

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

“Murmur It to the Mud”: The Speaking Subject in Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*

by

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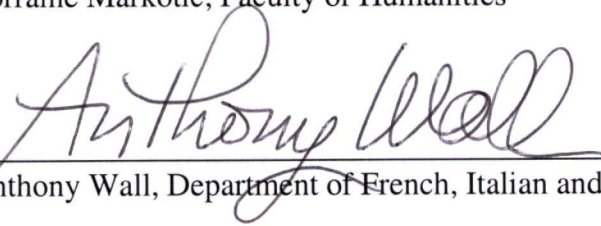
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled “ ‘Murmur It to the Mud’: The Speaking Subject in Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*” submitted by Erin Wood Bodner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



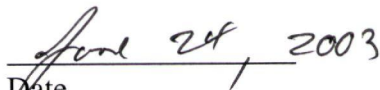
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Abstract

This thesis engages with psychoanalytic theory, as well as standard Beckett scholarship, to posit an explanation for the access to language of the subject in Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*. I interrogate multiple theories of the constitution of the subject, focusing on the linguistic theory of Julia Kristeva, and conclude that none of these theories adequately account for Beckett's speaker's language. I thus construct an account of my own, borrowing from and transforming prior thinking in order to engage with the text on its own terms, rather than those required by adherence to a particular theory. Rejecting, among other aspects but most significantly, the chronology of Kristeva's theorization of the semiotic and the symbolic, I argue that Beckett's speaker constitutes himself through language: not as part of a linear sequence of progression and regression, but in a process of gradual becoming in which the sign does not repress negativity.

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At last I began to think, that is to say to listen harder.

Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

Introduction

The voice that speaks Samuel Beckett's *How It Is* demands an explanation which it seems simultaneously to defy. The voice is both completely mute and faintly audible, both within the text's speaker and outside him, uttering speech that is his alone and a mere quotation. Such paradoxes underscore the fundamental question with which this thesis is concerned: how it is this subject speaks, when—according to standard theories of the constitution of selfhood—he does not qualify as a subject at all, much less a speaking subject. In addressing this question, I engage most fully with the linguistic theory of Julia Kristeva, specifically her account of the subject's constitution, acquisition of language, and production of semiotic texts. I argue that *How It Is*, though an illustrative example of semiotic language, resists the chronological specifications of Kristeva's theory that she inherits from Jacques Lacan. Hence, my answer to the question of this speaker's access to language posits a different account of language acquisition: one in which the sign does not repress negativity, but emerges in concert with it, in a gradual process of becoming that cannot be reduced to the single defining separation that Kristeva calls the thetic break. In *How It Is*, this process of becoming constitutes not only the language of the text, but also the selfhood of its speaker. His voice allows, but does not guarantee, his being; each time he speaks, he calls himself into existence anew.

In Chapter I, I emphasize the linguistic play and fragmentation in this text, placing my remarks in the context of, first, prior scholarship on this text, and, second, Kristeva's theorization of the semiotic. I characterize the practice of reading this text as non-teleological and indeterminate, but not foreclosing altogether the possibility of

finding meaning in it. Rather, this meaning inheres in the very play that disrupts conventional syntactic and semantic structures. The materiality of the language—its sound and its heterogeneity—constitutes its meaning: meaning not as a substance but as activity.

In Chapter II, I argue that, as an instance of Kristeva's concept of the genotext, *How It Is* exceeds the boundaries she places on her own thinking. I do not find evidence in Beckett's text of a sequence of repression and return, but rather a non-linear process of becoming. As a result, I reject the Kristevan account of the thetic break, and the Lacanian account of the subject's constitution, Kristeva's adherence to which necessitates her chronology.

Chapter III reveals further reason for the inadequacy of Lacanian thought to account for this speaker's subjectivity and access to language. Lacan's notion of selfhood is emphatically visual, as evidenced by his concepts of the screen and the gaze as well as his narrative of the subject's consolidation in the mirror stage. I explore these notions, and other issues of specular identity, in terms of this text, and conclude that visibility in *How It Is* is not possible on its own terms, but is only a function of language.

Having dismissed specularity as a means of constructing the self, I consider in Chapter IV an alternative: corporeal sensation. Borrowing from Kaja Silverman's recent work models that posit the bodily ego as a felt rather than seen limit of identification, I explore the gestural identity of Beckett's speaker. I argue that the mud he is surrounded by—and indistinguishable from—prevents the establishment of his bodily borders, and marks another disjunction with Kristevan theory, this one with her concept of abjection.

I conclude my argument in Chapter V by asserting that this speaker's language constitutes his being, not in a way that initiates or brings to an end a linear sequence of development, but in an endlessly repeated, unfinishable process of movement that leads neither forward nor back. The imbrication of intellection and negativity in *How It Is* collapses the timeline by which Kristeva situates her thinking, muddying the oppositions between acquisition and loss, progression and regression, symbolic and semiotic. Beckett's text thus reveals the traces of stubbornly conservative thinking in Kristeva's theorization of texts that create new fields of possibility in language.

I. “scissored into slender strips”: Linguistic Play and Fragmentation

In the English Introduction to his critical-genetic edition of Samuel Beckett’s *Comment c’est / How It Is*, Edouard Magessa O’Reilly maintains that, of all Beckett’s works, only *How It Is* is composed of fragments (x). All Beckett’s other works, formally experimental to varying degrees, employ at least minimal punctuation, and retain the sentence and paragraph as the basic units of composition. But *How It Is* features entirely unpunctuated prose presented in discrete fragments that require other terms to describe them: Knowlson and Pilling call them versets (63), Perloff calls them strophes (420), and Gidal calls them segments (47). O’Reilly emphasizes the juxtapositions of this unique semantic and rhythmic structure that differs greatly from that of the paragraph. He explains: “These fragments frequently do not coincide with semantic units and do not rely on the lexical tools of syntactic cohesion. At times a continuous development is fragmented [. . .] while at other times fragments contain semantic elements which are not obviously related to each other” (x). The result is a reading practice that is continually frustrated by syntactical indeterminacy within fragments and semantic indeterminacy between them.

Consider, for example, the non-progressive effect of the staccato word-groups—the parsing of which is not definite—in the following fragments from *How It Is*:

think perhaps at a pinch it’s possible what else am I doing at this moment
and bless my soul there it comes again howls thump on skull silence rest

no that's not it either a possible thing no really I can't imagine perhaps I
should ask I'll ask some day if I can

no fool merely slow and the day comes we come to the day when stabbed
in the arse now an open wound instead of the cry a brief murmur done it at
last (68)

Note further that, after the reprieve of white space that follows the struggle of interpreting the first fragment, the next one begins with the seemingly straightforward phrase “no that's not it either.” But this phrase destroys, rather than prolongs, the sense of reprieve, because it does not correspond to a stable referent in the previous fragment, from which it seems to progress. Perhaps the “it” is a “possible thing” and perhaps what is “possible” is to “think.” But this interpretation differs from those obtained reading conventional prose both because more effort is required to produce it and because, paradoxically, this greater effort does not provide a greater sense of certainty.

Peter Gidal stresses that this textual fragmentation undermines the basic narrative expectation of telos. He describes the prevention in such writing of a “full phrase which would complete a fiction (of truth or of fiction). It is the *segment* which must not function as complete, in order for it not to suddenly turn into its overdetermined opposite, ‘the flow of the story’”(47). *How It Is* may certainly be described as a novel, and has been by many critics, but never without recourse to extreme paradox and never without addressing the problematic chronology. The central event is an interaction between the speaker (who claims to be mute) and another man named Pim, who (though he speaks)

we are continually reminded does not in fact exist. The tripartite division of the text into distinct periods of time—"how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is" (7)—breaks down. Ostensibly structured as a conventional flashback, this text instead keeps running ahead to the pervasive present tense and then stalling, ultimately unable to describe "how it is." After slipping into the present tense while attempting to recount his past with Pim, the speaker announces: "that clinches it this won't work in the past either I'll never have a past never had" (54). With no story to tell, then, the goal of the present narration is simply to cease narrating, but this end proves more difficult to attain than continuing. Knowlson and Pilling describe each "verset" as seeming "both an end in itself and part of a greater whole. The French title [which puns on *commencer*, to begin] could hardly be more apt here, for the book is always beginning again and ending again a few words later, and hence the speaker's life seems very much like 'something over. . . which still goes on'" (63).

The practice of reading *How It Is* is thus non-teleological as well as indeterminate. Leslie Hill describes a reader "not so much addressed by the novel as absorbed into it" (135), drawn into an act of "rewriting" the text, as the accumulation of repetitions continually reforms levels of intelligibility. And Barbara Trieloff explains that this hermeneutic activity operates in a non-linear movement of time. She claims that the fluidity of the text elicits "readings that are both anachronistic (readings based on recall of the past) and anticipatory. The text, therefore, opens up, 'dis-closes' directions and readings other than those first found in the reader's normal, sequential progression, page by page" (96). That is, the "effort" I attribute to my interpretation earlier derives from a

back-and-forth tension in the reading of *How It Is* (between only a few fragments in my analysis) that requires making what Trieloff calls “chiasmic alignments” (96) within the text. The desire for order leads to this restructuring, this reading out of order, as if such a suturing might produce an ideal text recovered from the cryptic enclosure of its own scrambling.

But this process of (re)alignment, whether on a tiny or large scale, is inescapably arbitrary (in semantic terms, though not according to other structures of “sense” that I will argue function in this text). Furthermore, the disruption of syntax in *How It Is* not only seems to present words out of order, but often presents a particular phrase that demands simultaneous, contradictory interpretations. David Watson argues that the structure of contradiction Beckett employs in the trilogy is a “sequence of alternating affirmations and negations,” but that *How It Is* supplements these with “sets of deconstructed double forms capable of generating opposing structures of sense at the same time” (86). Alan Singer calls these double forms “syntactical antinomies.” He describes the process of discovering plausible, idiomatic statements in *How It Is*, but doing so in a “field of semantic conditions of possibility wider than any one particular construal of meaning” (134). The act of interpretation thus defers not to an overarching structure of sense in the text as a whole, but to an improvisation of possible sense that is consciously constructed in the absence of a unified meaning. This method of creating sense is similar to the speaker’s extortion of speech from Pim; he wants to hear evidence of understanding, not mere babble, and so he creates his own conditions for finding evidence: “I need proof so stab him in a certain way signifying answer once and for all

which I do therefore” (71). Not only are we thus informed that the speaker may be answering his own question, but he also reveals that even this “proof” is more the result of exhaustion than intellection. For after “trying all the consonants in the Roman alphabet” in a series of trial and error, he cannot help but “answer in the end it’s inevitable me Pim” (71).

There is, then, perhaps a sense that any reading of this text could be passed off as correct, that one could perform the hermeneutical equivalent of “trying all the consonants in the Roman alphabet” with impunity. But indeterminacy is not meaninglessness. Iain Wright argues that Beckett’s texts are so relevant to contemporary theory not because they are devoid of authorial discourse, but because they reveal that there are relative degrees of saliency in such discourses. He advocates not abolishing the author, but replacing the notion of the author as univocal with that of “the author as a space of contradictions, the site of an articulation of unresolved problematics, the nexus of clashing codes” (19). A critic desiring the certainty of univocal authorial discourse would presumably be disappointed by Beckett’s own words in a letter written shortly before he began work on *How It Is*: “We have no elucidations to offer of mysteries that are all of their making. My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin” (qtd. in Esslin 1). Such words need not be discouraging, however. For there is no resonance except among overtones, and the “fundamental sounds” of *How It Is* are richly rewarding. (And aspirin is easily obtained.)

Ruby Cohn emphasizes the importance of sound in Beckett's late prose works, referring to them as "lyrics of fiction," texts "where a fusion of words sometimes borders on confusion, and where the meaning seems buried in the melody" (*Back* 220). Marjorie Perloff's term for the same texts, "associative monologues" (419), attempts to situate them somewhere between verse and prose. She draws heavily on Northrop Frye's description of "free prose," a form of writing that is much closer to ordinary speech than conventional prose because it progresses on the basis of "associative rhythm" rather than orderly relations of subject and predicate. Frye describes this rhythm as "largely innocent of syntax. It is much more repetitive than prose, as it is in the process of working out an idea, and the repetitions are largely rhythmical filler, like the nonsense words of popular poetry, which derive from them" (qtd. in Perloff 423). Perloff's analysis of Beckett's "free prose" asserts that it might just as accurately be called free verse, because of the (more or less) regular recurrences of sound patterns usually discussed in terms of poetry (425). She focuses on the following words: "to speak of happiness one hesitates those awful syllables first asparagus burst abscess but good moments yes I assure you" (25). It is clear that these "awful syllables" move the text forward and produce a linguistic pleasure that in fact constitutes these "good moments." A similar effect is produced by the following fragment, in which the "scissoring" could refer as fully to the text itself as to the "wings": "I scissored into slender strips the wings of butterflies first one wing then the other sometimes for a change the two abreast never so good since" (9).

Trieloff describes making the "chiasmic alignments" of interpreting Beckett's late prose in an "echo-chamber" of sound-memory, one that "frees" the text from its "material

concreteness in print” (96). She thus emphasizes the performativity of this language over its signification. She argues that Beckett’s patterns of repetition “follow more an aural than an expository progression” (92). Her emphasis on this oral/aural quality of his writing leads her to discount the possibility of constructing any “logical message” (92) from its pages. Instead, she emphasizes the “hermeneutic freedom” (96) granted by repetition and punning, in which the reader transforms the text and experiences it as an event (98). My objection is not to her account of the transactional nature of interpretation, but to her insistence that the “meaning” that is discovered in sound is inherently “an inane, self-conscious, narcissistic babble” (93). Rather than a dissolution or disintegration of meaning, the aural qualities of *How It Is* emit a multiplication of meanings, that—though not univalent—proceed according to a logic of their own.

For example, in the following fragments, the linguistic play not only advances the text, but imbues it with its conditions of possibility. It is the “dear sounds” that provide “pretext for speculation” and, in effect, create the world of the speaker’s supposed past. The act of saying certain words, and of hearing their sound, leads directly to the question “what does that mean.” And the answer displays both an aural fixation with language and an understanding of syllogism:

the same as which which place it’s not said or I don’t hear it’s one or the
other the same more or less more humid fewer gleams no gleam what does
that mean that I was once somewhere where there were gleams I say it as I
hear it every word always

more humid fewer gleams no gleam and hushed the dear sounds pretext
 for speculation I must have slipped you are in the depths it's the end you
 have ceased you slip you continue (22)

Despite the confusion between “I” and “you,” and “ceasing” and “continuing,” there is an insistence that some “slip” must have occurred: some fall from “somewhere where there were gleams.” Indeed, though the intricate calculations of Part Three are eventually revealed to be false (like the world above of gleams), the speaker’s careful following through of his propositions lends credence to his statement “there’s reason in me yet” (111).

This interplay between sound and signification in *How It Is* provides “pretext” for further “speculation.” According to Singer, “it invites speculation that Kristeva’s abstract formulation of a subject-in-process might find its desirable specifications in Beckett’s text” (154). Indeed, Julia Kristeva herself has taken up Beckett’s writing—specifically *First Love* and *Not I*—but done so in a manner that remains more concerned with “abstract” conceptions of psychoanalysis than with the “specifications” of his forms (in “The Father, Love, and Banishment,” *Desire* 148-58). Similarly, much of the Beckett criticism directly employing Kristevan theory emphasizes the feminist implications of her “maternal” semiotic, and only considers such language when it issues from Beckett’s female characters. For example, Elin Diamond discusses the woman-centred plays *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* as instances of hysteric and semiotic maternal language. Her focus derives from Kristeva’s locating the semiotic “in the pre-verbal moment of mother-child bonding” (212). Likewise, Patricia Delorey describes *Not I* (again) as a

verbalization of hysteric (again) semiotic speech (32). These studies are valid, but my approach to Beckett through Kristeva differs because the very thing I want to contest in Kristeva's concept of the semiotic is her temporal demarcation of it. As I will explain in Chapter II, the semiotic language functioning in *How It Is* does not support Kristeva's claim that her logic implies a *chronologic*—a sequence of development that ultimately subordinates the semiotic to the symbolic. I will argue that her adherence to Jacques Lacan's account of the specular constitution of self in the mirror stage cannot explain the access to language of Beckett's speaker in *How It Is*.

But I must first provide a rationale for discussing Kristevan theory in conjunction with *How It Is*, and that in turn requires an overview of the theory itself. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, an abridged version of her lengthy doctoral thesis in French, Kristeva defines the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" as two "modalities" of the "signifying process" (24). That is, language is constituted by processes, not static entities, and these processes are in a dialectical relationship with one another. Toril Moi explains that Kristeva's distinction between semiotic and symbolic is a transformation of Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic order (12). Both conceptions of the "symbolic" involve the establishment of a sign system based on a clear distinction between subject and object, self and other. Kristeva draws on Husserl in her description of this distinction as a thesis, or positing, hence naming the time at which this attribution of difference takes place the thetic phase. This phase establishes the necessary correlates of symbolic (or social) language: "the transcendent object and the transcendental ego of communication (and consequently of sociability)" (Kristeva, *Desire* 131).

Prior to this phase, Kristeva argues, is the “kinetic functional stage of the *semiotic*” (*Revolution* 27). The word “kinetic” is illustrative in understanding this mode of signifying as being mobile, and thus linked to the body rather than an abstract sign system. Pulsions of energy flowing through the body constitute the “*chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (*Revolution* 25). The *chora*, from the Greek word for womb or enclosed space, is for Kristeva not so much a space as a process of movement. Thus, though she borrows the term from Plato’s *Timaeus* (*Revolution* 25), her notion of the “receptacle” is even less ontological than his own. Kristeva’s *chora* may be given a—mobile and provisional—situation, but is not a position or sign. It is, therefore, an untheorizable element at the core of Kristeva’s theorizing, representative of the paradoxical nature of attempting to define (in language) the aspect of language that disrupts and eludes it. Kristeva’s position, says Moi, “is at once subversive of and dependent on the law” (13). But Moi underscores the ineliminable pervasiveness of this paradox, because it is the same one that faces any speaking subject.

