

# Beckett, Bourdieu and the Resistance to Consumption

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An important feature of the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is that his theories extend to untheorized facets of behaviour: physical habits and material tastes that might previously have fallen outside the sphere of systematic sociological analysis. The elements of the everyday, in other words, that had hitherto remained impervious to analysis. By using Bourdieu's ideas, this article aims to shed light on the parts of Beckett's work that concern such types of behaviour, and similarly fall outside the reach of much of Beckett criticism: passages of physical description often seen as gratuitous bad taste. Reading Beckett's prose writing alongside Pierre Bourdieu's social theory, particularly that to be found in his influential book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, brings to light an unfamiliar aspect of Beckett's work, and reveals there a surprising sensitivity to issues of class and social interaction.<sup>1</sup>

Beckett's work engages also with more overt forms of regulation than those uncovered in Bourdieu's investigation of taste. It explores what the theorist of the everyday Michel de Certeau, after Foucault, has called "discipline." De Certeau observes that that the "grid of discipline," the system whereby economic capitalism regulates the individual's relationship with the elements of everyday experience, appears to be "everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive." If this is true, he argues, "it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them."<sup>2</sup> In the earliest theorizations of the everyday, Max Weber likewise examined the rational social structures by which capitalism must function. The capitalist system has need, he observed, "not only of the technical means of production, but of a calculable legal system and of administration in terms of fixed rules."<sup>3</sup> Beckett's early writing makes an oblique but striking examination of such systems: attempts are made to regulate the bodily behaviour of his protagonists through the mechanisms of the 'public schools,' the police and the legal system. Examining Beckett's work from this angle, then, this paper argues for the importance of an element little observed in Beckett criticism: the operation of the discourse of social judgment, the discourse of propriety, in his writing.

How far, then, do Beckett's characters 'resist' these "mechanisms of discipline" in their relationship to the everyday? It can be argued that they offer such systems a particular and particularly robust challenge. Firstly, they are unable – whether through intransigent refusal or sheer incompetence – to learn the discourses of these systems; to learn, in short, the syntax of power, and their own place as object within it. Secondly, and more significantly for the purposes of this paper, they also present such systems with bodies that simply will not be disciplined – bodies neither clean, continent, nor regulated by habit. These are bodies that are responsive neither to external control nor, in a more profound rejection of 'rational' culture, to the control of the mind itself. The human form is for Bourdieu the site where cultural and social structures are manifested: abstract symbolic relations are given embodied form in the constitution, movement and gesture of the body. Correspondingly, the everyday bodily habits of Beckett's characters, read in this way, conceal suggestive reflections on what De Certeau might call the carnival of the body, with its unruly energies and processes, and its implacable resistance to socialization.

Most significantly of all, Beckett's bodies resist the capitalist act *par excellence*, the act of consumption itself. Their instinct is for expulsion and excretion rather than consumption, preferring to emulate the "starveling" who wastes until he reaches the "bliss of coma" than to partake of the acts of consumption – whether it be consumption of food, love, or speech itself – that constitute their absorption into the capitalist social order. This resistance to consumption, presented innocently in the early work, where Beckett's protagonists are all too eager to swallow society's material and cultural

products, however indigestible, becomes as his work develops a more explicit and willed resistance to culture, authority and tradition.

### **I Propriety, property and *le corps propre***

The characters of Beckett's early prose writings struggle to participate in what Rita Felski has called the "lived process of routinization."<sup>4</sup> They live on the edge of the social world, and can consider nothing in it familiar with safety. Watt, the itinerant hero of Beckett's novel of that name, provides an early example. His impression of the station waiting-room in which he finds himself at the end of the novel expresses this predicament: "this was a waiting-room of which even the nicest degrees of strange and usual could not be affirmed with propriety."<sup>5</sup> The wording of the observation is telling. Watt's problem is not represented as an epistemological one, in terms of the loss of truth, nor as a phenomenological one, as a case of psychic disturbance; it is instead described in terms of social decorum – as a matter of *propriety*. This word is striking in a story of such persistently improper and unexpected behaviour on the part of Watt and those around him. It seems to expose a situation, familiar to modern thought but devastating in its implications for Beckett's isolated character, in which it is not an immediate and direct understanding of the world that allows us to interpret it, but instead the correct affiliation to the prevailing customs of interpretation.

