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Anxiety of Textual Incarceration and Resistance to Self-Interpellation: Samuel Beckett's Juggling with the Modes of Self-Representation

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ABSTRACT

The present study proposes that Samuel Beckett's famous reluctance to engage in the textualization of his personal life may be rooted in his apprehension towards the potential constriction of his self in the medium of language. This apprehension may have been further exacerbated by the fear of his life becoming subsumed by the written word. The notion that "we are what we say we are" postulates that one's identity is shaped by their own self-expression. In the context of biography, this notion can be extended to "we are what is said we are." Explaining his concept of interpellation, Louis Althusser, posits that various ideological apparatuses create a set of assumptions, attitudes, and desires that constitute an individual's self-identity. I argue that biography being an ideological apparatus of its own kind might do the same. Beckett's reluctance to engage in the textualization of his personal life may be a result of his desire to avoid the possibility of his self-identity being interpellated or defined by such texts. This may also explain his attempts to eliminate recognizable markers of his life from his work and his assertion of an absolute disconnection between his life and his work.

Keywords: auto/biography, self-representation, interpellation, carceral concerns, narrative control

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I

> *When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear. . . . The writer who won't show his face is encroaching on holy turf. He's playing God's own trick. Falling Man* by Don DeLillo (p. 36–7)

Samuel Beckett wrote around eighty thousand letters to his various acquaintances. Presumably, a writer of such prolificacy should not be shy of speaking his mind or making himself known. Apart from his barely decipherable hand, hardly any marker of the studied deception of the addressee can be traced. Understandably, Beckett's level of intimacy does fluctuate with respect to the person he is writing to but collectively, the letters betray a mind that is frank and forthright. Notwithstanding, however, Beckett was an intensely private person. He positively abhorred the public gaze and meticulously avoided it. In 1969, when Beckett was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature, he refused to appear in the reception organized for the purpose. He also remained in Tunisia, running from one hotel to the other in order to evade the press. He intended to stay put through the hubbub of the award. However, when it became painfully obvious to him that he was up against obsessive voyeurism of the public gaze, "Beckett made an appearance in the drawing-room of a different hotel, smoking a cigar . . . . [H]e sat down, looking ill at ease, said nothing, and puffed away at his cigar. The cameras whirred and, before the cigar even had time to burn down a single centimetre, he was whisked away and back to his room" (Knowlson, 2004, p. 709).

Beckett's critically acclaimed *Damned to Fame*: *The Life of Samuel Beckett* written by James Knowlson which, according to the author, is Beckett's "sole authorized biography" (p. 10) appeared in 1996. The idea was around as early as 1972 when, according to Knowlson, "an American publisher invited me to write his biography. I declined when Beckett indicated that he would prefer me not to do this. He always hoped that it would be his work rather than his life that was placed under the microscope" (p. 10). However, Beckett was to agree as if perforce when the travesty of his life appeared in 1978 in the form of Deirdre Bair's *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. He knew that other expeditions would follow probably with an equally disastrous effect. James Knowlson writes,

> Approached again about writing his biography in 1989, I wrote to Beckett saying that this time too I would not proceed without an unambiguous 'yes' from him. He replied with a one line note: 'To biography of me by you it's Yes'. When we met to discuss this, he told me that he regarded his life as separate from his work but that, since someone else would certainly be commissioned to write a new biography, he had decided to cooperate very fully with me, expressing satisfaction that his biographer would at least be someone who knew his work well. (p. 10)

There is a background to Knowlson's demanding an unequivocal "yes" from Beckett. Beckett's first biography came out in 1978 written by an amateur biographer Deidre Bair. Beckett took her proposal for writing his biography somewhat lightly and allowed her initially to proceed with her plan. Bair recounts her decision to write his biography, Beckett's initial acceptance, and his subsequent sullen withdrawal behind the impenetrable wall of privacy in her recent memoir *Parisian Lives* (2019) which Kathryn Hughes describes as "deliciously indiscreet."[1]

Samuel Beckett: A Biography was published in 1978 after a prolonged period of research and interviews. The work received a National Book Award in 1981 for its paperback. Though the biography failed to get endorsement from Beckett himself, the book was considered to be the most exhaustive examination of Beckett's life and works at the time.

