

# Modernism beyond the Human

*Transnational Perspectives*

*Edited by*

Alberto Godioli and Carmen van den Bergh



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

# Contents

List of Figures VII  
Notes on Contributors VIII

Introduction 1  
*Alberto Godioli and Carmen van den Bergh*

## PART 1

### *Modernism and the Nonhuman*

- 1 Prefiguring Modernist Posthumanism: Baudelaire, Rimbaud and the Objectification of the Lyric Self 17  
*Alessandro Cabiati*
- 2 Becoming-Digit: Valentine de Saint-Point's Posthumanist Futurism 45  
*Pavlina Radia*
- 3 Politics of Identity: Giuseppe Ungaretti's Poetry of the Great War between Nomadic Subjectivity and Performative Realism 67  
*Enrica Maria Ferrara*
- 4 Variations on "Maquinismo": Looking beyond the Human in Ramón Gómez de la Serna's Writings 92  
*Ângela Fernandes*
- 5 The Tender Being of Something Else: Geography and Lists in Gertrude Stein's *Ida* 111  
*Laura Oulanne*
- 6 Samuel Beckett and Modernist Vitalism 133  
*Marc Farrant*

## PART 2

*Modernist Animals*

- 7 Ruminations of a Serbian Ox: Radoje Domanovic's Satire of Anthropocentric Folly 155  
*Vedran Ćatović*
- 8 "Come se": Transcending the Human-Animal Divide in Pirandello's Short Stories 177  
*Santi Luca Famà*
- 9 Modernist Exiles: the Berlin Years of Viktor Shklovsky, Aleksei Remizov, and the Masturbating Ape 199  
*Asiya Bulatova*
- 10 "Brandishing Her Plumes": Virginia Woolf, Feather Tropes, and the Plumage (Prohibition) Bill 220  
*Saskia McCracken*
- 11 Posthumanism *avant la lettre*: Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* and the Boundaries of Humankind 240  
*Florian Kappeler*
- 12 Animals and *Logos* in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* 257  
*Laura Lainvãe*
- 13 Towards an Interpretation of a Modernist Bestiary in Color: Palazzeschi's *Bestie del 900* and Maccari's Illustrations 279  
*Sarah Bonciarelli*
- Index 301

# Samuel Beckett and Modernist Vitalism

*Marc Farrant*

## Abstract

This chapter seeks to unravel the complex relation between Samuel Beckett's aesthetics of the 'unword' and his concomitant radical questioning of the human. I situate my discussion of Beckett in what might be termed the current 'vitalist turn' in the humanities. I claim that Beckett's sustained critique of Enlightenment rationality – which he terms an 'anthropomorphic insolence' in the wartime novel *Watt* – cannot be assimilated to a vitalist programme that privileges life as a bulwark against the instrumental forces of modernity. By contrasting Beckett's notion of the 'inhuman', in his writings on art in the 1930s, with the contemporary paradigm of the posthuman, I follow the task Beckett sets his readers: to remain with the negative, to not forsake failure as a backwards conduit to success. As such, I claim that Beckett's works offer no possibility of redemption through immanence. Beckett's countless figures of failure cannot be redeemed through a collapsing of the difference between various modes of being. Rather, Beckett's non-representational modernist aesthetic can only be seen as successful in its rendering of the otherness of being insofar as it fails to capture or represent this otherness. The difference between the human and non-human is thus not overcome but displaced indefinitely. Finally, I trace the negativity of life in Beckett back to the origins of both modernism and vitalism in romanticism, exploring the legacy of Beckett's particular reception of nineteenth century ideas in his writings on art and in the late work, *How It Is*.

## Keywords

modernism – Beckett – being/becoming – vitalism – inhuman/posthuman – time/temporality

## 1 Introduction

In his seminal "Literary History and Literary Modernity" (1970), Paul de Man addresses the notion of modernity as a "way of acting" (384) or, we might say,

as a way of life. For de Man this poses a problem that arguably continues to haunt the categorising and historicizing tendencies of recent modernist studies, namely that “[t]he spontaneity of being modern conflicts with the claim to think and write about modernity” (1970, 384). Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche’s vehement critique of nineteenth century historicism, de Man outlines a fundamental disarticulation between the temporal and the historical under the name of life. But what is it about the ontological (rather than merely biological) status of life that makes it incompatible with history, and what does this incompatibility have to do with literature or literary modernism?

In this chapter I focus on the writings of Samuel Beckett, a figure whose modernity (in the literary-historical sense) has often been contested.<sup>1</sup> I situate my discussion of Beckett in what might be termed the current ‘vitalist turn’ in the humanities.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as de Man’s essay demonstrates, it would be wrong to take life as a belated framework when clearly life is integral not only to the reception but also to the *production* of literary modernism from the very beginning. Life denotes a field of interchangeable terms whose contrary counterparts include tradition, organisation, narrative, structure, history, reason, anthropocentrism and identity (and this list could be expanded). Accordingly, Beckett’s avowed anti-humanism and non-representational aesthetic can be seen as aligned with life. In Beckett studies, such an alignment is being undertaken so as to release Beckett from the manacles of post-structuralism and in the name of a more material phenomenology (in the writings of Ulrika Maude), by Deleuzean scholars (such as Stan Gontarski and Audrey Wasser), and by those interested in the relation of Beckett to posthumanism (Jean Michel Rabaté). By sublimating Beckett’s power of the negative onto a field of life recent critics have helped to better describe Beckett’s rendering of bodily experience and the affective dimensions of his works (especially with regards to theatrical performance).<sup>3</sup> These critics have also revealed the groundedness of Beckett’s cerebral and

1 As Mark Pedretti writes in an illuminating essay on Beckett and late modernism: “At the least, it is fair to say that the work of Samuel Beckett resists the easy periodization schemes of twentieth-century literary history” (2013, 583).