That what is perceived to be true or even natural might be a matter of consensus rather than objective fact is of course a possibility familiar to philosophy and one that even the most confidently realist writers have raised in their writing. But where Beckett gives us a novel viewpoint is in showing us an individual who cannot conform to the prevailing custom either in behaviour or thought, much as he would like to; someone who sees the world with such naivety as to return us to first principles at every encounter with the real. Language for Watt is both the way into this experience of collectivity and the barrier to it. It is not the fact that there is no adequate word for the concept 'pot' that so troubles him, in a well-known example, but that the word everyone else happily uses for the concept means nothing to him: "Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, ...it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot" (78). He seeks reassurance in the fact that this is the "known name, the proven name" (78), but finds none. The scant comfort that Watt finds, in fact, is in the confirmation by others of a communal sense of meaning. He seeks to affirm of himself that he is "a man, or, Watt is in the street, with thousands of fellow-creatures within call" (79), and he looks in this crisis to Erskine, his fellow servant, whose naming of the pot, while doing nothing to assuage Watt's own anxious relationship with it, would "have shown that at least for Erskine the pot was a pot, and Watt a man" (81). Watt wants nothing more than to fall into the collective delusion that there is some organic identity, or at least an untroubled connection, between the word 'pot' and the object he holds in his hand. Not to be able to do so sets him apart from his 'fellow-creatures.'

Beckett appears to employ by this strategy a particular kind of reverse psychology. Such a character's wide-eyed desire for common knowledge – knowledge of ordinary language, but also, less often examined in Beckett's work, of socially appropriate physical behaviour and habit – makes us look at this knowledge anew and at an ironic distance. How valid and how valuable is this common knowledge that Watt struggles so hard to acquire? By this negative strategy, Beckett demonstrates what it means to cultivate sociability and how this might be bound up with understanding itself. It is to say nothing new to argue that Beckett's characters struggle to participate in the everyday. A new aspect of Beckett's writing comes to light, however, when we think about where the everyday is represented in Beckett's works, even if this is often in terms of the protagonist's negative relationship to it, and what it might tell us there about quotidian social habits as well as the extreme positions of self-exile or banishment.

With Watt's dilemma and the striking unfamiliarity of the pot in his hand comes a glimpse of the "unsutured nature of the social," in Mark Poster's description of De Certeau's theory.<sup>6</sup> Just as the relation between signifier and signified is not a given – a condition by now taken as read in discussions

of Beckett's work – the relationship between man and artefact, worker and product is also an unpredictable one that removes the 'made' object from its prosaic use-value. These crises of naming indeed refer in Beckett's work to manmade objects, another notable example being the infamous knife-ferret in *Molloy*, described in this novel in the following laborious way:

[I]t consisted of two crosses joined, at their points of intersection, by a bar, and resembled a tiny sawing-horse, with this difference, however, that the crosses of the true sawing-horse are not perfect crosses, but truncated at the top, whereas the crosses of the little object I am referring to were perfect, that is to say composed each of two little identical V's, one upper with its opening above, like all V's for that matter, and the other lower with its opening below.<sup>7</sup>

This object frustrates all attempts to describe it, and all analogies that Molloy tries to assign to it. Even the terms 'right and left,' 'upper and lower' cannot be applied to it, as it is unclear which way up it is supposed to stand. In an audacious gesture on Beckett's part, it is in fact only identified in a much later work, and only then by the requisite (and interpretatively futile) connection being made in the mind of the reader: "knife-holder" – "Question answered."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in a reversal of the terms of the capitalist economy, it is this object's very lack of function that gives it its fascination for the original narrator (and also for his reader): "I could never bring myself to sell it, even in my worst need, for I could never understand what possible purpose it could serve, nor even contrive the faintest hypothesis on the subject" (*Trilogy*, 63). Read in this way, the bewildering descriptions of these objects, themselves of such excessive and unproductive length, represent a mute resistance to the instrumentality not only of language but also of the object in everyday life.

