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The Beckettian Mimesis
of Absence

By ERIC P. LEVY

BECKETTIAN MIMESIS insists on the primacy of perspective: “seen from a certain angle” (The Lost Ones 13, 16; Malone Dies 245). But it is a perspective that paradoxically claims exclusive validity (“from this point of view but there is no other” [“Imagination Dead Imagine” 65]), while acknowledging its own limitation and fallibility: “for the visibility, unless it be the state of my eyesight, only permits me to see what is close beside me” (The Unnamable 297). Moreover, it is a perspective that, through recognizing its futility (“To be on the watch and never sight ...” (The Unnamable 368), repudiates its own function: “Perhaps it would be better to be blind ...” (The Unnamable 372-73); “I don’t believe in the eye either, there’s nothing to see, nothing to see with ...” (The Unnamable 375). In this context, the ultimate object seen from the Beckettian perspective is the reduction of sight to redundant reflex with neither stimulus nor registration: “Then the eyes suddenly start afresh as famished as the unthinkable first day until for no clear reason they as suddenly close again or the head falls” (The Lost Ones 32). Similar linkages of perspective with unprovoked and unregistering reflex occur in Not I (“on and off ... shut out the light ... reflex they call it” (79, original ellipsis) and Company: “Only the eyelids stirring on and off since technically they must. To let in and shut out the dark” (37). A more emotive description occurs in The Unnamable:

As the italicized portions of passage just cited suggest, the mimetic function of this reduction of perspective to unnoticing mechanism or “force of habit” is to represent a mode of “animation” (Texts for Nothing 130; The Unnamable 353, 371) unable to achieve the coherence and continuous sequence


2. Samuel Beckett, Not I, in First Love and Other Shorts; Company (London: Calder & Boyars, 1979, 1980). All references to these editions are included parenthetically in my text.
proper to life: “will I never stop wanting a life for myself?” The fundamental task of Beckettian mimesis is to imitate not life as conventionally construed in “the old words, the old credentials” (Watt 85), but a paradoxical mode of experience founded on awareness of unawareness: “… I didn’t know where I was, nor in what semblance, nor since when, nor till when …” (Texts for Nothing 130). The Beckettian term from this mode of experience is “absence” (Texts for Nothing 131; Watt 207; Malone Dies 222; Ill Seen Ill Said 22, 51)—a condition that deprives experience of engagement with the circumstances of its own “presence” (Watt 207): “how is it nothing is ever here and now?” (Texts for Nothing 102). A short list of examples will illustrate: (a) “Absent, always. It all happened without me” (Endgame 74); (b) “a space with neither here nor there where all the footsteps ever fell can never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further way” (“For To End Yet Again” 15); (c) “my mind absent, elsewhere” (Texts for Nothing 108).

As the last quotation suggests, to be “absent” is to be “elsewhere,” and the elsewhere in question concerns enclosure in the “closed system” (Murphy 109) of the mind (termed, in Eh Joe, “that penny farthing hell you call your mind” [17]) or, in Ill Seen Ill Said, “the madhouse of the skull” [20]). That mental system is “subject to no principle of change but its own” (Murphy 109), and its primary object of attention is the autonomous movement of its own content which, in each Beckettian text, is described in terms of a presiding “metaphor” (The Unnamable 325). But in Beckettian mimesis, the state of absence, whereby characters are “sunk in themselves” (“The Calmative” 38), is represented on diverse levels and from conflicting angles, with the result that the very notion of absence is profoundly problematized. Hence, to assure clarity in our exposition, let us follow the Unnamable’s example and “proceed with method” (The Unnamable 349). This will entail advancing our analysis through a series of stages.

