YAEL LEVIN

# Univocity, Exhaustion and Failing Better: Reading Beckett with Disability Studies

This essay proposes to untangle the problem of the *and* linking disability and Beckett studies, to borrow Shoshana Felman's formulation: 'the apparently neutral connective word, the misleadingly innocent, colorless, meaningless copulative conjunction' (1982, 5).

The emergence of theories of disability in the last decades has rendered figurative interpretation suspect; neglect of literal and material truth has been hailed unethical, the exercising of an ableist bias that utilizes physical impairment as a rhetorical device. Rubin Rabinovitz's claim that 'it is unimportant whether [Beckett's] fictional entities conform to their material counterparts', and that what is at issue 'is how physical objects can be used in portrayals of the world of thought and feeling' (317–18), raises concerns amongst disability studies scholars. A case in point, Ato Quayson notes that 'what is quite odd in studies of Beckett to date is the degree to which physical disability is assimilated to a *variety* of

*Journal of Beckett Studies* 27.2 (2018): 157–174
Edinburgh University Press
DOI: 10.3366/jobs.2018.0234

www.euppublishing.com/jobs

philosophical categories in such ways as to obliterate the specificity of the body and to render it a marker of something else' (56). David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* anticipates Quayson's find. The book claims that literature uses disability as an 'opportunistic metaphorical device' (Mitchell and Snyder, 47). Such practice generates a paradox: while 'stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions' (48). Quayson, Snyder and Mitchell agree that the injustice is a product of a slippage from lived-experience to its manifold substitutions. Quayson attributes the oversight to Beckett readers; Snyder and Mitchell suggest the agent of abuse is the writer. This significant distinction notwithstanding, their criticism meets in metaphor, in the substitution of a figure for a referent. The metaphorization of disability is faulted twice. First – it obliterates the material truth of the figure, second – such substitution cements a host of prejudicial significations.[1]

Though this would appear an inauspicious start for an investigation of the encounter between Beckett and disability studies, it is precisely in these objections to metaphor that disability studies readers are most Beckettian. As early as 1969, Stanley Cavell faults Beckett readers for reading the author figuratively. 'It is *we*' he writes, 'who had been willfully uncomprehending, misleading ourselves in demanding further, or other meaning where the meaning was nearest' (119–20). 'Beckett's art', Shira Wolosky writes nearly thirty years after that, 'deploys complex strategies of apotropism – the turning away from figures' (51). More recently, Audrey Wasser again reproaches readers for relying 'on interpretative strategies that continue to lend a referential function to Beckett's figures' (105). When Molloy states he is under the weather, we would do well to remember that that is not what but where he is.

The two discourses' objections to hermeneutic practices of substitution and exchange owe themselves to different critical agendas. Where disability theory wishes to ground our reading in lived experience, readers such as Wasser attempt to do justice to a poetics that effectively resists such treatment. Unpacking the dynamics of figuration in Beckett's works, Anthony Uhlmann suggests that 'the tendency to point towards a connection is drawn

to the surface at the same time as that connection is refused. We see this most clearly in *Waiting for Godot,* where a reading of Godot as God is both opened and openly disallowed within the text' (38). I would argue that the self-same objection to metaphor hinges not on the ethics of substitution but on the very question of analogy.

Disability studies posit a divide between life and literature. Literature is expected to hold a mirror to life; creativity and fancy serve the demands of verisimilitude. Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness* lends support to the impression that such a mimetic approach to the literary is attended by a clear set of value judgments:

> Disability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation. Read from a perspective of disability studies, this active ethical core becomes manifest because the disability representation is seen as having a direct effect on social views of people with disability in a way that representations of other literary details, tropes, and motifs do not offer. In other words, the representation of disability has an efficaciousness that ultimately transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it. (Quayson, 2012, 256)