Thomas Trezise has written of the shared etymology of the terms *property* and *propriety* and their relationship in Beckett's work.<sup>9</sup> Watt, socially excluded, without property or position, can speak "with propriety" about very little. Both authority and good taste are denied to those who have no social standing. These terms are also prevalent, with the same range of connotations in the work of De Certeau's collaborator, Pierre Mayol, in the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where Mayol studies the life of a French neighbourhood in terms of the social regulation instituted by the discourse of "propriety." The link between property and propriety is also implicit in Bourdieu's writing. Cultural prestige and authority, designated in Pierre Bourdieu's work by the borrowed term of *capital*, overlap with the more literal sense of this term: material property or wealth.<sup>10</sup> For Beckett's itinerant characters, inhabiting a condition familiar to the protagonists of much Irish literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, their material dispossession is matched by a lack of self-possession in social terms. Read through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, their encounters with the world present a strange comedy of manners that has a profound social import.

Perhaps even more tellingly, Trezise goes on to point out that the French 'propriété' is also etymologically related to 'propre' or 'propreté,' cleanliness, and comments that it is "a notion not irrelevant to the understanding of obscenity, scatological and other" in Beckett's writing. The physical as well as the linguistic habits of Beckett's characters indicate their tendency to be improper, their inability to distinguish between private and public spheres. This extends to their own bodies, the boundaries of which become uncertain, and the behaviour correspondingly vulgar, even unclean. This constellation of values – property, propriety, what is *propre* (one's own), and being *propre* (clean) – converge in the narrator's labelling of Watt's problem a failure of *propriety* rather than knowledge or nerve.

Beckett's protagonists are, unsurprisingly, never at one with the mass of humanity around them, unable as they are to learn accepted habits of speech and behaviour. The narrators in Beckett's early fiction often remark of the protagonists, for instance, that they never quite become 'regulars' in any of the public houses they visit. When Beckett first raises this issue in his draft novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, he seems to make an oblique and self-conscious comment on the very concept of characterisation in the novel in general. He says of Belacqua, the hero: "Almost it seemed as though he were doomed to leave no trace, but none of any kind, on the popular sensibility."<sup>11</sup> This seems to be

true for the sensibilities of Belacqua's readers as well as his fellow characters: we do not recognize in him any of the features of E. M. Forster's 'round' characters of realist fiction, characters that critics at the time Beckett begins to write are still expecting to tally with their "severe" examinations of "daily life."<sup>12</sup> Beckett seems indeed to flout the very founding principles of mimesis, denying the reader what Aristotle called "recognitions," and refusing to be – as this first theorist of mimesis decreed – *plausible*.<sup>13</sup> The narrator comments archly in this respect: "Is it not curious that [Belacqua] should thus be excluded from the ring of habitués and their legitimate benefits?" The reader's curiosity is not rewarded, however, by any explanation or motivation for this exclusion; it remains curious, and she, like the pub regulars, is kept at a distance from this perplexing creature. The Belacqua in the short story "Ding-Dong," another version of this hero, is scarcely more integrated. When he enters a pub, the narrator comments: "Here he was known, in the sense that his grotesque exterior had long since ceased to alienate the curates and make them giggle, and to the extent that he was served with his drink without having to call for it."<sup>14</sup> He nonetheless can never be a 'regular.' He is "tolerated" and "let alone by the rough but kindly habitués of the house," but it is clear that he will never join their number.

Beckett's characters can neither embrace habit nor be included in the social habits of others. They will never, in the author's word, be habitués. And this word *habitué* itself invokes both the idea of 'habit' and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Bourdieu's *habitus* can be defined as the cognitive structures and dispositions laid down in us by the processes of the social world, and by the repetition and imitation of key authoritative behaviours within that world. In short, Bourdieu argues that one's habits – one's tastes and modes of behaviour – are determined by one's place in the social and economic structure. Beckett's protagonists, isolated and excluded from this structure, therefore fail to absorb the necessary habits of thinking either to negotiate the world, or even to perceive themselves within it; they can recognize neither their own position nor the dispositions that it might entail. A new and provisional contract with the world has to be struck again and again.

