

# Slow Violence and Slow Going: Encountering Beckett in the Time of Climate Catastrophe

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## Abstract

This chapter reads Beckett's fascination with what Steven Connor has called 'slow going' alongside Rob Nixon's description of the 'slow violence' of climate breakdown. Following Nixon's suggestion that 'slow violence' does not register readily in narratives and temporalities of crisis, I examine Beckett's attention to what remains in a paradoxically stuck and ongoing time. Suggesting that Beckett's work sticks with and witnesses catastrophe rather than crisis, the chapter uses *The Lost Ones* to explore Beckett's commitment to staying with a disaster that cannot be overcome, alongside the articulation of a giving up that is not a decision but part of a drive to go on. Using Beckett's interest in Freud's death drive, I suggest that Beckett's later texts work through materialisations of attachment and dependence as a way of thinking with and living with, rather than denying or repressing, the reality of the 'nothing to be done'.

Writing as the COVID-19 pandemic lurched on into 2022, Adam Phillips framed an essay on the under-explored value of 'giving up' with an inevitable epigraph from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*: 'you must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on'. In the face of what he frames as a deep cultural suspicion of giving up, Phillips wonders what to make of such resistant persistence: 'What are we doing to ourselves and others, sometimes, by not giving up?' Going on when one shouldn't, which, it must be noted, is rather different from Beckett's going on when one can't, is characterised by Phillips as the fundamental flaw of tragic heroes,

who represent ‘catastrophic examples of not giving up’. In its original figuration, catastrophe is the ‘fatal turning point in a drama, the winding up of the plot’, when all is overturned (*kata* ‘down’ plus *strephein* ‘turn’). Catastrophe marks the immanence, then, and often the imminence, of the end. But the drama of tragedy comes from what seems like a mistake about genre, as characters continue to act as if they were in a crisis where events can be turned, rather than a catastrophe in which the swerve from survival has already taken place. The word ‘crisis’ emerges in late middle English as a decisive moment, the turning point in the trajectory of a disease. Linked to the Greek *krinein* – to decide, to distinguish, to separate – this medical term in the Hippocratic corpus was taken up in the seventeenth century in more socio-political terms, both to signal and to produce what the historian of time Reinhart Koselleck calls a ‘moment of judgment and diagnosis, as well as the prescription for a therapy’ (2006, 358, 370). Once this crisis moment has been seized, once the decision has been made and a separation has occurred between one trajectory and another, for better or worse there is no turning back. The temporalities of crisis and catastrophe may share an irreversibility, but whereas crisis opens up the horizon of the future, in catastrophe disaster has already been set in train – all one can do is to wait for it to play out.

As Phillips’s epigraph implies, Beckett is a writer whose work might be framed in terms of not giving up. ‘On’, insists the narrative of *Worstward Ho*, even when failure is bound into every strophe. But Phillips’s ambivalent placement of Beckett in an epigraph draws attention to an uncertainty about whether his work might be taken as standing for not giving up or its opposite. For not giving up, or indeed its opposite, can hardly be raised to the level of a strategy when things have always already turned worstwards. As *Fizzle 4* puts it: ‘I gave up before birth, it was not possible otherwise, but birth there had to be’ (1995, 234). Giving up is not a choice, here, or a decision that might avoid or enable something. The tragic hero mistakes their position as one where action is possible or required, asking ‘what is to be done?’; but in Beckett’s

landscape there is '[n]othing to be done' (1990, 11). There is no dramatic resolution as crisis turns to death, tragic flaws are revealed, and catharsis ensues. Instead of an experience of waiting for a catastrophe to come, waiting, as *Godot* insists, is an experience of shuddering on in disaster's wake. Phillips suggests that '[g]iving up requires a sense of an ending: it is knowing, in so far as it is possible, when the business is finished', but Beckett's work diverts attention away from such pragmatic knowing. Clov's 'Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished' (1990, 93) in *Endgame* is not a refusal to give up and a stoic continuation after a tipping point has been reached; rather, it is a more radical kind of giving up on the possibility, even the pleasure, of giving up. This is, of course, its own kind of going on, though one that has significantly defected from the agency of decision and action.

