Chapter 2 turns to post-World War II France, where the aftermath of war produced fierce debates about the status of aesthetic autonomy, presided over by the field-shaping influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and his theory of intellectual engagement. In this context, Samuel Beckett emerges as a transitional figure in the art of hunger tradition: both its last modernist and its first standard-bearer in the post-war period beyond modernism. Situating Beckett’s writing from the 1940s onwards within the post-war French debates about the status of aesthetic autonomy, this chapter follows Beckett’s resistance to both littérature engagée, and defenses of autonomy that linked art to freedom. Hunger, linked in his writing of this period with obligation, necessity, and the collapse of collective and political communities, becomes the vehicle through which he develops a new theory of art as a practice of unfreedom.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, hunger, aesthetic autonomy, post-Vichy France, freedom
“Between a Gozzoli as such and a Gozzoli from our exploded categories, I would die of starvation”: so Beckett proclaims in a letter to his close friend and frequent correspondent Georges Duthuit in May 1949. Given, that is, the choice between Italian representational art of the kind Duthuit loathed, and modern abstract art of the kind he favored, Beckett prefers to starve. His espousal of starvation refuses not just Duthuit’s specific aesthetic position, but the very terms of the debate in which Duthuit is engaged, implying that even “our exploded categories” are determined by the figurative tradition to which they are ostensibly opposed. The debate against which he is positioning himself—the “bataille réalisme–abstraction”—dominated French art criticism in the post-war period. By proclaiming that he would rather die of starvation than engage its terms, Beckett places himself outside the oppositions on which the post-war French aesthetic field was founded. Like the modernist hunger artists discussed in Chapter 1, his espousal of an aesthetic position identified with hunger allows him to figure the collapse of a social context for his aesthetics.
Beckett’s rejection of the terms of the post-war aesthetic debate are grounded in his skepticism of two of its axioms. First, Beckett rejects the call to make art political, which dominated thinking about art and literature in France in the 1940s. In this, he is part of a late modernist shift that understands aesthetic autonomy as entailing autonomy not just from the market, but also from politics. While for the early modernists discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, aesthetic autonomy was above all an attempt to exempt art from commercial considerations, by the 1930s, as Tyrus Miller has argued, the question of art’s relationship to politics had become central to aesthetic debate. In response, the controversy around aesthetic autonomy shifted to encompass the question of whether art should be political. In France in the aftermath of World War II, the answer to this question very often seemed to be an unequivocal yes. The lingering politicization of the aesthetic realm following the German Occupation of France meant that the most influential theories of art in the post-war period, from Communist social realism to Sartrean littérature engagée, reflected a growing consensus that aesthetic autonomy was politically irresponsible. In this context, even the apparently formalist distinction between realism and abstraction that Beckett alludes to in his distinction between the two Gozzolis implies a political choice between the Communist embrace of realism, on the one hand, and the emergent association between liberalism and post-war modernist abstraction, on the other. In this context, Beckett’s suggestion that he would prefer to die of starvation suggests a shift in the art of hunger. Starvation in this new context begins to function as a dramatization not primarily of the tensions entailed by aesthetic autonomy’s production of artistic poverty. Instead, it dramatizes the impossibility of an a- or anti-political aesthetic autonomy in a context that produces the politicization of art in all its forms.
A minority of thinkers in the post-war period shared Beckett’s skepticism of the compulsory politicization of art, preferring aesthetic autonomy over the prevailing alternatives of social realism, or *littérature engagée*. Even those committed to some version of aesthetic autonomy, however, overwhelmingly subscribed to a more fundamental axiom, which was shared across the ideological and aesthetic positions of the post-war literary and artistic fields. This axiom held that art and literature provided a path to freedom. It underpinned both the defenses of and attacks on art’s political uses, and became a surprisingly widespread point of consensus, cutting across the highly charged debates that characterized the French aesthetic field in the late 1940s. Given that both realism and abstraction were linked to this rhetoric of freedom, Beckett’s proclamation that he would rather die of starvation than follow either path represents his break with this consensus, reflecting his preference for an art that is divorced not only from politics, but from the possibility of freedom itself. Like earlier hunger artists, Beckett uses starvation to dramatize his commitment to an art that is both autonomous and unfree, imagined as a fatal confrontation with the physical limits of his mortal body.
Beckett’s art of hunger is a response to a field in which aesthetic autonomy is discredited and in crisis, where the social consensus on which modernist autonomy was built has fractured and disintegrated. In this context, it represents a crucial turn in the history of the art of hunger. The problem of producing autonomous art without a literary field organized around autonomy—the problem that I traced through modernist hunger artists in Chapter 1—returns in post-war France as the collapse of the viability of aesthetic autonomy not just (or primarily) as a way of organizing the literary field, but also as a philosophical concept. As the debate about art’s relationship to politics comes to dominate philosophical discussions about aesthetic autonomy, the art of hunger’s tendency to imagine art as unfree and anti-political acquires a new set of meanings. This chapter places Beckett’s development of an aesthetics of starvation within the context of post-war French literary and artistic debates, arguing that the art of hunger develops in his writing as part of a larger shift towards an unfree, anti-political art. Writing against both the association between art and freedom that runs throughout the post-war French literary field and the politicization of hunger that pervades French and Irish national discourse at this time, Beckett’s art of hunger theorizes an unfree art through the falling away of political and aesthetic communities.
The second half of this chapter argues that the theory of art that Beckett develops in reaction to post-war French aesthetic debates finds expression in the form of Beckett’s late prose. The unfreedom of Beckett’s autonomous art culminates in the formal subjugation of body and affect to abstract, logical form, in a process that develops from the sucking stones episode of *Molloy* in the post-war period, to its full realization in the late prose of the 1960s through to the 1980s. The aesthetic positions entailed by the art of hunger are realized in Beckett as a set of formal processes that act on both reader and character. They produce an embodied aesthetics, where embodiment becomes the site of the body’s unfreedom, its subjection to the pattern and permutation that constitutes the internal logic of the text itself in the late prose. This process reconceives aesthetic autonomy as a formal strategy and not simply an aesthetic concept, in which texts develop as closed systems that generate their own idiosyncratic laws. Read this way, I argue that Beckett’s late prose as a whole can be understood as an extrapolation of the art of hunger into a question of textual form.