One might take as illustration an early collision between Molloy and the social world in Beckett's novel of that name. A policeman makes the following request of the protagonist:

Your papers, he said.... Not at all, I said, not at all. Your papers! He cried. Ah my papers. Now the only papers I carry with me are bits of newspaper, to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool.... In a panic I took this paper from my pocket and thrust it under his nose. Oh I don't say I wipe myself every time I have a stool, no, but I like to be in a position to do so, if I have to. Nothing strange about that, it seems to me. (*Trilogy*, 21)

Indeed, the behaviour of Beckett's protagonists does not, in isolation from the world and other people, have anything strange about it. It is its flouting of social propriety, its exquisite inappropriateness to the situation at hand, the everyday context against which it is set that makes it remarkable. Likewise, Beckett's characters cannot relate language to its context: Molloy here is unable to select the correct interpretation of the word for his particular situation. Language is only meaningful when it can be located with reference to the appropriate position in the appropriate social structure, a matter of *habitus*.

Molloy has only one habit relating to papers and this is one that it is improper to bring to light in public. Therefore, the papers that should legitimize him and give him a place in society are replaced by those that expose the self that should be most private. This act of consumption, using newspapers to "wipe himself," is not socially endorsed, but aberrant. In a similarly creative approach to the everyday object, a copy of the *Times Literary Supplement*, a few pages later, is "admirably adapted" (*Trilogy*, 38) to the purpose of wrapping him up in winter and keeping his farts from escaping. These singular adaptations can be read as parodic versions, set out with a kind of maniacal explicitness, of De Certeau's acts of "inventiveness," a 'making do' with heterogeneous materials that represents the resistance of everyday life to the regulated social order.

Yet Molloy's failure to understand or abide by the utility of either kind of 'paper' situates him on the lowest rung of Bourdieu's hierarchy of cultural capital. In possession of the educational tool of the

newspaper, he can only recognize its material, not its cultural value. He cannot take the first step towards acquiring a capital which he might later exchange for economic wealth. He has no place, in fact, in the social and economic structure and can find no abstract representation of his identity (symbolized by the bureaucratic ‘papers’) beyond the physical. This failure of symbolization occurs at many levels in Beckett’s novels, revealing a continuity between the failure to position oneself in relation to a social model of behaviour or circulation and the failure to use correctly the symbolic powers of language itself. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Detoit, unusual among critics in being particularly observant of Beckett’s social dimension, have described his work as a “set of metaphoric representations of how the human subject is *called* into the human community.”<sup>15</sup> What Beckett shows us is that even individuality is a set of gestures and behaviours constituted within this community. To refuse the call of the community is to refuse oneself not only company but identity itself.

## II The body and bad habits

An exploration of the individual at the very margins of social visibility embraces the passages in Beckett’s work that critics find difficult to assimilate into an argument or an interpretation, the passages that are sheer bad taste. Molloy’s makeshift toilet papers thrust under the policeman’s nose are, for example, on one level simply a scatological pun. There are many such moments in Beckett’s work, moments which often seem gratuitously concerned with bodily impropriety. But such puns in Beckett’s work are more than toilet humour. Beckett forces us in withdrawing bodily propriety to think about how this propriety is constructed. What values attach to the concept, and how it does it relate to the integrity of the self?

Bourdieu writes that *habitus*, the set of dispositions that social structures create within us “embed what some would mistakenly call values in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body – ways of walking or blowing one’s nose, ways of eating or talking.”<sup>16</sup> To behave ‘naturally’ with respect to the body, in other words, is to obey countless rules and conventions, but at the same time to be able to render those conventions ‘second nature,’ automatic, even to oneself. The natural is *habitus* become habit; in Bourdieu’s terms, “beyond the reach of... control by the will.” Beckett investigates the flip side of this process, illustrating his characters’ failed socialization by means of their bodily behaviour. It is precisely Beckett’s protagonists’ curious “ways of walking or blowing their nose,” as will be seen, that testify to their lack of *habitus*. Rather than being consumers that acquire and possess appropriate bodily gesture and technique, they are instead consumed by their bad habits. Furthermore, such transgressive behaviours are not the exception to the learnt rule – the canonical sense of ‘bad habits’ – for these individuals, but their defining characteristics.

