BECKETT AND AESTHETICS

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Introduction: Beckett and Surrealism

Samuel Beckett (1906–89) sometimes seemed like a man not entirely at home in the twentieth century. The furniture of his work usually consists of old or timeless things: lobsters, Gorgonzola cheese, passages from Dante, to take examples from his first successful short story. Beckett's characters own bicycles and take the train and use the telephone, but for the most part could dwell in the fourteenth century or the twenty-fourth without seriously compromising themselves. Futurist exhilaration in technology was foreign to Beckett's temperament.

Aloof, eremitical, Beckett wrote about technology as if it were somebody else's environment. In the script for *Film* (1964), he throws up his hands: "This poses a problem of images which I cannot solve without technical help . . . perhaps I exaggerate its difficulty through technical ignorance."[1] On the other hand, Beckett's collaborators often noted that he had a canny and detailed understanding of technological possibilities. This book argues that Beckett's whole canon is intimately engaged with technological problems: vacuum tubes, amplitude modulation, magnetizing heads, even computer programs are present either explicitly or in quasi-allegorical form. I concentrate here on Beckett's stage work, but I believe that the same is true of Beckett's prose fiction, especially the later material.

Beckett in some sense wanted to be uneasy about technology. Just as Krapp struggles to find the right passage of tape, and eventually throws away a tape in disgust, so Beckett wrote for radio, film, television, in deliberately awkward ways; he refused to take advantage of what the medium can do well, preferring the effortful, the recalcitrant, even the incorrect. But this was Beckett's way with every artistic medium that he worked in: to foreground the medium, to thrust it in the spectator's face, by showing its inadequacy, its refusal to be wrenched to any good artistic purpose.

When young, Beckett was fascinated by the notion that writing might provide psychic authenticity and vivid presentation of the physical world, as Proust's and Joyce's novels seemed to do; instead he found himself immersed in artificialities, self-enclosed wordgames. Indeed he discovered that, whatever he sought from art, he tended to find exactly the opposite. He tried to escape from this bind by means of two tricks. First, in order to gain mastery over his art by describing the sheer cussedness of the artistic phenomenon he devised allegories of artistic frustration, such as the narrow outdoor corridors in *Watt*, fenced by barbed wire and preventing any access to the gardens, through which Watt and Sam make their cautious way.[2] Second, he proclaimed an art of non-representation, estrangement, and general failure, in order to arrive at some grasp of fact through an extremely indirect route. If it is true that art can do little or nothing, then to provide little or nothing is a form of facing the truth.

One of the lessons of twentieth-century art is that modesty is better rewarded than self-aggrandizement, both in the case of the artist and the case of the critic. Large claims have often been unsuccessful. Those formalists who insist that art is nothing but abstract shapes tend to find that the artwork dissolves into a welter of psychic intentions, that it becomes an appendage to the artist's biography or to the politics of its age; by contrast, those deconstructionists who argue that art is essentially an embodiment or a subversion of power tend to find that the artwork clenches itself into aesthetic form, asserts an atemporal presence. Beckett saw much more clearly than most of his contemporaries that art resists the models imposed on it; and so, instead of imposing purposes and templates upon art, he experimented with the notion that an artistic medium itself might be made to speak, if approached with a sort of intelligent humility. Of course, Beckett, being Beckett, was less interested in what a medium could do than in what it couldn't do – its areas of muteness, incompetence, non-feasance of transmission. Jean Cocteau, in *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), put the medium on stage by having the narrator sit inside a giant gramophone; in Beckett's theatre of media each medium tends to dwindle before the stress that Beckett places on it.

Beckett never claimed to be a philosopher, but he seemed to organize his explorations of, or assaults on, the various artistic media by questioning the tenability of the various antitheses that seem to govern the medium. Beckett's voyages across the media have begun to be explored by some important critics: Gilles Deleuze on television and film,[3] Mary Bryden on music,[4] Lois Oppenheim on all the arts[5], to name a few. I hope to continue this examination by attending, as well as I can, to the flinty details of

Beckett's craft. A good deal of excellent work has been done on the Beckett canon as a reflex of history, or as a reflex of Beckett's psychology; I will concentrate instead on Beckett's aesthetics, his extraordinary doting on technique.

Here are some of the antitheses that fail to sublate properly into a dialectic, and stubbornly remain paradoxes, arranged according to the medium that Beckett was investigating.

Fiction

(a) *Representation v. Non-representation*. At the beginning of his career, in 1928, Beckett praised Joyce:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself* . . . When the sense is dancing, the words dance. Take this passage at the end of Shaun's pastoral: "To stir up love's young fizz I tilt with this bridle's cup champagne, dimming douce from her peepair of hide-seeks . . ." The language is drunk. The very words are tilted and effervescent.[6]

Writing should contrive to incarnate its subject stereomorphically; it should dance, it should get drunk, instead of merely describing these things. The hope for this sort of thick, embodied style can be found in many places in Beckett's early fiction, such as the description of the rocking-chair trances in *Murphy* (written 1934–36; published 1938): "The rock got faster and faster, shorter and shorter . . . Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped."[7] The prose embodies the rhythm that it describes. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written 1932; published 1992), when Beckett wrote about sickness, the words themselves become sick:

confluent noli me tangere rodent ulcers lancinating his venter, incubating the nits what nits bloody well you in the scarf of his cuticle, his mouth a clot of sordes . . . his inspirating (there's no call to labour this particular aspect of his malaise) crepitous mucous sonorous sibilant crackling whistling wheezing crowing and would you believe it stridulous[8]

