

*Take a Good Look at
this Living Corpse:*
The Mechanics of Black Humor
in Solipsistic Short Fiction

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AN HONORS THESIS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
TUFTS UNIVERSITY 2013

Contents

I.	Introduction	(3)
II.	The Incongruous Humor in Beckett's <i>Nouvelles</i>	(8)
	i. <i>Dissecting Beckett's bleakness: sterility and negativity.</i>	(10)
	ii. <i>Beckett's exploitation of conventional humor & the comic "framework"</i>	(14)
	iii. <i>Logic, exposition, and repetition: Beckett's jokes are not really jokes</i>	(18)
	iv. <i>Applying Beckett's absurd to the bleak human condition.</i>	(22)
III.	The Paradoxical Buffoon in Wallace's <i>Brief Interviews With Hideous Men</i>	(29)
	i. <i>The likeness between Beckett's and Wallace's short fiction.</i>	(31)
	ii. <i>Defining the bleak in "On His Deathbed": isolation and hatred of the other</i>	(33)
	iii. <i>Latent conventions of humor in "On His Deathbed"</i>	(36)
	iv. <i>Characterizing Wallace's complex, paradoxical protagonist.</i>	(39)
	v. <i>The role of "On His Deathbed"'s blackest humor</i>	(44)
IV.	The Inexorable Silliness in Solipsism	(48)
	i. <i>Beckett and Wallace's distinct depictions of solipsism</i>	(48)
	ii. <i>Beckett, his <i>Nouvelles</i>, and the warmth in isolation</i>	(56)
	iii. <i>Wallace, "On His Deathbed," and the ignorant solipsist</i>	(60)
V.	Conclusion	(64)
VI.	Works Cited	(66)

I. Introduction

There is nothing radical in claiming that short stories are genetically related to jokes. In fact, David Foster Wallace wrote an entire speech about this, stating that “great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common...the effect of both often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long stuck valve.” Like jokes, stories rely on compression and pithiness, hell-bent on providing some final, revelatory spark. In all honesty, the closest tie between the two is length—jokes and stories are similar first and foremost because they are short. There is something more deliberate, a fantasy of perfection that pervades shorter works, as though the author had more time and less to belabor. Neatly packaged and accessible in its totality, a story’s small span makes the whole seem more readily visible to readers—we imagine we can synthesize all meaning when there is so little to sift through.

Of course, this holistic grasp is still a fantasy, but it helps to believe that getting a handle on Beckett’s *Nouvelles* and Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* remains a thousand times easier than trudging through the Trilogy or *Infinite Jest*.¹ And if jokes and short stories are closely related, then the “sudden and percussive” should resound on several levels—the funny is best presented within funny stories.

Despite this, there is no “venting” in Beckett’s and Wallace’s novellas, no sense of decompression—though there is definitely humor. Their stories, simultaneously bleak and hilarious, do not aim to provide any sort of Freudian *cathexis* or amelioration; the reader is never granted release from the collection’s abounding negativity. And there is no question that the stories are negative: Wallace and Beckett saturate their black comedies with implications of death and solipsism, exploiting frustration and

¹ Beckett later preferred the title “Three Novels” for the collected *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*

“unknowing” to darken the human condition. Rather than alleviate metaphysical pain, their humor revels in it. Ultimately, Beckett and Wallace harness hilarity to expose the innate absurdity of man’s fruitless, existential wondering.

Canonically, Wallace and Beckett have not, as of yet, been compared at any great length. Though they share comparable academic roots and socioeconomic backgrounds, the two were obviously not contemporaries. They lived half a century apart and wrote during totally separate literary movements. Nonetheless, there is a haunting similarity between their collections’ humor. Written when both authors entered mid-life, *Brief Interviews* and the *Nouvelles* each proffer black comedy intent on deconstructing the human experience.

This essay will examine a relationship between solipsism and comedy. Solipsism, with its connotations of isolation and nihilism, could be considered the bleakest take on phenomenology (as if phenomenology already lacked in negativity). The thread—and threat—of solipsistic desire running rampant through each narrative marks Beckett and Wallace’s humor as black. In deconstructing their juxtaposition of the tragic and the comic, we can truly begin to appreciate the attitude behind Beckett’s *Nouvelles* and Wallace’s *Brief Interviews*.

The first chapter will determine the mechanics of Beckett’s humor. In noting his sporadic use of archetypal farce, we will establish that Beckett fully intends to be funny. Of course, this does not change the fact that he fully intends to be desolate, too—Beckett’s wit never lightens the mood with laughter; it just laughs. In recognizing this comic consciousness, we can then uncover the latent hilarity of his darker passages. Beckett employs hyperbolic repetition and exposition to brand a bizarre comedy that exposes the absurdity of narration, self-expression, and everyday existentialism. He thrives on paradox and incongruity to find the humor in all aspects of gloom.

The second chapter will detail the similarities between Beckett's *Nouvelles* and Wallace's story, "On His Deathbed, the Young Off-Broadway Playwright's Father Begs a Boon." Unlike Beckett's stories, with their pithy remarks and quick wit, the humor in "On His Deathbed" humor builds slowly, with the gradual reveal of the protagonist's hypocritical and ironic behavior. Again, hyperbole and paradox converge to form an absurd comedy that complements the negativity of solipsism rather than supersedes it.

The final chapter will explore why each author poses his negativity in the question of solipsism, and why this choice is inherently humorous. Each narrator clearly desires isolation and the rejection of societal norms, albeit one naively and the other narcissistically. Either way, both wish to be excessively sequestered to the mind. Solipsism is an innately ludicrous concept because it is an extreme—it is a hyperbolic example of man's attempt to fully understand the universe around him by co-opting it. Thus, the paradox Wallace and Beckett employ in the minutiae of their humor applies allegorically as well—solipsism, as a stance, is inherently paradoxical. It is a throwaway philosophical position, so impossible it is almost useless, forgettable. But Wallace and Beckett never let us forget—they shove isolated, self-centered existentialism in our faces until we laugh, however uncomfortably.

Kafka once posed that our species "gets pleasure out of exaggerating painful things as much as possible."² Beckett and Wallace's stance is that to ignore the humor in man's most vexing longings is to ignore an integral part of the human experience—but comedy should not be employed to ignore our painful phenomenological wonderment, either. In fact, perhaps it takes humor to get at the crux of our existential ache. Like pleasure and pain, mirth and misery are intertwined, a symbiotic relationship inextricable from man's journey. Laughter can be used to view our own metaphysical musings

² Begley, Louis. (2008) [Franz Kafka: The Tremendous World I have Inside My Head](#)

abstractly, in a new light (though not a lightened light, and definitely not an enlightened light). Our futile quest for meaning is innately funny, and solipsism is not the answer. Nor is it completely of the question, either. Such is the irony that pervades human life.

A final note on killing humor: with theories stretching from incongruity to psychoanalytic to superiority to semiotic, sometimes it seems that the only common ground in humor criticism is a preemptive warning:

“We all know that there is no quicker a way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it” –David Foster Wallace³

“Analyzing a joke can ‘kill’ it. I hope you will enjoy this book and will come away from it not feeling that “Berger hath murdered humor.” –Arthur Asa Berger⁴

“Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”–E.B. White⁵

Murder, dissect, kill, and other aggressive terms are often used to describe the analysis of humor. Laughter, after all, is one of those innately human characteristics that separates us from the beasts, and to destroy a joke is almost equal to a personal attack on mankind’s very consciousness, on our species’ fragile self-conceptualization. Perhaps in an attempt to appease the masses, Wallace, White, Bergson, and every theoretician who has written a blurb on the physiology of laughter feel the need to warn their readers, as if to say: the following essay will destroy that which you love—but by all means, continue!

I would add my own voice to this cacophony of cautious admonition, but the humor I address is essentially indestructible. Beckett and Wallace’s prose is already dead. This essay can only attain the metaphorical equivalent of poking at a carcass, and in doing so, unravel the complex, unattainable quality of their comedy that makes us laugh while we cringe, stuck inhabiting their dark, morgue-like atmosphere. In becoming

³ Wallace, D. F. (2007). Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed. In *Consider the Lobster & Other Essays* (pp. 60). New York, NY, USA: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company.

⁴ Berger, A. A. (1993). *An Anatomy of Humor* (pp. 60). New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA: Transaction Publishers.

⁵ White, E. B. (1941). Some Remarks on Humor, preface to *A Subtreasury of American Humor*

coroners, we may actually begin to disembody the deadening quality and sterility of Beckett and Wallace's prose.

II. The Incongruous Humor in Beckett's *Nouvelles*

In 1965, Samuel Beckett tried his hand at screenwriting for what would be the first and last time with his twenty-two minute feature, *Film*.⁶ The short film, a silent black-and-white pastiche, boasted a single character: a tramp in one of Beckett's patented bowler hats, simply named "O." Charlie Chaplin was Beckett's first choice for the role, though he would later be forced to settle for the 68-year-old Buster Keaton.⁷ The casting confirmed what many had already understood to be among Beckett's direct inspirations—the silent film hero.

Chaplin's "Little Tramp" legacy was an admitted foundation for Beckett's earlier successes.⁸ His clownery included scenes where, as a homeless wreck, Chaplin would purposefully get arrested just for a place to stay the night, or suffer nervous breakdowns in assembly factories.⁹ The backdrop of his film might be the Great Depression, or the sordid underbelly of the industrial revolution, but the core content of each feature was distinctly humorous—zany antics and slapstick chase scenes, all serving, first and foremost, to entertain. Chaplin may present a bleak, realist scenery, but he always comes out relatively unscathed and on top. He always gets his girl and—often literally—walks off into the sunset.

This juxtaposition, in which Great Depression meets happy-ending, perfectly embodies most theorists' conception of the comic's role: to provide *cathexis*, or "the release of pent-up energy, which often has a libidinal aspect to it and which is generally

⁶ The feature immediately followed Beckett's 1963 play, *Play*.

⁷ "Chaplin was Beckett's first choice for the role, but when Rosset, who had commissioned the screenplay — and whose Grove Press would publish it — sent a copy to Chaplin in California, he was coolly informed by a secretary: "Mr. Chaplin doesn't read scripts.'" (Talmer)

⁸ "At the queens, he developed a lifelong fascination with pratfalls and slapstick. Vaudeville was still popular in Dublin, and Beckett went often to the Theatre Royal and the Olympia. He was fascinated with the developing cinema as well, and never missed a film starring Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, or Harold Lloyd." (Bair, 48)

⁹ c.f. *Modern Times*

life affirming and celebratory” (Berger, 11). Arthur Asa Berger goes on to define humor as an instrumental coping mechanism:

The tragic hero, I suggest, provides catharsis; the comic hero provides cathexis. The laughter that comedy evokes in us is, in large measure, connected to the relief of a tension that has been built up about how some “mess” that the comic figures have got themselves into will be resolved. Our laughter suggests a recognition that somehow we will all survive—even if somewhat battered and deflated. In the ecology of the psyche, humor is instrumental and of enormous importance. (Berger 11)

Chaplin, with his lighthearted shtick set during the darkest of times, typifies the machinery of *cathexis*. Times may be bad, but *Modern Times* does not exist to remind the audience of their current miseries—its goal is to lessen them. There could be a war on, or some ruthless copper on his tail, but we can rest assured that Chaplin will always survive. Thus Chaplin’s displaced, comforting humor is designed to distract from man’s woes rather than augment them. And although Beckett clearly admired his tramp aesthetic, this “release” or “resolution” presents the very antithesis of humor’s role in Beckett’s work. Within his short story collection, *The Nouvelles*, Beckett never produces laughter to provide levity from life’s ailments. Instead, he harnesses laughter in order to illuminate these very ailments, the inexorable pain of the human condition, in all its ironic, incongruous glory.

There can be no Freudian “libidinal charge” or “life affirming” aspect to his comedy, for Beckett’s prose is essentially dead. The sole speaker of *First Love*’s collection embraces solipsism, forcing his ideal of sterility onto his readers while eschewing all human contact. Beckett’s protagonist refuses to take agency over his own narrative or physical body, never wishing to copulate, let alone procreate. Yet the paradox of conception abounds, for as he speaks of his solipsistic desires and bodily misgivings, Beckett’s narrator simultaneously conceives a story, a fictive world that he shares with his readers.

Paradox is the key to Beckett's comedy. In wielding incongruity, Beckett exposes the sheer impossibility of existential bliss to mock and revel in an absurd ideal. Throughout his mirthful narrative, Beckett never relents from solipsism's accompanying gloom and thus never offers *cathexis*. The resulting stories are both bleak and funny, proving that the two opposing tones are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are nearly symbiotic—Beckett's darkest passages offer the strongest opportunities for humor. Often, his comedy can be overlooked, mired as we are by solipsism's incessant, pessimistic poking. But through an understanding of the analytic theories of comic superiority and incongruity, we can begin to unravel the unattainable, indefinable quality to Beckett's comedy that makes us laugh as we despair, forced to reckon with his tomb-loving tone. The dense, bleak ambiance that initially overwhelms readers of Beckett's fiction can improve upon closer contact. Dissecting his corpse of work has the power to illuminate the subtle humor rather than to kill it, and what first reads as solipsistic, existential and depressing may instead reveal itself as solipsistic, existential, and hilarious. Joyful, even.¹⁰

i. Dissecting Beckett's bleakness: sterility and negativity

Humor does nothing to disguise the fact that the aesthetics of Beckett's prose are exceedingly bleak.¹¹ There are no characters in the *Nouvelles*; no relationships, no locations, no names. The only narrative fixture we are granted is an inner monologue, produced by an amorphous, doddering mind who wanders both literally and figuratively

¹⁰ Ileana Marculescu has touched on comedy's ability to reshape Beckett's bleak outlook, specifically concerning solipsism: "The wager of solipsism which, at times, looks sterner and more earnest than, say, Tertullian's paradoxes, Kierkegaard's fear and trembling, or Pascal's emotional wager of faith, takes on definitely the hue of a literary jocular device, being saved thereby from physical impossibility and ridicule." (Marculescu, 2)

¹¹ Adorno characterized this bleakness as *degout*, or disgust: "Disgust, a productive force in the arts since Baudelaire, is insatiable in Beckett's historically mediated impulses, freeing a motif from the prehistory of existentialism—Husserl's universal annihilation of the world—from the shadowy realm of methodology." (Adorno, 121)

through each story. This mind, belonging to an unnamed narrator whose age and location are also left unclear, preoccupies himself with the physical world only when chronicling the decay of his own body. In fact, he may or may not already be dead:

I don't know when I died. It always seemed to me I died old, about ninety years old, and what years, and that my body bore it out; from head to foot. But this evening, alone in my icy bed, I have the feeling I'll be older than the day, the night, when the sky with all its lights fell upon me, the same I had so often gazed on since my first stumblings on the distant earth. For I'm too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot, waiting for the great red lapses of the heart, the tearings at the caecal walls, and for the slow killings to finish in my skull, the assaults on unshakable pillars, the fornications with corpses. ("The Calmative," 47)

Such is the foggy mental state of Beckett's protagonist throughout the *Nouvelles*, alternating between longing for death and dying. Even within the opening passage from "The Calmative," the narrator asserts that he is impossibly both dead and alive, somehow getting "older" and "rotting" though he has just given himself an expiration date of ninety ("I died old, about ninety years old"). The waiting for the "lapses of the heart" speak of a body still living, yet the "tearing of caecal walls" is a function reserved for decaying corpses. This contradictory tone recurs ceaselessly throughout the collection:

"The End":

Old, lousy, rotten, ripe for the muckheap. Take a good look at this living corpse.

