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# Putting the Impossible to Work: Beckettian Afterlife and the Posthuman Future of Humanity

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*This paper analyzes the rhetoric of futurity at work in a number of texts dealing with the “posthuman future of humanity.” It follows these texts in an attempt to historicize such a future in relation to human history. But it also identifies an overwhelming temporal contradiction at the heart of their discourse: that the posthuman is already with us even as it remains to come. If so, is posthuman identity to be interpreted as a mere phase in the history of human subjectivity? Does posthumanity come about in response to ethical and epistemological challenges inherited from the experience of human subjects? Or is it rather an altogether new paradigm that renders the very use of words like “subjectivity,” “history,” and “experience” anachronistic? Drawing on Hegel, Derrida, and especially Beckett, I argue that an experience of the impossible informs the moment of posthuman self-reflection; and consequently, that the challenge of theorizing a point of contact between human and posthuman being (or human and posthuman history) calls for a new, ad hoc interpretation of the concept of “impossibility.”*

**Keywords:** posthuman / impossible / finitude / Samuel Beckett / Jacques Derrida / death-in-life

One of the defining critical issues in posthuman studies today is the problem of grasping (and properly articulating) the historical character of our current posthuman condition—in other words, of situating the posthuman moment in human history. Is posthumanity to be interpreted as a mere phase in the history of human subjectivity? Does it come about in response to ethical and epistemological challenges inherited from the experience of human subjects? Or is it rather an altogether new paradigm that renders the very use of words like “subjectivity,” “history,” and “experience” anachronistic? This essay seeks to address these questions by analyzing strategies of historical self-definition at work in a number of texts dealing with the “posthuman future of humanity.” Drawing on Beckett and Derrida (and implicitly on Hegel), I will argue that an experience of the impossible informs the moment of posthuman self-reflection; and

consequently, that the challenge of theorizing a point of contact between human and posthuman being (or human and posthuman history) calls for a new, ad hoc interpretation of the concept of “impossibility.”

The scope of this argument allows for no more than a brief survey of the posthuman canon. But as we look at some representative texts, two hypotheses suggest themselves right away: first, that posthumanity is always co-implicated with humanity, that from the outset it was a constituent part of the human character, possibly a function of the eminently human faculty of self-transcendence; and second, that a posthuman epoch set in, with historic consequences, once human history reached its saturation point.

Neil Badmington spells out the first hypothesis in *Alien Chic*, where he reads the figure of the alien in contemporary culture as a symptom of human anxieties vis-à-vis the posthuman within:

Posthumanism, as I see it, is the acknowledgement and activation of the trace of the inhuman within the human. In the end, absolute difference is abducted by difference (with an “a”). In the end, “Man” secretes the other within. In the end, close encounters are constitutive, and invasion is inescapable. In the end, humanism finds itself a little alien. (155)

The relationship between posthumanism and human experience obeys a peculiar logic here. Let us note, first of all, that the posthuman is defined through an act (or a series of acts) by which “humanism finds itself. . . .” It is a moment of self-discovery and “acknowledgement,” where what needs to be acknowledged is mankind’s inherent other, an alien that differs from human beings no more than “humans differ from themselves” (Badmington 129). Accordingly, self-difference is viewed as a predicate of human nature, perhaps even a defining potentiality of the species. But there is no indication that it might be anything more than an abstract, immutable character trait, save for the anaphoric insistence that *acknowledgement* and *self-discovery* must necessarily occur “in the end.”

It is of course significant that over the past fifteen to twenty years posthumanism has acquired an unprecedented historical self-consciousness, an ability to speak of itself as an evolving discipline and an intellectual project. Introducing a special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* devoted to Posthumanism, Katherine Hayles notes that

[t]aken as a group, the essays point not so much to consensus as to common sites where contestations to determine the future of humanity are especially intense. [. . .] It is too soon to say where these engagements will end. Perhaps the only clear conclusions are that the future of humans will increasingly be entangled with intelligent machines, and that embodiments will still matter in some sense, however virtual or cyborgian they become. (“Refiguring the Posthuman” 316)

The briefest of summaries will suffice, here, to identify an overwhelming temporal contradiction at the heart of the debate: the posthuman is already with us, even as it is yet to come. In other words, the currency and the futurity

of the posthuman are one and the same. An important implication of Hayles's argument is that the variety of contexts in which posthumanism plays itself out coincides with a variety of possible futures. It is by focusing on the future as a site of multiple possibilities that the posthuman begins to be thought. The task is all the more urgent when we observe that Hayles is speaking here not of a posthuman future but, more precisely, a "future of humanity" in which the posthuman ought to become increasingly recognizable, that is to say, more and more like itself.

## ETHICAL PROBLEMS, POSTHUMAN SOLUTIONS

This anachronism lies at the heart of any discourse on the posthuman: viewed as part of an evolutionary continuum, posthumans share a genetic past with human beings. In a very concrete sense, they emerge from within a human world. But they must leave that world behind. To theorize the historicity of the posthuman, to comprehend the place of the posthuman in human history, is also to come to grips with this logic of evolutionary supersession.