1. Autonomy, Engagement, And *Épuration*

Debates over the relationship of art to politics, and the viability of aesthetic autonomy in a newly politically charged context dominate the post-war French literary field. The problem of literary commitment became a particularly urgent one in post-war France, where the cultural prestige of French writers was put under pressure by attempts to come to terms with the fraught moral and political legacies of the Occupation. As Gisèle Sapiro argues, this period of French history poses particularly stark challenges for aesthetic autonomy, asking us to consider, “What happens to literary autonomy in a period of crisis,” particularly one in which “the literary field witnessed the abolition of those conditions that had assured its relative independence.” The attempt to answer this question presents the first sustained post-war crisis for aesthetic autonomy, and produces a body of philosophical and theoretical thought that, from Sartre’s *What is Literature?* to Blanchot’s post-war writings and Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero*, set the terms of subsequent debates about the nature of literature and its relationship to politics.
The foundations for these debates were laid during the German Occupation of France (1940–4) and in the purge of writers and intellectuals that immediately followed the Liberation in 1944. For the French literary field, the Occupation seemed to mark the end of an autonomous literary or cultural sphere, mobilizing and polarizing French intellectuals and writers around political questions to an unprecedented degree. Many of France’s leading inter-war intellectuals emerged during the war as Nazi sympathizers or collaborators, with influential writers such as Charles Maurras and Robert Brasillach writing in support of the Vichy regime. Meanwhile, the Resistance also mobilized intellectuals in opposition to the Occupation, and in 1941 the Comité National des Écrivains (CNE) was formed as the writer’s branch of the Resistance, under the auspices of the Communist Party. The CNE’s clandestine publication, *Les Lettres françaises*—which was run by Jean Paulhan and Jacques Decour, and carried unsigned work by writers such as Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, François Mauriac, Raymond Queneau, and Jean-Paul Sartre—insisted from the outset on the political responsibility of writers and intellectuals, aggressively denouncing those they suspected of collaboration.

Even for those writers who sought to retain an autonomous position, the totalitarian nature of the Occupation made this impossible. The hyper-politicized environment of the war years colored all aspects of life, from the most literary to the most quotidian. The German occupiers in the north and the collaborationist Vichy regime in the south both took over periodicals, presses, and broadcasters, heavily censoring and controlling what was published and broadcast. Writers who wished to publish were forced to choose between venues that, by virtue of their continuing (p.77) existence, operated to varying degrees with the sanction of the governing regime, or those that, operating clandestinely, declared their opposition to Vichy and the Nazi occupiers. Under such conditions, the space for aesthetic autonomy radically contracted, and, as Sapiro argues, the very question of “whether or not to publish in these conditions became a political issue. The most apolitical attitudes thus took on a political significance.”4
The politicization of writing that characterized the war years continued to shape the French intellectual environment in the immediate aftermath of the war. The CNE’s wartime denunciations set the tone for a flurry of prosecutions and ostracisms of collaborationist writers in the immediate aftermath of the Liberation. *L'épuration*—the juridical and extra-juridical purge of collaborators in the immediate aftermath of the Liberation—was a society-wide affair, but trials and denunciations of writers and intellectuals often assumed an out-sized symbolic importance. Brasillach was charged with treason for his wartime writings and executed; others were sentenced to prison terms of varying lengths. Some, like Céline, who had fled France as the Allies retook the country, were tried and sentenced in absentia. Many others were never tried by the courts, but were placed on blacklists by the CNE, which sought to exclude them wholesale from the post-war French literary field.

The intellectual response to *l'épuration* revealed the extent to which ambivalence about the merits of aesthetic autonomy structured the post-war French intellectual scene. On the one hand, charges levelled against collaborators and suspected collaborators frequently accused them of literally selling out to the Germans, sacrificing political and ethical principles in exchange for (often fictive) material gain. The old claim that the “pure writer” was one who “remained poor” is repurposed here as a guarantee not just of aesthetic autonomy but also of political virtue. On the other hand, the suggestion that literature was autonomous from politics, rather than just from the market, came to be associated with the position of the collaborationist writers. During the purge trials, accused writers and their lawyers often appealed to the claim that literature was inherently autonomous, arguing that their writing’s formal qualities held it outside the realm of the merely political. The resulting association between aesthetic autonomy and collaboration lent weight to the CNE’s wartime insistence on literature as an “instrument” and its disdain for writers who, in professing fidelity to pure art, became (to the CNE’s eyes) complicit in Nazi crimes. Thus, while art’s autonomy from the market remained a broadly accepted ideal in the post-war period, its autonomy from politics was discredited by its association with collaborationist writers.
In this context, the great debate that structured the French literary field at the end of the war was not initially between autonomous and non-autonomous art (the former being discredited in advance), but between the Communists’ and the existentialists’ different versions of a committed, political literature. In the immediate post-war years, the Communist Party assumed a position of “hegemony in the intellectual field,” in part as a result of their central role within the Resistance. They swept municipal and Constituent Assembly elections in 1945, strengthening their wartime claims to moral authority, and began to attract significant literary and cultural figures in large numbers, as long-time Communist Louis Aragon was joined by other major writers and artists, including Paul Éluard, Pablo Picasso, and Fernand Léger. In this context, as Anna Boschetti has argued, “the question of the correct relationship to the Communist Party,” and with it the correct relationship to the party’s belief that art be subject to the demands of politics, “shows itself to be the obsession of an entire generation” of writers and intellectuals.
Jean-Paul Sartre provided the most influential response to the Communist position, developing a political but not straightforwardly didactic theory of literature. In the process, he became the central figure of the post-war literary field, coming to hold, as Boschetti argues, “undivided sway over the entire realm of French intellectual life,” and shaping the anti-autonomous position for decades to come.¹⁰ His clearest statement of this position comes in his influential essay *What is Literature?*, which was published serially in his journal *Les Temps modernes* in 1947 and collected in a single volume in 1948. Revising the Kantian claim that the aesthetic is characterized by its “finality without end,” Sartre insists that while “the book is not, like the tool, a means for any end whatever,” it does find an end in “the reader’s freedom.”¹¹ The engaged writer is one who responds to this demand, aiming “to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom.”¹² This version of committed art is not, like the social realism promoted by the Communists, simply a reflection of the world as it exists, but it nonetheless conceives of art as committed, heteronomous, and bound to the world. At the same time, as Suzanne Guerlac has argued, Sartre’s position is more autonomous than is sometimes supposed.¹³ In particular, he remains committed to literature’s economic autonomy, arguing that “the writer is not paid; he is fed, well or badly, according to the period, for his activity is *useless*.”¹⁴ This uselessness grants literature its critical capacity, allowing it to exist outside of society’s institutions and conventions, and thus to “give society a *guilty conscience*.”¹⁵ Sartre, in other words, follows the polemists and accusers of the purge in distinguishing between art’s autonomy from the market and its autonomy from politics, imagining art’s autonomy from the market as granting it a privileged political function. The distance between Sartre’s position and that of modernist proponents of aesthetic autonomy can be measured, however, through the writer’s access to food: while Sartre’s writers are not paid, they *are* fed, a distinction that seems to keep them free of the corrupting influence of capitalist exchange, while holding them within and keeping them dependent upon the social body. Sartre’s writer *engagé* might retain his autonomy from capitalist modes of exchange, but he is not and cannot be a starving artist.
The rejection of aesthetic autonomy that runs from the CNE through the purge trials to Sartre held a powerful moral and political appeal in a context in which autonomy had been first exposed as impossible and then used as a cover for collaboration. This position, while retaining pre-eminence throughout the post-war period, was not without its critics. In 1948, in the immediate aftermath of the publication of *What is Literature?*, Jean Paulhan—a wartime member of the CNE and one of the founders of *Les Lettres françaises*—published *De la paille et du grain* (*Of Chaff and Wheat*), a scathing renunciation of the purges. Accusing the advocates of *l’épuration* of hypocrisy for their demand that writers exhibit patriotism, Paulhan’s essay attacks the suggestion that writers owe any kind of responsibility to their homeland. His journal, the *Cahiers de la Pléiade*, founded in 1946, sought to put into practice this principle that literature be judged only according to literary standards, publishing work by writers out of favor under the purges alongside those with unblemished records. In an introductory “Note” to the winter 1948 issue, Paulhan (p.80) affirmed the journal as “a place...where men and words (and books) can be cleansed of the filth accumulated during the years of war, Occupation, and deliverance.” The consecration of an autonomous literary space would, in other words, do the work of national purification that the purges themselves could not.
Paulhan’s repudiation of the purges was part of a resurgence of debate over autonomy in the final years of the 1940s. This moment in French intellectual history is captured by the brief post-war run of *Transition*, edited by Beckett’s close friend Georges Duthuit and published irregularly from 1948 to 1950, which sought to restage these debates for an anglophone audience. *Transition* placed the debate over literary *engagement* at the center of the field, reprinting extracts from *What is Literature?* in issues 1 and 2, and serializing Duthuit’s commentary on the issue, “Sartre’s Last Class,” across five of its six issues. For Duthuit, however, Sartre’s principal antagonist was not Paulhan but André Breton, whom Sartre attacked in the first extract of *What is Literature?* published in *Transition*. In a response, published in the second issue of *Transition*, Breton proclaims that, “ART WILL NEVER TAKE ORDERS.”