&

They found him dead, crumpled up in the water closet, his clothes in awful disorder, struck down by an infarctus. Ah what peace. (26)

"First Love":

Now the truth is they never gave me a hat, I have always had my own hat, the one my father gave me, and I have never had any other hat than that hat. I may add it has followed me to the grave.

&

December, I had never felt so cold, the eel soup lay heavy on my stomach, I was afraid I'd die. I turned aside to vomit, I envied them [the dead]. (74)

In each case, these sentences occupy the same page, denying readers any sort of stable grasp on the narrator's condition. These incongruities abound, and the narrator's perverse mortuary logic is perhaps best exemplified by his own term: the "living corpse."

However, this morbidity does not account for Beckett's tone of austere sterility as much as the style of the prose itself. We could easily write off these grotesque, macabre fixations as absurdly humorous if they were not enclosed by a tone of abject lifelessness. Beckett's meter manages to read as both dense and empty—hardly ten syllables go by without some interruptive punctuation or tangential remark, yet no plot or information is relayed. Reconsider the passage from *First Love*: “Now the truth is they never gave me a hat, I have always had my own hat, the one my father gave me, and I have never had any other hat than that hat.” All that can be revealed here is that the narrator was once given a hat by his father, yet, incredibly, the sentence contains several unwarranted digressions and the term “hat” is repeated no less than four times. It should be noted here that the “they” of this statement is never exposed to be anyone in particular and this “hat” departure has no apparent purpose in the text; there is nothing that appears to be related to either entity before or after this sentence and the passage itself does nothing to further the story's plot (thin as it may be).¹²

The tone of this superfluous statement, taken on its own, translates as quite silly and, as such, could induce pleasure through laughter. But the sheer density of these redundant, context-free remarks quickly becomes overwhelming. Obtuse and without apparent meaning, Beckett's prose demands constant doubling-back; it is easy to become lost in the deliberately drab confusion. Our resulting feeling is that of a numbness—an automated response to the high concentration of terse, linguistic nothingness surrounding all the death and decay. Readers cannot help but immunize themselves to this tone, succumbing to Beckett's muted sterility. As sterility denies life by definition, in reading *The Nouvelles* we become isolated from all outside life. Thus, loneliness manifests

¹² The following sentence: “I thought of Anna then, long long sessions, twenty minutes, twenty-five minutes and even as long as half an hour daily. I obtain these figures by the addition of other, lesser figures.” (“First Love,” 74)

through narrator's chosen solipsism, as does the physical act of reading, which sequesters us to this bleak fictional world.

The incessant redundancies that make up Beckett's texts convey a cold, mechanical atmosphere, placing readers in an infinite hell shaped by concise absurdities.¹³ Added to this stylistic void is the fact that very little *actually happens* in each story. The general plot sequence for all four stories can be mapped out rather quickly:

1. Unnamed narrator, presumably an old soul, is ejected from his current dwelling.
2. Narrator wanders unfamiliar streets, describes some type of physical incontinence.
3. Narrator encounters animal/child/woman, attempts to disengage from contact.
4. Narrator finds new, unkempt lodgings, removes furniture, waits to die.
5. Narrator ejects self from lodgings into the unknown.

Secondary characters barely exist, and if they do, they are also left unnamed.¹⁴ The only action taken is either wandering or escaping; the only desire or drive seems to be death. There is a striking lack of the typical narrative arcs—no conflict, no climax, no personal growth, gain or loss. The short fiction staples of romance or revelation are almost completely tossed out, nor are we presented with a standard beginning, middle, and end. Instead, the stories somehow commence after the end, dubiously following death. When this narrative nothingness is presented through Beckett's concise and contrary prose style, we are left with a grave, dismal ambiance. Clearly a quick, superficial summary of the general tone does no justice to the hilarity of Beckett's collection.

And it is undoubtedly easy to lose sight of the humor amid these obscure narrative acrobatics—death, sterility, and epistemological solipsism are not themes traditionally

¹³ Bergson characterized such sterile, repetitious toil as "lifeless" as early as 1904: "The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living—in a word, of some manufacturing process or other. This deflection of life towards the mechanical is here the real cause of laughter." (Bergson, 17)

¹⁴ This is not true for "First Love," though the alteration from the name "Lulu" to "Anna" may be the exception that proves the rule—the only named character in Beckett's stories is not fixed, impermanent, as if the act of naming is too much for the narrator: "Anyhow I'm sick and tired of this name Lulu, I'll give her another, more like her, Anna for example, it's not more like her but no matter." ("First Love," 74)

ascribed to slapstick or comedy. Yet despite these grim trappings, the comic is irrefutably present. Indeed, humor may be the most prominent narrative technique throughout the *Nouvelles*' stories, replete as they are with bewildering repetitions and ricocheting contradictions.¹⁵ This comic aspect is vital, for it throws the story's macabre fixations into flux. Beckett's unavoidable, inescapable humor forces us to question and reexamine his narrator's initially despondent tone.

ii. *Beckett's exploitation of conventional humor & the comic "framework"*

In his 1927 amendment to *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, "Humour," Freud stressed the importance of establishing a comic framework:

But how does the latter bring about the mental attitude which makes a release of affect superfluous? What are the dynamics of his adoption of the 'humorous attitude'? Clearly, the solution of the problem is to be sought in the humorist. In bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion... The expenditure on feeling that is economized turns into humorous pleasure in the listener. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (Freud, "Humor," 4)

Freud claims that the listener feels safe once the comic frame has been clarified, repositioning all dangerous or blasphemous topics as "harmless" and "pleasurable." The framework must be clear in order for an audience to "adopt the humorous attitude," lest we fear or, worse, take offense. Framing also provides a distancing or sense of detachment, granting readers a position of superiority and emotional control.¹⁶ Although Beckett's humor of choice is black, there is still no denying that he draws comedy to the forefront: he provides humorous overtones, and not subtle undertones. This comic

¹⁵ Beckett exhibits self-consciousness on this front: "All I say cancels out, I'll have said nothing." ("The Calmative," 48)

¹⁶ Bergson agrees: "Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity. In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter." (*Laughter*, 3)

vanguard is established through a carefully coded “frame,” which Beckett constructs by showcasing a few standard comic tropes including slapstick, toilet humor, and self-deprecation.

Slapstick may be the broadest comic trope of all, traditionally defined as “physical humor, often involving degradation by action. It is an infantile form of humor, an ‘attack’ on our claims to adulthood, importance, and status of any kind” (Berger, 51).

Accordingly, we find it amusing to see others humorously frustrated; usually this takes the form of a wild variety of bizarre accidents, mistakes, coincidences, etc.¹⁷ Beckett flexes his flair for slapstick by adopting the tramp aesthetic (a theme that resurfaces in nearly all of Beckett’s later works—hence the subtle yet relentless allusions to the Bowler hat, the precise cap that Charlie Chaplin dons as his finery). This farcical, situational humor, often considered to be the lightest and most harmless form of entertainment, appears incongruous when relayed within the collection’s sterile abyss:

I have two rooms, she said. Just how many rooms do you have? I said. She said she had two rooms and a kitchen. The premises were expanding steadily, given time she would remember a bathroom. Is it two rooms I heard you say? I said. Yes, she said. Adjacent? I said. At last conversation worthy of the name. You have no current? I said. No, she said, but I have running water and gas. Ha, I said, you have gas. (“First Love,” 78)

The passage can be broken down into several basic jokes. To start, there are a number of implicit exformative properties, chiefly surrounding the discussion of Lulu/Anna’s house.¹⁸ “Given time she would remember a bathroom,” is an absurdist play on a societal norm, as kitchens and amenities tend to be within the realm of reason. The premises cannot literally be “expanding steadily,” as readers can understand (and find funny) that one does not typically count these areas when reporting rooms in real estate; furnishings are hardly a shocking commodity. We can also consider “At last, conversation worthy of

¹⁷ c.f. Chaplin’s success with *Modern Times*, a silent film past the silent era

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace defines exformation as “vital information not *removed from* but *evoked by* a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient.” (Wallace, “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness...” 60)

the name,” to be in jest, as ‘good conversation’ rarely consists of one-word exchanges, let alone the droll topic of axial space.

We arrive, then, at the punch line containing infantile wordplay—“ha, you have gas”—a phrase fairly juvenile coming from a grown man speaking to the supposed love of his life (“It was my night of love”). Bergson and Freud trace the glee of farce and puns to childhood, when the pleasure of imitating sounds grows to manipulating words.¹⁹ The overly grotesque, corporeal subject matter of the pun is also a conventional, adolescent comic technique, which Beckett often explores beyond the boundaries of comfort.²⁰ The narrator’s defecation and decay is outright prolific, stretching our need for a comic framework. Our ability to stomach the grotesque, too, depends on the frame with which we approach it:

The grotesque can be terrifying or it can be comic. This may be because some kind of a comic frame has been established which conditions the way we respond: we escape the sense of terror that the grotesque can generate, via its fusion of incompatible elements into some crazy whole. (Berger, 36)

Beckett often fuses the gross with his narrator’s self-image, presented in a matter-of-fact tone bordering on apathy.²¹ This narrator is wholly unconcerned with society’s reactions to his form because he is never invested in his own physicality. Thus, he can make light of it with ease. Insult comedy, even when inflicted on the self, falls under standard comic trope.²² Hobbes classified this comic phenomena under the superiority theory as early as

¹⁹ Freud specifically refers to them as “thoughts which have been frustrated by rational criticism,” thus predating language-play. (*Jokes*, 215)

²⁰ “Toilet Humor” often accompanies slapstick: “This will give you some idea how constipated I was, at this juncture. It was, I am now convinced, anxiety constipation. But was I genuinely constipated? Somehow I think not. Softly, softly. And yet I must have been, for how otherwise account for those long, those cruel sessions in the necessary house? At such times I never read, any more than at other times, never gave way to revelry or meditation, just gazed dully at the almanac hanging from a nail before my eyes, with its chromo of a bearded stripling in the midst of sheep, Jesus no doubt, parted the cheeks with both hands and strained, heave! ho! heave! ho!, with the motions of one tugging at the oar, and only one thought in my mind, to be back in my room and flat on my back again. What can that have been but constipation? Or am I confusing it with diarrhoea! It’s all a muddle in my head” (*First Love*,” 67.

²¹ A direct example of “self-deprecation”: “He pointed out to me that the sidewalk was for everyone, as if it was quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category.” (“*The Expelled*,” 38)

²² Freud: “a particularly favorable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share—a collective person, that is (the subject’s own nation, for instance).” (*Jokes*, 175)

1651: “The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes, 9). As it is likely that Beckett’s audience does not comprise homeless deformed corpses, feeling an “eminency” at the expense of Beckett’s trampy narrator would not be difficult.

Even Beckett’s protagonist is somewhat of a standardized stock-character—he is absentminded, ignorant of social queues, and rigid/ugly in movement.²³ If slapstick antics were to set the tone of Beckett’s *Nouvelles*, then they would easily add up to a standard, uniform style of blithe comedy. But Beckett’s fiction hardly reads as lighthearted entertainment or juvenile escapism, precisely because these jokes do not form the basic fabric of Beckett’s novellas—they are merely brief digressions that set a sporadically farcical tone to counter the omnipresent morbidity. They are technically proficient, archetypal jokes, and allow readers to understand that the *Nouvelles* are not solely the existential, post-apocalyptic void Beckett proffers.

These short glimpses into stock comedy display the potential extent of the comic within each story. Beckett sets the humorous stage, Freud’s “framework,” with the more conventional slapstick, toilet humor, and self deprecation in order to establish laughter’s place in the narrative. With these ridiculous jaunts, Beckett gives us a peek into his harsher, less accessible absurdities; these traditional tropes open up the narrative, forcing readers to question why farce accompanies the bleak. Once we understand that humor has a significant role, we must then reexamine what originally appeared dark and gruesome (i.e., the bulk of each text).

²³ Bergson on rigidity & repetition: “Now, certain deformities undoubtedly possess over others the sorry privilege of causing some persons to laugh; some hunchbacks, for instance, will excite laughter. By toning down a deformity that is laughable, we ought to obtain an ugliness that is comic. By a kind of physical obstinacy, by rigidity, in a word, it persists in the habit it has contracted.” (Bergson, 11)

iii. Logic, exposition, and repetition: Beckett's jokes are not really jokes

Under this new slant, nearly every sentence is revealed to be ironic. Beckett constructs a unique, obscure brand of microcosmic banter fraught with paradox, forming strange punchy statements that defy theoretical definition. Unlike the sprinkling of small stock-comic digressions, this is the most frequent narrative technique forming the building blocks for Beckett's existential absurdism. An example:

If I stayed here something awful would happen to me, I said, and a lot of good that would do me. ("The Expelled," 20)

These subtly amusing, bewildering expository remarks dominate the overall tone and humor of the texts. They can appear with or without context, at turns driving the thin plot or providing a momentary break in narration. Likewise, they can be one to two sentences, in varying meters (though they always contain a careful rhythm). They are silly, but not in the textbook absurdist humor approach. In fact, it may be easier to deconstruct these "jokes" by what strictures they negate rather than propagate. Ultimately, these lines toy with our preconceptions of logic, repetition, and exposition.