2 As the philosopher Martin Hägglund underlines: “The revival of ‘life’ as a central category during the last decade of continental philosophy belongs to a more general turn away from questions of language and discourse, in the name of a return to the real, the material, and the biological” (2016, 36). Literary critic Omri Moses similarly notes vitalism’s “striking prestige in contemporary cultural theory” (2014, 20).

3 Beckett’s sparse late drama and televisual plays seem tailor-made for the performative or embodied turn in theatre studies (cf. Anna McMullan, 2010). The emphasis on interpreting cultural forms as performance rather than text means displacing the constative and conceptual in favour of the corporeal and temporal aspects of a work.

posthuman aesthetics in terms of his extensive knowledge and interest in the life sciences, evolutionary biology, and in the brain and neuroscience.

However, this chapter situates vitalism as a framework to interrogate a slippage between the descriptive and evaluative in recent Beckett criticism. An initial definition of vitalism points to this slippage. Vitalism was an early twentieth century intellectual movement, inspired by figures such as Nietzsche, William James, and Henri Bergson (although in the first section of this essay I propose an alternative ancestry back to Romanticism, Kant, and Schopenhauer), concerned with displacing a mechanistic worldview that had reigned supreme since the Enlightenment. As Timothy Wientzen outlines in a discussion D.H. Lawrence's vitalist politics, by the late nineteenth century "questions central to scientific materialism had begun to enter the mainstream of cultural and political life. From pragmatism to public relations, the physiological discourse of an automatic, conditioned body become fundamental to the most diverse accounts of political modernity" (2013, 33). Not only were vitalists opposed to the calculating intellect of scientific determinism, they also opposed the transcendental ego posited by rationalism (from Descartes to Kant). Continuing in this vein, recent Beckett criticism has furthered the work of earlier existentialist approaches by pushing Beckett's treatment of the Cartesian mind/body dualism (so prevalent across the early works) to a point where the possibilities of both transcendental subjectivity *and* the mechanistic body are broken apart. The problem that the discourse of vitalism makes apparent (and that arguably defines Beckett's work, if not also the tradition of continental philosophy that followed vitalism) is the problem of being neither wholly free nor wholly determined. In other words, whereas before the critical description of Beckett's critique of Enlightenment subjectivity had an overtly evaluative dimension (linked variously to conceptions of Beckett's anti-foundational politics or to an ethics of alterity present in the works), the new material focus of recent criticism risks replicating the structure of linear causal determinism, in its descriptions of Beckett's automatized bodies and affective matrixes, that early vitalists sought to overcome.<sup>4</sup>

Omri Moses, in his study of vitalism and modernist character, sketches this recent return to questions of vitalism and life in a way that reveal what I am conceptualising as a slippage between the evaluative and descriptive: "The new materialisms remain attractive for many critics because of their

---

4 For example, earlier critics such as Richard Begam and Simon Critchley have sought, respectively, to align Beckett's critique of subjectivity with a broadly anti-foundational perspective (Begam 1996) and with an emphasis on ethical conceptions of otherness or alterity (Critchley 2004).

psychophysiological orientation, which offers continuity between scientific and cultural domains, and because the imperatives of survival and augmentation of life revisit the concern of ‘old’ materialisms, but which a less deterministic stance” (2014, 21). Ultimately Beckett’s critique of vitalism, as outlined in this chapter, distinctly troubles this possibility of having one’s cake and eating it; of saddling up alongside the positivist sciences whilst simultaneously preserving a capacity for freedom irreducible to both reason and nature. This becomes apparent and prescient when one takes into consideration the evaluative dimension of the works; the question not only of what life is, in Beckett, but what life is worth. By seeking to account for the latter, descriptions of the former become more problematic. As Moses suggests, the vitalist concerns of new materialist approaches “present a picture of the world in constant movement, where human and nonhuman powers work in an interwoven configuration to effect change. [...] Yet the emphasis on novelty and change do not immediately lead to prescriptive demands: transmutation is not a value in itself. We have to appreciate what counts as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is only meaningful in the context of life” (2014, 21). Moses doesn’t say here what he means by life (although we can infer a sense of shared quotidian experience), yet this statement is illuminating. If what is to be valued – life itself – can only be valued in the context of life, then a final or positive attribution of value to life will be impossible. There is a tautology surrounding life (insofar as life becomes the condition of possibility for its own evaluation and, by extension, its own experience) that I argue not only maps onto Beckett’s unwording aesthetics but also emerges as a principle of composition; a principle marked by a ceaseless work of difference, a combinatory aesthetic of addition by subtraction and vice versa, that can be reduced to neither pure transcendence nor pure immanence.

Accordingly, life constitutes a limit-concept, integral to Beckett’s non-representational aesthetic of the “unword” (2009a, 515) – as outlined in the famous German Letter of 1938 – that profoundly challenges the task of hermeneutic exegesis (whether literary critical, historical, or philosophical). Previous approaches have taken life, most often implicitly, as central to articulations of existentialist freedom, to post-structuralist engagements with an ethics of alterity through tropes of dying and weakness, and to more recent new materialist approaches to the body, including that of posthumanism. In this chapter I seek to recover, perhaps impossibly, a sense of life before the act of critical and conceptual sublimation in the work of literary-critical interpretation. Certainly as a theme in Beckett’s works life offers little with regard to functioning as a positively charged source of affirmation or value. Indeed, when life appears explicitly in Beckett’s work it does so often in the guise of an exhortation, such