BEFORE EMBARKING ON our investigation, it is appropriate to review the critical terrain. The mimesis of absence in postmodern literature is a topic which, according to Yuan Yuan, has provoked “only isolated sporadic studies.” Most of these forays have invoked conceptual schemes constructed by struc-
turalist and poststructuralist theory. Relevant examples include (a) Todorov’s foregrounding the problematics of causality (“[t]he absence of the cause”) in postmodern narrative, (b) Derrida’s emphasis on erasure (la rature) and the trace (le tracé), and Lacan’s construction of the Real as that which abides extraneous to the signifiers whose function is to express it. But aesthetic theory has also been invoked, from two directions. One involves reference to the doctrine of minimalism which formulates the artistic project as the asymptotic approach to absence resulting from what Andrew Renton terms the “deliberate impulse toward exclusion.” The other allusion to aesthetic theory derives directly, according to Eyal Amiran, from Beckett’s essay “Peintres de l’empêchement,” where the task of art is to “acknowledge, as van Velde’s painting does, the absence of rapport and the absence of the object.” Modern acting theory has made its own contribution to the notion of absence through its emphasis on what William Worthen calls the “histrionic antithesis between absence and presence, role and self.” More conventional or literal interpretations of absence, specifically in Beckett’s art, include (a) Mary Catanzaro’s notion of absence in Krapp’s Last Tape as “the absence of the other” or the “unavailability of a partner”; (b) Barbara Becker and Charles Lyons’s interpretation of Waiting for Godot in terms of the “absence of context” for the given “dramatic environment,” characteristic of postmodern drama; and Maria Brewer’s reading of Godot as occupying “the absent space outside of the performance space.”

Having reviewed relevant precedents, we can begin to forge our own path. In Beckett’s earlier novels, absence is sometimes epitomized by characters so hermetically insulated from awareness of external stimuli that they are hardly more than personifications of that condition. For example, in Murphy, Mr. Endon is portrayed exclusively in terms of his “immunity from seeing anything but himself” (Murphy 250). In Watt, the same characteristic applies to Mr Knott, who inhabits a state of complete oblivion. But with the figure of Mr Knott an ironic factor is introduced. For the perpetuation of his state of absence presupposes presence: in this case, the presence of a “spectator” (The Unnamable 375) or witness:

of himself he knew nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease. (Watt 202-63)

Here the presence of the witness sustains the absence of what is seen:

That with his need he might witness its absence. That imperfect he might witness it ill. That Mr Knott might never cease, but ever almost cease. Such appeared to be the arrangement. (Watt 203)

Yet, the perspective of the witness is extremely ambiguous in Beckettian mimesis. On the one hand, as the example cited from Watt indicates, the role of the witness is supportive or corroborative. Related examples occur in Ohio Impromptu (“... I have been sent by—and here he named the dear name—to comfort you” [16]) and Waiting for Godot: “You did see us, didn’t you?” (34); “Do you think God sees me?” (49). But on the other hand, the role of the witness can be threatening and invasive, as with the description, in Film, of a photograph of a mother and infant: “Her severe eyes devouring him” (43). The most explicit account of the danger posed by the witness occurs in the Unnamable’s reference to Basil whose witnessing modifies or adulterates that which he sees:

Without opening his mouth, fastening on me his eyes like cinders with all their seeing, he changed me a little more each time into what he wanted me to be. Is he still glaring at me, from the shadows? (The Unnamable 298, my emphasis)

Hence, in its positive capacity, the role of witness facilitates “the blessedness of absence” (Malone Dies 222), such as Mr Knott seems to enjoy. Conversely, in its negative function, the role of witness induces “the agony of perceivedness” (Film 34).

At bottom, the need for “the blessedness of absence” derives from “the agony of perceivedness.” That is, vulnerability to negative witnesses, who impose their moral judgments on those they see, engenders or renews the recoil into absence which, in turn, entrains the presence of a positive witness whose function we can clarify by analyzing absence into its constituent poles: autonomous interiority (also termed “ataraxy” [Watt 208] or detachment) and the unremitting self-preoccupation which sustains that interiority as a “refuge” (“The Calmative” 32). In the passage quoted earlier, Mr Knott and Watt respectively represent each of those poles: Mr Knott is associated with the state of autonomous interiority, while Watt is connected with the act of

15. Regarding the related notion of Mr Knott’s need “not to need” (Watt 202), see Daniel Katz, Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999): “The need to need nothing is precisely the need that can never be met, as every abolition of need becomes no more than a reinforcement of its law. In order to finally achieve the state of needing nothing, one would also have to reach the state where one no longer needed to need nothing, which would then open the door to all the needs one wished to exclude” (63).