The common methodical approach attributed to punch lines is what many theorists call the "defeat" of expectations: the audience is denied the logical consequence the "set-up" implies, and subsequently finds humor in the incongruity or surprise. Logic is key to most humor, as rationality is the code by which we humans conduct ourselves and form our institutions. Thus, to violate logic, we get to break from social norms, delighting in the aspect of mischievous play. Beckett's humor, however, straddles a paradoxical line. His jokes simultaneously subvert and adhere to expectations:

I did not investigate the cause, for I said to myself, It's going to stop. But as it did not stop I had no choice but to find out the cause. ("The End," 25)

The rain too, I often heard it, for it often rained. ("The End," 28)

In each of these two examples, there exists a peculiar sort of logic—it is reasonable that the narrator should hear the rain *if it is raining* and likewise sensible to “find the cause” if “it” does not stop. What we never expect is an entire production delineating the narrator’s thought process. These are illogical redundancies! It is completely expository and unnecessary for the narrator to describe his reasoning rather than simply supply the results of that rationale. Yet this bizarre choice must be purposeful, as Beckett deliberately repeats specific words (“often,” “rain,” “stop,” “cause”) to create a distinctive, droll cadence. This over-inundation of information defeats Norretranders’ property of exformation outright.²⁴ Beckett refuses to explicitly discard information in order to cleverly evoke associative, social connections “exploding” in the punch line’s reveal (thereby placing the reader “in on” a joke and soliciting laughter). Instead, his narrator reports far too much. Yet despite this inversion, Beckett still manages to draw laughs. After all, these exceedingly explicit statements are undeniably comical—absurd in their adherence to logic, their short stature and quick tempo builds to an accent remarkably reminiscent of a punch line.

In this vein, Beckett’s narrator creates a riff off of the obvious, often through repetition:

It's a receipt, he said, for the clothes and money you have received. What money? I said. It was then I received the money. (“The End,” 18)

Try in your pockets, he said. I haven't a thing, I said, I came out without a thing. (“The Calmative,” 60)

Terms are explicitly redundant: “money,” “thing,” “said”—ostensibly, it would not be hard to find synonyms for such simple fare. This needless repetition presents the opposite effect of conventional word play and condensation; reiterations are mechanical and

²⁴ “Exformation is everything we do not actually say but have in our heads when, or before, we say anything at all - whereas information is the measurable, demonstrable utterance we actually come out with.” (Norretranders, *iv*)

cheap, lacking in the subtlety or wit of a “good” pun.²⁵ Writing is typically criticized as repetitive when words reoccur on a single page, let alone a single sentence! This proximity cannot be accidental; the words are so hyperbolically overused that Beckett must be making a deliberate choice. Moreover, there are no paradigmatic forces at work, no latent content to be unpacked.²⁶ The narrator simply makes a statement, then follows it with a mirrored, repetitive action: he comes out without a thing, he receives the money. Beckett makes a mockery of the obvious, using excessive clarity to confuse narrative expectations. Even the word “receive” is subtly echoed in the repetition of “receipt,” as if the phonetics of the words carry as much weight as their meaning. This, too, is a silly construction reaching back to man’s infantile penchant for playing with sound—a phenomena closely related to “word play” yet simultaneously subversive of the technique.

This marked repetition only draws more attention to Beckett’s excessive exposition:

I told him I had changed my mind and no longer wished to go to the Zoo. Let us not go to the Zoo, I said. (“The Expelled,” 42)

The surplus of clarification is stretched so far it becomes laughable. All of the meaning is on the surface, yet no sentence resolves itself to be meaningful.²⁷ Though this style consists of explicitly stating the obvious, there exists, implausibly, an element of surprise—by steering too straightforwardly, Beckett twists the traditional narrative order. Well-conditioned readers never expect such blatant over-summarization. Consequently, Beckett intentionally invites readers to mock his narrator, whose technique mirrors a

²⁵ “It is the bad puns, which play on language in too forced or obvious a manner, that elicit our groans. In a good pun, there is a play on meaning; in a bad pun, there is only a play on sound.” (Berger, 45)

²⁶ Paradigmatic: humor based on implicit oppositions

²⁷ “Beckettian absurdity is already achieved as a result of the immanent dialectic of form. Not meaning anything becomes the only meaning” (Adorno, 137).

beginner's fledgling attempts at storytelling. The narrator deliberately violates the compositional principle "show—don't tell," instead preferring to overdo both.

Nevertheless, we cannot be allowed to simply write off the narrator as some caricatured buffoon, so hapless he cannot manage to get linearity right. This absurd zoo report is also coming from a voice capable of such complex and insightful thoughts as: "I whose soul writhed from morning to night, in the mere quest of itself... Poor juvenile solutions, explaining nothing. No need then for caution, we may reason to our hearts content. The fog wont lift" ("The Calmative," 64). This phenomenological poetry appears mere paragraphs away from the "zoo's" syntagmatic farce.²⁸ Beckett's narrator continues to brand himself as a peculiar and paradoxical breed. It is almost inconceivable that a narrator so laboriously straightforward in his expositions could also be so unpredictable. Beckett's narrator accomplishes the impossible: by recounting his tale with mechanical linearity and omitting nothing, he inevitably repeats everything. And what is repetition but an endless, automated cycle? Beckett absurdly creates an infinite loop out of a squat, straight line.

The *Nouvelle's* humor thrives on negation: it is not exformative, not paradigmatic, not displaced. It does not defeat or subvert expectations, nor does it present or resolve logical problems. Beckett's micro-humor is totally oxymoronic: phrases are often concise yet not condensed, obvious yet unexpected, logical yet nonsensical, linear yet repetitive. They inhabit an ambiguous space between humor and jokes—jokes, as they are punchy and microcosmic, and humor as defined by Freud:

Humour possesses a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes, for jokes either serve simply to obtain a yield of pleasure or place the yield of pleasure that has been obtained in the service of aggression... It is true that humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes, that it never finds vent in hearty laughter. But (without rightly knowing why) we regard this less intense pleasure as

²⁸ Syntagmatic: surface-level, explicit humor

having a character of very high value; we feel it to be especially liberating and elevating. (Freud, "Humor," 4)

If jokes are quick and easy, then humor is sly and enduring. Again, Beckett's prose contradictorily inhabits both spheres. The one-liners exemplify this: "I did not know the town very well, scene of my birth and of my first steps in this world, and then of all the others" ("The Expelled," 20). We would naturally expect a protagonist to be familiar with the town in which he had spent his *entire life*, though it is not entirely implausible he was that hyperbolically hermitic (just exceedingly and irreverently improbable). These statements are rarely uproariously funny; we "never find vent in hearty laughter," though they are immediate and elicit a snicker—more "high-brow" than day-to-day knock-knock fare. Thus, Beckett constructs humor out of off-beat, frustrating jokes thriving on a mix of paradox and hyperbole. Nearly every sentence mirthfully overuses logic, repetition and exposition to take narration to its preposterous extreme.

iv. Applying Beckett's absurd to the bleak human condition

The way these lines build over time, saturating the texts and toying with our intellect, places them in the realm of humor. With his unique absurdisms, Beckett establishes that what we find funny can also challenge us. Once we understand his incongruities to be humorous (though this humor does not alleviate the severity of the subject), Beckett's bleakest segments suddenly become palatable. In this new light, we can begin to unpack and digest the darkest of passages:²⁹

The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible under those of grass and humus mingled, I do not find unpleasant, a trifle on the sweet side perhaps, a trifle heady, but how infinitely preferable to what the living emit, their feet, teeth, armpits, arses, sticky foreskins and frustrated ovules. And when my father's remains join in, however modestly, I can almost

²⁹ "Light" may be a problematic term, because it implies a lessening of the existential load. c.f. Bakhtin: "There are certain works in which the two aspects, seriousness and laughter, coexist and reflect each other, and are indeed whole aspects, not separate serious and comic images as in the usual modern drama. True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness." (Bakhtin, 121)

shed a tear. My sandwich, my banana, taste sweeter when I'm sitting on a tomb, and when the time comes to piss again, as it so often does, I have my pick. ("First Love," 65)

Inconceivable as it is that the dead could have a perceptible "smell" through six feet of earth, let alone smell better than the living, there is a distinct logic—breathing bodies are not without body odor. Ostensibly, some eccentric soul could find one stench "infinitely preferable" to the other. Of course, to label this rotting stench as a bit too "sweet" or "heady" is another step toward the outlandish. The affixed repetition of "trifle" hints at Beckett's self-conscious wit—his narrator is trifling with a grave issue. Beckett continues to trivialize the cemetery atmosphere, implying that his narrator cries at his father's burial not for the usual reasons, but for the heightened aromatics. Even then, he can but "shed a tear"—no deluge of emotion for a deceased parent in this nuclear-family deficient world. The use of lists to describe the scents of the living (as well as the sexual allusion to "frustrated ovules") speaks to another conventional comic trope.³⁰ The juxtaposition of the banana, comic fruit *par excellence*, with the traditionally ascetic cemetery presents a silly opposition—we can easily imagine the trumpy, ambiguously aged narrator munching atop a tomb, bowler-hat clad, banana in hand. Once more, narrative exposition is hyperbolically overdone, specifically when "the time comes to piss again, as it so often does." Regular urination is a fact of life, unnecessary to clarify and the use of "again" and "so often" perpetuates the redundancy. This effective frippery punctuates the suggestion that the narrator pees over graveyards, in a sense further sterilizing the dead.

As "not unpleasant" as Beckett's narrator claims to find graveyards, there is little denying that this setting is unsettling. Though presented with humor, Beckett does not shed a positive light on the dead's permanent habitat. He distinctly does not wish to alleviate the traditional gloom of cemeteries, he simply a familiarity with the scenery—

³⁰ Berger on lists: "the comic catalogue offers the humorist a golden opportunity to be incongruous, the play with words and sounds by traducing the functionality and logic of the list." (Berger, 27)

his narrator is complacent in his crushing desire to join the fallen.³¹ If mere atmosphere were the only impetus of bleakness, some alleviation argument might prosper. As it is, Beckett proves himself capable of equally if not more negative sentiment when discussing mortality in the abstract:

It took me a long time, my lifetime so to speak, to realize that the colour of an eye half seen, or the source of some distant sound, are closer to Giudecca in the hell of unknowing than the existence of God, or the origins of protoplasm, or the existence of self, and even less worthy than these to occupy the wise. It's a bit much, a lifetime, to achieve this consoling conclusion, it doesn't leave you much time to profit by it. ("First Love," 82)³²

Beckett's narrator notes the range of his cumbersome "unknowing;" he questions the existence of God, earth's origins, and even the possibility of the "self." This tentative solipsism is indisputably heavy. Death is further alluded to, as he hasn't "much time" left. The humor stands out, however, when we consider the short phrase "consoling conclusion": the narrator's defeatist attitude, relinquishing all hope of metaphysical understanding, is hardly solacing, yet he mockingly claims to be consoled. Again, there is ridiculous repetition: "time," "existence," "life," and the application of a list has similarly been put to comic effect. The all-encompassing concept of a lifetime is hilariously diminished to both "a bit much" and "a long time." These trivializations are, again, narrative excess, producing humor through contradiction—rather frivolous, trifling axioms for so dark a subject matter. Beckett deals with man's most vexing existential questions, and then punctuates these vexations with the counteractive "so to speak." Following this line is an additional hint of the absurd, as though these bleak, arcane revelations could be "profited by" in any useful manner. Nevertheless, the passage makes a marginal amount of sense—old age and experience often *do* bring about man's greatest understandings, and then offer "little time" to apply them. The passage is impossibly silly

³¹ c.f. "They found him dead, crumpled up in the water closet, his clothes in awful disorder, struck down by an infarctus. Ah what peace." ("The End," 23)

³² Giudecca, Dante's lowest circle of hell (in which Judas resides)

and sensible at the same time, and neither quality overtakes the other. Beckett shows that two truths can occur concurrently; logic can ground the absurd.³³ The bleak can be hilarious.

This paradoxical coexistence is the crux of Beckett's humor, because it does nothing to lighten the existential load of the passage. Beckett laughs in the face of bleak certainties, that humanity is capable of such heady self-doubt as to question the meaning of existence alongside mundane physical phenomena (sight, sound). What Beckett accepts (and proffers) is that this dense, suffocating state of "unknowing" is ironic for a species that prides itself on and defines itself by self-consciousness. And traditionally, irony—especially the irony of the human condition—deserves a good laugh.³⁴

Of course, designating Beckett's approach as "the absurd" is nothing new. The umbrella term has been used to classify Beckett's penchant for paradoxical, ironic prose to the point of exhaustion. Absurdism violates our sense of logic, our sense of the way humans typically think and behave—supposedly to reflect some insight on the innately illogical nature of our habits and institutions. But, in typical obstinacy, Beckett's technique simultaneously subverts this process. As evidenced, there still remains logical merit to Beckett's jokes: "If I stayed here something awful would happen to me, I said, and a lot of good that would do me" ("The Expelled," 20). This is perfectly reasonable thinking, yet reaches absurdity because it barely bears mentioning—obviously something "awful" is not "good" for the narrator. In fact, this looping, redundant statement cannot

³³ Adorno agrees: The logical figure of the absurd, which makes the claim of stringency for stringency's contradictory opposite, denies every context of meaning apparently guaranteed by logic, in order to prove logic's own absurdity: the absurd does not take the place of the rational as one world view of another, in the absurd, the rational world view comes into its own" (Adorno, 141).