It will be noted that Joyce and Beckett took different approaches to the task of writing carnal, hyper-representational texts. Joyce unpeeled the written page into distinct transparent layers; in the passage cited above, one layer concerns the nuzzling of lovers ("her peepair of hide-seeks") and the other layer concerns drunkenness (the bottle of Piper Heidsieck champagne

buried in the very phrase). But Beckett gnarls and pile-drives his sentences, gashing the verbal texture, instead of making delicate figurations on the superimposed onion-skins. Such passages in Beckett are often notable for an absence of grace – a certain laborious quality tends to infect them, and the words start calling attention to themselves in ways that defeat their denotative quality. By the time of *Watt* (written 1941–44; published 1953), all hope of representation is collapsing into a sort of text governed by arith-metical, pre-compositional strategies, as if a computer had been given a list of intransitive verbs and body-describing adjectives and told to generate characters by means of word lists:

Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window

For one day Mr Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middlesized, yellow and ginger, and the next small, fat, pale and fair, and the next middlesized, flushed, thin and ginger, and the next tall, yellow, dark and sturdy[9]

But just as all normal pathos tends to vanish into abstract textual mani-pulations, so the abstract textual manipulations generate a strange sort of pathos, a sense of a mind reeling over an abyss of artistic impotence. In "Three Dialogues" (1949, with Georges Duthuit), Beckett tried to give voice to his sense of paradox, in that he was contriving a psychically in-tense, almost sentimental sort of non-representationality: "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world"[10], thereby promoting the figure of the Suffering Artist from a local or temporary sort of suffer-ing to a permanent state of anguished monumental grandeur, Myself am failure.

(b) *Voice v.* Ecriture. One of the puzzling themes of the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* (written between 1947 and 1950) is the multiplication of interior voices. Are these voices symptoms of paranoid hallucination in the mind of the character? Of Beckett himself? Could Dr. Freud cure the text, rid it of these vocal furies, leave it in a state of happy silence? It might be better to argue that these voices are generated by an aesthetic problem: the equivocation between the vocal and the written nature of language. The premise of the trilogy is to place extreme stress on the writtenness of the text, from Molloy's asylum notes to Malone's Venus pencil to Moran's report; but this emphasis sets up a counter-pressure: the text wishes to assert its status as oral speech, and so dislocated and unplaceable voices start to leak into the text from all directions. As Richard

Begam has shown beautifully,[11] by the time of *Company* (1980) the dialectic of the vocal and the written has reached such a pitch that the text is a sort of fugue between voice and *écriture*, which disconcertingly keep trading places.

Drama

(a) *Improvisation v. Script*. This dialectic is simply the theatrical equivalent of voice v. *écriture*; an actor who improvises seems to be following the whims of an interior voice, whereas an actor who slavishly follows a script is obeying an already-composed piece of writing. The transition between the mature fiction of the trilogy (and *Mercier and Camier*, written in 1946) and the early drama of *Waiting for Godot* (written in 1948) is simply a transposition to a new medium of the same problem. In *Waiting for Godot*, the actors seem confined in the vaudeville routines of their stichomythia, hoping, or fearing, that some novelty will jolt them into a more spontaneous response to the world; but the boundaries between script and improvisation are unclear – is Lucky's tirade a symptom of mental breakdown, or a reading of a set piece? – and it is hard for the spectator to be certain whether Didi's and Gogo's comments on their performances ("That wasn't such a bad little canter"[12]) represent a departure from or an adherence to the prepared text. In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) the role of script is played by the tapes, which will always deliver exactly the same message no matter how often they are played; but on the other hand, the role of improvisation is also played by the tapes, in that the tapes play back a fossil of an extinct improvisation, full of false starts and uncertainties. Here, as elsewhere in Beckett, the distinction between improvisation and script, between the casually-spoken and the read-aloud, seems to vanish. As Beckett meditates on the theatrical experience – in which actors pretend that they have just made up the words they speak, words that in fact usually pre-exist as a written text – he finds ways of calling attention to the bizarreness of this universally-accepted premise. Again, Beckett's work is a calling-into-question of the medium in which the work appears.

(b) *Catharsis v. Fun*. Throughout its history, the drama has been a hybrid of ritual (worship of Dionysus, enactment of the *quem quaeritis* Easter trope, ceremony of resistance to capitalist exploitation) and goof (dwarf jugglers, belching drunkards). Most plays labor to separate these functions, but there are a number of plays, including the *Second Shepherds' Play* and *Macbeth* and Hofmannsthal's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, that combine them by intercutting the gospel sobriety, the ethical challenges, with spoofs and

niaiseries. Beckett goes further: he abolishes the distinction between game and earnest by squashing them onto the same theatrical plane. If, as Nell says in *Endgame* (1957), "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness,"[13] then death, suffering, amputation, blindness, loss of function, loss of world, are the richest amusements life offers. W. H. Auden wrote that Helen Keller jokes are blasphemies against humor[14] and Beckett consciously blasphemes against the distinction between comedy and tragedy on which so much earlier drama is predicated. The more obviously wrenching and painful the theme, the airier and more acrobatic the treatment – as in *Play*, in which adultery is abstracted into a dazzling light-show, or *Not I*, in which memories of rape are abstracted into a word-chase delivered by a clownishly isolated pair of lips.

