artwork/caspar-david-friedrich-wanderer-above-the-sea-of-fog](https://www.artsy.net/artwork/caspar-david-friedrich-wanderer-above-the-sea-of-fog)
CHAPTER 2. HESITATION, NEW OBJECTS, AND VICHY FRANCE

After WWII, the physical setting of Beckett’s fiction shifts from the ambivalent Ireland of *More Pricks than Kicks* to what Patrick Bixby calls the “no man’s land” of Beckett’s later plays, novels, and short stories.51 The rich potentialities contained in the cloud of unknowing that David Caspar Friedrich painted in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818) coalesce after the end of WWII into the smoke of bombings and the mushroom cloud. And yet, amidst a world in pieces and a France reckoning with collaboration, Beckett deploys the image of fog and mist to help further new, increasingly abstract methods of literary representation. In *Texts for Nothing* 1, it is “the mist that blotted out everything, valleys, loughs, plain and sea.”52 In “The New Object,” an essay written in 1949, mist is that which, for the painter, impedes the direct representation of objects. As a meteorological phenomenon, mist is an impediment to human vision: a veil, another word that Beckett will use to memorable effect in “The New Object.”53 These terms, veil and mist, coexist in “The New Object” as the French word *empêchement*, which translates literally to impediment or obstacle. In a paradoxical (but strangely logical) formulation, Beckett uses the concept of *empêchement* to expand the theoretical possibilities of painting and, as I argue, fiction as well. By drawing attention to the mutual imbrication of art, history, and politics, I demonstrate how our understanding of Beckett’s enigmatic and difficult essay is enriched by accounting for its postwar context. As David Lloyd points out: “post-war French culture was preoccupied with the question of how to reconstruct a civilisation on the

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53 Beckett is not the first to conceive of a “veil” in relation to painting. Alice Kuzniar notes that for the Romantics “landscape painting thus does not so much reproduce nature as it veils its natural referent, alerting its viewer to its substitutional role” (359). Kuzniar also notes that Schelling describes landscape painting as a “veil” (or “Hülle”) because of the influence of painterly techniques like the portrayal of light: “light is the condition of an optical perception, but in its various shades it also modifies our perception. Light both reveals and cloaks the objects it falls upon” (363). Alice Kuzniar, “The Vanishing Canvas: Notes on German Romantic Landscape Aesthetics,” *German Studies Review* 11, no. 3 (1988): 359–76.
ruins of a catastrophe that was as much ideological in the largest sense as it was a question of ‘bricks and mortar.’” In this chapter, I examine the “ruins of a catastrophe” as text and context: first, by grappling with “The New Object” and its difficult aporias, then working backwards chronologically into the silence of Beckett’s war years. The prewar and Vichy artistic landscape, and particularly the situation of Jewish artists, provides a new ethical imperative to what seems in “The New Object” to be purely aesthetic concerns. Finally, I examine Beckett’s often overlooked *Texts for Nothing* in order to demonstrate how the techniques of the abstract painters Bram and Geer van Velde, both whom are discussed in “The New Object,” are tentatively and carefully reconfigured into short prose that attempts to grapple with the veiled landscape and abortive wandering of wartime.

As with almost all the postwar texts by Samuel Beckett, “The New Object” eludes easy summary. According to Peter Fifield, it was occasioned by an exhibition by Bram and Geer van Velde at the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery in New York City, and is a translation of “of roughly three quarters of the French essay ‘Peintres de l’empêchement.’” As a catalogue introducing relatively unknown European painters to a New York audience, “The New Object” goes about fulfilling its genre expectations in a remarkably roundabout way. The manifesto-like quality of “The New Object” is particularly noteworthy in that it sees the normally reticent Beckett advancing a set of normative aesthetic aims, albeit not in his own artistic medium. The central claim of the “The New Object” seems outlandish: Beckett argues that all painters before the van Veldes have been painting, despite all appearances to the contrary, the exact same object. Naturally, this raises many issues related to epistemology and metaphysics, but perhaps even more pressing is the historical situation out of which “The New Object” emerges. Rather than

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conclusively interpreting the slippery object, I would like to dwell on the ambiguities and aporias that inhere in the text in order to demonstrate Beckett’s conscious, but cautious and failure-prone, cultivation of a politically responsible aesthetics.

Beckett begins “The New Object” with an acerbic rebuttal to what the “usual crocodiles,” those who view art with a stockbroker's eye, as well as “serious and respectable connoisseurs” have now accepted as fact: that the tenuous “Paris School,” of which Bram and Geer van Velde are part, is “finished” (878). On the contrary, declares Beckett, the Paris School is still “in its infancy and has a promising future ahead of it” (878). Beckett’s optimism regarding the future of the Paris School leads him to link the van Velde brothers’ “search for an object” with the “history of painting” (878) more generally. This history is not apolitical. Art in the French context from the 1940s to 1950s was a battleground with few solid boundaries. The “Paris School,” pre-, during, and post-Vichy, was a particularly important flashpoint in the convergence of art and politics.

At first glance, it seems odd that Beckett, never a revivalist, would valorize and even attempt to resuscitate a bygone artistic movement as a critic. Unlike the Surrealists, the Paris School was never a unified grouping with agreed-upon styles and motivations apart from a general inclination towards continuing the development of Cubism and Fauvism. Indeed, the most important distinguishing factor about the Paris School is that it was not the French School. Romy Golan offers a penetrating summary of this latter group, the Ecole Française, who in the 1920s turned to a conservative style which, for lack of a better term, can be described as a form of Regional Naturalism [...] Accordingly, supported by their ideological convictions, they abandoned the metropolis in favor of the French countryside,
often going back to their home provinces. Some of these artists belonged to the landed gentry and went to live on their estates; others conformed to the revived image of the artist/gentleman-farmer by acquiring some land. This kind of return to the soil was hailed as invigorating, virile, and moral, a pointed contrast to the goings-on of the metropolis.  

For Beckett, as we have already seen, the notion of stable roots was a noxious idea both personally and artistically: *More Pricks than Kicks* was already a monumental blow to pastoralism, to say nothing of the increasingly deracinated later fiction. After reading a younger Beckett’s vitriolic response to Manet in his letters from the 1930s, an aesthetic repulsion to the French School is to be expected. Far more troubling in the *École Française* than retrograde painterly practices, however, is what Golan’s language alludes to: its prefiguration of blood and soil nationalism and prelude to fascist collaboration. In sharp contrast to the avowed nationalisms of the French School, the Paris School, whose members generally lived and worked in the Montparnasse district, was made up of “foreigners,” either in terms of actual immigration status or, crucially, because many of the members of the *École de Paris* were Jewish.

Overtly anti-Semitic responses to the Paris School had been expressed since the 1920s, and the passage of time did little to dull the ugly national and racial sentiments voiced about the community. In the 1931, the Jewish critic (but fascist sympathizer) Waldemar George wrote

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57 Golan points out that many of the painters in the “French School,” such as André Derain, Dunoyer de Segonzac, and Maurice Vlaminck, joined in a cultural tour of Nazi Germany in 1941. In a letter to Georges Duthuit, Beckett singles out Derain’s art in particular as “unthinkable” (11 August 1948).


59 Golan points out that the arrival of Jewish painters was often described as an “invasion,” and the seeming inability or unwillingness of Jewish artists to contribute to the “naturalist” mode of French painting was viewed as dangerous subversion by some critics (“The École Francaise vs the École de Paris,” 85).
that “The School of Paris is a house of cards built in Montparnasse. […] Its ideology is oriented against that of the French School. […] The moment has come for France to turn in upon herself and to find on her own soil the seeds for her salvation” and that the “[Paris School] refers to a French tradition but in fact annihilates it.”

George’s paranoid reading of the Paris School casts an aesthetic debate in apocalyptically political terms, one deeply rooted in an idea of the French nation that even some avant-garde artists were attempting to align themselves with. Moreover, as the Vichy regime came to power, George was not alone in his fears. The Secretary General of Fine Arts, an art historian named Louis Hautecoeur, promoted a French classicism that, as Elizabeth Karlsgodt puts it, emphasized “harmony, taste, balance and reason, and a stylistic unity among the various branches of the visual arts.”

He was joined by other members of the Vichy regime in fearing that the “French School” would be would be “corrupted by foreign, and implicitly Jewish, influence.” Indeed, the official backing given to Jean Bazaine’s Fauvist and Cubist derived tricolor school can be read in this light as an attempt to divert abstraction in the arts away from “foreign”/Jewish methods, and towards nationalist celebration. An artistic death knell to the Paris School was signaled by the reduction of Cubist research, experimentation, and technique to the glorification of the colors of the French flag in tricolor nationalism. Far more disastrously, the political and social destruction of the Paris School was accomplished by complicity of the collaborationist government in the persecution of the school’s many Jewish members. Thus, we see just how accurate Beckett’s appraisal of the situation in the opening of “The New Object” truly is: the death of the Paris School was not only effected in terms of market forces and shifting tastes, but by a political situation that attempted, in both polemics and

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60 Qtd. in Elizabeth Karlsgodt. *Defending National Treasures: French Art and Heritage under Vichy* (Stanford University Press, 2011), 44.
61 Ibid, 32.
62 Ibid, 45.
practice, to eradicate the new art and the people who practiced it. Yet in the unlikely persons of Geer and Bram van Velde, traces of the Paris School remained. In “The New Object,” Beckett will take up the potency of the annihilating force of the reconstituted Paris School in a manner that reads almost as a parody of the fears of George and Hautecoeur, but transfigured into a powerful and cryptic account of the new horizons of art. However, it is precisely when Beckett, the poet of negation, is at his most affirmative and effusive that it is easiest to lose track of what he is writing. With the historical and political legacy of the Paris School in mind, I would like to pivot to an unpacking of the formal, aesthetic claims made in “The New Object,” taking and developing them on their own terms, before returning to both the issue of Beckett’s political aesthetic and, perhaps most importantly, his fiction.