³⁴ "The genres of reduced laughter—humor, irony, sarcasm—which were to develop as stylistic components of serious literature (especially the novel) prevail. The most extensive form of reduced laughter in modern times (especially starting with Romanticism) is irony." (Baktain, 121)

feasibly further the plot, as nothing has been allowed to occur. There has been no development or action—which is precisely Beckett’s narrative goal.

This is the pervasive tone of the *Nouvelles*; these expositions form the structure of the whole, surrounding the brief scatological digressions and existential revelations.

Exposition is meant to clarify and further the plot, yet Beckett twists it into recursion. In exploiting exposition to cancel itself out, he negates the narrative and recedes further into his “unknowing” mind:

I should have taken off my greatcoat and thrown it through the window, but that would have meant thinking of it. (“The Expelled,” 46)

My first movement was to go, but my fatigue, and my having nowhere to go, dissuaded me from acting on it. (“First Love,” 69)

Each statement offers a motion, some potential development, and then retracts it as the thought collapses over itself. The density of these defeatist yet pert remarks begs the question—why bother to narrate in the first place? What is the drive, if sterilization—and not creation—reigns supreme? The narrator’s apparent motivation for writing is simply to write, an “I speak therefore I am” twist on the Cartesian edict. Beckett’s narrator longs to write something, anything, though what comes through on paper is nothing. He has not “taken off his great coat” and he has not “gone”—he has merely thought of it in retrospect, and noted it down to no end. It is relatively reasonable that he can regret what he has not done, but why bother to put it on the record? What is the use of exposing this information? Beckett’s “absurd” lies in the illogical act of narrating itself. He painfully narrates the abject nothingness happening within his novellas (though how “nothing” can happen presents another paradox) despite his futile, solipsistic concerns.

To write, and thus to narrate, is to succumb to the absurd, and Beckett wields this principle with irreverence:

I thought I could go no further, but no sooner had the impetus reached my legs than on I went, believe it or not, at a very fair pace. I wasn't returning empty-handed, not quite, I was taking back with me the virtual certainty that I was still of this world, of that world too, in a way. But I was paying the price. ("The Calmative," 56)

The narrator is only "virtually certain" that he is of this world (and another, which is never fully explained or again referred to; it could belong to the dead, to the mind, to some unforeseen dimension, the crux is that we, too, are unknowing). While inanely detailing the menial act of walking, he impudently invites readers to "believe it or not," aware of his dubious credibility as a speaker. This outlook, an eternal state of physical and spiritual insecurity, could be considered callous or pessimistic but for the ironic, comedic framework. And the humor is there: the trivialized optimism of "a very fair pace" is ridiculously amalgamated with the existential subject matter. Beckett does not lighten so much as he delights in the bleak. The "paying the price" punch line epitomizes this absurd pain, as it demands laughter while it elicits despair. The line, essentially without context, defines the "price" of "going further" or existing, while still narrating said existence.³⁵ Despite this painful "paying," the phrase also undermines the agony of physical movement and phenomenological dread of the preceding sentences. With humor, Beckett impishly forces a reexamination of the total.

This farcical reassessment brings about positivity. Not one that supersedes the dark, revelatory skepticism, but one that revels in it. Beckett constantly reminds us that he ridicules the act of narration as he employs it, and that his longing for death's isolation is ironically social, as he has directed his decay toward an audience. These abundant paradoxes make for an uncomfortable, almost unbearable, read, yet they are undeniably hilarious. Beckett wields incongruity precisely to destroy binaries. The *Nouvelles* prompt

³⁵ For context, the quote is preceded by: "I would have said, touching my hat, Pardon me your honour, the Shepherds' Gate for the love of God." And followed with: "I would have done better to spend the night in the cathedral, on the mat before the altar." ("The Calmative," 56)

us to reevaluate the human condition;³⁶ Beckett has us laughing at, while concurrently accepting (instead of evading) existential “unknowing” as reality. Ultimately, this is a dissonantly hopeful stance—despite his beliefs, he chooses to create, he has a narrative output. Beckett can still enjoy himself while self-conscious of his subsistence within the human state of the unknown.

³⁶ Adorno on Beckett’s solipsistic human condition: “what would be called the *condition humaine* in existentialist jargon is the image of the last human, which is devouring the earlier ones—humanity. In its narrowness and contingency, individual experience could nowhere locate the authority to interpret itself as a cipher of being, unless it pronounced itself the fundamental characteristic of being. Precisely that, however, is untrue. The immediacy of individuation was deceptive: what particular human experience clings to is mediated, determined. The individual’s claim of autonomy and of being has become incredible. But while the prison of individuation is revealed as a prison and simultaneously as mere semblance, art is unable to release the spell of fragmented subjectivity; it can only depict solipsism. (Adorno, 127)

III. The Paradoxical Buffoon Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

David Foster Wallace's literary influences have been catalogued extensively, rather effortlessly since the late author wore his admiration on his sleeve. He openly adored the metafictional Barth, the postmodern Pynchon, as well as DeLillo, Barthelme, Vollman, Kafka—the list goes on. Curiously, little to nothing has been linked between Wallace and Samuel Beckett, two of the more prominent writers of the twentieth century. This scarcity of associations is especially odd considering that Joyce played a major role in both author's lives (Wallace's mother would read *Ulysses* aloud to him throughout his childhood, while Beckett was Joyce's research assistant for many years), and oceans of scholarship have been devoted to drawing out each author's Joycean influences.³⁷

Of course, it is not shocking that academics would be loathe to find a connection between the two writers—on the surface, Beckett and Wallace share little in common, be it chronologically or structurally. Beckett, after all, was known primarily as a playwright whose page count diminished as he aged, his works clocking in at an average of eight minutes by the time he passed away.³⁸ His earliest prose pieces straddle an ambiguous mid-century divide, often hailed alternately as either the last modern or the first post-modern writing. Wallace, meanwhile, famed for *Infinite Jest*, wrote massive, sweeping novels of epic proportions boasting a “new-humanist” ethos and embracing Pynchonian maximalism. Tracing the post-postmodern maximalist back to an absurdist minimalist

³⁷ “The three friends taught tennis beginning in the summer of 1976, Wallace then fourteen, in the same Urbana public parks where they had learned. As an instructor, Wallace let his pleasure in words play out. Noticing that in tennis manuals overheads were usually abbreviated OH, he started calling them “hydroxides.” And he would name his teams after sections of *Ulysses*: the Wandering Rocks and Oxen of the Sun.” (Max, 9)

³⁸ “Beckett stands at the frontier between the minimalist experiment and its self-cancellation altogether.” (Marculescu, 5)

would not be every scholar's first step, especially when criticism of Wallace is still in its earliest stages (and criticism of Beckett, at this point, borders on hackneyed).

Despite these categorizations, it is hard to imagine Wallace lived in ignorance of Beckett's literary shadow, bearing in mind that Beckett is the 20th Century's second most published-about author and Wallace never left the world of academia. Beckett championed a post-apocalyptic absurdism that left its mark on the latter half of the century, and whether this influence trickled down directly or indirectly, it is unlikely that any 21st century author could escape his sphere. When a contemporary writer lays claim to a mischievous humor assaulting both author and audience alike, Beckett cannot be far from their mind. Consequently, when we examine each author's experimentation with the short story format, a peculiar bond forms; Beckett's distinct humor appears especially imprinted upon Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

The running foundation throughout Wallace's highly experimental *Brief Interviews* is the neurotic, solipsistic male. Though each story boasts a different format or protagonist, all call into question the need for relationships or the nuclear family given the individual mind's inherent isolation.³⁹ Moreover, each story manages to present this bleak outlook with a twisted, black humor and, as in Beckett's novellas, this menacing humor does not distract from the dismal solipsism on display. Wallace's humor never intends to alleviate the desolation he establishes through his oppressively neurotic narrative. Instead, the dark and the comic coexist, more, complement one another, goading the reader into a contradictory state of gleeful unease.

³⁹ "When *Infinite Jest* was done, Wallace found himself more comfortable with shorter fiction. The value of this writing was unclear to him, though, and did not make him feel he was using his time well. 'Writing is going shittily here,' he wrote to DeLillo in September 1996. 'I've spent all summer doing dozens of obscure ministories that seem neither comprehensible nor interesting to anyone else.' Some were about "the spiritual emptiness of heterosexual interaction in post-modern America," as he would phrase it in a later interview, others almost metaphysical aperçus about the hazy intersection of cognition and the world." (Max, 235)

Much like Beckett's *Nouvelles*, Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* heavily employs the first-person monologue, with core excerpts written as one-sided interview answers and others as mock-play monologues. The most soliloquy-driven of these pieces, and hence the most evocative of Beckett's style, is undoubtedly "On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, the New Young Off-Broadway Playwright's Father Begs a Boon."

This chapter will compare the Beckettian humor techniques of the previous section to define the black comedy in "On His Deathbed." Like Beckett, Wallace establishes his dark backdrop with solipsism, expressed through his narrator's assertions of hatred, isolation, death, and decay (themes that stand alone as dreary). But, again, bleakness is only part of the story—"On His Deathbed" is undeniably comical. The key to Wallace's humor lies in the juxtaposition of severity and hilarity within his characterization of THE FATHER. After all, this curmudgeonly speaker's words are the only text we are granted, and thus, his innermost views form the narrative. His voice *is* the story. As such, he is the sole source of being, and farce. Wallace harnesses paradox, hyperbole, and hypocrisy to depict his agonized protagonist, subjecting him to both sympathy and ridicule. In dissecting this haughty speaker, we begin to realize why Wallace amalgamates gloom and mirth, inflicting both pleasure and pain upon his reader.

i. The likeness between Beckett's and Wallace's short fiction

A comparison to Beckett surfaces immediately, awash as "On His Deathbed" is with passages including:

[PAUSE for technician's removal of ileostomy pouch and skin barrier; FATHER's evacuation of digestive gases; catheter suction of edemic particulates; moderate dyspnea; R.N. remarks re fatigue and recommends truncation of visit; FATHER's outburst at R.N., technician, Charge Nurse] ("On His Deathbed," 278)

As pioneer of theatre of the absurd, Beckett's influence is palpable. These [PAUSE] interruptions occur over twenty times within the story, in ostensible tribute to the trope Beckett endlessly employed (so prolific was Beckett's use of the silence that criticism cataloguing his output have been titled "PAUSE").⁴⁰ Wallace uses these breaks to exploit bodily decay to excessive and comedic effect, constantly citing various viscous "pouches" and "digestive gases" with enthusiasm—a hyperbolic motif extraordinarily reminiscent of Beckett's delight in the grotesque.

However, "On His Deathbed" is far from a carbon copy of Beckett's *Nouvelles*. There are key differences, specifically concerning context: while Beckett addresses an ambiguous reader, always alluding to his being heard with second-person phrasing ("living souls, you will see how alike they are"), Wallace specifies a particular audience. He gives context to his audience with the very title of "Deathbed," establishing that the intended listener is the one "young off-Broadway playwright."⁴¹ But this specificity is also paradoxically murky: the dying speaker first appears to direct his monologue toward a priest (referred to as "Father") who suddenly morphs into a nurse or nun ("you are kind, sister"). Ultimately it is revealed that, as the title originally stated, the dying man has always been speaking to his son, represented by a character named "YOU" (alluding to the physical reader). This is an unreliable set up, a metafictional ploy serving to expose the infinite layers of deception in the story—the father/speaker is not addressing a priest, a nun, or his angry son; he is addressing "you." But "he" does not exist, nor is "On His Deathbed" is a play written by an "off-Broadway playwright" characterizing a father figure; it is a piece written by the author David Foster Wallace presumably for an unknown audience, ergo, anyone who will read his book. This is essentially a less direct

⁴⁰ c.f. "Beckett's Comic Silence in the Plays of Harold Pinter"

⁴¹ "Living souls, you will see how alike they are" ("The Expelled," 46)

yet poignant way of noting the variability of fiction and audience. Mirroring his title character's confusion is the reality that Wallace can never truly know his reader—which is, coincidentally, the dilemma of Beckett's narrator, who remains decidedly frank about his state of constant ignorance and “unknowing.”⁴² This “unknowing” introduces a sizable difference between the two author's protagonists—Beckett's narrator is lost in uncertainty, while Wallace's FATHER is blinded by arrogance. Either way, we can laugh at their hyperbolized outlooks, always stymied by their own incongruous logic.

Otherwise, the two narrators remain bizarrely similar. We jump into each dying character's subjective consciousness *en media res*, never granted any concrete information about his background or personhood. Though Wallace's title ostensibly fills in the holes, the remainder of the text speaks otherwise: his narrator is unnamed, given no profession, age or nationality; nor do we ever learn the name of his son or wife. In fact, the details of the soliloquy are told primarily as memories (much like “The Calmative”).⁴³ The only action taking place within the narrative is the performance of slow, physical death.

ii. Defining the bleak in “On His Deathbed”: isolation and hatred of the other

The spoken narrative of THE FATHER's monologue can be broken down quickly:

1. Old man, presumably on his deathbed, coughs up myriad bodily fluids.
2. Narrator discusses the instant lack of love he felt for his infant son
3. Narrator describes son's grotesque skin condition/tantrums
4. Narrator laments the loss of his wife's affection to his son

⁴² c.f. “One day I witnessed a strange scene. Normally I didn't see a great deal. I didn't hear a great deal either. I didn't pay attention. Strictly speaking I wasn't there. Strictly speaking I believe I've never been anywhere.” (“The End,” 25)

⁴³ “To the fore, a few yards away, flowed the canal, if canals flow, don't ask me, I have enough trouble as it is in trying to say what I think I know. I sometimes wonder if that is not all invention, if in reality things did not take quite a different course, one I had no choice but to forget.” (“The Calmative,” 69)

5. Narrator reveals his disgust at his child's lack of intellect and paranoia concerning his son's successful façade in adulthood
6. Narrator begs listener to carry on hatred for his son following his death.