Pitching himself, like Paulhan, against both the rhetoric of treason that surrounded the purge trials and the Sartrean call to commitment that followed, Breton protests that, “No political-military imperative can possibly be accepted or proclaimed in art without treason. ... The ignoble word COMMITMENT which caught on after the war, reeks of a servility which both poetry and art can only loathe.”
Recalling inter-war surrealism’s espousal of the starving artist, Breton’s defense of a mode of pure or autonomous art claims that its “categorical rejection of the conditions of life and thought imposed on man in the mid-twentieth century” calls for an “ascetic.” 20 Other defenders of autonomy likewise countered Sartre’s image of a writer “fed, well or badly” by his society with the deployment of hunger and associated tropes of famine and asceticism. In his “Letter—Red,” reprinted in the same issue, Henri Pichette claims of the poet that, “If he is genuine, he must and can live on famine.” 21 Max-Pol Fouchet, in a reply to Pichette, concurs, linking famine to political refusal. Fouchet praises Pichette for his embrace of rebellion instead of revolution, despite the fact that, “The business of revolution...is to share out our daily bread, whereas rebellion is (p.81) destructive and brings in no harvests.” 22 Whereas Sartre imagines the writer as unprofitable, but fed, Breton, Pichette, and Fouchet, in rejecting the Sartrean call to commitment, return to the modernist trope of the artist as both ascetic in his implicit refusal of food, and unproductive in his inability to generate food or to participate in the kind of political revolution that would distribute it more equitably within society. The modernist starving artist’s history as a figure for art’s autonomy from the market, in other words, returns in the post-war debates as a refutation of Sartrean commitment and an embrace of the artist’s concurrent autonomy from political imperatives.
By the end of the 1940s, autonomy had begun to produce a number of sophisticated defenses, which would pave the way for the emergence of so-called French theory in the 1960s and 1970s. Maurice Blanchot’s post-war literary criticism, collected in 1949 as *La Part du feu (The Work of Fire)*, exemplifies this theoretical repudiation of Sartrean commitment. His influential essay “Literature and the Work of Death” (first published as two essays in 1947 and 1948) sets itself directly against Sartre, opening with a dismissal of the very question—“Why write?”—with which *What is Literature?* begins. Whereas Sartre insists on literature as a form of action, Blanchot claims, to the contrary, “Literature does not act.” Instead, literature for Blanchot gives us “a view of the world which realizes itself as unreal using language’s peculiar reality.” Foregrounding the slippery self-annulment of language, Blanchot suggests that literature can neither refer confidently to the world, nor act successfully upon it—that its ensnarement in language renders it necessarily autonomous. Roland Barthes adopts a similarly anti-Sartrean tone in his 1953 study *Writing Degree Zero*, which draws on essays that date back to 1947, and attacks “intellectual modes of writing” that, being “literary to the extent that they are powerless and...political only through their obsession with commitment,” “can only give rise to a para-literature.” As these names and texts suggest (and as we will see in more detail in Chapter 3), Sartre’s call to intellectual commitment cast a long shadow over the history of twentieth-century French thought, prompting a tremendous intellectual outpouring (p.82) in response that laid the early foundations for what would in the 1960s and 1970s become French poststructuralism.
Looking ahead to the rise of French theory two decades later, these debates also looked back to the legacies of modernism. Indeed, the stakes of the struggle over literary engagement in post-war France lie in part in their importance for the fate of modernism in the wake of the political compromises, the discrediting of aesthetic autonomy, and the national humiliation of World War II. The centrality of André Breton—an important figure of continuity between the inter-war avant-gardes and the post-war literary field—to this debate, and his own insistence on the continuity between his pre-war and post-war thought, underscores the extent to which debates about the writer’s commitment were debates about what was to be done with the modernist heritage. Sartre himself makes this point, positioning Breton and the surrealists as the development of the modernist claim to autonomy, which “radicalizes the old literary claim of gratuity in order to make of it a rejection of action by destroying its categories.”

Indeed, the identification between aesthetic autonomy and modernist tradition runs through most participants in this debate. Paulhan appeals to Rimbaud and Romain Rolland as his exemplars of literature’s inherently traitorous status. Blanchot develops his thought in this period through readings of Kafka and Mallarmé, as well as those, like Lautréaumont, who had been reclaimed for modernism. Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* works out a literary history that foregrounds writers like Flaubert, Mallarmé, Proust, Céline, and Queneau. For all these writers, the debate between autonomy and political engagement was also a question about whether French literature would continue to be modernist—that is, whether it would retain the assumptions and aesthetic principles that had guided it from the late nineteenth century through to the outbreak of World War II.
For all the urgency of this debate in the late 1940s, the French literary field was surprisingly unified on a key point: from the CNE and Sartre, to Breton, Blanchot, and Barthes, post-war French intellectuals broadly agreed that literature was (or ought to be) oriented towards freedom. In the second installment of “Sartre’s Last Class,” Georges Duthuit satirizes this surprising convergence between apparent rivals Sartre and Breton: “One frail divinity draws out the full force of love from both men and is defended by both with the same fervor of eloquence from wound and threat: liberty.”\(^{28}\) Duthuit is right. Where Sartre argues that the goal of \((p.83)\) writing is “the reader’s freedom,” Breton effectively concurs, suggesting that art must espouse “the unconditional defence of a single cause, that of the liberation of man.”\(^{29}\) This conviction that art’s principal justification is its capacity to create freedom runs through the entire post-war literary field. On one end of the autonomy/commitment spectrum, the Communists, seeking to use literature as a tool of revolution, imagine it as a path to liberate the workers from their enslavement. On the other, even a writer as committed to autonomous art as Blanchot argues that literature’s capacity for negation represents, like the revolutionary Reign of Terror, a desire for “absolute freedom.”\(^{30}\) The understanding of freedom at stake in these positions varies widely, with communist revolution differing markedly from Blanchotian freedom-as-negation and existentialist and surrealist versions of the reader’s freedom entailing different versions of the subject and methods for producing liberty. But for all the bitterness of the debates over literature’s relationship to politics, the post-war French literary field was united behind its conviction that it provided a route to freedom.