17. Samuel Beckett, Film, Eh Joe and Other Writings. All references to this edition are included parenthetically in my text.
unremitting attention on that state. In later phases of Beckettian mimesis, instead of respective association with distinct characters, the two poles of absence are collapsed inside the same state of awareness which, in turn, paradoxically concerns its own lack of unity: “this being which is called me and is not one” (Texts for Nothing 131). Here we encounter “the question of voices” in The Unnamable (347), wherein a single interiority is represented by an originary voice and the uncomprehending auditor-witness who repeats its utterance. Related versions occur in How It Is (“I say it as I hear it” [7], “From an Abandoned Work” (“the voice that was once in your mouth” [49]) and Not I:

and now this stream ... not catching the half of it ... not the quarter ... no idea ... what she was saying ... imagine! ... no idea what she was saying! ... till she began trying to ... delude herself ... it was not hers at all ... not her voice at all .... (Not I 81. original ellipsis)\(^{18}\)

In the last two examples, without any ambiguity, the auditor-witness is simply the original subject at one remove from his or her own thought (or verbalization thereof). That is, one subjective awareness is rendered in polar terms: autonomous interiority (represented by the originary voice) and its sustaining witness (represented by the auditor). The Unnamable’s formula for this predicament is “in yourself, outside yourself (385). This complex configuration—perhaps Beckett’s most spectacular innovation in narrative form—is the same as that informing the conjunction of Mr. Knott and Watt—except that now the “real separateness” (to interpolate F. H. Bradley’s term) of characters has been replaced by the internal relations between reciprocal aspects of the same ambient experience.\(^{19}\)

This fission of awareness into insular experience and its estranged witness translates the Beckettian mimesis of absence to a new level. As noted earlier, the goal for absence is the need to avoid “the agony of perceivedness.” But here the perceivedness to be escaped ironically concerns the very act of self-preoccupation by which absence itself is defined: “immunity from seeing anything but himself” (Murphy 250). That is, the motive for imagining the estrangement of awareness from its own content (“... it’s I who do this thing and I who suffer it ... ” [The Unnamable 402]) is to turn self-consciousness into self-unconsciousness, and thereby provisionally fulfill the “hopeless” project of “flight from self” (The Unnamable 315, 367). The Unnamable’s reference to his “creatures” (371) will clarify: “They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to mine, the title I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it” (303-04). Here the purpose of devising fictional “anikins” (The Unnamable 306) is to enable their creator or “deviser”
(Colby Quarterly 34) to relate to his suffering as its witness, rather than as its victim, and thus undergo his own pain vicariously. The same project to relate to suffering as its witness is taken one step further through “the matter of voices” (The Unnamable 325). By identifying as the auditor-witness of a voice expressing self-consciousness which they repudiate, the Unnamable and his analogues cited earlier extend “flight from self” to include repudiation of “the existence of self” (“First Love” 33).20 In alternate formulation, they transmute Mr. Endon’s “immunity from seeing anything but himself” into immunity from ever seeing self: “it’s not I” (The Unnamable 407); “It’s not me, it can’t be me” (Texts for Nothing 113).