Radio, Film, and Television

Intimacy v. Remoteness. One of the important themes of Beckett's later career is the hunt for new media to stimulate his extremely medium-driven artistic imagination. He was especially intrigued by media that contain striking defects: radio promotes the concept of blindness from an individual deficiency to a universal rule; the silent film behaves similarly with such concepts as deafness, ignorance, self-immuring – the characters, being mute, must shout with their gestures and pretend to understand one another; television seems to project precarious images which are always in danger of vanishing into a field of dancing gray dots; and radio, film, and television alike were defective in that they lacked any sense of the corporeal presence of actors. All media, to Beckett's way of thinking, are mutilated and inept; but the technological media of the twentieth century confess their incompetences in especially striking ways. Beckett's first radio play, *All That Fall* (1957), is especially clever in its recoil from the intimacy of radio – the voices are right there in your own living room, as if some friends had dropped by – to a *Verfremdung* of the medium, a chill of voices that confess their inability to speak.

Painting and music

Nacheinander v. Nebeneinander. In the eighteenth century Lessing distinguished between the arts of *Nacheinander* (the sequential arts that exist in the domain of time, such as music and poetry) and the arts of *Nebeneinander* (the juxtapositive arts that exist in the domain of space, such as painting and sculpture). Furthermore, he argued that this border should not be

crossed: poetry should never attempt the static description that painting can perform easily, and painting should never attempt to portray violent movement. In the twentieth century, the musicologist Theodor Adorno extended Lessing's argument: he hated what he called pseudomorphoses – attempts by one medium to imitate the technical procedures of an alien medium. For example, he thought that Stravinsky was a poor composer because he tried to create a pseudomorphosis of painting into music, by using a pictorial method (pattern-unit construction, as in a mosaic or a Cubist drawing) to create a musical composition: "The spatialization of music is witness to a pseudomorphosis of music to painting, on the innermost level an abdication."[15]

But for a writer as distrustful of media as Beckett, any morph is a pseudomorph – in other words, any technical procedure in art, no matter how natural or proper it seems to be, is a sort of deformity. As a connoisseur of misshapen art and technical vanities, Beckett was drawn to all sorts of pseudomorphoses from various artistic media into writing. The imaginary pictures that appear in Beckett's work beautifully illustrate his love of pseudomorphosis: in *Watt* there can be found, hanging from a nail on Erskine's wall, a diagram of a circle and a dot that, far from constraining itself into a static figure, is the most vigorous and restless thing in the entire novel, spinning out elaborate whirling fictions of unbelonging, homelessness, as if it were a child's doodle version of a painting by Bram van Velde:

Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and the circle entered together upon the same plane . . . Watt wondered if they had sighted each other, or were blindly flying thus, harried by some force of merely mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance. He wondered if they would eventually pause and converse, and perhaps even mingle, or keep steadfast on their ways, like ships in the night, prior to the invention of wireless telegraphy. Who knows, they might even collide.[16]

In *All Strange Away* (1963–64), the pin-up of naked Emma posted on the wall has a disconcerting way of mutating into a male figure named Emmo.[17] In the anti-Lessing world of Beckett's later prose, pictures turn into animated cartoons, while fictions develop the dead immobility of pictures.

This transvestism among artist media can also be seen in Beckett's treatment of music. Actual pieces of music turn into visionary hallucination (as in *Ghost Trio*, 1975, or *Nacht und Träume*, 1982), as if a Beethoven trio or a Schubert song were better realized in a stage spectacle than in a concert; while stage spectacles turn into a sort of virtual music, a music of actors' movements – as in *What Where* (1983), a mimed fugue in which the

torturer–victim (subject–countersubject) relation in one module keeps al-
tering into a new module, so that the countersubject of one version becomes
the principal subject of the next.

   Perhaps behind all these antitheses is the antithesis of Failure v. Success.
Beckett's repeated assertions that his art is the art of impotence and nesci-
ence, that his motto is "Fail better,"[18] are, I believe, veiled ways of saying
that the true failure lies not with Beckett the particular artist but with art
itself, always at the mercy of decomposing and perverse media. Beckett saw
himself as an artist who was unusually honest about art's inability to carry
out the artist's goals. But if, as we shall see throughout this book, the road
of art always leads in the direction opposite to the one the artist thinks he or
she is following, then perhaps the artist who intends to fail may (uniquely?)
succeed.

<div align="center">II</div>

Beckett's habit of disengaging himself, of handling the stuff of his art with
tweezers and rubber gloves, also extends to his relations with other artists.
He did not affiliate himself with artistic movements; nonetheless his work
has strong and detailed relations with a number of the great isms of the
twentieth century. There is, for example, a Neoplasticist Beckett whose
canon evolves like Mondrian's; just as Mondrian's early abstractions of
trees and his early abstractions of waves converge in grid designs which are
no longer recognizable as either tree or wave, so Beckett's characters erode
into smooth indifferent pebbles or cylindrical buttons. In *Murphy*, the title
character has a distinct sense of humor, a set of quirky preferences (Celia,
ginger), an uncle in the Netherlands, even a last will and testament – he
asks that his ashes be flushed down the toilet of the Abbey Theatre, "if
possible during the performance of a piece"[19]; but by the time of *Fizzle 1*
(1977), Murphy, his wish to pass into plumbing evidently gratified,[20] has
simplified into a postmortem crawler through pipes, as if he were threading
his way through the inner tubing of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*
(1943).