The model of ‘body as container’ is a fundamental symbol of propriety, self-control and identity, as Mark Johnson has argued.<sup>17</sup> The processes of absorption and evacuation in particular, which happen at the breaches in this container, are controlled by deep-seated habits and rules. Physical incontinence correspondingly becomes a sign of the failure of this container and a profound indication of marginalization. And Beckett explores this particular social marker more fully than most writers. The narrator of the appropriately named ‘The Expelled,’ one of Beckett’s early novellas, develops as a child a strange way of walking which he explains as the result of hereditary rheumatism. In fact, this gait is adopted to disguise the effects of his incontinence:

I had then the deplorable habit, having pissed in my trousers... of persisting in going on and finishing my day as if nothing had happened. The very idea of changing my trousers, or of confiding in my mother, who goodness knows asked nothing better than to help me, was unbearable. I don’t know why... Whence this wary way of walking, with the legs stiff and wide apart, and this desperate rolling of the bust, destined no doubt to put them off the scent, to make them think I was full of gaiety and high spirits, without a care in the world.<sup>18</sup>

The cliché “to put them off the scent,” as well as its horrible appropriateness, indicates a hunted feeling that points to the protagonist’s anxious and isolated position in society even at this young stage. Furthermore, this early failure of socialization has repercussions later for his most basic modes of behaviour. A baroque strategy for concealing his shameful behaviour becomes with time an ingrained habit in its own right. Later in the story, and in his life, his peculiar gait is not compatible with the crowded pavement, and causes him to knock over an old lady. A policeman stops him and remarks that “the sidewalk was for everyone.” The narrator comments of the word ‘everyone:’ “as if it were quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category” (52). He is uncouth in terms of social behaviour, but further than this, the very language of everyday living throws him out, unable to assimilate him to its categories. His uncouthness, as the etymology of the term suggests, renders him unknowable and monstrous.

Molloy too, in the novel written shortly after this story, fails to understand the rules that underlie social behaviour or the structures that determine it. As David Weisberg has commented, without reference to Bourdieu but in terms very close to his, Beckett makes “the social distribution of knowledge and taste the decisive social content” in this novel.<sup>19</sup> Molloy comments early in his narrative:

And if I have always behaved like a pig, the fault lies not with me but with my superiors, who corrected me only on points of detail instead of showing me the essence of the system, after the manner of the great English schools, and the guiding principles of good manners... and how to trace back to its ultimate source a given comportment. For that would have allowed me, before parading in public certain habits such as the finger in the nose, the scratching of the balls, digital emunction and the peripatetic piss, to refer them to the first rules of a reasoned theory. (*Trilogy*, 25)

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is not the “reasoned theory” for which Molloy misguidedly seeks, but it does provide an indication of the “ultimate source” for a “given comportment.” Imitation of one’s ‘superiors’ for Bourdieu forms a key but often unarticulated part of one’s education. What is missing for this character is precisely Bourdieu’s *habitus* – taste, certainly, but also a social framework for the control and judgement of these physical impulses. It is not theory that is at stake but practice, as Bourdieu is at pains to emphasize in his thinking: the social world in the body as well as the body in the social world.<sup>20</sup>

Significant too is the particular source of such a ‘system’ for Beckett: the “great English schools” that the Protestant schools of Ireland aimed explicitly to emulate. There is a political dimension to such ‘good manners,’ then, and the grotesque behaviour of such a character, however ingenuous, in turn a resistance to the colonial discipline that they represent. To “behave like a pig” is a politically coded gesture which appropriates the colonizer’s own representations of the Irish. Beckett pokes fun in this way at the English preoccupation with regulating the unruly and rebellious body, but also hints at a political dimension to this repression of the rebellious physical frame. The operation of *habitus* can also reflect the insidious processes of cultural colonization.

The anarchic body in Beckett’s work has been read in a more abstract manner by the majority of his critics. The idea that the body might be a porous and unreliable container allows in their readings for a profound exploration of what happens to identity when distinctions between inner and outer, self and other, have broken down. A lack of socialization for these narrators creates, paradoxically, a lack of individuality: a failure to distinguish, protect and control what is their own. Or, put another way, the extreme of individuality that comes from being outside social habits goes so far in Beckett’s characters as to constitute the lack of any perceptible boundaries of self. The taboos are no longer in place that would protect the body from its ‘other,’ that is, from the waste products that are evidence of its fearful interior and its own incipient mortality, its capacity to become itself waste. As Julia Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*: “It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean self’ but... gave way before the dejection of its contents.”<sup>21</sup> What seem initially to be

simple bad habits in fact point towards a collapse of identity itself.

The theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari recognized this condition in Beckett's later literary creations, which they describe as a sort of "deluge or failure of the body," a collapse of differentiated structure, signification and function in the bodies of his narrators. The body then becomes a "body-without-organs," a geometric set of 'poles' by which 'flows' enter and exit.<sup>22</sup> The poles within which Beckett's narrators in his trilogy occupy themselves are often those concerned with eating and excreting, creating an almost vegetal existence. The narrator of the second book of the trilogy, *Malone Dies*, sums up such an existence: "Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles" (*Trilogy*, 185). Beckett said famously of his work that it was "a matter of fundamental sounds, no joke intended," and it can indeed seem relentless at times in referring the fundamental back to the fundament, the anus.<sup>23</sup> It seeks in this way to keep in view the basics of life: "what matters," as Malone says in the same passage, "is to eat and excrete" (*Trilogy*, 185). The deeper one penetrates into the preoccupations of the individual, Beckett's work in fact suggests, the more generalized, base and impersonal one's urges and desires reveal themselves to be.

The insistence on the trope of evacuation in such scatological passages from Beckett's works suggests that when there is a tension between incorporation and rejection in Beckett's bodies the emphasis falls on the latter. The dominant reading of this element in Beckett's texts is a psychoanalytic one. Kristeva, as has been seen, identifies it with the abject. Leslie Hill identifies it with the incomplete incorporation of the mourned object, whether it be the body of Christ or the dead parent.<sup>24</sup> Steven Connor, in another work, demonstrates how the dynamic of ingestion and expulsion in Beckett's work is part of the death drive itself.<sup>25</sup> Eloquent and persuasive as these readings are, however, it might also be possible to look at what this tension suggests about Beckett's attitude to the consumption and transmission of culture itself.

These psychoanalytic approaches are, indeed, far from incompatible with the social model. The idea of the drives by which the subject is organized at this fundamental level, as Beckett might put it, can in fact be seen as an alternative kind of regulation, or discipline. These mantras ("Eat and excrete;" "Dish and pot") provide a disciplinary framework that replaces the social one. As Deleuze and Guattari's observations imply, the organization of the body into a system of 'flows' is a kind of structure that resists structure, and the repetition of these basic desires constitutes a 'habit' deeper than *habitus*. While these characters consume, however, they can still be seen to be complicit with the imperative that underpins capitalist society: the imperative of consumption. What makes Beckett's characters most resistant to the laws of the human society in which they still live, albeit with increasing degrees of incomprehension, is their gradual renunciation of the will to consume.

What Beckett's critics read by means of a psychoanalytic framework, Bourdieu might, as has been suggested, interpret in a social one. *Habitus*, as has been seen, functions for Bourdieu, like these psychoanalytic phenomena, "beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will."<sup>26</sup> The preoccupation with excretion rather than ingestion in these works might also represent, in Bersani and Dutoit's terms, the failed process of interpellating these particular subjects into the human community. Their failure to ingest and assimilate nourishment is equated with their failure to communicate with and be assimilated into the social sphere.

Several instances of this phenomenon occur in Beckett's *Molloy*. At the start of his tale, the protagonist seeks mental nourishment avidly through conversation. When he meets a stranger on the road, he is eager to gulp down the stories he is told: "I swallow everything, greedily" (*Trilogy*, 13). He loses the will to socialize, however, becoming increasingly hostile to other people, and, correspondingly, he loses his taste for nourishment. He flings aside the tea and bread, admittedly unappetizing, offered to him by a charitable female (possibly the social worker) in the police station (23-24). He is indifferent to the food and drink that the woman Louise hospitably brings him, saying of this time: "Unfortunately I didn't much care for good things to eat" (37). In this period of the story, he eats sparingly: "My appetite! What a subject. For conversation. I had hardly any. I ate like a thrush" (53). The phrase "for conversation" here works in a double sense: his appetite, being so small, is a poor subject for conversation, but his appetite *for* conversation is similarly diminished. Later he eats

“perforce” only, “from time to time” (83). His acts of eating are feral, asocial, animalistic rather than human: he eats “like a thrush” at Lousse’s house, and subsequently consumes only “roots, berries” and “carobs, so dear to goats” (83) in the forest.