The paradoxical function of the witness in Beckettian mimesis can be probed further. Conventionally, the function of a witness is to confirm that which is seen. Consider, for example, the first scene of Hamlet, where Horatio is invited to the battlemented “platform” (1.2.213) of Elsinore Castle in order to verify the presence of the Ghost: “That if again this apparition come, / He may approve our eyes and speak with it” (1.1.31-32).21 In contrast, the function of the Beckettian witness is to confirm, not presence, but absence. But this task of confirming absence is undertaken in various ways, on the principle of “what vicissitudes within what changelessness” (Texts for Nothing 118). As we have seen, one way concerns the simple observation of another’s interior oblivion, as when Watt watches Mr. Knott. Another way concerns the audition of a voice which is repudiated by the auditor to whom it belongs: “this voice which cannot be mine” (Texts for Nothing 94). We can now address a third way in which the witness sustains absence: one that concerns the eye of imagination construed as annihilating observer. Here that which sees progressively diminishes what is seen, until nothing remains.

The annihilating witness operates in a manner contrary to that of the positive witness encountered in Watt. Whereas there the function of the positive witness is to enable what is seen to sustain the state of interior absence, the function of the annihilating witness is to eliminate what is seen, so that the witness seeing might thereby enjoy the state of absence. The supreme example of the annihilating witness concerns Ill Seen Ill Said—a work whose very title foregrounds the role of witness. Here the ostensible object of narration involves an old woman, “already dead” (41), pursuing an existence of unremitting “monotony” (42). But the true subject is not the woman, but her witness, personified as “an eye having no need of light to see” (7-8). This “relentless eye” (29), which “[a]lone can cause to change” (53) that which it sees, maintains its “vigil” (19), until the object of its “intent gaze” (16) is “slowly dispelled ... like the last wisps of day,” leaving only “that void” (59). Through this process of “demolition” (9), which reduces place to the site

20. Samuel Beckett, “First Love,” in First Love and Other Shorts. All references to this edition are included parenthetically in my text.
“where no more to be seen” (58), the annihilating witness eventually perceives “[a]bsence supreme good” (58), and thereby achieves “happiness” (59).

Hence, the annihilating witness is occupied not with “the agony of perceivedness” (the state of being seen—Berkeley's *percepi*, cited in *Murphy* 246), but with the agony of perception (Berkeley's *percipere*). Yet the perception in question concerns the contents of the “inner” world, not the “outer” one (*Company* 62). For the project of the annihilating witness is to rid inwardness of disturbing content:

Nothing for it but to close the eye for good and see her. Her and the rest. Close it for good and all and see her to death. (*Ill Seen Ill Said* 30, my emphasis)

The same project is expressed in *Eh Joe*: “Throttling the dead in his head” (17). It is as if Watt and Mr Knott were reconfigured as aspects of the same awareness, such that the state of absence (formerly associated with Mr Knott) now depends on the annihilating function of his witness (formerly associated with Watt) who, through the “mental activity” (*Company* 62) of *seeing to death*, renders awareness vacant.

**ON THE LEVEL** now under consideration, the great ambiguity in Beckettian mimesis concerns the axiological status of absence: that is, its nature and ranking as a value. On the one hand, as we have seen, absence is defined as the “supreme good” (*Ill Seen Ill Said* 58). But on the other hand, its achievement presupposes annihilation, negation, or “privation” (*The Lost Ones* 60)—the very operations associated in Thomistic metaphysics with evil: “Evil ... is the privation of good, which chiefly and of itself consists in perfection and act” (*Summa Theologica* I, 48, 5, resp.).22 Gilson reiterates: “Evil is a pure negation within a substance.”23 Indeed, as we have seen, the function of the annihilating witness is described in brutally privative terms: “Throttling the dead” and “see her to death.” The Beckettian doctrine of “Absence supreme good” (*Ill Seen Ill Said* 58) actually inverts the Thomistic paradigm, where good is defined in terms of plentitude (the perfection in which nothing necessary for self-realization is missing), and evil is defined in terms of privation or impairment of that plentitude. Whereas in the Thomistic paradigm “evil implies the absence of good” (*Summa Theologica* I, 48, 3, resp.), in the Beckettian paradigm absence is itself the supreme good.