What might Beckett's writing and this particular relationship to catastrophe and endurance mean, then, in a time of climate crisis, when humans are coming to understand themselves as agents who have already decisively altered the geology of the globe? How can we read Beckett's articulation of 'nothing to be done' amidst ecological crisis and the urgency of climate breakdown? As the economist Howard Stern has put it: 'We are at a remarkable point in history. [...] We must decide and act or the opportunity will be lost. The time is now'. He asks, simply: 'Why are we waiting?' (325). In the face of this urgent question, what does it mean to stick with Beckett's waiting time, his meantime, when not acting, not changing our attitude to the world in which we subsist, can be read as a symptom of what Amitav Ghosh has termed 'the Great Derangement' (11) of modern humanity – the fantasy of imagining ourselves to be separate from a natural environment we might plunder and degrade without cease or consequence? Does Beckett have anything to say, other than acting as a tour guide to a scene approaching extinction in which action is always necessarily too late? This chapter examines Beckett's attention to what remains in a paradoxically stuck and ongoing time that understands itself as both a product of and response to catastrophe and breakdown. Indeed, I want to suggest

that Beckett's work offers a precise articulation not of crisis but of catastrophe – an extinction towards which there can be no rebellion and a time in which the human is always and already subjected to a 'loss of species', as *How It Is* has it. In what follows, I want to explore how Beckett's commitment to staying with a disaster that cannot be overcome, alongside the articulation of a giving up that is not a decision but part of a compulsion or drive to go on, might offer some ways of thinking with and living with, rather than denying or repressing, the reality of the 'nothing to be done'.

### **Unthinkable tense**

'Outside of here it's death', states Hamm in *Endgame*, while Clov, seemingly indentured to serve Hamm as a child, concurs that this is a 'corpsed' world of unceasing environmental degradation and extinction. Hamm's fantasy that '[y]ou can make a raft and the currents will carry us away, far away, to other ... mammals' is clearly only that (1990, 109). As Greg Garrard has argued in his eco-critical reading of *Endgame*, Beckett unflinchingly breaks down the idea that nature might be nurturing and autonomous. The idea that the natural world might resist our capacity to damage it is over: there is 'no more nature'; 'it's finished' (1990, 97, 93). But although, as Hamm says, 'the whole place stinks of corpses' (1990, 114), the comforts, even perhaps the pleasures of extinction – what Moran in *Molloy* significantly calls 'the fatal pleasure principle' (1994, 99) – seem just as impossible to achieve as a progressive future into which one could step. As Winnie suggests in *Happy Days*, one might embrace 'the eternal dark. [Pause.] Black night without end. [Pause.] Just chance, I take it, happy chance. [Pause.] Oh yes, abounding mercies' (1990, 166). But the gradually growing mound in which Winnie is trapped is just one more of Beckett's 'impossible heap[s]' (1990, 93) that mark time's passage – an accumulation of scorched earth that seems unlikely to bring the mercy of extinction via a quick death, only chronic continuation in ever-worsening conditions.

This gathering of dusty earth around Winnie's neck in *Happy Days* happens off-stage, across an indeterminate time-frame and in ways that intriguingly match the rhythms of what Rob Nixon has described as 'slow violence'. Nixon argues that we are used to framing violence 'as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into sensational visibility'; but much climate change 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space' (2). In the face of the difficulty in representing that which shudders below the thresholds of the attention economies of crisis, shock, and the spectacular event, Nixon articulates the need to develop

creative ways of drawing attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency. (10)

In other words, the catastrophes of slow violence must be figured in ways that allow them to signify as crises.

But *Happy Days* is not interested in investing calamity with dramatic urgency. Crisis action is as out of reach as the revolver Winnie might once have used to hasten an end. Indeed, Beckett's scenes persistently withdraw from the spectacular, explosive affects of apocalyptic destruction. For, as Winnie implies, although 'the earth has lost its atmosphere', on this 'earth ball', as she names it, all is not quite lost: 'Perhaps not quite all. [*Pause.*] There is always something. [*Pause.*] Of everything. [*Pause.*] Some remains' (1990, 161). Instead, the scene endures in a meantime – a stretched duration of decrepitude that endures in the wake of a former life or disaster in the past, but also waits in a penumbra cast before absolute extinction. The time of these lives limps on chronically, waiting and persisting in stable but slowly

worsening conditions, without the hope of either cure or death. It is always too late, although things inhere in the not yet.