2. The Obligation To Starve: Beckett’s Post-War Art Criticism
This fiercely contested literary field forms the backdrop for Beckett’s most significant period of literary activity. Between 1945 and 1949 while these debates were raging in Parisian literary journals, Beckett, writing in French for the first time, was undergoing his most prolific and important creative period, during which he wrote three novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable), two plays (Waiting for Godot and the posthumously published Eleuthéria), and the Nouvelles series of short stories. This outpouring established his reputation as a leading writer in both the French and anglophone literary traditions, and continues to form the basis of his canonicity and critical acclaim. The Beckett of this period is sometimes remembered (particularly in English-language scholarship) as an isolated figure, outliving Joyce and his sphere of influence—so central to Beckett’s pre-war writing—without assimilating into an alternate literary scene. This impression has been central to Beckett’s reception as a late modernist, which imagines him holding the fort as an increasingly idiosyncratic outpost of modernism into the latter half of the twentieth century.

(p.84) The publication of his collected letters over the last decade, however, has made it increasingly clear that Beckett’s turn to French took place against the backdrop of his immersion in the French literary world of the immediate post-war period. During the late 1940s, Beckett’s letters show close familiarity with the leading French literary magazines, as well as with the debates outlined in Section 1. Through his friendship with Georges Duthuit, he was closely involved with the production of the post-war run of Transition, contributing occasional pieces, performing extensive credited and uncredited translation work, correcting many of the journal’s articles, and engaging in an on-going conversation with Duthuit about works published by the journal. Given Transition’s investment in restaging the key French literary debates for an international audience, his involvement with this periodical alone would have made Beckett intimately familiar with the intricacies of the post-war disputes over aesthetic autonomy and political commitment. Taken in the larger context of his broader reading in the period, it is clear that, during this crucial period for the development of his aesthetics, Beckett was immersed in the debates and ideas that constituted the post-war French literary field.
Within this field, Beckett’s sympathies and commitments lay with those who sought to defend autonomy. Although he had served as an active member of the Resistance during the war, he always remained at a distance from its more literary arm, never becoming involved in the CNE and its organs or with the broader literary Resistance and its clandestine publications. This gave him an ambivalent position in relation to these post-war literary debates. On the one hand, he stood outside the chief engines that sought to insist on the politics of literature in the aftermath of the war. On the other, he had been sufficiently engaged with Resistance activities as to inoculate him against the accusation that his disinterested writing necessarily produced a disengaged politics. Intellectually, he was closest to writers like Blanchot, about whom his partner, Suzanne Dumesnil wrote, in relation to Beckett’s nomination for a prize judged by Blanchot: “To have been defended by a man like Blanchot will have been the main thing for Beckett, whatever the outcome.” And like Blanchot, Beckett avoided directly engaging the debate over commitment in his published writing, instead mounting a series of implicit defenses of autonomous art through an engagement with modernism.
Beckett’s post-war writing about aesthetics primarily takes the form of essays on art, particularly the paintings of his friends Bram and Geer van Velde (his pre-war criticism, in contrast, focuses primarily on literature, (p.85) including substantial critical essays on Proust, Joyce, and Irish poetry). He works out his position in three significant essays, written and published contemporaneously with his period of great literary productivity: “La Peinture des van Velde, ou le monde et le pantalon,” published in Cahiers d’Art in 1946; “Peintres de l’empêchement,” for Derrière le miroir, the publication of the Parisian art gallery Galerie Maeght, which appeared in May 1948; and the “Three Dialogues,” co-written with Georges Duthuit, which appeared in Transition in December 1949. The switch to the visual arts as a medium for thinking through his aesthetics is significant in the light of the contemporaneous French debates over the relationship between art and politics. As Sarah Wilson has observed, “many of the more public battles for Communist ascendency from 1935 to 1954 were waged in paint,” making painting an important site for the debate over the relationship between art and politics that raged in France at this time.\(^\text{32}\) In the visual arts, as in literature, such debates were shaped around the legacy of modernism. As Kevin Brazil has argued, “This link between realist aesthetics and Communist political humanism permeated the discourse surrounding painting in post-war France.”\(^\text{33}\) Social realism was by this time the official aesthetic position of the Communist Party, and the “bataille réalisme-abstraction” (the battle between realism and abstraction) was raging—a debate between politically engaged, realist art, on the one hand, and autonomous, abstract art on the other.
Situating Beckett’s turn to art criticism within this debate reveals his commitment to both modernism and autonomy. On the one hand, he writes exclusively about abstract painters, whose works lack overt political content and reflect his indifference to the claims of Communist social realism. Bram van Velde’s paintings—his favorites in this period—are not only abstract but also eschew the descriptive titles of many of his modernist peers, removing them still further from the threat of political or historical reference. On the other hand, however, Beckett is quite explicit in his letters to Duthuit that his aversion is not just for politically engaged social realist art, but for “the old formalism–realism distinction” as a whole.34 His embrace of Bram van Velde is premised on the claim that the painter represents “an art of a different order...from any achieved up to date”—that is, that he represents a definitive break not only from social realism but also, as he argues in the “Three Dialogues,” from other abstract painters like André Masson and Pierre Tal-Coat.35 In this, Beckett reprises the modernist language of rupture, locating true artistic novelty not in the high modernist moment of the preceding generation, but in the post-war present. Van Velde’s contemporary art represents, Beckett claims, the only truly new art—the only art that fully accomplishes the modernist rupture with the past. At a time when modernism seemed to be on the retreat, Beckett’s readings of van Velde insist not only that it is not yet over, but that it is in fact still to be accomplished.
Despite the importance of both literature and the visual arts to debates about aesthetic autonomy and political art, accounts of these two art forms remained surprisingly distinct. Discussions within literature, in particular, often located art outside of the debate about literary commitment. Sartre influentially opens What is Literature? by excluding non-literary arts—and ultimately poetry as well—from his call to arms: “No, we do not want to ‘engage’ painting, sculpture and music ‘too’, or at least not in the same way.” Such a position reflects Sartre’s own doubts about the cruder mode of political commitment advocated by Communist social realism. But this segregation in the debates also filters through to the broader literary sphere, where debates over autonomy and politics focus almost exclusively on questions of writing, language, and the proper social role of literature, abandoning the inter-arts emphasis of inter-war modernism. Even Transition, despite Duthuit’s status as a well-known art critic, keeps these debates surprisingly separate. “Sartre’s Last Class,” Duthuit’s essay about Sartrean commitment, is serialized throughout the magazine’s run—failing to appear only in the fifth issue, which is devoted to the visual arts and its intersection with literature, despite the fact that the “Documents” section of this issue is devoted overwhelmingly to precisely the debates about politics and the visual arts outlined earlier in this section.
Beckett, however, not only writes extensively about art in this period, he also does so quite explicitly in order to develop his own positions on literary aesthetics. In a letter to Duthuit which contains early versions of the “Three Dialogues,” Beckett urges his reader to “bear in mind that I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else,” underscoring the extent to which his writing on the visual arts functions—as critics have repeatedly assumed—as a testing ground for his own ideas about literature. From his position just beyond the normal remit of literary debates, in a space that has been granted its autonomy in advance, Beckett participates obliquely in these debates, developing a quietly anti-Sartrean (p.87) aesthetics. Like Blanchot and Barthes, he signals his distance from Sartre by repudiating the question “What is literature?” itself, which Beckett dismisses in a letter to Duthuit in August 1948 without mentioning Sartre by name. Where Sartre’s theory of writing begins with the assumption that “It is we [i.e., humans] who set up a relationship between this tree and that bit of sky” and moves on to locate the impulse to make art in “the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world,” Beckett praises van Velde, in direct contrast, for his explicitly non-relational art. As he writes in “La Peinture des van Velde,” the year after What is Literature? was first serialized, “The history of painting is the history of its relations with its object.” Van Velde’s innovation, however, is to break decisively with this history, accepting for the first time, as he argues in the “Three Dialogues,” “the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself.” Van Velde’s art is, therefore, both radically autonomous and fundamentally anti-Sartrean, founded in a severing of the relation that makes political engagement itself possible.
Nonetheless, if Beckett’s decision to write on art partakes of an inter-arts dialogue that seeks to appropriate the autonomy of abstract painting for his own writing and to use art as a testing ground for his non-relational aesthetics, he does so not by claiming an analogy between writing and painting, but rather by underscoring the gap that prevents the two arts from ever truly approaching each other. In his early post-war essays on the van Veldes, Beckett is especially explicit about this, writing that Bram van Velde’s paintings “deprive [the spectator], even the quickest to commentary, of the use of speech,” and produce “a silence…like that which we keep, even as we ask ourselves why, in the presence of a mute.”