The infancy of the Paris School that Beckett identifies at the beginning of “The New Object” is his affirmation of a historical task that appears unresolved, one forced by the horrors of the war underground and only now beginning to be felt anew. Beckett’s mode of accounting for the history of painting is by tracing its “relation to the object” which evolves “in terms first of extension, then of penetration” (878). By “extension” and “penetration,” Beckett means that “there are more and more things to paint, then more and more possessive ways of painting them” (878). The conclusion that Beckett reaches from this brief history is where the central thesis of the essay lies: “the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation, either on account of its accidents or on account of its substance, and primarily on account of its accidents, because in consciousness accident is anterior to substance” (879). In sharp contrast to post-Kantian accounts of both aesthetics and figuration, Beckett emphasizes that the blocking of the object from representative view is due in part to the nature of objects (more on this later), but primarily due to “its accidents,” which, in this account, precede the “substance” of the object,
thereby foregrounding contingency. One way of parsing this opaque formulation is by emphasizing the potentially accidental and provisional nature of sense-perception: misperception of the object leads to a faulty diagnosis of its substance. A stronger interpretation, however, is that accident is ontologically bound up with the object, such that any attempt at revealing its substance will be equally mired in chance and contingency.

For Beckett, this accident or error of representation is of a specific sort: a category mistake. After tactfully dismissing the proponents of surrealism, who according to Beckett are concerned primarily with “the renewal of genre” and remain aloof from “the great enquiry” (879) into the object, from the empirical side of his survey of modern artists, he remarks on the existence of those whose work examines the problem of the object and object-representation:

The Christs and clowns of Rouault, the most Chinese still-life of Matisse, a conglomerate by the Kandinsky of 1943 or 1944, proceed from the same effort, the effort to state that in which Christ, a potato and a square of red are one, and from the same distress, the distress before that refusal of that oneness to be stated. For that in which Christ and the rest are one, as far as the painter is concerned, and beyond all question of idiosyncracy [sic], or exteriority or interiority, is that they are things, the thing, thingness. (879)

Beckett's argument about the precedence of accident to substance comes into slightly clearer focus here: rather than the “idiosyncracy” of individual perception or conditions of “exteriority or interiority,” all of the seemingly disparate objects of painting – Christ, potato, square of red – are in fact of a single category: things. The first of the theses upon which the history of painting seems to rest is here rejected by Beckett, for rather than an expanded field of suitable objects to paint, there is – or has been – exactly one object to paint, albeit manifested in almost endless
variations. What is constitutively new in the van Velde brothers, then, is that they double the potential number of objects to paint from one to two: it is now possible to paint the object that impedes representation, the object of *empêchement*.

Yet, as might be surmised by the many connotations of this nigh-untranslatableable word (*empêchement* is rendered throughout “The New Object” as “mist,” though a more literal translation might be “impediment” or “obstacle”), things are not quite so straightforward. Beckett is remarkably attuned to the mechanics of painting, as he formulates in the most famous dictum to arise from the essay: “For what remains to be represented if the essence of object is to elude representation? There remain to be represented the conditions of that elusion” (879). From here, Beckett extrapolates two different conditions of evasion, their method of deployment varying based on the type of painter: “The one will say, I cannot see the object to represent it because the object is what it is. The other, I cannot see the object to represent it because I am what I am” (879). Beckett uses these two conditions to offer an alternative to the second thesis of his history of painting (the increasing possessiveness with which artists attempt to grasp the object), one in which the object pulls away from the would-be possessor’s grasp. In describing the types of artists that correspond to his typology for the new object, he deploys both senses of the “accidental” nature of both objects and sense perception described earlier. Geer van Velde detects the accidental nature of the object itself; Bran van Velde understands the limits of his own sense perception. When Beckett writes that “Their painting is an analysis of privation” (880), he thus means “privation” in both senses (in the object and in perception) we have discussed. From here, Beckett's writing moves from its relatively traditional logical syntax towards a rhapsodic mode discussing the “unveiling towards the unveilable” (880), the
overwhelming otherness of the object, before concluding once again with a perhaps unlikely refutation of the “virtuositites of negation” in favor of the affirmation of “absence” (880).

The “virtuosos” of negation do not only include the Surrealists, whose work he had extensively translated in throughout the 1930s, but artists like Pierre Tal-Coat and André Masson that were addressed in Three Dialogues. While later art histories have grouped at least van Velde and Tal-Coat under the banner of Tachisme, Beckett noticed important differences between the two approaches. Tal-Coat’s paintings, such as the Massacres of the 1930s and even his less representational work in the mid-1940s like Aquarium reflect an engagement with the history of the “old object”: while their primitivist brushstrokes and even brutality are a striking challenge to the classicists of the Vichy regime, they remain mired in the same nationalist debates about artistic identity and providing different answers to the same old questions. As “B.” puts it in the Three Dialogues, Tal-Coat represents a “thrusting towards a more adequate expression of natural experience” (138), something still rooted in the very soil the French School valorized, albeit reacting against it. Bram van Velde, on the other hand, with a first name (Abraham) that conjured up the same Semitic connotations as Samuel Beckett’s own, and belonging to a both extinguished and unfashionable Paris School, provided a way out. Just as Cubism was capable of “extending” and “penetrating” the old object from all angles, so too could Bram and Geer van Velde consider the new object from multiple (subjective and objective) vantage points. Before turning to Texts for Nothing, the context of the Paris art scene during wartime, outside of the decimated Paris School, requires further elaboration. The complex and shifting lines during Vichy between collaboration and resistance, acceptance and refusal, provide the political bedrock upon which the aesthetic stakes of Texts are placed.

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63 Emilie Morin, Beckett’s Political Imagination (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 114-119.
The aftermath of WWII left not only the physical ruins of bombed-out structures and mass death, but the psychological ruins of collaboration too. Despite his reticence to describe the “boy-scout stuff” in which he participated during the occupation, Beckett’s legacy in Gloria SMH, a resistance cell that was eventually betrayed, is now a matter of public record.64 Far murkier, however, is the legacy of both art movements and individual artworks which existed in France before, during, and after the Nazi occupation and the Vichy regime. Far from united political and aesthetic blocs, both the Resistance and the collaborationists were riven by internecine cleavages, where everything from abstraction to classicism to Romanticism were on unstable footing: appropriated or considered politically and aesthetically suspect by various factions. One particularly telling illustration of these splits regards the legacy of the French composer Claude Debussy. After the collapse of the French Third Republic, rival nationalisms – Resistance and Vichy – sought to appropriate the composer’s legacy and art for their respective factions. Jane Fulchur points out that for the supporters of the Vichy government, Debussy “was a symbol that could obfuscate its political and cultural compromise with the German victor while still signifying a national spirit, a love of France.”65 For this wing of Vichy supporters, those affiliated with Action Française and right-wing classicism more generally, Debussy filled the role of the French-but-not-too-French intermediary, one who could be mentioned in the same breath as Wagner in Nazi circles, but also represent the revival of classically French artistic practices.66 Yet the classicists were in conflict not only with fellow right-wing contingents (especially what Fulchur refers to as the “avowedly Romantic French fascists”) but with a

66 Ibid, 460.
Resistance that was not willing to let a figure as important as Debussy remain an unchallenged prop for the Vichy regime. The Resistance was not an organization made up of members in total agreement: communists, liberals, conservatives, and nationalists were all members of its ranks, and their aesthetic principles varied wildly. Surrealism, with its left-wing and communist tendencies (to say nothing of its difficult content), was immediately untenable as a unitary aesthetic reference point or model for an organization at least ostensibly led by Charles de Gaulle. The solution, according to Fulchur’s account, was to appropriate figures like Debussy to “facilitate the construction of a unified and competing representation of the authentic French community and its values.” The example of Debussy is representative of the shifting, combative ground on which closely linked political and aesthetic debates were being waged during the Vichy period. Competing nationalisms – left and right wing, collaborationist and resistant – did not wholly dismiss or embrace either individual figures or art movements, even avant-garde ones.

The issues at stake with the legacy of Debussy and art more generally during Vichy is more complex than simply appropriations of legacy, a question of which historical figures can “stand for” regime or resistance. Perhaps even more important than biographical facts of the artist, the formal qualities of artworks take on a renewed political existence during wartime. Painting during Vichy (along with literature) was no exception. Michele Cone points out that the rise of “tricolor painting,” a loosely affiliated school of post-Fauvist and Cubist painters whose nationalist motivations were articulated by in a 1943 essay by Jean Bazaine, was an ambivalent exercise in collaboration. On the one hand, as Cone points out, the “shock effect of ‘tricolor’

67 Ibid, 467.
68 Ibid, 472.
69 Tricolor refers to the red, white, and blue of the French flag, and the limited color palette the affiliated painters employed.
painting in the context of other art seen during the Occupation period in Paris cannot be denied.” Experimental art had long been considered politically suspect by the Nazis, a fact to which Beckett’s notebooks composed during his stay in Germany in 1936-37 attest, and even the relatively tame tricolor school could have been considered “degenerate.” However, as Cone also puts it, the quietism and apologia for the Vichy regime practiced by the nationalist tricolor painters created “a metaphoric veil behind which unimaginably tragic scenarios could and in fact did take place.” Cone argues in favor of the more straightforwardly representational artworks of avowedly resistant painters like Francis Gruber and Jean Fautrier as an antidote to the “veil” effects of abstract art. After the war, when Beckett was involved with discussions with his art dealer friend Georges Duthuit regarding where artistic practice could and should go, he argued instead that representation, even in its most avowedly resistant form, were engaged in compromise with domination.