Deirdre Bair's decision to write Beckett's biography was not an outcome of a well-thought-out plan or any sense of deep attachment with the writer. Fresh from the university, she decided to try her hand at writing a biography. Preparing a list of the living writers, which included E. M. Forster and Joseph Conrad, and arranging them alphabetically, she got Beckett at the top. Instantly, she wrote to Beckett expressing her intention. To her surprise, Beckett was open to the idea. Beckett wrote back, "Any biographical information I possess is at your disposal" (*Parisian Lives*, p. 88). "If you come to Paris," he added, "I will see you" (2019, p. 88).

When Bair and Beckett first met in Paris, Beckett greeted her with the words, "So you are the one who is going to reveal me for the charlatan that I am" (*Parisian Lives*, p. 15). Bair was rather befuddled when Beckett agreed to meet her in Paris only to declare that he would neither aid nor impede her in the writing of his biography. Despite this statement, Beckett's actions during their seven-year collaboration were contradictory and constantly changing. He agreed to meet Bair for interviews, but only on his own schedule, and forbade her from making a systematic record of their meetings, forcing her to rely on her memory afterwards. Additionally, Beckett would become distant and unresponsive when Bair attempted to broach topics that he was sensitive about.

Bair finds the whole process of writing Beckett's biography as an unfolding of his parting remark after their first meeting in unexpected ways when he announced, "I will neither help nor hinder you. My friends and family will assist you and my enemies will find you soon enough" (2019, p. 20). Notwithstanding his ambivalence, Beckett agreed to participate in multiple interviews with Bair, though under specific conditions. During their meetings, Beckett forbade Bair from taking notes or recording their conversations, referring to them as "just two friends talking" (2019, p. 84). Beckett also expressed his belief privately to his friends that Bair, as a "naive American girl" with stripes in her hair would not be successful in completing the biography (2019, p. 153). This lack of faith in her ability and trust in

her judgment on Beckett's part kept Bair at her toes and often left her wondering, "[w]ould he become so upset that he would withdraw his cooperation?" (2019, p. 87).

Throughout the interviews, Beckett was evasive and dismissive of Bair's questions, and wrote to her stating "My life is dull and without interest" (2019, p. 32). Bair initially believed that Beckett was fully cooperating with her, but soon realized that he did not take her seriously as a biographer. Beckett also allegedly sought information about the book's progress from his associates. However, despite his deep and serious misgivings Beckett kept his word. And, Bair acknowledges his honesty and commitment in her autobiography, "I have met many honorable persons throughout my long professional life, but there was never one whose integrity equalled Samuel Beckett's. His word was indeed his bond" (2019, p. 200). After the publication of the biography, Beckett sent Bair a brief note stating "Seems a very handsome looking book" (2019, p. 203). Beckett passed away in 1989, and Bair never received any further feedback from him.

What exactly may explain this evasiveness of Beckett? I theorize that it is the anxiety arising out of the possibility of textual incarceration of his selfhood that keeps him wary. This anxiety gets compounded by a palpable fear of life attuning itself to the text. Words have a boomerang effect; they might turn back upon the speaker and petrify them with their Medusa-like gaze. Paul Eakin said something to a similar effect: "We are what we say we are" (p. 43). In the case of biography, this dictum might become, "we are what is said we are". Louis Althusser has given the concept of interpellation to describe how different ideological apparatuses create a set of assumptions, attitudes, and desires whose agglomeration we identify as our self. Beckett seems to avoid any attempt at textualization of his life because of the prospect of its getting back to interpellate his actual self. Perhaps, this is the reason that he tries to refine recognizable markers of his life out of his work and even when his biographical details find their way into his work, he tries to downplay them and claims an absolute non-interaction between his life and his work.

The forthcoming section will explicate the theoretical framework, prior to proceeding towards a critical evaluation of Beckett's assertion concerning the absolute separation between his personal life and artistic oeuvre in the following segment. The final section concludes my argument.