Literature and the life it represents are distinguished through a moral hierarchy. If the literary is unable to offer a just representation of life, disability serves it by breaking through its artifice and allowing the reader to transcend its limitations. There is a truth, it is one, and it occurs squarely outside literary language. A leading theorist of disability studies, Tom Shakespeare views academic work as an attempt 'to get as close to lived reality as possible' (1), once again cementing the evaluative distinction evident in Quayson's words. Beckett offers a decidedly different approach to this ontological divide, famously celebrating Bram van Velde's method of painting 'because it is the first to repudiate relation in all its forms.' 'We have waited a long time,' Beckett writes,

> for the artist who has enough courage, who is enough at ease among the great tornados of intuition to realize that the break with the outside implies the break with the inside, *that no*

> *relations of replacement for the naïve relations exist*, that what we call the outside and the inside are the very same thing [. . .] His painting is, if you like, the impossibility of reestablishing correspondence (Beckett, 2006, 19; my emphasis)

In 'The Object of Neuroscience and Literary Studies', Karín Lesnik-Oberstein associates such a difference in approach with an ideological divide between positivist logic and poststructuralist thought. The article views the scientific turn in literary criticism as a product of the liberal-humanist bias evidenced in critical discourses deployed about science and literature and the relationship between the two. The humanist bias, she claims, views deconstruction as

> evaporat[ing] a world of natural, material subjects and objects; as Carroll argues, 'poststructuralism yields causal primacy to language', which for Carroll, as Carlo Salzani points out, means 'it is incompatible with a "perspective in which 'life', self-replicating DNA, precedes thought, to say nothing of language"' (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2017, 1318)

The point of my investigation of the interdisciplinary encounter between literature and disability studies is not to be seen as a rehashing of Lesnik-Oberstein's demonstration of the rejection of poststructuralist thought. Rather, it traces the assertion of a methodology of correspondence, the exercising of a preference for codified hierarchies. Life, in its tangible and knowable phenomenological articulations serves as the ground for its textual analogues. Meaning is determined through the establishment of textual correspondences to pre-existing categories that are always more meaningful than their aesthetic counterparts. In place of Lesnik-Oberstein's suggested interdisciplinary division I would propose univocity and analogy as two distinct paradigms of Being that would facilitate a clearer understanding of the stakes involved in figuration. The alternative binaries are not in opposition to those traced in her article, but the different terminological associations allow us to sidestep some of the biases she describes so that we may view the material and the linguistic not as contraries but as elements issuing forth from a single dynamic principle of life.

Ulrika Maude's reading of Beckett's work in light of Tourette's syndrome offers a helpful demonstration of the manner in which we might undo the binary opposition between scientific and poststructuralist discourses. Though lodged in the positivism of scientific language, Maude's presentation of physico-linguistic articulations of Tourette's demonstrates that 'the very distinction between motor activities, poetic language and language pathologies has been rendered problematic by recent neuro-anatomical research' (163). Contemporary scientific findings can, in fact, be called upon to describe slippage and accumulation rather than stratification and categorization.

The goal in reading Beckett with disability studies, then, is to stage a fruitful encounter between the two disparate discourses without committing either to the limitations of mimesis (verisimilitude and restrictions of interpretation) or to the potential solipsism of nonrelation. If the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the mimetic and non-mimetic hermeneutic paradigms appear to leave us at an impasse, what is proposed is an encounter of a third kind. This would not be a synthesis of the first two but rather their Beckettian exhaustion. Inspired by Beckett's works, Gilles Deleuze defines 'exhaustion' as the accumulation of a 'set of variables of a situation' without 'preference', and without their 'organization in relation to a goal' (1998, 153). I would argue that if we extend the term's use from poetic technique to critical methodology we might establish a method of enhancing rather than upsetting a theoretical agenda that is grounded in the mimetic tradition. A performative, non-hierarchized accumulation of the principles of disability studies in their Beckettian articulation will show the author's poetics to have anticipated what disability studies theorists have only recently come to suspect. As Lennard J. Davis writes:

> The dismodern era ushers in the concept that difference is what all of us have in common. That identity is not fixed but malleable. That technology is not separate but part of the body. That dependence, not individual independence, is the rule. There is no single clockmaker who made the uniform clock of the human body. The watchword of dismodernism could be: Form follows dysfunction. (239)

## A Single Relation

The exhaustion of the encounter between disability studies and Beckett must begin with a single relation. To begin singly is to follow the methodology of first-wave critical theorists who read the text mimetically. The purpose is to isolate disabled figures in the oeuvre, correct stereotypes and highlight honest or productive interventions in these literary topoi. *Molloy*'s first pages easily lend themselves to such an investigation. Molloy sums up his interrogation at the police station as follows:

> It ended in my understanding that my way of resting, my attitude when at rest, astride my bicycle, my arms on the handlebars, my head on my arms, was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency. Modestly I pointed to my crutches and ventured one or two noises regarding my infirmity, which obliged me to rest as I could, rather than as I should. But there are not two laws, that was the next thing I thought I understood, not two laws, one for the healthy, another for the sick, but one only to which all must bow, rich and poor, young and old, happy and sad. He was eloquent. I pointed out that I was not sad. That was a mistake. Your papers, he said. (Beckett, 2009, 16)

The meeting with the law is a sobering one, one that demonstrates the conflation of disability and abjection. It is in his very existence that Molloy offends society; his actions, motivated as they are by his physical impairments, are seen as indecent and indecipherable. The only discourse available to the people who wish to communicate with him is one of pity and sympathy, a discourse Molloy repeatedly rejects, suggesting it is as foreign to his desires and needs as is his own to the society that is unable to understand him. The police officer's assumptions about Molloy are expressed in the negatives on a list of binary opposition. Sick, poor, old and sad – the interchangeable adjectives articulate cultural assumptions about those who lie outside the norm. Feeling the list does not faithfully cohere with his identity, Molloy attempts to correct the officer in order to communicate something of his

true nature: he is not sad. The correction, however, only upsets the officer. Stripped of such categories of human variety, he has no way of comprehending the life in front of him. The man cannot possibly be rich and sad, sick and happy and so on. Molloy's refusal to accept charity as his one tether to society thus leads to a breakdown of communication. Miscomprehension breeds violence. Molloy reports: 'I am full of fear, I have gone in fear all my life, in fear of blows. Insults, abuse, these I can easily bear, but I could never get used to blows. It's strange. Even spits still pain me. But they have only to be a little gentle, I mean refrain from hitting me' (17–18). His experiences fall into one of two categories: pity or abuse. Molloy's professed hatred for the first renders him vulnerable to the second.

Where these early descriptions appear to conform to the very labels Molloy rejects – he is a victim of social abuse, miscomprehension and prejudice – we are later given to understand that Molloy is 'no ordinary cripple' (Beckett, 2009, 77). 'People imagine', he reflects, 'because you are old, poor, crippled, terrified, that you can't stand up for yourself and generally speaking that is so. But given favourable conditions, a feeble and awkward assailant, in your own class what, and a lonely place, and you have a good chance of showing what stuff you are made of' (79). The scene in which Molloy attacks the charcoal-burner plays havoc with our cultural stereotypes at the same time that it might be seen to cement more traditional collocations of physical and mental impairment with a perverse moral nature. Encountering a man he believes to be even more 'feeble' than himself, Molloy mimics and exacerbates the scene of abuse reported earlier at the police station. Where the police officer grew eloquent in his exchange with Molloy, here it is the latter who does the same and the charcoal-burner who appears to be at a loss for words. By dint of a kind of reversal of the master-slave dialectic Molloy satisfies his need to assert himself and avenge his abusers. Molloy's transformation from victim to vigilante is intensely rewarding. But the reader's pleasure is a guilty one. We enjoy Molloy's acrobatics but realize there is no moral imperative for his act. It is here that we might fault Beckett for cementing the traditional collocation of disability with a perverse morality. Whether or not this is the case, Molloy's

empowerment is short-lived. In concluding his narrative Molloy reverts once again to the picture of dependence with which his narrative began. Awaiting rescue he admits:

> Fortunately for me at this painful juncture, which I had vaguely foreseen, but not in all its bitterness, I heard a voice telling me not to fret, that help was coming. Literally. These words struck it is not too much to say as clearly on my ear, and on my understanding, as the urchin's thanks I suppose when I stooped and picked up his marble. Don't fret Molloy, we're coming. Well, I suppose you have to try everything once, succor included, to get a complete picture of the resources of their planet. (Beckett, 2009, 85)

Taking stock of these various scenes and the manner in which they might be brought together to produce a cohesive picture proves difficult. The novel disallows such syntheses. The text instills in its readers a false impression of moral superiority by encouraging them to judge the police officer as a limited, bigoted bureaucrat who must negotiate disability in one of two ways: the sad, poor unfortunate deserving of sympathy or the perverse outcast meriting suspicion. It then goes on to unmask its hoax when it transpires that readers are caught in the same futile attempt to assimilate Molloy's character to their own culturally and morally sanctioned categories. The reader's struggle to understand Molloy's character performatively repeats the self-same difficulties encountered throughout the novel. We might argue, then, that even the most productive of mimetic insights on the treatment of disability in the novel challenges the very principles on which such an investigation is founded. Methodologies of correspondence, recognition and synthesis are repeatedly undermined by the novel's eschewing of accepted categories and logical formulations. The rejection of analogy does not explode disability studies' ethical imperative but rather serves it by undermining the ableist biases that disability theorists wish to expose and change. What is cast off is the mimetic model of categorical recognition – where we compare what we find in the fiction to our predetermined categories of human variety and their attending stereotypes. By offering difference, slippage – an accumulation of incompatible character traits rather than a selection of known ones – Molloy

upsets our method of turning to stereotype in handling figures of disability. His strangeness demands of the readers that they see and think differently.[2]

## There Is No Single Relation

As suggested at the outset, Beckett's readers often take disability and figures of impairment to stand for abstract ideas – questions of ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, history and so forth. A compelling argument against such hermeneutic practice might be that Beckett does not substitute. The vehicle is never lost, marginalized or obliterated by its tenor because both are kept; the very hierarchical division of the two parts of the figure is misleading – everything is given equal value. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze offers the sucking stones and biscuit passages in *Molloy* and *Murphy* respectively to demonstrate Beckett's permutations. But the refusal to prefer or to select is evident everywhere in Beckett, even outside its mathematically sanctioned series. Throughout *Molloy* there is a conjunction of motifs of physical and mental impairment and philosophical inquiry. One does not stand for the other; they cohere side by side in mutual ruin. The novel opens in the conflation of physical and mental deterioration and writing. We can place Molloy in a home where he is visited once a week by a caregiver of some kind (delivering money, always coming on Sundays – much like visitors of ailing relatives would); the same relationship is also cast in professional terms. Money is given in exchange for writing. The first reading does not negate or challenge the second. There is no life of writing outside this scene of decay; there is no decay without the obligation to write. The following scene provides a helpful demonstration of the coherence of a commentary on care and composition, knowledge and being, the conflation of physical decay with a method of writing, thinking and being:

> To get up, to get down on the road, to set off hobbling in pursuit of him, to hail him, what could be easier? He hears my cries, turns, waits for me. I am up against him, up against the dog, gasping, between my crutches. He is a little frightened

> of me, a little sorry for me, I disgust him not a little. I am not a pretty sight, I don't smell good. What is it I want? Ah that tone I know, compounded of pity, of fear, of disgust. I want to see the dog, see the man, at close quarters, know what smokes, inspect the shoes, find out other things. He is kind, tells me of this and that and other things, whence he comes, whither he goes. I believe him, I know it's my only chance to – my only chance, I believe all I'm told, I've disbelieved only too much in my long life, now I swallow everything, greedily. What I need now is stories [. . .] And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but, how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means but it's the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind, that for example water rises in proportion as it drowns you and that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery. So I doubtless did better, at least no worse, not to stir from my observation post. (Beckett, 2009, 8–9)