Molloy muses: ‘My life, my life, now I speak of it as something over, now as a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?’ (1994, 36). Peter Boxall describes this characteristic temporality as Beckett’s ‘unthinkable tense’ (14), and, suggestively, it emerges in Beckett’s postwar work just as much of the world was going through what has been described as the Great Acceleration by those attempting to define the ‘unthinkable object’ of anthropogenic climate change.<sup>1</sup> As Kathryn Yusoff writes, the Great Acceleration of the 1950s marked the world geologically: it moved beyond coal to the material conversions of mixed fossil fuels; disseminated carbon particles worldwide; produced new geochemical compounds and pesticide residues; doubled counts of soil nitrogen and phosphorus through new fertilisers; and distributed materials like concrete, plastics, and synthetic fibres, alongside the radioactive elements of the nuclear age (30). All was sedimented and dispersed within the stones and bones of what we might name an ‘unspeakable globe’ (1992, 95).

Beckett’s most obviously accelerated play, *Breath* (1969), shortens human life to a mere 35 seconds; but the human is not the only timescale represented here. The ‘miscellaneous rubbish’ with which the stage is ‘littered’ (1990, 371) produces an image of detritus familiar to contemporary eyes from figurations of a future that is both cancelled and filled with human-produced waste that will outlive us. As Adam Piette has indeed argued (107-108), one might read the body in Beckett’s ‘cylinder pieces’ of the 1960s as caught in the ‘deep time’ violence – enduring in a half-life alongside nuclear waste and radiation that will persist beyond historical time into a landscape of cinders and ‘bleached dirt’ (Beckett, 1995, 173). At a postwar temporal turning point of reconstruction, then, Beckett’s work became bound to another kind of time immanent within the winding up of acceleration Yusoff describes. By abdicating speed and

refusing to allow time simply to pass, either on or over, Beckett's work indeed looked to stay on in the wartime waste, the rubbish, the ruins, while simultaneously imagining a far future that would endure in the litter of acceleration.

In his foundational account of 'slow going' in Beckett's work, Steven Connor has traced out a particular tempo that does not seem to offer obvious resources for Nixon's timely job of raising the distributed and ongoing slow violence of climate catastrophe to the urgency of crisis. He finds instead in Beckett's slowness an attempt to use scene, but also the inherent and inevitable temporisation of grammar and syntax, to bear witness to the ordinary human experiences of living through, measuring, and binding time, while all is simultaneously and waywardly done and undone by it. Connor argues for Beckett's slow going as a wilfully, even perversely resistant slowness that refuses to be put to work, pithily describing 'going slowly' as 'something we attempt to do to time', while 'slow going is what time does to us, through us' (2014, 116). For Connor, Beckett's work pays attention to a tense he calls the 'present discontinuous' – of living in and through a time that never quite submits to use or accumulation, despite all our best efforts:

The ordinary, fundamental, terrifying topple of time's slow foot into the next moment, the *disfazione* (unfolding, unworking, falling out, dissolution, decomposition) of sheer elapse that never resolves anything as dramatic and determinate as elapse or relapse, the pitiless passing away, in soft and imperceptible torrent, that passes understanding. (2014, 120)

Worrying away at the impossibilities and aporias of representation, Connor describes Beckett's *oeuvre's* 'vocation to synchronise itself to a time that it can neither command nor countermand, a vocation that has a particular sharpness when we have devised so many ways of turning the

irreversibility of time's passage into story time' (2014, 129). Such work could hardly raise slow violence into a story that could work as a call to alarm and historical action. But if one is approaching an object explicitly characterised by our incapacity to represent it – the 'hyperobject' of climate catastrophe – there might yet be something to be learned from staying with slow going's resistance to the narrative temporalities and the forms of representation that have tended to get put to historical and political work.

In his history of Western temporality, Reinhart Koselleck has argued that the major timescapes of modernity shifted during the period spanning the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries from prophecy, orientated in relation to the immanence and known structure of the Last Judgment, towards a secular idea of prognosis in which human political and economic activity could shape the conditions of the future (2004, 21-22). Koselleck argues that this movement towards prognosis produced an account of history that was inherently temporalised, that could be diagnosed and judged, precisely because it contained moments of decision. With time constantly produced in relation to human action, the future could be figured as fundamentally open and distinguishable from the past. What Koselleck calls the 'epochal consciousness' that arose in the late eighteenth century indeed entangled history and the *telos* of progress with crisis, which allowed the turning points of historical eras to be determined, judged, and figured as a 'structural signature of modernity' (2006, 372).