II

"Interpellation" is a concept introduced by the French philosopher Louis Althusser to describe the process by which individuals are "hailed" by ideology and come to identify with the roles and positions assigned to them by society. It is a process by which individuals internalize the dominant cultural norms, beliefs and values, and come to perceive them as natural or inherent to themselves. Althusser's theory of interpellation highlights the ways in which individuals are shaped by the

dominant ideologies of their culture, and how these ideologies are used to maintain social and power structures. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of institutions in shaping our perceptions and identities.

According to Althusser, interpellation occurs through the institutions of society such as family, education, media, religion, and politics, which act as "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs) that transmit and reinforce dominant ideologies. These ISAs "hail" individuals and invite them to identify with certain roles and positions, such as those of gender, class, and race. Interpellation is not a one-time event, but rather a continuous process that takes place throughout an individual's life. It is not a conscious process, but rather, individuals are often unaware of the extent to which they have internalized dominant ideologies.

In Marxist theory, interpellation is a key concept in understanding the role of ideology in shaping individual identities and maintaining societal power structures. Althusser proposes that society is composed of both ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) which work together to reproduce the relations of production in a given society. The ISAs, which include private institutions such as family, church, media, and politics, work to inculcate dominant ideologies into individuals through socialization and other forms of conditioning. The RSAs, on the other hand, are public institutions such as police and military that serve to maintain the status quo and suppress dissent.

Through this process, the individual subject is constructed and becomes the "bearer" of the dominant ideology, which functions as a means of maintaining the status quo and reproducing existing power relations. The concept of interpellation therefore highlights the ways in which individuals are shaped by the dominant ideologies of their culture and how these ideologies are used to maintain societal power structures. Althusser writes:

> [T]he category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects. (p. 116) Althusser describes interpellation as a process of individuation on preordained lines in which individuals are encouraged to identify with the roles and positions assigned to them by society. The process is not forced upon individuals through violence, but rather it is presented in such a way that individuals are encouraged to accept it voluntarily. The ideologies that are offered to us are everywhere we look, and are so pervasive that they are often internalized as our own beliefs and values. This is why interpellation works best when it is an invisible and consensual process, where individuals believe that the values they have internalized are their own, and that they are the most logical and obvious way to live. As a result, ideologies

> play a crucial role in constructing our identities and assigning us a particular place in society. When an individual is fully interpellated, s/he has successfully been brought into accepting a certain role or set of values willingly.

Barrett J. Mandel's landmark essay "Full of Life Now" also offers an important theoretical support for the study. He is conscious not only of the autobiographical nature of fiction but also the fictional nature of biography. He avers, "I cannot participate in the creation of something that does not remember it is a pretense, a perspective, an angle" (p. 43). Mandel riles against the "false dichotomy fiction/non-fiction" (p. 51). He thinks "the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction is false: It precludes the subject who can discern the presence of potentiality, the presence of the other" (p. 56). This paper discovers both the potential presence of biographical details in fiction but also the efforts of the writer directed at the disentanglement of his life from his work.

For the purpose of the present study, the definition of Media theorist David Gauntlett is even more pertinent. Gauntlett argues that "interpellation occurs when a person connects with a media text: when we enjoy a magazine or TV show, for example, this uncritical consumption means that the text has interpellated us into a certain set of assumptions, and caused us to tacitly accept a particular approach to the world" (p. 27). What Gauntlett perhaps means is that the texts we read interpellate us. I argue that *not only the texts we read interpellate us, but also the texts we create interpellate us, especially when they incorporate instances from our real life experiences*. Similarly, the texts that are expressly written to describe our self, analyze our characters, and relate our stories come back to haunt us too. Therefore, biography has got an explosive potential to interpellate its subject, a potential that makes the subjects of auto/biographies wary of the genre and leads them to disentangle their selves from the written text.