He goes on to suggest that this problem is a product of the exemplary visuality of the painter’s work, observing that, “To write purely visual apperception, is to write a sentence stripped of meaning.”

By placing art beyond the grasp of writing, Beckett makes the inter-arts dialogue a point not of convergence but of disjuncture, and suggests that this disjuncture is precisely the place where these paintings’ autonomy lies.
In this, Beckett echoes Clement Greenberg, whose influential theory of modernism in art made a small entrée into the Parisian literary sphere around this time in the form of an essay on twentieth-century American art, published in Les Temps modernes in 1946. In this essay, Greenberg is scathing about the corrupting influence of “literature” and “literary paraphernalia” on art in the US, echoing arguments that he had earlier developed in his 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” In this earlier essay, Greenberg claims that the history of modern art—both the visual arts and other art forms—is that of “a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive.” The endgame, he suggests, is modernism: that phase of aesthetic development in which, “The arts have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined.” Greenberg’s insistence on autonomy as a mode of medium specificity in which literature is excluded from art resonates with Beckett’s attempt to imagine the autonomy of the van Veldes’ painting through writing’s lack of purchase on them. But in writing across the inter-arts line—indeed, in using the difficulty of this line as a site for theorizing autonomy—Beckett moves towards a way of understanding aesthetic autonomy in literature as a kind of failure of literary resources, a mode of inexpressibility that these essays not only espouse but also perform.
This sense of aesthetic autonomy as the inexpressible attains one of its most emblematic forms in the “Three Dialogues,” where Beckett famously espouses an aesthetics founded on, “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.” But if this widely quoted formula in some respects typifies the desire for an inexpressible art that runs through the earlier essays, it also introduces an important variation. Both of the earlier French essays on the van Veldes reflect the desire of the French literary field as a whole to find a way to more successfully link art to freedom or liberty. In “La Peinture des van Velde, ou le monde et le pantalon,” Beckett suggests that Bram van Velde “blew up” the “impenetrable block” of composition, “in order to liberate from it what he needed.” He repeats the emphasis on the van Veldes’ attempt to liberate painting in “Peintres de l’empêchement” two years later, suggesting that, in their work, “What painting is liberated from is the illusion that there exists more than one object of representation.”
The Beckett of the “Three Dialogues,” however, abandons the language of freedom and liberation, writing scathingly of André Masson’s “concern with the amenities of ease and freedom,” and instead espouses an art driven by obligation and necessity. Reimagining art as a duty—“the obligation to express”—Beckett breaks sharply with the consensus around art’s relationship to freedom that runs through the post-war French literary field, from the political writers of the Communist Party, to Sartrean *intellectuels engagés*, to defenders of autonomy like Blanchot and Paulhan. Indeed, Beckett first advocates a position that would “stick close with necessity” in a letter to Duthuit in August 1948, only weeks after another in which he makes a smirking reference to Duthuit’s “Sartre–Breton equation”—that is, to the art critic’s claim that the two supposed enemies actually approached each other’s positions in their shared embrace of liberty. By March 1949, in the letters that form the basis for the “Three Dialogues,” Beckett is celebrating Bram van Velde’s “fidelity to the prison-house” and his “refusal of any probationary freedom,” in a decisive break with his earlier sense that van Velde’s art constituted a final liberation from painting’s limitations. Rejecting the terms of the Sartre-Breton debate that structured the literary field, as he will later reject the “formalism–realism distinction” in painting, Beckett’s readings of van Velde locate his novelty in his rejection of the consensus around art’s relationship to freedom.
It is probable that Beckett’s position as a critic of the visual arts helped to motivate this rejection. As Serge Guilbaut has shown, 1948—the year in which Beckett began moving away from a language of freedom—also saw “the first reconciliation of avant-garde ideology with the ideology of postwar liberalism,” as American art critics began to describe formal abstraction and aesthetic autonomy in terms of political freedom. Although these claims emerged from American writing and publications, Beckett’s friendship with Duthuit, who had an international profile in this period, as well as his affiliation with Transition, which was distributed in the US and therefore involved with the Franco-American intellectual conversation, would likely have made him aware of these developments. Indeed, Beckett’s refutation of the claim that “the School of Paris (p.90) (meaning to be determined) is finished or almost” in “Peintres de l’empêchement” alludes to US attacks on Parisian artistic supremacy, which Guilbaut links to the emergence of the link between liberalism and aesthetic freedom. In this context, Beckett’s rejection of the claim that art might constitute a mode of freedom should also be understood as a defense of non-political art against the “apolitical politicism” that turned artistic freedom to political ends.