as “Bugger life!” (2010a, 94), as Watt exclaims in the novella *Mercier & Camier*, or “fuck Life” (2006, 442) as the voice in *Rockaby* tells us. Life in Beckett always threatens to recede to a point of absolute non-value, like an everyday or commonplace platitude. Similarly, the failure of physical (de)composition seems on the surface a far cry from a Deleuzian “fluid ontology” (Wilmer & Žukauskaitė 2015, 6); an ontology marked by intensities of affect and feeling, by multiplicity, change and potentiality. As the editors of *Deleuze and Beckett* write: “Bergsonian notions of movement and change help us to interpret Beckett’s works not as a scene of nothingness but as a flow of movement” (Wilmer & Žukauskaitė 2015, 7). Indeed, in her influential book *The Posthuman*, philosopher Rosi Braidotti encourages us to comprehend the very idea of posthumanism as founded in a Deleuzian-inspired vitalist ontology, arguing that “non-essentialistic brands of vitalism frame the posthuman subject” (2013, 138). But affirmative descriptions of intensity, flow and becoming not only deploy a semantic frame far removed from Beckett’s actual writings (which draw on a descriptive vocabulary of stasis and suffering far more than one of movement and potentiality), but they also rely upon an evaluative framework that the logic of Beckett’s works ultimately disavow. Such a framework has been described usefully by Jane Bennett as a “commitment to the indeterminacies of material causality – a philosophical faith in indeterminacy” (2010, 53). This faith fails to consider how determinacy is not simply in opposition but actually depends upon indeterminacy, just as life in Beckett is always already inextricably linked to death.

In the first of the following three sections I seek to explore how Beckett’s disavowal of the “anthropomorphic insolence” (2009d, 175) of human reason, as its put in the wartime novel *Watt*, is bound up with a philosophical inheritance (which I trace in terms of life-philosophy, from the Romantics thinkers of the late eighteenth century to Bergson) that disrupts the assignation of value to life. This includes the vitalist aspirations or underpinnings of some contemporary criticism. Benjamin Noys outlines “a turn to the vital” in the contemporary humanities defined as a “turn to ‘matter’ and ‘objects’ [in order to stress] how what was previously treated as ‘inert’ in fact incarnates a liveliness, resistance, and a capacity to evade forms of capture and control” (2015, 173). The vitalist turn in contemporary Beckett studies can thus be summarised as a turn from the subject (and questions related to subjective dissolution) to the object, positing a vital form of political resistance in Beckett’s minimalist aesthetics of the unword.<sup>5</sup> However, by tracing Beckett’s writings on the subject/object

5 In a chapter on Beckett and biopolitics (Farrant, 2020), I address the intractable difficulty of attributing a form of positive or sovereign resistance to Beckett’s works. After all, it is precisely by positing life as a source of radical otherness or ‘outside’ that totalitarian regimes



relation back to his engagement with Kant and Schopenhauer, I seek to disrupt any appeal to a redemptive field of pure immanence. Alongside reading Beckett's later critical writings and notebook materials, a focus in this section is Beckett's early monograph *Proust* and his early disavowal of the vitalist inclination to solidify and nullify time by way of privileging space.

In the second section I discuss how the context of vitalism, as expounded in his writings on visual art, helps to delineate Beckett's trenchant critique of humanism, and the possibilities of an inhuman – rather than posthuman – modernism. The negative anthropology espoused by Molloy, in Beckett's eponymous novel, is thus seen to emerge at the border zone between human and non-human modes of being: "What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not" (2009c, 37–38). Beckett's aesthetics of the unword, consequently involves a concomitant radical questioning of the human. This becomes especially manifest in Beckett's art criticism after the war.<sup>6</sup> In the 1946 "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon," on the van Velde brothers, Beckett writes on the idea of the human: "un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu'on reserve pour les temps des grand massacres [a word, and no doubt a concept too, that is reserved for times of great massacres]" (1984a, 131). Such a view echoes an earlier radio report "The Capital of the Ruins," made in 1945 whilst Beckett was working for the Irish Red cross in the decimated French town of Saint-Lò. Beckett writes of "a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins" (1995, 278). This mocking attitude towards the pretensions of human progress is perhaps best formulated in *The Unnamable*: "So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it's human, a lobster couldn't do it" (2010b, 88). Rather than pursuing Beckett's countless figures of failure and disintegration as key to collapsing the difference between different modes of being, the art writings point in a more nuanced and paradoxical direction. To summarise, a non-representational aesthetic can only be seen as successful in its rendering of alterity or otherness insofar as it fails to capture or represent otherness. The difference between the

---

exert a force of biopower that sacrifices life in the name of (a preferred) life. As the radical indeterminacy of life and the lives of Beckett's characters tell us, if there is a kind of resistance attributable to Beckett's work this is instead in the form of a resistance towards the reduction of life to very polarity between oppression and resistance.

6 As Kevin Brazil argues (2013), Beckett's commentaries on art in this era relate his ongoing aesthetic gestation to the great debates of the time, notably between Sartre, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others, which centred around the meaning of the human in an inhuman, post-world war landscape.

human and non-human is thus not overcome in a gesture of posthuman vital life but displaced indefinitely.

One reader particularly attentive to paradoxes of Beckett's art is Audrey Wasser. Wasser argues that rather than an "aesthetics of failure" (2016, 95), which she sees as premised on an allegorical reading of the figures of failure in Beckett's art, we ought to move beyond a representational reading and toward a rhetorical one. As appealing as it might be to read Beckett's works as critical allegories of their own unwording, such a modality simply "reinstate[s] at another remove those totalizing concepts of subject and work that [one wants] to criticize" (2016, 95). In other words, there is something inherently contradictory in this allegorical approach to Beckett's dissolution of subjectivity since, as Wasser argues, "this very notion of allegory relies on a mechanism of reflection that reproduces the formal structure constitutive of the very subject in question" (2016, 108). Tracing a genealogy of modern subjectivity back to Romanticism, Wasser argues that such a model of "self-reflection constitutes the form of the modern subject par excellence" (2016, 106). In the third and final section, I explore how Wasser's compelling reading of Beckett nonetheless displaces the problems I have associated with vitalism from questions of life form to literary form. Through a reading of Beckett's *Trilogy* and *How it Is*, I suggest that although she is right to suggest that we ought to give up the tautologous attribution of aesthetic mastery to Beckett's critique of mastery, she nonetheless fails to register the remnants of another, alternative legacy of Romanticism which permeates her conception of the generative immanence of the artwork.<sup>7</sup> That is, the displacement of infinite self-reflection and irony onto a negative rather than positive infinity of life.