Owing to its direct address and professed commitment to capturing life in its essence, auto/biography turns interpellation into the imprisonment of the self. Gilles Deleuze expands upon Beckett's skepticism towards language and, by extension, toward auto/biography, in his essay "The Exhausted":

> It is not only that words lie, they are so burdened with calculations and significations, with intentions and personal memories, with old habits that cement them together, that one can scarcely bore into the surface before it closes up again. It sticks together. *It imprisons and suffocates us*. (p. 22, emphasis added)

Language imprisons us by locking us into a system of signification. To Deleuze, Beckett's deep misgivings about language stem from the belief that it offers a flawed representational regime and exerts a constraining influence. One can well imagine that these flaws are amplified in the realm of auto/biography due

to its promise of truth about one's existence. I, therefore, argue that Beckett's reluctance over the idea of bringing out a systematic record of his life hints at a broader cultural concern over the imprisonment of self in language. To be recorded is to be arrested. Borrowing from T. S. Eliot, we can say that the act of narrating a life can be likened to fixing it "in a formulated phrase" (1915, p. 132).

The process of constructing a life narrative involves selecting certain events, experiences, and emotions, and presenting them in a coherent and meaningful way that encapsulates the supposed essence of the individual. In doing so, the narrative imposes a certain order and structure upon the individual's life, distilling it down into a digestible form that can be easily understood and remembered. This process of reduction and simplification gives certain control to the biographer over the life story of the individual they are writing about. As the narrative must conform to certain preconceptions and expectations about what a life should be, the conventions of biography also inflict certain violence on the life of the subject. The modern subject of Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" may help us locate the carceral anxiety induced by biography:

> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
> Then how should I begin
> To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? (1915, p. 132)

The carceral anxiety is evident from the musings of the self-conscious hero of Eliot's poem who is left "pinned and wriggling on the wall" before the judgment of the public gaze. That he is reduced to this precarious situation by a "formulated phrase" shows his equal distrust of the sonic along with the ocular. Building on the modernist scepticism over the ability of the sensory paradigm to capture the truth and the language to convey it, I hypothesize that biography aggravates the situation by creating a sort of carceral anxiety. The "anxiety of textual incarceration" in the title of the present article is my construction in order to explicate the anxiety experienced by the subject of the auto/biography over the threat of getting straitjacketed by words on the page.

Auto/biography stultifies the subject and arrests a fluid phenomenon of life into a static object. Life, on the other hand, continues to revisit itself by giving new meanings to the events in the light of fresh experiences. Every new experience has the potential to completely change one's perspective and make one see one's past completely differently. Auto/biography robs the subject of the freedom to revisit their life both in its details and in its entirety. I argue that the anxiety experienced by the subjects of auto/biography is real and textualization of one's life is tantamount to its stultification and imprisonment. And, as Deleuze points out, "It imprisons and suffocates us" (p. 22). I further argue that Beckett experienced this anxiety of textual incarceration. His anxiety over the textualization of his life is

evidenced by the fact that, firstly, he continued to defer and frustrate the possibility of his biography as long as he could; secondly, despite drawing deeply upon his personal life, he tried to maintain blank, placeless, and universalist façade of his creative writing and, thirdly, he asserted that there was absolutely no connection between his life and his work.

III

Beckett has often claimed that his life and his work do not intermingle. However, his biographers have other views. James Knowlson notes:

> In the first interview with Beckett intended specifically for this book, I said that although I understood perfectly well what he meant when he spoke of a separation between his life and his work, I could not agree that such a separation was as absolute as he claimed. I then quoted some of the images of his childhood in Ireland that appear often in his work, even in his late prose texts. . . . Dozens of such images could be cited, I maintained, which bridge his life and his work. At this point, Beckett nodded in agreement: 'They're obsessional,' he said, and went on to add several others. (p. 12)

Lawrence R. Broer (1979) finds a similar consensus in Beckett's earlier biography and considers it the most important achievement of Bair's work: "In spite of Beckett's attempt to forge a style so abstract and impersonal that his work is stripped of even the barest clues that might identify him, our paramount discovery is that in all this century it would be difficult to come upon another writer who has so lived the life of his characters and suffered their miseries, or for whom artistic catharsis in the form of painful self-revelation has so meant salvation" (p. 156). The move from the apparent universal to particular also gets reflected in the scholarship on Beckett's work. Peter Boxall traces references to "universality" and "placelessness" in the early scholarship on Beckett's work (2009, p. 160). However, he contradicts them by arguing that "the naming of and reference to Ireland [. . .] takes place in a kind of hidden back room, stowed somewhere beneath a surface which tends towards placelessness and geographical anonymity" (p. 40).