   But there is one artistic movement that is central to Beckett's aesthetic –
a movement that was born out of the very discords among artistic media
that were so to excite Beckett's imagination. The first appearance of the
name of this movement appeared in 1917, in Apollinaire's program note to
the ballet *Parade*, in which the sets (by Picasso), the scenario (by Cocteau),
the choreography (by Massine), and the music (by Satie) seemed to have
little to do with one another:

The Cubist painter Picasso and the boldest of choreographers, Léonide Massine, have effected it, consummating for the first time the alliance of painting and dance, of plastic and mime, which is the sign of the advent of a more complete art.

Let no one cry paradox! The Ancients, in whose life music held such a great place, knew absolutely nothing of harmony, which is almost everything in modern music.

From this new alliance, for until now stage sets and costumes on one side and choreography on the other had only a sham bond between them, there has come about, in *Parade*, a kind of super-realism [*sur-réalisme*]

. . . Above all it's a question of translating reality. However, the motif is no longer reproduced but only represented and rather than being represented it would like to be suggested by a kind of analysis–synthesis embracing all its visible elements and something more, if possible, an integral schematization that would seek to reconcile contradictions while sometimes deliberately renouncing any rendering of the immediate outward aspect of the object.[21]

A realism to be attained through splintering, through calculated dishar-
mony of means, through deliberate renunciation of "any rendering of the immediate outward aspect of the object" – this is the sort of realism that Beckett wanted: what Apollinaire here calls a sur-realism. In Beckett's first complete play, *Eleuthéria*, he mocks Surrealism by having a character say of his wife, who has laid barbed wire around her absent son's chair, "Soon the apartment will be full of barbed wire. (*Pause*) It must be said, in Violette's defense, that for one whole afternoon, she was under the spell of the Surre-
alist exhibition."[22] But Beckett himself spent his whole life under the spell of the Surrealist exhibition.

If Beckett associated Surrealism with barbed wire, it may have been because Surrealism felt prickly to him. Beckett's early relations with the Surrealists were troubled by the fact that most of them were unfriendly to Joyce's work[23]; and the Surrealist movement, its membership zealously guarded by André Breton, had its exclusionary, cliquish aspects. In his fiction, in his aesthetic theory, in his circle of associates, Beckett tried to remain both inside and outside of Surrealism. And yet, as we will see in later chapters, his instincts were Surrealist: his instinct, when writing stage plays, to fracture the theatre into distinct planes, in which action and speech never coincide; his instinct, when writing for technological media, to isolate *melos* from *lexis, lexis* from *opsis*, as in *Words and Music* (1962) and *Cascando* (1963); his instinct to go against the grain of the medium, to force one medium to assume properties more readily available to some other medium, as in the television play *Eh Joe* (1966) in which the camera scarcely moves from the character's face, and the voice-over does all the work of imaging; indeed his very instinct to articulate his work by means of antitheses that never

resolve, like the ones listed above – an approach strictly in agreement with
Breton's rigorous alogic, as expressed in the Surrealist maxim that opposites
must not be perceived as contradictions.[24] Beckett's work took shape both
according to the psychic–automatic Surrealism of Breton and his followers,
and according to the original Surrealism of Apollinaire, in which reality was
violently seized in the contrapuntal friction among the competing media
of music, painting, and discourse.

   Beckett's early translations of the Surrealists were, I believe, as important
to his artistic development as his critical studies of Proust and Joyce were. For
example, in 1928 Beckett translated "The Fiftieth Anniversary of Hysteria"
by Louis Aragon and Breton:

we propose a fresh definition of hysteria, as follows:
   "Hysteria is a more or less irreducible mental condition, marked by the subver-
sion between the subject and the moral world under whose authority he happens to
be . . . Hysteria is not a pathological condition and may in all respects be considered
a supreme means of expression."[25]

In 1930 Beckett translated parts of *The Immaculate Conception*, by Breton
and Paul Éluard, a book that attempted to simulate various mental illnesses,
debilities, and paralyses (Jacques Lacan was among those who reported this
experiment in *Annales médico-psychologiques*):

If my voice can lend itself successively to the speech of the most disparate beings,
to the speech of the richest and the poorest, the blind and the hallucinator, the
coward and the aggressor, how then can I possibly admit that this voice, finally
mine and mine alone, originates in regions that have, if only for a time, been
outlawed? – regions to which I, in common with the majority of mankind, cannot
hope ever to accede? . . . We would even . . . declare that, in our opinion, the
"essays of simulation" of maladies virtual in each one of us could replace most
advantageously the ballad, the sonnet, the epic[26]

Beckett's first published novel, *Murphy*, most advantageously replaces the
novel as we know it with an exercise in the simulation of psychosis, and a
number of passages catch exact echoes of the rhetoric of Beckett's Breton
translations. Here are Murphy's first reactions to his new job as an attendant
in an insane asylum:

the impression he received was of that self-immersed indifference to the contin-
gencies of the contingent world which he had chosen for himself as the only felicity
and achieved so seldom.
   The function of treatment was to bridge the gulf, translate the sufferer from his
own pernicious little private dungheap to the glorious world of discrete particles,
where it would be his inestimable prerogative once again to wonder, love, hate,

desire, rejoice and howl, in a reasonable balanced manner, and comfort himself with the society of others in the same predicament.

All this was duly revolting to Murphy, whose experience as a physical and rational being obliged him to call sanctuary what the psychiatrists called exile[27]

It turns out that a psychotic prose style is a little different from a hysterical prose style; whereas Breton and Éluard, in *The Immaculate Conception*, take ass's milk sand baths and ride on the backs of jellyfish and engage in other sorts of wildly disordered activities, Beckett imitates an ir- or supra-rational manner of thought by indulging in counting games, arranging biscuits or pushing buttons in all the various orders that come to mind. Hysterics play with the whole dictionary, it seems, while psychotics play with a limited number of elements. The permutation-generated passages in *Watt* can also be regarded as Breton-like experiments in simulating mental debility.