Koselleck suggests that because the idea of crisis 'is meant to reduce the room for maneuver, forcing the actors to choose between diametrically opposed alternatives' (2006, 370), to identify a crisis is to demand a markable and moral difference between past and future. Something happened in the past; something went wrong in order for this moment of crisis to be reached and decision and action must follow. We can note such crisis logic in the attempt to determine the various 'golden spikes' marking the beginning of the Anthropocene, when things went 'wrong', as a distinction between what 'is' and what 'ought to be' is made. To



draw attention to this is not to deny the reality of the existential threat of anthropogenic climate change; but it is to suggest that a call to deal with climate crisis by turning away from past error towards a different future might be entangled in the same temporal logic of human agency and calculation, allied to a colonisation of the future, that has produced the environmental changes now formulated *as* a crisis. For Isabelle Stengers, responding to the climate emergency as a catastrophe is also simply a matter of realism. Because a profound disturbance in relations with the planet has already taken place, there can be no recovery. '*There is no afterwards*' (2016, 57), writes Stengers; as a consequence, '*there is no choice*' (2016, 58) – no decision to be made. Koselleck's history of modernity as a crisis in which humans can decisively intervene has been overwritten by what Rebekah Sheldon has described as a new awareness of the 'autonomy and wayward causalities of the planet [...] the end of techniques of control premised on the manageability of natural processes and the end of nature as a repository of monetizable agency' (178-9). This is a future that feels simultaneously 'cancelled' and catastrophically ongoing.

Critical accounts of Beckett's rendering of catastrophe have been dominated by the idea the work emerges in the wake of the disaster of the Second World War and the ethical and representational lacunae precipitated by the historical event of the Holocaust. As Shane Weller has convincingly demonstrated, both Beckett and writer-philosophers like Maurice Blanchot turn to ideas and aesthetics of linguistic negativism to rethink the human in the wake of the disaster of twentieth-century European history. In the face of a disaster of such severity that it seemingly shatters the possibility of representation, whether poetic or conceptual, Beckett and Blanchot's linguistic negativism and skepticism neither attempt to revivify Enlightenment values of rationality, nor do they recuperate value through a dialectical temporality where negated material is sublated and progress produced (Weller, 154). Instead, in the wake of a disaster that cannot be turned into an object of knowledge from which one can move forwards,

Weller shows how a text like *The Unnamable* turns to a textual temporality bound to ‘intensive unwordings’ via the use of ‘epanorthosis’, in which statements are proposed only to be revised (109). Connor similarly notes a proliferation of commas that both interrupt the text and force it onwards, miming a circling back that commits to the doing and undoing of repetition – to the slow going of deviation rather than progression (2014, 123).

Writing on the Anthropocene, Nigel Clark has argued that its unrepresentable complexity, its ‘entanglement of the known and the unknowable, the tryst between that which adds to knowledge and that what radically undoes this knowledge, is not a world away from the paradoxes of the disaster in which Blanchot immersed himself’ (21). Nor, one might say, is it a world away from the paradoxes of repetition and disaster which form Beckett’s slow going. Beckett himself wrote in a letter of 1959 that Blanchot was ‘on to something very important which he probably over-systematizes’ (2014, 237), perhaps implicitly affirming his own preference for textual experiments that formally resist the presentation of a project or a system, but stick instead with a particular rhythm or shape that goes on when one can’t go on. For one way of making something of what Beckett offers to the scene of climate emergency is a materialisation of a slow violence that nevertheless maintains contact with representational impossibility, instead of transforming it into the punctuality of crisis that produces action and a future in historical continuity with the past. For Blanchot writes that the disaster is ‘always already past’:

When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment. (1-2)

Whereas crisis logic purges a scene of the time of paradox and suspension, disaster and catastrophe produce an impasse of the sort that both Beckett and Blanchot stick with, through repetition, circling back, and an experimental textuality bound to the production of uncertainty and failure. As Connor suggests, Beckett's slow going is not simply a form of going slowly which might, more broadly, be figured as turning away from the temporalities of the modern towards the imagined care, attention, and organic continuity of a now lost past. Instead, by positioning itself within the suspension of historical time traced out by the disasters of modernity, Beckett's writing effects an experimental interruption, a hiatus, in which something else might insist, something else might come to matter.