There are numerous instances in Beckett's work when facts of his life become fodder for his creative outpour. A major fact of Beckett's life that finds its way into Beckett's work is his epiphany which clarified to him the direction of his creative endeavours. In a moment of clarity, he realizes that "I am doomed to spend the rest of my days digging up the detritus of my life and vomiting it out over and over again" (Bair, 1990, p. 352). He finds out:

> Optimism is not my way. I shall always be depressed, but what comforts me is the realization that I can now accept this dark side as the commanding side of my personality. In accepting it, I will make it work for me. (1990, p. 352)

Sjef Houppermans in his essay "Proust and Beckett: Visions of Mourning" describes how darkness became *tour de force* for Beckett's creative genius: "The gist of the matter is that Beckett discovered he was a writer of the night, of twilight and withdrawal, of ashes and bare bones. In the bedroom of his mother, while she was struck down by Parkinson's Disease, the mother at once so beloved and so hated, he embraces the dirge and the continually repeated song of death and darkness" (p. 346). The epiphany appears in *Krapp's Last Tape* albeit in a muffled fashion:

> Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . .[hesitates] . . . for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely–[KRAPP switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again]–great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most–[KRAPP curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again]–unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire–[. . .] (p. 176).

Alan W. Friedman rightly comments that *Krapp* is the work in which Beckett most overtly represents himself though he does so less than he did in the draft of the play. It retains allusions to his mother's long widowhood and death (1933-50); an early love . . . ; the humiliation of the French *Murphy*, which sold only seventeen copies; walks on the heath with his dogs; and, most important, the epiphanic revelation he had in 1946 of his creative path: to accept the bleakness of his vision, and to write out of personal experience, and largely in first person monologist form (p. 126).

Another fact of Beckett's life that significantly impacted Beckett's work was his relationship with James Joyce. He had been under the tremendous influence of the prodigious Irishman with whom he shared his self-imposed exile in France. After Marcel Proust, Joyce is the other major writer on whom Beckett has penned a critical essay. In fact, Beckett did a service to James Joyce by writing an insightful piece on *Finnegans Wake* when the novel's critical reception was anything but warm. He has been greatly impressed by Joyce's expansive technique. In fact, "[i]t was at his suggestion that [Beckett] wrote 'Dante… Bruno. Vico… Joyce'" (Brater, p. 139).

As James Knowlson posits in his seminal 1996 biography of Beckett, a deeper comprehension of Beckett's literary influences, themes, and methodologies

can provide a more comprehensive understanding of his creative process, which is characterized by what Knowlson refers to as a "grafting technique." Furthermore, a closer examination of Beckett's methods of composition reveals a clear similarity to those employed by his fellow Dubliner, James Joyce. According to Bair, Beckett acknowledged the profound impact of Joyce on his own artistic development, stating that "Joyce was a major force, but Beckett's response to the maestro may be defined as much in terms of resistance as influence. Joyce, Beckett would repeat, made him realize artistic integrity" (1990, p. 73). Beckett's approach to reading was influenced by Joyce, which he subsequently applied to his own writing; "copying out phrases to be grafted into his own writings, ticking them off to show they had been incorporated" (Ackerley, p. 16). Knowlson concurs,

> Certain parallels between Beckett's early methods and those of Joyce are fairly obvious. Joyce took particular care with his research, reading books primarily for what they could offer him for his own writing. (Indeed many people who knew him, including Beckett, have claimed he read almost exclusively for this purpose.) Though he was inspired more by disinterested intellectual and scholarly curiosity than Joyce was, Beckett's notebooks show that he too plundered the books he was reading or studying for material that he would then incorporate into his own writing. Beckett copied out striking, memorable or witty sentences or phrases into his notebooks. Such quotations or near quotations were then woven into the dense fabric of his early prose. It is what could be called a grafting technique, and at times it almost runs wild. He even checked off the quotations in his private notebooks once they had been incorporated into his own work. This technique was not specifically adopted by Joyce, but it was very Joycean in its ambition and its impulse. (p. 109)