This dispensation has profound implications for “ethics” (*The Lost Ones* 58). For, as Gilson explains, “Morality consists in ordering all human acts in view of the true good, which is the true end ....”24 Hence, if the true good is absence, then human acts ordered in view of that end will entail modes of privation, negation, or depletion—what Beckett terms “lessness”: “minimally

less. No more. Well on the way to inexistence” (Ill Seen Ill Said 54). Therefore, at bottom, the moral “imperatives” (Molloy 87) in Beckettian mimesis entail the compulsion to empty:

when one fills, one seldom fills quite full, for that would not be convenient, whereas when one empties one empties completely, holding the vessel upside down, and rinsing it out with boiling water if necessary, with a kind of fury. (Watt 95)

Thus, the Beckettian mimesis of absence inverts the notion of the Absolute. As Bradley notes, “Anything is absolute when all its nature is contained within itself.”25 In the Thomistic paradigm, God is the supreme Absolute; for His Being is not only self-sufficient and self-caused, but is the “superabundant” (Maritain’s term) cause of all other being.26 In contrast, the Beckettian absolute entails not a Being whose plenitude and perfection, manifested as omniscience and omnipotence, overflow in the act of Creation, but “the famished one,” “the all-impotent, all nescient,” who “has nothing, is nothing” (The Unnamable 346), “who could not be and gave up trying” (The Unnamable 347). Whereas the absolute, as we have just seen, is conventionally defined as that which contains all its nature within itself, the Beckettian absolute is that whose nature is to contain nothing. This is absence construed as supreme good.

IN BECKETTIAN MIMESIS, the aptitude to contain nothing is expressed in contrary spatial metaphors. One involves location in emptiness: “You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me” (Endgame 36). The other involves location in a confining “cocoon” (Malone Dies 282). For the idea of containing nothing can be expressed by emphasizing vastness of vacancy or constriction of capacity. The latter alternative is exemplified by Winnie in Happy Days. At the opening of the first act, she is “Imbedded up to above her waist in exact centre of mound”; then, at the beginning of the second act, she is “imbedded up to neck” (Happy Days 7, 49).27 Winnie is acutely aware of constriction, as she gazes into the empty “wilderness”: “The earth is very tight today, can it be that I have put on flesh, I trust not” (Happy Days 21, 28). Ironically, as we can establish by reference to two passages from Texts for Nothing, that which contains Winnie is her own volubility—the “empty words” with which she attempts to absent herself from the reality of her predicament.

The linkage of words, engulfment, and absence is made explicit in Texts for Nothing (published, in French, three years before Happy Days):

Me, here, if they could open, those little words, open and swallow me up, perhaps that is what happened. If so let them open again and let me out, in the tumult of light that sealed my eyes, and of men, to try and be one again. (Texts for Nothing 112-13, my emphasis)

25. Bradley 475.
The passage offers a lucid gloss on *Happy Days*—and, by extension, as we shall see, on the Beckettian notion of absence. For the “tumult of light” which absence seeks to escape by means of engulfment recurs in the play: “blaze of hellish light” (11); “With the sun blazing so much fiercer down, and hourly fiercer, is it not natural things should go on fire never known to do so, in this way I mean, spontaneously like” (38). The blazing “wilderness” from which Winnie seeks distraction by means of monologue is the world, the public or shared environment, which in essence is only glaring emptiness—what Clov in *Endgame* refers to as “Zero” (29).

We reach now another ambiguity in the Beckettian mimesis of absence. On the one hand, absence is construed as withdrawal, avoidance, or denial. In this mode, absence is epitomized by the phrase, “not being there” (*Texts for Nothing* 125), because “there” is viewed as uninhabitable. In this context, absence entails a recoil from presence and can be maintained only by continuous distraction or preoccupation. A related passage from *Texts for Nothing* similarly links this kind of absence with volubility, in terms of an image concerning burial by words that anticipates Winnie’s predicament in *Happy Days*:

> That’s right, wordshit, bury me, avalanche, and let there be no more talk of any creature, nor of a world to leave, nor of a world to reach, in order to have done with worlds, with creatures, with words, with misery, misery. (*Texts for Nothing* 118)

But on the other hand, as the passage just quoted shows, absence is associated not only with recoil by means of worded distraction but also with the project “to have done with worlds, with creatures, with words, with misery, misery.” That is, the ultimate project of absence is not merely withdrawal from presence but the “extinction” of presence (*Texts for Nothing* 139), so that absence alone remains. The first project entails absence from presence; the second seeks the presence of absence.