### **What is lost**

Something happened. Something has happened in the 'unthinkable past' (1995, 223) to produce *The Lost Ones*'s precise, almost closed environment. Something has determined its strict temperature and light fluctuations and the rationally unmotivated behavioural requirements that wind down and away from any recognisable possibilities of human flourishing; but it all precedes what the text can know. Written in 1966, with a final paragraph added in 1970, the crisis event is never revealed. Readers are instead presented with various 'aperçues' of a closed space produced by textual experimentation and an imagined form of scientific experimentation in which the gradual entropic disintegration of the human species is being anatomised and calculated:

Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one. Vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain. Inside a flattened cylinder fifty metres round and sixteen high for the sake of harmony. (1995, 202)

As Anna McMullan has noted, the ‘history of the anthropocentric drive towards scientific observation as a technique of knowledge is satirised and turned on its head as it is the human species whose habitat and behaviours are objectified, described, measured’ (36). But, of course, the objectification and reduction through calculation of certain groups of people is hardly a deviation from humanity’s catastrophic histories. Indeed, the curiously dispassionate observations of the cylinder’s ‘little people’, whose ‘customs’ are dissected under what appears to replicate nineteenth-century anthropological and ethnographic modes of observation (Abbott), seem separated by very little from the genocidal or biopolitical violence associated with an extractive colonial gaze.

There is no evidence of any way out of this damaged ecosystem shuddering towards the uninhabitable, although the idea that there might be is part of the motor that drives the slowly unwinding movement in the cylinder. For the searchers maintain a compulsive fascination with the idea that the scene of catastrophe might be transcended or escaped, either via a ‘secret passage branching from one of the tunnels and leading in the words of the poets to nature’s sanctuaries’, or a ‘trapdoor hidden in the hub of the ceiling giving access to a flue at the end of which the sun and other stars would still be shining’ (206). Read as an allegory of the attachment to escape that persists in the Anthropocene, the secret passage could represent a turn away from modernity that would restore a fantasised state of natural harmony, while the trapdoor might be figured as either an extension of techno-modernity’s logic (via solar energy and geo-engineering) or the transcendence offered by ideas of inter-planetary colonisation or transhumanism. But the cylinder has already turned ‘darkward’ and there is only one way into or out of this apparently closed system – via the mechanism that allows the narrator to describe its aperçues of the cylinder and a reader to encounter them.

There is no escape because the only way into and out of the cylinder is occupied, perhaps even blocked, by the narrating consciousness. But although this seems to be something over

which the narrator has control, the text works formally to undermine the autonomy and power of its representational vantage. Following the withdrawal of any possibility of the 'light' of the 'way out', the narration, which has shown a particular fondness for precision and imperatives ('Imagine'), stumbles on its own sureties. The way out's 'fatuous little light will assuredly be the last to leave them', the text states, confidently, but soon interrupts its certainty: 'always assuming they are darkward bound' (207). The imagined end might be proposed if things continue in the way described, but all is not assured as specificity and imperatives become increasingly frayed: 'So on infinitely until towards the unthinkable end if this notion is maintained a last body of all by feeble fits and starts is searching still' (222). The conditional, modifiers, and repetitions like 'if this notion is maintained', worry away at the tightly woven fabric of the scene: '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' (223). Although the capacity for the creation and destruction of its microcosm is the sovereign power of authorship and narration, here such authority is invoked only to be overwritten. There is something that lies beyond the text's horrifying and vaguely horrified anthropocen(tr)ic attachment to its own control, most crucially the contingency within time's slow decantation to which the narrating consciousness bears witness. Despite the text's attempts to grasp the totality of the cylinder through what contemporary scientific discourse would call projection and modelling, even this highly restricted environment is too complex for the narration to be sure how the repeated assertion that 'all is for the best' (216) and yet 'all is not yet quite for the best' (223) will play out. 'All has not been told and never shall be' (219). Without the 'perfect mental picture' (204) that could only emerge at the end of time, when all projections and repetitions have ceased, all cannot be known.