Intuitively, evolutionary discourse may be seen to compete with the post-apocalyptic imagery prevalent in numerous posthuman myths. But in fact, the historical character of the posthuman compels us to think of evolution and apocalypse as co-implicated. Evolutionary discourse affirms temporal continuity and privileges versions of becoming—myths of gradual genetic reprogramming—over the sense of an irreparable rupture in time. And here too, the notion of a "possibility" to be fulfilled or transgressed is key. Bruce Clarke, for example, concludes *Posthuman Metamorphoses* with the observation that "humanity [. . .] will earn its continuation only by metamorphic integration into new evolutionary syntheses" (196). Within this narrative, the posthuman fits the role of a "human metamorphosed by reconnection to the worldly and systemic conditions of its evolutionary possibility" (Clarke 196). Thomas Foster, in turn, speaks of "contemporary post-humanist impulses to intervene in and direct what would have once been a process of natural selection, in order to accelerate human potential for differentiation and (self)modification" (6). Note that the phrase pits two types of evolutionary work against each other: *natural selection* takes evolutionary possibilities as given in advance (in nature), whereas the *human potential for differentiation*, itself a given, opens the field to some degree of indeterminacy in the exercise of human agency. Only a third term, *acceleration*, registers a disruption of the natural order that, in effect, coincides with the posthuman event.

Where it intervenes in evolutionary processes, the posthuman event marks an uncanny intersection of technology and nature. It introduces difference not from within a field of given possibilities, but in excess of that field. Nature becomes more than natural, the organism more than merely organic. Most importantly, for my purposes of here, the event makes the very realization of genetic possibilities dependent on the workings of the impossible. H.G. Wells provides the argument with a powerful illustration:

It often seems to be tacitly assumed that a living thing is at the utmost nothing more than the complete realization of its birth possibilities, and so heredity becomes confused with theological predestination. [ . . . ] We overlook only too often the fact that a living being may also be regarded as raw material, as something plastic, something that may be shaped and altered, that this, possibly, may be added and that eliminated, and the organism as a whole developed far beyond its apparent possibilities. (*Early Writings* 36)

Here, technological invention is found to be inherent in natural selection, a constitutive factor and a guarantee of the plasticity of living forms. To be sure, technology's role in this process is not reducible to any practical application, to this or that particular instance of technological use. Rather, the power of technology and the significance of a technological experience emerge in precisely the kind of event that folds nature and the impossible together. As Callus and Herbrechter have argued, the posthuman does not need technology, though it remains a technological formation through and through. It is simply "that which reconfigures the actual and the possible once human potential is reengineered and new orders instituted (whether by technology or otherwise)" ("Introduction: Cy-Borges" 35).<sup>1</sup> Or, if you will, it is what puts the impossible to work as human possibilities are re-engineered—and therein lies the key feature of its technological determination.

By this last definition, the evolutionary character of the human/posthuman relation may be conceived alongside the sheer irruptive power of the posthuman turn. The rhetoric approximates that of Foster's argument (quoted above). Here, however, the emphasis lies on the inventive thrust of the *now*, on the moment's future origin, rather than its position in an evolutionary continuum. If the posthuman can indeed be understood as an acceleration of human potential—and we are able to adopt this definition without qualms—it is because we recognize an original impossibility at work in reality, in nature, and in the possible itself.

But the folding in of human and posthuman histories belies another, more serious issue—one that goes to the heart of the debate on early cybernetic fantasies of disembodiment. As Hayles observes, in the ideology that sustains these fantasies "[t]he contrast between the body's limitations and cyberspace's power highlights the advantages of pattern over presence. As long as the pattern endures, one has attained a kind of immortality" (*How We Became Posthuman* 36). Hayles goes on to trace a vague, causal link between the cultural bias towards disembodiment and posthumanist myths of ecological disadaptation and of being ill-at-ease in the world:

In a world spoiled by overdevelopment, overpopulation and time-release environmental poisons, it is comforting to think that physical forms can recover their pristine purity by being reconstituted as informational patterns in multidimensional computer space. A cyberspace body, like a cyberspace landscape, is immune to blight and corruption. It is no accident that the vaguely apocalyptic landscapes of films such as *Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, and *Hardware* occur in narratives focusing on cybernetic life-forms. The sense that the world is rapidly becoming uninhabitable

by human beings is part of the impetus for the displacement of presence by pattern.  
*(How We Became Posthuman 36–37)*

Dematerialization is contemplated, here, as an evolutionary response to a biological and ecological threat. But the scenario, Hayles argues, is at best naive—and at worst corrupt. It threatens a return to the dichotomy of “mind” and “body” that props up the liberal humanist project. It is a reversion from the gains of historical materialism. Most damningly, it labors under the misguided assumption that the Mind (or some version of it) is the true site of identity, that it has natural primacy over matter, and that the body is merely its accessory for being in the world—a tool that can be exchanged should a more efficient (or more fashionable) one become available. Robocop and Terminator were never far from being repossessed as parables on human agency or metaphors for the endurance of human resolve. So too, the posthuman subject viewed as a pure sequence of information, as the translation of thought into digital form, stakes its survival on the idea that technological instantiation is incidental to being—that some material form enables truth’s circulation in the marketplace, but doesn’t affect its nature. Hayles goes on to say:

[O]ne could argue that the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body. [. . .] If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality. *(How We Became Posthuman 4–5)*

A great deal hangs on the implied association between immortality and unlimited power. For Hayles, the stakes are, first and foremost, ethical. Dreams of disembodied immortality are *ethically* objectionable because they deny the finitude of the subject. In other words, they afford the subject a megalomaniac illusion of coinciding with the whole of being. To have unlimited power is to attain an absolute perspective. It is to hold the entire history of being in a single act of memory. It is also to eliminate difference and to preclude the possibility of a properly challenging experience, or any sort of encounter with the unexpected. In the long run, disembodied immortality neutralizes *virtuality* itself, *viz.*, the operations of a modal verb, the power of a technological invention or of an unforeseen event to affect reality.