Much like the Beckett novellas, "On His Deathbed"'s humor is not immediately accessible. On a first reading, desolation decidedly takes the forefront. The anguish never ends, as the narrator unrelentingly piles on disdain for his son, his complaints only interrupted by grotesque moments of a [PAUSE for episode of ophthalmorrhagia; technician's swab/Bush of dextrocular orbit; change of bandage] ("On His Deathbed," 260). So THE FATHER's disgust is displaced onto the reader, repulsed as we are by death's fluids and mechanics. And if these grotesque breaks were not bleak enough, death saturates the narrative, as the very premise entails. THE FATHER admits that he is "bedridden, near blind, gutted, catarrh, dying, alone and in pain. Look at all these bloody tubes... I am dying, I know it. One can feel it coming you know, know it's on its way. Oddly familiar the feeling. An old, old friend come to pay his" ("On His Deathbed," 279). Already dying, somehow worse is the fact that he welcomes this slow death, preferring nothingness to his painful, isolated life.⁴⁴ Clearly, this does not set the stage for a lighthearted comic romp.

Perhaps more upsetting than these superfluous, grinding moments of decay, however, is the narrator's self-imposed isolation following his rejection of the nuclear family. THE FATHER immediately hates for his infant son, blaming him for the supposed loss of "the girl he married" in a blatant reversal of the oedipal complex:

The girl I married would have reacted very, very differently to this creature, believe me. Treating her breasts as if they were his. Property. Her nipples the color of a skinned knee. Grasping, clutching. Making greedy sounds. ("On His Deathbed," 264)

THE FATHER is clearly jealous of his son's access to his wife's lady-parts, maligning

⁴⁴ Beckett also expresses this: "they found him dead, crumpled up in the water closet, his clothes in awful disorder, struck down by an infarctus. Ah what peace." ("The End" 23)

his son's entitled "ownership" of what would otherwise belong to husband alone. Usurped by this infantile, half-formed "creature," THE FATHER demonizes his own offspring in retaliation. This loss of his life partner to what should have been an addition to their happy-little-family leaves him in an austere atmosphere, darker even than his hospital deathbed. The isolation builds from the very outset of this "demonic" existence, disturbing his concept of "a life that was *yours*."

Following the birth of his son, the narrator is further left alone with his hatred. He cannot express his true feelings toward the child for fear of societal judgment. In this state of omission, he sequesters his authentic self to his mind—a self-imposed solipsism. Lonely in his loathing, his only solace is his ever-developing disgust. Compounding this dismal mental space is the constant paranoia and frustration THE FATHER feels, that his honesty would be damned by normative society:

Why does no one speak of it, this madness? That your failure to cast yourself away and change everything and be delirious with joy at—that this will be judged. Not just as a quote unquote parent but as a man. Your human worth. The prim smug look of those who would judge parents, judge them for not magically changing, not instantly ceding everything you'd wished for heretofore—*securus judicat orbis terrarum*, Father. ("On His Deathbed," 264)⁴⁵

He fears civilization would be appalled to hear his true regard, that he did not immediately "magically change" to "cede everything" or feel "delirious joy" at the birth of his son. He lives in fear of being found out, while harboring hatred for the world and the woman he married, unable as they are to accept his alternative viewpoint. Not only is he isolated from his wife, he is publicly isolated from himself. THE FATHER's censorship leaves him stuck straddling a politically-correct line, constantly fighting his conscious desires to voice his disdain: "I will say it: evil. There. I can imagine your face. But he was evil. And I alone seemed to know it. He afflicted me in a thousand ways and I could say nothing. My face fairly ached at day's end from the control I was forced to

⁴⁵ *securus judicat orbis terrarum* = "the verdict of the world is conclusive"

exert over—even the slight note of complaint” (“On His Deathbed,” 260). The narrator is frustrated by his own façade, exhausted by the “exertion” of self-control needed to hide his hatred and subsequent solitude (“I alone,” he iterates). He is worn down by his torn state, a lonely mind trapped in a body that conforms to societal norms.

So THE FATHER is alone, hates his child, feels a stranger to his own wife, and constantly excretes putrid, morbid fluids throughout the narrative—none of which are expelled in a straightforwardly funny framework. But with the same lens that we acquired to access Beckett’s humor, we can uncover the deadpan mischief in Wallace’s collection. As much as the story initially reads like a dead man’s complaint, Wallace teases out humor subtly but surely, establishing his flair for the comedic through deadpan, bodily humor, and slapstick.

iii. Latent conventions of humor in “On His Deathbed”

Wallace asserts his comedic intent with the occasional one-liner, often deadpanned after a hyperbolic tirade:

Constantly sodden with his steam and in warm weathers came a rank odor of mold which she would have been appalled had I openly credited to him as its real source, his 'rocket' and tinkle, all wood everywhere warping, wallpaper peeling off in sheets. The gifts he bestowed. (“On His Deathbed,” 267)

The narrator here dramatizes his toddler’s inability to adequately direct his urine, grotesquely referred to as “sodden steam” causing “rank odor.” He again bemoans his inability to share his shock with his wife, who would have “been appalled” to hear him blame their child for causing wallpaper to “peel” and “mold.” THE FATHER’s disdain comes across as ridiculous, already expecting his newborn to be housebroken and in possession of full faculty of his bladder. Bedwetting, while typical of toilet humor, is not shocking from an infant. Thus, Wallace’s punch line, “the gifts he bestowed,” becomes a

sardonic punctuation outlandish on two separate levels. The obvious is that of the father sarcastically terming “piss” a present, in a manner similar to Beckett’s juxtapositions:

The vilest acts had been committed on the ground and against the walls. The floor was strewn with excrements, both human and animal, with condoms and vomit. In a cowpat a heart had been traced, pierced by an arrow. And yet there was nothing to attract tourists. (“The End” 21)

Eerily, both passages involve long-winded, grotesque details (of waste-covered walls) followed by pithy, farcical remarks. The rapid change in pacing creates an abrupt, unexpected riff, as does the sudden shift from gross-out to sarcasm.

A second layer of humor, meanwhile, derives from the meta-perspective of the author. Wallace’s complex comedy builds off of the slow, evolving mockery of his unreasonable narrator. Not only does he force his intellectual snob of a father to utter the low-brow terms “rocket and tinkle,” Wallace’s sneering punchline only further exposes his narrator’s unreasonable expectations—as if readers could identify with this Latin-espousing fussy despising his infant son.

Wallace also flexes his low-brow prowess when revealing his narrator’s sexual frustrations:

I looked down and saw him already attached to her, already sucking away. Sucking at her, draining her, and her upturned face—she who had made her views on the sucking of body parts very plain. (“On His Deathbed,” 257)

The jab is not instantly prominent, lost in the narrative’s drowning complaints. The remark demands a double-take, and we are granted voyeuristic access to the narrator’s aggravation regarding his wife’s sexual prohibitions. The result is sneakily mirthful; we understand the implication when she has previously made her views on “sucking” to the narrator “very plain.” Another dark layer of comedy evolves from the concept that this father figure is suddenly jealous of his infant son’s sexual prowess, yet again reversing Freud’s oedipal complex. Berger (and Freud) insist that sexual humor is extraordinarily

common, especially when it deals with frustrated efforts:

One of the comic joys of civilized life seems to involve interfering with people's sexual lives and denying them their pleasures. This has something to do with the power of super-egos, which continually "triumph" over the id, though we also have many so-called "dirty jokes" in which sexual activity is consummated." (Berger, 34)

Sexual activity must have been consummated to produce THE FATHER's offspring, but he is evidently not fully satiated, farcically unable to "triumph" over his wife's attentions (or desires). Admittedly, Wallace's appropriation of this trope at the bleaker level of incest and familial competition is probably not the "comic joy" Berger envisioned.

Wallace exposes his speaker to physical mockery as well, although these antics are related in hindsight:

I lurked in doorways and watched. Even at university this was a boy for whom Sophocles' *Oresteia* was weeks of slack-jawed labor. I crept into doorways, alcoves, stacks. Observed him when no one's about. The *Oresteia* is not a difficult or inaccessible work. I searched without cease, in secret, for what they all seemed to see. And a *translation*. ("On His Deathbed," 274)

The sheer image of this high-brow curmudgeon (still missing a physical description) lurking around corners and spying on his adolescent son is totally ludicrous. The contrast between the high-brow snobbery the narrator expresses alongside slapstick, silly behavior creates an incongruity. On one hand, "Deathbed's" father disdains his kin's inability to read the *Oresteia* in classical Greek (the line "And a *translation*" oozes snobbery in italics). With the other, he sneaks around his son's college—not even their shared home!—exerting a hyperbolic amount of energy just to watch someone read in a library. This "creeping in doorways, alcoves, stacks" evokes the image of a skulking, Inspector Clouseau-type character, juxtaposing the fathers' excessive scholastic snobbery with the figure of a bumbling buffoon.⁴⁶ This allusion mirrors Beckett's citing of Chaplin, a trampy foil to his narrator's solipsistic, intellectual aspirations (as the tramp thrives on

⁴⁶ Chief Inspector Jacques Clouseau was the protagonist of Blake Edwards' comedy series *The Pink Panther*. I refer here to the Peter Sellers franchise and not the 2009 Hollywood reboot featuring Steve Martin.

physicality). Wallace plays with the slapstick trope to expose the absurdity of the narrator's arrogance. This juxtaposition of absurdity and arrogance introduces an undercurrent of irony that is essential to understanding "On His Deathbed's" layered, latent humor. In fact, *The Oresteia* is so crucial to THE FATHER's ironic characterization that the slapstick passage is referenced again later on in the story, when THE FATHER begins his descent into senility, losing his treasured sanity:

THE FATHER: God, Aeschylus. The *Oresteia*: Aeschylus. His doorway, picking at himself in translation. Aeschylus, not Sophocles. Pathetic.

[PAUSE]

THE FATHER: Long nails on men are repellent. Keep them short and keep them clean. That is my motto. ("On His Deathbed," 281)

THE FATHER suddenly realizes (sans context) that he meant Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and not Sophocles'. He then changes direction completely to offer advice regarding men's nail sanitation. This alignment of nonsequiturs presents another blatant mockery of his snobbery—he worships the highest classical education as he simultaneously loses his mind, and with it, ironically, his intellect.

iv. Characterizing Wallace's complex, paradoxical protagonist

The force behind Wallace's humor grows with the irony and paradox involved in THE FATHER's credibility. Like Beckett, Wallace plays with logic, both following and subverting reason with one fell swoop. The narrator is clearly a cultured, erudite man who asserts his wit and self-awareness with vigor. He name-drops such figures as Nietzsche and Thomas Aquinas and makes sure to present his ideas clearly, linearly, in strong academic or legal jargon.⁴⁷ He maintains a pedantic, authoritative voice. Above all, however, he asserts his rationality with an omniscient, haunting sense of self. He understands that his views are not socially acceptable, and narrates "On His Deathbed" as

⁴⁷ "My self-respect was a plaything in those clammy little hands as well. *The genius* of his weakness. Nietzsche had no *idea*." ("On His Deathbed," 267)

if it were one side of an argument rather than a story. By all accounts, we should be able to take this self-effacing, learned man's side seriously.

But he loses all rights to credibility the second he reveals his innermost thoughts, no matter how powerfully and rationally he words them (including the many caveats and *te jure* invitations for scorn). His complaints are, ultimately, inherently unreasonable! He hates a baby—a helpless, half-formed subject. Because this premise is shaky from the outset, we can never fully align ourselves with THE FATHER. Instead, we are invited to laugh at him. It is as though he doesn't understand what an infant is, has never encountered one before, never even *been* one before. He constantly reiterates the line “no one told me” followed by some revelation of disgust—yet is not baby-preparedness an enormous capitalist industry? The “expectant parent” is a sizeable economic market replete with plenty of guides and goods accessible to any modern consumer. If THE FATHER truly is the “Cyrillic” scholar he'd like us to believe, he should be able to comprehend *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

At the same time, there is merit to his argument. His contempt can come across as completely sensible:

It did not seem obvious to me, I can assure. Have you ever actually seen an afterbirth? watch drop-jawed as it emerged and hit the floor, and what they do with it? No one told me I assure you. (“On His Deathbed,” 257)

The physical sight of placenta probably is pretty harrowing, no matter the prior preparation. And this speaks beyond the grotesque—there is merit to the thought that you can never be fully prepared for the shock and responsibility of having to care for an uncivilized, ungrateful, completely dependent infant. But despite the objective grossness of afterbirth “hitting the floor” and other reasonable claims, this is still an overly theatrical, haughty way to react. He chooses to express ordinary shock as snobbish derision, defending and intellectualizing his disgust.

Dramatic, intellectualized disgust becomes a recurring theme. THE FATHER's lens is a unique one—outstandingly cultured, he is able at times to rationalize his baby-hatred quite convincingly. And pediaphobia is, on some scale, reasonable—there is likely a tiny irrational fear in most expectant parents that we may not inherently love our child from the outset, or that our child will grow up to be demonic. But THE FATHER overdoes it; he exacerbates this phenomena, tapping in to this small yet normative fear to bring it to a preposterous extreme. His hyperbolic logic toes the line between reason and absurdity. This contrast, presenting the innately ridiculous with authoritative logic, provides an uneasy, paradoxical comedy. We can laugh at THE FATHER's pageantry while uncomfortably understanding his gauche points.⁴⁸

This build up of impossible rationalizations is at turns amusing and excruciating, forming the paradox of “On His Deathbed” that enables us to laugh at Wallace's narrator. Yet another contrast builds off his self-consciousness. Occasionally, it becomes clear that THE FATHER fears his disgust may sound too harsh. At these points, he preemptively backs up his malicious claims by citing certain ticks or traits, as if we would consider them empirically damning:

⁴⁸ Wallace asserts the hilarity of his speaker's disdain and despair by allowing his loathing to slowly simmer and come to a boil, his solemn rants climaxing in hilarious dashes of absurd pomp:

It was all disgusting. Ceaseless. The sensory assault. You cannot know. The incontinence. The vomit. The sheer smell. The noise. The theft of sleep. The selfishness, the appalling selfishness of the newborn, you have no idea. No one prepared us for any of it, for the sheer *un-pleasantness* of it. The insane expense of pastel plastic things. (“On His Deathbed,” 257)

He addresses the grotesque point by point, deliberately punctuating each carefully listed item for dramatic effect. “The incontinence. The vomit. The sheer smell. The noise,” treating the changing of a diaper as if it were the end of the world, as if this archetypal baby-baggage could produce shock in a sympathetic listener. This infant “assaults” him. Sleep is dramatically stolen, not missed—“theft.” Again, he points out that “no one prepared us for any of it,” though what he did in fact expect from his child is impossible to conceive. Certainly the advent of this helpless, subjectively “selfish” newborn “appalled” him. But what could he have otherwise anticipated? The notion of a giving, independent baby helping out around the kitchen and pitching in with household chores is equally ludicrous. This absurdity culminates with the punchline, “the insane expense of pastel plastic things,” rhythmically breaking the terse preceding meters (a list made up of short clauses) to drive the humor home. Like Beckett's narrator, Wallace grants THE FATHER an inane aversion to physical objects, hyperbolically referring to toys as “pastel plastic things.” This self-aggrandizing snoot takes painstaking efforts to make an ordinary object sound foreign, abstracting it from everyday life. The renaming is totally unnecessary; all readers would immediately recognize the words “bottles” or “pacifiers” (though whether he himself would recognize such terms is never clear). Yet the abstraction carries weight—children's toys are made of plastic, and they can be pricey. Despite these valid points, this deconstruction does not actually add logic to his argument.