The *chora*, Kristeva elaborates, “is a modality of signifi-ance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic” (*Revolution* 26). It is, then, what remains in a signifying practice when the sign is removed—or rather, in Kristeva’s sequential designation, what constitutes a signifying practice prior to the advent of the sign. She asserts: “The semiotic can thus be understood as pre-thetic, preceding the positing of the subject. Previous to the ego thinking within a proposition, no Meaning exists, but there *do* exist

articulations heterogeneous to signification and to the sign” (*Revolution* 36). The *chora* is thus not merely the movement of drives, but a totality of articulations proceeding from these drives. These “Meaningless” articulations are “analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (*Revolution* 26).

The subject who voices these articulations is emphatically not the Cartesian *cogito*, not a fully constituted subject in a position of cognitive mastery, but a “subject in process/on trial [*sujet en procès*]” (*Revolution* 37). The double valence of the French term “*en procès*” helps to explain how Kristeva negotiates the chronological complications of her developmental account of language. She claims the semiotic precedes the acquisition of language proper and is thus “linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes” (Moi 12). That is, it is linked to the sounds made by infants, who may easily be considered “subjects in process”: subjects who are not yet, who are becoming subjects. But for such sounds to emit from subjects who are acquainted with the rules of a linguistic code, who have entered the symbolic order, seems anachronistic. Though the semiotic and symbolic are both always present in a dialectical process, the *chora* is “more or less successfully repressed” (Moi 13) when the subject enters the symbolic. Adult subjects in whom the semiotic predominates are thus identifiable as “subjects on trial,” subjects for whom the signifying function already acquired threatens to collapse. Kristeva provides examples of both types of semiotic discourse in *Desire in Language*: “the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes and sentences” and the “rhythms, intonations, glossalalias in psychotic discourse” or the “‘musical’ but also nonsense effects” in poetic

language (133). The difference between psychotic and poetic discourse is that, in psychotic, the semiotic processes are “set adrift” (135), but in poetic, they act—along with but in tension with the symbolic—as constraints on what always remains “a *signifying practice*, that is, a socially communicable discourse” (134). The dual potential of the semiotic to aid the subject in becoming and to threaten its being leads Kristeva to designate the *chora* as “the place where the subject is both generated and negated” (*Revolution* 28).

This paradoxical and fluid place is a continuum punctuated by rhythm; we must remember that the *chora* is formed by “the drives *and their stases*.” These stases are the “marks” that interrupt the “flow” of the drives, thereby producing rifts in the continuum before the articulation of difference initiates a more distinct separation. Kristeva writes: “The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating *chora*, in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality” (*Revolution* 40). These marks do not interrupt the continuum in an orderly or intentional way, but are simply the traces of the drives’ inhibition: an inhibition that seems to work like a dam, building up a surplus of energy that would spread and diffuse itself but cannot. These inhibitions are forced by “the constraints of biological and social structures,” and cause the temporarily arrested drive facilitation to mark “*discontinuities* in what may be called the various material supports [*matériaux*] susceptible to semiotization: voice, gesture, colors” (*Revolution* 28). Such discontinuities

acquire a significance outside meaning, and become the prominent features of semiotic rhythm.

Significantly, though colour is one of the semiotizable materials, there is not at this stage an operation of the visual equivalent to that of the mirror stage. Kristeva insists that the *chora* “precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization” (*Revolution* 26). Thus, the semiotic does not include the specular image that for Lacan is the “prototype” for the “world of objects”; the visual as it functions in the semiotic does not “permit the constitution of objects detached from the semiotic *chora*” (*Revolution* 46). I will argue in Chapter III that specularity in *How It Is* is similarly non-Lacanian, and in fact demands an alternate explanation for the constitution of subjectivity than that offered by the account of the mirror stage. However, at this point I will present Kristeva’s Lacanian version of the break that initiates the symbolic, to complete this brief summary of her theory. I will defer my counter-argument until Chapter II, and devote the remainder of this chapter to those linguistic aspects in *How It Is*—already introduced—that accord with Kristeva’s formal designations of the semiotic.

Kristeva maintains that all enunciation (that is, expression within a sign system) is *thetic*; it requires the positing of subject and object as distinct from one another. She follows Lacan in asserting that the process of separation begins with the captation of the *imago* in the mirror stage and culminates in the discovery of castration. No social communication—communication with an other—is possible without the constitution of (the self and) the Other. Kristeva describes this identification as follows:

Castration puts the finishing touches on the process of separation that posits the subject as signifiable, which is to say, separate, always confronted by an other: *imago* in the mirror (signified) and semiotic process (signifier). As the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus. The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother, and the perception of this lack [*manque*] makes the phallic function a symbolic function—the symbolic function.

(*Revolution* 47)

I want to emphasize two important points that Kristeva makes here. First, the (thetic) break that marks a threshold between semiotic and symbolic also produces the division between signifier and signified. And the inclusion of these two functions in the symbolic reveals that, after the break, the symbolic includes part of the semiotic. For the signifier is in fact the “heterogeneous functioning” of the semiotic (*Revolution* 49). Second, the preoccupation with the signifier in poetic language, that is thus a return to the semiotic, is also a return to the place of the mother. Hence, Kristeva later reasons that, if the prohibition of incest is what makes the social language of the symbolic order possible, “poetic language would be for its questionable subject-in-process the *equivalent of incest*” (*Desire* 136). She makes this point to underscore both the “intrinsic connection between literature and breaking up social concord” (thereby demystifying incest), and the

role of the body in (especially poetic) language. She emphasizes that the attention paid to the signifier is not the result of an abstract, formalist project, but is “more deeply indicative of the instinctual drives’ activity relative to the first structurations (constitution of the body as self) and identifications (with the mother)” (*Desire* 137).

The primacy of the signifier—and hence the semiotic—functions in the following way. When the drives undergo stases in language, the words that mark these stases come to function as more than mere signs. Hence, “meaning is constituted but is then immediately exceeded by what seems outside meaning: materiality, the discontinuity of real objects” (*Revolution* 100). This process destroys the foundation of any phenomenological concept of linguistics, because it places the objects of language both in and out of the symbolic system. Kristeva explains: “a phoneme, as distinctive element of meaning, belongs to language as symbolic. But this same phoneme is involved in rhythmic, intonational repetitions; it thereby tends towards autonomy from meaning so as to maintain itself in a semiotic disposition near the instinctual drives’ body” (*Desire* 135). The phoneme that both is and is not a phoneme forces us to acknowledge the heterogeneity in any seemingly univocal language.

It is important to note that the complex relationship of semiotic language to meaning resembles my previous remarks about the meaning(s) of sound in *How It Is*. Kristeva writes that the semiotic is “a disposition that is definitely heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or surplus relationship to it” (*Desire* 133). Even when poetic language employs sounds that do not serve an established function in symbolic discourse, their being made part of a signifying practice

endows them with resonances among which readers try to assemble meanings. The multiple valences of nonsense words or puns do not cancel each other out—and must thus be experienced as irreconcilable contradictions—but neither do they cancel out comprehension altogether. Kristeva asserts: “No text, no matter how ‘musicalized,’ is devoid of meaning or signification; on the contrary, musicalization pluralizes meanings” (*Revolution* 65).

Kristeva provides us with yet more terminology when she describes what kinds of texts are “musicalized,” terminology that is important for underscoring the position of the subject in such texts. The word “text” itself is used to designate semiotic practice as it differs from narrative, metalanguage, and contemplation (*Revolution* 88). But she makes another distinction that is both more specific and more evocative: between “phenotext” and “genotext.” The phenotext is a symbolic mode that “serves to communicate [. . .] it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee” (*Revolution* 87). The term is thus linked to “phenomenon,” from the Greek *phainein*, to show. The genotext, by contrast, is etymologically linked to birth: “the space it organizes is one in which the subject will be *generated* as such by a process of facilitations and marks within the constraints of the biological and social structure” (*Revolution* 86). The genotext is thus—in part—a materialization of the *chora*, “the place where the subject is both generated and negated.” Kristeva specifies its features:

What we shall call a *genotext* will include semiotic processes but also the advent of the symbolic. The former includes drives, their disposition, and their division of the body, plus the ecological and social system

surrounding the body, such as objects and pre-Oedipal relations with parents. The latter encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorial fields. (*Revolution* 86)

I propose that *How It Is* may serve as an example of a genotext, though my argument in Chapter II differs from Kristeva's on just what kind of subject is "generated."

Many of the pluralized meanings in *How It Is* that I remarked upon earlier and that so pertinently relate to the semiotic are caused by the lack of punctuation. Singer's "syntactical antinomies" often group themselves into possible readings based on the insertion of a period or comma. He offers possible parsings for the phrase "it said I murmur for us here one after another" (73). Perhaps, he argues, the first syntactical unit is "it said I," but there could just as plausibly be two separate statements: "It said. I murmur." (133). Moreover, this phrase is representative of the confusion that results from a particular punctuational omission in *How It Is*: the quotation mark. The first words are: "how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it" (7). The last are: "good good end at last of part three and last that's how it was end of quotation after Pim how it is" (147). But, as Watson has observed (97), neither the "end of quotation" nor its (seemingly incessantly repeated) beginning is identifiable in this text, and so the words are neither determinate in themselves nor attributable to a specific voice. The effect is a kind of free indirect discourse, amplified and accelerated to the point of distortion. An interpretative desire to identify voice is dismissed by the text: "who is speaking that's not said any more it must have ceased to be

of interest” (21). The pervasive repetition of the phrases “I quote” and “I say it as I hear it” reminds us of this conundrum while building up more layers of indeterminacy.

The question of who is speaking, and of whom, and of what, is frustrated by both the “midget grammar” of the unpunctuated, fragmented prose and the sound slippages that transform “life” into “wife” and “Pim” into “Pam Prim.” Consider the following “samples” of text, that allude to a further level of ventriloquism by referencing the “opener” and “thump on skull” involved in the speaker’s tortuous extortion of speech from Pim:

samples my life above Pim’s life we’re talking of Pim my life up there my
wife stop opener arse slow to start then no holding him thump on skull
long silence

my wife above Pam Prim can’t remember can’t see her she shaved her
mound never saw that I talk like him I do we’re talking of me like him
little blurts midget grammar past that then plof down the hole (76)

There is evidence here of the rhythm, intonation, and repetition that constitute the marks of the semiotic, and even a nonsense word (“plof”) that has no place in normal symbolic language.

The speaker’s attempts to unite elements of his speech in a thematic rather than aural way are difficult to assess. The phrase “that family” is often used to describe a particular group of things, a particular genus identified somehow in the continuum of his life in the mud. Some lists are easily understood as belonging together in a “meaningful”

way. For example, he describes the words that would be useful to someone (unlike him) for whom time passes: “days nights years seasons that family” (17). But the following “family” seems more arbitrary and less definitely related: “questions if I were to lose the tin-opener there’s another object or when the sack is empty that family” (9). Is this the genus of questions, of objects, or of losses? Or is it something else? The categorizations dictated by logic are superseded here by misidentifications that reveal a poor understanding of the world of objects and an equally confused sense of self. The speaker claims: “I see all sizes life included if that’s mine” (21). It seems to be “life” itself that the speaker is in doubt of possessing here, and he seems to understand it—if he does have it—as merely a “size.”

The idea of possessing life, of being oneself a subject because having one’s self as object, fits well with the semiotic disposition’s inability to distinguish between self and other. And the word “possession” undergoes a transformation through sound in the following fragment that further blurs the boundary between the two: “the sack when it’s empty my sack a possession this word faintly hissing brief void and finally apposition anomaly anomaly a sack here my sack when it’s empty bah I’ve lashings of time centuries of time” (17). Through the “faint hiss” of the allophonic “s” sounds and subtly different short vowel sounds, “a possession” becomes “apposition.” That is, a word denoting an object translates into a word denoting the equivalency of two nouns: here, subject and object. The inherent wrongness of this is expressed in the words “anomaly anomaly,” themselves wrong because they do not follow the grammatical rule of apposition: that two *different* nouns or noun equivalents refer to the same thing. The

placement here of the identical word twice is itself an anomaly. But the analogy persists to the end of the fragment. The fullness of the sack corresponds to the fullness of the speaker's life. The consideration of the sack being "empty" is followed by the dismissive interjection "bah" and the assertion "I've lashings of time."

The linguistic play and fragmentation in *How It Is* demands that we negotiate its "wrongness" and approach it from a position other than that of conventional interpretation. An investigation of its aural qualities, like Trieloff's, need not rest on the assumption that a frustrated reader must turn elsewhere when meaning "continually dissolves, losing its form and substance" (89). The "form and substance," the stubborn materiality of Beckett's language, is precisely what constitutes its "meaning"—though this meaning is of course not univocal. Carla Locatelli refers to an "increase of meaning" in Beckett's writing from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, that is "linked to a diminished relevance of the denotation, and conative and poetic functions of language replace the referential one" (69). Kristeva remarks that understanding the practice of the (semiotic) text requires an act of "dissolving"—of the sign, not meaning—and insists that something will remain in its stead: "the material signifying process" (*Revolution* 103). Engaging in this act involves a sacrifice, the relinquishing of our "'meta-' position, the series of masks or the semantic layer," but it is necessary to "complete the complex path of signifiante." She offers another definition, this time of a term that seems deceptively simple. With texts such as *How It Is*, she argues, "*reading* means giving up the lexical, syntactic, and semantic operation of deciphering, and instead retracing the path of their production" (*Revolution* 103). I will not pretend that my own attempt to adopt such a

reading practice could be free of the paradox that Moi formulates: the simultaneous dependence on, and subversion of, the law. The act of writing this thesis entrenches my own “meta-” position, even as I try to escape it. But my desire to uncover, at least in part, the “signifying process” of a text that continually threatens to be—in its own words—“just one of those things that pass understanding there are some” (61) leads me to attempt the “difficult balancing act” (Moi 13) myself.

II. “something wrong there”: Failure of the Thetic Break

As Knowlson and Pilling have remarked, *How It Is* begins (in its second fragment) with an unconventional “invocation”: “tell me again finish telling me” (7). Their analysis of this phrase focuses on its ambiguity of address, directed as it is to both the voice “without” and the voice “in me.” But this confusion between outside and inside is ultimately collapsible to one voice, the speaker’s own, that takes the place of the muse who would normally be called upon in an invocation. Knowlson and Pilling observe that the speaker addresses himself here, “so as to announce his ‘vocation’, call himself into existence and constitute himself at the centre of the work” (62). This speaking oneself into existence inheres in the doubly interpretable phrase “tell me.” These words mean both “tell me a story” and “tell the story of me; narrate me into being.” Hence, narrative does not function here as it does in an epic. Its purpose is not to tell a story, but to confer being on the (would-be) teller. The only remark addressed to a muse, “Thalia for pity’s sake a leaf of thine ivy,” seems a plea (to the muse of comedy) to make the “old joke” of culmination—the possibility of reaching the “end of part one leaving only part two leaving only part three and last”—a more plausible “dream” (38).

This preoccupation with culmination points to what, for me, is an even more striking feature of the “invocation” than its reflexivity. An epic rightly begins not only with an address to the muses, but also at a specific point in the narrative: *in medias res*. It begins in the middle of the action, and hence must relate a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. But the invocation in *How It Is* is not simply “tell me.” Rather, it is the phrase “tell me *again*,” immediately followed by the phrase “*finish* telling me.” If

this text begins *in medias res*, it begins in the middle of a narrative that has no beginning or end. The idea of a past that has already occurred and may thus be repeated (“tell me again”) is immediately countered by the idea that this past has not reached its completion, that it must in fact be the present (“finish telling me”). It is precisely this temporal difficulty that renders *How It Is* a text irreducible to Kristeva’s theoretical specifications. Even the most radical writing, for her, constitutes a *return*: a crossing back over the threshold of the thetic break to a phase that *reached culmination* and may thus now be viewed as retrogressive. In *How It Is*, however, a *return* is unknowable as such, because it is always to a phase that was left *unfinished*, that remains essentially *unfinishable*. Beckett’s speaker attempts anxiously to get through—for the first and last time—a process that Kristeva claims is revisited with jubilation.

At first glance, Kristeva’s description of the simultaneity and dialecticism of the semiotic and symbolic would seem to foreclose on a theory of their sequential distribution. Her claims like the following might seem baffling: “Theory can ‘situate’ such processes and relations diachronically within the process of the constitution of the subject precisely because *they function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject himself*” (*Revolution* 29). Why should synchronism imply diachronism? The answer for Kristeva is that she is formulating her theory within the bounds of an already articulated account of the “constitution of the subject.” Her attempt to revise this account without dismantling it leads her, at times, to the paradoxical position of taking both sides in her own arguments. She claims here that the only semiotic that exists is part of the symbolic: “the semiotic that ‘precedes’ symbolization is only a *theoretical supposition*

justified by the need for description. It exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices” (*Revolution* 68). But then she insists, on the same page, that this “theoretical supposition” of a pre-symbolic semiotic is *not* a mere supposition: “semiotic functioning is discernible before the mirror stage, before the first suggestion of the thetic. But the semiotic we find in signifying practices always comes to us after the symbolic thesis, after the symbolic break.” It thus becomes clear that Kristeva’s *chronologic* is necessitated by the *logic* she inherits from Lacan. It is not the semiotic that requires the symbolic break, but the maintenance of the theory of the symbolic break that requires the diachronic description of the semiotic.

Kristeva’s notion of time—which not only problematizes her own theory, but also marks its disjunction with *How It Is*—proceeds directly from the developmental timeline in Lacan’s account of the mirror stage. This stage, which occurs between the ages of six and eighteen months, is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end: an end that looks even further ahead than its actual position. Lacan describes the stage as a “drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation” (4). This “anticipation” is not only of the infant’s not yet acquired physical maturation, but also of the socialization that will follow the infant’s sense of self. Lacan describes two products of the mirror stage that contribute to this burgeoning subjectivity: the progression from a “fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” and the “assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (4). Neither of these is experienced by Beckett’s speaker. His body-image, when not assimilating extraneous (if imaginary) features like the sack or

Pim, is one of dismemberment. He describes his right hand, “having lost its thumb,” leaving his body and continuing its journey separately: “it’s a help to go like that piecemeal” (28). Likewise, his sense of identity is untenable as singular or definite. He asks in Part Two: “when Pim stops what becomes of me” (90). He may seem to have progressed from this co-dependent paranoia when he is told at the end of Part Three that he is “alone” (146). But he is told this as part of a self-conducted catechism wherein he asks himself questions just like he asked Pim in Part Two; the capitalized phrases that designate in Part Two the phrases carved into Pim’s back recur in Part Three to reveal that the tortuous process is indeed a self-mutilation. The acknowledgment that he is alone (and therefore rightly capable only of monologue) occurs within a “dialogue” that will not relinquish the additional mediation of its status as quotation. Furthermore, Lacan observes that “the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium” surrounding a “remote inner castle” (5). Beckett’s speaker, by contrast, describes himself as an old, destroyed “tenement” (36). Consolidation in *How It Is* is always contemporaneous with disintegration: “progress properly so called ruins” (22).