## 2 The Subject/Object (Non)Relation

Beckett's philosophical interests and affinities are various and manifold. Nevertheless, from Heraclitus to Bergson, we might provisionally group together Beckett's select canon of thinkers by using the category of life-philosophy. As Ingo Farin explains, life-philosophy addresses the polarity of life and reason

---

7 As Wasser astutely delineates, several previous approaches shun a sharp distinction between content and form and explicitly align, as for instance in Georges Bataille's account of Molloy, "the formlessness of a character directly to the formlessness of the language that describes him" (2016, 102). This leads to a variety of allegorical interpretation whereby a thematic sense of silence, decomposition, or absence is attributed to a formal aesthetic which is often contradictorily marked by a sense of verbosity, abundance, and vitality.

and its modern guise can be understood as “primarily *protest philosophy*” (2012, 4). Accordingly, figures such as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Proust draw upon a notion of life to systematically undermine claims to universal truths by ignoring questions of subjectivity, time and perception. Such universal claims, as Beckett argues in his 1930 monograph, *Proust*, are “extratemporal” (1970, 75); stable projections grafted onto reality so as to freeze it within the stultifying framework of what Beckett terms “habit” (1970, 18), or bourgeois common-sense. Although as David Addyman has demonstrated, it is “impossible to demonstrate conclusively that Beckett read Bergson before he wrote *Proust*” (2015, 107), there remains a strong Bergsonian influence. Both Proust’s thought itself bears a strong affinity to Bergson and Proust’s reception was deeply inflected by the widespread influence of Bergson at the time.

This philosophical influence can also be observed in Margot Norris’ account of early modernist “biocentrism,” a movement she attributes to the foundational texts of Darwin and Nietzsche and which manifests in the work of writers like D.H. Lawrence. On the one hand, biocentrism informs a subversion of the “anthropomorphic premises of Western philosophy and art,” and on the other hand, the invention of “strategies that would allow the animal, the unconscious, the instincts, the body to speak again” (1985, 5). The avant-garde thus sought to dissolve text into life or life into text, thereby radically collapsing the difference between subject and object. In the context of Beckett’s writings on *Proust* this aversion to Reason can be seen as a critique of homogenous duration, a quantitative understanding of time that Bergson associates with the patterns of symbolisation and representation which allow the subject to master the phenomenal or objective world.<sup>8</sup> Certainly Beckett pursues a tempocentric reading of *Proust* which would appear to align with Bergson’s intuitionism and blurring of the past and present. Beckett sets out to, as he writes, “examine in the first place that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation – Time” (1970, 11). It is time which thwarts desire, conceived in its fulfilled state as “the complete identification of object and subject” (1970, 57). However, Beckett’s privileging on time over space nonetheless reveals a certain disharmony with Bergson’s attempt to devise, as Manfred Milz puts it, a continuous or qualitative sense of time that would permit an “intuitive perception of the absolute” (2008, 147). This disharmony manifests in the monograph’s consistently Schopenhauerian outlook. Indeed, in later writings, including

---

8 In contrast to this quantitative account, Bergson outlines a qualitative temporal heterogeneity in which “several conscious states are organized into a whole, permeate one another, [and] gradually gain a richer content” (2001, 122).

the novel *Murphy*, the Bergsonian ideal state of mind that would come about from a union of subjective perception and objective reality is jeopardised by a monadic solipsism that fundamentally threatens life from functioning as a source of resistance to calculative reason.<sup>9</sup>

This move in *Murphy* is anticipated by Beckett in 1934 where in a critical text, entitled “Recent Irish Poetry,” he writes of a fundamental “rupture in the lines of communication” (1984b, 70) between subject and object. This radical dissociation of subject from object, as that which engenders the alienated view of life later solidified by Beckett’s “gallery of moribunds” (2009c, 143), lies at the heart of an attack on representation: “The artist who is aware of this may state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects [...] as no-man’s-land” (1984b, 70). Beckett’s negative formulation is staged in his later writings through an aesthetics of “non-relation,” as formulated in correspondence with Georges Duthuit and expanded in *Three Dialogues* (1949).<sup>10</sup> The question that arises is: if Beckett disavows the humanistic and anthropomorphic pretensions of Western thought, to what extent is the “no-man” imbued, as in Bergson, with a vital intensity through which life is posited as an alternative value?

Beckett’s commentary on subject/object relations is indebted to a reading of Schopenhauer and, to a lesser degree, Kant (or Kant via Schopenhauer). The division between the phenomenal and noumenal realms – the world as it appears to us and the inaccessible world of things-in-themselves – is the fundamental focus of Schopenhauer’s critique of post-Kantian Idealism or the tradition of German Romanticism (whose figurehead, for Wasser, is Friedrich Schlegel). The latter can be characterised as an attempt to bridge the gulf between subject (the one who thinks life) and object (life as that which is thought) by positing a form – following Johann Fichte – of “Absolute Life” (as cited in Thacker 2011, 15) which renders Kant’s split redundant. In so doing the idealists seek to render thought as no longer transcendental or separate from the world but rather continuous with it. This shift from being to becoming marks the latent vitalism of the idealist tradition, a tradition Wasser seeks to

9 For Gontarski, conversely, the eponymous character of *Murphy* typifies a vitalist sense of “being as becoming” (2012, 601); of a positively charged sense of flux and multiplicity whose movement in stillness points towards a limitlessness of creativity.