In the Three Dialogues, perhaps the most discussed piece of Beckett’s postwar nonfiction, Beckett critiques the art of Andre Masson and Pierre Tal-Coat for several, often exceptionally abstract or unclear reasons (even the “D.” character representing Duthuit in the debate has trouble deciphering B.’s criticisms and is occasionally exasperated by him). While many critics have offered insights into the philosophical and metaphysical dimensions of Beckett’s fixation on the object, I would like to instead ground our reading of Three Dialogues and the later piece “The New Object” within the political and material history of artistic practice

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70 Michele Cone, French Modernisms: Perspectives on Art Before, During, and After Vichy (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83.  
71 Ibid 84. Elizabeth Karlsgodt develops this argument in her book Defending National Treasures: French Art and Heritage Under Vichy: “Propaganda Minister Paul Joseph Goebbels believed it was in the German interest for the arts and cultural life to flourish, particularly in the French capital. The division responsible for censorship in Paris, the Propaganda-Abteilung, exempted the French from strict artistic censorship, allowing a wider range of expression than was permitted in the Reich. As a result, German officers enjoyed gallery exhibitions of “degenerate” art in Paris that would have been banned in Berlin” (22).
before, during, and after Vichy that I have gestured to. The artistic poles represented by Masson and Tal-Coat participate in a postwar nationalistic debate about the fate of figuration by virtue of their sheer formal existence. To say nothing of his aesthetic qualms with both painters, valorizing either would force Beckett to take sides in a struggle mediated by competing nationalisms, or, as the B. character puts it with regards to Tal-Coat: “straining to enlarge the statement of the compromise” (138). This compromise exists both as an enlargement of “nature,” which B. describes in the Romantic terms we are familiar with, as the “composite of perceiver and perceived” (138), and as a compromise with the blood and soil of nationalist representations. As Shane Weller points out, Beckett’s choice to live in Paris and “defend the art produced there was not in itself a choice in favour of France, which would repeat the nationalist assumption, but a demand for international (or anti-national) autonomy.”

Bram van Velde’s work, little-known, produced by a Dutch national with few friends and scraping by in poverty, was an especially attractive aesthetic model of inter/antinationalism. Unlike Masson and Tal-Coat, van Velde’s work picks up from the formal developments of Cubism and Fauvism without reproducing their ugly absorption by Vichy propaganda during the tricolor period. The work that still needed to be done with the collapsing of the object had to proceed and learn from the sharply analytic models of Cubism, rather than the primitivism of Tal-Coat or the post-Surrealism of Masson, in order to avoid the compromised position of even the most experimental representational art.

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72 For an account of the philosophical dimensions and ramifications of the Beckettian new object, see Tim Lawrence’s *Beckett’s Critical Aesthetics* and David Lloyd’s *Beckett’s Thing*.
75 Beckett describes his attraction to painters “poor, undiguisedly useless, incapable of any image whatever” (qtd. in Weller 166).
It is tempting to read *Texts for Nothing*, composed soon after “The New Object,” as attempting to enact the principles contained in the essay in Beckett’s fiction."76 Yet it is perhaps telling that Beckett wrote to his friend MacGreevy regarding “The New Object” and “Peintres de l’empêchement” the following: “Thanks for your friendly reference to the van Velde preface, abominable ‘machine’ that I shall always regret, no less than its Cahiers d'Art predecessor.”77 As with all of Beckett’s carefully composed and audience-dependent letters, we should not ascribe to it the complete and unvarnished truth. What is certain, however, is Beckett’s hesitation at the “machine”-like qualities of the “The New Object,” a too-ready replacement of one old thing for another. By potentially reducing the new object to a formula, something conveniently reproducible, Beckett’s project may be engaged in precisely the same reproduction of the ever same it attempts to get away from. Thus, Beckett’s hesitation is motivated by both a knowledge of the futility and compromised position of representation, the need to go beyond preformed figuration in both literature and painting, and by the potential that this process could be a mechanical exercise in futility. The resonances between “The New Object” to *Texts for Nothing* are not equivalences, but homologous hesitations amid the many branching paths of new postwar and post-Vichy refusals. In the very structure of the 13 *Texts*, we see a fitful and hesitant portrayal of a new object of fiction, one where all the trappings of narrative momentum have vanished. *Texts* reflects a near-Cubist method of composition, where the same scene at the outset or in the middle of wandering is viewed from a multiplicity of angles. Filtered through the now-accessible archive of Beckett’s editorial practice, we see him carefully, tentatively, and with a

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76 For example, Susan Brienza provides an account of the many slippages in pronouns and verb tenses in the *Texts* that destabilize attempts at marking a clear delineation between exterior and interior. Susan Brienza, *Samuel Beckett’s New World: Style in Metafiction* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 20-47.
great deal of revision, attempting to apply the lessons articulated in “The New Object” to his own fiction.

Impediments, obstacles, *empêchement*: “moments of hesitation not so much rare as frequent” (*CSP* 137), as the ninth *Text for Nothing* puts it. Hesitation has been a motif in Beckett’s fiction from the beginning: from Belacqua’s inability to make up his mind in romantic partners to the 40-odd page digression in *Watt* that finds the titular servant paralyzed by the logic of feeding a neighborhood dog. Beckett’s most productive and well-known period saw him write plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* that are veritable monuments to indecision and hesitation. Yet, at the tail end of this productive period, *empêchement* becomes a symbol of both periodization and the content of Beckett’s fiction. In a more literal translation than Beckett’s “mist,” *empêchement* means an obstacle or impediment, something that hinders one from arriving at their intended destination. Beckett, writing from both the aftermath of French art debates and his own postwar fiction, found the composition of *Texts for Nothing* to be riddled with such hindrances and hesitations as he deliberated with choices of form and content in his writing that sought to find homologies between the lessons of painterly abstraction and literature.

Beckett once referred to *Texts for Nothing* as the “grisly afterbirth” of *The Unnamable.*

In stark contrast to its older, polished, endlessly citable (“I can't go on, I'll go on”) sibling, *Texts for Nothing* has received a comparative dearth of scholarly and public attention. Few critics have felt able to write about the *Texts* without mentioning their minor status: Shira Wolosky remarks that “Of the *Texts for Nothing* little has been made.” Paul Sheehan sees the *Texts* as “difficult to place as they were, reputedly, difficult to produce, a modest coda to a compulsive writing

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frenzy” and reproduces the minimizing remarks made by H. Porter Abbott and Beckett himself about the pieces. Christopher Langlois notes that “one of the many challenges of reading Texts for Nothing involves determining precisely this work's significance as a transitional moment (or not) within Beckett's oeuvre.” In other words, is it merely a sputtering afterbirth or a step in a new direction? This question is particularly relevant when we place the anxiety Beckett displayed regarding Texts alongside his fears of the “abominable ‘machine’” he had written earlier in “The New Object.”

One periodization of Beckett is offered by Alain Badiou, which Jean-Michel Rabaté glosses as “In Badiou's timeline, the Texts for Nothing mark the end of the first period and signal the termination or the exhaustion of Cartesian solipsism; then, How It Is would display a new beginning and show an opening to the other.” While Rabate notes that this distinction is problematic, it does offer us an interesting problem: how should we think about Beckett's prose writing that seems to fall outside pre-given, near teleological structures like either of the Trilogies or the closed space fiction? Our critical approach seems mediated or tempered by Beckett's own hesitancy about his work, both in his letters and, importantly, in the manuscripts themselves. My reading of Texts for Nothing takes up the issue of periodization somewhat indirectly, but in a way that pushes back against the Badiou's identified break. Rather than a definitive conclusion to Beckett's “Cartesian solipsism,” Texts for Nothing is much closer to a laboratory, representing a range of textual and aesthetic approaches that are, for Beckett, practically experimental. The Texts are a concrete attempt at revising the textual figuration of landscape that we saw Beckett parodying in More Pricks. I do not, however, see this as the

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81 Christopher Langlois, Samuel Beckett and the Terror of Literature (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 97.
82 Jean-Michel Rabaté, Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human (Fordham University Press, 2016), 145.
domain exclusively of *Texts*: the Trilogy, and *Molloy* in particular with its Swiftian overtones and equivocal approach to a cartographic imagination, also attempts to grapple with spatialization. If *Texts for Nothing* represents a return to materiality after the void-like interiority of *The Unnamable*’s spaces, then this materiality is never firm or unequivocal. Shira Wolosky describes the tentative and unstable process by which the *Texts* proceed and regress: “In general in Beckett there is a double impulse toward invention and refutation. On the level of character, this takes place as the effort to resist, even while inevitably producing, fictional representations of the self.”

We can take this identified tendency towards revision ("invention and refutation") as regards “fictional representations of the self” and use it as a prism through which to view the world these representations inhabit, one that attempts to rework (rather than eschew altogether, as in *The Unnamable*) the post-Romantic object of nature in fitful starts and stops.