Hence the captation of the *imago* that for Kristeva allows enunciation is not a possibility in *How It Is*, or “how it was” or “how it will be.” She claims that thetic communication “requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects” (*Revolution* 43). But for Beckett’s speaker, there is no single image with which he may identify, thereby separating himself from all others. Not only is seeing per se a contestable phenomenon in *How It Is*—as I will argue in Chapter III—but, even if we accept the “images” as valid, they do not

consolidate the speaker's self as unique. He says simply: "all those I see are me" (86). Hence, the *misidentification* (or *méconnaissance*) that is in Lacan a mirage of the "agency of the ego" (2) is in Beckett an inability to distinguish an ego at all.

Kristeva would argue that the identificatory problems in *How It Is* demonstrate the metaphoric death and rebirth experienced by the artist who exports "semiotic motility across the border on which the symbolic is established" (*Revolution* 70), returning to the place of the mother, before symbolic language. But the mother in *How It Is* enjoys no position of prominence; the speaker's desire is precisely to escape her, if need be, in order to commence signifying. Though ostensibly mute and, in Part One, lying open-mouthed in the mud, the speaker attaches meaning to the one word he feels physically capable of at that moment: "aha signifying mamma impossible with open mouth" (26). But he is quick to assert that the correspondence he desires between signifier and signified could be formed between any sound and any thing. "Mamma" is not essential: "there is room to spare aha signifying mamma or some other thing some other sound barely audible signifying some other thing no matter" (26).

What I hope is emerging is the discrepancy between Kristeva's formulation of the semiotic-symbolic dialectic and the version functioning in *How It Is*. Kristeva argues that textual experience aims toward the "thetic—that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social" (*Revolution* 67). She characterizes this practice as a dangerous experiment threatening the subject, but maintains nonetheless that "the thetic continues to ensure the position of the subject put in process/on trial" (*Revolution* 63). Hence, for Kristeva, the thetic is both limit and

foundation of the signifying process. When the text aims toward it, it appears as a cliff down which the subject might fall, thereby dissolving his/her selfhood. But when the subject is thus threatened, it does double-duty as its own safety rail.

In *How It Is*, however, there is no thetic that can be explored like a frontier with fear and excitement, that will ultimately never fail to provide foundation. The only thing in this text that would be analogous to Kristeva's thetic break is the "end" sought desperately by the speaker, the culmination that seems so unattainable he is not even able to finish carving the word "end" into Pim's back, stopping after the "N" (88). Whereas Kristeva describes the text as enacting a death and a "kind of second birth" (*Revolution* 70), because it is a return, the death desired by—but not guaranteed—Beckett's speaker would make possible a *first* birth: a first complete entrance into the symbolic order he longs for. I want to underscore the word "complete" to emphasize that there are *traces* of the symbolic in this text, but that they do not function according to the rules of the symbolic *order*. These traces trouble Kristeva's notion of progressive sequence; they make it impossible to consider Beckett's speaker as either trapped in the first stage of her theory (that would include no such traces) or as returning to the semiotic. The traces of symbolic language in *How It Is* are not the marks of a fully acquired, but temporarily challenged, thetic prowess. Rather, they attest to a different acquisition of language than that put forth by Lacan and Kristeva: one in which the sign does not repress the drives' heterogeneous negativity (that may nonetheless return), but emerges in concert with it. Kristeva argues that the sign is a function of the fully-constituted subject's cognitive mastery, and only comes into being after the thetic break. I argue that the sign does not

follow cognitive mastery, but precipitates it, in a gradual and contradictory process that cannot be reduced to a single “break.” The language in *How It Is* does not constitute a backwards leap over a threshold of meaning, but a habitation in a heterogeneous space where meanings are not absent, but not definite either.

The synchronous relationship between negativity and the sign in *How It Is* manifests itself in the language of their equivalence. In Kristeva’s formulation, language is marked with the (previously) repressed when the semiotic function infiltrates the symbolic. She argues that language acquisition “implies the suppression of anality,” the aggressive rejection that dominates the anal phase (*Revolution* 152). When an object becomes a sign, it is definitively detached from the body and therefore no longer implicated in the drive of rejection. But, she argues, once this process is complete, rejection may return and hence mark “*signifying material* with the repressed. [. . .] This ‘material,’ expelled by the sign and judgment from first symbolizations, is then withdrawn from the unconscious into language, but is not accepted there in the form of ‘metalanguage’ or any kind of intellection” (*Revolution* 163). The difference in Beckett is that the “repressed” material of rejection that Kristeva says is “expelled by the sign” is, in fact, the sign itself. It is not therefore entirely unrelated to “metalanguage,” even though it embodies negativity.

Language as rejection is figured in *How It Is* by the recurrent linking of the oral with the anal. Though he claims later to have never known anyone, including his parents (78), the speaker describes the language of his mother as a bowel movement: “the world world for me from the murmurs of my mother shat into the incredible tohu-bohu” (42).

This expulsion of words would seem to be without meaning, like the “tohu-bohu” (chaos or confusion) that receives it. But the word “murmurs” is the same one used to describe his own speech that, as we have seen, is not devoid of signification. And the alliteration in “murmurs of my mother” is indeed an ideal example of the link between sound and signification in this text. In the following fragment, anal rejection is once again linked to the mouth—to the “breath” that issues from it like words—while laughter, normally associated with the mouth, is dispersed throughout the body (and, it seems, the mud):

“quick the head in the sack where saving your reverence I have all the suffering of all the ages I don’t give a curse for it and howls of laughter in every cell the tins rattle like castanets and under me convulsed the mud goes guggle-guggle I fart and piss in the same breath” (38).

The semiotic quality of using vulgar words like “fart and piss” is suggested by the phrase(s) “I don’t give a curse for it and howls of laughter.” Both laughter and cursing are symptomatic of drive activity entering the symbolic. Kristeva describes laughter as the kind of non-verbal expression that constitutes the “leap” that introduces socio-material processes into the subject outside the rules of the social/symbolic order (*Revolution* 205). It is a function, then, of the split subject governed by both conscious and unconscious processes. She quotes Baudelaire’s statement that laughter “comes into the class of all artistic phenomena which indicate the existence of a permanent dualism in the human being—that is, the power of being oneself and someone else at one and the same time” (*Revolution* 223). Kristeva’s analysis in *Desire in Language* of the poetic language of Louis-Ferdinand Céline pays particular attention to his use of expletives.

Such words, she claims, “exercise a *desemanticization* function analogous to the fragmentation of syntax by rhythm” (142). This function is achieved, placing obscene words outside symbolic discourse along with rhythm, precisely because these elements form part of the signifying process without themselves *referring* to objects outside symbolic discourse. The materiality of these words constitutes their meaning, not an objective referent. Kristeva writes: “the obscene word mobilizes the signifying resources of the subject, permitting it to cross through the membrane of meaning where consciousness holds it, connecting it to gesturality, kinesthesia, the drives’ body, the movement of rejection and appropriation of the other” (143). Hence, the presence of such words in a text would be, for Kristeva, another symptom of the negativity that cannot be recognized as part of “any kind of intellection.”

But Beckett’s imbrication of the obscene with the contemplative reveals that intellection may be affected by anality and still function as such. In the midst of the rigorous calculations by which the speaker tries to exercise his “reason” in Part Three, he adopts the meta- position of philosophical inquiry when he perceives the equivalences of tormentor and victim: “or emotions sensations take a sudden interest in them and even then what the fuck I quote does it matter who suffers faint waver here faint tremor” (131). The faint “waver” and “tremor” seem to be direct experiences of “sensations” as much as abstract descriptions of them, but they have not obscured the speaker’s ability to phrase a conventional rhetorical question, and in fact supplement his argument. Likewise, the word “fuck”—though it signifies on an extra-symbolic level—does not interrupt the flow of syntax as much as the oddly placed “I quote.” That is, the phrase “I quote” that serves

such a useful purpose in intellectual writing, attributing language to an other within one's own discourse and thereby consolidating the symbolic necessity of identification, here hinders the advancement of the intellect rather than helping it.

Perhaps the best example of the simultaneous emergence of negativity and signification in *How It Is* is in these words: "I strain with open mouth so as not to lose a second a fart fraught with meaning issuing through the mouth no sound in the mud" (26). The agency normally attributed to symbolic language is suggested here by the words "I strain." But the full phrase "I strain with open mouth" more vividly calls to mind the physical exertions—not so much willed as instinctual—involved in the expulsion of objects (or air) from the anus, rather than the mouth. And, indeed, the result of this strain is a "fart." But it is a fart that is inherently signifying: it is "fraught with meaning," accompanied—perhaps burdened—by meaning. And yet this meaning produces "no sound in the mud." In the heterogeneous continuum of mud, a single meaning is not perceptible as such. But it is nonetheless present, and produced as inevitably and intermittently as a fart. The speaker's attempt to construct a framework of univalent signification from this oral emission has already been discussed—"aha signifying mamma"—as has his failure to consolidate that univalence—"or some other thing some other sound [. . .] no matter." But his present inability to escape the mud, in which any attempt to demarcate slides into a surplus of differentiation, does not deter his desire to signify or his belief that words may endow him with "dignity" (26).

Because Kristeva characterizes the rejection evident in texts like *How It Is* in terms of "returning" rather than "becoming" (*Revolution* 147), she is able to maintain that

the subject in process/on trial is temporarily threatened, but always preserved by the thetic. That is, the thetic break marks the fundamental thesis: the positing of the subject. This thesis is maintained despite the danger that the text represents for the subject. Moreover, Kristeva argues, an additional positing takes place in the text, not of the subject, but of its own process. She describes the thesis that takes place in poetic language: “the subject must be firmly posited by castration so that drive attacks against the thetic will not give way to fantasy or to psychosis but will instead lead to a ‘second-degree thetic,’ i.e., a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic *chora* within the signifying device of language” (*Revolution* 50). Kristeva is more specific in *Desire in Language* about the dialectical nature of this “second-degree thetic”: “it posits its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between *language* and *rhythm* [. . .] between the symbolic and semiotic” (135). Hence, with the hindsight of Kristeva’s retrogressive formulation, an interplay between semiotic and symbolic is protected under the banner of an emphatically symbolic characteristic: the thesis.

Finally, in addition to ensuring the position of the subject and positing its own process, the thetic plays another important role in the text according to Kristeva: it harnesses heterogeneity through fetishism. Whereas theses characterize the symbolic, stases are an instinctual part of the semiotic. Fetishism, Kristeva argues, is a “stasis that acts as a thesis,” displacing the thetic function onto the drives (*Revolution* 64). It may seem difficult to defend how fetishism—which *is* a stasis, linked to the drives, inescapably heterogeneous—is observable *acting as* a thesis. Kristeva elaborates: “What

had seemed to be a process of fetishizing inherent in the way the text functions now seems a structurally necessary protection, one that serves to check negativity, confine it within stases, and prevent it from sweeping away the symbolic position” (*Revolution* 69-70). I argue that fetishizing is not a “structurally necessary protection,” but that the claim that fetishism acts as a thesis is a *theoretically* necessary protection to uphold the concept of the thetic break. Without that concept, the symbolic is not entirely “swept away” from the text, but it is no longer held in “position.” Rather, it moves and becomes along with the semiotic, at times acting *like* a thesis insofar as it attempts positing people or things—but, in *How It Is*, repeatedly failing in these attempts.

The evidence of the (inchoate) symbolic in the fetishistic stases of this text is in the recurrent preoccupation with the objects of the speaker’s discourse. The following fragment is densely repetitive, but its most insistent feature—one that appears frequently throughout the text as a whole—is the phrase “we’re talking of”: “happy time in its way part two we’re talking of part two with Pim how it was good moments good for me we’re talking of me for him too we’re talking of him too happy too in his way I’ll know it later his way of happiness I’ll have it later I have not yet had all” (51). These stases that circle back upon themselves, like eddies in the river of the drives’ flow, (re)specify elements of the narrative to impress upon the reader the importance—and, it seems, *existence*—of these things. They are thus posited as they would be by the thetic, but these anxious repetitions do not add up to anything. Gidal writes that the non-teleological structure of the “segmented” text requires “the erasure (which palimpsest is) and the redundancy of repetition” (47).

The notion of palimpsest is particularly relevant to *How It Is*, not only because the repetitions are placed atop “erasures” of the ones that preceded them, but because the mud in which the speaker tries to locate—or posit—himself constantly flows over the marks that are traced in it. These marks, the “vast tracts of time” (7) that conflate space and time in this text, do not remain in place because the mud never dries (25). As Eric P. Levy observes: “Since the mud has no boundaries and is not contained by anything, it has (according to Aristotelian logic) no place whatsoever. If Bom [the speaker] has no place (a position in space), then he has no position in time” (84). Because the speaker can know neither where he is nor where he has been, he cannot make any (distinguishable) progress; the repetitions of his movements, like those of his speech, do not get him anywhere. He is thus anxious to “dig deep furrows” (53) in Pim’s body, to write something that will remain. But his constant over-writing “erases” the scars that could speak for him, obscuring them in the “worn back bleeding passim” (70). He is eventually faced with a “text” as fragmented as the one he is in: “the gaps are the holes otherwise it flows more or less more or less profound the holes we’re talking of the holes not specified not possible no point I feel them” (84). The object he tries to posit here—“we’re talking of the holes”—is an absence. But even an absence may seem to signify; because the holes are more or less deep, they may be thought of in the more metaphorical sense of “profound.”

The speaker’s failures to consolidate aspects of the symbolic are often identified by the phrase “something wrong there.” For example, consider the confusion of

pronouns and indeterminable relationship between better and worse in the following fragments:

saying to myself he's better than he was better than yesterday less ugly
less stupid less cruel less dirty less old less wretched and you saying to
myself and you bad to worse bad to worse steadily

something wrong there

or no worse saying to myself no worse you're no worse and was worse
(9)

The speaker's inability to distinguish between subject and object leads to the same confusion in his insinuations of referent, thereby rendering his attempted theses even more problematic: "my life above Pim's life we're talking of Pim my life" (76). Paul Davies observes that these repetitions of "we're talking of" create an illusion of textual management: "There is this impression that if this conscious control is not kept up, the material will fly in all directions and become unrenderable. But in the absence of material, the will has nothing to hold, in which case its outward manifestations of constraint must always be superfluous" (97). Ultimately, any binary opposition in this text is "wrong" because the self has not been separated from the other. Every positing here is an attempt to posit the subject because the speaker assimilates everything in his world (later denying its existence entirely): "my sack my body all mine all these parts every part" (34). The recurrent phrase "it's one or the other" is an undecidable

formulation in this context, because “one” and “the other” are indistinguishable: “the tin broached put back in the sack or kept in the hand it’s one or the other I remember when appetite revives or I forget open another it’s one or the other something wrong there” (8). The untenable binary later becomes blurred: “at the inconceivable outset by chance by necessity by a little of each it’s one of the three” (40).

A further source of confusion in the speaker’s descriptions of objects, and one that keeps the “we’re talking of” repetitions from being completely “superfluous,” is the prevalence of the word “it.” This word, at one level, refers to everything in the text at once. Everything is how “it” is, and every word comes under the rubric “I say it as I hear it.” But “it” is also used to designate a specific object, often before that object has been named, and confusingly soon after another object has also been called “it.” Note the deferred identification of what “it” (in its latest guise) refers to in the following section, as well as the speaker’s dismissal of doubt with the word “obviously”:

if that is not enough I flutter it my hand we’re talking of my hand ten
seconds fifteen seconds close my eyes a curtain falls

if that is not enough I lay it on my face it covers it entirely but I don’t like
to touch myself they haven’t left me that this time

I call it it doesn’t come I can’t live without it I call it with all my strength
it’s not strong enough I grow mortal again

my memory obviously the panting stops and question of my memory
obviously [. . .]

what about it my memory we're talking of my memory (14-15)

The difficulty in positing something as “it” is precisely that it lacks a proper name by which subjects are distinguished in the symbolic. Knowlson and Pilling describe the title “how it is” as “an ‘anonymous’ utterance of the verb ‘to be’” (72). Without a name, being is precarious and indistinct. Knowlson and Pilling thus emphasize “both the necessity and the absurdity” of the speaker’s act of conferring names on himself and others according to the rule “m at the end and one syllable the rest indifferent” (Beckett 60). They identify the “wrongness” of this permutational activity as the fact that “the one syllable word with ‘m’ at the end that is crucial—‘am’—is not a proper name at all” (72). I will later address a further problem inhering in the speaker’s rule, but will first review the substantial amount of critical writing that has been devoted to the practice of naming in *How It Is*.

P. J. Murphy attributes the most power to the speaker’s act of naming. He remarks on his attachment to the sack: “something far more we don’t profit by it in any way any more and we cling to it” (66). Murphy writes: “The ‘more,’ the extra dimension of significance, is simply that the sack is ‘something’ that has consented to being named, and the name remains as a talismanic invocation of this would-be reality even after it has virtually disappeared as a physical entity” (68). It is true that the name as empty signifier survives its supposed attachment to a real object, but this “invocation” is clearly as

problematic as the one that opens the text. Our conventional reading practice is completely subverted by the simultaneous naming of an object and insistence that it does not in fact exist. Though the conventional reading of fiction always involves the naming of objects that do not (in reality) exist, this text names objects that do not even exist in the fictional world of the text itself. The temporal difficulty in “tell me again finish telling me” also inheres in “then go right leg right arm push pull towards Pim he does not exist” (27). Watson observes: “Where in one sense Pim is the fictional creation of the narrator, in another sense the narrator’s subject position is contingent on the prior existence of the Pim narrative” (93). This paradox means the “invocation” of Pim leads to narrative discrepancies that destroy, rather than maintain, the illusion of “would-be reality.” For example, consider the phrase “to have Pim’s timepiece something wrong there and nothing to time” (40). The wrongness of this is multivalent: having a timepiece with nothing to time; having the timepiece of someone who does not exist; and finally, having the timepiece of someone who—even if we invoke his existence with a name—is precisely *temporally* misplaced. The speaker is not supposed to meet Pim until Part Two, but he already has one of his possessions in Part One. Hence, the use of a proper name rather than “it” does not necessarily make for a more “meaningful” reading of this text.