Despite its evocations of Dante (Caselli, 2005, 183-200), then, *The Lost Ones* suspends the temporal logic of prophecy in which divine Last Judgment brings time to an end; it withdraws from an idea of an author/narrator, or some other god or demon in possession of a plan outside of the time of the text, from which all has already been decided and only needs to play out. But the text similarly withdraws from the temporality of crisis in which human action can judge and open the horizon of the future. It defects from a framing that centres human decision and its power of world creation and world destruction – the ultimate figuration of authorship. For there are no mechanisms that would enable either salvation or total dissolution: the cylinder is simply too vast for searching, or indeed narrative modelling, to yield results; but it is also too narrow for all searchers simply to give up at the same time. Although all is winding down towards the ‘unthinkable end’, ‘flesh and bone subsist’ (203) between poles of temperature and light that oscillate within the habitable so that a quick death is not mistakenly precipitated: ‘Then all go dead still. It is perhaps the end of their abode. A few seconds and all begins again’ (202). These moments of stillness are articulated as a ‘crisis’ (220), but they do not last. Instead, the atmospheric fluctuation repeats, causing skin to shrivel and colour to fade into greyness. Because the narrating consciousness remains in forced proximity to suffering within this just narrow enough cylinder – close enough to realise the sights and sounds of desiccation – it remains as attached to its scene as the searchers. It is bound, ceaselessly, to the position of witnessing up close and over time what it has caused, alongside that which plays out beyond its control.

The finite space of the cylinder produces inescapable proximity and thus searching and witnessing for all. As a consequence, it requires a series of ‘fundamental principle[s]’ transmitted and policed by habit to keep the cylinder in the territory of slow violence rather than of spectacular crisis in which occasions of ‘repeated violation’ ‘would transform the abode into a pandemonium’ (209). Because of these principles, there is change, but so slow as to play

out over geological timeframes. The arrow of time is indeed marked by ‘a great heap of sand sheltered from the wind lessened by three grains every second year and every year increased by two’, although only ‘if this notion is maintained’ (212). All happens by ‘slow and insensible degrees to be sure as to pass unperceived even by the most concerned if this notion is maintained’ (214). Here, then, Beckett’s invocation of a space and time that curls and unfurls, that is both impossibly proximate and finite and approximates itself towards the infinite, insists, simply, that the autonomy and agency of the human is not what it was. Textual echoes of the Holocaust and Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* persist in the final imagined scene and its one remaining searching body (‘if a man’ (223)),<sup>2</sup> invoking the capacity of humans to destroy worlds within the obscene rational systematising of a ‘Final Solution’. But the insistence of the ‘if’ and fact that all cannot be known in time also bears witness to that which exceeds the human – an outside to human agency: ‘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*’ (223; emphasis mine). *The Lost Ones* remains an uncanny double articulation of the power of anthropocentric agency and authorial world-making to create ruined environments in which the violence of destruction plays out, alongside a world in which one must bear witness to wayward causality and to time’s essential contingency that will never cease from interrupting human narratives of control.

### **What remains**

‘Scattered ruins same grey as the sand ash grey true refuge’; ‘Ruinstrewn land’; ‘Mingling with the dust slowly sinking some almost fully sunk the ruins of the refuge’ (Beckett, 1995, 197, 232, 244): again and again, Beckett’s writing of the 1960s and 1970s returns to ruins, to rubble, to stones and bones, and to the gradual stilling of entropic disintegration. Reading Beckett alongside psychoanalysis, Phil Baker has set out two central modes of unbeing

in Beckett's writing: one that moves towards dissolution or rubbish and another towards petrification or stone (1997, 137). Beckett himself seemed to describe at least one of these poles, although they are hardly fully separable in his work, as an expression of 'man's congenital yearning for the mineral kingdom' (Büttner, 67, n. 20),<sup>3</sup> linking the idea explicitly to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There, Freud finds in the compulsion to repeat a fundamental '*urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*' (35) and a desire to return to 'the quiescence of the inorganic world' (61); in other words, he describes a death drive that exceeds or, better, supplements the supposed universal dominance of the pleasure principle. In 1930, Beckett encountered a version of Freud's death drive through reading Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth*, which brings together the pleasures of intra-uterine calm and the pleasures of turning deathwards:

What biologically seems to us the impulse towards death, strives again to establish nothing else but the already experienced condition before birth, and the 'compulsion to repetition' arises from the unquenchable character of its longing, which exhausts itself in every possible form. The process is biologically speaking what we call 'life'.  
(196)

As is well known, and as Rank demonstrates here, Freud unbinds any simple opposition between the Eros and Thanatos. The instincts of mastery and self-preservation are not working in opposition to death; rather, they are

component instincts whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those that are immanent in the organism itself [...] [T]he



organism wishes to die only after its own fashion [...] [T]he living organism struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain life's aim rapidly, by a kind of short-circuit. (Freud, 38)