By inference, an ethically valid posthumanism would need to be attuned to the idea of its own finitude. More importantly, it would know itself to be *empowered* by its finitude. It would find, in the full acceptance of its mortality, a certain self-defining potential. (Indeed, if this were not so, Hayles’s argument might reduce to a mere call for technological self-censorship). To embrace “the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited

power” is to promote a new understanding of death—death as a source of power, or at the very least, as an empowering agency.

The last ten years have witnessed a sustained effort to theorize this version of the posthuman. Yet the significance of “death” for the project—the relation between death and power—remains largely unexplored. Hayles’s insistence on posthuman embodiment has the indubitable merit of grounding posthuman identity-politics in a concrete and highly particularized reality. Her attention to the material processes underlying informational exchange continues to guard against universalizing and homogenizing tendencies in posthumanist thought. But the approach has had the additional effect of reclaiming the posthuman for the history of subjectivity. The posthuman is made thought-friendly and history-friendly, as its apocalyptic sting is strategically removed. As Hayles herself notes, it is only a “fraction of humanity” that should be threatened by this version of the posthuman, since it effectively critiques only one of many possible models of subjectivity. In the last analysis, “the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human [ . . . ] Located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information, the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines” (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 286–287).

It is probably unnecessary to point out that this version of posthumanism remains at bottom a politics of human identity. It features the posthuman as a propitious moment in the history of the human subject—a new ideological configuration of the old form—rather than an alternative paradigm. Once again, the suspicion here is that posthumanity’s ethical gains are not really its own—that embodiment and mortality are in fact borrowed criteria underwriting a borrowed ethics.

Thomas Foster seems to be grappling with this very issue when he speaks of a “key antinomy or unbridgeable gap that posthumanism has trouble thinking through” (xxvii). He analyzes this gap as an impasse “between the argument that posthumanism [ . . . ] can be part of struggles for freedom and social justice, and the argument that posthumanism dismisses such struggles or even makes them obsolete” (Foster xxvii).

## THE RHETORIC OF DEATH-IN-LIFE IN BECKETT

Possibly more than any other writer in the twentieth century, Beckett has labored to articulate this condition of self-externality. The strange sense of being historically obsolete yet unsurpassable is shared (and in a sense explicated) by a host of narrators from Beckett’s fiction—disembodied voices, and utterly finite beings, whose compulsive logorrhea is dramatized as an inability to die completely.

Beckett’s preoccupation with the overlap of death and life is evident even in his early fiction. The protagonist of the stories collected in *More Pricks than Kicks*, Belacqua Shuah, bears the name of Dante’s flute-maker in *Purgatorio* IV, a figure

of supreme idleness, and the *Comedy's* arch-example of a negligent soul. Several features of his character would have appealed to Beckett's sensibility. Chief among these is Belacqua's indolence, which is not merely sloth, but moral inertia—a flat and self-contented passivity with respect to all impulses, be they good or bad. It is this inertia that first draws Beckett's interest in the overlap of life and death. Like many of the souls Dante encounters in Purgatory, Belacqua inhabits a space between the animate world and the inanimate. But Belacqua is uniquely at home in the middle-ground. Indeed the most striking expression of his inertia is a tendency to merge with his surroundings. When Dante comes upon him at the foot of Mount Purgatory, he is leaning against a rock, motionless. Dante hears his voice, but sees only the mountain.

Una voce di presso sonò, Forse  
 Che di sedere in prima avrai distretta.  
 Al suon di lei ciascun di noi si torse,  
 E vedemmo a mancina un gran petrone,  
 Del qual ne io ne ei prima s'accorse.

[ . . . ] A voice from nearby sounded, "Perhaps  
 You may be obliged to sit down, first."  
 At the sound of it both of us turned  
 And we saw to the left a great boulder  
 That neither he nor I had noticed previously.

(Alighieri, *Purgatorio* IV, ll. 98–102; translation modified.)<sup>2</sup>

The irony of Belacqua's character (and a further sign of his at-homeness in Purgatory) is that he is in no hurry to be redeemed. Relishing the opportunity for a verbal duel, he mocks Dante's eagerness to move forward, and gladly embraces his divine punishment—waiting at the foot of the mountain for a period equal to the length of his sinful life. Dante's Belacqua wields irony as a rhetorical device self-consciously adopting it as a moral stance: while he waits out his penance, he enjoys the pleasures of repartee and one-upmanship with Dante, to whom he concedes the moral high-ground. By contrast, his Beckettian counterpart is the *unknowing subject* of a broader irony, the irony of a self-ironizing moral universe that would have us laugh at both human weakness and divine judgment at the same time.