J. E. Dearlove emphasizes the confusion in the speaker’s assignment of names, particularly according to his rule. In addition to Pim and Bom (the name that most closely refers to himself), the speaker names his wife Pam Prim (76), his dog Skom Skum (85), his witness Kram and scribe Krim (80), and also refers to potential others as Jim, Tim (71), Bim (80), and Bem (114). Dearlove writes that the “absence of individual

boundaries results in the conjugation of names” (99). This “conjugation” paradoxically becomes more problematic rather than less when reduced to contain only the first two:

the same voice the same things nothing changing but the names and hardly
they two are enough nameless each awaits his Bom nameless goes towards
his Pim

Bom to the abandoned not me Bom you Bom we Bom but me Bom you
Pim I to the abandoned not me Pim you Pim we Pim but me Bom you Pim
something very wrong there (114-5)

The conjugation of verbs indicates the person who performs the action. This conjugation (or declension?) of names fails to perform its essential function: indicating the person as separate from all others. Thus, this language is indeed structured according to a “midget grammar” that fails to consolidate meaning as it would be in the symbolic. Despite the anxious repetition of the sounds “Pim” and “Bom,” the speaker remains essentially “nameless.”

Watson’s psychoanalytic reading of *How It Is* comments on the risk for the subject when the name fails to separate him or her from others. He observes that “without difference there is no language and no subject: indifference is death” (96). He thus emphasizes how precarious the speaker’s existence is in *How It Is*, because difference is just barely discernible emerging “from the flat surface of primeval mud.” Moreover: “The problem is exacerbated when the name as marker of identity no longer serves to differentiate” (97). The subject’s existence may be neither confirmed nor

denied when he is neither without a name altogether nor in possession of a definite, exclusive name. The speaker is able to answer “yes” to the proposition that he exists, but replies “no answer” to the question “what’s my name” (146). His rule for names is “m at the end and one syllable the rest indifferent.” But, according to Watson’s reading, it is not merely “the rest” that is “indifferent,” but the entire formulation. Watson also writes that this text enacts “the slide of narrative desire into perpetual differentiation” (101). Perpetual differentiation is a way of approaching indifference. Repeatedly doubling the number of a polygon’s sides to infinity results in the limiting curve that is a perfect circle. Hence, Watson’s Kristevan reading of the speaker as a fully-constituted subject who returns to the pre-symbolic space of indifference makes it clear that the “slide of narrative desire” he speaks of is a version of the death drive. But this speaker’s desire is to escape indifference, to be recognized as alive somewhere out of the mud, “above in the light” (8)—which would require the end of *this* heterogeneous space, his death *here*. He cannot do this precisely because he has not experienced the separation of the thetic break and returned, but has never left this place: “all this business of above yes light yes [. . .] bright and less bright yes little scenes yes all balls yes” (145).

The explanation Davies gives for the speaker’s naming rule is not a convincing one. He claims that the “one syllable” component is merely comical, because the names thus resemble the language of babies and clowns (100). Perhaps babies and clowns do tend to speak in mono-syllables, but there are many names that consist of only one syllable—and even end in “m”—(for instance, “Sam” Beckett) which are not intrinsically humorous. Davies also says that the “m at the end” specification is because “m” is the

“easiest of all sounds to produce, even opening the mouth is not necessary” (99). But the speaker’s mouth is most often described as open—he is continually “panting” (7)—so it is actually easier for him to utter words that do not require *closing* of the mouth (“aha signifying mamma”). Furthermore, opening the mouth is necessary anyway to utter the entire names, because of the initial consonants. And finally, the closed-mouth “m” sound that ends these words in English (along with Knowlson and Pilling’s “am”) would not be the same in the original French text.

Cohn provides an excellent analysis of the puns that multiply meanings in *Comment c’est*. Though most are of course lost in the translation, I think it is important to consider those of Pim and Bom, since it is in the nature of proper names (even provisional ones) to remain largely the same in different languages. She emphasizes the irony of how complexly, emphatically positive the connotations are of the words these names resemble in French (*Samuel* 189). Pim sounds like *pain* (bread) and Bom sounds like *bon* (good). I want to underscore not only that these words do not leave their speakers with closed mouths, but, more significantly, the aural equivalence between the “m” and “n” in these puns. This equivalence also functions in a pun relating to the advent of the symbolic, and is thus very much to the point here.

Watson describes the simultaneous emergence of the name in the symbolic order—the name of the father—with the paternal interdiction against incest: “the *non du père* is also the *nom du père*” (37). Hence, on a first, solely orthographic level, all the names that may be generated by the rule “m at the end and one syllable” resemble what they are: they look like *nom*. But, when these names are pronounced orally (in French),

their meanings multiply because of the principle that makes *nom* sound like *non*. Hence, they also resemble what they are not: the implied *non* negates them at their very inception. But even *non* in this context does not function solely as negation, cannot function as only one thing when it is part of a pun. Kristeva describes negation in judgment as a negation of the predicate; it is thus linked to syntax and linguistic mastery (*Revolution* 122). Negativity, however, overwhelms both that mastery and the binaries established by negation: “Rejection—negativity—ultimately leads to a ‘fading’ of negation: a surplus of negativity destroys the pairing of opposites and replaces opposition with an *infinitesimal differentiation*” (*Revolution* 125-6). This differentiation, as we have seen, prevents the proper functioning of names in this text and thus reveals negativity once again to be stubbornly present at the very moment at which the sign—the name of the father—ought to repress it. There has not been a “fading” of negation in this text; rather, this negativity has prevented negation from being consolidated in the first place. A further pun, this one a kind of visual joke based in English, emphasizes the point I am making here. The speaker carves the name he has chosen for himself (“BOM”) into Pim’s “arse” (or bum), “the vowel in the hole” (60). Naming here is intricately linked to the negativity of the body’s drives, as the vowel disappears into the body, into the very place of anal rejection.

The argument I have put forth in this chapter against the concept of the thetic break, replacing Kristeva’s emphasis on *return* with my own on *becoming*, accounts for an illuminating discrepancy between Kristeva’s theory and Beckett’s text. Kristeva insists that the “semiotization of the symbolic [. . .] represents the flow of *jouissance* into

language” (*Revolution* 79). She claims that the subject’s recognition and enactment of being put in process/on trial is always a “jubilant recognition that, in ‘modern’ literature, replaces petty aesthetic pleasure” (*Desire* 141). But the tone of *How It Is* is largely anxious and desperate, not jubilant. The wordplay produces what may be called “petty aesthetic pleasure,” but the speaker’s crisis of subjectivity constitutes a desire for escape, not a leap into freedom. The indeterminacy of the semiotic troubles him enormously at the end of the text, when the litany of “yes” and “no” is replaced by the pervasive “no answer”:

so things may change no answer end no answer I may choke no answer
sink no answer sully the mud no more no answer the dark no answer
trouble the peace no more no answer the silence no answer die no answer
DIE screams I MAY DIE screams I SHALL DIE screams good (147)

Wright has remarked on the lack of *jouissance* in *Molloy*. He observes that the subversion of secure subject positions by Beckett’s speakers leads not to eroticized liberation, but to “misery and meaninglessness, and that activity is what they seek continually but unsuccessfully to escape from, back into a world of solid foundations, solid signifieds” (17). I do not agree that the result is absolute “misery” or total “meaninglessness” (and seemingly neither does Wright), but I do think there is an urgency to “escape.” But this escape—at least in *How It Is*—would not be “back into” the world of the (solid) symbolic, but into it for the first time.

III. “an image not for the eyes”: Corrupted Specularity

In keeping with the speaker’s confinement in the perpetual present tense is his assertion that he has neither memories nor dreams “this time,” but only images (11). There is neither a past that he can recall and return to, nor a future that he can dream of and approach. Instead, there are images that seem to flicker with the transitoriness, the constant succession, of films; this link to the cinema is emphasized by his description of the “curtains part[ing]” to reveal an image (53). Hence, the image in this text is a prominent feature—as indicated by the separate publication of *L’image*, an excerpt from *Comment c’est*, before the full text was published (in either language) in *X, A Quarterly Review* and also after by Les Éditions de Minuit (O’Reilly xxi). But when the curtains part, they are curtains of mud, and the “image” revealed is also necessarily composed of “primeval mud impenetrable dark” (11). So the preoccupation with images in (especially Part One of) *How It Is* in fact directs our attention to something that is not there; it underscores the problematic nature of seeing in this text. In *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett’s Dialogue with Art*, Lois Oppenheim forwards the thesis—which I find reductive and inaccurate—that “the unifying force of all Beckett’s work is a preoccupation with the visual as paradigm” (3). But her thinking does approach my own when she suggests that Beckett’s writing resembles Mark Rothko’s “invisible art” insofar as the “visual paradigm” for both artists in fact reveals the “impediment of sight” (48). It is not vision that underlies Beckett’s images in this text, but language. I will argue that the corrupted specularity in *How It Is* reflects that its speaker embodies a form of selfhood that is inexplicable according to Lacan’s account of the mirror stage (and Kristeva’s adoption of

it). Furthermore, I will address other specular concepts of psychoanalytic theory—and their *non-visual* approximations in *How It Is*—to analyze the lack of sociality that corresponds to his lack of conventional subjectivity. In doing so, I hope not only to demonstrate a feature of Beckett’s text that I feel has been largely ignored or misunderstood, but also to unsettle the central position of specularity in these theories of the subject.

Beckett’s speaker maintains from the beginning that there are no “other inhabitants” (13) of the mud besides himself, but that he sometimes indulges in images or dreams (forgetting his own distinctions and confusing his own terminology) in which he could connect with others. Sometimes, he feels like “someone having tasted of love of a little woman [. . .] or failing kindred meat a llama emergency dream an alpaca llama” (13-4). His willingness to cling to a llama rather than someone of his own species—“kindred meat”—reveals that these images do not portray the relationships of a socially functioning subject. Dearlove writes that “the voice’s images do not create intellectual or emotional bonds between him and their ‘few creatures in the light’ (p. 8)” (101). This lack of interpersonal connection is evident in the scene excerpted as *L’image*: what would conventionally be an idyllic description of the speaker and a girl, both in their teens, having a picnic in April or May. The language is extremely impersonal, though the two are “exchanging endearments” as they eat sandwiches: “my sweet girl I bite she swallows my sweet boy she bites I swallow” (30). The speaker’s use of words like “dextrogyre,” “sinistro” (29) and “introrse” (30) emphasize his technical description of their movements, as if they are merely mechanical contraptions: “heads back front as

though on an axle” (30). He does not describe the girl lovingly, but makes it clear that she is merely serving as background for an opportunity to observe himself: “seen full face the girl is less hideous it’s not with her I am concerned me” (29-30). But his description of himself is similarly grotesque (30).

This self-absorbed, self-generating aspect of the images reveals not only the asociality of the speaker, but also the eerie falsity of the images as “images”—they often seem precisely more like dreams or memories because they describe the speaker’s awareness of things that are extra-visual. For example, consider the following excerpt:

she sits aloof ten yards fifteen yards she looks up looks at me says at last
to herself all is well he is working

my head where is my head it rests on the table my hand trembles on the
table she sees I am not sleeping [. . .]

that’s not all she stoops to her work again the needle stops in midstitch she
straightens up and looks at me again she has only to call me by my name
get up come and feel me but no

I don’t move her anxiety grows she suddenly leaves the house and runs to
friends (10-11)

The speaker seems both inside and outside himself here, mentally inhabiting the space of the man resting on the table, but unaware—at first—where his head is. If he were resting

his head in a position that would preclude the woman's knowledge of whether he is working or sleeping, he would not be able to see her at all. But he can, to varying degrees of specificity; first she is aloof, at an uncertain distance, then he is able to tell she has stopped her needle in midstitch. Moreover, he can "see" things that are invisible, namely her thoughts—what she says to herself and that her anxiety grows—as well as where she goes when she has left him. Likewise, her observance of him is based on vague evidence: "my hand trembles on the table she sees I am not sleeping." This could mean that she deduces from his present movement that he is not sleeping right now. But, because trembling is such a slight movement—possible in sleep—she may interpret it as a symptom of general fatigue, indicating that he is not sleeping lately, and is now resting fitfully. Visual knowledge is thus subordinated to mental projection here, but ultimately neither can solve the problem of both characters' anonymity and thus indeterminate existence. He feels that she has only to call him by his name to connect with him meaningfully, but this is impossible.

At first, the speaker's difficulty with seeing seems a result of the excessively mediated way that he attempts it: "life in the light first image some creature or other I watched him after my fashion from afar through my spy-glass sidelong in mirrors through windows at night first image" (9). A spy-glass might seem a useful observational instrument, but it is here used in conjunction with so many other lenses that it cannot provide much clarity. Locatelli comments on a similar effect in Beckett's *ill seen ill said*: "the non-hierarchical organization of instruments of observation and of observers, shows a mistrust in the possibility of multiplying cognitive power through the

excellency of a single, closed procedure” (11). The main source of obscurity in the speaker’s “first image” may seem to be that it takes place “at night,” but he later describes his desire to close his eyes and wait for night because “the safest way always at night less light a little less” (78). Life in the light can be just as difficult to apprehend when there is an abundance of light. The speaker describes visiting Pam Prim in the hospital, regretful for having found only marguerites when she had begged for something colourful like holly or ivy because everything in her room is “white as chalk” (77-8). He is again able to observe only objects with success, not the people with whom he tries to forge closeness: “iron bed glossy white two foot wide all was white high off the ground vision of love in it see others’ furniture and not the loved one how can one” (77). A “white on white trace” (135) provides not illumination, but erasure.

The greater clarity that the speaker sometimes achieves is, then, not a result of improved vision, and is therefore a delusional clarity. Cohn remarks: “For the heroes of Beckett’s French fiction, perception becomes increasingly difficult, and the ‘I’ of *Comment c’est* sees his first image darkly, through several glasses. Gradually, however, as the narrator *warms to his narration*, the images grow clearer” (Samuel 197, my emphasis). It is the act of describing these images that constitutes their “visibility,” and when the correct words cannot be found, the objects themselves are also missing. The speaker cannot explain to Pam Prim why he has failed to obtain holly or ivy, cannot “find” the places where he has looked without the words that would convey these places to her. But his not yet consolidated grasp of the symbolic makes social communication impossible: “tell her I couldn’t find find the words the places [. . .] find the words tell her

the places where I had looked” (78). He is not able to tell *her* anything; the best he can do is “murmur it to the mud” (9). Since he is unable to suppress fully the drives within him, he cannot order or punctuate his words to a sufficient degree to communicate effectively with an other—even if that other is a figment of his imagination. Instead, his constant repetition of “I say it as I hear it” emphasizes the simultaneity and equivalency of the words he hears and the words he (silently) speaks. The editing we would expect to have taken place already in a written text (leaving no trace of rejected phrases), and to occur continuously in spoken conversation (thus omitting aspects of the discourse after they have been thought, but before they have been spoken) is in *How It Is* a component of the text itself. The illusion of an object that precedes its description is destroyed by this inclusion of the authorial voice governing which details we will “see”: “I hoist myself if I may say so a little forward to feel the skull it’s bald no delete the face it’s preferable” (54). Not only is the skull made unreal to us because of the word “delete,” but the face is revealed to exist only insofar as it is deemed “preferable” to be described. Such objects have no transcendental presence, and thus their status as images depends precariously on the language available.

Furthermore, this language often seems to defeat its own purpose as descriptive, in much the same way that the anxious repetitions of “we’re talking of” fail to posit the objects referred to. Because the entire text is so repetitive, the images do not acquire the verisimilitude that results from an accumulation of detail. The speaker claims to “see” himself here, but we cannot do so without resorting to the same act of mental projection that he depends on: “centuries I can see me quite tiny the same as now more or less only

tinier quite tiny no more objects no more food” (17). There is in this image neither a metaphoric comparison to another tiny object (besides himself, which is merely redundant) nor a metonymic contextualization that would provide us with a scale for measuring size (because there are “no more objects”). Only the insistence upon the word “tiny” itself is offered as evidence.

Locatelli writes (again of *ill seen ill said*) that Beckett represents “the physicality of objects through textual anaphora, rather than through ecphrasis, that is, through linguistic repetition rather than through addition of vivid details” (33). The pertinence of this observation to *How It Is* reveals that it is not only in the aptly named *ill seen ill said* that Beckett “displays the ineliminable role of saying in the determination of visibility” (33). Locatelli’s *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett’s Prose Works After the Nobel Prize* focuses on Beckett’s “Second Trilogy”: *Company*, *ill seen ill said* and *Worstward Ho*. All three, she says, are “exercises in iconic subtraction, emptying images of the ‘pictorial quality’ that structures them. Thus, the more images vanish, the more representation appears as a primordial relational mechanism constituting consciousness and constructing the world” (28). *How It Is* was published (in English) in 1964, five years before Beckett was awarded the Nobel. Locatelli treats this text only in passing, remarking that it is a middle point on the “gnoseological quest focused on language” that leads from *The Unnamable* to the works she examines closely (218). But I argue that the investigation of language in *How It Is* affects its “pictorial quality” in a way strikingly similar to that Locatelli identifies only in later texts. She writes that “what is visible is shown as the effect of figurality: the visible is captured and endowed with permanence by

linguistic figurations” (188). The prominence of figurality is introduced in the first words of Beckett’s *Company*: “A voice comes to one in the dark. *Imagine*” (7, my emphasis). But the *image* in *How It Is* is never independent of *imagination* either, but firmly subordinated to the requirements of linguistic representation.

For example, consider the following fragments from the aforementioned picnic scene:

heads high we gaze I imagine we have I imagine our eyes open and gaze
before us still as statues save only the swinging arms those with hands
clasped what else

in my free hand or left an undefinable object and consequently in her right
the extremity of a short leash connecting her to an ash-grey dog of fair size
askew on its hunkers its head sunk stillness of those hands

question why a leash in this immensity of verdure and emergence little by
little of grey and white spots lambs little by little among their dams what
else (29)

The entire scene is classified as subjunctive by the repeated phrase “I imagine”—made prominent by its interruptive placement in the syntax—revealing that the image is a function not of fact, but of projective desire. A similar effect results from the speaker’s earlier phrase: “in obedience to the wish the image of the moment” (12). Hence, the scene is not immediately available as complete, but is constructed as it is described,

moved along by the words “what else.” His free hand is not *observed* to be his left, but *decided* to be, and likewise her free hand must “consequently” be her right. The chain of description leading from her hand to the leash to the dog is not a mere metonymic progression of what is there, but a process of creating possibility that meets with an immediate narrative problem: “question why a leash.” The lambs that provide cause for the effect of the leash appear after the fact; they *emerge* “little by little,” added to the scene, not passively observed within it. The additional detail of their accompaniment by their mothers seems based solely on the rhyme of “lambs” with “dams.”