The *Texts* mark a return to the problem of motion that we saw Beckett grappling with to great parodic effect in *More Pricks than Kicks*. Rather than the journey – into the forest, out and about in Dublin – or the epiphanic motionlessness that concludes “Ding-Dong” and “Walking Out,” *Texts* leave us only with the predilection, in equal measure, for motionlessness and motion, and the impossibility of both. As Paul Sheehan describes it: “nature can provide neither the transcendence of departure nor the immanence of withdrawal.” Indeed, most of the texts begin with the speaker being thrust into the world, needing to go and being unable to do so. Jonathan Boulter has described the parallelism of this situating device to Heidegger’s idea of “thrownness” into the world, but my interest centers once again on the vestiges of the journey,

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and the space through which it both does and does not move.\textsuperscript{85} To this latter point, \textit{Texts} 8 gives us: “time has turned into space and there will be no more time, till I get out of here” (132). While a sensation of timelessness or time extended to an unbearable duration is a hallmark of Beckett’s fiction (especially in the closed space period), the explicit folding of time into space in \textit{Texts for Nothing} renders the possibility of narrative particularly unstable. As Christopher Langlois puts it, the “narrative stalls before it encounters the possibility to begin, and yet it has begun.”\textsuperscript{86} Stalled but beginning, the wanderer figure still at the heart of the \textit{Texts} is forced to navigate a timeless space, not one that is a pure void, like \textit{The Unnamable}. On the contrary, the landscape of the \textit{Texts} is explicitly material and politically resonant.

The journey or setting out in the narratives of \textit{Texts} is often a command rather than a desire, as in \textit{Texts} 3: “Here, depart from here and go elsewhere, or stay here, but coming and going” (109). The paradoxical commands of this section hearken back to the parodic-Romantic outlook of Belacqua’s earlier wanderings: “Who taught me all I know, I alone, in the old wanderyears, I deduced it all from nature” (110). The \textit{Wanderjahr} no longer terminates in more or less happy fulfilment, as when Belacqua and Lucy confine themselves to a house in order to listen to Schubert in “Walking Out,” but in the inability to move or stay put. Indeed, almost every \textit{Text} begins and ends in a state of constrained movement with the imperative to move, a paradoxical impediment that recalls empêchement. Current motionlessness pairs with a nostalgic remembrance of journeys past, as in \textit{Texts} 5: “I know where I’d go, I’d go into the forest, I’d try and reach the forest, unless that’s where I am, I don’t know where I am, in any case I stay” (\textit{CSP} 117). The move to the forest, Ruysdael’s or otherwise, here operates reflexively while the speaker is constrained. In \textit{Texts} 4 also the presentation of paralysis seems to be a choice rather

\textsuperscript{86} Christopher Langlois, \textit{Samuel Beckett and the Terror of Literature} (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 112.
than a physical inability to move: “What counts is to be in the world, the posture is immaterial, so long as one is on earth. To breathe is all that is required, there is no obligation to ramble” (CSP 116). And yet, of course, hesitation continues to make itself felt: “The graveyard, yes, it’s there I’d return, this evening it’s there, borne by my words, if I could get out of here, that is to say if I could say, There’s a way out of here, there’s a way out somewhere” (Texts 9, CSP 139). Haunted remembrance in the form of the graveyard is bound up with the desire to conceive of an alternative, a longing for the mere statement that “there is a way out.” Texts 3 instantiates a particularly affecting moment of imagined remembrance: “Quick quick before I weep. I’ll have a crony […] a fellow warrior, we’ll relive our campaigns and compare our scratches […] We have not long, that’s the spirit, in the present, not long to live, it’s our positively last winter, halleluiah” (CSP 111). It is hard not to read the wish for a “fellow warrior,” rendered in militaristic language, as the explicit merging of the aesthetic, historical, and political: a thinly veiled representation of time spent hiding and on the run, where the desire for companionship and the near certainty of death comingle while one hesitates and waits. I do not wish to create too strong of a correspondence here, or to indicate that Beckett is attempting straightforwardly to represent wartime conditions, but the parallels are striking.

In Marjorie Perloff’s account of the traces of Beckett’s experience in WWII in his fiction, she notes that stories like “The Expelled,” “The Calmative,” and “The End” feature a protagonist wandering about the countryside and seeking shelter in a way that is eerily reminiscent of the actual movements of Samuel Beckett and Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil after their Resistance group, Gloria, was betrayed. Yet, at the same time, Perloff notes how Beckett consistently veils any direct reference to this experience: “Beckett’s poetic war fictions fuse a curious literalism with the Mallarmean principle that to name is to destroy. To use words like war, Vichy,
Resistance, Auschwitz, atom bomb would inevitably be to short-circuit the complexity of the experience in question.”

Texts for Nothing proceeds along these principles, even more obviously hiding direct reference to the war by eschewing the narrative of wandering and meeting strangers: as in the case of the longed for “fellow warrior,” they can only be imagined.

What the Texts do is focus on the minutiae of decision making while on the run – whether to keep moving or stay put – and extrapolates from it a provisional aesthetic of hesitation imbricated with the still-ongoing legacies of war: “Did I try everything, ferret in every hold, secretly, silently, patiently, listening? I’m in earnest, as so often, I’d like to be sure I left no stone unturned before reporting me missing and giving up” (Texts 7, CSP 127). It is not only in the content of Texts for Nothing that we find this hesitation, however: Beckett, still reckoning with both the aesthetic and political implications of collaboration, found the process of translating the Texts from French to be marked by indecision as well.

The manuscript of Text 1, housed at Trinity College Dublin, reflects a compositional process that walks back and forth over the territory it is in the process of describing. In the first typescript, Beckett’s revisions veer away from structural changes and instead focus on the subtleties of word choice and syntax. Throughout the manuscript, he uses ink to strikethrough and replace words or to rearrange the order of sentences, as in the line: “I’m in the hole the centuries have dug, centuries of bad weather.” “Bad” here is replaced with “fitting,” perhaps an expression not of judgment but of resignation. Yet in its final, published iteration, the phrase has changed to “centuries of filthy weather” (CSP 101). This pattern of alteration that seeks to seemingly diminish the effect of “anthropomorphizing” nature (changing the value judgement

“bad” with the resigned “fitting,” for example) occurs multiple times over the course of Beckett’s revisions. We see in the manuscript “the cold is gaining on me,” where the strikethrough is replaced with “eating into,” before finally ending up as “eating me” (CSP 102); or the description of “a mountain, no, a hill, but so bleak, so bleak,” where each instance of “bleak” is replaced with “wild,” a change that tracks to the published version. Sometimes, Beckett’s hesitation seems to occur for other reasons, like when the narrator remarks in the manuscript “They wanted me to go home. My dwelling place.” Perhaps Beckett saw “dwelling place” as being too overdetermined by Biblical reference, so he thought to change it to the far more neutral “habitation.” Yet, in the final version, it seems as though he decided that these religious overtones would do nicely, albeit with the help of a hyphen: “They wanted me to go home. My dwelling-place” (CSP 101). Whatever the reason for Beckett’s hesitation, his process bears witness to a unique and restless fascination not only with the connotations of words, but with how they produce space within the text too; a question with close affinities to the postwar legacy of figuration and the Paris School.

One final example: “The mist will clear, I know it will, I know it well,” where “I know it will” is replaced with “know it.” The deletion of “I” and “will,” perhaps a minor change for a writer less exacting than Beckett, alters the sentence in important ways. Rather than establishing the speaker’s foreknowledge, the change alters the force of the declarative to an injunction to the reader, compelling them to know “it” (the mist). On the other hand, “I know it well” functions as a typically Beckettian paradox, as mist is continually shapeless and changing. In the published

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89 Other Biblical references do pepper Texts for Nothing, as in Texts 6: “the nostalgia for that slime where the Eternal breathed and his son wrote, long after, with divine idiotic finger, at the feet of the adulteress, wipe it out” (CSP 124).
version, however, the sentence has become “the mist will clear, I know my mist” (CSP 102), shifting the tone from injunction to the expression of a protagonist who has spent great amount of times waiting, perhaps in hiding, watching the shifting of the mists that obscure the vision of searching eyes.

Beckett’s writing takes him ever further from the last glimpses of identifiable, representable nature into the ruins and closed spaces of Imagination Dead Imagine and Lessness, a trajectory that seems directly foreshadowed in Texts 7: “the station in the ruins where I sit waiting, erect and rigid, hands on thighs, the tip of the ticket between finger and thumb, for a train that will never come, never go, natureward” (CSP 129). With the explicit refutation of nature as a reference point, Beckett’s fiction turns to generating spaces that bear little relation to anything that exists on earth. Beckett’s move away from the natural is can and should be viewed as an extension of his critiques of anthropomorphizing principles of Romanticism discussed in my first chapter. Yet as we have seen throughout this chapter, other influences, debates, and unique formulations like those in “The New Object” also helped develop Beckett’s artistic practice. After the postwar French art debates, Beckett forged a new commitment to an ethical approach to representation, one rooted in a defense of the Paris School’s abstraction. As he writes in “The New Object,” this implies a disidentification with the “virtuosos of negation” and affirmation of the portrayal of absence. Yet Beckett’s critical and nonfiction work do not provide ready blueprints for how this project could be achieved in literature. Texts for Nothing shows us a Beckett on the one hand committed to the figuration of empêchement in his disavowal of the traditional markers of landscape and nature, showing them to the reader as fitful glimpses and half-remembered reminisces, and on the other hand demonstrating the hesitation involved in such a deracinated portrayal of once-natural referents in his manuscripts and the content of his
fiction. In order to further develop his principle of literary abstraction, Beckett continued to experimentally develop new methods for the portrayal of space in form and content. In the next chapter, we see these experiments yield powerful and evocative results in the geometrically precise but deeply abstract *Imagination Dead Imagine* and in the chance composition of *Lessness*. 
CHAPTER 3. THE SPACE OF ABSTRACTION