The length of this passage owes itself to the difficulty of portioning off Beckett's prose – everything hangs together.[3] The impossibility of selection is also an impossibility of substitution. Interest constantly shifts from questions of health to epistemology, ontology and writing. The familiar metonymies of disability, the descriptions of Molloy's physical difficulty and the anticipated aversion exhibited by his interlocutor, lead seamlessly to questions of writing and knowledge. We cannot say whether the stories Molloy needs are solace for his impairments or his loneliness, or whether he seeks distraction from a paralyzing self-awareness. The stories are just as likely fodder for his aesthetic imagination, those pages he needs to fill with writing for his Sunday visitors. We cannot choose; Molloy's various thoughts coexist in a unified ontological plane and cannot be organized according to an evaluative hierarchy.[4] One reading should not be substituted for another; we cannot read the treatment of disability as a metaphor for questions of identity, knowledge or aesthetics. The slippage

between the three insights offered at the end of the passage once again illustrates the absence of signposts to the shifting questions that occupy Molloy's thoughts. That water rises in proportion as it drowns you is made to cohere with the filling in of words on a page and the decision to stay put. The linguistic parallels ('you would do better, at least no worse') show that the different preoccupations are intermixed in a kind of paralogical progression. Syntactic coherence provides continuity in the absence of a conceptual or logical one. This haphazard medley may appear senseless, but there is method to this madness. Molloy reflects:

> There is a little of everything, apparently, in nature, and freaks are common. And I am perhaps confusing several different occasions, and different times, deep down, and deep down is my dwelling, oh not deepest down, somewhere between the mud and the scum. And perhaps it was A one day at one place, then C another at another, then a third the rock and I, and so on for the other components, the cows, the sky, the sea, the mountains. I can't believe it. No, I will not lie, I can easily conceive it. No matter, no matter, let us go on, as if all arose from one and the same weariness, on and on heaping up and up, until there is no room, no light, for any more. (10)

Beckett readers often see in passages such as these the workings of epanorthosis, a figure of retraction. Elaborating on Bruno Clément's use of the term, Wasser describes it as 'a kind of nervous adjusting, adding, displacing, or diminishing', 'a process that need not entail synthesis in a consciousness, but that seeks only to perpetuate itself in a series of endless displacements' (Wasser, 2013, 262). This too may be seen to fall within the stylization of exhaustion, the deferral of choice for an endless relay of permutations. Though Wasser's description is valuable, the idea of displacement – itself another catchword for substitution – seems inaccurate. The passage unfolds through accumulation rather than exchange. Nothing is lost or discarded. The difference between the two models of development is significant. The disabled body is not cast off but is rather a substrate upon which everything else gathers. The narrative and its various thematic and stylistic constituents are based on a single generative principle. Weariness is the key not to substitution but to accumulation, the

workings of univocity rather than analogy. One thing does not correspond with another – everything issues forth from a single process of differentiation. Deleuze commends Beckett for the very method wherein physical decay is not used as a stand-in for philosophical meditation but is co-present with it. He writes: 'Beckett's great contribution to logic is to have shown that exhaustion (exhaustivity) does not occur without a certain physiological exhaustion, somewhat like Nietzsche showed that the scientific ideal is not attained without a kind of vital degeneration' (154). The physical toll and the virtual cataloging of permutations are co-present; one does not occur without the other.

