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*Realism, Modernism and the General: Beckett,
Lukács, Adorno*

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Definitions of realism have tended to revolve around the question of generalizable experience. Traditionally the realist work should offer its reader an opportunity to infer general principles about the society in which it is set from the specific cases it describes. In the work of the Marxist critic Georg Lukács, realist texts are valued for the facility that they offered to move from an identification with the specific experiences of their characters to a more general understanding of the social and economic conditions which produce those experiences. Furthermore, for Lukács, realism is a political category as well as an aesthetic one, as the realist text – whatever the ideological commitments of its author – is by definition a progressive one. Modernist literature – which to Lukács seems designed to block any such generalisation – was viewed as an outgrowth of an aberrant naturalist tendency to fetishise the specific.

This paper considers the polarised reactions of Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno to the work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett is the *bête noir* of Lukács's anti-modernist polemic, which has been subject to the ridicule of theorists who understandably wished to distance themselves from Soviet totalitarianism and the repression and banalization of art which the regime perpetrated in the name of 'socialist realism'. However, 'critical realism' is a much more important category in Lukács's aesthetics, a category in which he includes non-partisan writers like Homer, Shakespeare, Balzac and Thomas Mann. It is his contention that the practitioners of modernist art had merely adopted 'the ideological complement of their historical position' (Lukács 1996: 151), a basically existentialist ontology which denied the social construction of the self and replaced a Marxist notion of revolutionary class consciousness – based on the ability to generalise individual experiences and so to view them as representative of a class – with a mass of unconnected individuals.

Adorno has a very different view of Beckett and of modernism in general, which will emerge over the course of this paper. Adorno manages to generate a sympathetic reading of Beckett from a Marxist perspective, but this is not without its problems. I intend to use the conflicting approaches of these two theorists in a reading of Beckett's trilogy of novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Between Adorno and Lukács the question of how literature can relate to the general experience of capitalist modernity is crucial. Beckett's *Trilogy* – held by Lukács to be the nadir of a pathologically solipsistic trend in modern literature – provides a challenging test case.

“Formalism” vs. Critical Realism

What must be avoided at all costs is the approach generally adopted by bourgeois modernist critics themselves: that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique. (Lukács 1996: 142)

Lukács argues that modernism is victim to a 'false polarisation' of form and content. Modernist art erringly separates off something it calls 'form' and experiments with it for the sake of newness and, Lukács contests, at the cost of distorting the work's representation of reality. Beckett's use of the stream of consciousness – which is singled out as a typically modernist effect – is a particular problem for Lukács. Grounding the presentation of reality entirely in the consciousness of the narrator

serves to undermine the presentation of objective reality to the point of solipsistically questioning its existence. When it becomes the defining element of narrative, the stream of consciousness is also guilty of reducing history to a flow of sensations, which despite its random fluctuations is fundamentally unchanging and static. Virginia Woolf sums up this modernist tendency in her essay 'Modern Fiction.' 'The mind', she writes, 'receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms' (Woolf 1994: 160). In the face of this bombardment, the individual is impotent to enact change, and becomes merely a passive recipient of sense data, losing all relation to the general experience of class. This tendency reaches the peak of absurdity when 'the stream of consciousness is that of an abnormal subject or of an idiot,' (Lukács 1996: 148) and Lukács cites Beckett's *Molloy* as the most extreme example of this aberrant trait. Indeed, while Lukács writes at greater length about Joyce and Kafka, the criticism he directs at them is tempered by grudging admissions of their skills: Kafka, he grants, possesses 'extraordinary evocative power,' (Lukács 1996: 162) and Joyce has 'manifest abilities' as a writer (Lukács 1996: 143). Beckett is given no such dispensation, and is classed along with Montherlant as 'overtly perverse' (Lukács 1996: 143). He had taken the formal innovations of a gifted but misguided generation of modernist writers, and turned them into something even more monstrous in its negation of historical progress and its descent into psychopathology.