Perhaps the most relentless mimesis of the presence of absence is developed in *The Lost Ones*, where one after another of those populating an enormous cylinder enter the ranks of “the vanquished,” who remain “dead still where they stand or sit in abandonment beyond recall” (60). In its “last state,” containing a multitude consecutively lapsed in oblivion, the cylinder becomes the container of absence:

> So much roughly speaking for the last state of the cylinder and of this little people of searchers one first of whom if a man in some unthinkable past for the first time bowed his head if this notion is maintained. (*The Lost Ones* 62-63)

The cylinder containing absence obviously recalls the mound containing Winnie. For eventually Winnie will be trapped inside the mound-cylinder, buried by her own “wordshit.” The implications of this predicament can be clarified by careful analysis. To begin with, in virtue of the relation between volubility and progressive inhumation, Winnie exists in two modes: one concerns involvement in words spoken in the “wilderness”; the other concerns eventual enclosure in silence. The same duality applies to *The Unnamable*.
The Beckettian self is an unstable compound of expression and silence, presence and absence, content and emptiness. It is animated by ambivalence. On the one hand, as represented by the annihilating witness, it seeks to rid awareness of content: “vanished, endlessly, omit” (“Imagination Dead Imagine” 63). But on the other hand, it seeks, with equal fervour, as Winnie will now illustrate, not to see its own emptiness. Earlier, we associated the wilderness surrounding Winnie with the outer or public world, reduced to its essential vacuity. But it is equally valid to associate the wilderness with her own interiority. For on one occasion Winnie actually refers to herself as the wilderness:

I say I used to think that I would learn to talk alone. (Pause.) By that I mean to myself, the wilderness. (Smile.) But no, (Smile broader.) No no. (Smile off.) Ergo you are there. (Pause.) Oh no doubt you are dead, like the others, no doubt you have died, or gone away and left me, like the others, it doesn’t matter, you are there. (Happy Days 50, my italics in the dialogue, original italics in stage directions)

Through speech, Winnie seeks to expunge awareness of her own interior vacancy. In order not to see that wilderness, she distracts her attention from it by producing words. Indeed, the unacknowledged purpose of her words is to enclose herself inside the mound they build, so that the wilderness of her own emptiness will no longer threaten her.

Willie, her companion-witness, corresponds to Winnie’s refusal to confront her own emptiness; for she created him out of nothing: “Oh no doubt you are dead, like the others, no doubt you have died, or gone away and left me, like the others, it doesn’t matter, you are there” (Happy Days 50). The narrator of How It Is, stranded without location in “perfect nothingness,” also invokes a witness: “all alone and the witness bending over me” (80). Valuable commentary on the invention of a witness for company occurs in Company:

Huddled thus you find yourself imagining you are not alone while knowing full well that nothing has occurred to make this possible. The process continues none the less lapped as it were in its meaninglessness. (Company 86)