Over the course of the previous two chapters, my method has gradually shifted. When I discussed the relationship of Romanticism to Beckett’s work, I narrated what appears to be a direct confrontation: a revolt against a specific, inherited tradition. This struggle occurred in acerbic letters and in stories that, in their content, parodically reconfigured the cosmos of Naturphilosophie into an object of ridicule and occasional pathos. As I moved to the fiction produced in the shadow of WWII, the equivalency of Beckett’s relationship to representation and the visual arts shifted. No longer were there easily identifiable targets of derision or identifiably parodic content in fiction. Beckett’s revolt against the inherited values of art and representation in “The New Object” are mystifying, its targets at once broad and difficult to pin down. Critique, when it comes, is staked out on the level of form perhaps more than content. The frenetic Belacqua shifts to the recursive Molloy and the hesitant narrator(s) of Texts for Nothing. As wandering becomes increasingly immobile, space in turn is rendered abstract and inorganic, and identifiable real-world reference points opaque and void.91 Yet at the same that the wanderer figures are calcifying into stony paralysis, Beckett’s inventiveness and motion from formal experiment to experiment never wavers, and indeed increases in force and rapidity. My reading of an anti-Romantic but representational Beckett in chapter 1 and a Beckett tentatively deploying new forms of representation in the wake of war and artistic debates in chapter 2 now shifts to a Beckett experimenting in different modalities of what can broadly be considered post-representational art, a field in which Beckett now, after so many years toiling in more or less solitude, has fellow travelers. These individuals, like Morton Feldman, John Cage, Lucy Lippard, and Sol LeWitt, and their associated movements, were also investigating similar problems that

Beckett encountered, foregrounding the compositional potential of chance, mathematics, and conceptual procedures at the experimental limits of their respective fields. At the limits, we find the production of the new. In this chapter, I examine two works by Beckett that bear a resemblance to broader movements in the art world, not through overt referentiality or authorial intent, but through certain homologies of structure. In *Imagination Dead Imagine*, we see Beckett using a mix of formal techniques akin to conceptualism in order to challenge long-held suppositions about the separation between literature and painting. In *Lessness* indeterminacy and chance operations gives prose the combinatorial potential of both the musical phrase and an endlessly permutable mathematical series.

If we are to look for post-representational or abstract in Beckett’s late prose, *Imagination Dead Imagine* (IDI) is both singular and representative. Composed shortly after *All Strange Away* and published in 1965, *Imagination Dead Imagine* belongs to the “closed space” period of Beckett’s oeuvre, alongside works like *Ping*, *Fizzles*, and *The Lost Ones*. Unlike *Ping* and *Fizzles*, Beckett uses relatively traditional sentence structures and punctuation in IDI, offering a clear account of both the structure and meteorological cycles of a rotunda or vault floating in space that is exposed to extremes of both heat and light. Unlike *The Lost Ones*, IDI is much narrower in scope in terms of (semi)living subjects: instead of an anthropological gaze depicting a miniature society, IDI offers two motionless figures ensconced in the rotunda who, despite being immobile with closed eyes, “are not sleeping” (*CSP* 185). Beckett’s almost coy rhetoric in the story is highly self-aware: *Imagination* begins by bringing natural features to the reader’s attention before telling them to discard it: “Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit” (*CSP* 182). This glimpse of a paradisal locale is not, in fact, omitted, but rather given and taken away, a peekaboo parody of scenery before the narrator turns to
“white in the whiteness the rotunda” (CSP 182). Beginning with an act of negation rather than construction, the diminution and subtraction that is characteristic of Beckett’s closed space work veils any sort of easily recognizable natural referent. Indeed, it becomes difficult to speak of “nature” at all in Beckett’s late works. As I pointed out in chapter 1, the Romantic conception of nature requires relationships between things, parts to wholes tending toward organic unity. *Naturphilosophie* is predicated on the identificatory response between man and nature that Beckett so loathed. The paramount importance of time, which allows for the development of both man and nature, is also elided in the stasis of Beckett’s closed spaces. Pauses between light/heat and darkness/cold in *IDI*, a defamiliarized imitation of the revolution of the Earth around the Sun, can take “a fraction of a second to what would have seemed, in other times, other places, an eternity” (CSP 183). Radically contained, Beckett’s practice here is similar to what Paul Saunders describes as a “negative ecology” or an “ecology of ignorance,” noting that it is the failure of Beckett’s work to be “practically ecological” that makes them “so surprisingly indispensable as ecological experiments, in their own context and in today’s.”92 While Beckett’s negative ecology is humble in its denial of pretensions to universality, the experimental nature of his approach is compositionally intriguing and risky. Beckett does not simply deny nature, but carefully constructs something else. In *IDI*, it is precisely when his language borrows from the empiricism of recording phenomena and the notation of geometry that his literary practice exemplifies a new and strange sort of abstraction, one that in its unique literary form reworks traditional conceptions of literature’s ability to portray space.

I am not the first to identify Beckett’s artistic practice in literature with abstraction. (Indeed, we can read the famous German Letter of 1937, wherein Beckett advocates for a

literature of the “unword,” as marking the beginning of his attempts to “abstract” the written word.) Pascale Casanova offers a particularly compelling and generative reading of Beckett’s oeuvre as a progression towards what she calls literary abstraction, culminating in the novella *Worstward Ho*. Casanova’s approach in the first chapter of *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* is especially notable for the way it applies the very same deductive, logical procedures that Beckett used to compose *Worstward Ho* in order to untangle it, a theoretical stance that stands in a tense, dialectical relationship to its object. One of the central claims that Casanova makes regards how literary abstraction functions in *Worstward Ho*. She notes the oscillation in the novella between the poles of “somehow” and “nohow”: “The law of ‘somehow’ involves the necessity of an unstable text that fixes, at the very moment it is written, its own laws of functioning. It recounts nothing but its internal genesis; and it endlessly explains how and why it needs to be written in this particular form at each instant.” The creation and regulation of self-governing laws is one of the central components of literary abstraction for Casanova, and one that Beckett adheres to quite closely in *Worstward Ho*. Later, she delineates literary abstraction from pictorial abstraction even more precisely: “The very movement of the text, what it ‘recounts’, is the process of ‘abstractification’: unlike the image in painting, the abstract literary image only exists in the movement of its very dissolution, in the progressive retreat of the meaning of words.” Instead of artists who interrogated the meaning and social production of words through careful patterning of sound and syllable, like Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons* or James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, Casanova valorizes Beckett’s choice to eschew “the sonorous materiality of the word” in favor of its logical and patient dematerialization or

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95 Ibid, 103.
“unwording.” In order to arrive at the culmination of this process in Beckett’s last major published work, Casanova posits a teleological model, a Beckett engaged in the process of working out the problem of subtractive abstraction and writing texts increasingly “[detached] from any external determination.” Here is where I diverge from Casanova’s argument and framing, for to read Beckett’s oeuvre as progressing toward subtraction instead of experimenting in different abstract modalities overdetermines these actually quite fragile works, and carries with it a number of methodological risks.

If *Worstward Ho* is the final term in an increasingly abstracted series, it causes us to overlook the specificity of individual works and the challenges others pose for the “growth model” of literary abstraction. The empirical record also poses challenges for Casanova’s account. Immediately preceding *Worstward Ho*, we find something unexpected: not the second-most abstract prose text in the Beckett canon, but *Ill Seen Ill Said*, a novella with the closest thing to characters, setting, and narrative since *Malone Dies*. Moreover, *Ill Seen Ill Said* lacks the “lessening” effect that for Casanova is so crucial to subtractive abstraction. The words do not retreat toward the dissolution of their meaning-making capabilities, or at least do not do so with anything resembling the calculated subtraction of *Worstward Ho*. Indeed, this poses another challenge for Casanova’s account: how do we measure or account for an increase in abstraction? This challenge is one of both periodization and the narrow definition of “subtractive abstraction.”

The question of periodization is not simply an academic one. Despite my questioning of the teleology of abstraction, the changes in Beckett’s approach to figuration over time are of crucial importance. Distinct periods not only demonstrate Beckett’s contact with different artists and art movements, but also register the material traces of historical and political contexts both

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96 Ibid, 12.  
97 Ibid, 27.
diachronically and synchronically. (Viewing each of Beckett’s writings as an isolated node would only give us a tentative synchronicity.) Casanova’s identification of *Worstward Ho* as a unique and singular text has support from other quarters: Dirk van Hulle and Mike Kestemont challenge the classic tripartite (early, middle, late) division of Beckett’s work via stylochronometric analysis, identifying *Worstward Ho* as a novel so stylistically distinct on grammatical and linguistic grounds from the rest of Beckett’s prose that it constitutes a unique period unto itself.98 Yet while van Hulle and Kestemont buck other conventional wisdom about categorizing Beckett into periods, such as pointing out that a periodizing break occurred within the Trilogy, at the start of *The Unnamable*, rather than afterwards, Casanova’s account only sees one major break: the period of time before the 1937 “German Letter,” where Beckett stakes out some claims about the literature of the “unword,” and afterwards, when he embarked on putting this theory into practice in progressively more pejorative ways. I differ from both van Hulle and Kestemont as well as Casanova: while I have broadly corresponded certain Beckett texts with his interest in (or repulsion from) various art movements, his work does not stay rooted to these interests for sustained periods of time. Beckett’s works can instead be viewed as *occasional*. By this I do not mean that they stand alone as autonomous creations; rather, their affinities often defy strict temporal or progressive groupings, and that the motivations for their creation occasionally cluster around certain artistic problem, especially those of figuration. As his career goes on, Beckett’s writing toolkit does become progressively fuller of techniques, both as a result of his own textual labors *and* as a result of the historical artistic developments that he was connected and responding to. My reading of Beckett suggests that we should push the problem of

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98 Van Hulle, Dirk and Mike Kestemont. “Periodizing Samuel Beckett’s Works: A Stylochronometric Approach,” *Style* 50, no. 2 (2016): 172–202. Stylochronometry is, according to van Hulle and Kestemont, the use of “diachronic models to study the development of the writing style in the works of individual authors” (178), usually aided by electronic computation.
abstraction further: not only subtraction or the evacuation of the typical structures of literature, but as multiplication, an expansion of the field of the possible with words. For Casanova, Beckett’s literary abstraction is conceptualized by its movement towards what culminates in *Worstward Ho*, the invention of “absolutely self-sufficient writing […] creating terms that respond exclusively to the logic of the pure space of the text.” This outlook of absolute self-sufficiency necessarily views works like *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Lessness* as regressions in abstract form, minor experiments that do not sufficiently advance the absolute the “pure space of the text.” In my estimation, rather, the unique grammar and internal structure of both pieces in some ways exceed the limits of Casanova’s subtractive abstraction. By dialectically drawing from and influencing developments in conceptual and stochastic artistic practices across genres, Beckett’s mathematical approach to the construction of space functions as both harbinger and hitherto unanswered challenge to possibilities of literature.