The residence of Joyce was situated in close proximity to the Seine, and it was a common practice for Beckett and Joyce to engage in a leisurely stroll on Sunday mornings along the Quai de Branly, Quai de Grenelle, and Bir Hakeim, proceeding to take a walk on the Allée des Cygnes, a tree-lined pathway located on a small island near the Pont de Grenelle. Their footsteps echo years later in Beckett's short play, *Ohio Impromptu*: "From its single window he could see the downstream extremity of the Isle of Swans. . . . Day after day he could be seen slowly pacing the islet. Hour after hour" (qtd. in Knowlson, p. 140). He and Joyce often paced the Isle of Swans in silence. James Knowlson records Beckett saying:

> There wasn't a lot of conversation between us. I was a young man, very devoted to him, and he liked me. . . . I was very flattered when he dropped the 'Mister'. Everybody was 'Mister'. There were no Christian names, no first names. The nearest you would get to a friendly name was to drop the 'Mister'. I was never Sam. I was always 'Beckett' at the best. (p. 140)

Beckett told Richard Ellmann in 1954 about "one occasion when Joyce dictated a small part of *Finnegans Wake* to him. There was a memorable knock on the door, which Beckett apparently did not hear. Joyce said, 'Come in,' and Beckett wrote it down. Afterwards, he read back what he had written and Joyce said, 'What's that 'Come in'?' 'Yes, you said that,' said Beckett. Joyce thought for a moment, then said, 'Let it stand'" (Brater, p. 130). "The 'knock' we hear in *Ohio Impromptu*," Enoch Brater argues, "is in fact the aural counterpart to the double image we see" (p. 129). Reader and Listener have established between themselves some tacit understanding regarding the knock's dual domain. When Listener knocks, Reader responds by reacting in two ways. He pauses, then doubles back on the phrase he has just uttered, triggering its repetition. The knock resounds through time and space to interrupt the flow of narration by underscoring what comes before and creating suspense for all that may follow. Halting the narration, it signifies a beat in the action, but it also signals a continuity through partial duplication. Certain features of this story are delivered as a tale twice told (Brater, p. 129-30). James Knowlson writes about Beckett's fascination with the older writer in these words:

> There was a lot in the background and personality of the older Irish writer to attract Beckett. They both had degrees in French and Italian, although from different universities in Dublin. Joyce's exceptional linguistic abilities and the wide range of his reading in Italian, German, French and English impressed the linguist and scholar in Beckett, whose earlier studies allowed him to share with Joyce his passionate love of Dante. They both adored words, their sounds, rhythms, shapes, etymologies and histories, and Joyce had a formidable vocabulary derived from many languages and a keen interest in contemporary slang in several languages that Beckett admired and tried to emulate. (p. 137)

Beckett was aware of this overwhelming influence of Joyce on his writing technique. He consciously tried to distance himself from Joycean technique. "Joyce was a synthesizer," Beckett told Martin Esslin, "I am an analyzer" (qtd. in Brater, p. 5).

There is at least one particular instance when fiction eerily turns into life. In Beckett's novel *Murphy*, the eponymous character is attacked by an anonymous pursuer in the streets. While the novel was yet in the process of publication, Becket himself was stabbed by a pimp in the streets without any provocation whatsoever. After stabbing Beckett, the man ran away quickly. Beckett fell to the ground and, after a few seconds, he felt his left side and discovered blood on his hand. He called out that he was bleeding. His friends managed to get him to their flat, undressed him, and were horrified when they saw the wound. As they did not know the name of a doctor, they phoned the police, and Beckett was rushed off, unconscious by now, by ambulance to the nearest hospital. "[I]n spite of his wish to let the matter drop, the police insisted on pressing charges against the pimp in Beckett's third

court case in a matter of months. He met Prudent in the entrance court and asked him why he did it. 'Je ne sais pas,' Monsieur,' answered the pimp, adding a polite, but incongruous '*Je m'excuse*' (I don't know why, sir. I'm sorry) (Knowlson, p. 359).