Lukács's idea of a capacity to generalise from individual subjectivity so as to come to an understanding of the objective social whole has a rich political and philosophical lineage which is worth sketching here. Rousseau's concept of the 'general will' (*volonté générale*) was formulated as a concept of the common interest in contrast to 'the will of all' (*volonté de tous*) which was merely the sum of different private interests (Rousseau 1979: 3). This strong statement of generalisable political consciousness fed into the thinking of the French revolution, which appeared to some as a manifestation of the general will despite the profound conflicts of interest that characterised it. Hegel then took up Rousseau's concept of the general will in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, suggesting that 'this will is not the empty "thought" of willing – such as is ascertained with silent consensus, that is, consensus through representatives – but instead real General Will, will of each and every individual as individual' (Hegel 1994: 131). Marx subsequently adapted this idea, seeing contradictions between private interest and general interest as consequences of a particular stage of material historical development. In the case of industrial capitalism:

[T]he division of labour implies the contradiction between the interest of the separate individual or the individual family and the communal interest of all individuals who have intercourse with one another. And indeed, this communal interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as the "general interest", but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labour is divided. (Marx & Engels 1974: 53)

For Marx, the notion of the general will is given concrete reality in the rising political consciousness of the proletariat, 'a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of a necessary revolution' (Marx

& Engels 1974: 94). Lukács category of critical realism insists that literary texts should serve this consciousness by revealing the specific nature of the ‘mutual interdependence’ of individuals within society. Even the novels of a conservative realist such as Balzac do this – in Lukács’s view – and for this reason, like all great literature, they make manifest the ‘general will’, or revolutionary consciousness.

It would be futile to take on Lukács on his own terms and reclassify Beckett as a critical realist. That the two narrators of *Molloy*, or those of *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, provide no firm ground on which to build an accurate general picture of contemporary society, or any other society, is surely a part of a deliberate authorial strategy. The narrative constantly insists on its dependence on the extremely unreliable memories of its narrators:

People pass too, hard to distinguish from yourself. That is discouraging. So I saw A and C going slowly towards each other, unconscious of what they were doing. It was on a road remarkably bare, I mean without hedges or ditches or any kind of edge, in the country, for cows were chewing in enormous fields, lying and standing, in the evening silence. Perhaps I’m inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on the whole that’s the way it was. They chew, swallow, then after a short pause effortlessly bring up the next mouthful. A neck muscle stirs and the jaws begin to grind again. But perhaps I’m remembering things. (Beckett 1959: 9)

The fact that Molloy cannot distinguish between himself and a pair of anonymous passers by is discouraging indeed for a Lukácsian reading, for the reader’s perceptions are always mediated by this kind of doubt. We cannot even trust that the two men, who he designates A and C, are not just the inventions of Molloy’s mind, particularly as he frankly admits that he may be inventing or embellishing. The final sentence quoted sums up Molloy’s condition perfectly: he corrupts the cliché which in the spirit of pop-solipsism dismisses unlikely events as hallucinations: ‘perhaps I’m seeing things.’ ‘Perhaps I’m remembering things’ is a bizarre inversion of this, because remembering things is precisely what Molloy, as the narrator, is supposed to be doing. He can’t even remember the appropriate cliché. The ending of Moran’s monologue, which concludes the novel, is a grim joke which throws everything in the narrative into further doubt: ‘Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining’ (Beckett 1959: 176). For Lukács, all this dissembling prevents the reader from gaining any perspective beyond the doubled idiocy of Molloy and his failed rescuer.