Beckett's perversely resistant 'slow going' on of 'slow violence' is clearly not simply under the guiding star of the life drive; but it also resists the 'quick death' of the short circuit. Instead, as *The Lost Ones* demonstrates, the cylinder and the lives within it grind through their repetitions according to hardly comprehensible injunctions. Each obeys the compulsion, or what perhaps deserves the name of a drive, to search for its 'lost one' (Beckett, 1995, 202), but does so 'after its own fashion', or rather after the fashion of the drive of the system. Sometimes the searchers are diverted by climbing ladders and exploring niches, with ascent and descent structured according to 'conventions of obscure origin' (207) in which some actions are permitted and some are within the psychoanalytic territory of the 'taboo' (208); at other times, '[t]hose with the stomach to copulate strive in vain' (202), 'making unmakeable love' (214). We are told that there are '[b]odies of either sex and of all ages from old age to infancy' (211), but the casual reversal of normative developmental time, which would run from infancy to old age, indicates that the usual trajectories and temporalities of birth, growth, reproduction, accumulation, and death are not in operation here. There are some few babies in the cylinder, such as 'the mite' who is 'mechanically' clasped to a woman's breast, but who turns its head away, searching for its own lost one who is not her (211). They do not grow, develop, or die. There is, however, some change or alteration – a trajectory towards stillness – but there must be no precipitate rush. Stillness must only be achieved after the system has wound its way through and down across time.

Driven neither simply by the pleasure principle or life drive, nor by the short-circuit of a quick death, I want to suggest that this Beckett text effects what might be called a creative

alliance with another version of the death drive that can be excavated from the interstices of Freud's writing. I draw here from Lisa Baraitser's account of a 'maternal death drive' that supplements Freud's death drive, sustaining a relationship to the 'life' as a form of ongoing time, but remaining 'otherwise' to the life drive or pleasure principle. Although repetition can be understood as a way of negating life, development, and change by 'restor[ing] an earlier state of things', it also contains elements of perseverance, preservation, and endurance that work through a tendency to shift and deviate, which prolongs life rather than effects its speedy dissolution. Whereas Rank uses the maternal to link the death drive to a state of calm before birth, and Beckett more than once uses this same figuration of a 'wombtomb' (Salisbury, 162), Baraitser uses the maternal as a way of making sense of the death drive's commitment both to 'iteration' (repetition) and to 'alteration' (deviation and development). Baraitser finds in a 'maternal' figure (who is not necessarily linked to biological femininity and birthing) someone who enables the 'unfolding of another life in relation to one's own path towards death and marks the point that alteration and iteration cross one another' (507). These temporalities of the maternal are aligned with practices of maintenance bound to repetition – a permanent labouring that goes on sustaining and 'animat[ing] "life" in such a way as to allow the subject to die in its own fashion' (503). Holding back and refusing the temporality of crisis judgment that would profess that it knows what is to be done, this drive enables 'a capacity to wait for the other to unfold' (509). Crucially, this repetition that sustains something unfolding after its own fashion is a form of labour that is not a matter of indifference to the labouring subject; instead, 'maternity', writes Baraitser, 'in its failure to be indifferent to the specificity of its labour, implies a return, again and again, to a scene that matters' (509).

What Baraitser outlines here is a time of repetition that keeps on coming back to what sustains life and the time it takes for lives to come to matter to one another. A number of critics have noted how Beckett's work articulates a concern with a Freudian idea of the death drive,

particularly the complex relationship between repetition's negation and the paradoxical production of value and pleasure, as iteration and alteration become a signature of the work.<sup>4</sup> And it may seem strange to attempt to read Beckett's texts, with their early explicit repudiation of the feminine and the maternal, in relation to a maternal death drive. But a death drive that is based on the fact that lives unfurl in relation to other lives, and they do so sustained by proximity and attachment, by non-progressive, sometimes numbing and, in many ways, deathly repetitions that are, nevertheless, not a matter of indifference, does help to make sense of the later Beckett's textual repetitions, and the ways in which violence, care, and unceasing attachment play out in scenes of catastrophe. Undergirded not by decision or judgment but a drive, there is a return, over and again, to a scene that matters and a scene of attachment, in both formal and thematic terms: 'A place, that again. Never another question. A place, then someone in it, that again' (Beckett, 1995, 169). Beckett's work persistently gives up both on the obvious accumulations underpinned by the pleasure principle and life drive, alongside the pleasures of extinction and a 'quick death'; instead, repetition and deviation return the texts, over and through time, to modes of formal and thematic maintenance that play out the care and violence that always inhere in scenes of interdependency where there is relationship of mattering.