The traditional limits of literature are something that Beckett always, often with a good deal of humor, challenges. He consistently interfaces with, deploys, and questions previous paradigms of the artistically possible, a fact that other critics have recognized. Indeed, there is a certain playfulness in the way that Beckett responds to the seemingly “natural” division between artforms and received aesthetic truisms that have been in place since Aristotle, or perhaps more relevantly here in a discussion of limits, the work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in *Laocoön*. Beckett’s work in *Imagination Dead Imagine* challenges key dictums from *Laocoön* in an almost direct manner. Lessing is clear about his central argument, that of the division

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100 Especially helpful for my project has been Tim Lawrence careful archaeology of Kant and Schopenhauer in Beckett’s nonfiction writing in *Beckett’s Critical Aesthetics*.
101 There is evidence that Beckett knew Lessing’s work. Knowlson writes that during Beckett’s 1936-1937 excursion to Germany, he visited “Lessing’s house and the Augusta Bibliothek where Lessing had been Librarian from 1770-1781. He bought from a local bookshop a complete set of Lessing, which he had posted directly to his home in Foxrock” (273).
between painting and poetry or narrative: “The rule is this, that succession in time is the province of the poet, co-existence in space that of the artist.”\textsuperscript{102} The temporality of the canvas exists at a single instance, and we are able to take in all of the spatial features of the painting, like the position of its subjects, in a single, sustained glance. Narrative, on the other hand, is the peculiar domain of the poet, who has great difficulty describing objects as they extend in space. For Lessing, the division between painting and poetry is absolute, or nearly so:

\begin{quote}
Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties into the heart of the other’s domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all the petty encroachments which circumstances may compel either to make in haste on the rights of the other.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

Borrowing from Lessing’s masculine, warlike language, we may view the Cubist painters as perhaps the first to encroach on the borders of poetry and painting, portraying the passage of time in works like Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2” that replicated the effect of the camera. Beckett’s own encroachment in the opposite direction, the turning of extended duration into space, came later, but no less forcefully. So we read in Texts 8: “time has turned into space and there will be no more time, till I get out of here.”\textsuperscript{104} The collapsing of narrative time into space (here not “the pure space of the text” as Casanova puts it, but a carefully delineated physical environment) is not accomplished solely by sheer invocation, however: it is a problem to be worked through. In \textit{Imagination Dead Imagine}, Beckett moves from the Cubist

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 110.
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move of *Texts for Nothing*, the collapsing of time into space, into new figurations marked by geometrical abstraction.

For Beckett, abstraction does not come in a single form. The torquing and syntactic alteration of language according to logical schema is the sort of abstraction that Casanova identifies, one present already in the tortured permutations that grind narrative in the novel *Watt* to a screeching halt. The geometrical abstraction of *Imagination Dead Imagine* poses a conceptual challenge, not identical to Conceptualism, but homologous in structure: a statement or description of a space that does not proceed in narrative time, but flits up for a moment before disappearing into “the black dark for good” (*CSP* 185). Beckett’s statements about this space, a “rotunda […] Diameter three feet, three feet, from the ground to the summit of the vault” (*CSP* 182), is precisely the sort of detour that Lessing warns would be painful for readers and poets alike:

> How do we obtain a clear idea of a thing in space? First we observe its separate parts, then the union of these parts, and finally the whole. […] Suppose now that the poet should lead us in proper order from one part of the object to the other; suppose he should succeed in making the connection of these parts perfectly clear to us; how much time will he have consumed?[^106]

A few pages, more or less, but “what would have seemed, in other times, in other places, an eternity” (*CSP* 183). Beckett seems aware of the toll the tedium of making “the connection of these parts perfectly clear” takes on the reader, even in a piece as short as *Imagination Dead*

[^105]: Tim Lawrence points out that the “The distinction between 'statement and 'description' was an important one for Beckett […] Beckett's preference for statement over description supports varieties of imagery not fixed by the intellect, but which occupy the background or vanishing point of sight.” Tim Lawrence, *Samuel Beckett’s Critical Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 101.

Imagine. Tonally, the “narrative” – although it has no real characters and goes nowhere – is deliberately uneven. The text’s dialogical structure both invites response and directly addresses the reader: “No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there” (CSP 182). There is a “difficulty” there, of course, because the problem the text poses in its oscillation between hesitation, invitation, command, hypotheticals, and pseudoscientific description is precisely that of figuration, the portrayal of “separate parts, then the union of these parts, and finally the whole,” the onerous labor described by Lessing. The result of this labor is not simply a scholastic refutation, but an expansion of the field of the possible with literary representation. By challenging readers to conceptualize space rather than the time-based flow of narrative, Beckett advances his approach to abstraction even further by foregrounding concept rather than action, space instead of time, and image over plot.

The conceptual element of Imagination Dead Imagine, or perhaps the challenge to conception, is contained in the text’s paradoxical title that both invokes the reader’s “dead” capability to imagine and commands them to do so anyway. Sol LeWitt, writing two years after the publication of Imagination in 1965, offers the traditional definition of conceptual art: “the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the [conceptual] work” because “it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.” Beckett’s work, while containing undeniable similarities, is however constructed and executed in a way that is not at all perfunctory, and thanks to the centering of narration, seems to unfold its concept rather than simply state or measure it: “Go back out, a plain rotunda, all white in the whiteness, go back in, rap, solid throughout” (CSP 182). What was once the domain of the

108 Contemporary conceptual literature, such as the work of Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, or Robert Fitterman, tends to follow the LeWitt paradigm much more closely.
wanderer character, motion (ceaseless or otherwise), is now transferred to the reader, who must navigate a terrain being generated by their imagination.\textsuperscript{109}

Indeed, never before in Beckett’s prose are environments or human characters figured as precisely as in \textit{Imagination Dead Imagine}. Precise, that is, from the perspective of geometry: despite the detail that Beckett offers (“Two diameters at right angles AB CD divide the white ground into two semicircles ACB BDA” (CSP 182)), our actual mental image of the rotunda, its surroundings and its inhabitants, is remarkably difficult to realize. Along with the casual, inviting voice that asks the reader to test the materiality of the veranda, Beckett strikes another tone in \textit{IDI}, what Susan Brienza describes as a “scientific narrator” who “recommends telescopic and microscopic views of the rotunda, its surroundings, and its contents.”\textsuperscript{110} Beckett’s recent experience with the medium of film may help explain how fitting lens-based metaphors seem to be for explaining the text’s “focalization,” which zooms in and out on specific details, alternating between scientific exactitude and the evocation of infinite vastness.\textsuperscript{111} These techniques, closely linked to technological developments, are also enmeshed in the process of geometrical abstraction. When examined either microscopically or from a great distance, objects become defamiliarized, and abstraction in Beckett’s short prose is often a question of scale effects as well as permutations.

The question of figuration is deepened further when we examine the bodies housed within the rotunda. They are pictured geometrically in much the same way as the vault itself: the woman “head against the wall at B, the arse against the wall at A, the knees between the wall

\textsuperscript{109} The invitations to look around the structure also has a parallel to installation art, a topic David Houston Jones discusses in his essay “A Singular Totality: Beckett, Salcedo, Hatoum and Installation Art, from Closed System to Embodied Cognition,” in \textit{Samuel Beckett and Contemporary Art}, ed. David Houston Jones (ibidem Press, 2018).
\textsuperscript{110} Susan Brienza, \textit{Beckett’s New Worlds: Style in Metafiction} (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 128.
\textsuperscript{111} His short with Buster Keaton, entitled \textit{Film}, was filmed in New York in 1964, a year before the publication of \textit{Imagination Dead Imagine}.  

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between B and C, the feet against the wall between C and A, that is to say inscribed in the semicircle ACB, merging in the white ground were it not for the long hair of strangely imperfect whiteness” (CSP 184). A little later, we read that “the bodies seem whole and in fairly good condition, to judge by the surfaces exposed to view” (CSP 184). In this interpenetration of (ostensible) subject and object, surfaces are difficult to accurately discern, at least partly because of the “agitated light” that leads the narrator to declare that “inspection is not easy” (CSP 184).

Surfaces have multiple functions in *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Jonathan Boulter points out their archival function, finding in the rotunda and closed space more generally “memory that works as an archived residue of the process of impossible mourning.” For Boulter, ossification is elegiac, and the preservation of the bodies in the rotunda solidifies them as memory. Yet the archive contained in the vault is troubled by the difficulty of separating out surface from surface, much less surface from substance. The tomblike structure of the vault does not only contain the two bodies, it finds them “merging in the white ground.” By destroying the boundaries between things, Beckett abstracts our perception of the rotunda while at the same time offering a narrator who casually invites us to conceive the still life contained therein.