Hence, an analysis of images in *How It Is* may not be conducted without an acknowledgment that there is “something wrong” with them as well. Knowlson and Pilling write that “what is wrong with them is that they recall to life a figure who is intent on being dead” (68), but that does not address their supposedly visual form, only their content. However, these same critics do describe all the images as visually unclear—“diaphanous and insubstantial” (68)—and emphasize the shift from visual to verbal that occurs in the movement from Part One to Parts Two and Three (65). What I want to emphasize is that the verbal predominates even in Part One: that the images can no better portray “how it was” than “how it is.”

Even those critics who do not perceive the images as problematic acknowledge that they are not merely visual. Davies gushes Romantically about how powerful the images are. He claims that they seem to occupy more of a proportion of the text than they do quantifiably, “in part because of their status as pieces of imaginative language, resonating and radiating meanings, in part also because a lot of the rest of the book is

repetitive, seeming thus to shrink in significance” (101). I am not sure why repetition should diminish significance, rather than enlarge it, nor have I observed the images themselves to be without repetition. But I do think Davies is partially correct when he attributes the effect of the images to “imaginative language.” However, I think that language *progresses* in these passages by the same play with sound and rhythm I discussed in Chapter I, and must thus be recognized as more than mere “imaginative language” evoking a pictorial scene. Davies greatly admires the following:

we are on a veranda smothered in verbena the scented sun dapples the red
tiles yes I assure you

the huge head hatted with birds and flowers is bowed down over my curls
the eyes burn with severe love I offer her mine pale upcast to the sky
whence cometh our help and which I know perhaps even then with time
shall pass away

in a word bolt upright on a cushion on my knees whelmed in a nightshirt I
pray according to her instructions (15)

The rhythm and alliteration so prominent in the words “we are on a veranda smothered in verbena” continue throughout: “s” sounds dominate the rest of the first fragment, the next features “h” in “huge head hatted” and then an abundance of “o” sounds, and the liturgical rhythm in “I offer her mine pale upcast to the sky” matches the prayer setting. Sound is also made a prominent feature of the scene itself; the woman then “drones” a bit

of prayer while the air “thrills with the hum of insects” (16). Smell is likewise prominent, in the smothering verberna and scented sun. Vision itself is figured violently, in the woman’s burning eyes and the look the boy “steal[s]” at her (16). Indeed, Davies’ claim to have such a vivid mental picture of this particular image may have much to do with the fact that Beckett scholars are likely to recognize (though perhaps unconsciously) that the scene resembles a “well-known photograph” of Beckett and his mother (Knowlson and Pilling 78). Even the introduction to the image is a strange combination of reference to, and denial of, vision: “I *see it* from below it’s like *nothing I ever saw*” (15, my emphasis). Davies later concedes that “light” in this text is not necessarily linked to visual apprehension: “the fact that light and an imagination of memory coincide indicates how light is a fitting symbol for spiritual rather than sense-perceptible reality” (121).

Hill does not address the fundamental wrongness of the images visually, but does find them as resistant to straightforward explication as Beckett’s more linguistically difficult fragments. He writes that the “process of interpretation is stimulated by these scenes but, just as clearly, also stalled and disappointed” (139). Oppenheim references Locatelli in linking her “visual paradigm” to the “figurality of language” in Beckett (39). And Dearlove emphasizes not language per se, but the intertextuality that links Beckett’s texts to each other. She writes that the images in *How It Is* not only portray (unsuccessfully social) relationships, but also “reflect other Beckettian works” (101). The most explicit example of this occurs in the following: “asleep I see me asleep on my side or on my face it’s one or the other on my side it’s preferable which side the right it’s

preferable the sack under my head or clasped to my belly clasped to my belly [. . .]

Belacqua fallen over on his side tired of waiting forgotten of the hearts where grace abides asleep” (24). The mention of Belacqua alludes to Beckett’s early *More Pricks Than Kicks* and, by extension, to Dante’s *Inferno* (Beckett 9). Its inclusion here marks the speaker’s abandonment of merely visual description—which we recognize as deferring to narrative desire by the assertion of details that are “preferable”—to invoke instead literary shorthand that provides extra-visual information about the character.

The link between the images and language—that, as I have argued, is in turn linked to anal rejection in this text—is evoked by the speaker’s statement: “I pissed and shat another image in my crib never so clean since” (9). Furthermore, the eyes with which he claims to “see” things are emphatically not his physical means of perception (which are “blue”). Instead, he claims: “I see me on my face close my eyes not the blue the others at the back and see me on my face” (8). Logically, the existence of these other eyes “at the back” (which see when “close[d]”) explains his ability to “see” things while face down in the mud (or on a table). But he is also able to see *through* things: “the tears behind the hands” (21) and “the blue through the hot stones through the jersey” (45). Hence, these eyes must fabricate what it is they claim to see. The speaker describes the images as occurring suddenly and quite against his will: “ah these sudden blazes in the head as empty and dark as the heart can desire then suddenly like a handful of shavings aflame the spectacle then” (35). But soon after this statement is his description of himself as an old, ruined building, his eyes “two old coals that have nothing more to see” (36). If his eyes are “coals,” then the “sudden blazes” are *sui generis*.

At the beginning of Part Three, when the images have “ceased” as the speaker earlier predicted they would (10), he attempts to generate more of them by addressing himself in the imperative. This address retains a sense of otherness with the words “I quote on,” but this sense is of course illusory: “clench the eyes I quote on not the blue the others at the back see something somewhere after Pim that’s all is left breath in a head” (104). The earlier problem with naming—discussed in Chapter II—recurs here, in strikingly similar terms: “say sack old word first to come one syllable k at the end seek no other” (105). Locatelli remarks that “we recognize what we have already endowed with the distinctness of a name, and we simply do not see what we cannot name” (193). Hence, the sack that the speaker tries to see—which has previously been easier for him to describe than his unnamed or self-named “creatures”—is only “possible” when it is named. He assures himself: “a sack that will do the word the thing it’s a possible thing [. . .] see it name it name it see it” (105). The following fragment contains a multitude of imperatives, and firmly places seeing *after* the voice that initiates it: “stop panting say what you hear see what you say *say you see it* an arm colour of mud the hand in the sack quick say an arm then another *say another arm see it* stretched taut as though too short to reach *now add a hand* fingers parted stretched taut monstrous nails all that *say you see all that*” (105, my emphasis).

Singer provides an excellent reading of the speaker’s “dream” at the end of Part One (the only sustained image that follows the picnic scene) that in fact applies to all the images of *How It Is* as I have characterized them. The dream begins as follows:

the dust there was then the mingled lime and granite stones piled up to
 make a wall further on the thorn in flower green and white quickset
 mingled privet and thorn

the depth of dust there was then the little feet big for their age bare in the
 dust

the satchel under the arse the back against the wall raise the eyes to the
 blue wake up in a sweat the white there was then the little clouds you
 could see the blue through the hot stones through the jersey striped
 horizontally blue and white (45)

Singer remarks that “the visual resolution of the dream imagery in this passage dissolves under the pressure of conflicting perspectives, much as we have seen thetic predication dissolve in the free solution of unpunctuated grammatical elements” (147). Though there are elements in the text that—in place of punctuation—keep the text from being in an altogether “free solution,” I agree that they do not impose a single, determinate meaning, just as these images do not constitute a single, determinate perspective. Next, Singer argues, is a leap that posits meaning for the dream: a leap that is not precipitated by *visual* cues. The dream concludes: “raise the eyes look for faces in the sky animals in the sky fall asleep and there a beautiful youth meet a beautiful youth with golden goatee clad in an alb wake up in a sweat and have met Jesus in a dream” (45). Here is another imperative construction, and one that tries to insist upon a past by moving quickly

through the present. Note that the change here is not only of identity—attaching an extra significance to the youth—but also of tense: from “*meet* a beautiful youth” to “*have met* Jesus.” Singer argues that “the imagistic incarnation of Jesus is not coherent with the other imagistic particulars of the dream [. . .] the dream offers a unique form of knowledge, specifically, in the words of Beckett’s narrator, ‘that kind of image not for the eyes not for the ears’ (45). [. . .] the kind of image the narrator ‘speaks’ here is preeminently for the mind, or of the mind” (149).

This non-specular imagery is symptomatic of the speaker’s non-Lacanian process of becoming. Kaja Silverman’s *The Threshold of the Visible World* takes its title from Lacan’s mirror stage essay and explores “many meanings” of the threshold metaphor (11). She diverges from Lacan’s “emphatically visual” (10) theorization in her first chapter, “The Bodily Ego,” to consider other psychoanalytic conceptions of the body’s boundary. I will take up these conceptions in Chapter IV, presenting alternative possibilities for the constitution of Beckett’s speaker’s ego. But I will now focus on the specular paradigms of both Lacan and Henri Wallon, in conjunction with similar—but non-visual—structures in *How It Is*. I have already argued that Lacan’s mirror stage account is not congruent with the form of subjectivity Beckett presents, and my analysis of image in this chapter provides further evidence of that. Because constituent identification has not occurred for the speaker of *How It Is*, there is no *imago* to act as prototype, or threshold, for his visual apprehension. Thus, his experience of the visual is both unlimited and inadequate; he is able to “see” nothing clearly because he is confusedly projecting everything himself.

According to Lacan, writes Silverman, “the subject’s corporeal reflection constitutes the limit or boundary within which identification may occur” (11). There is no such limit for Beckett’s speaker. While affirming “all those I see are me” (86), he produces vague descriptions of a variety of characters, as well as of his sack, a llama, hospital furniture, and various other things. The boundary that should separate these different objects is tenuous at best. He sees parts of things, he sees through things, and the “life” that should distinguish people from things is just one of many “sizes” in which the images may come: “I see all sizes life included if that’s mine the light goes on in the mud the prayer the head on the table the crocus the old man in tears the tears behind the hands skies all sorts different sorts on land and sea” (21). The picnic image affects the speaker more than any other, despite his dehumanized description of it; as it disappears, he says “I realize I’m still smiling there’s no sense in that now” (31). And the figures from it seem to come close to him, albeit in an amorphous and fragmented way, but then we learn that even such illusory, partial presence does not belong to them, that “it doesn’t happen like that.” He tries to call them back after they have disappeared the first time:

it is dusk we are going tired home I see only the naked parts the solidary
faces raised to the east the pale swaying of the mingled hands tired and
slow we toil up towards me and vanish

the arms in the middle go through me and part of the bodies shades
through a shade the scene is empty in the mud the sky goes out the ashes

darken no world left for me now but mine very pretty only not like that it
doesn't happen like that (32)

Not only is this image devoid of the peripheral boundary that outlines the *imago* in Lacan's formulation, but it is also—if only in a momentary delusion—unfixed from the flat surface on which images appear in a mirror.

The dynamic, though estranged, relationship that Beckett's speaker has with the "others" he confronts has more in common with Wallon's version of the mirror stage than Lacan's. Wallon, a French psychoanalyst like Lacan, offers an alternate description of a mirror stage in which the visual *imago*, or—to use his term—"exteroceptive ego," is constituted. He also describes the consolidation of the "proprioceptive ego," a non-visual component of the self, but I will leave that aspect until Chapter IV. For now, I will focus on Wallon's theorization of the mirror image, which provides what Silverman calls "identity-at-a-distance" (15). In contrast to Lacan's instantaneous, jubilant (mis)identification, Wallon describes a lengthy period separating "the child's first exposure to a mirror and the moment at which the reflected image is psychically incorporated. During this period, the mirror image remains stubbornly exterior" (Silverman 15). Silverman recounts Wallon's examples of the different types of behaviour exhibited by infants toward their reflections throughout this stage: embracing, playing with, longing for, licking, striking, allying with, and—in what seems an anomalous reaction alongside these other types—turning to the image when hearing its own name called (15). Thus, the infant treats the image as a separate thing, but nonetheless as a thing "in relation to which it somehow orients itself" (Silverman 15).

This paradoxical sense of feeling the same as something that is other is the identity-at-a-distance that I think is an apt description of the speaker's relationship to Pim in *How It Is*.

The first contact produces a brief feeling of pained surprise, followed by a sense of "ownership." The word ownership is interesting in terms of identity-at-a-distance because it evokes both self and other; we "own" objects separate from us, but also experience our bodies as our "own." Hence, the extent to which he claims to own Pim's body is ambiguous: "smartly as from a block of ice or white-hot my hand recoils hangs a moment it's vague in mid air then slowly sinks again and settles firm and even with a touch of ownership already on the miraculous flesh" (51). The "vagueness" of his reaction is further complicated by our prior knowledge that he "recoils" from his own skin: "I don't like to touch myself" (14). His sequence of behaviour accords with Wallon's theorization: from initial confusion and distrust to an estranged identification. Certain aspects of his orientation to Pim also recall Lacan's specifications about the *imago*. Pim is perceived in a "contrasting size"—"two or three inches shorter" (58)—and an inverted "symmetry" (Lacan 2): the speaker claims at first "we are not yet head to foot" (51). But it is important to note that he is not perceived this way by *visual* means. Instead, touch and hearing provide the speaker with a mental "image" of Pim. He says: "the cries tell me which end the head but I may be mistaken [. . .] then guided by stump of thumb on spine on up to the floating ribs that clinches it" (54). Even his perception of visual aspects like colour occurs through synesthesia: "mass of hairs all white to the feel" (54). The physical appearance of Pim is not what matters to the speaker: "he can speak then that's the main thing" (56).

In addition to making Pim speak according to a “table of basic stimuli” (69)—similar to, but more elaborate than, Molloy’s method of communicating with his mother in Beckett’s novel of that name (18)—the speaker manipulates his body, playing with it as he would a doll. Pim “stays whatever way he’s put” (59) and is incapable of ingesting the food brought to his mouth (as, indeed, the flat surface of a mirror would be): “I have eaten offered him to eat crushed against his mouth lost in the hairs the mud my palm dripping with cod’s liver or suchlike rubbed it in labour lost” (65). And the speaker’s delusions of Pim’s separateness are always haunted by his awareness that they are in fact the same. He describes the watch on Pim’s arm: “my right hand sets off along his right arm [. . .] my index worms through the clenched fingers and says a big ordinary watch” (58). But after this discovery—in which gesture and language conflate as his finger speaks—is his (again ambiguous) admission that this arm is his “own.” The watch, which keeps him “company” as does the fictional existence of Pim, stops: “I shake *my* arm it starts no more” (59, my emphasis). His occasional sense of mastery over his “creature”—“I’ll quicken him you wait and see and how I can efface myself behind my creature” (52)—alternates with doubt about his own being: “when Pim stops what becomes of me” (90). Even the most elaborately described acts of torture to control Pim’s speech, which are seemingly performed on an other in a merely “mechanical” way, endanger the speaker rather than Pim (or, more accurately, the speaker along with and prior to Pim, who is always already himself). He says: “I am not going to kill *myself* demanding something beyond *his* powers” (64, my emphasis).

The speaker's identification with Pim, while insisting that Pim is a separate being, occurs most densely in the layers of speech that are ventriloquized. The lack of quotation marks that I have previously discussed as problematic render this discourse both one and multiple. The repetition of phrases like "this man/creature is no fool" and "if I were he" adds to the confusion of voice:

but this man is no fool he must say to himself I would if I were he what
does he require of me or better still what is required of me that I am
tormented thus and the answer sparsim little by little vast tracts of time

not that I should cry that is evident since when I do I am punished
instanter

sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry

something perhaps beyond my powers assuredly not this creature is no
fool one senses that

what is not beyond my powers known not to be beyond them song it is
required therefore that I sing

what if I were he I would have said it seems to me in the end to myself but
 I may be mistaken and God knows I'm not intelligent otherwise I'd be
 dead (63)

The speaker's inability to provide a positive answer to his question "I MAY DIE" (147)—in the capital letters that indicate the "Roman capitals" (62) he carves into Pim's back—means that Pim as well (insofar as he is the speaker) is an "unbutcherable brother" (74), while the delusion of him as a separate being is recognized as "completely false" (144).

Speech, rather than sight, is also the function that approximates in *How It Is* another specular aspect of psychoanalytic theory that I would like to address before ending this chapter: Lacan's conception of the "screen" and the "gaze." Subsequent to his mirror stage essay, Lacan posits a more complex, more sociocultural process by which subjects are perceived and thus consolidated. The screen, like the reflection, is a specular representation onto which the subject is mapped. But, unlike the mirror image, the screen does not imply any "iconic or indexical" relationship between the external image and the actual subject (Silverman 19). Furthermore, "the subject must not only align him- or herself identificatorily with the screen, but must also be apprehended in that guise by the gaze" (Silverman 18). The gaze, that is equivalent not to any specific look but to cultural apprehension in general and is thus not localizable, "photographs" the subject against a particular "screen" and so fixes the visual identity that is conferred on the subject. The subject cannot choose his or her own identificatory image, but must

receive the “ratification” of an outside observer—or rather, the cluster of unapprehensible observers that forms the cultural gaze.

Beckett’s speaker seeks “ratification” by postulating the existence of, first, a specific witness, and second, a more “unlocalizable” presence: “an intelligence somewhere a love” (137-8). The witness, Kram, is accompanied by and not really distinguishable from the scribe, Krim. Cohn emphasizes their conflation and ultimate inadequacy by pointing to another translinguistic pun: the German word *krinkram* means “junk” (*Back* 237). The existence of Kram and Krim is precipitated—but thus also undermined—by language; they are introduced in the subjunctive and are therefore clearly invented:

a witness I’d need a witness

he lives bent over me that’s the life he has been given all my visible
surface bathing in the light of his lamps when I go he follows me bent in
two

his aid sits a little aloof he announces brief movements of the lower face
the aid enters it in his ledger (18)

The emphasis here on *visual* observation is repeated later, again in the subjunctive: “he would need good eyes the witness if there were a witness good eyes a good lamp he would have them” (44). But this delusion is eventually rejected. Among the “extracts” from the ledger that extend from page 80 to 84 (in which, as usual, the voice is not clearly

distinct from that throughout the text) is the statement by Kram/Krim: “the state he’s in now less the eye than the ear if I may say so it’s obvious new methods a necessity” (81). Moreover, the following statement, on one level, seems to come from Kram and be about the speaker, but on another, seems just as plausibly to come from Krim (or the speaker himself—which of course it really does) and be about the witness: “can he be blind he must” (82). Hence, the real role of the witness is not to look, as is described on the text’s first page: “someone *listening* another noting or the same” (7, my emphasis).