10 In a 1949 letter to Duthuit, Beckett praises Bram van Velde practice of painting for being “new because it is the first to repudiate relation in all its forms. It is not the relation with this or that order of opposite it refuses, but the state of being in relation as such” (2011a, 140).

repudiate but nonetheless draws upon in her insistence on a similar dynamic or immanent ontology of the work of art.<sup>11</sup>

In his “Whoroscope Notebook” of the 1930s Beckett writes down a revealing summation of the Kantian framework that opens it up to precisely the kind of idealist critique which would succeed it. Beckett writes: “Kant’s proof that the conditions of experience are also the conditions of possibility of the objects of experience!!!” (as cited in Murphy 2015, 264). In other words, the objects of thought turn out to be the products of thought, whereas the thing in-itself, including that which grants thought (namely reason), remains unthinkable. For the idealists this is unsatisfactory, yet by exteriorising thought – making subject and object continuous – they also disown the possibility of a self-sufficient, rational subject. In Beckett’s fictions, the breakdown of the human subject similarly disavows the anthropocentric foundation of thought as that which dictates that the world is ‘for us’ insofar as we are outside of it. Hence Beckett’s critique of Enlightenment subjectivity is inseparable from his move against representation in the arts, a move that Rabaté – in a chapter on Beckett and Kant – takes as indicative of the way “Beckett’s intellectual evolution duplicates Kant’s passage from the first to the third critique” (2016, 107). However, for Wasser this exposes the subject, and subjectivity as such, to an abyssal irony (where “thinking becomes a thinking of thinking,” 2016, 107) that repeats the original separation of subject and object at another remove. Consequently, as readers and critics of Beckett’s works, she argues we are doomed to constantly fall into this abyss lest we give up on pretensions to isolating or extracting definitive meaning, including even the nuanced claim that Beckett is about the “representation of unrepresentability” (2016, 109).

Wasser’s alternative attention to the “pathos” (2016, 113) of reading, however, rests on an alternative fallacy inherited from the same tradition. As another contemporary theorist of life, Eugene Thacker, argues, the collapse of the Kantian distinction doesn’t merely result in an abyssal irony but merely inverts the originary philosophical abstraction. That is, the idealist attempt to make Life-in-itself a form of immanent becoming (common to all instances of the

---

11 In contrast to Fichte’s intuitive continuity between subject and object, Wasser asserts that Schlegel’s alternative romanticism “attempts to hold on to both an immediacy of intuition and an infinity of reflection” (2016, 106). I am suggesting that by seeking to displace reflection as “the medium of the romantic absolute” (2016, 107), Wasser fails to spot the affinity between her account of artistic immanence and the romantic immediacy of Fichte’s originary sense of Absolute Life. In other words, a sense of life as unmediated or without limits corresponds just as much to a notion of infinity (meaning to be without limits) as a sense of endless mediation or reflection.

living whilst being simultaneously irreducible to both the noumenal realm of ideas *and* the phenomenal realm of the living, the realm of the objective sciences) ends up dogmatically spatialising time insofar as movement cancels out succession. As Thacker elucidates, this shift from being to becoming inaugurates life as “an infinite process of becoming, flux, and flow, an infinite expression of the living in an organic whole called life” (2011, 15). However, life as such becomes superabundant or over-present; by turning the static or transcendent category of being into a dynamic and immanent category of becoming, post-Kantian idealism affirms life as a positive infinity (i.e. akin to the God of negative theology). In other words, immanence fails to escape transcendence.

Indeed, this is ultimately Beckett’s reading of the “Proustian solution” (1970, 75) of involuntary memory. Untainted by the machinations of calculative reason, involuntary memory offers the artist both a conduit to extra-temporal truth and a sublimation of time as becoming. This immediate access with past experience Beckett terms the “ideal real [...] this mystical experience communicates an extratemporal essence” that negates “Time and Death” (1970, 75). This solution is an idealist fantasy, however, and Beckett terms Proust’s solution “romantic” precisely because of its “substitution of affectivity for intelligence” (1970, 81). Although he suggests a certainty naivety in Proust’s romanticism, Beckett nonetheless redeems this emphasis on temporally situated affectivity by aligning it not with Bergsonian vitalism but with Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer’s own formulation of Absolute life, that which he terms the Will-to-life, avoids such a positive teleology by being constituted as wholly negative; contrary to a possessive aesthetic that seeks to freeze time in the form of space, for Beckett: “The artist is active, but negatively” (1970, 65).<sup>12</sup> The Will-to-life works through negation, it is everywhere at variance with itself.<sup>13</sup> Beckett inherits Schopenhauer’s thinking of life in his own work, I argue, as a negative

12 Accordingly, Schopenhauer’s Will-to-life is constructed meontologically, as a kind of nothing. Like idealism, and similarly as an answer to the problem of devising an ontology of life, this avoids the reduction of life to the pitfalls of epistemological classification but goes further by also circumventing the inverted transcendentalism of an immanent or pantheistic life principle. Following Kant and the subject/object split, the problem of forming an ontology of life derives from seeking a continuity between life and the living. Schopenhauer thus seeks to overcome this difficulty by grounding this continuity in terms of nothingness.

13 Rather than providing what Thacker terms an “ontology of generosity” (2011, 15), Schopenhauer instead sarcastically notes: “life is thus given as a gift, whence it is evident that anyone would have declined it with thanks had he looked at it and tested it beforehand” (1969, vol. 2, 579).

infinity that constitutes a limit to any master-discourse on life, whether ontological, biological, or theological.