Another major problem with modernist representation, and one which prevents it from having any general significance as far as Lukács is concerned, is in the view of history that it presupposes. In Lukács’s view, modernism represents history as ‘static’ rather than ‘dynamic and developmental’ (Lukacs 1996: 143), an insight that can be supported with reference to Beckett’s *Trilogy*. Moran explicitly characterises his own experience as utterly governed by sensation:

I drown in the spray of phenomena. It is at the mercy of these sensations, which happily I know to be illusory, that I have to live and work. (Beckett 1959: 111)

This characterisation of reality as a ‘spray of phenomena’ – and an illusory one at that – recalls Woolf’s ‘incessant shower of innumerable atoms’. The scientific imagery that focuses on sensory perception in both cases attests to the individualistic view of the subject abhorred by Lukács: the individual is isolated and confronted by reality as ‘myriad impressions’ or a ‘spray of phenomena’. It is impossible to make generalisations about history from these streams of sensation. Similarly, a Lukácsian reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses* would stress the way in which the reader encounters memories and experiences without a sense of one’s priority over the other. History, the nightmare from which Stephen is trying to awake, is a part of the present which cannot be situated in a general hierarchy of meaning. Borges observes of the book that:

Its life seems situated on a single plane, without those steps that take us mentally from each subjective world to an objective stage, from the whimsical daydream of one man’s unconscious to the frequently trafficked dreams of the collective mind. Conjecture, suspicion, fleeting thought, memories, lazy thinking, and the carefully conceived enjoy equal privilege in this book; a single point of view is notably absent (Borges 2000: 13).

For Borges, at least, the minute specificity of Joyce’s style makes it extremely difficult to posit a relation to the general social whole. Lukács makes an analogous observation, but attaches to it a judgement:

A gifted writer, however extreme his theoretical modernism, will in practice have to compromise with the demands of historicity and of social environment. Joyce uses Dublin, Kafka and Musil the Hapsburg monarchy, as the locus of their masterpieces. But the locus they lovingly depict is little more than a backcloth; it is not basic to their artistic intention. (Lukács 1996: 145)

When the objective reality of Dublin becomes a mere ‘backcloth’, the causal relationship between it and the specific experiences in the foreground is eroded. For Lukács, this devalues it as art.

The view of history that is associated with this focus on sensory perception is borne out in other ways in the *Trilogy*. Language cripples the narrators, flattening history into a play of tenses. The memories of the *Trilogy*’s narrators strike them in a similar way, they become part of the present in the process of thinking and writing them. They live in a perpetual present, incapable of attaining a general historical perspective on the events of their lives. Molloy writes:

When I try and think riding I lose my balance and fall. I speak in the present tense, it is so easy to speak in the present tense, when speaking of the past. It is the mythological present, don’t mind it. (Beckett 1959: 26)

History appears not as a concrete process, but as an effect of language; the difference between ‘think’ and ‘thought,’ ‘speak’ and ‘spoke’ is linguistic – typographical even – a couple of letters. This theme recurs frequently in the *Trilogy*, and it applies as much to

the narrators' conjectures about the future as to their conjectures about the past. The narrator of *The Unnamable*, for example, mentions that 'I could also do, incidentally, with future and conditional participles' (Beckett 1959: 302). He employs such participles in the sentence which immediately follows, but they are only participles, and do not provide the solid grasp on historical process for which Lukács yearns. Beckett's political value, then, is not to be found in a 'critical realist' relation to reality. The formal devices he employs in *Molloy* alone, to say nothing of the even more challenging *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, suggest a refusal to engage with the general in the realist terms with which Lukács would define it. Lukács's formulation of critical realism is closely related to his view of the function of Marxist critique, which is made clear in his introduction to *Studies in European Realism*:

Let us begin with the general atmosphere: the clouds of mysticism which once surrounded the phenomena of literature with a poetic colour and warmth and created an intimate and "interesting" atmosphere around them, have been dispersed. Things now face us in a clear, sharp light which to many may seem cold and hard; a light shed on them by the teachings of Marx. Marxism searches for the material roots of each phenomenon, regards them in their historical connections and movement, ascertains the laws of such movement and demonstrates their development from root to flower, and in so doing lifts every phenomenon out of a merely emotional, irrational, mystic fog and brings it to the bright light of understanding. (Lukács 1972: 1)

This view of Marx, as a rationaliser and a dispeller of fogs, is paramount to Lukács's approach. But it is here that an alternative tradition in Western Marxism offers a different perspective, one that permits a more favourable view of Beckettian modernism. Adorno and the Frankfurt School emphasised the side of Marx which dwelled on the contradictions inherent in capitalist society, and that had inevitably found their way into its characteristic modes of thought and representation. Realism, far from being a tool with which to lay bare the realities, was a part of the mystification.