But, even if Kram were an actual, competent witness, his observation could not provide the ratification of the gaze. Silverman suggests that one could imagine the mother who holds and observes the child during the mirror stage as the gaze, but that this would be inaccurate because “no look can actually approximate” general cultural apprehension (18). The speaker’s sense of that apprehension, significantly, is not of the “eye” of a camera, but of “an ear above somewhere above and unto it the murmur ascending and if we are innumerable then murmurs innumerable” (134). This “ear” is imagined as a God-like figure “who all along the track at the right places according as we need them deposits our sacks” and “to whom at times not extravagant to impute that voice quaqu the voice of us all” (138). Hence, this non-visual version of the gaze would both passively observe the speaker and actively confer on him his selfhood, both listening and speaking. It would answer his questions and ratify his existence: “the voice of him who before listening to us murmur what we are tells us what we are as best he can” (139). But this delusion is also abandoned; the speaker goes on to “eliminate him completely” (144) and assert that there is no one but himself to observe or affect him. So he returns to

“the familiar form of questions I am said to ask myself and answers I am said to give myself” (144). And, as we realize in the silence of “no answer” (147), self-ratification is not a possibility. Because the speaker has no social existence, is not recognized by anyone other than himself, he cannot know himself as such.

Neither Lacan nor Wallon treat specularity in simplistic terms. Lacan emphasizes the fictiveness and alterity of the *imago*—even though it *is* an actual reflection of the child—thus labeling its captation a *méconnaissance*. And his concept of the screen is as an “opaque” surface against which the gaze photographs subjects, hence resulting in external representations that subjects are forced to identify with, whether or not they perceive themselves that way (Silverman 19). For Wallon, the initial visual apprehension of one’s reflection is not sufficient to constitute subjectivity. But both theorists assume that seeing (even in these problematic ways) is a necessary part of the process of becoming through which the subject is consolidated and may thus gain access to language and the social/symbolic order. However, Beckett’s speaker does not “see” in even as provisional a way as psychoanalytic thought prescribes. He tries to see, and tries to persuade himself that he sees, but is in fact in a world where nothing is visible. That he is, despite this, able to *imagine* visibility—and describe it verbally—is evidence that the specular paradigm is *not* a prerequisite for the speaking subject. This does not render psychoanalytic thinking useless for explicating *How It Is*, as my concluding arguments in this chapter have shown. But it does mean that the *specular* emphasis in this thinking is reductive; the visual is neither universal nor unique in the consolidation of selfhood.

IV. “flesh without breach or fissure”: The Bodily Ego Without Threshold

It is perhaps unsurprising that a specular model of subjectivity does not account for the selfhood of Beckett’s speaker in *How It Is*, who exists in “warmth of primeval mud impenetrable dark” (11). Selfhood does not even seem the appropriate term, but—insofar as he speaks—he is a speaking subject, whose access to language begs an explanation, especially if he seems to lack subjectivity. His existence in “warmth” as well as “dark” points to what seems a more applicable paradigm for this speaker than visual apprehension: bodily sensation. Silverman describes psychoanalytic accounts that posit sensation as a method of constituting the self in “The Bodily Ego,” taking her chapter title from Freud. She quotes his remark in *The Ego and the Id* that the ego is “first and foremost, a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (9). Lacan’s account of the mirror stage describes the “projection of a surface” in an emphatically visual medium, an account that has proven inadequate for interpreting *How It Is*. Freud’s translator James Strachey, however, offers a non-specular explanation for Freud’s statement in a note added to his edition (and approved by Freud): “The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body” (qtd. in Silverman 12). It is with this understanding of the “projection of a surface” that I will investigate the “bodily ego” in *How It Is*.

Silverman’s discussion of the “sensational body” draws on Viennese neurologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder’s *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, first published in 1935. The words “image and appearance” indicate that Schilder retains an

interest in visibility, but seeing is only one of the ways that he claims we construct a model of our own body. He also emphasizes the role of “mental pictures”—like the *imagined* scenes in *How It Is*—in the formation of this model “in our mind”: “The image of the human body means the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves. There are sensations which are given to us. We see parts of the body-surface. We have tactile, thermal, pain impressions. There are [also] mental pictures and representations” (qtd. in Silverman 13). Thus, the image of the body is a *mental* “projection,” not a biological given, but this projection is at least in part the result of corporeal sensation.

Bodily movement and sensation—in contrast to the “images” that are always, and imprecisely, imagined—seems a reliable index of subjectivity in *How It Is*. Though his motion is in part “unspeakable,” the speaker carefully explains the mechanics of his “travelling days,” asserting that not a detail ought to be “changed”:

but first have done with my travelling days part one before Pim
 unspeakable flurry in the mud it's me I say it as I hear it rummaging in the
 sack taking out the cord tying the neck of the sack tying it to my neck
 turning over on my face taking leave and away

ten yards fifteen yards semi-side left right leg right arm push pull flat on
 face imprecations no sound semi-side right left leg left arm push pull flat
 on face imprecations no sound not an iota to be changed in this description
 (40)

His corporeal processes seem to outlast his mental capacity for invention, and, indeed, his ability to describe these processes linguistically, to unify them in the paradigm “categories of being.” He describes the failure, first, of “images dreams sleep food for thought” and then the failure of more visceral categories: “the need to move on the need to shit and vomit and the other great needs all my great categories of being” (14). But the “resource” remaining to him despite these failures is the motor capacity to move his hand: drawing it to his face, fluttering it (for ten to fifteen seconds, it seems), and laying it on his face (14). Movement itself thus appears to exceed (or precede) its symbolization.

Indeed, after Part One, when the “images” cease, the speaker is able to “see” Pim only by touch. And, because he describes his movements so precisely, this “seeing” is enjoyed not only by him, but by the more general “one” (though we know that there is only “one” person in the mud—the speaker “sole elect” (13)—therefore we understand this “discovery” of Pim as a delusion). He adopts the “one” of philosophical rhetoric after first using “us” in what reads as a conventional address to the “gentle reader” by an intrusive narrator: “my right hand seeks his lips let us try and see this pretty movement more clearly” (55-6). His body gains knowledge about his surroundings, thereby also—*seemingly*—gaining knowledge about the border and shape of his own body. He explores this “fellow-creature” (54):

it rises my foot we’re talking of my foot and rubs down one can see the
movement all along Pim’s straight stiff legs it’s as I thought there’s one

my head same movement it encounters his it's as I thought but I may be
 mistaken with the result it draws back again and launches right the
 expected shock ensues that clinches it I'm the taller

[. . .]

a few more movements put the arm back where I found it then towards me
 again the other way overhead sinistro until it jams one can see the
 movement (57-8)

I write that the speaker only *seems* to gain a sense of his body's perimeter by this method for a number of reasons. The phrase "but I may be mistaken" carries doubt beyond the "clincher" that follows it. The recurrence of the words "we're talking of" reminds us that the anxiously repetitive attempts at thetic positing in this text never hold (in place). The vocabulary used previously in the images—specifically "sinistro" from the picnic scene (29)—recurring here casts this passage as possibly another delusion, as does the very insistence that "one can see the movement" in a text where seeing is so problematic. Finally, there is of course the fact that I mentioned at the start of this paragraph: this passage *must* be another delusion—at least insofar as it describes the interaction of *two* characters—because "Pim he does not exist" (27). Knowlson and Pilling describe the difference between Parts One and Two of this text as the contrast of "multiple and insubstantial" delusions (the "images") with "one single substantial delusion—the figure of Pim, a *projection* mistaken for an 'other'" (69, my emphasis). A "projection" of an

other who does not exist cannot establish the border necessary for a “projection” of the surface of one’s *own* body.

Schilder’s emphasis on cutaneous sensation is an emphasis on what *surrounds* the bodily ego, what contacts and thus contains it. That is, the sensational body, though not *distanced* from what constitutes it as the child is from the visual *imago* in the mirror stage, experiences the *close* of distance—the touch—as a threshold of separation. We only perceive the surface of our body when it comes into contact with other surfaces; sensation is conferred on the body from what is outside it. Silverman writes that “social exchange” is thus necessary to experiencing sensation, “since it can be defined only through the relationship between the body and the world of objects” (13). The role of other people, over and above mere objects in this social exchange, is to inscribe cultural specifications on what Schilder calls the “postural model of the body” (Silverman 12). Impersonal, arbitrary touch is not enough to produce a bodily ego. Rather, the body is also “profoundly shaped by the desires which are addressed to it, and by the values which are imprinted on it through touch” (Silverman 13).

The bodily ego does not exist outside of a social community, a cultural context, or at the very least—as with the pigeons and locusts whose patterns of (visual) identification Lacan addresses in the mirror stage essay (3)—a species. Beckett’s speaker, alone in the mud, cannot qualify as a member of a species. And if he cannot identify as part of a group, his singular identity is unknowable. Levy writes that “a particular (individual) requires a universal (species) in order to be logically intelligible *as a particular*” (85). Thus, Levy argues, the speaker “clings” to “the species” in order to retain a sense of

identity, though he is aware that he cannot be a “universal” man without someone to keep him “company” (85-6). Knowlson and Pilling describe the “losses of the species,” that the speaker nonetheless (and seemingly simultaneously) “clings” to, as resulting in part from his “inhuman” behaviour towards Pim. Beckett writes in Part One: “before Pim the golden age the good moments the losses of the species I was young I clung on to the species we’re talking of the species the human saying to myself brief movements no sound two and two twice two and so on” (47). Then in Part Two, Knowlson and Pilling interpret the speaker as “clinging on” to the species by literally clinging to Pim, but *losing* the species once again (“almost forfeit[ing] the right to be considered human”) by committing “atrocities of an inhuman kind on a figure as helpless and confused as himself (who is, in fact, himself)” (69).

I agree that the speaker’s act of clinging to Pim’s “arse” with his nails—“straddling the slit whence contact with the right cheek less pads than nails” (52)—is an(other) attempt to grasp the species. It resonates with both the parody of social behaviour in the picnic scene, “and the girl too whom I hold who holds me by the hand the arse I have” (29), and the speaker’s earlier remark, “suddenly like all that happens to be hanging on by the finger-nails to one’s species” (26). But I disagree that the “inhumanity” of the (self-)torture in Part Two constitutes the “loss of species,” and also that there could even be a “loss” of what is not possessed in the first place. The “species *the human*” is not a relevant category for this speaker (or at least not an exclusive one). His statement quickly following this designation, “two and two twice two,” leads to a mathematical description that changes what “we’re talking of” from “the

species the human” to (the species) “the base.” He insists: “sides two yards base three a little less this the base we’re talking of the base” (47). His elaborate delineation of the torture in Part Three as part of a (simultaneously) repeating pattern further emphasizes that the ethics of “humanity” are here replaced by a mere “mathematical [. . .] justice” (112). Hence, “atrocities” are not registered as such: “what the fuck I quote does it matter who suffers” (131). What all this points to is that what the speaker “clings on” to is *not* in fact “the species the human”—of which he is not really a member—but something else, something resembling the mathematics of Part Three (eventually revealed to be false as well) insofar as it constitutes the “procession” in this text that is *not* false. There is a moment of hesitation when the procession of creatures is renounced, which reminds us that there may be another procession at work here: “and this business of a procession no answer this business of a procession yes never any procession no” (145-6). I will return to this other “procession”—that which the speaker really “clings on” to—later, in order to demonstrate that *this* clinging, and the *finger nails* by which he does so, lead us toward the theorization of this speaker’s language that I posit as an alternative to Kristeva’s stubbornly conventional psychoanalytic account.

But first I want to examine the “world of objects” surrounding (or at least said to surround) Beckett’s speaker, in the absence of proper “social exchange,” to investigate further the possibilities for his bodily ego. The only significant “object” that the speaker claims to possess is his sack. It is the first object named (7), the first to be insisted as what it is “we’re talking of” (8), and the last to be renounced as false: “with my sack no I beg your pardon no no sack either no not even a sack with me no” (146). Along with the

“images,” the sack has the starring role in Part One; the “big scene of the sack” (36) lasts for seventeen fragments. Moreover, the pseudo-social relationship that the speaker has with the sack is arguably less “inhuman” than the one he has with Pim. He says of this treasured possession (this word “faintly hissing” into “apposition,” thus anticipating its transformation from object to the subject he then addresses as “thou”): “I take it in my arms talk to it put my head in it rub my cheek on it lay my lips on it turn my back on it turn to it again clasp it to me again say to it thou thou” (17). Indeed, the sack seems to be another method by which to “cling” to a sense of humanity, to attain (or become) “something more”: “this sack for us here is something more than a larder [. . .] than a friend to turn to a thing to embrace [. . .] we don’t profit by it in any way any more and we cling to it” (66). But humanity is not achieved by this nonexistent, or at best masturbatory, “relationship” with the sack. And the only time the sack could be of assistance in establishing the speaker’s bodily ego is when he enters it completely, attempting to pull it around him, marking the edges of his body.

For, in terms of psychoanalytic identification, the shape of the body is itself a “sack” in which the ego must perceive itself as a close fit. Lacan calls the *imago* “the threshold of the visible world” (3) because it establishes the form that subsequent identifications must take—the shape they must fit into—to be congruent with this “Ideal-I [. . .] the source of secondary identifications” (2). Jean Laplanche “fleshes out” this silhouette by referring to the form identified with as a “limit, or a sack: a sack of skin” (qtd. in Silverman 11). Silverman comments that this formulation demands congruence in three dimensions; this “sack” is a “container whose shape determines in advance the

imaginary ‘contents’ which can be put into it” (12). It might seem obvious to point out that this “container” must “contain” in order to fulfill its role as limit, but the “sack” in *How It Is*—that we may now conceive of as his body itself, or at least the border which ought to establish his bodily *ego*—fails to do just this.

Perhaps the best indication that the sack is essential to the speaker’s subjectivity, and fails him, is that it “dies.” He describes its disintegration (during the “big scene of the sack”): “through the jute the edges of the last tins rowel my ribs perished jute” (35). It might seem here that the “edges” of the tins (that of course are in fact “false”) mark his body’s border *instead of* the sack, but their emergence “through” the sack would, it seems, *puncture* his flesh as well. To “rowel” is to prick with something sharp like the spikes on the end of a spur. And it seems likely that the speaker—though he can apparently feel pressure—would not be able to tell if he were bleeding. Because the mud is “never cold never dry,” he is always covered in warm viscosity, “the air laden with warm vapour of water or some other liquid I sniff the air smell nothing a hundred years not a smell” (25). If the mud is in fact “nothing more than all our shit” (52), this “vapour” could likely be of urine. The effect of the speaker’s flesh *constantly* being in contact with “the familiar slime” (48) rather than *coming into* contact with something solid (like Pim) is that Pim’s presence (insofar as it is imagined) is eventually *indistinguishable*.

Towards the end of Part Two the speaker wonders of Pim: “if he is breathing still or in my arms already a true corpse untorturable henceforward and this warmth under my arm against my side merely the mud” (92). Hence, the phrase “death of sack arse of

Pim” (38) refers not to two separate events, but to the same thing, simultaneously (which is seemingly why this “dream what a hope” of progression is linked to Thalia, the muse of comedy). Both the sack and Pim’s arse, “now an open wound” (68)—that represent the speaker’s body—are “dead” in that they no longer preserve an inside against an outside. But they are also, paradoxically, unknowable *as dead* because they are inherently indistinct. In contrast to wondering if Pim is a “true corpse untorturable,” he describes him (and/or himself) here as “unbutcherable,” though still questioning his existence: “curiosity was he still alive thump thump in the mud vile tears of unbutcherable brother” (74). It is thus unsurprising that the speaker experiences his own mortality as something that comes and goes: “I grow mortal again” (14-5).

Dearlove writes that “Beckett destroys the perimeters of the self in space as well as in time” (99). The destruction of time occurs, as we have seen, in the collapsing of the narrative from three parts into the simultaneity that they really are, obscuring the “clarity” that ought to result from “divid[ing] into three a single eternity” (24). In space, the sack provides yet more striking evidence of the speaker’s lack of boundary when he crawls inside it—like skin—and it “bursts.” His body is thus without solid form, in Dearlove’s words, “almost amorphous” (100). Beckett writes twice that the “bottom [of the sack] burst,” once on page 46, and before that as follows: “me again always everywhere in the light age unknown seen from behind on my knees arse bare on the summit of a muckheap clad in a sack bottom burst to let the head through” (36). This passage is particularly illuminating as it reflects once again the problematic “mortality” of this speaker. The sack of *his* skin bursts, signifying *death*, but the simultaneous (and contradictory)

interpretation available to us of the phrase “bottom burst to let the head through” is of *birth*. The “sack” is a placenta as well, the “bursting” of which initiates one’s entrance into, not exit from, the world. The situation here is further complicated by the speaker elsewhere in the text seeming to remain *in utero*: “in the end I’d succeed in seeing my navel the breath is there” (34). As in many other Beckett texts—for example, *Waiting for Godot*, in which there is “birth astride of a grave” (57)—birth and death seem contemporaneous, the young and the old identical. One of the images is of “a boy sitting on a bed in the dark or a small old man I can’t see with his head be it young or be it old his head in his hands I appropriate that heart” (18). The speaker later claims not to believe in the possibility of his own childhood. He speaks instead of “having been born octogenarian at the age when one dies in the dark the mud upwards born upwards floating up like the drowned” (70). This confusion—and that of Pim’s sack “not burst” though his own is (when they are of course the same)—leads him to wonder if a more theological explanation could account for the “life after (or along with) death” in this environment. But it seems unlikely: “Pim’s sack not burst there’s no justice or else just one of those things that pass understanding there are some [. . .] is it possible the old business of grace in this sewer [. . .] hear no more lie there in my arms the ancient without end me we’re talking of me” (61).