The theory of art that Beckett develops through his essays on van Velde is therefore best understood as a particularly trenchant form of aesthetic autonomy. His rejection of relation and expression entails an espousal of autonomy, by emphasizing the irreducibility of the aesthetic experience and its radical divorce from both the exterior world in which politics unfolds, and the interior world of authorial expression. Such a non-relational, inexpressive art not only undoes the foundations on which a political art, be it Sartrean engagement or Communist social realism, would be built; it also refuses the conventional link between aesthetic autonomy and freedom, reimagining autonomy not as an expression of the artist’s freedom, but as subjugation to the limitations of the aesthetic or artistic condition. For Beckett, as for the writers discussed in Chapter 1, this new art—unfree, inexpressive, non-relational, and autonomous—is best figured as an art of hunger, as he suggests in the line with which I began this chapter: “Between a Gozzoli as such and a Gozzoli from our exploded categories, I would die of starvation.”
Hunger figures two interrelated aspects of Beckett’s post-war aesthetics. First, it reflects his commitment to an art that would accept the impossibility of relation. As early as “La Peinture des van Velde, ou le monde et le pantalon,” Beckett writes of “l’occasion et l’aliment” of painting.\textsuperscript{57} He reprises these terms in very literal English translation in the “Three Dialogues,” where he conceives of painting, as imagined by the history of Western art, as having two aspects: “the aliment, from fruits on plates to low mathematics and self-commiseration, and its manner of dispatch.”\textsuperscript{58} But, he goes on, “All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself.”\textsuperscript{59} Van Velde’s art, as “the first to desist from this estheticized automatism,” is non-relational in the sense that it is starved, accepting, for the first time in art history, the inability of art to ingest its “aliment.”\textsuperscript{60} The acceptance of non-relation entails—this is the second use to which Beckett puts hunger—the acceptance of the impossibility of the artist’s position. It is an acceptance, in other words, that (p.91) “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.”\textsuperscript{61} The art of hunger, as the opposite of “good housekeeping” and even of “living,” is the art of this failure, figuring the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of going on after art has been severed from aliment. As the product of the impossible and doomed attempt to create art in the absence of relation, it figures art as a form of unfree autonomy.
Nonetheless, just as he resiles from thinking of art as a route to liberty, in the context of the increasing politicization of artistic freedom, Beckett is careful to ensure that his art of hunger remains a purely philosophical matter, divorced from the political and socioeconomic uses to which such imagery might give rise. This concern is clear from the way he develops the closely related metaphor of an impoverished art, a trope that dominates Beckett’s writing on art in 1948 and 1949. In a letter to Duthuit in July 1948, Beckett links the “acceptance of ignorance, of pure weakness” to a tradition of poverty, running from Francis of Assisi to Arthur Rimbaud and Malcolm de Chazal, and in June 1949, he returns again to this configuration, suggesting that what separates his aesthetics from Duthuit’s is “the opposition possible–impossible, wealth–poverty, possession–deprivation, etc., etc.”62 Mapping “impossibility” onto “poverty” and “deprivation,” Beckett uses poverty and hunger to imagine an art that does without and is not able to.
By the end of 1949, however, when the “Three Dialogues” finally appear, he has revised this claim, rejecting “the pathetic antithesis possession-poverty” on the grounds that, “The realization that art has always been bourgeois, though it may dull our pain before the achievements of the socially progressive, is finally of scant interest.” Poverty, in this new account, draws art too firmly into a politicized realm of class struggle and social progress. It suggests, unacceptably from Beckett’s perspective, that the intractability of the artist’s position might be analogous to the desperation of the poor person’s. Instead, Beckett seeks to abandon the preoccupation with art’s bourgeois status that, from Greenberg to Sartre to the Communists to Barthes, has given rise to a push towards a new art that would speak to or from the proletariat, or from an avant-garde position exterior to the bourgeoisie. In contrast, Beckett’s aesthetics, conceived as a mode of deprivation, poverty, or hunger, does not, he insists, entail a political claim about art’s capacity to engage, represent, or overcome these states as actually lived. Instead, Beckett distinguishes between the “ultimate penury” of an art without an object, an art (p. 92) stripped of relation, and “the mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal stale bread for their starving brats,” claiming that, “There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these esteemed commodities. The one is a predicament, the other not.” This distinction rejects the analogy between the art of hunger and real starvation on ontological grounds: the “ultimate penury,” unlike physical hunger, is not ameliorable. It represents, therefore, a more absolute form of autonomy—one from which there is no escape—and a final, firm rejection of art’s political potential.
The aesthetic of “ultimate penury” that Beckett develops represents a turn away from the demands of post-war French aesthetics, towards a radicalization of the thought of one of his favorite philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer’s aesthetics turn around his conviction that the world is governed—and made unbearable—by the pervasiveness of unceasing will, and that art is defined by its capacity to temporarily still the will, creating a brief moment of respite. Because appetite is one of the central engines of the will, his aesthetics follow the broader tradition of German Idealist philosophy discussed in the Introduction in pointedly excluding food and other excessively appetite-provoking “aliments” from representation. The “Three Dialogues,” however, goes further than Schopenhauer himself, espousing an art that, severed from its “aliment,” rejects the relational conditions of desire and will permanently, not just temporarily. The “ultimate penury” instead approaches the culmination of Schopenhauer’s ethics, rather than his aesthetics: the state of “voluntary and intentional poverty” that might “serve as a constant mortification of the will, so that satisfaction of desires, the sweets of life, may not again stir the will.” Beckett therefore refuses post-war anti-capitalist art in favor of a radicalization of the Schopenhauerian position. He collapses the temporary reprieve from the will granted by art into the permanent reprieve from its demands which, Schopenhauer believes, will end inevitably in an unwilled starvation. He ends, that is, by turning away from political art towards a quasi-metaphysical autonomy, figured as an art of hunger.
Beckett’s art of hunger therefore develops through a sustained dialogue with his immediate literary field, but he writes from a position that is discredited in advance, positioned, as D. says of B.’s aesthetics in the “Three Dialogues,” as “a violently extreme and personal point of view.” Writing against the overwhelming dominance of Sartrean commitment and other contemporary calls to make art political, he insists on an art that is not only apolitical, but devoid of all relation; not only ineffectual at changing the world, but intrinsically marked by failure on its own terms; not only autonomous, but devoid of any move towards freedom. Situating himself outside both the late 1940s’ demand for art to be responsible, and the period’s broader consensus on art’s liberating potential, Beckett instead reprises the modernist trope of the art of hunger as a figure for the impossibility of his aesthetics, and for his aesthetics of impossibility. Positioning himself in the line of Rimbaud’s “self-devouring, ever-reducing thought” and Schopenhauer’s starved aesthetics, Beckett’s art of hunger allows him, like the writers discussed in Chapter 1, to figure the unviability of his preferred form of autonomy at this moment in history. Assembling a personal canon from figures such as van Velde, Schopenhauer, and Rimbaud, Beckett produces a transhistorical counter-field, one in which his art of hunger finds company in failure.