Other passages by Breton, not translated by Beckett, suggest ways in which Beckett's artistic theory and practice realized energies latent in the Surrealist movement. Breton anticipated in 1936 Beckett's praise of Bram van Velde, in "Three Dialogues" (1949), as the first painter to "submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation"[28] between the world of the senses and the world of the mind:

Painting, for instance, was until recently preoccupied almost exclusively with expressing the manifest relationships between external perception and the ego. The expression of this relationship became more and more deceptive and insufficient in proportion as it became less possible for it to attempt to enlarge and deepen man's 'perception-consciousness' system, whose most interesting artistic possibilities it had long since exhausted, leaving only that extravagant attention to external details of which the world of any of the great 'realist' painters bears the mark. By mechanising the plastic method of representation to the extreme, photography dealt a final blow to all this. Painting was forced to beat a retreat and to retrench itself behind the necessity of expressing internal perception visually. I cannot insist too much on the fact that this place was the only one left to it . . . Surrealist painters could not bring even the most evidently free of their creations to light were it not for the "visual remains" of external perception.[29]

Breton resembles Beckett exactly in his belief that the history of painting is a desperate and futile attempt to heighten the intensity of relation between two intrinsically unrelatable domains. If Breton stops short of Beckett's belief that a non-figurative painting could cut itself free from *all* allusion to the external world, he nevertheless pointed Beckett on the right road. Indeed there are passages in Breton's writing in which his fury of rejection of the commonplace world, his insistence on creating new realities, strongly anticipate the world of Beckett's fiction:

The idea of a bed of stone is just as intolerable to me as a bed of feathers. What do you expect, I can sleep only on a bed made of the pith of the elder tree. Take a turn sleeping there yourself. Very comfortable, isn't it? . . . *In reality*, do I sleep on a bed of elder pith? Enough! I don't know. It must be true in some way, because I say it.[30]

Beckett, in *Watt*, described a fish that keeps rising to the surface and falling to the ocean bed, in order to learn to endure the middle depths: "But do such fish exist? Yes, such fish exist, now."[31] Impudently Bretonesque counterfactualities are an enduring feature of Beckett's work, early and late. To account for the allegation that a female character is a hemophiliac, Beckett added a footnote to *Watt*: "Haemophilia is, like enlargment of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work.[32] In *Enough* (1965) the meadow is decorated with flowers that seem more like appliqués than flowers as we know them: "The very flowers were stemless and flush with the ground like water-lilies. No brightening our buttonholes with these."[33] These are the sorts of dreams you have when you sleep on a bed of elder pith.

When Beckett wished to call attention to the Surrealist aspects of his work, he used a special term: dead imagination.

Breton's catch phrases – psychic automatism, convulsive beauty – stress the epileptic aspect of Surrealism: inspiration feels alien and comes unbidden. In the *Surrealist Manifesto* Breton gave a famous example of a sentence that "*knocked at the window*" of his mind: "'There is a man cut in two by the window' . . . it was accompanied by a feeble visual representation of a walking man sliced halfway up by a window perpendicular to this axis of his body."[34] Beckett's dead imagination is just this sort of trance-state, carried a little further beyond stunned to a condition of hectic morbidity, a fever of decomposing brain tissue; feeble visual representations of human bodies, not exactly cut in two, but cramped and crammed in odd ways, disturb the author's composure. Breton was fascinated by transgressions of the border between life and death; he liked to imagine the spontaneous growth of crystals, and bouquets of "halcyonoids and madrepores" from the bottom of the sea: "Here the inanimate so closely touches on the animate that the imagination is free to frolic to infinity concerning these forms completely mineral in appearance, and to reproduce along these lines the procedure by which one recognizes a nest or a bunch of grapes taken out of a petrifying fountain."[35] Beckett, too, in his dead-imagination mode, enjoyed elaborating images of mineralized human beings, whose rigor mortis was intermitted with infinitesimal shudders instantaneously suppressed.[36]

A dead imagination differs from a live one in several ways. A live imagination produces images that are images of something in particular: images with a referent in the physical world, images with a burden of intelligible meaning. A dead image, by contrast, has no power to flame with import. A dead image can be thought of as a symbol with all the phlogiston drained out of it; it often looks portentous, but the hunt for portent leads nowhere.

In his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett sketches a theory of an anti-symbolist art – an important first step toward killing "imagination" in the highfalutin sense of the word. Beckett praises Beethoven for his ability to suggest abysses of silence beneath "paths of sound suspended in giddy heights," and goes on to posit an art less noisy, chattering, interpretable than the usual sort: "For in the forest of symbols, which aren't any, the little birds of interpretation, which isn't any, are never silent."[37] Symbolism was an art movement originally designed to resist the discursive, the prosaic, to edge toward silence, but Beckett finds that the symbolic method hinders the symbolists from attaining their goal – the blank page desired by Mallarmé. The true art of silence, the art that tears aside the verbal surface to peer at what is underneath, must rid itself of symbols and their clamor for clarification. Beckett's essay *Proust* (1931) shows his debt to the symbolist method, according to which a whole village can be baked into a cookie; but it is possible that he also learned from Proust a certain revulsion against symbols, a hatred of the overmeaningful that is a countertheme throughout Proust's novel. In *Swann's Way* Proust's narrator describes the relief of dissociating the pain of a toothache from various symbolic equivalents, and his reeling disgust at his inability to empty the smell of the staircase varnish from its evocations of private sorrow.[38] It has long been noted that Beckett's novels skirt autobiography at every turn; but perhaps his purpose is not to evoke his youth but to desymbolize it, anesthetize it, neutralize it into music or a pebble collection. The symbol must be reduced to "autosymbolism"[39]; its tentacles must let go of the world, and instead clutch and defend the thing in its isolation.