Realism now emerges as the ideological counterpart of capitalism, and even where realist writing is committed to the cause of socialism, it is still guilty of succumbing to the mimetic logic of the system it attempts to criticise:

A successful work ... is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its inner-most structure. (Adorno 2000: 208)

Where Lukács had hailed the ability to move from specific experiences to general social being as the great mission of art, Adorno dismisses it as a bogus means of resolving 'objective contradictions in a spurious harmony'. But what is so interesting and demanding about Adorno's approach is that while it stages an ideological critique of realism, it still insists on the value of a kind of formal mimesis. 'The Autonomy of Art' makes a very fine distinction between the tough modernist art which Adorno saw

as embodying formally the objective contradictions of capital, and the cultural products which are legitimated merely by a notion of *l'art pour l'art* (Adorno 2000: 239-263). It is not enough merely to abandon the claim to political or social content and base an artistic practice on formal experimentation. The form of a work must assimilate the general contradictions of the society in which it is produced, and this can be done only when it asserts its absolute autonomy from the base corruption of the culture industry. This, Adorno believes, is in practice impossible, but it is the great value of bourgeois art that it simulates this autonomy. Only thus can art become more than just a by-product of society, and begin to reflect, or to manifest, the general concrete conditions of which realism is a mere symptom. What is more, the distrust of 'content' and the insistence that the responsibility to society lies with form alone apply to critical thought as much as to art. Adorno's own oeuvre must always be read with this in mind. As Fredric Jameson puts it:

the overt presentation of content in its own right, whether in sociological or in philosophical writing, stands condemned as a fall back into that positivistic and empirical illusion which dialectical thinking was designed to overcome. (Jameson 1971: 54)

This is why, Jameson argues, 'the work of Adorno nowhere yields that bald statement about the administered world which would seem to be its presupposition' (Jameson 1971: 54). Clearly, from Adorno's perspective, Lukács's approach is guilty of adherence to the positivistic logic of bourgeois ideology, and his reading of Beckett is necessarily marred by this. In mining the text for realist content, and seeking in it an empirical, descriptive account of social conditions, Lukács blinds himself to the potentials of the formal attributes of the text. In his account, form is either dismissed as mere 'technique' or blamed for interrupting the reader's direct engagement with the empirical realities of the society which the text has a responsibility to depict. It is Lukács who has succumbed to a false opposition of form and content. For in seeking the ideological content of a particular formal device he fails to engage with it as form. For Adorno, an engagement with the concrete impossibilities of modernist form potentiates an analogous engagement with the general, objective contradictions of capitalist modernity. Even where it attempts to impose a critical judgement on society, realist art commits the cardinal sin of presenting a near inexplicable and radically divided world as a rationalisable and integrated whole. Adorno's work, in Jameson's words,

insists relentlessly on the need for modern art and thought to be difficult, to guard their truth and freshness by the austere demands they make on the powers of concentration of their participants, by their refusal of all habitual response in their attempt to reawaken numb thinking and deadened perception to a raw, wholly unfamiliar real world. (Jameson 1971: 3)

The idea that specific experiences can be rationally explained as part of a general whole is thus viewed, in this argument, as a piece of bourgeois ideology. The only way to

reveal that general condition is by making ‘austere demands on the powers of concentration’.