Malone too stops receiving soup and contemplates starvation. In a memorable image, he seems to have escaped the fate society has in store for other “impotent old men,” whereby “someone rams a tube down their gullet, or up their rectum, and fills them full of vitaminized pap, so as not to be accused of murder” (254). Such is, as he puts it, the “providence” of human society – a providence he would happily forego. The link between self-starvation and social rebellion is made explicit by Malone himself later in the novel when he thinks of the “Mayor of Cork,” Terence MacSwiney, a political prisoner in 1919 who “lasted ages” (275) before succumbing to hunger strike – a symbolic form of negative resistance so familiar in the history of Beckett’s country. If force-feeding, whether it be with food, culture or ideology, is a political strategy, starvation, like “behaving like a pig,” is the political response: a response that appropriates another negative historical image of the Irish and turns it into a powerful form of passive aggression.

### III Consumption and cultural capital

Pierre Bourdieu, while explicitly rejecting the idea that education should be ‘force-feeding,’ has elaborated a theory of socialization based on the idea of incorporation.<sup>27</sup> He defines taste as, “class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied... It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically.”<sup>28</sup> Or as James Joyce’s Bloom puts it more succinctly, you “never know whose thoughts you’re chewing.”<sup>29</sup> Beckett’s narratives provide numerous images that invert this received conceptual metaphor of taste and socialization. What his characters are fed, they expel rather than absorb. Likewise, Beckett’s protagonists fail to assimilate knowledge and instruction, or even the habits of thinking and speaking of those around them. The Unnamable, the eponymous narrator of the third novel in the trilogy, trenchantly rejects, for instance, what he is force-fed in the way of learning by his anonymous interlocutors:

I’ll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it’s thanks to you I’ll be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with. And I’ll be myself at last, as a starveling belches his odourless wind, before the bliss of coma. (*Trilogy*, 32)

Like Malone, he rejects this attempt at forced assimilation to the social.

It is also possible to find, in this compulsion to expel, a response on Beckett’s part to modernist anxieties about influence, authority and tradition. He rejects the capitalist model of accumulation of cultural capital that such concepts entail. The knowledge that is “like gobbets in a vomit” has been regurgitated before it even reaches the Unnamable: social discourse itself spews stories that are endlessly recycled to the point of being indigestible. The Unnamable cannot make them his own. His attitude to this unpalatable mass of culture aligns him with T. S. Eliot’s bad poet in his ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ cut off from tradition and treating the past, the collective cultural memory of literature, as a “lump, an indiscriminate bolus.”<sup>30</sup> What Beckett presents as the willed incomprehension of his protagonists also represents his own resistance to assimilation into a conservative cultural tradition.

This passage of *The Unnamable* brings to mind an observation Proust’s narrator makes in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where he comments that certain members of society cultivate sophisticated tastes, but “fail to assimilate what is truly nourishing in art.” They nonetheless “need artistic pleasures all the time... victims of a morbid hunger which is never satisfied.”<sup>31</sup> They have not successfully

incorporated good taste, but superficially attempt to mimic those who truly have it. Proust's narrator's snobbery (and perhaps Proust's own) reinforces the relationship between taste and material wealth and status that Bourdieu has identified. Marcel distinguishes in this passage between a sort of *arriviste* energy, which gives one the "ability to launch ideas and systems" on a carefully selected public, and what he calls "genuine taste:"

For the ability to launch ideas and systems – and still more of course the ability to assimilate them – has always been much commoner than genuine taste, even among those who themselves produce works of art, and with the multiplication of reviews and literary journals (and with them of factitious vocations as writer or artist) has become very much more widespread. (250)

He does concede, however, that one can 'assimilate' the ideas and systems one produces through the more debased form of cultural activity: a word reminiscent of Bourdieu that suggests a rather closer relationship between these two types of taste than Proust's narrator is willing to consider. Bourdieu indeed would dismiss such a distinction as snobbery, situating *habitus* much deeper in the psyche than Proust does, and suggesting that Proust's 'genuine taste' is just an unconscious and earlier version, through family and education as well as adult social activity, of the same cultural modishness that appears to need such energetic and deliberate cultivation.

Beckett's protagonists are at a different pole to the hungry vultures for culture that Proust portrays. The Unnamable's mouth may be described as "speech-parched," never having enough, but he envisages a time when he might let it fill with "spittle" (*Trilogy*, 32), an "empty" substance that might replace the vomit of social discourse. Ultimately this too gives way to the "odourless wind" of a body that is emptied, that feeds only on itself. Despite the cultural matter "rammed down [their] gullet," Beckett's narrators are by temperament anorexic rather than bulimic.