A fiction purged of mimesis and symbol alike would seem to deny itself every resource. What is left for Beckett to do? Beckett's chief mode of self-entertainment was to refine the procedures through which a text can reflect its lack of content, the central absence.

During the last twenty-five years of his life, Beckett wrote a good deal of prose fiction about rotundas or desert wanderers. Now a rotunda, even if it looks from above like a zero, is not nothing; nor does it lack symbolic evocativeness, for it reminds us of home or temple or asylum or crypt or columbarium. Indeed the rotunda and the desert wanderer are extreme

stylizations of the human condition: we are always in hiding or in flight. Because of this sense of severe simplification of our state, we tend to look for allegory in Beckett's later work; but we are defeated, precisely because the elements are so excessively suggestive that they suggest nothing at all. A rotunda may suggest the comfort of shelter or the marble chill of death. Schoenberg was fond of saying that his music was not atonal but pantonal; Beckett ingeniously reverses the curriculum, moves from pansignificance to insignificance. Some astronomers believe that the universe is expanding so quickly that it will never be able to collapse and regenerate itself, and therefore in the distant future it will thin itself into better and better approximations of unbeing; this is just what happens in Beckett's later fiction, which keeps distending into ever wider and feebler meanings.

Furthermore, the images of rotunda and wanderer are eerily combined, colluded, as if motion and rest, birth and death, were indistinguishable. Beckett's earliest rotundas, like that in *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965), were snug white edifices about three feet in diameter, stuffed with two white, imperceptibly animate bodies. In *The Lost Ones* (written 1966, published 1970), the universe of discourse consists of a rotunda fifty meters in circumference, filled with two hundred residents who shuffle about or climb ladders to nowhere or are still. In *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), the female protagonist can appear inside or outside her vaguely circular cabin in various frozen iconic postures – she does not have to cross the intervening ground, for time and space in this text are jumpy, discontinuous. She brings flowers to a stone monolith, and herself often seems a monolith, a "Memnon."[40] She is so surrounded by stone that she seems infected by it. In *Worstward Ho* (1983), we are bemused by the spectacle of a pair of figures walking across a void: "Say better worse now all gone save trunks from now. Nothing from pelves down. From napes up. Topless baseless hindtrunks. Legless plodding on. Left right unreceding on."[41] Beckett seems to crave an image which is simultaneously a person and a place, flesh and stone, aperture and closure, motion and rest, construction and wreck. It would be hard to improve on *Worstward Ho*'s image of a fragment of Ozymandias plodding leglessly across a void; a visible oxymoron. The method of a novel from the middle of Beckett's career, *The Unnamable*, is to deny reference semantically, by a strategy of perpetual contradiction of every proposition; the method of *Worstward Ho* is to deny reference imagistically, by constructing a lapsed and incoherent thing, by displaying its deformity, its blight, its muteness from every angle, by letting it vanish into thinglessness. Figures of speech from Beckett's earlier work are promoted to events: Malone in *Malone Dies* compared himself to a dwindling heap of sand[42]; in the later work Beckett's

gaze was fixed on the image of a desert walker who is turning into a heap of sand, at one with the desert through which he walks, a single plenum or vacuum without quality or attribute or distinguishing mark.

All Strange Away (1963–64) begins with a sentence that was also used as the title of *Imagination Dead Imagine*. A dead imagination, it seems, is too weak and incompetent to elaborate its images; it simply grasps some dull premise – a rotunda crammed with bodies, or a doll with its feet sewn together (*Ping*, 1966), or some clockwork searchers stumbling around in a cage (*The Lost Ones*). Then the dead imagination regards this donnée from several angles, lets the automaton conclude its gesture and come to a halt, and at last abandons its image. A dead imagination, then, is a device less for forming images than for getting rid of them. There is another possibility, however: that a dead imagination, since it is unable to seize and hold even a sketchy, boring, or far-fetched image, is a faculty that continually tinkers with, alters, erases, redraws its images; because it can never find an image that satisfies it, it is endowed, zombie-fashion, with a febrile parody of life, positing images in a long agony of mutation. This is why a dead imagination can sometimes seem strangely active, alert.

Thus the dead imagination in *All Strange Away* invents a man who sits in a small cubicle, wonders where the light comes from, decides to show the man lighting one match after another for eternity, finds that unattractive, pronounces that the light simply comes from an unspecified source, decides to decorate the cubicle with pin-up pictures of a naked girl named Emma, describes how the man rubs up against them, decides that it would be more diverting to posit a woman in the cubicle looking at pictures of a naked man named Emmo, and so on. After each change in the premise we are told that it always was the new way, that there never were matches, or that the protagonist never was a man; the whole history of the premise is revised. A dead imagination helplessly drifts from image to image, unable to credit any of them, unable to declare that a particular image is solid and satisfying. Things that move get nowhere, while things that rest keep shifting queasily; in this manner change and stasis are one.