To appreciate this dynamic we might compare Beckett's treatment of Belacqua with T.S. Eliot's use of another moral exemplum from Dante's Purgatory: the Provencal poet Arnaut Daniel. According to Eliot, Daniel is the quintessential purgatorial soul insofar as he embraces his punishment, eagerly immersing himself in the fire that refines him.<sup>3</sup> His desire for redemption is emblematic of a redemptive potential in human nature, a power of self-transcendence to which Eliot's poetry always aspires.

Beckett's Belacqua is a parodic subversion of the same principle. He, too, submits willingly to his sentence, and in so doing, represents the modern Everyman as a purgatorial creature. But in his case, the willing acceptance of punishment—the



diagnosis it implies—only makes a mockery of the desire to be redeemed. Within this interpretative framework, Dante's encounter with Belacqua may be seen to function as a meta-discursive moment that makes of the pilgrim's whole journey—life and afterlife—a purgatorial experience, precisely that “limbo purged of desire” announced in Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (44), and dramatized in all of his later works.

The implication is that in Beckett's work, reality itself—reality as a whole—is suspended in a state of in-betweenness. The idea is first suggested in the essay on Joyce, where Beckett speaks of “this earth that is Purgatory, Vice and Virtue” (“Dante . . . Bruno” 21). Here Purgatory represents not only the point of contact between opposing moral determinations, but also the space in which those determinations collapse. Identified with “this earth,” it stands for the full breadth of human experience, a space in which all distinctions and determinations are undone.

The opening scene of “Dante and the Lobster” strikes the same note. As Daniela Caselli observes, the scene sets up a subtle game of identifications. “Belacqua moves—although he is ‘stuck’—from the Dante to the Beckett text [ . . . ] a subtle use of the pronouns merges Belacqua Shuah—the reader of *Paradiso* II—with Dante's Belacqua of *Purgatorio* IV, and with Dante the protagonist of the *Comedy*” (Caselli 59). The Dantean reference thus provides an opportunity to blur boundaries not only between different identities, but also between the world of the book and the world of the reader.

Furthermore, the scene conflates Purgatory with Hell and Heaven, as if to abolish all topographic, ethical and ontological distinctions. In the absence of human desire, all three stages of Dante's spiritual journey fold into each other. Time (*lived* time, that is; the time of human experience) loses its thrust, and a passive waiting replaces Dante's heroic will-to-redemption as the universe's ethical norm.

It is important to clarify that this passive waiting is not merely a negative determination of action. It precedes the distinction between action and passion. It is neutral to both terms, and in fact may be said to hold them in reserve; hence its irreducibility to the order of subjective experience. Beckett's “limbo” is in this sense a peculiar conjunction of existential and ontological states (being-dead or being-alive; being-actual or being-virtual), a meeting of dialectical opposites, but without any possibility of a workable synthesis. Nor is the dominant tone here one of disgust, as Martha Nussbaum might argue, but rather, one of ironic reflection that is symptomatic of this state of being-in-between.

## THE REALITY OF DEATH-IN-LIFE

I have argued elsewhere that this rhetoric of death-in-life in Beckett offers an ironic take on vitalist models of time and subjective experience.<sup>4</sup> Beckett at once adopts and overturns the Bergsonian view of time as a continuous evolutionary movement, a process that is neither ideal nor strictly speaking material. Here I

would like to elaborate on the logic of in-betweenness implied in that strategy, and the sense of unsurpassable finitude it calls into play.

Aside from the connotations of Belacqua's name, Beckett mobilizes the motif of death-in-life in a number of images and verbal echoes recurring throughout the text of "Dante and the Lobster." Readers will recall the ending of the short story on a note of "quick death" (*More Pricks* 22). In turn, that note reverberates with a Dantean pun that had preoccupied Belacqua earlier in the day: "*qui vive la pietà, quand'è ben morta*" ("Here pity is alive when it is dead" [*Inf.* XX, 28]; or in Beckett's own poetic translation: "Pity is quick with death").<sup>5</sup> Once we are alerted to this thematic cluster, it is easy to see that it permeates Belacqua's consciousness. His lunch revolves around the purchase of a "rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese," that ought to be "sweating" and "alive," but instead turns out to be a "cadaverous tablet" giving off a "faint fragrance of corruption" rather than "a good stench" (*More Pricks* 14). In preparation of his meal, he takes care that the toast be "done to a dead end" (12) and looks forward to "the anguish of pungency, the pang of spices, as each mouthful die[s] scorching his palate" (13).

The irony of these passages has been duly noted by critics: Belacqua's horror at the thought of boiling the lobster alive contrasts with the pleasure he takes in consuming the rotting cheese and metaphorically doing the toast to death. It is a short-lived horror, to be sure. But it registers, for a moment at least, an awareness of the difference between *literal* and *figurative* determinations of life and death. A genuine experience of finitude seizes Belacqua precisely at this point. In the fleeting instant, it is harder than ever to sustain the illusion that there might be such a thing as "life in the abstract" (*More Pricks* 114). The reality of life and death is brought home as immediately and undeniably as this sudden surge of emotion. Nor can life itself be reduced in this case to an ideal process unfolding in time towards an abstract limit. Yet the earnestness of that conclusion is soon dissipated, and Beckett's ironic pun on "quick death" suggests that Belacqua's pity is in fact little more than easy pity.