The inhabitants of the cylinder in *The Lost Ones* bear the traces of human relations – 'Whether relatives near and far or friends in varying degree many are in theory acquainted' (204) – but, as we have seen, they are not driven by the relations that straightforwardly underpin progressive time: 'If [man and wife] recognise each other it does not appear. Whatever they are searching for it is not that' (213). Nevertheless, some things continue to matter in this environment denuded of most recognisable attachments: there is 'care taken by the searchers in the arena not to overflow on the climbers' territory' (210), while '[c]ertain infractions unleash against the culprit a collective fury surprising in creatures so peaceable on the whole

and apart from the grand affair so careless of one another. Others on the contrary scarcely ruffle the general indifference' (207). Here, the impossible search for each lost one is fundamentally enabled by the injunction that it is 'forbidden to withhold the face or other part from the searcher who demands it' (221). Even though the text makes clear that there will be no reparative order of harmony achieved when each finds its lost one – for giving up, entropic disorganisation, and the inorganic stillness figured by Freud's death drive will always come sooner – what is 'maintained' in the cylinder is a 'notion' of attachment and the slow motion of moving things that matter in ways impossible fully to conceptualise. As in *How It Is*, which imagines 'justice' as a repeated scene of dependent torturers and tortured of whom not one is ever left finally alone, there remains, we might say, a permanent principle of attachment in which nothing and no-one is ever figured as immaterial.

But what is to be done? The Anthropocene remains scarred by extractivist mining and drilling for fossil fuels that have driven the technologies and the action-temporalities of modernity. In the face of this deathly 'congenital yearning for the mineral kingdom' (Büttner, 67, n. 20), to borrow Beckett's formulation, Clark suggests that perhaps the most radical action would simply be to 'leave fossil fuels in the ground' (33) – to give up on the 'yearning' that has underpinned so much of the 'progress' of human civilisations and the urgent interests of our times (including fashioning a way out of disaster), and remain instead within the time of catastrophe. Doing so would entail turning away from the decisiveness of crisis action towards the profound uncertainty and contingency of a future in touch with the reality of the interdependencies of all life – interdependencies that exceed human capacities either to conceive or represent them. Stengers suggests that staying with catastrophe creates the conditions for new alliances with the human and more than human world that might produce different kinds of knowledge. These alliances also have the potential to produce others kinds of time that would slow down science's emphasis on decisive action with the matters and

attachments of the social (Stengers, 2017), and indeed, we might add, the more than social. Clark similarly finds in the global impasse of the climate emergency, this disaster from which no self finally can be abdicated but in which one must nevertheless go on, ‘an incitement to risk-taking, improvisation and experiment’ (22), even as he acknowledges that existing frames of knowledge and action have been shattered.

Beckett also offers a form of experimentation, although his work is not to be mustered into such forward-looking formulations. Creating texts that attend to the alliance of the inhuman within the human, to the rhythm of iteration and alteration within the death drive that demands that we remain alive to attachment and dependence, hardly offers an articulation of crisis that might be seized or a grand narrative that could precipitate action in relation to the climate emergency. Instead, his textual experiments use catastrophe and a ‘congenital yearning for the mineral kingdom’ as something to think with, rather than something to be repressed. These experiments test the limits of what can be conceived and represented, running through the time of the disaster but sticking with the attachments and interdependencies that remain. In doing so, they articulate a particular way of going on that turns away from the forms of time that have enabled certain groups of humans to go on as if they were not attached to the earth and to multiple human and non-human others, or not attached in a way that mattered. And in envisioning something of how one might live out the drive to go on, even in the midst of the ‘nothing to be done’, something that matters is ‘maintained’ in Beckett’s work – something that is more than merely a ‘notion’.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research funded in whole, or in part, by the Wellcome Trust [205400/A/16/Z]. I am grateful to Lisa Baraitser, Kelechi Anucha, Jocelyn Catty, Stephanie Davies, Michael J. Flexer, Martin Moore, Martin O’Brien, Jordan Osseman, Deborah Robinson, and Raluca Soreanu of the Waiting Times project for the discussions that have informed this chapter.

## Notes

1. Timothy Morton (2013) has described climate change as a ‘hyperobject’ – an object that exceeds our capacities to conceptualise or represent it, either temporally or spatially.
2. See Katz (2009).
3. The phrase in Büttner’s precis rather than a direct quotation.
4. See, for example, Connor (1994), Katz (2009), Salisbury (2012).

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