This “sewer”—the mud that is also “shit” and that is also, because it lacks differentiation, death—equates also, through its link to maternity, with the mother. The placenta is a membrane that permits the “exchange of materials by diffusion but without direct contact between fetal and maternal blood” (“Placenta”). The mud performs the

same nourishing function, not poking at a body that seems solid like the tins through the jute sack, but entering it “by osmosis.” He describes the process:

Pim has not eaten [. . .] my palm dripping with cod’s liver or suchlike
 rubbed it in labour lost if he’s still nourished it’s on mud if that’s what it is
 I always said so this mud by osmosis long run fulness of time by
 capillarity

by the tongue when it sticks out the mouth when the lips part the nostrils
 the eyes when the lids part [. . .]

[. . .] certain pores too the urethra perhaps a certain number of pores

this mud I always said so it keeps a man going and he clings to the sack
 that was the point to be made [. . .]

[. . .] we don’t profit by it in any way any more and we cling to it (65-6)

This passage leaves no doubt that “clinging” to “the species the human” is not only unsuccessful for this speaker, but ultimately unnecessary.

The effect of the mud on this speaker’s bodily ego—the effect of preventing its constitution—is perhaps more obvious in the context of Wallon’s definition of the sensational body than Schilder’s. I mentioned in Chapter III that Wallon theorizes not only a visual, “exteroceptive” ego, but also a “proprioceptive” one. Proprioceptivity is a

“nonvisual mapping of the body’s form” into a three-dimensional space like that Laplanche calls a “sack”: an “imagined spatial envelope” (Silverman 16). The word derives from the Latin *proprius*, meaning “personal” or “belonging to,” and *capere*, meaning “to grasp” or “to conceive.” The proprioceptive ego is thus the subject’s capacity to apprehend that his or her body is indeed his or her “own.” It governs concepts like “here,” “there,” and “my”—which, we have seen, are problematic for the speaker in *How It Is*—and is “intimately bound up with the body’s sensation of occupying *a point in space*, and with the terms under which it does so” (Silverman 16, my emphasis). The speaker cannot be aware of “a point in space” because he is stuck in an endless expanse of mud, because, as he says, “life unchanging here” (73).

The narrative that the speaker tells himself, a story of movement and activity spanning time and space, is absurd—but perhaps also necessary—because the mud renders it impossible. He says: “I sink a little further then no further it’s the same kingdom as before a moment before the same it always was I have never left it it is boundless” (43). Indeed, even the sensation of sinking “a little further” is not really granted to him. He longs occasionally for the shock—which would be violent—of a change of scenery, but knows that there is no “hope” of this: “sudden quasi-certitude that another inch and I fall headlong into a ravine or dash myself against a wall though nothing I know only too well to be hoped for in that quarter this tears me from my reverie I’ve arrived” (41). Not only are ravines and walls an impossibility in the mud, but so is the apprehension of an inch or an arrival. Indeed, all movement through space, despite seeming such a precise and important activity for this speaker (or, as I said earlier in this

chapter, reliable index of subjectivity), is eventually renounced. He is as careful to include the specifics of his “travelling” at the end as he has been all along, only to be told (or tell himself) that this motion too is false: “never crawled no in an amble no right leg right arm push pull ten yards fifteen yards no never stirred no” (146). According to Wallon’s definition of the proprioceptive ego, it is unsurprising that one who lacks it would also be deprived of this ability, since he claims that proprioceptivity encompasses the muscular system responsible for the “shifting of the body and its members *in space*” (qtd. in Silverman 16, my emphasis).

Beckett’s speaker, lacking muscular strength, is really only concerned with *linguistic* strength, as becomes clear in the following *description* of movement, which contains the familiar refrain from the *invented* images, “it’s preferable.” He narrates:

I turn on my side which side the left it’s preferable throw the right hand
forward bend the right knee these joints are working the fingers sink the
toes sink in the slime these are my holds too strong slime is too strong
holds is too strong I say it as I hear it

push pull the leg straightens the arm bends all these joints are working the
head arrives alongside the hand flat on the face and rest (19)

Despite some of the words being “too strong” for “a language meet for me meet for here” (17), the “joints”—ostensibly corporeal, but ultimately narratological—are “working.” The speaker seems to surprise even himself that “these scraps barely audible of a fantasy” (19) are coming together to weave a narrative that, fragmented and misleading as it is,

“hangs together still” (35). Jonathan Boulter claims that *How It Is* “rewrites the notion of narrative even as it presents a self-consciously ‘linear’ narrative in a productively, and paradoxically, paratactical form” (109). Indeed, the lack of connectives in parataxis corresponds to the speaker’s lack of the ability to move through space; metonymic contingency is absent in both cases.

With no bodily ego, the speaker is unable to feel completely separate from Pim, even though the very existence of Pim is a projection intended to represent an other. He begins their “life in common” (55) feeling that his side is “glued” to Pim’s (54). Later, he has the “impression”—which can refer to bodily sensation as well as mental speculation—that they share one body: “his mouth against my ear our hairs tangled together impression that to separate us one would have to sever them” (91). He reattributes singularity to the “millions” (114) he imagines moving in an endless procession of travellers journeying toward their victims, who will, after the brief couple, then abandon these tormentors to seek victims of their own. But the sense of distance he conceives of to make his calculations eventually collapses in the realization that, in the mud, “this diversity is not our portion” (140). Instead, he returns to his earlier belief in only one body, this one “vast” and indistinct like the mud, and therefore not a “proper” (in the sense of proprioceptive) body at all. He declares:

in reality we are one and all from the unthinkable first to the no less
unthinkable last glued together in a vast imbrication of flesh without
breach or fissure

for as we have seen part two how it was with Pim the coming into contact of mouth and ear leads to a slight overlapping of flesh in the region of the shoulders

and that linked thus bodily together each one of us is at the same time

Bom and Pim tormentor and tormented (140)

A further problem with this description—part of what makes it “unthinkable”—is that it persists in affirming that there is a “coming into contact,” despite our awareness that such a discrete sensation is impossible in the “vast imbrication” that is more mud than “flesh.”

This discussion of the mud—specifically the parallels I have drawn between it, the mother, shit, and death—necessitates a brief return to Kristeva: to her theorization of abjection. She writes in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* that abjection plays a key role in the “dynamics of the subject’s constitution, which is nothing other than a slow, laborious production of object relation” (47-8). Her chronology situates abjection as the drive to “divide, reject, repeat” *before* the separation has been established between subject and object; it is the state of “primal repression” (12). This early rejection eventually—in the case of the “normal” subject—leads to the recognition of *objects* as distinct from the *subject*, a recognition necessary to enter the symbolic order of language, which “sets up a separation and [. . .] concatenates an order” (72). Entering the symbolic order, governed by the name of the father, requires separating from the “archaic dyad” (58) of union with the mother. This union is contemporaneous with primal repression, and the mother is thus the “object” of abjection. The link Kristeva makes elsewhere

between the space of the mother and the *chora* of the semiotic process—discussed in Chapter I—implies a further link between abjection and the repression of the semiotic necessary to consolidate the thetic break. But abjection is theorized as a *prerequisite* of such positing, taking place *before* the thetic provides its safeguard of subjectivity. The abject is “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (4).

In other words, the space of the abject is occupied by *more* than the mother. The abject is all that which prevents the subject from constituting itself as “detached and autonomous” (1), all that which traverses the border of the self (of the bodily ego), all that which thus *dissolves* that border, or rather *prevents* its establishment in the first place. In *How It Is*, the abject is—or *ought* to be—the mud. Kristeva describes the process of abjection here in terms not of the mother, but of the mud’s other doubles, shit and death:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.

[. . .] How can I be without border? (3-4)

This passage describes the normal subject's capacity—until confronted by the “utmost of abjection” (4) that is the corpse—to abject *successfully*, to “thrust aside” (3) shit to “the other side of the border, the place where I am not.”

Beckett's speaker, however, is *not* on the other side of a border from the mud, has *not* “thrust aside” this “defilement,” and thus resembles what Kristeva calls a “deject.” The deject, the “one by whom the abject exists,” is not positioned in one place or posited as one thing. Instead, he is a “stray” who “never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh” (8). The problem with *objects* in *How It Is* is thus a symptom of this failure of abjection to consolidate the subject/object division. Kristeva writes that a consequence of this division not taking place is “the indifferent scattering of objects that are experienced as *false*” (46, my emphasis). Beckett's speaker, we have seen, declares at the end that “the whole story from beginning to end yes completely false yes” (144).

It would seem, then, that *How It Is* serves as an excellent example of the literature that “confronts” the abject that Kristeva explores in *Powers of Horror*. She claims that writing such texts “implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself *in its place* and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play” (16, my emphasis). However, I argue that Beckett's speaker, though in the place of abjection and engaging there in verbal play, does *not* “thrust aside” the abject in even this playful and therefore dangerous way. Rather, the abject is precisely what he “clings” to. But, perhaps paradoxically, this sustained embrace of the abject does *not* provide him with

what Kristeva argues is the “salvation” of the deject (and/or the speaker of semiotic language): *jouissance*. Binary oppositions break down in *jouissance*, but preserving, rather than destroying, the subject, through his or her experience of a joyous, though painful, passion, “of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (9). There is not in *How It Is* the “sublimation of the unsignifiable” through “music in letters” (23) that Kristeva argues can be found in texts by James Joyce (among others), but an ever-increasing anguish resulting from a desire to signify *coupled with* an unwavering demand that the abject be the means of, rather than an obstacle to, signification.

Kristeva writes that the act of abjecting the “weight of meaninglessness” is a “safeguard” against annihilation; abject and abjection are the “primers of my culture” (2). In other words, only by abjecting does one “cling on” to “the species the human.” But the speaker in *How It Is* does the opposite; he clings to what he ought to abject, and he does this *in order* to feel part of a species—in order to exist. Even when he clutches something that in some way “represents” humanity, it is an undeniably abject version of it: Pim’s arse (eventually an open wound), the arse of a girl who is merely “less hideous” when seen “full face” (29), or a tattered sack that reflects his own “improper” body. Moreover, it is clear that these various delusions are not in fact “human,” but simply “the familiar slime” of the mud. This is most apparent in the following passage: “to be hanging on by the finger-nails to one’s species [. . .] feel yourself falling [. . .] if you could come to think of it of what you nearly lost and then this splendid mud” (26). There is nowhere to fall, because everywhere is mud, but there is also therefore nothing to hang

on to except mud. Nonetheless, the speaker considers himself to be grasping the species, *nearly* losing it but not quite, pitting mere fingernails against annihilation. This is particularly striking because fingernails themselves become abject, become part of the waste that we thrust aside. Schilder emphasizes how difficult it is to retain a bodily ego in the face of such disintegration, when “the body schema is continually losing certain elements, such as excrement, fingernails, and hair” (Silverman 21).

Beckett’s speaker, however, is not dismayed by the occasional *loss* of a fingernail. He says: “they broke for want of chalk or suchlike but not in concert so that some my nails we’re talking of my nails some always long” (53). The words “for want of chalk” remind us how exactly these nails are “hanging on” to the species: themselves expendable, and in the midst of indistinguishable muck, they are inscribing the *language* that does not belong here—or, it could be argued, only does as incoherent babble. But his words, though infused with negativity, nonetheless display the pains the speaker takes to make them meaningful, in hopes to attain by this method the “primers of culture.” His technique is methodical and his attitude determined: “with the nail then of the right index I carve and when it breaks or falls until it grows again with another on Pim’s back intact at the outset from left to right and top to bottom *as in our civilisation* I carve my Roman capitals” (70, my emphasis). The “procession” of *words* is thus what really matters to him, and what will not be renounced.

Eventually, of course, the speaker acknowledges that Pim’s back is no longer “intact”—that it never really was intact, or even present. But the recurrence of the “Roman capitals” at the end of the text indicates that language survives the destruction of

what was considered necessary for it to be there. It may be overrun by its own indifference, ultimately providing “no answer,” but it remains nonetheless, like the *fingernails* of the “eastern sage” who “died at last saying to himself latest breath that they’d *grow on*” (53, my emphasis). He says this, though at the point of death, not with his *last* breath but with his “latest.” Language, then, is what “lives after death”—or *predates* the constitution of the subject—in this text. As I will argue in my next, and final, chapter, the extent to which Beckett’s speaker exists is the extent to which he speaks.

V. “my life we’re still talking of my life”: Being in Language

The catechism at the end of *How It Is* that repudiates most of what precedes it is a process of elimination, paring away “all this business” that is extraneous to remain only with what “holds” (145-6). That is—contrary to Levy’s argument that *How It Is* is an “experience of Nothing” (94)—there is *something* here about which there is nothing to “regret” or “emend” (146). My exploration in the two previous chapters of different theories of the constitution of the subject has also been a process of elimination. All this business of specular identification does not hold in a text where seeing is an impossibility. Likewise, all this business of corporeal sensation does not hold for a speaker who cannot feel himself occupying a point in space—or moving through that space—because he is surrounded by, and in fact indistinguishable from, the mud. But there is something, indeed some *movement*, that remains for this speaker. The “brief movements of the lower face” that constitute his (soundless) “murmur [. . .] in the mud [. . .] when the panting stops” (7) are all that there is to this narrative. But they are not only enough; they are more than enough. For this murmur constitutes, along with and inseparable from the text, the speaking subject himself.

The speaker coexists with a narrative to which his relationship is irreducibly complex; it is both that which he tells and that which tells him. Knowlson and Pilling agree: “‘Narrator’ and ‘narrated’ cannot here be separated” (77). Thus, “how it is”—the product of the speaker’s “I say it as I hear it”—is always also “how I’m told” (12). This text, or life, is understood to be a “version” that is inherently flawed, but “recorded none the less it’s preferable somehow” (7). It seems “preferable” because it is *possible*

(however marginally), and therefore it is contrasted to the dream of other worlds (or words) “where I am inconceivable” (37). Birth is firmly subordinated to language; if it is possible, it is only possible in words. He speaks of “me from the murmurs of my mother shat into the incredible tohu-bohu” (42), this example equating birth not just with language, but specifically with language as a bowel movement—thus echoing the excremental birth recalled by Molloy: “her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct. First taste of the shit” (16). Elsewhere, he describes “having been born octogenarian [. . .] floating up like the drowned and *tattle tattle four full backs of close characters*” (70, my emphasis). On other occasions, birth is a mere function of language insofar as its placement in the subjunctive undermines its status as real. He says: “*if* I was born it was not left-handed” (35) and “soon it is *as if* [. . .] I had lived” (43, both my emphases). Only his speech guarantees his existence. But even this strange formulation resembles—superficially—the scene at the birth of a “normal” infant. One cannot help but equate his description of speech as the torture of Pim with the gentle slap that elicits the reassuring wails of a baby: “the voice extorted a few words life because of cry that’s the proof” (122).

But there is a crucial difference: the cry of a baby is evidence that it is *breathing*, but *breathing* for this speaker is precisely what interrupts his *speaking*, and therefore his access to life. Cohn writes in *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* that this (mute) speaker “knows he speaks only when he feels his face move” (188). And she emphasizes in *Back to Beckett* that he only expends this energy when he is able to *hear* what it is he is to say, or what he is saying. She writes: “In order to listen to the interior voice, the panting has

to stop, and this is equivalent to a temporary death” (233). The speaker differentiates between the breath that is a mere “token” of “life” and the life of the voice: “when it abates the breath we’re talking of a breath token of life [. . .] when it abates [. . .] it’s then I hear it my life [. . .] a murmur this old life” (132-3). Significantly, our experience of reading this text—of “bringing it to life”—replicates this pattern. Stopping for breath only in the gaps between each unpunctuated fragment, we “pant” awhile and then continue. Cohn asserts: “Though most of the verses of *Comment c’est* endure for longer than a breath, the reader is forced to breathe as guided by the verses” (*Back* 229). Furthermore, this alternation between dull, habitual breathing and the murmurs that constitute the speaker’s “life” calls to mind Beckett’s statement in *Proust* that there are moments when “the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being” (8). Part of the rejection of the Pim torture narrative is the denial of this speaker’s suffering, at first withheld but then “extorted”: “never made to suffer no never suffered no answer NEVER SUFFERED no” (146). However, as I have argued already, the tone of this text is not one of *jouissance*, but predominantly one of bitter despair. Even in Cohn’s study of Beckettian comedy, she describes the “anguish that accumulates” (*Samuel* 192) in *How It Is*.

Boulter also emphasizes suffering in *How It Is*, arguing that the crucial question it presents to us is “*when* is suffering?” (110). Drawing heavily on Heidegger, he claims that this text’s central problem is “not one of the identity of the speaker but of the temporality of the speaker because temporality always determines the ‘being’ and thus the subjectivity of the suffering subject” (111). The question of temporality leads us

again to language, because—as I argued in Chapter IV—the only possible “procession” that might measure time or space in *How It Is* is that of words. The speaker dismisses the question of his identity and focuses instead on the temporality, the duration, of the narrative: “no matter I don’t say any more I quote on is it me is it me [. . .] all I say is how last how last” (16). The very repetition of the phrases “is it me” and “how last” is an attempt to endure time by marking its passage with language, to “last a moment with that” (24). Boulter connects the obsessive description in Part Three of a procession through the mud with the procession of the text toward the “end” the speaker longs for: “we can account for the narrative as process and configuration in territory, as an articulating expression of desire” (116). Of course, this end never really arrives—the end of the text returns us to its beginning: “how it is,” *comment c’est, commencer*. And Cohn reminds us that in the French, a further pun underscores that an advance toward the end (*bout*) is always also an advance toward the mud (*boue*)—and thus not an advance at all (*Samuel* 190).

This experience of passing the time without advancing through it means that the language of this text—which Murphy insists “has the strength to command being” (75)—*must* perform its function *repeatedly*, not only when the speaker immediately echoes his previous phrase, but throughout the text as a whole. That is, each time language is spoken it confers being on its speaker, but because this occurs *each* time, we are reminded that this being lasts only as long as the time it takes to speak it. Language never constitutes this subject for the first and/or last time, but always does so *again*: “his mind nothing physical the health is not in jeopardy a word from me and I am again” (26);

“I hear me again murmur me in the mud and am again” (126). There is, then, the same erasure and over-writing of palimpsest throughout the text that there is on the “bleeding” (70) body of Pim. New words are offered *in place of* old ones, obscuring and usurping them, not supplementing them. Supplemantarity could only occur in a movement leading to somewhere (and sometime) beyond itself. Murphy allows that the speaker’s statement “I SHALL DIE” (147) could be a valid anticipation of a tense change, claiming that this speaker “will only have being in time when the eternal present of narrative time ceases and a new historical time begins” (70).