### 3 The Inhuman

What Jean-Michel Rabaté terms Beckett's "determined animus against postwar humanism" (2016, 18) in fact emerges already in the pre-war writings of the 1930s, especially in Beckett's letters on the visual arts. Writing in his diary, on the German artist Franz Marc, Beckett states: "Interesting notes in Marc re subject, predicate, object relations in painting. He says: paint the predicate of the living, Picasso does that by the inanimate. By that he appears to mean not the relation between subject and object, but the alienation (my nomansland)" (as cited in Feldman 2006, 15). Similarly in Jack Yeats' paintings Beckett discovers "nature almost as inhumanly inorganic as a stage set" (2009a, 540). Rather than vital abundance, Beckett's inhuman aesthetics reveal a petrified incommensurability at the heart of life. This is most clearly articulated in an earlier 1934 letter to MacGreevy on Paul Cézanne.<sup>14</sup> For Beckett Cézanne is the first artist "to see landscape & state it as material of strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever" (2009a, 222). Cézanne's heroic feat is to present to viewers an "atomistic landscape with no velleities of vitalism," the consequence of which is celebrated as "one bright spot in a mechanistic age – the deanthropomorphization of the artist" (2009a, 222–223). In another letter to McGreevy Beckett discusses the "incommensurability" of reading Cézanne's life in his works, since "he had the sense of his incommensurability not only with life of such a different order as landscape but even with life of his own order, even with the life [...] operative in himself" (2009a, 227).

This incommensurability or logic of non-relation does not, however, reinstall a privileging of static being over flux-like becoming. Cézanne's alienation of the artist does not result from standing-above or separate from the represented object, but rather from being embedded within a dynamic temporality that risks sundering the relation of subject and object precisely by conflating the two. For Beckett, Cézanne's distance from the imagistic or photographic "snapshot puerilities" of Impressionism derives from an awareness of the embeddedness of the artist. Cézanne understands "the dynamic intrusion to be himself & so landscape to be something by definition unapproachably

---

14 In a chapter on Beckett and the posthuman, Rabaté argues that Beckett's writings on Cézanne portend "a new poetics or a new ethics of nonrelation in which distance, dehiscence, and incommensurability are key terms" (2016, 40).



alien" (2009a 223). Cézanne's works help to contextualise the injunction made in Beckett's post-war art criticism (specifically in a piece translated from French as "The New Object"), namely to paradoxically represent how "the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation" (2011b, 879). Just as Beckett's aesthetics and ethics of nonrelation refute the mastery of the mimetic premise, which stands above the object, neither does Beckett seek to overcome the alienation of subject and object by positing a vital continuum between the two. This is why representation cannot ultimately be avoided; indeed, the unrepresentable depends on representation, just as form in literature can never be wholly separated from content. By positing a relation of non-relation, life is consequently figured as inherently contradictory, irreducible to either an essential concept of life-in-itself or to empirical or phenomenal instances of the living. To summarise, Beckett's art writings build upon his other intellectual and philosophical engagements; subject and object are not simply separated nor are they simply merged, but they become related through an entanglement of both impossibility and necessity. In the next section I read this logic in Beckett's post-war fictions (namely the *Trilogy* and *How It Is*) as key to displacing both a vitalism of content and a vitalism of form.

#### 4 An Orgy of False Becoming

In Beckett's *How It Is* (1961) a relation of nonrelation is sustained by a narrator and his encounters with a figure called Pim. The solitary narrator crawls through an endless wasteland of "primeval mud impenetrable dark" (2009b, 7). The monologue is entirely unpunctuated. The sparse and minimalist paragraphs rise and fall successively, the opening sets the scene "how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it" (2009b, 3). The voice continues to speak in a frantic combinatory rhythm pausing only to breathe through the mud. The text is poised between form and formlessness. The narrator's monologue is constituted by condensed word-groups of compacted meaning, creating an ungrammatical parataxis. Juxtaposition is both a key compositional technique and a thematic motif. The monologue is constantly displaced between thought and speech; the narrator is both the creator, the focal narrative voice, and a creature being spoken into existence.

This structural equivocation between form and formlessness manifests a sexual amorphousness: "having rummaged in the mud between his legs I bring up finally what seems to me a testicle or two the anatomy I had" (46). The relation with Pim also occurs across an amorphous plane of similitude, in which each partner becomes "glued together like a single body in the dark the mud"



(2009b, 106), as the narrator puts it. This creates an “orgy of false being life in common” (2009b, 59), a relation of non-relation in which moments of intense love are somehow predicated on mastery and violence, and vice versa: “with the nail then of the right index I carve and when it breaks or falls until it grows again with another on Pim’s back” (2009b, 60). “We have our being in justice” (2009b, 108), states the narrator, and this justice guarantees that each is due their turn as both tormentor and victim. Here Kant and Sade become the implied pseudocouple. The life in common, Absolute life, is not positively charged but a negativity infinity in which, as Schopenhauer argues, “[t]ormentor and tormented are one” (1969, Vol. 1, 354).<sup>15</sup> In *How It Is* this self-division is defined as the “two aspirations warring in each heart” (2009b, 125).

This relation of non-relation in *How It Is* re-iterates the negative anthropology of Beckett’s earlier works. However, the attack on anthropomorphism, and its explicit link with rational humanism, is not staged simply through collapsing the difference between human and non-human modes of being. The fragmentation of thresholds (sexual, creaturely, textual) does not overcome difference through a commonality of vital life in the mud, rather this disintegration propagates difference at every level. Subject/object relations are held in an embedded state of contradiction: “not known not said whence preparatives sudden series subject object subject object quick succession and away” (2009b, 7). Rather than a process of “becoming-animal” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, 12), that seeks to cross all thresholds in a “continuum of intensities” and achieve the “unformed matter of deterritorialized flux” (1986, 13), Beckett’s work highlights the impoverishment of vital formlessness. As Noys argues: “Life is not a mobile and expressive value always escaping its various incarcerations, but rather the experience of life is shaped by [...] forms of value. The very notion of ‘life’, a ‘mobile’ life or a ‘rich’ life, is one structured through the forms of class, race, and gender, displacing the vitalist stress on a generic form of life that, somehow, sustains value” (2015, 180). This generic form of life, what Deleuze terms the “impersonal life” (Wilmer & Žukauskaitė 2015, 8), thus attempts to overcome the co-implication of form and content, seen as integral to identity, yet fails to register how this co-implication is also essential to the work of difference. After all, is it really possible to extract the body or pathos from