Thus, the Beckettian mimesis of absence depicts recourse to contrary witnesses: (a) the annihilating witness who, by ridding awareness of its content, enables “the blessedness of absence” (Malone Dies 222), and (b) the preserving witness who, though in reality absent, enables the illusion of presence: “always muttering, to lull me and keep me company …” (Texts for Nothing 78).
The paradox of absence and presence, isolation and company, remains an irrational core in Beckettian mimesis, like the “Matrix of surds” (Murphy 112), “the square root of minus one” (Texts for Nothing 128) or “the true division ... of twenty-two by seven” (Molloy 64). Ordinarily, the mind (and a fortiori the implied reader’s mind) abhors irrationality and seeks to resolve it through “reasonings, based on analysis” (Molloy 64). To forestall this temptation, Beckettian mimesis invokes yet another kind of witness—a hypothetical viewer whose orthodox rationality would misinterpret or misconstrue what is seen: “And the thinking being coldly intent on all these data and evidences could scarcely escape at the close of his analysis the mistaken conclusion ...” (The Lost Ones 39); “an intelligence would be tempted to see” (The Lost Ones 33); “Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough” (Endgame 33); “the ideal observer’s lamps” (How It Is 95). These allusions to the hypothetical witness, whose conclusions are invalidated by their rationality, serve to insulate Beckettian mimesis from the conventions of “meaning” (Watt 79). Indeed, reference to the false conclusions of the hypothetical witness foregrounds the irrelevance of “logic” (The Lost Ones 19) in explaining Beckettian experience. Instead of logic, there are the contradictions of “preference” (How It Is 34).

Related symbols vividly express the irrelevance of reason. Brief consideration of two examples will clarify. The first concerns the umbrella which, in Watt, is associated with the mind’s recourse to “conceptions” by which to interpret or explain perplexing experience:

But it was a conception of which for the moment he had no need, and conceptions of which for the moment Watt had no need Watt did not for the moment unfurl, but left standing, as one does not unfurl, but leaves standing, in readiness for a rainy day, one’s umbrella in one’s umbrella stand. (Watt 135)

In Molloy this conceptual umbrella is rendered useless, once Moran’s “disintegrations” (157) cause him to view as “wretched trifles” the intellectual practices “which had once been [his] delight” (161). Hence, the “canopy” of Moran’s umbrella is reduced to “a few flitters of silk fluttering from the stays ...” (Molloy 171).

A second symbol for the uselessness of reason concerns the opening of tins, an action which in Watt represents the attempt to solve an intellectual problem: “So at first, in mind and body, Watt laboured at the ancient labour. And so Watt, having opened this tin with his blowlamp, found it empty” (Watt 136). In the much later novel, How It is, the narrator frequently refers to tins and tin-opener, but the reflex to resort to them is now merely vestigial; for he no longer requires that kind of nourishment: “no appetite a crumb of tunny then mouldy eat mouldy no need to worry I won’t die I’ll never die of

hunger” (8). His compulsive recourse to “the old half-emptied tins” (39) recalls the Texts narrator’s habitual repetition of “the same old questions and answers” (Texts for Nothing 78). It also invokes a passage from “The Calmative,” in which the narrator suddenly mentions tins in the context of posing a series of questions: “I see a kind of den littered with empty tins” (27). The link between (a) reaching for the tins and (b) the vestigial habit to seek intellectual solution is reinforced in a passage in How It Is which jumps suddenly from “the opener” to “minutiae” and “problems”:

access to the sack that I have my left hand enters gropes for the opener here a parenthesis
no minutiae no problems .... (How It Is 65)

Thus, through the thwarting of reason, the Beckettian mimesis of absence is enabled to represent experience in terms that do not conform to logic. In other words, just as this mimesis blurs the distinction between the real and the imaginary (“Such confusion now between the real and—how say its contrary?” [Ill Seen Ill Said 40]), so it obscures the opposition between rational “necessity” and “absurdity” (Watt 133). But the Beckettian mimesis of absence commingles another pair of contraries as well: “pathos” (The Lost Ones 39; Ill Seen Ill Said 47) and hubris. But before we can examine this commingling, we must clarify the terms involved. Pathos is the reaching out of pity or succoring emotion toward the victim of suffering or unhappy predicament. Its ultimate motive is unification with the object, as the celebrated definition, formulated by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, indicates: “Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer” (A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man 221). In contrast, hubris—defined by Dodds as “arrogance” or “self-assertion”—entails not unification, but separation. That is, through hubris the individual elevates his or her importance above that of anyone else. Pozzo illustrates: “Yes, gentlemen, I cannot go for long without the society of my likes even when the likeness is an imperfect one” (Waiting for Godot 16).