Writing likewise is, in this imaginative framework, a purgation rather than a construction of the self. Familiar metaphors of writing as the excretion of waste or as sexual issue rebound on Beckett's narrators, and threaten their integrity as body and mind become leaky and uncertain containers. This is all to their purpose, however. Expression is, the Unnamable suggests at one point in a suggestive pun, "a question of elimination" (368): "whether to fill up the holes or let them fill up of themselves it's like shit, there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word, one has only to seek, seek in vain, to be sure of finding it in the end, it's a question of elimination" (368). He describes here a process of filling up the blank spaces between words with "shit," making for one long unintelligible flow. Ironically, the process of elimination here is not one that guarantees to distinguish the one, perfect word from all the others; we have seen that Beckett's narrators are unable to choose successfully between possible meanings, or between correct words and wrong ones. They cannot define and identify themselves positively through language, but only expel all the words that do not express them – which is all of them. Writing is thus the very opposite of identification: the elimination of distinction itself, whereby language renounces its own differences and therefore also its capacity to make sense, instead imitating the body and its relentlessly base physical processes.

Beckett's works themselves similarly evade definition through difference in terms of genre, literary history and cultural status: they are difficult to categorize precisely because they cannibalize a multitude of past moments of literature and discourse in the service of an entity (a self, a story) which is itself brutally simple: "Dish and pot;" "to eat and excrete" (185). The work of culture in organizing, controlling and protecting from such 'raw' processes of life and death is dismantled, and the hierarchical structures of taste collapse. As Beckett's bodies fail to incorporate nourishment, his texts reject the consoling structures of poetry or philosophy, or degrade them to the service of the unforgiving facts of life.

Beckett's works suggest, therefore, that if propriety is too completely rejected, then with it one also rejects what is one's own (*le propre*). In the everyday world, identity is intimately bound up with social dispositions and observances. One must speak a common language, a necessity that the Unnamable articulates at one point: "it's of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their

language" (326). This has, of course, a more explicitly political dimension in Beckett's work. Even an Anglo-Irish writer such as Beckett, himself closer to colonizer than colonized, cannot but have been aware of the disenfranchising effect of being made to speak another's language. One must participate in the social meanings this language contains, and assimilate its values, or be, literally, unspeakable.

Yet both Beckett's characters and his works reverse the law of cultural capital, practising a kind of willed self-dispossession that resists assimilation to the prevailing social system. Beckett also rejects, however, the bourgeois artist's 'protest' – a high modernist cultivation of individualism – in favour of expressing the most basic processes of the body. Yet his work is not impoverished, however fundamental his situations and indigent his characters may be. Although his late prose is that of a "starveling" in terms of its depleted means, if not in terms of its rhythmic and visual intensity, the great works of the 1940s and 1950s are properly 'inventive' in De Certeau's sense of the word. Artfully ill-disciplined and often grotesque in relation to the rigid discipline and austerity of his theatre, they use heterogeneous means, the bric-à-brac of many social discourses, to creative ends. Their impropriety of style, in short, has proper political meaning.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice ([London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons ([1904-5] London: HarperCollins, 1991), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Rita Felski, "The Invention of the Everyday," *new formations* 39 (1999-2000): 15-31.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1958), 233.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 125.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: A Trilogy* (London: Calder, 1994), 63. Further references will be cited as *Trilogy*.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said* (London: John Calder, 1982), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The forms of capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ([1927] London: Calder, 1993), 127.

<sup>12</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ([1927] London: Penguin, 2000), 48.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan

Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2339.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks* ([1934] London: Calder, 1993), 43-44.

<sup>15</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Detoit, "Beckett's Sociability," in *The Critical Response to Samuel Beckett*, ed. Cathleen Culotta Andonian (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 188.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 466.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33-40.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Complete Short Prose 1929-198* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 50-51.

<sup>19</sup> David Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 96.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 53.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 149-166.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: Calder, 1983), 109.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie Hill, *In Different Words: Beckett's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23-4 and *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 466.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Que vive la television publique?," *Le Monde*, 19 October 1988, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 190.

<sup>29</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* ([1922] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 717-18.

<sup>30</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent" ([1919] London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, vol. VI (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 250.