The attempt to think the one with the other, the materiality of the body alongside a rethinking of human subjectivity might appear to court the prejudicial labeling against which disability studies scholars warn. As Mitchell and Snyder explain: 'The study of disability must understand the impact of the experience of disability upon subjectivity *without simultaneously situating the internal and external body within a strict mirroring relationship to one another*' (58). It is here, however, that the turn to a principle of univocity rather than analogy, accumulation rather than substitution marks a significant shift. As Mitchell and Snyder explain: 'while we situate our argument in opposition to reading physical disability as a one-to-one correspondence with subjecthood, we do not deny its role as a foundational aspect of identity' (58). Disability emerges as a physical fact rather than a metaphor, one that is not the vehicle for a new philosophical model of subjectivity but rather the substrate upon which we might observe a process of becoming. This insight informs recent attempts in disability studies to utilize the materiality of impairment towards a rethinking of subjectivity. Recalling some of the insights offered in Beckett's novel, Davis views the disabled body as the foundation for 'a new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence' (241). Maude's study of Tourette's allows us not only to imagine such a subject but also to consider how impairment might inform a hermeneutic practice of univocity rather than analogy. Tourette's, she argues, 'confounds and collapses distinctions between voluntary and

involuntary action, biological and cultural formations, motor skills and linguistic activity, neurology and psychology, poetic language and language pathologies, animal and human and body and mind' (164). Such an erasure of categorical boundaries suggests we need not rely on identification, correspondence, and hierarchization in order to draw meaning.

## Fail Better

In his interview with Israel Shenker, Beckett elaborates on the relationship between art and limitation: 'I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er [somebody who cannot]. The other type of artist – the Apollonian – is absolutely foreign to me' (Beckett, 1997, 148–9). Beckett's comment here can be read as an aesthetic turn to complement the rethinking of subjectivity explored above. Much like Kant's aesthetic theory is the product of, and in turn cements a conceptualization of the enlightenment *cogito*, Beckett's reformulation allows us to think aesthetics anew, outside the model of a cohesive, self-conscious mind.

Beckett goes on in the interview to explain his idea further:

> I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is an achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unuseable – as something by definition incompatible with art. (1997, 148)

It is here that a potential difference emerges between Beckett's project and the commitments fostered by disability scholars. The passage is suggestive of a shift from a description of his experiences as someone who cannot to the aims of an artist who wishes to consider impotence as the key to artistic production. Such a turn is problematic from the point of view of disability studies and might

be seen as a form of abuse not unlike the narrative formations that many disability studies theorists deplore. The abusive connotations notwithstanding, Beckett's aesthetics cannot be conflated with the model presented in Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*. The latter bespeaks of an art that is couched in ableist aesthetics; Beckett's radical transgression overturns the binary oppositions on which such a literary tradition rests.

A more serious concern stems from Beckett's grounding of this new aesthetics in a model of failure or impotence. Disability studies seeks to rethink disability identity outside 'the personal tragedy model' and to posit, in its stead, 'an affirmative model' wherein disability might be seen as 'a positive personal and collective identity' (Swain and French, 2000, 569). Such a shift in the imaginary is beneficial to people with impairments by offering role models who lead 'fulfilled and satisfying lives' (571). Beckett clearly denounces the idea of achievement; his art conjoins failure, impotence and ignorance with physical and mental disability. And while one is not the tenor of the other, as they are not combined through a relation of substitution, such a conceptual conflation nevertheless once again marries the idea of disability and impairment with inability and frustration. Disability studies significantly diverges from the principles of Beckett's aesthetics in its attempts to normalize or reframe disability by employing models of achievement and overcoming. Though Beckett anticipates disability studies' deconstruction of the binary oppositions of Western Metaphysics, the model of failure must still be grounded in the traditional binary grid if it is to maintain its defamiliarizing value. Where disability theorists might attempt the deconstruction of the normate towards a new thinking outside the particular opposition between achievement and failure, Beckett wants nothing more than to fail better.