The solidity and facticity that ought to be bestowed on the surfaces within and without the rotunda via their concrete mathematization and geometrical cohesion is another way in which abstraction in the text is achieved, albeit paradoxically. Despite nearly receiving blueprints to this imagined structure where life comingles with stone, it is difficult to imagine the rotunda and its bodies without quite literally sketching them out. The difficulties posed by explicit

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113 Jones remarks that “The body of *Imagination Dead Imagine* is the artefact of a self-canceling imagination and, like those of other closed system texts, is systematically demoted in ontological terms. The two unnamed bodies of *Imagination Dead Imagine* become little more than geometrical figures” (147).
114 Brian Finney helpfully diagrams the vault in “A Reading of Beckett’s ‘Imagination Dead Imagine,’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 17, no. 2 (1971): 66.
mathematical depiction are not merely those of autonomous hermeticism, however. As a formal
technique, “mathematizing” artworks has a history, one interwoven especially with periods of
great political and artistic turbulence. Writing in the wake of WWII and the realities of the
Holocaust, Theodor Adorno offers a theoretical and historical account of mathematization as a
tendency in *Aesthetic Theory*:

> Mathematization as a method for the immanent objectivation of form is
> chimerical. Its insufficiency can perhaps be clarified by the fact that artists resort
to it during historical periods when the traditional self-evidence of forms
dissolves and no objective canon is available. At these moments the artist has
recourse to mathematics it unifies the level of subjective reason attained by the
artist with the semblance of an objectivity founded on categories such as
universality and necessity; this is semblance because the organization, the relation
of elements to each other that constitutes form, does not originate in the specific
structure and fails when confronted with the particular. For this reason
mathematics favors precisely those traditional forms that it at the same time
denounces as irrational. Rather than embodying the abiding lawfulness of being,
its own claim to legitimacy, the mathematical aspect of art despairingly strives to
guarantee its possibility in a historical situation in which the objectivity of the
conception of form is as requisite as it is inhibited by the level of
consciousness.\(^{115}\)

In Adorno’s account, mathematization as a technique is not something that is always available to
all artists; rather, in moments of crisis and rupture, it becomes available as a “chimerical” formal

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model. These moments are characterized not only by the fading appeal of older, once stable forms, but by the inability of previous forms to both account for the present moment and serve as a model for the artist. The fading of certain forms that appeared “self-evident” motivates a turn to what seems always unchanging and stable: mathematics. By shifting “the organization, the relation of elements to each other that constitutes form” to an outside model, the form of the artwork, which should be immanently derived and manifested, finds itself mimicking the traditional forms the artist saw as insufficient or sought to escape. Thus the double bind of mathematization: at precisely the moment it is most attractive (when “no objective canon is available”) it is most likely to enmesh the artist and artwork in forms that are insufficient to their historical situation. From this paradox, Beckett offers a tentative solution: the reworking of form alongside the deployment of mathematization.

Beckett’s interest in mathematics is nothing new in the period *Imagination Dead Imagine* was written. Since at least *Watt* and the sucking stones of *Molloy*, Beckett consistently experimented with the potential of careful logical and mathematical patterning in both his prose and drama. Yet Beckett was also aware of what Adorno sees as the historical dimension of mathematization, something he points out in a letter to Georges Duthuit in 1948:

> I feel so clearly what you say about space and the Italians.\[116\] I remember a picture in the Zwinger, a St Sebastian by Antonello da Messina […] Pure space by dint of mathematics, tiling, flagstones rather, black and white, with long, Mantegna-style foreshortenings, that would draw moans from you, and the victim of the stoning, displayed, displaying himself, to the admiration of the couriers taking the Sunday air on their balconies, the

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\[116\] The editor’s footnote in *Collected Letters Vol. 2* to this entry makes clear that Duthuit was actively antagonistic towards Italian Renaissance painting: “hostility to the Western mimetic tradition was cardinal to Duthuit’s aesthetic, hostility to Italian art in particular” (87). This knowledge lends Beckett’s comments a rather comic quality, especially the ironic remark that “it is hard not to go and hang yourself” after seeing da Messina’s painting.
whole thing invaded, eaten into by the human. In front of such a work, such a victory over the reality of disorder, over the pettiness of the heart and mind, it is hard not to go and hang yourself.¹¹⁷

Ever the savvy reader of painting, Beckett playfully identifies both the technical virtuosity of da Messina’s along with its limitations. Da Messina, painting at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, was working in a historical period at least somewhat analogous to Beckett’s own, a time of constant war, technological innovation, and the self-conscious expansion of artistic techniques and practice. The self-referentiality of the mathematized approach to “pure” space is something that is contained in the foreground of the St. Sebastian, the titular saint at once “displayed” and “displaying himself.” Oscillating between representation and represented, the sociality of what is lit up by “the pure dint of mathematics” intrudes upon the self-sufficiency and universality of the mathematized pictorial gesture. Even as mathematical form and religious content seem to join together in transcendence over the “reality of disorder,” the “couriers taking the Sunday air” are altogether indifferent: a pair of soldiers converse in the bottom right of the background, and one even lies fast asleep in the bottom left. It is as though the very content of the St. Sebastian mocks its formal claim to what Adorno called “universality and necessity.”

The careful geometry of Imagination Dead Imagine thus differs from Beckett’s earlier uses of mathematized gestures by no longer parodying the conceits of Romantic representation, substituting instead a uniquely clear presentation of literary abstraction. The strange mixture of pathos and humor that make up the foreground and background respectively of the St. Sebastian comes from the confrontation between mathematized form of the transcendent, dying saint with the content of an uncaring, blasé social reality; a conflict between the religious and

mathematically transcendent on one hand and the secular on the other. Similarly, what lends the prolonged counting and permutating scenes in *Watt* their humor is the mimetic comportment of the situations coupled with the formal audacity of their mathematical techniques: the simple act of feeding a neighborhood dog runs some 40 pages. *Imagination* retains an explicitly mathematized form but substitutes content for something that must be imagined precisely because it does not and cannot exist. Form and content in the story are up to task from the historical standpoint of artistic abstraction, and exist in dialectical tension with each other: what rescues *Imagination Dead Imagine* from being a mere blueprint or technical document is the persistent unreality of the space it circumscribes, an inconsistent and cameralike narrator, and the difficulty involved in our own capacity to imagine what could be. As Andre Furlani puts it in a description of the teleplay *Quad*, geometry “is not an escape from the deceit and destitution of the arbitrary signifier into the paradise of number but a nonverbal expression of that condition.”

Of course, the mathematized or geometrical abstraction of *Imagination Dead Imagine* is not the only way Beckett implements a project of literary abstraction. Casanova has pointed us already to the permutational approach of *Worstward Ho*, but *Lessness* embarks on a different project than either that text or *IDI*. The confoundingly clear descriptions of *IDI* give way to an environment without clear demarcations between earth and sky, and where *IDI* at least had reference to the passing of time, *Lessness* is static: “never but this changelessness” (*CSP* 197). In contrast to the text of the story, the literary production of *Lessness* was anything but changeless. Written in 1969, *Lessness* represents Beckett’s most sustained foray into indeterminate or chance composition. Paralleling similar developments in the arts and music, *Lessness* was assembled

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from a position of constraints rather than seemingly limitless freedom. Susan Brienza and Enoch Brater offer the following account of the composition of *Lessness*:

[Beckett] wrote each of the 60 sentences on a separate piece of paper, mixed them all in a container, and then drew them out in random order twice: the resulting sequence became the order of the 120 sentences. Beckett then wrote the number 3 on four separate pieces of paper, the number 4 on six pieces, the number 5 on four pieces, the number 6 on six pieces, and finally the number 7 on four pieces. Again drawing randomly, he ordered the units into sentence blocks according to the number drawn, finally making 120.

60 carefully composed sentences, their final arrangement left entirely to chance. This form presents a challenge for traditional methods of literary analysis: any sort of narrative that can be puzzled out in the first 60 sentences is reconfigured entirely in the second 60, and the relationship of referents across sentences will be entirely the product of contingency. At the same time, however, there are affinities in the sentences that generate clusters of linked topicality. J.M. Coetzee notes that “*Lessness* displays features not often encountered in connected discourse. The most notable is finiteness: whereas normal discourse draws upon a word-stock which in any theorizing must be treated as infinite, *Lessness* clearly signals that its word-stock is finite.” Through its mechanical procedures, the text rearranges a curated set of

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119 Chance or stochastic operations feature heavily in the music of Iannis Xenakis, Morton Feldman, Pauline Oliveros, and John Cage, among many others. Cage is a double reference point here too: not only did he write conceptual music, but as Marjorie Perloff points out, conceptual poetry as well. Moreover, for at least some of Cage’s acrostic (or “mesostic,” as he calls them) poems, he used Beckett’s writing as a source material. The muddled directionality of influence here seems to have suited both artists just fine.


121 Brienza and Brater identify six such topics, including “1) the ruins as ‘true refuge’; 2) the endless grey of earth and sky; 3) the little body; 4) the space ‘all gone from mind’; 5) past tenses combined with ‘never’; 6) future tenses of active verbs and the “figment” sentence about dawn and dusk” (245).

words that shun any notion of plenitude, emphasizing instead privation and limitation. The tension between infinity and finitude carries over to the environments portrayed in the text itself.