I'd engaged him, examined, subtly and thoroughly and without prejudice. Please believe me. There was not one spark of brilliance in my son. I swear it. This was a child whose intellectual acme was a reasonable competence at sums acquired through endless grinding efforts at grasping the most elementary operations. Whose printed S's remained reversed until age eight despite—who pronounced 'epitome' as dactylic. ("On His Deathbed," 274)

Thus, THE FATHER's outlandish expectations even follow his infant into childhood and adulthood. And though he does not explicitly state it, the implication is there—THE FATHER expects his audience to sympathize with his intolerance. A child who finds spelling and arithmetic ("elementary operations") difficult? An eight-year-old who already understands the word "epitome" yet cannot pronounce it? Appalling. The narrator intends for these faults, which in reality would be forgivable even in a competent adult, to drive home his point, but they instead further expose his rationale's irrationality. His observations are the opposite of "subtle, thorough, and without prejudice." The absurdity of his patronizing hatred is suddenly convoluted by the son's later success as a "young off-Broadway playwright," which THE FATHER also scorns. He is unhappy when his child is incompetent, and suspicious when he matures into a fully functioning adult.⁴⁹ What would satisfy this man? Incongruity creates a clown out of this reasoning, long-winded intellectual.

But it is not simply that he chooses his child for a nemesis that stands out as ridiculous—the notion of parent-child friction is nothing new. A part of every parent can understand the frustration of suddenly having to care for a being that initially cares nothing for you. But it is just a part; this resentment belongs to a dialectic and most parents also love their children, despite their vexations. However, THE FATHER never grows to care for his son, continuing to secretly despise the playwright until his dying

⁴⁹ "But know the truth: I knew him, inside and out, and this was his one only true gift: this: a capacity for somehow *seeming* brilliant, *seeming* exceptional, precocious, gifted, promising. Yes to be *promising*, they all of them said it eventually, 'limitless *promise*,' for this was his gift, and do you see the dark art here, the genius for manipulating his audience?" ("On His Deathbed," 274)

day. The stance of filial disdain is not at the crux of his absurdity, but the fact that he hates his son so much that he devotes his final moments to a dying diatribe, never relenting, is truly extreme. Ever hyperbolic and hypocritical, THE FATHER ironically spends ten pages expressing disgust for a situation that he himself mirrors. For all the scorn for the helplessness and dependence of his grotesque child, THE FATHER is currently secreting fluids in a hospital bed, at the mercy of doctors and family members. Death has placed him in the very position he despises, and he never seems aware of this irony.

Berger refers to this trope as “exposure,” explaining that we feel an eminence of superiority and comic relief when a narrator “unmasks” himself as “stupid” or inferior.⁵⁰ Freud, too, states that “we compare the ease with which the we have enjoyed the sight and the great expenditure which would otherwise be required to reach this end” (Freud, *Humor*, 4). In unmasking himself before us through his own folly, we have been supposedly alleviated of some cognitive effort. By this logic, we laugh because it is easy. But Wallace’s humor contradicts this notion—he would never have his audience get off so effortlessly. THE FATHER is far more multifaceted than some pseudo-intellectual accidentally revealing his genuine idiocy and insecurities; this narrator still makes formidable points and, at times, devastates the reader with his insight. His honesty resounds on an uncomfortable, universal level, and “On His Deathbed” is by no means a simple, light read. Like Beckett’s aversion to “lightening” a bleak outlook through comedy, Wallace does not wish to lessen the reader’s analytic load by exposing his character to ridicule. THE FATHER’s innate silliness stands alongside his hatred, juxtaposed rather than superseded. Irreconcilable logic and irrationality work hand in

⁵⁰ “The humorous technique which involves ignorance is closely related to the techniques of exposure and embarrassment. We gain a sense of superiority when the ignorance of others is revealed.” (Berger, 36)

hand, together creating a comic worldview not necessarily more joyous, but enjoyable despite its overwhelming negativity.

iv. The role of “On His Deathbed”’s blackest humor

As in the Beckett’s work, the humor in Wallace’s darker passages becomes more accessible once the complexities of the narrator’s character have been fully bared:

It was Kafkan—you were punished for protecting him from himself. 'No, no, child, my son, I cannot allow you to thrust your hand into the vaporizer's hot water, the blades of the window fan, do not drink that household solvent—a tantrum. The insanity of it. You could not explain or reason. You could only walk away appalled. Will yourself not simply to let him the next time, not to smile, and let him, 'Have at that solvent, my son,' learn the hard way. (“On His Deathbed,” 259)

On the surface, THE FATHER here has expressed the darkest of desires: to kill his own child. Through neglect, he would have his toddler perish in the name of rationality.

Obviously he never did kill his child, however, so how seriously are we to take his hyperbolic tirades? How credible is his hatred? THE FATHER fails to recognize how his arrogance is perceived by an audience. This disconnect continues as his frustrated longings to “explain or reason” are hilariously thwarted; clearly a newborn cannot yet comprehend the dangers of the world around him, conceived with some intuitive understanding of chemical toxicity. The narrator’s grandiloquence invites mockery; he cites Kafka in the same breath he moronically chides an infant for infantile behavior.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the imagery of him smiling as his child pours poison down his throat is absolutely menacing. But if we place it within the context of his boorish snobbery, the concept is easily ridiculed—“learning the hard way,” ultimately means dying, but his murderous rage is fueled more by a need for intellectual victory than abject hatred. He longs to win, even if it requires homicidal negligence, and has to physically “will”

⁵¹ Beckett, too, has no qualms with killing children: “They never lynch children, babies, no matter what they do they are whitewashed in advance. I personally would lynch them with utmost pleasure, I don’t say I’d lend a hand, no, I am not a violent man, but I’d encourage the others and stand them drinks when it was done.” (“The Expelled,” 38)

himself not to passively murder his son—an idea so extreme that we cannot help but laugh.

Yet THE FATHER's disdain again maintains validity—it can be infuriating and exhausting to have to watch over another being at all times, his son constantly a danger to himself. And we cannot forget that THE FATHER, unaware of his arrogant aura, remains hyperbolically aware of how socially unacceptable his views are: “Feel it? the judgment, disgust? that one is never to say such a thing, to mention that *one* paid, that one's limited resources had been devoted to—that would be selfish, no? a bad parent, no? niggardly? *selfish?*” (“On His Deathbed,” 261). This insight prompts an unsettling, insoluble query: how can he be so painfully, unremittingly self-conscious yet maintain such bombastic ignorance? Why is he not aware of his unreasonable expectations, of the obvious humor derivable from his hyperbolic deficiency of humility? His delusions of logic and vigilance bring the reader into an equally ambiguous zone; we can never be sure if THE FATHER is irrationally disdainful or simply voicing a harsh truth that we, too, never dare speak. Lurking in the background is the possibility that his child truly is exceptionally evil, and that THE FATHER lacks the full faculties to express this menace, trivial examples and pedagogic language failing to convey an idea so abstract.⁵² Perhaps his playwright son legitimately represents all that is sinister or ungrateful or phony, and we only classify this monologue as bleak because it defies societal norms and touches on the uncomfortably base, sordid reality that an innocent can still be capable of harm.

If his self-awareness at times acts as a saving grace, it also lends credence to the insanity argument. His overt consciousness at times morphs into bleak neurosis and paranoia; like Beckett's narrator, THE FATHER has a penchant for repeating himself.

⁵² Wallace was known to be of the belief that “Postmodern fiction's original ironists—writers like Pynchon and sometimes Barth—were telling important truths that could only be told obliquely.” Essentially, some realities cannot be expressed through linear, coherent thought—abstraction holds the key to the unattainable. (Max, 156)

These redundancies, too, merge the border between hilarity and dejection: “Appalling.” “Bollocks.” “*Te Jude*.” Repetition caricaturizes the author while hammering home his despair. These (Hobbes)(C. w. Wallace)(Norretranders) repetitions call his autonomy into question—even while asserting the earlier “It did not seem obvious to me,” he repeats the phrase “I assure you” twice in the same sentence. If Bergson’s stock comic buffoon is one who embodies “the mechanical encrusted upon the living,” then these desperate repetitions bring to mind comically broken machinery, THE FATHER as skipping record. Furthermore, they place additional doubt upon his self-cognizance. Does he know he is repeating himself? Does he “assure” us for dramatic effect, or has he forgotten his words in a fit of senility? Do these reverberations strengthen his resolve or shatter it? Thus, THE FATHER’s entire psyche is in flux, as is our perception of him. He could be ingenious, brave, and objective in his honest introspection, or outlandish, senile, and idiotic with his unabashed baby hating. In all likelihood, Wallace’s very point is that he is both. He can be funny and doddering while making valid and damning insights; none of these dualities are mutually exclusive.

Wallace openly set out to create a non-redemptive humor out of suffering, as delineated in *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*:

They were funny but they were not playful or redemptive, qualities many readers had come to associate with his name. “I wanted to do a book that was sad.... It’s something I tried to do in *Infinite Jest*. Everybody thought that book was funny, which was of course nice, but it was also kind of frustrating. I designed this one so that nobody is going to escape the fact that this is sad.” (Max, 253)

The inability to escape is precisely the key to the comedy—his humor resides in a void alongside the sadness, the darkness, complex in its ability to evoke laughter and despair with one swift motion. Nothing in *On His Deathbed* is straightforward or simple—THE FATHER is fanatical yet insightful, alone yet surrounded, funny yet bleak. Wallace holds disdain for a “culture trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as

reassurance.” He would have us stand at an uncertain divide throughout the story, squirming in our seats through mirth and misery alike. Never full reassured, we can still find pleasure in our darkened state.

IV. The Inexorable Silliness in Solipsism

i. Beckett and Wallace's distinct depictions of solipsism

The epistemological position of solipsism is an inherently paradoxical stance for any artist to take. The very concept of a “speaker,” the only character present in Samuel Beckett and David Foster Wallace’s soliloquies, refutes the idea of an abjectly isolated mind. Each narrator explicitly addresses an audience, an other beyond his oft-fetishized skull. Even beyond artistic expression, solipsism itself is a paradox—irrefutable and indefensible at once, as Wittgenstein later postulated, the solipsist (and the writer) depends upon language to define himself. Language, the very impetus for communication, implies a second consciousness with which to relate. Narration ironically dashes the desires of Beckett and Wallace’s isolation-idealizing narrators, setting the stories’ pessimistic, dismal tone. Meditating upon one’s existence already has the tendency to get bleak, and solipsism may be the darkest existential quandary of all. What Wallace and Beckett perversely posit, however, is that if this paradox is life’s darkest, it is also life’s funniest.

Unsurprisingly, both Beckett and Wallace looked to Wittgenstein while developing their views on solipsism. Beckett traced the philosophical discourse from Berkeley to Husserl,⁵³ while Wallace openly idolized Wittgenstein’s “*Tractatus*” and later “Investigations”:

There’s a kind of tragic fall Wittgenstein’s obsessed with all the way from the “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” in 1922 to the “*Philosophical Investigations*” in his last years. I mean a real Book-of-Genesis type tragic fall. The loss of the whole external world. (Burn 44)

⁵³ “The best known instances of solipsistic talk (not always accepted as such) are given by George Berkeley and, closer to our days, by Husserl and Wittgenstein. While Beckett is certainly not indebted to the last two (at least not in this respect), he owes much both to some logical persuasions, and to Berkeley. So the roots of Beckett’s solipsism are in classical British philosophy, although not exclusively there” (Marculescu, 2).

Philosophically, solipsism has been abstracted and contorted throughout history and can no longer be whittled down to a precise, single concept. The essence of the idea, however, refers to the denial of an external universe independent from the mind of the agent. Drawing from the two authors' strong backgrounds in the Western epistemological and metaphysical traditions, we can accordingly form a shared definition of the idea: only one's mind is sure to exist. Each addresses this belief through a single character's monologue within his text, exploiting the innate irony of the soliloquy. The notion of the soliloquy presents a literary paradox essential to Beckett's and Wallace's stance on solipsism: speaking to oneself—for an audience—is a contradiction. Nonetheless, each author frames his protagonist, whose voice forms the sole source of consciousness in each narrative, as a solipsistic entity.

Rather than deferring to the handful of varying historical and theoretical definitions, it better serves our purposes to examine two author's texts in order fully to grasp their stances on the concept. The threat of solipsism runs rampant throughout each narrative, as both authors fervently contended with the theory that we are all "marooned in our own skulls."⁵⁴ In fact, Beckett and Wallace introduce the dark, isolated outlook of their soliloquies with close attention to the physical skull, particularly emphasizing the skeletal:

I treated my crablice with salt water and seaweed, but a lot of nits must have survived. I put compresses of seaweed on my skull, which gave me great relief, but not for long... And yet I could not go about bare-headed, with my skull in the state it was. ("The End," 20)

It is not my wish to labour these antinomies, for we are needless to say in a skull, but I have no choice but to add the following few remarks. ("The Calmative," 57)

Medical terminology and the very specific use of the word "skull" abound, as both authors conjure associations of morbidity and sterility ("head" would be a euphemism in

⁵⁴ David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed"

contrast). Beckett's "Calmative" passage echoes Wallace's earlier "marooning," as his narrator prefers to consider himself mired in the brain rather than the body. Not only does he find it preferable, he assumes that it is "needless" to say "we are in a skull," (of course, then says it anyway), as though his audience—"we"—have naturally formed this conclusion as well. The "we" serves a further purpose—it launches the concept that readers could be a figment of the narrator's imagination; "we" are in "a" skull, a single skull, rather than a multitude of individual crania. This conflation rejects excess subjectivities, instead sequestering all to the skeletal interior of one narrator.