---

15 In other words, for Schopenhauer the original nothingness or formlessness of life drives the process of positive individuation, but one becomes individuated at the cost of denying the very nothing upon which the individual is premised. Accordingly, Beckett inherits an ethics that refuses to paper over this initial negativity and is thereby marked by an ineluctable self-division. Therefore existence as such is seen as being marked by what is termed in *Proust* the “original and eternal sin [...] of having been born” (1970, 67).

meaning; are affective or somatic states truly extra- or pre-linguistic? Beckett's 1974 poem "Something There" posits this question in the form of a profound and highly suggestive closing ambiguity: "somewhere out there/ like as if/ as if/ something/ not life/ necessarily" (1994, 63). Rather than the immanence of life, Beckett's 'as if' opens the more interesting poetic possibility not of replacing identity with difference, or representation with repetition, but of uncovering the work of difference within identity. In other words, life is always already inscribed in forms of meaning that hence open the possibility for life to be thought of as such, as the ground for any value, but only insofar as these forms demarcate the impossibility of any formless – which is to say pure or absolute – value of life. As Steven Connor has argued in an essay on Beckett and finitude, rather than an extirpation of all limits in accordance with a "sovereign value of endless propagation" (2008, 37) or limitlessness, Beckett makes finitude (our inherently limited state) both necessary *and* impossible; rather than an overcoming all limits, Beckett's overcomes any particular limit, thereby infinitising the finite.

Beckett's works stage this paradoxical combination of an infinite finitude through language, notably via the subject-constituting role of language that is explicitly thematised in the *Trilogy*. Beckett's trilogy of novels, which all feature storytellers talking about storytelling, make explicit the observation that language constitutes the subject as such but only insofar as the subject is made into an object, the material and collective form of the deictic marker 'I'. If language is what is proper to the human animal, as inscribed in the philosophical tradition of the West since Aristotle, then for Beckett language figures human life insofar as it radically disfigures or unfigures the human. This reaches an apotheosis in *The Unnamable*: "But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful. But what then is the subject? Mahood? No, not yet. Worm? Even less. Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it" (2010b, 57). The narration here attests that rather than a flux-like becoming, the linguistic subject in Beckett's works takes on, as Rabaté argues, the "ecstatic being of nonbeing" (2016, 44). Through a logic and aesthetic of what Beckett calls the unword, life is poised between the human and non-human or posthuman; between life as an abstract concept and life as a vitalist sublimation of the living. The disintegration of the possibility of a static, rational, human form does not yield a vitalist formlessness. Rather, life names the condition of form as subject to time and succession, subject to the contradiction of the present as constituted by a self-division that necessitates its passing.

Time is abject, time threatens the ego with its outside, its own death. There is no form of life not subject to disintegration, to contingency and temporal

succession, but that means equally that there is no original formlessness that is somehow pure, omnipresent and full of vital intensities. As Shane Weller argues in relation to the question of animal life in Beckett: “there is no indeterminacy that is not rooted in determinacy, and no determinacy that is not rooted in indeterminacy” (2013, 24). Rather than the positive infinity of a generic and abundant life that evades conditions of capture and control, Beckett asks us to conceive of a negative infinity of life as that which undermines the totalisation of any sovereign or particular form of capture or control (whether that be the anthropocentric premises of reason that makes life ‘for us,’ or of the privileging of human life over animal life). The palindromic logic of the no/on, of an ethics of nonrelation, makes life simultaneously affirmative and negative, something and nothing. As Winne says in Beckett’s 1961 play *Happy Days*: “To have been always what I am – and so changed from what I was” (2006, 161).

## 5 Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, and to expand the consequences of this discussion of life onto literature and the concept of modernism, I propose to briefly read the logic of an infinitely finite life through Wasser’s analysis of epanorthosis in Beckett’s *Trilogy*. As Wasser outlines, epanorthosis marks a rhetoric device of self-correction that is used across the trilogy: “epanorthosis works as a hinge between two or more assertions, marking the latter as a repetition of the former while simultaneously differentiating their conceptual content” (2016, 9). For instance, as when Molloy reflects on his own storytelling: “Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pen-sum one day got by heart and long forgotten” (2009c, 29). Wasser’s rhetorical rather than representational approach to this passage seeks to move past the fallacy she detects in prior readings which mistake the causal conditions for Beckett’s work (author; language; history) with the work itself. Accordingly, her post-critical emphasis on the act of reading, on the *how* rather than the *what* of meaning, attempts to understand Beckett’s disjunctive prose as indicating the impossibility of the relations it posits (i.e. between saying and inventing). Molloy’s parataxis and epanorthosis instead gesture towards the importance of refusing totalisation; of refusing a reading that would depend on a sense of relationality between life and art. For Wasser, these techniques exemplify an immanent or auto-generative form of literary experimentation whose

causation remains internal and is aligned with the production of aesthetic pathos. However, rather than merely yielding a sense of impossibility between terms or statements, Beckett's use of epanorthosis also yields a sense of ineluctability or necessity that cannot be wholly displaced by an account of pathos or emotion. The non-relational thrust of Beckett's aesthetics does not mean that we simply escape relationality, but rather that every relation is compromised. Accordingly, there can be no origin without repetition, no representational reading that would not be compromised by an aesthetics of pathos. Yet by the same logic, a logic of both impossibility and necessity, there can be no repetition without origin, no account of form or emotion without thought or content. Just as there is no pure saying, no definite meaning we might ascribe to Beckett's texts, so too is there no pure invention, no sense of the new outside of context or time.