Explication and Inexplicability

[Modernist art] rests on the assumption that the objective world is inherently inexplicable. (Lukacs 1996: 147)

What Adorno pessimistically perceives as the fundamental nature of the modern world – its irreducible and alienating complexity – is for Lukács central to the ideological mystifications of modernism. History becomes, particularly in the work of Kafka and Beckett, a nightmare from which there is no hope of an awakening. It is possible that Adorno actually subscribes to this worldview, so profound is his pessimism. But to lay the charge of pessimism on Adorno’s doorstep is not in itself a challenge to his theoretical formulations. To scrutinise these more closely, I will now turn to an examination of the concept of inexplicability in the *Trilogy*.

The four narrators of the *Trilogy* are in no position to explain anything to the reader. All of them are open to the possibility that there is no external world beyond their own minds or their immediate situation, and when they are forced to assume that there is such a world, they prove unable to give any useful explanation for it. This is a common trope in much of Beckett’s writing. If, as Adorno contends, *Endgame* is in some sense about a holocaust, its characters are manifestly unable to grasp the significance of this. When asked ‘What’s happening, what’s happening?’ Clov can only reply as he does several times in the play, ‘something is taking its course’ (Beckett 1990: 98).

The passage in which Moran speculates on the meanings encrypted in the erratic dance of his bees sees him pacing the confines of the interpretive hole in which Beckett’s people find themselves:

The dance was best to be observed among the bees returning to the hive, laden more or less with nectar, and it involved a great variety of figures and rhythms. These evolutions I finally interpreted as a system of signals by means of which the incoming bees, satisfied or dissatisfied with their plunder, informed the outgoing bees in what direction to go, and what not to go. But the outgoing bees danced too. It was no doubt their way of saying, I understand, or, Don’t worry about me. (Beckett 1959: 169).

The meanings which Moran attaches to different types of movement gradually become more complicated as he introduces different factors – pitch of hum and height of trajectory – into his apian semiotics. He finally concludes:

In spite of all the pains I have lavished on these problems, I was more than ever stupefied by the complexity of this innumerable dance, involving doubtless other determinants of which I had not the slightest idea. And I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand... And I admitted with good grace the possibility that this dance was after all no better than the dances of the people of the West, frivolous and meaningless. (Beckett 1959: 170)

Moran's initial attempts to decode the movements of the bees are victim to a category mistake. He scrutinises them in a paranoid manner, searching for communicative meaning which will be impossible to find. But he fails to understand the dance as a dance, as something non-signifying and frivolous, as well as failing to understand its functionality. It is, after all, meaningful – in the sense that it can be interpreted as an essential part of the bees' life process, the gathering of food – as well as being frivolous. If Moran studied the routes people take to the supermarket and the tunes they whistle on the way as a system of signals, he would surely come to the same conclusion: that it was too complex ever to be understood. But he would have missed the point. Beckett invites us to make this anthropological comparison when Moran confesses that the bees' dance may be 'no better than the dances of the people of the West, frivolous and meaningless.' This comparison with human dances prompts consideration not just of the Waltz and the Tango, but of the trip to the supermarket and the working day. This is the position in which Beckett's characters find themselves in relation to human society: unable to make the cognitive leap from the observation of specific, subjective, experiential phenomena to a more general level. Life appears to them as an incomprehensible, meaningless dance.

This gulf which seems to separate the subject from the society of which he is a part, preventing him from understanding its institutions and therefore preventing him from mounting any reasoned critique of that society (in the terms which Lukács demands) is something which Beckett had perhaps drawn from Kafka. Josef K awakes one morning to discover that he has been arrested without having done anything wrong, and the rest of the action of *The Trial* deals with his efforts to understand this nightmare bureaucracy and clear his name. But he dies, eventually, resigned to the incomprehensibility of his world. Molloy is also arrested, and although the sergeant manages to communicate to him the specific violation for which he is being reprimanded ('It ended in my understanding that my way of resting, my attitude when at rest, astride my bicycle, my arms on my handlebars, my head on my arms, was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency' (Beckett 1959: 20)), Molloy finds it impossible to deduce from 'points of detail' the 'essence of the system' which forbids certain comportments (Beckett 1959: 25). The following passage reveals Molloy's inability to grasp the system to which he is subject:

Conscious of my wrongs, knowing now the reason for my arrest, alive to my irregular situation as revealed by the enquiry, I was surprised to find myself at freedom once again, if that is what it was, unpenalised. Had I, without my knowledge, a friend at court? Had they succeeded in finding my mother and obtaining from her, or from the neighbours, partial confirmation of my statements? Were they of the opinion that it was useless to prosecute me? To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter. It can be done, but reason is against it. It is better to leave things to the police. I don't know. If it is unlawful to be without papers, why did they not insist on my getting them? Because that costs money and I had none? But in that case could they not have appropriated my bicycle? Probably not, without a court order. All that is incomprehensible (Beckett 1959: 24-25).

In Lukács's terms, the position articulated by this kind of passage is particularly politically abhorrent. The circumstances which appear as a threat to Molloy's freedom are not merely incomprehensible, they are absurd. He is incapable of reading it as a system; it appears to him instead as a collection of random and unrelated incidents, the arbitrary fiat of officials who represent an anonymous and unknowable field of malevolence. Beckett often seems to be actively deriding the idea of generalising or imposing an interpretive political scheme on reality: 'To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter.' Professions of political faith can be, like professions of religious faith, a form of Sartrean bad faith: fatuous half-truths which make a hostile world more palatable by serving the ends of self-satisfaction. Under these circumstances – where the political system is not an integrated and causally consistent whole, but an absurd nightmare – it becomes impossible to mount any kind of critique. Molloy is consequently unable to define 'freedom' in relation to these circumstances, qualifying his use of the term with 'if that is what it was.'

I would argue that it is in this Kafkaesque aspect of Beckett's work – which is particularly present in *Molloy* – that it gains some of its most direct political force. There are perhaps deeper political meanings which are somewhat alien to the critical vocabulary of Marxism (because of their theological bent). Indeed, there are profound problems with Lukács's contention that modernism's thematic interest in the 'inexplicability' of the modern world is inherently politically regressive. Simply, it is not at all obvious that, as Lukács seems to assume, the inability of Beckett's characters to generalise from the situation in which they find themselves prevents the reader from doing so. By placing Molloy's failure to understand society at a degree of remove from the reader, Beckett places the reader in a position to consider not only society but also the social processes of understanding and articulating alienation within that society. Adorno expresses his admiration for Kafka, who he grouped with Beckett, thus:

He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgement that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in the resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away (Adorno 1996: 199).

This certainly rings true with Beckett's scepticism towards fatuous political platitudes, that degree of consolation which is to be found in judging the world to be bad. But this winding sentence is unsatisfactory in a way typical of Adorno's writing. His argument folds in on itself in its contradictory impulses to legitimate the productions of high modernism as politically potent negations of capitalist reality, and to dispel from the reader any comfort that this mirage of autonomy – which in any case has its roots in the 'original sin' of the division of mental and physical labour – might provide. Adorno's riposte would be that he permits such contradictions in his work because only through contradiction can it bear any useful negative relation to the world's disunities, which it strives not merely to describe but to embody. But the problem is that Adorno fails to attribute sufficient agency to art, relegating this question to one of high versus low art and politicising this distinction. Popular forms, for Adorno, merely succumb to the logic of the mass market, while tough modernist work such as Beckett's novels embodies the general contradictions of capitalist culture while resisting commodification. More convincing is T.J. Clark's argument that [t]he

question of “high” versus “low” is secondary: it cedes to the need for knowledge of the past and means to imagine the future’ (Clark 1999: xxvi).