Another symptom of the dead or moribund imagination lies in the imaginer's inability to conceive of himself as a coherent entity. From *Watt* on, Beckett's artist-figures have tried in vain to understand the provenance of images and voices, the mechanisms by which material comes into one's head and is elaborated and transcribed. In Beckett's last long prose work, *How It Is* (1961), the protagonist crawls with a sack of canned fish through a whole world of mud, but through the mud he sees – by means of a second pair of eyes – glimpses of what seem to be scenes from Beckett's childhood.

Of course the protagonist doubts that the scenes are memories or that they have any relation to his life. He assumes that these images, his faint cries, will somehow be recorded, and so he hypothesizes generations of auditors and scribes, dynasties of Krims and Krams, perched over his prone body in the mud, living only to listen and record. Of course, according to Beckett's doctrines, a work of art and its ostensible models or references in the physical world are in a state of total unrelatedness, and so the protagonist of *How It Is* endlessly multiplies figments of relation, figments that complicate, attenuate, and discredit any connection between the imagination's seizures and the world of experience. The text as it appears on paper, the images in the artist's head, and the artist's personal engagement with the world of experience, all dwell in separate and hostile zones of being. Therefore Beckett does not wish to speak of a single man who dwells in all three zones, a single artist who sometimes takes bracing walks in the countryside and sometimes invents fictions and sometimes writes them down; Beckett prefers to personify a separate entity in each zone, and to refuse to suggest how intercourse among them is possible.

Most of Beckett's late works embody this fracturing of the artist. The initial premise of *Company* (1980) consists of a hearer lying supine in the dark and a voice telling him homely stories about a life, not necessarily the hearer's life – stories about a little boy asking his mother how far away the sky is, or about the decomposition of a hedgehog put in a box, or about an old man listening to his footfalls on a country road. Eventually we are told of a third entity, the deviser who devised both hearer and voice. The deviser starts to wonder about himself – is he too lying supine in the dark? – but eventually decides that he is crawling about on all fours, a posture helpful for distinguishing himself from the hearer. Of course, the more the deviser keeps trying to construe his own position and identity, the more the reader is forced to posit a fourth entity, someone to devise the deviser; as in *How It Is*, there is no limit to the endless multiplication of chimeras when one tries to work out the relations among unrelatable things. By the end of *Company* the deviser and the hearer seem to grow more and more intimate, congruent, and it begins to appear that the hearer may have invented the deviser, instead of vice versa; but the hypothesis that the figments are one and the same is no more compelling than the hypothesis that discriminates them. The human subject is, as always in Beckett's works, amazingly unstable, and the personage in *Company* finds it possible to entertain himself with the companionable ghosts of his own plurality – the most available company. In *Endgame* Hamm speaks of "the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper

together, in the dark,"[43] and *Company* can be seen as an investigation from another angle of this speculation, in which the dramatis personae of a play collapse into a single agent. Indeed many of Beckett's later prose works look like rethinkings of theatrical premises: the rotundas are lapsed stages, temples of Dagon caught in a process of extremely slow fall, just as their inhabitants, and the desert wanderers, are heroes lapsed beyond tragedy.

Worstward Ho, like *Company*, presents the creative process as divided beyond any hope for integration; but here it is a division, not among human agents, but among statues. The dim void on which the text dwells is interrupted by three sets of effaced, almost featureless figures: a standing figure, a pair of desert plodders hand in hand, and, to perceive them, a solitary head with downcast eyes. Having presented this tableau, the narrator does what he can to worsen it, that is, to improve it: the standing figure is demoted to a kneeling figure; the pair of plodders are parted and (as we have already seen) made to lose their heads and legs; the subjective head is hewn down until it is only a slab from eye to eye, foreheadless, jawless. The passage in which Beckett starts to perform surgery on the standing figure (number one, in his enumeration) is one of his most hilarious:

First one. First try fail better one. Something there badly not wrong. Not that as it is it is not bad. The no face bad. The no hands bad. The no – . Enough. A pox on bad. Mere bad. Way for worse. Pending worse. First worse. Mere worse. Pending worse still. Add a – . Add? Never. Bow it down. Be it bowed down. Deep down. Head in hat gone. More back gone.[44]

Picasso said that he spent all his life learning how to paint like a child; it seems that Beckett, possessing the most remarkable literary equipment of his age, spent a lifetime learning how to write like a mental defective, in a toothless, broken-jawed, goggling idiom, maniacal and compulsive, what someone might say as he pounded a puppet with a hammer. In its way, this style is a triumph of diction. It is a kind of verbal gravel.