But even here, disability studies follows Beckett in its realization that the affirmative approach might necessitate some significant adjustment. Jan Grue unpacks figures of disability in popular culture in order to tease out the social injustices and conceptual problems which attend models of disability that emphasize achievement and an overcoming of obstacles. From the Paralympic games to superheroes and reality show contestants, Grue finds all are bound together by the assumption that

'being a disabled person *ought to be* the source of extraordinary willpower and achievement – a moral imperative which results in impossible demands on people with impairments as well as people with chronic illnesses' (Grue, 2015, 215). Such a moral imperative is particularly troubling in its articulations in the image of the 'supercrip'. This now widespread term connotes a 'familiar allegorical figure of disability' noted for 'success at overcoming' and 'demonstrating ability beyond that which is commonly expected of disabled people' (204). Grue posits that the defining feature of supercrip narratives is 'their rationalization and legitimization of impairments as *positive attributes.* This happens when they are represented as causes of achievement and transformative experience' (205). He concludes with the suggestion that 'the emphasis placed on inherent, essentialist *strength* by activists in any identity category usually risks embracing ableism' (215). Disability studies are caught in something of a double-bind: to suggest that disability and impairment can be overcome gives hope to people with disabilities at the same time that it reinvigorates the ableist paradigm explored in Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*. A positive recasting of impairment, on the other hand, is both ethically and logically problematic. Disability theory thus finally finds itself in a Beckettian series where models of achievement and failure both are as unsatisfactory as they are inevitable.

An application of disability studies to Beckett's work must take cognizance of an essential incongruity between a politically conscripted theoretical framework and aesthetic experimentation, between a mimetic fidelity to lived experience and an art of non-relation. This essay has suggested that Beckett's poetics of exhaustion and its rejection of substitution and analogy does not cement the divide but rather provides a way to stage a productive encounter between the two. The body is not imagined as a stand-in or receptacle for philosophical ideas but rather as the substrate upon and with which these ideas evolve and change. The text maintains the materiality of mental and physical impairments at the same time that it loads them with a variety of different metonymical connections. Such a stylization of excess and accumulation serves to release disability from existing stereotypes and predetermined moral judgment. But

Beckett's greatest contribution to disability studies might finally be something else entirely: the brazen championing of the call to fail better.

## NOTES

1. James Berger challenges what he terms 'an iconoclastic tendency in disability theory that regards all metaphorical use of disability as suspect'. He argues that 'it is impossible to avoid the use of tropes; there is no language that might depict disability, or anything else, "as it really is"' (11).

2. Michael Davidson's reading of *Molloy* emphasizes a different Beckettian contribution to representations of disability. Grounding his analysis in a dynamic of dependence, he writes: 'Persons with disabilities depend on others in ways that challenge liberal ideals of autonomy and independence, and it is here that Beckett's work offers an important challenge to ideas of embodied normalcy' (16).

3. In an interview with Derek Attridge, Derrida famously described his method of reading Beckett: 'I would take three lines, I would spend two hours on them, then I would give up because it would not have been possible, or honest, or even interesting, to extract a few "significant" lines from a Beckettian text' (Derrida, 1992, 61). This is once again the inevitable reading effect of Beckett's works, here associated with the technique of exhaustion. We are always condemned to performatively reenact what we read. Molloy does not select and neither can we.

4. My interpretation here is diametrically opposed to that offered previously by Rabinovitz. Where I see this accumulation as an effective cancellation of hierarchical division, Rabinovitz suggests that 'Beckett's method of grouping clusters of interrelated ideas and endowing them with different levels of meaning reveals how things are always vaster and more intricate than their denotative equivalents' (330). In this respect, my reading is perhaps closer to Garin Dowd's reading of *Murphy*. Explicating the novel through Spinoza's philosophy, Dowd proposes a horizontal model in place of the verticality of figuration. He describes the novel's concluding pages thus: 'No simile plays about the slowed down bodies of this finale without finality. Not even the solace of metaphor offers the vestige of resolution. The levels have collapsed on to one another; the hierarchy with a vertical relay system organising and policing analogical gymnastics is no more' (Dowd, 2007, 100).

## WORKS CITED

Beckett, Samuel (1997), *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, New York: Routledge.

Beckett, Samuel (2006), 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9–10 March 1949', trans. Walter Redfern, in S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (eds), *Beckett after Beckett*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, pp. 15–21.

Beckett, Samuel (2009), *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, New York: Grove Press.

Berger, James (2014), *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity*, New York: New York University Press.