Immanence and Transcendence

It would help me, since to me too I must attribute a beginning, if I could relate it to that of my abode. Did I wait somewhere for this place to be ready to receive me? Or did it wait for me to come and people it? By far the better of these hypotheses, from the point of view of usefulness, is the former, and I shall often have occasion to fall back on it. But both are distasteful. I shall say therefore that our beginnings coincide, that this place was made for me, and I for it, at the same instant. (Beckett 1959: 298)

At this point it might be appropriate to restate the problem. The question of how literary representation might mediate between a purely perceptual, sensory plane and a general grasp of reality is at the root of most Marxist theories of the aesthetic. The key charge which Lukács levels against Beckett is that his work refuses to show the complex social interdependences of the individual consciousness, and suggests that a cognitive grasp of the social whole is no longer possible. Ironically, given that he provides a completely opposite estimation of Beckett’s value, Adorno actually reads Beckett in a similar way on this point. The difference is that Adorno is inclined to agree with this premise: for him, the modern world is so complicated and contradictory that realist representations of it – however critical – merely serve to legitimate it by giving a false sense of its harmoniousness.

I have already indicated that this is partly a continuation of earlier discussions of the relation of the individual to the ‘general will’, whose genealogy goes back through Marx and Hegel to Rousseau. But another way of stating this problem would be in terms of the religious question of the relation between the immanence of experiential phenomena on the one hand and the condition of transcendence on the other. Modernist literature has the advantage that it allows us to respond immanently to the contradictions which put the objective world beyond the grasp of cognition. In line with Nietzsche’s anti-transcendentalist polemics, Adorno asserts the value of an ‘immanent criticism’ and a literature of immanence, in contradistinction to the bogus transcendentalism which he ascribes to Lukács’s category of critical realism. ‘Immanent criticism’ implies a formalist approach rather than a sociological one, and in some senses this reflects the kind of attention that Beckett’s work demands. Steven Connor’s reading of the *Trilogy* feeds into this argument usefully:

Beckett’s work up to the end of the *Trilogy* is often said to have moved progressively away from the material world and its conditions, and to have withdrawn into the various different kinds of subjectivism and abstraction. But it’s possible to see Beckett moving in another direction, too, towards an ever more intense awareness of the predicament of immanence. (Connor 1988: 44-45)

This emphasis on ‘the predicament of immanence’ in some senses problematizes the Lukácsian idea that Beckett had moved in the direction of ‘subjectivism and abstraction’. Furthermore, as I will show, the *Trilogy*’s interest in immanence goes hand in hand with a foregrounding of the material nature of thought and experience. In this sense, Beckett is surprisingly close to Marx, who writes that ‘the element of thought

itself, the element of the vital expression of thought, *language*, is sensuous nature.' (Marx 1975: 356). And if the *Trilogy* does look out beyond mere solipsism, it does so through its focus on the materiality of language. It becomes clear that the move 'away from the objective world and its conditions' is not to be read in a Lukácsian sense. In fact, Beckett's exploration of immanence acts to demonstrate the materiality of subjectivism and abstraction, the physicality of transcendence. Consciousness is always already social, partly because linguistic, and as such it is a part of the objective historical conditions to which Lukács opposes it. It is itself a part of the general.

Malone Dies provides some of the most transcendent passages in Beckett's oeuvre, yet it constantly insists that the reader be mindful of the narrator's condition, his location and the physical acts of writing and thinking themselves. In fact, writing and thinking constitute for Malone a self-conscious effort to transcend and escape the material confines of his circumstances. For example:

What tedium. If I went on to the stone? No, it would be the same thing. The Lamberts, the Lamberts, does it matter about the Lamberts? No, not particularly. But while I am with them the other is lost. How are my plans getting on, my plans, I had plans not so long ago. Perhaps I have another ten years ahead of me. The Lamberts! I shall try and go on all the same, a little longer, my thoughts elsewhere, I can't stay here. I shall hear myself talking, afar off, from my far mind, talking of the Lamberts, talking of myself, my mind wandering, far from here, among the ruins. (Beckett 1959: 216-217)