Despite this exhaustive and exhausting—yet not futile—linguistic equivalent of running in place, the speaker does, as we have seen, cling to the *idea* of getting somewhere. His mathematical attempts to posit torture as real, and as part of a larger context of tortures, replace the idea of a vast circle of Pims and Boms with that of a “straight line eastward strange and death in the west as a rule” (123). Dearlove accounts for the “strangeness” of this specification by reminding us that “death” occurs in the “east” when there is an “identification of the self with the voice” (85). She explains: “At best the journey from west to east, from left to right, is analogous to the motion of words across the printed page. The voice’s geography belongs to its medium of words” (93). And, indeed, the speaker displays an awareness of the direction in which his words *should* go, if they are to be conceived of as *going*. He carves the words in Pim’s back “from left to right and top to bottom” (70). This carving, itself imagined like so much of the story, evokes the actual linguistic production of Beckett, who does, after all, manage

to fill 147 pages. Hill writes that *How It Is* “enacts [. . .] more than it recounts,” the content “elaborated in order to mirror the production of the text” (137).

Indeed, the carvings “mirror” this text quite faithfully, following each other, but “unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection” (70). In this sense, the speaker’s attempt to mimic “our civilisation” (70) by creating them seems absurd. Recalling Kristeva’s dichotomy between symbolic and semiotic once again, this “unbroken” barrage of words leaving no room for “reflection” is symptomatic of the semiotic that she distinguishes from “any kind of intellection” (*Revolution* 163). Hence, the “civilisation” of the symbolic is, like Pim’s back eventually, not at all intact here. Furthermore, symbolic language (a phenotext) is “language that serves to communicate [. . .] it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee” (*Revolution* 87). I reiterate these points now to take up more fully the problem of symbolic language as communicative, or social, in the context of this speaker’s “addressee.”

Murphy sums up this dynamic as follows:

For the voice to gain a referential significance beyond a merely formal interrelationship with other words, it must be directed towards something: the mud. [. . .] The relationship between the voice and the mud cannot be regarded simply in terms of the subject-object paradigm. [. . .] The mud appears as an extension or projection of the self rather than as an imposition upon the self as was the case with the sacks which were finally deemed expendable. (69)

In other words, there is a crucial flaw in the logic of the speaker's acceptance of the voice as *his* when, because speaking to the mud is merely speaking to himself, the lack of an addressee means there cannot be a subject of enunciation either. Uttering both sides of the concluding "dialogue," the speaker is both doubtful and adamant that his voice is his own: "murmuring sometimes yes [. . .] in the mud yes to the mud yes my voice yes mine yes not another's no mine alone yes sure yes" (146). Kristeva might attribute this contradictory and illogical formulation to the foreclosure of "any kind of intellection" in this semiotic language. Indeed, her notion of a genotext as one in which the subject is *generated* (*Revolution* 86) accords well with my own argument that language constitutes being in this text. But, as I argued in Chapter II, I do not concur with Kristeva that the "finishing touches" of this process of generation are—or could possibly be for this speaker—the mirror stage and castration (*Revolution* 47). To repeat my argument further, I do not perceive a separation of negativity from intellection in this language. Thus, I do not find evidence of a thetic break heralding the repression of negativity by the sign, and marking a threshold that has been crossed back over—by a fully-constituted subject with complete mastery of the symbolic—in order to joy in the semiotic once again.

It is important to recall here as well that Kristeva's theorization of negativity does *not* place it extraneous to language in general, but only to the language of a phenotext: straightforward social communication. This is perhaps made most clear in her essay on the work of Roland Barthes, "How Does One Speak to Literature?" in *Desire in Language*. She reviews his theory of "writing" in which "language [is] seen as

negativity” (93). She writes that such literature concentrates “what verbal communication and social exchange put aside” (96). This “concentration” remains largely undefinable, as it is a “nonexistent object for the sciences of communication or social exchange,” located vaguely “elsewhere” (96). Thus, when a “science of communication” such as literary criticism (more generally, intellection) confronts such negativity, it must “block” heterogeneity with “*One Affirmation*” (108). This reduction of multiplicity is performed by a critic who “hoards polyvalences, and *signs* them” (109). I cannot pretend that I do not recognize my own critical practice in this conception, which—as Kristeva points out (and Beckett, it seems doubtless, would agree)—is absurdly “comical” (109). But I will demonstrate that in the “polyvalences” of *this* text, there *inheres* that intellection that Kristeva argues is only ever *imposed* upon it from without.

I make this argument in order to disclose the inadequacy of the “straight line eastward” in Kristeva’s own theorizing. Chip Kidd writes in his novel *The Cheese Monkeys*: “We are the Western world. We read, see, think. Left. To. Right. We can’t help it” (114). Kristeva, though placing the accent on the subject’s capacity to *reverse*, and thus go *back*, from right to left, still adheres to this linear thinking. The line might not always be perfectly straight, but it extends between two distinct poles on a continuum of sequential progression. Significantly, her allusions to Céline’s first novel establish a linear journey as a model for her conceptualizations: “the *confrontation with the feminine* [. . .] Abjection, or the journey to the end of the night” (*Powers* 58). This linearity, the binary opposition it upholds, and the equation of the feminine with night (darkness,

formlessness, mystery), serves ultimately to preserve essentialist ideas about gender. Kristeva seems almost to offer anecdotal information such as Céline's adoption of his grandmother's first name as his pseudonym (*Desire* 136) as an apology for writing so exclusively about male authors. But the result of this has been, as I mentioned in Chapter I, an essentialist, overly literal treatment of the semiotic that—when again addressing male writers, like Beckett—will only confront an instance of “hysterical” *female* speech, such as *Not I*.

In contrast to this thinking about, and thinking *as*, moving from left to right (or vice versa) is Beckett's “running in place”—or perhaps more accurately, treading water (or rather, treading mud). The idea of progression and regression is rejected as early as *More Pricks Than Kicks* (though Beckett later explores the journey motif in his early novels), in favour of simply “gression.” The “sinfully indolent” (35) Belacqua describes his “gress” as “a Beethoven pause [. . .] whatever he mean[s] by that [. . .] ‘moving pauses’ [. . .] pure blank movement” (36). The reference to Beethoven in terms of a “blank movement” perhaps anticipates Beckett's later *Texts for Nothing*, the title adapted from the phrase “measure for nothing”: “that ghost measure which sets the orchestra's tempo” (Gontarski xiii-xiv). What is important to note about a “*moving* pause” is that it is not *stasis*, even though it may not lead anywhere. Belacqua, in fact, would prefer to keep perfectly still, but cannot: “all the wearisome tactics of gress and dud Beethoven would be done away with if only he could spend his life in such a place. But [. . .] in any case he ha[s] not the means to consecrate his life to stasis” (40). This desire is echoed in *How It Is*: “stay for ever in the same place never had any other ambition” (39).

In his biography of Beckett, Knowlson writes that in the early 1930s (when *More Pricks Than Kicks* was published), Beckett “worked consistently hard [. . .] to enlarge his vocabulary even further, consulting etymologies as well as dictionaries” (161). This voracious interest in language, in its origins and possibilities, seems to mine “our civilisation” for suggestive and novel sounds like “gress.” But Knowlson and Pilling make a distinction in *How It Is* between such erudition and more “fundamental sounds” that is much like Kristeva’s opposition between symbolic and semiotic. Moreover, they employ the imagery of the journey—the road—offering only the possibilities of a straight one or a crooked one, not one that leads nowhere at all. This opposition, as well as Kristeva’s, will not hold in the context of my forthcoming argument. They write:

At the end of parts two and three the capitalized elements are swamped by a flood of yesses and noes that break upon the ‘Roman capitals’ (69) like waves. Beckett is commenting here, as elsewhere, on the relationship between head and heart, for the ‘capitals’ are (as the etymology of the word suggests) *products of intellection*, [. . .] whereas ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are much more ‘fundamental sounds’. [. . .] The ‘Roman capitals’ are, despite their novelty, only another version of what Beckett calls, in *Text 11* as here, ‘the old road’ (68), the old Roman road in fact, without the chevrons (53) and zigzags (52) that the modern road (and modern fiction) has. [. . .] by the time of *How It Is* the Roman road is *as anachronistic as any of the other appurtenances of culture*. (72-3, my emphasis)

However, the “sounds” in *How It Is* that are arguably its most “fundamental” *are* in fact “appurtenances of culture,” but so infused with negativity that they have thus far resisted interpretation as “products of intellection.”

The word “quaqua” occurs repeatedly in *How It Is*, in phrases such as: “every word always as I hear it in me that was without quaqua on all sides and murmur to the mud when the panting stops” (47). Hence, “quaqua” seems to be an integral (fundamental) aspect of the voice with which *How It Is*, and this chapter, are closely concerned. But the vast majority of scholarship on this text ignores it completely. And those who do attempt to “explain” quaqua still find it quite baffling. Cohn writes in *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* that the speaker’s language is “frequently and cryptically summarized as ‘quaqua’” (186, my emphasis). She ventures that it is “presumably pronounced ‘caca’” (190), thereby positing it as a “nonsense” word that puns on a synonym for excrement. This interpretation certainly accords with my earlier examples (in Chapter II) of the imbrication of negativity and signification in this text, such as “a fart fraught with meaning” (26) (and it seems likely that Beckett would have perceived, intended, and delighted in this pun). But Cohn also includes in a sample of the sound-play in *Comment c’est* the phrase “à quoi croire” (189), thus directing us—perhaps unintentionally—to the simultaneous possibility of pronouncing quaqua the way an English speaker most likely would: “kwakwa.” The word is thus irreducibly polyvalent.

Trieloff finds her most compelling evidence for characterizing *How It Is* as “inane babble” in the word quaqua. She writes: “the ‘quaqua’ echo, which recalls Lucky’s

seemingly nonsensical speech in *Waiting for Godot*, prompts us to consider the voice [. . .] as the emitter of an inane, self-conscious, narcissistic babble of words. Meaning, as the voice also informs us—‘but quaqua meaning’—disintegrates continually” (92-3). But there is not a disintegration of meaning in either case, just a deflection. Lucky’s speech is not entirely devoid of sense, and in fact displays a “musicalized” (to use a Kristevan term) degree of erudition: “quaquaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell” (28). The pseudo-philosophical tone of Lucky’s “thinking” invites interpretation of “quaquaquaquaqu” as simply a multiplication of *qua* (meaning “as”) that is in fact voiced by Pozzo moments before: “What is there so extraordinary about it [the sky]? Qua sky” (25). Moreover, Cohn’s identification of the quaquacaca pun applies aptly here as well, again indicating the negativity (or more explicitly, the shit) that is always *contained within* the space of intellection (here, the academy): “labors left unfinished crowned by the Acacacacademy of Anthropopopometry” (28). The “meaning” of this “babble” seems so unmistakable that explicating it feels hardly necessary, and not at all clever.

My own understanding of quaqua (very different from, but intended to coexist with rather than eclipse, its status as “caca”) derives from Latin (like “gress”). The word “quaquaversal” means “dipping from a center toward all points of the compass [. . .] used esp. of geological formations” (“Quaquaversal”). It is formed from the Latin *versus*, past participle of *vertere* to turn, and *quaqu*, meaning wherever, in whatever direction, in every direction (the ablative feminine form of *quisquis* whoever, every—itself formed by

doubling *quis* who). Beckett's early and "excellent grounding in Latin" (Knowlson 57) would seem to ensure that "quaqua" does not function *only* as "babble" in this text, but that it signifies on *both* an extra-symbolic and a purely denotative level. (Furthermore, Beckett's knowledge of Italian (Knowlson 67)—in which *qua* means "there"—might indicate that his pervasive use of quaqua, so troubling to his readers, can also signify as an extension of a cruel irony that Cohn identifies in the French text. The phrase in *How It Is*, "plant her there and run cut your throat" (30), is in *Comment c'est*: "*plaque-la là et cours t'ouvrir les veines.*" Cohn writes: "The traditional French sounds of comfort, 'là, là,' contrast cruelly with the suicidal final phrase" (*Samuel* 198-9). The sound of "there there" in Italian is no more a source of "comfort" in this text than its French equivalent.)

With the Latin definition of quaqua in mind, we can perceive its use (always in fragments that attempt to situate the voice) as a description of the outside voice's orientation. Beckett writes: "voice once without quaqua on all sides then in me when the panting stops" (7). Completing his own translation of the original text into English, replacing the Latin as well as the French, produces: "voice once without wherever in whatever direction in every direction on all sides then in me when the panting stops." This reading (or rewriting) is consistent with the speaker's later statement: "I see nothing more hear his voice then this other come from afar on the thirty-two winds from the zenith and depths then in me when the panting stops" (39). Unable to determine its origin or location because he is in the mud, the speaker experiences the voice as surrounding him on all sides—like the mud—and then *entering* him, also, of course, like the mud. He will eventually describe his "nourishment," elsewhere attributed to the mud

speak the first (anticipating the second) and to speak the second (recalling the first). It is always, at the same time, how it was, how it is, and how it will be. Thus, the speaker's attempt to move "on and end" by dismissing ontology cannot succeed because chronology is lost along with it: "no matter when a little less of to be present past future and conditional of to be and not to be come come enough of that on and end" (38).

It is this frustrated desire to culminate a process that has not led anywhere which leads the speaker to take comfort in the "zigzags" and "chevrons" that Knowlson and Pilling distinguish from "the old road." But a zigzag can still reach a destination; indeed, switching back is often the only route available to cover steep and variable terrain. But the mud is no such terrain, and changing course in it does not constitute a detour, because the hypothetical destination is simply quaqu (in every direction). However, the speaker clings to the delusion of *progressing* (invoking mathematics as usual) by zigzag and chevron—"the old road" is still here, because it must function as the *median* to which these movements are orientated. Beckett writes:

and I go on zigzag give me my due conformably to my complexion
present formulation [. . .]

[. . .]

thus *north and south of the abandoned arrow* effect of hope series of
sawteeth or chevrons sides two yards base three [. . .] in the *old line of*

march which I thus revisit an instant between two vertices one yard and a half a little less dear figures *golden age* (46-7, my emphasis)

The “arrow” is not really “abandoned” if it is kept in sight to determine space “north and south” of it, thus this imagined movement is still the delusion of the “old line of march” (the Roman road) in the “golden age.” Indeed, if “all roads lead to Rome,” then one should theoretically be able to approach it quaqu. But there are no roads in the mud, straight or otherwise. The “vast tracts of time” could at best indicate only the movement of sinking deeper into the mud as a result of “spinning one’s wheels” indefinitely—which, as I have said, is a possibility that inheres in the materiality of the word quaqu.

The speaker’s final attempt to constitute his being “in time”—in the historical time that Murphy argues would initiate life at the same moment the speaker would “DIE”—takes the form of abandoning, along with so much else, the outside quaqu voice in order to claim the (inside) voice as fully his own. He says: “all this business of voices yes quaqu yes [. . .] all balls yes” (145). Knowlson and Pilling also describe the end of the text as “a kind of birth, with its own distinctive labour pains,” because “the speaker finds his own voice at last” (77). Murphy valorizes the “freedom” (65) of this discovery, of “the struggle of the narrator, trapped in an absurdly logical fictional world, to authenticate his historical being by breaking away from the formal structures imposed by the authorial voice” (62). However, I do not perceive the same “immense relief” (Knowlson and Pilling 77) in this ending, that—as we have seen—merely returns us to the beginning. The desire for death/birth, for “historical being,” is *not* fulfilled for this

speaker, precisely because the voice “in me” (that has *always* been the same as the voice “without”) *remains* quaqu—though ostensibly rejecting this formulation—insofar as it *enacts* the same challenge to linearity in the word (uncannily similar to quaqu) that constitutes it: murmur.

Like quaqu, murmur derives from Latin and *signifies* something “indistinct but often continuous” (“Murmur”). Also like quaqu, the word murmur *performs* what it means. It is another word with two syllables that can—because they are identical—collapse into one or explode into many. Thus, it cannot confer “historical being” on the narrator. Moreover, its imbrication of intellection and negativity resists (like quaqu) the sequential chronology of Kristeva’s thetic break. Even caca, seemingly such a “vulgar,” *infantile* word, derives as well from Latin: “*cacare* to void as excrement” (“Cacafuego”). Thus, we have further evidence that contradicts Knowlson and Pilling’s statement that the “appurtenances of culture” are here “anachronistic” (positing a chronology much like Kristeva’s).

But the logic behind their statement is certainly intelligible. They write that “[c]ulture is very much a matter of ‘how it was’ for this figure” (74) both because his conduct belies his often erudite description of it as, for example, “stoic love” (73), and because he speaks of his learning in the past tense (74). The speaker offers a catalogue of the subjects he has *lost*: “the humanities I had” (30), “the geography I had” (42), “the anatomy I had” (54). Most pertinent to my present argument, he insists: “I’ve lost my latin one must be vigilant” (42). But this speaker displays an unbounded capacity for (self-)deception. His Latin very strikingly remains, in words like quaqu (which,

admittedly, might not be recognized as Latin), the conspicuous “dextrogyre” and “sinistro” (29) of the picnic scene, and even, of course, in the word “vigilant” occurring in the very phrase that proclaims its loss. What this contradiction points to is that the concept of loss—the economy of lack on which conventional psychoanalytic thinking (including Kristeva’s) is based—is not among this speaker’s “categories of being” (14). And this concept is required by Kristeva’s theory of language acquisition. She posits a subject who does not yet have it (access to the symbolic), and then acquires it (meanwhile repressing the semiotic), and then voluntarily relinquishes it (this cognitive mastery), in order to experience the *jouissance* of a *return* to a prior state. Such a timeline is not evidenced by *How It Is*.

Rather, there is a speaker who—not having passed Kristeva’s test for a speaking subject—declares nonetheless: “my life we’re still talking of my life” (129). Knowlson and Pilling—anticipating, it seems, the birth/death they perceive at the end—claim that “we are in fact talking of his death and experiencing a verbal *rigor mortis*” (77). However, I argue that we *are* talking of his “life” insofar as his life “still”—in the sense of *always*—goes on as long as “we’re talking.” That it does this *repeatedly* is a function of the corrupted temporality emphasized at the beginning of the text in “tell me again finish telling me” (7). But, as Knowlson and Pilling themselves say, the speaker voices this invocation in order to “call himself into existence” (62). This self-constitution, performed “again” but never “finish[ed]”, dissolves (or rather *muddies*) the opposition between semiotic and symbolic more than Kristeva herself dares to do, and attests to the unique process in this text by which the speaking subject speaks.

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