References to Cain also fit into this thematic network. As Takeshi Kawashima has shown, the biblical figure is an essential part of the intertextual setup of Belacqua's character, adding a mythical element to the pattern of doubles and identifications in the text, and branding Belacqua himself with an accursed lineage.

Belacqua shares a stigma with Cain, who is destined for exile and dispossession. The sinner's lineage is extended when "Dante and the Lobster" mentions McCabe, a real prisoner sentenced to death, whose execution is scheduled for the following day. When Belacqua deploys an old *Herald* on the table, he finds the "rather handsome face of McCabe the assassin" staring up at him. Afterwards, Belacqua's mind is haunted by McCabe's image, and every time Belacqua sets eyes on it, a subliminal effect is added to his secret sympathy for the condemned. Belacqua, Cain, and McCabe all share the negative legacy of sin and punishment, in which the lobster of the title too is enmeshed. (Kawashima 332)

“Seared with the stigma of God’s pity, that an outcast might not die quickly” (*More Pricks* 12), Cain embodies a paradox of divine justice, and exemplifies the irony of being sentenced to a quick death. His mark protects him from harm, condemning him to a life (traditionally, an eternity) of wandering. Typologically associated with the killing of Christ, this exemption from death is a negative inversion of the glory of eternal life reserved for Jesus and his disciples. It represents a variation on the idea of resurrection, a reversal, as it were, of immortality. Thus, on the one hand, the piety of wishing the condemned man a mercifully quick death resonates with the mercy of God’s decree that no one lay a hand on Cain. Yet the pun also implies a divine judgment—a curse visited upon the outcast, who is suspended for eternity in living-death.

Cain’s brand of afterlife, in short, is one of those forms of impotence, of total dispossession, that Beckett himself has identified as a key to his artistic project: an afterlife that registers, not the soul’s triumph over the finite realities of the flesh, nor the power of revealed knowledge in the presence of God, but an inability to die, or to die completely.<sup>6</sup> Once again, we must take note here of a state of being that short-circuits dialectical oppositions. Like Belacqua’s passivity, which, as we have seen, is not merely a negative determination of action, Cain’s impotence is also not quite death and not quite life. It exceeds the one and falls short of the other.

This idea informs Beckett’s later fiction. In the opening scene of *Molloy*, for instance, the title character expresses a desire “to speak of the things that are left, say [his] goodbyes, finish dying” (*Three Novels* 7), while in *Malone Dies*, the lead character is obsessed with the thought that if he were dead, he would have no way of knowing it—or that once dead he might not be able to notice any change.<sup>7</sup> The eponymous character of *The Unnamable*, yearning for the passage of time, wonders why the hour itself seems so inert: “the question may be asked, off the record, why time doesn’t pass, doesn’t pass from you, why it piles up all about you, instant on instant, on all sides, deeper and deeper, thicker and thicker, your time, others’ time, the time of the ancient dead and the dead yet unborn, why it buries you grain by grain neither dead nor alive” (*Three Novels* 389).

What is particularly striking about this last image is that it disables the distinction between subjective and objective time—between duration and chronology—projecting the experience of death-in-life onto yet another stage, the threshold between internal consciousness and material reality. Time is never more real than at this point. Having acquired a solid density, its effects are felt in the flesh, all around one’s body, in measures of thickness and depth. Yet the experience could not be further removed from the living present. Time doesn’t pass because it is already wholly past—a time of “the ancient dead and the dead yet unborn” (*Three Novels* 389). We graduate, here, from the idea of paralysis, understood as a restriction of one subject’s motor function, to that of impassivity, intended as a predicate of time itself as a whole.

The obverse of that image returns us to Belacqua in a short story that was intended as the coda to *More Pricks than Kicks*. “Echo’s Bones” shows Beckett’s

fictional alter-ego sitting on his gravestone watching his grave being robbed. The scene ideally pulls together various thematic threads from the passages analyzed earlier. Like the Unnamable, Belacqua is neither quite dead nor quite alive. He awakens to an afterlife in excess of his own mortality, cheated of more than just his resting place. Instead of finding himself buried in an impassive time, he is deprived of his own death—his grave, not the thickness of the past but the excessive, unlimited presence of a consciousness that has overrun (life) itself. The object of the allegory is the very same impotence implied in Molloy's hopeless urge to "finish dying" and in Belacqua's earlier identification with Cain: namely, an impotence-unto-death, a draining of power that withholds even the freedom to die completely.

Such an experience of afterlife parodies the very idea of transcendence. In the perverse simultaneity of being-already-dead and being denied one's death, actuality and virtuality collapse into each other; death and mourning become indistinct. Indeed death itself is mourned for having become impossible.

### **FINITUDE, SELF-EXTERNALITY AND ETHICAL FREEDOM**

It is my contention, here, that posthumanism and Beckett studies overlap on the question of finitude.<sup>8</sup> To be more precise, they share a concern with the *ethics* of the limit. In Beckett studies, the treatment of this theme has developed along three broadly defined lines of enquiry:<sup>9</sup>

- a. A refutation of Martha Nussbaum's charge that Beckett's art is one of unredeemable guilt and disgust at the finitude of human existence (see especially Simon Critchley and Robert Eaglestone);
- b. A study of the Cartesian and anti-Cartesian implications of Beckett's fiction, mainly inspired by Beckett's response to the work of Arnold Geulincx (especially Matthew Feldman, and Anthony Uhlmann); or
- c. A discussion of Badiou's powerful, if somewhat eccentric analysis of figures of love and infinity in Beckett's later work (most notably, in Andrew Gibson).