Cavell, Stanley ([1969] 2002), *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davidson, Michael (2010), '"Every Man His Specialty": Beckett, Disability, and Dependence', *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, 6:13, pp. 13–27.

Davis, Lennard J. (2006), 'The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism', in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, pp. 231–42.

Deleuze, Gilles (1998), *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, London: Verso.

Derrida, Jacques (1992), *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, New York: Routledge.

Dowd, Garin (2007), *Abstract Machines: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattari*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Felman, Shoshana (1982), 'To Open the Question', in Shoshana Felman (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 5–10.

Grue, Jan (2015), 'The Problem of the Supercrip', in Tom Shakespeare (ed.), *Disability Research Today: International Perspectives*, London: Routledge, pp. 204–18.

Lesnik-Oberstein, Karín (2017), 'The Object of Neuroscience and Literary Studies', *Textual Practice*, 31:7, pp. 1315–31.

Maude, Ulrika (2008), '"A Stirring Beyond Coming and Going": Beckett and Tourette's', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 17:1–2, pp. 153–68.

Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder (2000), *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Quayson, Ato (2012), *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Rabinovitz, Rubin (1985), 'Samuel Beckett's Figurative Language', *Contemporary Literature*, 26:3, pp. 317–30.

Shakespeare, Tom (2015) 'Introduction', in Tom Shakespeare (ed.), *Disability Research Today: International Perspectives*, London: Routledge, pp. 1–5.

Smith, Daniel W. (2002), 'The Doctrine of Univocity: Deleuze's Ontology of Immanence', in Mary Bryden (ed.), *Deleuze and Religion*, London: Routledge, pp. 167–83.

Swain, John and Sally French (2000) 'Towards an affirmation model of disability', *Disability & Society*, 15:4, pp. 569–82.

Uhlmann, Anthony (2006), *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wasser, Audrey (2013), 'From Figure to Fissure: Beckett's *Molloy, Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*', *Modern Philology*, 109:2, pp. 245–65.

Wolosky, Shira (1995), *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

**Your short guide to the EUP Journals Blog http://euppublishingblog.com/**

***A forum for discussions relating to Edinburgh University Press Journals***

## 1. The primary goal of the EUP Journals Blog

To aid discovery of authors, articles, research, multimedia and reviews published in Journals, and as a consequence contribute to increasing traffic, usage and citations of journal content.

## 2. Audience

Blog posts are written for an educated, popular and academic audience within EUP Journals' publishing fields.

## 3. Content criteria - your ideas for posts

We prioritize posts that will feature highly in search rankings, that are shareable and that will drive readers to your article on the EUP site.

## 4. Word count, style, and formatting

- Flexible length, however typical posts range 70-600 words.
- Related images and media files are encouraged.
- No heavy restrictions to the style or format of the post, but it should best reflect the content and topic discussed.

## 5. Linking policy

- Links to external blogs and websites that are related to the author, subject matter and to EUP publishing fields are encouraged, e.g.to related blog posts

## 6. Submit your post

Submit to ruth.allison@eup.ed.ac.uk

If you'd like to be a regular contributor, then we can set you up as an author so you can create, edit, publish, and delete your *own* posts, as well as upload files and images.

## 7. Republishing/repurposing

Posts may be re-used and re-purposed on other websites and blogs, but a minimum 2 week waiting period is suggested, and an acknowledgement and link to the original post on the EUP blog is requested.

## 8. Items to accompany post

- A short biography (ideally 25 words or less, but up to 40 words)
- A photo/headshot image of the author(s) if possible.
- Any relevant, thematic images or accompanying media (podcasts, video, graphics and photographs), provided copyright and permission to republish has been obtained.
- Files should be high resolution and a maximum of 1GB
- Permitted file types: *jpg, jpeg, png, gif, pdf, doc, ppt, odt, pptx, docx, pps, ppsx, xls, xlsx, key, mp3, m4a, wav, ogg, zip, ogv, mp4, m4v, mov, wmv, avi, mpg, 3gp, 3g2*.