The sense of longing which haunts the text, a yearning not merely to be elsewhere but to escape materiality itself, reminds us that it is one of the functions of language is to offer the possibility of transcendence. But the impossibility that language alone can fulfil its promise also weighs heavily on *Malone Dies*, for despite all his efforts, Malone is destined ever to return to the unfortunate particulars of his present condition. One key passage sees Malone losing his exercise-book in which his narrative is supposedly written, the immanent precondition for his attempts at transcendence:

I fear I must have fallen asleep again. In vain I grope, I cannot find my exercise-book. But I still have the pencil in my hand. I shall have to wait for day to break. God knows what I am going to do till then.

I have just written, I fear I must have fallen, etc. I hope this is not too great a distortion of the truth. I now add these few lines, before departing from myself again. (Beckett 1959: 209)

Later in the paragraph Malone writes: 'The exercise-book had fallen to the ground. I took a long time to find it. It was under the bed.' The first paragraph quoted is a logical impossibility in the terms of the narrative: how can Malone write in the present tense about the loss of the exercise-book in his exercise-book? But the question is answered immediately. Malone's 'distortion of the truth' is to pretend for a moment that he is not Malone, immobilised in his bed, but a disembodied narrator, a projection, capable of reporting such a loss without suffering the obvious material consequence of it, the discontinuation of the narrative.

Malone's attempts to 'depart from myself' always begin and end in this awareness of the dependence of language upon matter. *The Unnamable* demonstrates this negatively. It is narrated by someone who is physically incapable of narration:

How, in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly? I don't know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee. It is I who think, just enough to write, whose head is far. (Beckett 1959: 303)

The logical impossibility of writing about one's inability to write does not deter the narrator here. But from the point of view of the reader, it forces recognition of the simultaneously transcendent and material nature of language. It must always originate in somebody who is at least physically capable of thought and of manipulating a pencil, and who has an exercise-book or analogous recording device to hand. And yet it is capable of producing an imaginary situation where the dependence of language on matter is transcended. This does not negate transcendence, it merely grounds it in the material world. The states of Malone and the narrator of *The Unnamable* recall to² them that what they write is as much a part of the world as they are.

This materialist response to the problems of immanence and transcendence also provides a different way of looking at the modernism-realism debate. In respect of this argument, Lukács and Adorno are both on the wrong side. They both agree – whilst imposing diametrically opposed value judgements on Beckett's work – that it constitutes some form of rejection of reality. For Lukács, Beckett violates a responsibility to reality, so that his 'rejection of reality is wholesale and summary, containing no concrete criticism' (Lukács 1996: 150). Adorno subscribes to a different but not unrelated view that art on the contrary has a responsibility precisely to reject the reality which he abhors. 'It is not the office of art,' he writes, 'to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads' (Adorno 1996: 190).

Raymond Williams points out that the metaphors of reflection (which governs Lukács's work) and of mediation (the Adornian model of the role of literature) are both indicative of a fundamental misreading of Marx's theory of base and superstructure (Williams 1977: 75-107). According to this misreading, the economic base constitutes a stable, objective, material reality, while the superstructure (in which art and language are included) reflects the base in a secondary way. In this model literature is always to be read with the aim of discovering through it general truths about the material world from which it is in some way distinct. From the specific properties of a work of literature – whether the focus is on its mimetic content or on its form – one should be able to make generalisations about the society that produced it. The problem with this, as Williams sees it, is that it relies on an idealist dualism which tends to ignore the materiality of language and literature. Both Lukács and Adorno ultimately make a categorical distinction between 'reality' and 'talking, thinking and writing about reality'. Beckett's *Trilogy* is a useful case study because it simply does not permit the reader to make this distinction. By immersing itself in immanence, Beckett's *Trilogy* reminds us of the materiality of language. Its relation to the general is thus to be sought here, and not in some notion that it reflects or mediates underlying social realities.

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