There is little, if any, dialogue among the three strands. For Badiou, Beckett is a thinker of alterity at its most essential. His art is a methodical and progressive refinement of the forms of encounter, a constant attuning to the minimal conditions required of a relation with an Other, pushing past nihilistic solutions to affirm the barest possibility of such an event. This is the basis of what Badiou terms "Beckett's paradoxical optimism" (Badiou 25), an uncompromising philosophical experiment conducted under the aegis of love: "The numericality of love—one, two, infinity—is the setting for what Beckett rightly calls happiness. Happiness also singularises love as a truth procedure for happiness can only exist in love. Such is the reward proper to this type of truth. In art there is pleasure, in science joy, in politics enthusiasm, but in love there is happiness" (33).<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Nussbaum argues that the negative emotional charge of Beckett's writing ultimately reduces it to an ethically bankrupt pessimism: "There is a peculiar movement in Beckett's talk of emotions [ . . . ] from a perception of human limits to a loathing of the limited, from grief to disgust and hatred, from the tragedy and comedy of the frail body to rage at the body, seen as covered in excrement" (Nussbaum 251).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the Geulingian camp returns to the themes of ignorance and powerlessness in Beckett in an effort to rethink the possibility of ethical freedom beyond the framework of Descartes's Mind-Body dualism. Ethics, in this context, begins with an emptying of the will, a divestiture of consciousness from the trappings of knowledge. For Geulincx, this is the way of humility, a cardinal virtue which allows one to acknowledge God as the ultimate cause of all things. Beckett's Geulingian intuition is to view *nescience* as a plausible way (perhaps the only one still available) to put the certainty of human finitude in contact with an experience of the infinite.<sup>12</sup>

I should make clear that my sympathies fall squarely with this last interpretation. As I understand them, Beckett's philosophical parables put traditional models of being-in-the world to the test by staging the exhausted, impracticable afterlife of that enduring Enlightenment ideal—the self-determined subject. The sense of being not only mortal, but in excess of one's own death, corresponds to a state of *infinite passivity*—precisely that "limbo purged of desire" in which Beckett's characters are always suspended.<sup>13</sup> Time itself is pressed into a state of pure hesitation; and on this hesitation, on the utter indeterminacy of the *now*, is staked the possibility of an ethical future.<sup>14</sup>

Yet it is Nussbaum's article that provides the most direct clue to Beckett's posthumanism. "Beckett's people," Nussbaum writes, "are heirs of a legacy of feeling that shapes them inexorably. They cannot help being shaped in this way, and they feel like 'contrivances,' like machines programmed entirely from without" (Nussbaum 250). The simile is telling; Nussbaum is right in suggesting that Beckettian ethics has much to do with the idea of a machine-like being facing the evidence of its own unsurpassable finitude. Significantly, this finitude is associated with a sense of being externally determined.

Drawing on that image, I would like to repurpose the theme of unsurpassable finitude by examining it against the recurrent Beckettian motifs of death-in-life and seeing-oneself-dead.<sup>15</sup> I read these motifs allegorically, as figures of a peculiarly modernist experience of finitude and liminality, in order to argue that Beckett's narratives dramatize an over-extended moment in human consciousness—a moment we might more generally describe as *impossible*.

This reference to the impossible gives Beckett's treatment of finitude its ethical purchase. A death that is actualized and mourned at the same time is not only an impossibility, but also the very matrix of an impossible event taking effect in reality. By making the reality of the impossible a central concern of his fiction, Beckett puts his finger on a paradoxical moment in the history of subjectivity, a historical impasse that calls for the invention of ad hoc ethical solutions.

To be sure, the association of ethical freedom with a space of pure subjective interiority forms a defining principle of modern philosophy—a foundational notion without which modernity itself becomes unthinkable. Nothing is more alien to the rights of the individual in a modern secular state than the idea of one's innermost thoughts being probed, judged and censored before they are expressed or put into action. Even allowing for the constructedness of social realities and experiences, the notion of mind control signals an ultimate invasion of privacy, the stuff of Orwellian dystopias and cold-war paranoid scenarios. In this context, consciousness is typically identified with a human potential for infinity. The (interiorizing) work of consciousness makes possible the transcendence of one's own finitude—as when the past is recollected and borne into the present, or the finality of every passing moment is overcome and rendered virtual.

The dread Beckett's characters feel at waking to a state of death-in-life is symptomatic of a subjectivity that has been turned inside out. The work of consciousness goes on, but without the benefit of interiority, it can only realize itself as an extreme form of impotence; an awareness of oneself as machine. To grasp the ethical import of Beckett's treatment of finitude, we needn't look further than this allegory of life at an impasse, this figurative identification of a machine-like existence with an excess of consciousness. Beckett consistently provides the criteria for a continued ethical thinking in the face of this impasse. His images of afterlife affirm both finitude and indeterminacy, and maintain them in a non-dialectical relation.