Beckett and Wallace establish their solipsists as, first and foremost, inhabitants of the mind. Whether the entire surrounding world is a product of their sole consciousnesses or not, they would rather think of their entire self residing in, and originating from, the skull. Embracing these skeletal bounds, the narrators would readily reject all material outside of the mind. But Beckett and Wallace never allow their narrators completely to accomplish this desired seclusion, instead frustrating their desires with incessant interruptions of physicality and foreign subjectivities (all threatening to a belief in the "brain in a vat").⁵⁵

In the wake of this skeletal preference, the body becomes a gratuitous, grotesque nuisance, subject to secretion and oozing and all sorts of abject deformities:

My son oozed, exuded, flaked, "suppurated," dribbled from every quadrant. To whom does one speak of this? That he taught me to despise the body, what it is to have a body, to be disgusted, repulsed. ("On His Deathbed," 259)

Because Beckett's and Wallace's speakers explicitly indicate their desires to inhabit the mind alone, this corporeal disgust must stem from a shared frustration—each man feels he has no choice but to be a body. Keeping him tethered to the physical earth, the body becomes a "despised" source of pain:

⁵⁵ cf. Brueckner, Anthony. 1986. Brains in a Vat. *Journal of Philosophy* 83: 148-67

But even them, my pains, I understand ill. That must come from my not being all pain and nothing else... I who had learnt to think of nothing, nothing except my pains, a quick think through, and of what steps to take not to perish, off-hand of hunger, or cold, or shame, but never on any account of living beings as such (I wonder what that means) whatever I may have said, or may still say, to the contrary or otherwise, on this subject. ("First Love," 74)

A constant reminder of the inability to transcend physicality, pain becomes both the source and result of this woe. As Beckett's narrator asserts, he would gladly think of "nothing," reaching a state of non-being, if it were not for pain. Even pain would be acceptable if it were completely continuous, equal to a sort of physical white noise. Instead, pain is fickle; unpredictable and irregular, it is impossible to be "all pain and nothing else," as constancy would counteract its interfering, heightened nature. And pain is only a starting point: the forced attention to the nervous system leads the narrator down a rabbit hole of bodily awareness. Next felt are the mundane "hunger," "cold," and other bothersome "steps not to perish." A life isolated to the mind would never require attention to such banalities!

When the world of the body forces itself upon the narrator, it exposes other unwanted extremities hailing from a universe outside his mind. The narrator reveals this by feeling "shame." Shame is a feeling dependent upon the judgment of others, though Beckett's narrator attempts to subvert this reality by preemptively assuring us that he never feels shame "on account of living beings." This is wholly ridiculous; by definition, shame and embarrassment are reflections, indicating how we perceive we are being perceived.⁵⁶ As vehemently as the narrator would try to deny it, shame presupposes the existence of an other.⁵⁷ To "perish of shame" independently of other subjectivities would

⁵⁶ Marculescu cites the essential phrase "to be is to be perceived," explaining that it can be interpreted, paradoxically, as "to be is to perceive" as well. She notes how Beckett plays with this irony: "The laconic dictum, '*esse est aut percipi aut percipere*,' summarizes the impossible central solipsistic position. But if philosophical solipsism is no more than a provisional, ephemeral, almost fictional stage in the development of an argument, it appears in Beckett's work as one of the leitmotifs that lend his artistic construct the indelible emblem of an impossible wager" (Marculescu, 2).

⁵⁷ "It is shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know*, the situation of being looked at. It is shame which makes me live and not know, for to know is prideful and through pride I do not live. Pride is the mask shame displays to deceive

then seem an impossibility. Beckett appears to be aware of this paradox, replying with an equally preposterous quandary: “whatever I may have said, or may still say, to the contrary or otherwise, on this subject.” The phrase is rife with contradictions—syntactically it says nothing, somehow redacting the narrative in the act of narrating.⁵⁸ This destroys all delusions of logic. The narrator has explicitly stated that he is not credible, reneging all past, future, and present statements. This leaves the reader in an impossible void. After a claim like this, what are we to consider the story? What makes up a story when you scrap beginning, middle, and end? What makes up *this* story other than the one narrator’s authority? The statement is purposefully obtuse, an absurd response to a paradoxical situation. There is nothing concrete, “contrary or otherwise,” to grasp.

Meanwhile, there is a dark undercurrent of self-awareness to the statement—the narrator understands that he has “said” or “will say.” To “say” is to speak, and to speak is to address another sentient being. This, too, stymies the narrator’s solitary desires. He cannot express himself without denying himself the pleasure of isolation. For, through Wallace and Beckett’s occasional application of second-person narration, each establishes that his narrator is not speaking in a vacuum (though they can never know for sure):

Why not tell you the truth? That your life is to be forfeit? That you are expected now to give up everything and not, only to receive no thanks by to expect none? Not one. To suspend the essential give-and-take you'd spent years learning was life and now want nothing? I tell you, worse than nothing: that you will have no more life that *is yours?* (“On His Deathbed,” 256)

To know I had a being, however faint and false, outside of me, had once had the power to stir my heart. You become unsociable, it's inevitable. It's enough to make you wonder sometimes if you are on the right planet. Even the words desert you, it's as bad as that.

the “Others” look from knowing. I say that it is shame that makes me live because it is a driving emotion; it highlights awareness of our adequacies or inadequacies, it makes “me” an object” (Sartre, 350).

⁵⁸ Adorno found shame and laughter related: “The shame which grips the listener when someone laughs at his own words becomes existential; life is merely the epitome of everything about which one must be ashamed” (Adorno, 133)

Perhaps it's the moment when the vessels stop communicating, you know, the vessels.
("The End," 29)

Confoundingly, each author makes use of "you" in both the first and second-person narratives. Both alternate between the ambiguous, rhetorical "you," referring to themselves ("you are expected," "the words desert you") and a legitimate direction to the outside reader ("you know," "I tell you"). The ordinarily simple, monosyllabic pronoun becomes contorted in meaning. This hesitant hovering, at once a reaching and recoiling to the audience, reveals the torn state of both narrators. Each is uncertain whether the "you" is merely inside their head, or if they just wish it were so. Hence, each is stuck wavering between his lonely ideal and the perceived world around him, never a hundred percent certain which is reality. This state of flux is inexorably painful—he "writhes," awash in unknowing.⁵⁹

In reality, if there is anything each narrator asserts with assuredness, it is how impossible it is to be assured of anything. Such is the consequence of solipsism, an unanswerable meditation on one's existence, absurdly indisputable yet improvable. As a result, both narrators regularly declare their uncertainty; the phrase "I don't know" is uttered in Beckett's novellas easily over fifty times.⁶⁰ So nagging is this self-doubt that it surfaces far beyond explicit assertions—"unknowing" bleeds into the narrative structure, where metafictional and phenomenological strands congeal at the apex of uncertainty:

How describe this hat? And why? ("The Expelled," 33)

Am I the only one to whom this makes no sense? Is revolted, appalled? Why is even to speak of such revulsion not allowed? Who made this rule? ("On His Deathbed," 263)

I have retained nothing, not a word, not a note, or so few words, so few notes, that, that what that nothing, this sentence has gone on long enough. ("First Love," 76)

⁵⁹ "I whose soul writhed from morning to night, in mere quest of itself" ("The Calmative," 64).

⁶⁰ "I knew it would soon be the end, so I played the part, you know, the part of—how shall I say, I don't know" ("The End," 28).

Solipsism rears its ugly head, stymieing the narrator in his ability fully to commit to storytelling. At the same time, he cannot fully commit to isolation, either, for he has clearly resorted to creative output. A pattern emerges: the narrator interrupts himself, questions why he speaks, then, unanswered, continues speaking. This halting self-consciousness, too, embodies the paradoxical nature of the solipsistic stance: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” Once resolved solely to occupy the mind, what then does the lone subject do? How does he occupy himself? How does he occupy his time?

This irresolution has an unusual effect upon readers—we, too, are frustrated by the narrator’s wavering. In fact, both authors’ narrators display a particular hostility toward their unwelcome audiences. Our dismal presence as readers, plus the ever-unsolicited bind to the body, leads to outward aggression: “now that the air was beginning to strike chill, and for other reasons better not wasted on cunts like you, I took refuge in a deserted cowshed marked on one of my forays” (“First Love,” 72). Inescapably forced to consider the other, the narrator assaults us in retaliation. This sentiment is hardly encouraging. As narrators, THE FATHER and Beckett have established that it is decidedly not their intention to warm the cockles of our hearts.

Of course, this resentment of the reader merely compounds the stories’ overwhelming negativity. There has never been doubt that these narratives are dark, and these metafictional attacks coat a bleak attitude already brought on by the looming epistemological outlook. Marculescu agrees: “this concrete literary experience in solipsism is floating amidst a sea of pessimistic if not outright nihilistic moral connotations” (Marculescu, 6). Yet even amid these connotations, the idea of solipsism remains the darkest strain of existential dread. Solipsism breeds nihilism and pessimism

on its own accord. And ultimately, Wallace and Beckett incorporate solipsism precisely to form the bleakest and most complex meditations in each narrative.⁶¹

Solipsism is inherently paradoxical, and we, and the narrators, are insufferably stymied by impossibility. At the heart of all the hatred and doubt and solitary desires is the truth that humans long to “know.” Ours is a mute world, a world that gives us language and speaks nothing back. Despite this, we yearn for the world’s words and answers—even if this means an answer as dismal as solipsism. Abject uncertainty is worse than even the bleakest existential possibilities for a species that “thirsts for conclusion.”⁶² We long for order, logic, and closure in a withholding world (whether that world is of our mind’s making or not) and frustration stretches in every direction—we are vexed by the inability to secure neither meaning nor “nothingness,” to transcend corporeality, but more than anything, to be certain. Beyond all the cemeteries, all the odes to sterility and gross bodily secretions, Wallace and Beckett’s hints at solipsism form the true center of negativity within each novella. This is the dark matter that has a serious, lasting effect upon the reader. Once the question of solipsism is posed, whether it can be answered or not, we must contend with the meaning of our own existence. Couched in unknowing, this forced phenomenology is not an easy fictive realm to inhabit.

But there remains a patent aura alongside this bleakness: If these themes of painful frustration and longing offer up the darkest passages of each narrative, then, as such, they simultaneously offer the strongest opportunities for dark humor. And this humor cannot be ignored—as persistent as the presence of metaphysical bleakness is within both authors’ narratives, equally persistent is the comic. It is just as important to

⁶¹ “Always incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous, self-pitying and deeply alone, alone the way only a solipsist can be alone. They never belong to any sort of larger unit or community or cause. Though usually family men, they never really love anybody—and, though always heterosexual to the point of satyriasis, they especially don’t love women. The very world around them, as beautifully as they see and describe it, seems to exist for them only insofar as it evokes impressions and associations and emotions inside the self.” (Smith, 264)

⁶² Henry Shukman, “The Art of Being Wrong”

consider comedy's place within the narrative as it is to question the motivations for solipsism. In fact, these queries belong side by side, as they are inextricably entwined with one another.

ii. Beckett, his Nouvelles, and the warmth in isolation

Beckett's narrator arguably takes a more direct stance on solipsism, one that is farcically positive: he would readily embrace isolation. "Alone at last, in the dark at last." ("First Love," 81). Whether or not he believes in the possibility of achieving definitive seclusion, he repeatedly asserts his solipsistic desires. This mirthful desire breeds an absurdly warm attitude toward the typically bleak subject.

Within "The End," "First Love," "The Calmative," and "The Expelled," Beckett's identical, one-minded narrator eschews all basic interactions with the physical realm. He perpetually attempts to disengage from all objects, animals, and people—often, this translates to escaping from excessively "furnished" shelter and fleeing any personal relationships, be they sexual or familial.⁶³ These flights from interfacing or communicating demonstrate the narrator's wish to deny the world around him, as does his continual disgust with his body. But the subsequent escapades, involving physical blundering or tramp-like behavior, can easily come across as campy. The occasional camp does little justice to the sinister, mirthful quality of Beckett's more prevalent existential passages:

What mattered to me in my dispeopled kingdom, that in regard to which the disposition of my carcass was the merest and most futile of accidents, was supineness in the mind, the dulling of the self and of that residue of execrable frippery known as the non-self and even the world, for short. ("First Love," 70)

⁶³ Berkeley established an aversion to materialism and objects (furnishings clearly belong to this category). "All I can do," he wrote, "is to frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving that I can conceive them existing out of the minds of all spirits." (Berkeley, 26)

The “world” and “non-self” (i.e., anyone else), are reduced to “residue” and “execrable frippery.” So the narrator sneers at the concept of the other, likening humans to scum and painting reality as excessive. The word “frrippery” alone onomatopoeically oozes triviality, with its foppish bounce and gratuitous double “pp.” But it is not enough to despise the surrounding world; Beckett’s narrator takes care to dismiss his own body as well. Deeming it a “futile accident,” he shows his defeatist hand by prematurely referring to the body as a “carcass.” Not only a carcass, but a “mere” one at that, as though the vessel we meager humans have been granted to contain our consciousness is but a bother. What this narrator longs for, instead, is to be isolated within his supine mind, or as he lovingly describes it, his “dispeopled kingdom.”

Of course, the sentence takes on a new meaning once we have reached the final “for short.” This farcical, sarcastic use of the idiom caps off the entire sentiment, mocking any illusions of earnestness. Obviously this recursive, grammatically acrobatic statement cannot be quickly concluded by so inconsequential an axiom!⁶⁴ The “for short” preposterously undercuts the passage’s grim complexities, implying that the audience could glide over his preceding words with ease. Beckett manages to trivialize a passage that revels in trivializing, mocking both his narrator’s pedantic tone and an audience’s inability to follow. With one simple phrase, he displays a wicked, metafictional self-awareness, which he channels toward ridiculing reader and speaker alike.