These distinctions between pathos and hubris often dissolve in Beckettian mimesis. For on many occasions, pathos concerns the vain wish to unify with absence, and hubris concerns the suffering which evokes that wish. Consider Hamm whose hubris concerns self-assertion through pain: “Can

31. Critics frequently link Godot with the notion of absence on existential grounds. See (a) Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 19: “Here the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself in pure nothingness, our nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability; (b) Lawrence Graver, Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 43: “Godot has become a concept - an idea of promise and expectation - of that for which people aware of the absence of coherent meaning in their lives wait in the hope that it will restore significance to their existence.” For a reading counter to these positions, see Eric P. Levy, “False Innocence in Waiting for Godot,” Journal of Beckett Studies 3.2. (1994): 19-36.
there be misery—loftier than mine?” (Endgame 2). In virtue of that pain he feels pathos for his inability to achieve absence from it: “If I could sleep I might make love. I’d go into the woods. My eyes would see . . . the sky, the earth. I’d run, run, they wouldn’t catch me” (Endgame 18). Perhaps the most striking linkage of pathos with the yearning for absence occurs in “Old Earth,” where the narrator, gazing through a window, suddenly sees the past which he craves to rejoin:

standing before a window, one hand on the wall, the other clutching your shirt, and see the sky, a long gaze, but no, gasps and spasms, a childhood sea, other skies, another body. (“Old Earth” 54)32

The most concise fusion of pathos and hubris occurs at the end of Company: “And you as you always were. Alone” (Company 89). Here aloneness evokes both pathos and hubris. It evokes pathos expressed in the mode of self-pity for isolation. But aloneness also expresses hubris—through signifying that nothing but self-pity is worthy of admittance to company.33

In Ohio Impromptu, the sympathetic Listener, whose sole function is to listen to “the sad tale” read by the Reader, personifies self-pity.34 Indeed, according to Beckett’s stage directions, Reader and Listener are “As alike in appearance as possible” (11). That is, they are the same character in different modes: (a) preoccupation with pain and (b) self-pity for suffering it.35

In Krapp’s Last Tape, hubris and pathos combine to plunge Krapp into absence at the end, when he sits “motionless staring before him” (28), contemplating a past he cannot retrieve. Hubris appears in his habit of scorning his earlier selves: “Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that’s all done with anyway” (24).36 Pathos appears through his habit of crying for the loss of love which his own hubris prevented him valuing properly when it was shared: “Scalded the eyes out of me reading Effie again, a page a day, with tears again. Effie . . . (Pause.) Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes” (25).37

34. Brater (126) cites the familiar view that the two figures represent Becket and Joyce (with his Latin Quarter hat).
36. Samuel Beckett, Krapp’s Last Tape, Krapp’s Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove 1957). All references to this edition are included parenthetically in my text.
The tragic dimension of Beckettian absence is that, through it, suffering achieves no anagnorisis or recognition of its meaning: “Then at last I can set about saying what I was, and where, during all this long lost time” (The Unnamable 331). The consequence of pain is not to clarify, as in the Heraclitean doctrine, the role of character in determining fate, but to perpetuate “confusion of identities” (The Unnamable 331): “perhaps it’s not me perhaps it’s another perhaps it’s another voyage confusion with another” (How It Is 86).38 Whereas in the classical tradition, as Jaeger notes, “Suffering brings knowledge,” in the Beckettian dispensation, the presence of “traumatic agents” (The Unnamable 333) only perpetuates the need for absence: “But already I’m beginning to be there no more …” (The Unnamable 334).39 Even death, the event which, by consummating fate, confirms and illumines the significance of the life it terminates, is reduced to just another opportunity for absence: “towards an even vainer death than no matter whose” (Texts for Nothing 115).