We return by this route to the critical issue of posthuman ethics identified by Hayles: namely, the problem of thinking through the virtualization of bodies, the co-implication of organic life with informatics, and the dream/nightmare scenario of a pure downloadable consciousness utterly divorced from its material substratum, without reducing posthuman subjectivity to a megalomaniac parody of its liberal humanist counterpart. The impotence-unto-death experienced by Beckett's characters and narrators offers a model by which to configure the relation between human life and a posthuman supersession of the finitude that characterizes human life—and it does so without lapsing into grand narratives of omnipotence and absolute knowledge.

## **MOURNING ONE'S OWN DEATH AND THE RUIN OF REALITY**

In invoking such a concept of finitude (through the Beckettian tropes of death-in-life and of a consciousness that mourns its own death), I take my cue from Derrida, who speaks of “two experiences of mourning,” one turned towards preserving the past, and one towards forgetting. These two experiences must eventually denote a single operation, namely, the work “of an *originary* mourning, of a possible mourning as that which is impossible” (“Preface” xxxix).

For our purpose, the main interest of this Derridean formula is in the way it exposes, at the heart of the Hegelian metaphors of interiority (and organicity), a deep-seated concern with the *impossible* as a historical force. Crucially, what

Derrida terms “impossible mourning” is not a mourning that never happens. Nor indeed should an impossible event be mistaken for an unreal one. Rather, any attempt to put the impossible to work must think of it as lacking nothing of reality. For if the impossible *did* lack something of reality, it could never be thought of as an event. Indeed it might be dismissed as a mere flight of fancy (an act of the imagination); as such, it would only reinforce, by way of simple subtraction, the order of pre-established possibilities. This kind of view would foreclose human history to the experience of whatever is not already inscribed in its program. It would cancel out the very condition in which new technologies emerge and unforeseen futures are created.

On this score, Derrida invites us to explore “the place of a thinking that ought to be devoted to the virtualization of the event by the machine” (*Without Alibi* 135). Note how the strange symmetry of this sentence mutually enfolds the task of *thinking* and the work of *virtualization* in order to endow the machine with enormous philosophical responsibility. Such a task, then, would correspond “to a virtuality that, in exceeding the philosophical determination of the possibility of the possible [ . . . ] exceeds by the same token the classical opposition of the possible and the impossible” (Derrida, *Without Alibi* 135). At stake in this formulation is precisely a posthumanist view of technology as that which opens the Hegelian dialectic to a space of utter indeterminacy. On this reading, *virtualization* opens reality to the workings of the impossible. It forms the very entry point of the impossible into the field of total possibility.

Virtuality, technology, and the machine: no serious treatment of the posthuman can avoid engaging with these concepts. Yet I suspect if certain versions of posthumanism downplay the radical nature of the posthuman turn, it is because they fail to see how an impossible event can operate in history: they mistake the impossible for the unreal. In so doing, they misunderstand the roles of futurity and technology in theorizing the posthuman condition. The counter-argument is simple enough: impossibility characterizes any event in which reality (as a whole) diverges from itself. We see its mark whenever history veers towards an unexpected future, or when nature is reprogrammed through technological invention. From a posthuman perspective, such events constitute reality’s inaugural moments — they are *conditions of possibility*. History is always being thrown off course, and the natural state is never given.

## THE RIGHT TO BE SHOWN IMPOSSIBLE

My conclusion, then, is that an experience of the impossible (such as might be allegorized in the act of mourning one’s own death, or in the extreme passivity of a “limbo of purged of desire”) is integral to posthuman self-consciousness and posthuman self-understanding; and consequently, that a Beckettian interpretation of the concepts of “impossibility” and “finitude” effectively recalibrates some of the most important issues in posthuman thought. These include, most notably,

the problem of theorizing a point of contact—a measure of overlap or translatability—between human and posthuman being, human and posthuman history, human and posthuman ethics, and so forth. The issue here is never whether the posthuman is a being of the future. Even when historicized, or spoken of in the past tense, posthumanity retains an unmistakably futural character in relation to human history. The moot point is whether a posthuman future was always a possibility for human beings—whether man always had it in him, as it were, to turn out this way.

Beckett intervenes in this debate by insisting on what *the Unnamable* calls “the right to be shown impossible” (*Three Novels* 375). The figure of a “limbo purged of desire,” and the recurrent motif of death-in-life, charge the Beckettian narrative with the power of an impossible event, a state of suspension that cannot be reabsorbed into the economy of any ideal history. Germane to both nature and culture, no less real to one than to the other, the “impossibility” I am referring to here short-circuits the dialectical setup that sustains modern versions of subjectivity—in particular, that old straw man the liberal humanist subject. Suspended between death and the inability to finish dying, Beckettian subjects (if we are to call them that) must relinquish any form of internal teleology. In other words, they must face up to their own self-externality.

The reality of our posthuman future emerges in precisely this kind of liminal existence, this sheer indeterminacy into which the field of given (predetermined) possibilities and the impossible are folded together. It falls to the posthuman to reflect on the conjunction between, on the one hand, the power of a living organism to carry itself past its inherent limit, and on the other, the embeddedness of objects in the actuality of that limit. Embracing hesitation as an ethical imperative, the posthuman becomes actual just as it understands itself to be impossible. Its lot, in this sense, is to experience the in-between of Spirit and Nature, to inhabit “the limit” as an opening in which reality plays itself out whole.