Wasser's literary ontology, and her account of Beckett's modernist works in particular, is designed to overcome a critical opposition: that an artwork is either externally caused or wholly autonomous. The attempt to avoid a puerile formalism associated with prior conceptions of modernist autonomy (e.g. New Critical notions of organic unity), and therefore to link to Beckett's literary works to the living contexts of writing, experimentation and reading, is laudable. Yet the integral relation between literary form and Beckett's ontology of life disrupts an account of immanent literary production. If the discussion of difference in Beckett's work is therefore no longer, as Wasser suggests, to be aligned with "a straining toward silence, or a critique of the subject, or an undoing of the traditional integrity of the novel" (2016, 116), then Beckett's critique of vitalism is an important reminder that immanence too risks the sense of self-sufficiency we conventionally assign to notions of transcendence. By seeking instead to account for the work of difference in terms of time and finitude, as well the vitalist emphasis on spatial formations, Beckett's works constitute an aesthetics between representation and abstraction. Ultimately, to return to de Man's account of modernity, what is revolutionary and new in Beckett is neither reducible to literary history, in the paradigmatic biographical or verifiable sense, nor reducible to a living realm wholly outside of history. Instead, as the negation of the old in the present by the new, modernism's temporal spontaneity can be seen as translated by Beckett's sense of life as non-identical and inherently divided, between life and death, and therefore subject to a sense of difference that makes historical mastery impossible whilst simultaneously necessitating an embeddedness in the finite, contingent, and material world.

## References

- Addyman, David. 2015. "Speak of Time, without Flinching ... Treat of Space with the Same Easy Grace': Beckett, Bergson and the Philosophy of Space." In *Beckett/Philosophy*, edited by Matthew Feldman & Karim Mamdani. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag: 103–126.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1970 [1930]. *Proust*. London: Calder & Boyas.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1984a. "La Peinture Des Van Velde Ou Le Monde et Le Pantalon." In *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press: 118–132.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1984b. "Recent Irish Poetry." In *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press: 70–76.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1994 [1974]. "Something There." In *Collected Poems in English and French*. New York: Grove Press: 63.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1995 [1946]. "The Capital of the Ruins." In *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*, edited by Stan Gontarski. New York: Grove Press: 275–78.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2006. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2009a. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929–1940*, edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, Dan Gunn, George Craig. Cambridge University Press.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2009b [1961]. *How It Is*. Ed. Edouard Magessa O'Reilly. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2009c [1951]. *Molloy*. Ed. Shane Weller. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2009d [1953]. *Watt*. Ed. C. J. Ackley. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2010a [1970]. *Mercier & Camier*. Ed. Sean Kennedy. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2010b [1953]. *The Unnamable*. Ed. Steven Connor. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2011a. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 2, 1941–1956*, edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, Dan Gunn, George Craig. Cambridge University Press.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2011b [1948]. "The New Object." *Modernism/Modernity* 18, no. 4: 878–880.
- Begam, Richard. 1996. *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Durham, NC: Duke UP: 47–69.
- Bergson, Henri. 2001 [1889]. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, translated by F.L. Pogson, New York: Dover Publications.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Brazil, Kevin. 2013. "Beckett, Painting and the Question of 'the human.'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 3: 81–99.
- Connor, Steven. 2008. "On Such and Such a Day ... In Such a World': Beckett's Radical Finitude." *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, no. 19: 35–50.
- Critchley, Simon. 2004. *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature*. London: Routledge.
- De Man, Paul. 1970. "Literary History and Literary Modernity." *Daedalus* 99, no. 2: 384–404.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Farrant, Marc. 2020. "Beckett, Biopolitics and the Problem of Life." In *Beckett and Politics*, edited by Will Davies & Helen Bailey. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Farin, Ingo. 2012. "Heidegger and Hegel: The Time of Life and The Time of Life-Philosophy." *Parrhesia*, no. 15: 24–34.
- Feldman, Matthew. 2006. *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'*. London: Continuum.
- Gontarski, Stan. 2012. "Creative Involution: Bergson, Beckett, Deleuze." *Deleuze Studies* 6, no. 4: 601–613.
- Häggglund, Martin. 2016. "The Trace of Time: A Critique of Vitalism." *Derrida Today* 9, no. 1: 36–46.
- Maude, Ulrika. 2011. *Beckett, Technology and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- McMullan, Anna. 2010. *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama*. London: Routledge.
- Milz, Manfred. 2008. "Echoes of Bergsonian Vitalism in Samuel Beckett's Early Works." *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, no. 19: 143–154.
- Moses, Omri. 2014. *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life*. Stanford UP.
- Murphy, P.J. 2015. "Beckett's Critique of Kant." In *Beckett/Philosophy*, edited by Matthew Feldman & Karim Mamdani. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag: 261–278.
- Norris, Margot. 1985. *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst & Lawrence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Noys, Benjamin. 2015. "Vital Texts and Bare Life: The Uses and Abuses of Life in Contemporary Fiction." *CounterText* 1, no. 2: 169–185.
- Pedretti, Mark. 2013. "Late Modern Rigarole: Boredom as Form in Samuel Beckett's Trilogies." *Studies in the Novel* 45, no. 4: 583–602.
- Rabaté, Jean Michel. 2016. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. New York: Fordham UP.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1969. *The World as Will and Representation*. Volume 1 & 2, translated by E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications.
- Thacker, Eugene. 2011. "Darklife: Negation, Nothingness, and the Will-To-Life in Schopenhauer." *Parrhesia*, no. 12: 12–27.

- Wasser, Audrey. 2016. *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism and the Production of Literary Form*. New York: Fordham UP.
- Weller, Shane. 2013. "Forms of Weakness: Animalisation in Kafka and Beckett." In *Beckett and Animals*, edited by Mary Bryden. Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 13–26.
- Wilmer, S.E., Žukauskaitė, Audronė (eds). 2015. *Deleuze and Beckett*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wientzen, Timothy. 2013. "Automatic Modernism: D. H. Lawrence, Vitalism, and the Political Body." *Genre* 46, no. 1: 33–55.