Beckett cannot just plainly portray a character in the throes of an existential crisis, he must deride him at the same time, teasing out the innate absurdities in any attempt at reasoning. Even his depiction of solipsism is convoluted—the narrator perversely longs to be his universe’s sole subjective soul, considering solitude reifying rather than lonely. This preference paints isolation as a bizarrely cozy state, a “kingdom.” Obviously this is

⁶⁴ An old joke about recursion: “to understand recursion, you must first understand recursion.”

not the norm; if history is any indication, humans tend to consider outright solitude sad and disconcerting and an overall impractical way to exist. Strangely enough, the narrator's pleasant attitude toward solipsism eases the concept's traditionally bleak tone; the negativity in Beckett's work does not stem from his narrator's isolation. Perhaps this comfort stems from Beckett's personal experiences, as he once wrote to Thomas McGreevy: "I isolated myself more and more, undertook less and less and lent myself to a crescendo of disengagement of others and myself. But in all that, there was nothing that struck me as odd" (Bair, 198).

Instead, negativity stems from his narrator's *need* for isolation. The *Nouvelles*' agony derives from the sheer impossibility of achieving abject isolation, or at least of reaching certitude of that achievement. Beckett punishes his narrator by frustrating his efforts to be alone, for Beckett understands the incongruity of his narrator's desire. He, too, can identify with the fantasy of finding an explanation or "rationale for being":

Beckett wrote back in sarcastic vein, saying he had quite given up hope of ever finding a god to believe in... Instead, he hoped to find a persona within himself, among his own features and entrails, which would provide him with a rationale for being. Because all else had failed him, he could find no relief in anything but what he called a baroque solipsism. (Bair, 199)

But solipsism is an impossible ideal, and Beckett contended with this early on, writing, "It was not until that way of living, or rather negation of living, developed such terrifying physical symptoms that it could no longer be pursued, that I became aware of anything morbid in myself." The body inevitably grounds man, interrupting solipsism's pull.

Beckett's black humor, then, derives from gleefully exploiting his narrator's longing for a state that is ultimately paradoxical and, thus, totally unfeasible. From the start, Beckett has highlighted the fallacies of solipsism simply by publishing.

The Paradox of solipsism exhibits almost literally the same shape as that of Beckett's ultimate and most profoundly stated aporia: impossible, therefore, unavoidable. I can't, I shall. It is impossible to think of myself as the sole source of being, yet this is inescapably true for the poetic universe, the only one delivered by the writer, anyway;

and it is rigorously correct, both experientially and logically. Thus the absurd lies at the core of Beckett's dramaticules, not as sheer non sequiturs, nonsense and flat denials of meaning, but as the logical paradox which moves the writing hand out of its inertia. (Marculescu, 9)

Beckett plays with infinite loops of paradox, piling absurdities atop each other until hyperbole results in laughter. At his darkest, he creates comedy out of the inability to wholly invest in solipsism, always skeptical of "the virtual certainty that I was still of this world, of that world too, in a way." "Virtual certainty" alone is oxymoronical, and any number of his statements can be unpacked to their simultaneous logical and illogical conclusions. Which is "this world?" The one outside his mind or the apparition of an outside world entirely produced inside his mind? In which case, what would that make "that world?" Or are they both quasi-layered universes within the solipsist's rich interior life? And is the entire creation of fiction merely an embodied exercise in solipsism?⁶⁵ These abundant, ludicrous non sequiturs provoke infinite questions while smirking at the futility of searching for answers. In ceaselessly employing the nonsensical, Beckett ridicules and revels in the painful incongruity that is the human strain for meaning, and "the vast parable of solitude grows into hyperbole when the comic overtones start taking over" (Marculescu, 9).

Thus, if hyperbole is not enough to elicit laughter, the narrator's many foiled attempts at peace certainly suffice. As discussed in the first section, frustrated desires are key to Freud's superiority theory. We supposedly find eminency in seeing others fail and there is a pleasure involved in witnessing the thwarting of Beckett's perversely buoyant narrator. His longing for an impossible ideal, however bleak it may seem to the rest of humanity, is theoretically naïve, and we are amused by both the absurdity and the

⁶⁵ "It is impossible to think of myself as the sole source of being, yet this is inescapably true for the poetic universe, the only one delivered by the writer, anyway." (Bair, 198)

frustration. By illustrating how very impractical his narrator's desires are, Beckett teases out the humor inherent in all paradox, even if solipsism may well be the darkest.

iii. Wallace, "On His Deathbed," & the ignorant solipsist

While Beckett could identify with the allure of solipsism, Wallace instead preoccupied himself with the horror:⁶⁶

One of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism. And so he trashed everything he'd been lauded for in the "Tractatus" and wrote the "Investigations," which is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made. So he makes language dependent on human community, but unfortunately we're still stuck with the idea that there is this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, in language, even if we're at least all in here together. This eliminated solipsism, but not the horror. Because we're still stuck. (Burn, 44)

Less sympathetic and ever moralistic, Wallace condemns his characters by portraying them as solipsists. If Beckett's solipsist is naïve, then Wallace's is narcissistic. Where Beckett's narrator was hyperbolically and hilariously stymied by his inability to stay certain, Wallace's is ridiculed for his delusions of certitude. This haughty attitude of self-assuredness becomes preposterous through THE FATHER's hypocritical damnation of his son:

Need for reassurance? What reassurance? He never doubted. He knew it all belonged to him. He never doubted. As if it were due him. As if he deserved it. Insanity. Solipsism. ("On His Deathbed," 260)

THE FATHER bemoans his son's lack of introspection, ironically unaware that these insults could easily be turned against him. This father speaks as though he himself does not display exaggerated solipsistic characteristics, or that he himself is not guilty of "never doubting." Again, the narrator exhibits Beckettian tendencies of desiring abject isolation—despising all objects ("pastel plastic things"), shirking human relationships,

⁶⁶ "Premier Amour" written between October 28 and November 12. At first it became another "trunk" manuscript and was not published until 1970 in French. One of the reasons Beckett withheld it was that it was too autobiographical, for he was still struggling to perfect the techniques of disguise and concealment that infuse his later writings." (Bair, 358)

openly admitting that his son “taught him what it was to despise the body.”⁶⁷ And as Zadie Smith says, the resulting sterility of the narrative “feels unbearable”:

The weight of things stacked against the reader insurmountable: missing context, rhetorical complication, awful people, grotesque or absurd subject matter, language that is— at the same time!— childish scatological and annoyingly obscure. (Smith, 273)

Metaphysically stymied, the structure of the story exudes an awareness of solipsism’s impossible paradox even if the narrator does not. THE FATHER shies away from exposition, recoiling inwardly while inevitably reaching out to an audience. This conundrum is reflected in his constant halting and doubling back while speaking:

Trying to—and—yes at the pillow, looking at the pillow, gazing at and thought of it, how quickly it—how few movements required not just to wish but to will it, to impose my own will as he so blithely always did, lying there pretending to be too feverish to see my—but it was, it was pathetic, not even—I was thinking of my weight on the pillow as a man in arrears thinks of sudden fortune, sweepstakes, inheritance. (“On His Deathbed,” 269)

Language fails THE FATHER—he simply cannot narrate his pain in a satisfactory manner. Frustrated in his efforts to speak clearly, THE FATHER paradoxically shares his conflict with the reader by demonstrating his verbal inability to share the conflict.

Within the confines of the narrative, however, THE FATHER’s impossible double standards manifest in the divide between condemning and succumbing to solipsism. Though he disdains the selfish, narcissistic qualities of his son, his desires are equally egocentric:

Why not tell you the truth? That your life is to be forfeit? That you are expected now to give up everything and not, only to receive no thanks by to expect none? Not one. To suspend the essential give-and-take you'd spent years learning was life and now want nothing? I tell you, worse than nothing: that you will have no more life that *is yours?* (“On His Deathbed,” 256)

In a sense, the birth of this child has disturbed his own particular “dispeopled kingdom.”

The “essential give-and-take” he’d learned “was life” allows no room for this new filial subjectivity—THE FATHER is wholly unpracticed and shocked by the idea of “giving”

⁶⁷ “Absorbed wholly in his own sensations. Reflectionless. At home in his body as only one whose body is not *his job* can be at home. Filled with himself right to the edges like a swollen pond. He *was* his body.” (“On His Deathbed”)

anything. Accordingly, worse than “nothing” is to be stuck in a life that is not “yours.” THE FATHER goes far beyond wishing for a reasonable adult life—he is hyperbolically hateful of this new subject who threatens THE FATHER’s own subjectivity with its incessant needs. THE FATHER would recede into solipsism rather than contend with the “ungrateful,” corporeal result of procreation. Wallace makes it unbearably painful for his narrator to acknowledge that there is something beyond his cushy interior life; to give up complete agency over his own personhood is THE FATHER’s worst kind of horror. A metafictional layer of condescension emerges: to Wallace, this secluded stance is morally unsound and dangerous, yet he perversely would have THE FATHER fear the opposite of his authorial ideal.⁶⁸

Wallace’s dark humor stems from THE FATHER’S overwhelming hypocrisy. In his diatribes, he never “doubts” the harsh demonization of his son, though he is savvy enough to always be poised and ready to counteract the doubt of others. This defensive stance is a common motif in Wallace’s work: “every possible criticism was already embedded in the text. *Brief Interviews* was not so much anti-ironic as ‘meta-ironic,’ driven much like the characters in its stories by the fear of being known” (Max, 255).⁶⁹ Wallace presents THE FATHER as woefully unaware how transparent these attacks and defenses can come across, and thus subjects him to ridicule. THE FATHER’s ultimate desires to reveal the wickedness of his son are hilariously subverted by his failed self-characterization. This is a type of humor that builds, one that cannot be summed up in a simple, pithy passage. THE FATHER, rather, becomes more frustrated and more ridiculous over time, both within the narrative (the gradual growth of his son) and the text (the gradual, hyperbolic backlog of complaints). Constantly striving to isolate himself,

⁶⁸ “Obviously, meditating on the evils of mankind, one may emerge as a solipsist—a pathway current in Oriental metaphysics. The idea that every other is a projection of self transcends, however, the implicit moral meditation and takes one abruptly into a hard-to-accept ontological statement.” (Marculescu, 6)

⁶⁹ AO Scott criticism as read DT Max. (Max, 255)

THE FATHER finds himself at the climax of “On His Deathbed” speaking to the one subject he despises the most, the one who again and again drew him back to the physical world: his son. We have no choice but to laugh at these frustrated desires, reveling in the paradox of a narrator preposterously condemning solipsism while succumbing to it himself.

V. Conclusion

i. The paradoxical, symbiotic relationship between solipsism and humor

Paradox abounds in the works of Beckett and Wallace. Incongruity is omnipresent, woven into the very minutiae of Beckett's bizarre jokes and contorted throughout Wallace's complicated characterization of THE FATHER. These miniscule contradictions essential to every sentence in "On His Deathbed" and the *Nouvelles* also feed into the collections' larger, allegorical paradox: the impossibility of solipsism and existential certainty. Hyperbolically put to use, paradox enables Beckett and Wallace to annihilate the dualisms that often define our realities. They establish that the horrific can be humorous, and the humorous can be horrific. We can laugh and cry about our impossible situation; it is our lot in life to never find conclusive meaning though we continually strive for conclusion nonetheless.

As clearly Beckett and Wallace's ostensible attitudes toward solipsism veer onto disparate paths, each is still able to tease out the humor inherent in the age-old concept of the existential crisis. If the absurd's job was to reveal life's inexorable ironies, then addressing the humor in solipsism is only the logical extreme of this already preposterous comic act. Solipsism is an impossible ideal, and to strive for it, innately foolish. With hyperbole and hypocrisy, Beckett and Wallace make a mockery of any being attempting to completely invest themselves in an ultimately unfeasible philosophical standard.

Marculescu outlines Beckett's toying with the concept:

Solipsism is... touched upon, toyed with, and, in the end, deconstructed as surely as any other, formal or informal, intellectual proposition that occurs to [Beckett]; the term "solipsistic" itself appears in the texts qualified in ironic or even oxymoronic ways. But even as it becomes more qualified, it is negated as such... humor pulverizing everything, even the hardest of philosophical dilemma, into a shining cloud of stardust. (Marculescu, 9)

Solipsism is played with as a means to reach a larger, more abstract concept—that of the human search for meaning. As such, Wallace and Beckett do not simply disdain of their idiotic, isolation-seeking protagonists, as the desire for solipsistic certainty is only a hyperbolic example of our race’s longing to reach phenomenological conclusions. Wallace explained this plainly in his essay on Kafka’s dark comedy: “the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home” (Wallace, “Some Remarks,” 66). The basic drive to understand one’s place in the universe applies to most sentience-claiming individuals, whether they believe that universe to be of one mind’s making or an unknowable, chaotic vacuum.

The “horror” stems from the sheer impossibility of ever reaching an existential conclusion. This “struggle” and the subsequent frustration failure breeds can easily delve into sympathetic territory, as this is a sentiment most readers of the human race could familiarize with. However, Beckett and Wallace choose instead to highlight the intrinsic humor within our impossible situation. The human condition can be both tragic and comic. Beckett’s narrator becomes lost in unknowing and Wallace’s FATHER is deemed ignorant in his assuredness, yet their struggles are poignant. Their “endless and impossible” is home to us all; we are all in a skull.

Humor does not “pulverize” the solipsism—solipsism is innately hilarious. Just as a symbiotic relationship exists between the preposterous and the paradoxical, so does humor feed off the most laughably austere existential stance. Hyperbolic and impossible, solipsism is an extreme that simultaneously symbolizes both our drive and abject inability to ever “know” our reason for existence. In teasing out the humor, Beckett and Wallace have not given an answer for man’s existence, and have thus not alleviated the pain of insufferable, incessant wondering. They have simply made our pain easier to laugh at.

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