3. Autonomy From Nation: Hunger Beyond France And Ireland
Beckett’s attempt to imagine aesthetic autonomy as unfree represents an attempt to remove art from the grasp of politics. It seeks, as we have seen, to deny both the Cold War-era repurposing of aesthetic autonomy as the literary form of liberalism, and the potential link between his evocation of hunger and Communist or social democratic political advocacy for the poor. Hunger’s potential political reach for Beckett, however, emerges not just from its potential to signify socioeconomic inequalities, but also from its intense politicization in both his national contexts. In both France and Ireland at this time, hunger forms part of a narrative of national liberation. It is imagined as a collectivizing experience, whose great suffering will spur the liberation of the oppressed and occupied people: the Irish from English colonization, the French from German occupation. Beckett’s art of hunger works assiduously against both these nationalist uses of starvation, capitalizing on his expatriate status to develop a form of what Goldstone calls “autonomy from nation.” In the process, he denies hunger’s capacity to provide a path to freedom or a communal social experience, holding starvation within the ambit of his anti-social and unfree mode of autonomy.
The most immediate context for hunger was the privation of the war years and their immediate aftermath in France. From the early stages of World War II, France suffered serious rationing and food shortages. Ration cards began in 1940 below the recommended daily intake of calories and fell dramatically over the course of the war, while food shortages and poverty meant that people were not always able to access even these meager portions. Even after the war, the combination of high rates of poverty and on-going rationing (which lasted in France until 1949) meant that hunger remained a pressing concern for the rest of the decade.

Against this backdrop, hunger became an important way of imagining the shared national experience. Paul Éluard, a member of the Resistance who became one of the leading literary Communists after the war, opens his poem “Courage,” published in 1943 in the clandestine Resistance publication _Les Lettres françaises:_ “Paris a froid Paris a faim” (Paris is cold Paris is hungry). Hunger here is part of the collectivizing experience that transforms Paris’s inhabitants into a mythologized “Paris,” figured conventionally through images of feminized suffering, languishing under occupation but poised, the poem assures us, to liberate itself (another of Éluard’s poems, entitled “Liberté,” was airdropped all over France by the Allies during the war). In a context in which, as Watts observes, “The Resistance writers divided literary history into two groups of writers: patriots and traitors,” this tendency to collectivizing liberation was immediately assimilated into a narrative of patriotism and national regeneration.
While Beckett lived through these wartime and post-war privations—James Knowlson reports him suffering through France’s rationing and arriving back in Ireland after the war “looking emaciated”—he vehemently denies their accompanying rhetoric of nationalism. His position as an Irishman in France already made this assimilation of collectivity to nation a problematic one, amplified by his pre-existing suspicions about nationalism and collectivism. Thus, while several critics have remarked on the ways in which the war—especially rationing and food shortages—found their way into Beckett’s writing, he nonetheless writes against its contemporary use in post-war France, fracturing the collectivizing, liberating narratives of French hunger. In the French text of *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), Beckett explicitly evokes the time he spent in the south of France, picking grapes for a man named Bonnelly at Roussillon, in the French department of Vaucluse, having fled Paris after his Resistance cell was exposed by the Germans:

**ESTRAGON.**

Mais non, je n’ai jamais été dans le Vaucluse! J’ai coulé toute ma chaude-pisse d’existence ici, je te dis! Ici! Dans le Merdecluse!

**VLADIMIR.**

Pourtant, nous avons été ensemble dans le Vaucluse, j’en mettrais ma main au feu. Nous avons fait les vendages, tiens, chez un nommé Bonnelly, à Roussillon.

**ESTRAGON.**

(*plus calme) C’est possible. Je n’ai rien remarqué.*

**ESTRAGON.**

No, I was never in the [Vaucluse]! I’ve puked my puke of a life away here, I tell you! Here! In the [Merdecluse]!

**VLADIMIR.**

But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called [Bonnelly], at a place called [Roussillon].