Worstward Ho may constitute Beckett's farthest exploration into the realm of dead imagination, a place at once scraped, granular, eaten away, and loosening, like the Europe of Max Ernst's decalcomaniacal *Europe after the Rain* (1940–42); perhaps *Worstward Ho* frames the end of the great age of Surrealist writing, just as Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914) frames the beginning. Some of Giorgio de Chirico's Surrealist paintings (such as *Archaeologists*, 1927) show mannequins whose thoraxes open to show pediments, columns, and other bits of architectural detritus; and *Worstward Ho* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*, with their memnons and faceless trunks, look like a realization in prose of Surrealist acephalism,[45] the collapse of the boundary
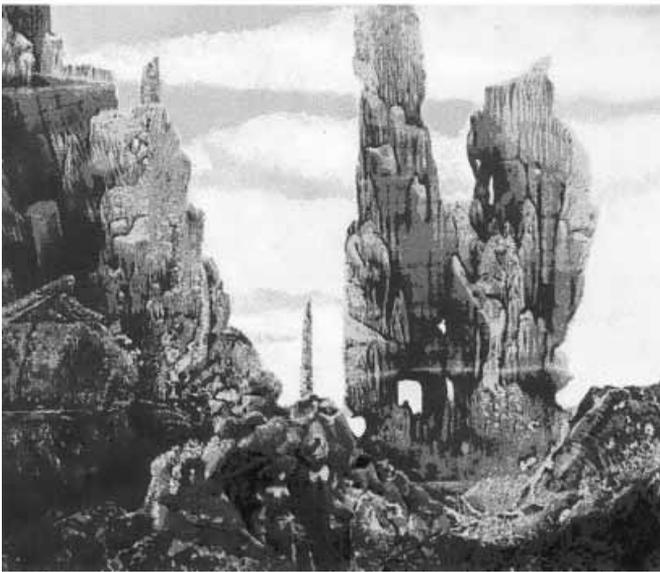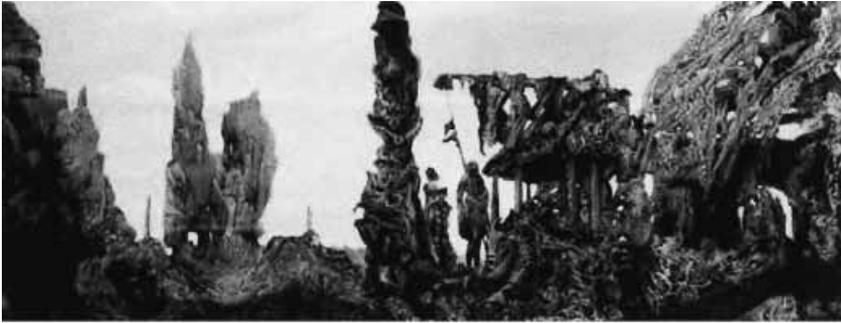
1. Max Ernst, *Europe after the Rain* (*Europe après la pluie*), 1940–42.

between person and environment, subject and object. Beckett's texts, like de Chirico's paintings, are a mishmash of a stage set and a character. Even the rotundas of the texts of the 1960s have a strong Surrealist character; the little temples, towers, tholoi, and other classical buildings on Dalí's or de Chirico's horizons, to which all the toed-in perspective lines point, are here opened for inspection. If you asked what goes on inside de Chirico's *Red Tower* (1913) – the utter lack of human presence makes the red tower into a cylindrical depopulator like the one in *The Lost Ones*, or *Le dépeupleur*, as the French title has it.

2. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Archaeologists* (*Gli archeologi*), 1927.
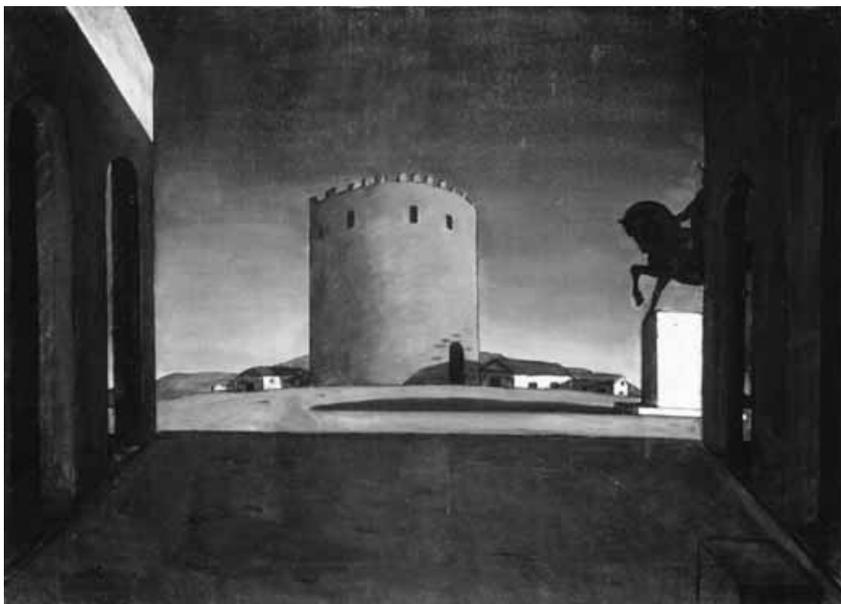
3. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Red Tower* (*La torre rossa*), 1913.

The classicism of the late prose deserves some attention. The short, dry, throttled sentences follow any number of early twentieth-century recipes for anti-romantic art: *Worstward Ho* could have been written with T. E. Hulme's "Romanticism and Classicism" as its Strunk and White. And such words as "rotunda" and "Memnon" are part of a classicizing vocabulary. Some critics, such as J. E. Dearlove,[46] have emphasized Beckett's Apollonian character, and his preoccupation with control makes this plausible. But it is also possible to understand Beckett's classicism as an aspect of Surrealist technique.

In an important 1937 essay, "What is Called the New Music, and Why?" the composer Ernst Krenek sets forth the inevitable affiliation between Surrealism and Neoclassicism:

Therefore one can use, with respect to the New Music of this kind, the terms "New Objectivity," "Surrealism," and "Neoclassicism," three attitudes with a common tendency to retain or recover the old material . . .

Taking this restorative tendency furthest is *Neoclassicism*, a term that must have first come into use in Busoni's circle.[47] Behind the *habitus* of a lucid spiritual reaction against the chaotic darkness of late Romanticism there is concealed, naturally, a genuinely romantic attitude, crystalized in the idea that one could again attain