*Lessness* is a different experiment than *IDI*, offering another view of how literary abstraction can function. Where *IDI* is tonally precise and inviting, *Lessness* is sprawling and disorienting in its limitless expanses and lack of punctuation or traditional syntax. The space of *Lessness* is oriented between two poles: the first is a collapsed refuge housing a body, and the second is a vast expanse of intermingled earth and sky. Chance dictates that the first line of the text introduces us to the “ruins true refuge” in which the “little body” lies, a building “four square true refuge long last four walls over backwards no sound” (*CSP* 197). This ruined refuge is the only somewhat demarcated space in the text, although it notably lacks the rigorous geometry of *Imagination Dead Imagine*. The rest of the landscape is not a void, as in other short prose and novellas, but a thoroughly veiled representation of land and sky, as though the narrator were describing from within a dust storm: “Earth sky as one all sides endlessness […] Earth sand same grey as the air sky ruins body fine ash grey sand” (*CSP* 197). From within this veiled perspective, all the constituent elements of the environment, even the bodily subject, are figured in the same way and with the same colors.\footnote{Much like Kazimir Malevich’s painting *White on White* (1918), different shapes are apparent within both canvas and text.} Because there is neither conventional action nor plot, even of the minimal variety that we encountered in *IDI*, Beckett’s literary abstraction here takes on a new cast: adding onto the conceptual problem of imagining the landscape, we must also imagine the relational links between spaces and bodies without the aid of an explicitly mathematized portrayal.

With its dearth of narrative links, *Lessness* seems to be a complete mystery from the standpoint of traditional representational aesthetics. Yet what its abstract structuring principle
and presentation reveal is a different kind of literary experience, one where the distance between reader and author is diminished. Coetzee’s probabilistic analysis of Lessness reveals something startling: “there are no determinate principles of ordering among phrases, sentences, or paragraphs, yet […] all are interdependent and connected. There is thus no principle of hierarchy or priority among the components of the work.”¹²⁴ Beckett’s nonhierarchical approach to composing Lessness diminishes the imposition of authorial intent: while still composing the building block elements of the story (the individual sentences), he cedes authority when it comes to the overall structure and composition of text. Implicit in all the closed space texts (and Beckett’s postwar work more generally) is the lessening of the effects of narrative, either through the motionlessness of characters or a puzzling circularity of form. At best, we receive a sequence of viewing angles like those in Imagination Dead Imagine. Lessness puts an even more definitive stop to the possibility of authorial narrativizing by virtue of its sheer contingency: it could have easily been presented differently had Beckett picked up the 60 scraps of paper in an altered order. Narrative, which seems to inexorably bring us from beginning to middle to end, is disrupted by the ruptured syntax of Lessness. Even verbs, which describe on a quite literal level what happens, are heavily elided.¹²⁵ Without them, we as readers are forced to bring things into relation with each other, a process that is rendered additionally complex thanks to the repetition that is entailed by the second half of the text.

A methodological problem for us as readers is prompted exactly halfway through Lessness: are we reading or rereading the story? All the individual units that comprise the text –

¹²⁵ As Brienza and Brater point out in their analysis: “Although Beckett marks off syntactic units with capital letters and periods, the syntax itself is intensely elliptical and condensed, consisting almost exclusively of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.” (244)
the sentences – are entirely unchanged from their first deployment. What does change, however, are the words surrounding each sentence. By foregrounding the alteration of meaning in terms of context, *Lessness* destabilizes what could be seen as the anthropocentrism of narrative: rather than bringing world into the text via description or statement, and thus subsuming to hierarchical models on the level of phrase to overall structure, Beckett enacts world within the text as a material object. By foregrounding procedures and operations, the radically limited textual world breaks off from the ostensibly infinite word-bank in order to demonstrate something preselected about the function of language. Rather than interpretation, Beckett offers here the hermeneutics of proximity; space and spatial relationships as a form and method of meaning-making.

By focusing our attention on the relationships between words, their shifting contexts as they are used and reused at the level of the phrase, Beckett’s literary practice gains an additional layer of materiality. While always eschewing any transcendental ideal, Beckett’s process-oriented later projects, in their geometrical or chance abstractions, create a different method of both writing and reading. Beckett is a difficult author, but reading his late work is not an exercise in obscurity. By making us, as readers, create and draw links between the word and the phrase as they appear and reappear, texts like *Lessness* are insistently democratic, requiring active participation in the processes of their creation.

Beckett’s disgust at the anthropocentrism of Romantic landscape painters led him on a search for both politically and aesthetically responsible means of representation. In chapter two, responsibility manifested itself in his valorization of the van Velde brothers and his resistance to the nationalizing discourses of wartime and postwar art debates. His commitment to experimentation produced the tentative multiplicity of *Texts for Nothing*, demonstrating throughout the thirteen different prose pieces how the principles he looked for in painting could
be translated to the page. Later, his representation of the wandering subject, moving from Belacqua’s frantic energy to the hesitation of the narrator of *Texts for Nothing*, finds itself at last at rest: Beckett’s increasingly abstracted practice produces the still life portraiture of *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Lessness*. And yet these last prose pieces have a restlessness to them too: their depiction of spaces that are at once infinite and confined, of an endless duration yet instantaneous, create new ways of both writing and reading. Rather than creating and developing one kind of abstraction, Beckett’s occasional experiments produce several different results: subtraction, geometrization, and stochastic procedures, to name only the ones discussed in this chapter. Written while the threat of global nuclear annihilation was a genuine potentiality due to the Cold War, Beckett’s unwavering commitment to creating art that eschewed Romantic universalizing and the nationalizing political aesthetics of Vichy-era collaboration led him to the development of more aesthetically and politically responsible modes of representation, one where the human subject is no longer the sole unit of analysis. At long last, the potential for a literature of the posthuman becomes a genuine possibility, not by sheer force of invocation, but through careful, thoughtful, and engaged construction. Beckett’s enduring legacy is not just the creation of new worlds, but a challenge to reckon with the aesthetics, history and the politics of figuration and representation.

126 Other points of departure could include the anthropological eye of *The Lost Ones* or Beckett’s experiments on stage, to name just a few.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have paid special attention to the background of Beckett’s *oeuvre*. By background I mean several different but connected things: the first is Beckett’s short stories as background, pieces of writing often underexplored in comparison to his novels and plays, especially when considering his very early fiction like *More Pricks than Kicks*. As I demonstrated in chapter 1, we can see here in incipient form the preoccupations and concerns – with Romanticism, nature, and representation – that would help guide Beckett over the course of his career towards new forms of literary abstraction. *Texts for Nothing* demonstrates the tentative process by which Beckett reworked the landscape and narrative, returning to the materiality of space after *The Unnamable*’s empty void and laying the groundwork for future experimental works. In *Imagination Dead Imagine*, Beckett’s methods yield a radical reworking of time and space through a precise, mathematized approach akin to conceptual art. *Lessness* achieves a different sort of abstraction through its chance composition, limited supply of words, and repetition, allowing it to include the reader as active, creative participant in the construction of the work itself.

Another way in which I have highlighted the background is by grounding discussions of the texts in the spaces and places of Beckett’s stories. By paying attention to the diminution of the human subject in Beckett’s fiction after WWII, my analysis also questions the naturalized anthropomorphism that sees in both space and the ostensibly natural world only a reflection of the humans who inhabit it. Moreover, eschewing the human subject as the sole or primary unit of analysis helps provide a new road out of the discussions of being, nothingness, and the metaphysics of the subject that have characterized large portions of Beckett scholarship since at least Maurice Blanchot’s essays in the 1950s. I see my work not as a rejection or even revision of
other authors who focus on the human subject in Beckett’s work, but as the opportunity for new avenues of scholarship. And, of course, my thesis does not ignore the human entirely: the figure of the wanderer is one that Beckett never escapes from, whether as parody of Naturphilosophie in More Pricks than Kicks or as still life in an alien landscape in Imagination Dead Imagine. The deep intermingling of the wanderer and the spaces through which he or she moves or remains immobile generates a new sort of subject entirely, one both estranged from and constructed within her or his environment.

The final background I have spent time analyzing is the actual composition of the primary texts and essays in question. As a material history, this approach highlights the political stakes of “The New Object,” a work emanating from debates before, during, and after Vichy France. Through the prism of these debates, in which art and politics were merged and remaining neutral an impossibility, we see Beckett thinking through the aesthetic and ethical imperatives of his commitment to abstraction. Beckett’s allegiance to the Paris School and the unlikely figures of the van Veldes solidified his commitment to continuing and expanding a project of avant-garde art, borrowing first from abstraction before turning to the even more experimental perspectives of his later work. Flickering between context, text, and intertext, my thesis draws attention the overlapping of life and art, politics and aesthetics in Beckett’s work. These intertexts are developed not only within the content of Beckett’s short prose and essays, but also in the process by which he wrote them. As we see with the manuscripts of Texts for Nothing, this involved a careful and often hesitant approach to composition, one marked by an ethical and aesthetic awareness of the legacy and future of representation.

My interventions throughout this paper help contextualize Beckett’s contributions to developing new possibilities of literature by placing him alongside visual artists rather than other
authors. Not only does this move provide insights for those working at the intersection of literature and the visual arts more generally, especially as it relates to modernism, but it widens our understanding of the nature of ekphrasis. Rather than looking for art at the level of description or content, Beckett offers a way of understanding artistic practices and developments as being translatable from one medium to another. This process is a murky one at best, but what Beckett seems to reveal, especially in his later fiction, is a way of understanding ekphrasis as form and structure rather than depiction. By adopting the principles of abstraction, of conceptualization, of chance operations, and translating them to works of fiction, Beckett dramatically expands the procedures by which literature can be constructed. While Beckett’s style is inimitable, the new horizons of form he reveals are a powerful challenge to writers, readers, and scholars to imagine the possibilities of literary abstraction.
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