The question remains why Beckett continued to deny the biographical nature of his work. One cannot pretend to understand the motives behind this denial, much less know them. However, this study is an attempt to trace a plausible explanation. One such explanation might lie in the carceral anxiety that pervades Beckett's work. That the issues of power and narrative control in the biography were front and center in Beckett's attitude to his biographer can be discerned in Bair's assertion: "I hesitate to describe his efforts by using the contemporary word 'spin,' but sometimes I thought he came perilously close to Brian Coffey's contention that he was trying to shape what posterity would think of him while he was still alive to enjoy it" (2019, p. 87).

Beckett's art is conscious of linguistic incarceration. His work is focused upon breaking the prison house of language. According to Martin Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*: "Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain in language through their speech" (p. 217). Language can be viewed as another representation of the "in" aspect of being. However, in Beckett's art, the containing function of language is pushed to its limits until its usefulness becomes obsolete. The Unnamable, who is adverse to language and thus to naming, claims, "I'm in words, made of words, others' words," only to immediately disavow the assertion, stating, "I'm something quite different, a different thing, a wordless thing in an empty space" (*Unnamable*, p. 390). Paradoxically, a word divorced from meaning is itself an empty space – a space that can contain a "wordless thing," even a thingless thing that the disembodied narrator seemingly aspires to become. For Beckett, language is a home where one can never feel at home.

This system of signs is also a prison house of being, a place of torture. The self is inevitably caught in the violence between the truth that eludes and the word that feigns. However, the outside world, the real, is a greater menace, a larger prison of silence "of which the universe is made" (*Molloy*, p. 122). The typical Beckettian self remains rooted at the threshold, opting for neither side. Andrew Kennedy, in his analysis of this paradox of language, observes that "[t]he central importance of language in all modernist writing becomes, in Beckett, a dangerous immersion in language as a creative/destructive element, language as the stuff that makes up, or else annihilates, the world and the self" (*Samuel Beckett*, p. 2). To keep self from "annihilation", its identity is withheld. Beckett tries to evade textual incarceration by withholding the geographical identity from his fictional landscape and keeping his characters non-descript. The universalist façade somehow masks his personal concerns. By refusing to enter directly into the discourse and implicating the self in

its vicissitudes, the author tries to ward off the linguistic threat of interpellation. The author, even if not dead, manages to stay at the edge of the discourse. Beckett manages to evade textual incarceration and effectively avoids reverse interpellation by playing Godot, both in his work as well as his life. By eternally deferring an unequivocal self-representation both in the public sphere and in his work, Beckett succeeds to sidestep the very real possibility of textual ossification.

IV

Samuel Beckett's reluctance to engage in the textualization of his personal life can be understood as a manifestation of his apprehension towards the potential constriction of his self through the medium of language, and his fear of his life becoming subsumed by his written words. His attempts to eliminate recognizable markers of his life from his work, and assertion of an absolute disconnection between his life and his work, can be seen as a means of resisting the process of interpellation and preserving a sense of agency over his identity. Beckett's reluctance highlights the complexities and nuances of the relationship between an individual's self-identity, language, and the act of writing, and raises important questions about the role of biography not only in expressing the self but also in shaping an individual's self-identity.

Endnotes

[1] In her review of Deirdre Bair's *Parisian Lives* published in the Guardian on February 28, 2020, Kathryn Hughes writes that when Samuel Beckett agreed to let Deirdre Bair write his biography, many speculated that it was due to a romantic relationship between the two. This was in 1971, and the assumption was that the reclusive and esteemed Irish and European author would not have chosen a young American with only a recent PhD to her name for such an important project unless there was a personal connection. The news caused a great deal of speculation and gossip among the group of professors, poets, intellectuals, and critics who had long considered themselves the guardians of Beckett's legacy, and who were disappointed that they had not been selected for the task. Hughes suggests that they were resentful of Bair's perceived advantage of having gained access to Beckett through personal means, while they had been busy attending conferences and trying to establish personal connections with him.

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