### Acknowledgments

This publication was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 302/08).

### Notes

1. Elsewhere, a propos of Derrida’s discourse on apocalypse, Callus and Herbrechter observe that “the disparities between the humanly possible and the inhumanly and dehumanizingly impossible have significantly altered and narrowed” (“Latecoming”). See also their “Critical Posthumanism, or, The Inventio of a Posthumanism without Technology.”
2. While I greatly admire Robert Durling’s translation, I modify it here in order to keep Dante’s use of “forse” (perhaps) at the end of the line. The importance of the word “perhaps” in Beckett’s work is well known, and the fact that Dante gives it prominence within Belacqua’s speech was no doubt significant for the Irish writer.



3. 'Poi s'ascose nel foco che li affina' (Alighieri, *Purg.* XXVI, 148). Eliot famously quotes this line at the end of "The Waste Land" (ln. 427), and again, more obliquely in "Little Gidding" (ln. 145). But the encounter between Dante and Daniel is also alluded to in Eliot's dedication of "The Waste Land" to Ezra Pound, and in the title of Eliot's collection of poems *Ara Vos Prec.*

4. See Borg, "Ethics of the Event."

5. For a commentary on this translation, which appears in the early poem "Text," see Ruby Cohn (11–12), Christopher Ricks (29–32) and Sam Slote (22–23). See also Daniela Caselli (esp. 58–61) for an analysis of the significance of Dante's pun throughout Beckett's career. As Caselli shows, "quick" is repeatedly used by Beckett in its archaic form, as a synonym of "living." For instance in "What a Misfortune," Belacqua bestows his pity not on the dead, but on "the nameless multitude of the current quick" (qtd. in Caselli 68); and in "Echo's Bones," he is said to have departed "from among the quick" (qtd. in Caselli 75).

6. See the Interview with Israel Shenker: "The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance" (Shenker 3).

7. Compare this to Victor Krap's statement in *Eleutheria*: "If I was dead, I wouldn't know I was dead. That's the only thing I have against death. I want to enjoy my death. That's where liberty lies: to see oneself dead" (150).

8. On this point, see Jonathan Boulter's analysis of Beckett's treatment of human finitude in terms of the figure of the ghost and the logic of postcorporeality (12–15).

9. For a more exhaustive summary of the ethical strands in Beckett criticism, see Russell Smith's "Introduction" to *Beckett and Ethics*. Smith reflects on the phrase "Beckett's 'ethical undoing'" to suggest (a) "an undoing of ethics through a disintegration of each term of the ethical relation"; (b) an ethical insistence even in the face of this undoing; and (c.) a form of "not doing" that takes on ethical value, in other words, a "principled rejection of an ethics of [ . . . ] action" (Smith 3).

10. To clarify what is meant by the "numericality of love," we must remember that Badiou develops his notion of "the encounter" in terms of a highly formalized procedure, tracing the passage from the One of the solipsistic *Cogito* to the Infinite (identified with the multiplicity of beings and an opening of subjective experience onto the sensible world), by way of the figure of the Two, which is proper of the encounter. Badiou's bias is clearly in favor of the figure of the Two, which mediates the other terms and, at the same time, constitutes them in relation to each other: "Happiness is not in the least associated with the One, with the myth of fusion. Rather, it is the subjective indicator of a truth of difference, of sexual difference, a truth that love alone makes effective" (Badiou 34). Hence, the focus on Beckett as a writer "who gives voice to the gift and the happiness of Being" (29).

11. To this day, Nussbaum's critique continues to provide the momentum for a re-evaluation of Beckett as a counter-intuitively ethical thinker. A recent international conference ("Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive," York 2011) saw two keynote lectures framed as a direct response to Nussbaum's argument: namely, Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Beckett's Three Critiques"; and Linda Ben Zvi, "Beckett and Disgust: The Body as 'Laughing Matter.'"

12. As Anthony Uhlmann points out, Beckett's encounter with Geulincx's *Ethics* may be seen to produce "an image of thought, with thought imagined as involving or being "grounded" upon the extremely unstable foundation of ignorance. Whereas the ancient imperative was "Know Thyself," this image of thought (at least as it is adapted from Geulincx by Beckett) affirms that the self, which nevertheless remains the ground for all subsequent knowledge, cannot be known" (Uhlmann 92).

13. The philosophical background to this claim, particularly as it pertains to modernism and twentieth-century theories of time, is presented in Borg, "Ethics of the Event."

14. With regard to this last point, we must rehearse at least two senses in which the discourse of futurity becomes important in twentieth-century thought: first, as the far side of a horizon of experience; and second, as an index of indeterminacy in history. The two ideas are of course related.

But where the former emphasizes the field of experience itself (the relation of the world to its limit), in the latter we look to the future as an ethical force. We identify the future with the new and the unforeseeable, indeed with any aspect of reality that escapes pre-determination.

15. For the purpose of this essay, “death-in-life” and “living death” are used interchangeably to signify any overlap between the two states. The notion of “afterlife” will also serve as a shorthand label for all tropes in which the boundaries between the life and death appear to have been transgressed.

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