**ESTRAGON.**

(*a little calmer) It’s possible. I didn’t notice anything.*
This exchange, however, highlights not the collectivizing experience of starvation, but rather the incommensurability of Vladimir and Estragon’s experiences, as they argue over memories and histories that don’t match up. The failure of cultural memory represented by this exchange is underscored in Beckett’s English translation, where the historical echoes are replaced by hesitations and ellipses instead of references to Bonnelly and Roussillon, and where the Vaucluse becomes the Mâcon country, privileging the scatological pun (Cackon) over historical accuracy. Reorienting the play towards an audience lacking the French experience of wartime rationing, Beckett preserves only the decaying, diverging memory that prevents the formation of a triumphant or redemptive communal narrative.
Indeed, although hunger is pervasive among Beckett’s characters in his post-war texts, his characters, especially in the novels, mostly starve alone. In *Molloy*, the title character seems to subsist on little whenever he is left to his own devices, while Moran, who begins the novel following Molloy and ends it by resembling him, gradually loses his hearty appetite over the course of the novel, in parallel to his growing separation from family and community. The expiring protagonist of *Malone Dies* survives, alone in a room, on a bowl of soup once every two or three days, until even this meager diet disappears towards the end of the novel. These characters, starving alone, experience none of the solidarity or potential for revolutionary sociability with which French writers in this period invested hunger. Even the somewhat more sociable exchanges over turnips and carrots in *Godot*, which Knowlson ties to the post-war French context, reflect a failure to achieve the subsumption of the individual within a larger collective whole. In these passages, Didi and Gogo negotiate and bicker over the distribution of root vegetables, trading them back and forth, putting them into pockets and bringing them out again, rejecting them, eating them, and generally clowning with them. If these exchanges are fundamentally cooperative, sometimes even tender and loving, they nonetheless require, like all clown acts, the point of distinction between Didi and Gogo to sustain the tension and get the laughs. Humorous and repetitive, they lack Éluard’s sense that hunger might have a narrative dimension, that it might lead to collective freedom. Like Beckett’s aesthetics more generally, they instead imagine a static closed system, in which collective identities cannot form and freedom—or any other form of progress—is unimaginable.
The anti-communal impulse embedded in Beckett’s representation of hunger is complicated and amplified by his position between two cultures and two histories of hunger. The French context is countered and at times undermined by Beckett’s equally ambivalent, equally anti-nationalist evocation of the long and brutal Irish history with hunger. The contours of this history are well known. Its emblematic moment is the Great Famine of 1845–52, a national catastrophe that “killed at least 1 million people and led more than that number to emigrate,” with far-reaching implications for Irish national identity and national self-conception. Within a decade of the famine’s end, nationalists had begun to use its memory to attack English colonialism and to mobilize a collective sense of aggrieved Irish nationalism. John Mitchel’s 1861 history of the famine, The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps), makes this case eloquently and influentially, arguing that “The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine.” He ends his work on a note of nationalist and anti-imperial defiance, producing a vision of national identity out of the recent experience of famine with the promise that “The passionate aspiration for Irish nationhood will outlive the British Empire.” The collectivizing power of the famine persisted well into the twentieth century, both in nationalist politics and in oral folklore. When the Irish Folklore Commission decided in 1945 to collect accounts of the famine to mark the centenary of its onset, they found plentiful stories. While these accounts, unlike Mitchel, tend not to blame the British government for the famine, many stories nonetheless attribute the suffering to a form of divine collective punishment, emphasizing the famine’s role as a collectivizing experience even where they do not imagine it to be an explicitly political one. Meanwhile, as the republican movement gathered momentum in the twentieth century, the nationalist use of hunger strikes as a weapon against British rule reanimated the political stakes of Ireland’s history of privation. Staking a claim to literally embody the suffering of the Irish people, nationalist hunger strikes relied on this collectivist belief, devolving the nation’s shared suffering onto the representative body of the exemplary republican. In Ireland as in France, hunger is imagined as a state of suffering so extreme that it both produces Ireland as a nation, and presents the strongest possible moral and political case for its liberation.
Irish modernism of the generations immediately preceding Beckett is steeped in this history of famine and hunger strikes. Several of Yeats’s plays seek to elaborate an Irish national mythology through images of hunger and famine, relocated to a medieval Irish past. His first play, *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), is set in the midst of famine and envisages its self-sacrificial protagonist as a heroine attempting to save her people. Lodging famine at the beginning of his attempt to generate a political community through theatre, Yeats imagines hunger as a central fact of Irish national identity. *The King’s Threshold* (1904) shifts the focus specifically to the writer, telling of a medieval poet’s self-starvation on the king’s doorstep in protest at his demotion within the court. While Beckett is on record mocking Yeats’s claim that “the ‘sense of hardship borne and chosen out of pride’” is “the ultimate theme of the Irish writer,” Emilie Morin has shown that the use of scarcity, both formal and thematic, in Yeats’s late plays was a significant influence on Beckett’s theatre. An even more direct influence, of course, was Joyce who, as Julieann Ulin has shown, was himself deeply—if less overtly—immersed in the iconography of the famine, as derived from nineteenth-century nationalist histories. Joyce’s deployment of this iconography in *Ulysses* explores the community-forming legacy of famine for the Irish people, even if, as Ulin argues, it is ultimately Bloom, the Jewish outsider, who is able to move beyond the paralysis engendered by catastrophe and act pragmatically to foreclose eviction and hunger in the novel.
From *Godot’s navets* to the barren landscapes and begging paupers of *Endgame* (1957), Beckett’s post-war writing, like that of his chief Irish interlocutors, returns repeatedly to scenes evocative of the Irish famine. As with the allusions to World War II, however, these allusions to Irish cultural memory are degraded to the point that they are no longer straightforwardly locatable within an Irish context. This effect is apparent in one of the more explicit references to the Irish history of hunger, one which focuses not on famine but on hunger striking. Towards the end of *Malone Dies*, as Malone wonders about the likelihood of his surviving as his soup disappears, he evokes the specter of the “Lord Mayor of Cork” who “lasted for ages.”

This Lord Mayor of Cork is Terence MacSwiney, an Irish republican who died in Brixton Prison in 1920 after an internationally publicized seventy-four-day hunger strike. His role in *Malone Dies* is to exemplify all that Malone is not: the latter lacks the Lord Mayor of Cork’s “political convictions,” his “human convictions,” and even his thirst. Without “political convictions” to make his starvation signify, without “human convictions” to allow him to identify with his “fellow creatures,” and without thirst to offer a minimal connection between self and world through desire or appetite, Malone is the absolutely anti-social, non-relational antithesis to MacSwiney. The Irish republican, identified in this passage only as “the Lord Mayor of Cork,” is wholly identified with the place and the people of Cork, as their chief representative. His historical function, and his capacity to act as a point of comparison for Malone, rests on his taking on the burden of history and political community on behalf of his people, and on retaining a connection to a specific locale. Malone, uncertain as to his location, disinterested in his origins, and unable to identify with his only visitor, is the antithesis of such a regional and national representative.
MacSwiney, who is reputed to have said, “It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most who will conquer,” embodies precisely the Irish republican tendency to turn suffering into triumph and liberation that Beckett despised in Yeats.\(^84\) In this sense, Malone’s difference from MacSwiney replicates at the level of national politics the distinction that Beckett draws in his art criticism between the painting of Bram van Velde, devoid of occasion, and that of painters like André Masson, for whom “anything and everything is doomed to become occasion, including...the pursuit of occasion.”\(^85\) Like van Velde, Malone refuses the redemptive gesture that would make his hunger into a new occasion, whether for politics or art. Both politically and aesthetically, Beckett’s writing insists on preserving hunger as the site of unredeemed failure, failure that cannot lead to either aesthetic or political freedom.

Beckett’s hunger therefore writes against both its French and Irish contexts, erasing and negating historical reference, and —through the interference between these two national frames —playing historical contexts off against one another. This contextual negation produces Beckett as an outsider to both Ireland and France, outside of their literary as well as their political traditions and conversations. In this, Beckett continues what Andrew Goldstone identifies as one of the key strands of inter-war modernist autonomy: autonomy as a mode of expatriate “cosmopolitanism...that keeps communal political programs at a distance,” and that forces “a choice between a relatively autonomous artistic practice and the solidarity of political community.”\(^86\) Like Djuna Barnes and Joyce himself, who Goldstone takes as his examples of this mode of autonomy, Beckett’s expatriatism allows him to assert his autonomy as a negation of political community—but one which, in keeping with Beckett’s aesthetics of unfreedom, fails to free him from the constant creeping reassertion of both national frames.
Hunger in a Closed System

Hunger is a particularly important site for this assertion of autonomy, because of its role within a project of political community-formation in both Ireland and post-war France. In denying his and his characters’ straightforward insertion into these communities, Beckett also denies hunger’s capacity, evident in both France and Ireland, to be transformed into a spur to freedom. Instead, Beckett’s characters remain trapped, interminably and often alone, within their starvation, subjugated not to the oppressive machinations of Nazi occupiers or British colonial government, (p.100) which might yet be overthrown, but to the hopeless, inexorable conflict between the apparently irremediable scarcity of their world and the physical needs of their bodies. As a result, Beckett’s denial of political community throws his characters back into the world of necessity and obligation engendered by his aesthetics of hunger.

4. Sucking Stones: Body, Form, Necessity
Instead of understanding hunger as a form of oppression, which would link it to the possibility of freedom and the political uses of art, Beckett imagines it in terms of necessity. His unfree autonomy in fact arises from the intersection of two modes of necessity: bodily necessity, and abstract formal laws, such as those generated by the laws of mathematics or the logic of prescriptive patterns. We have already seen the formal results of this subjugation to necessity in the exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* over the distribution of turnips, radishes, and carrots, where the bodily demands of hunger give rise to highly regular, conventionalized verbal and physical exchanges. Similarly, in *Malone Dies*, the protagonist’s slow starvation is structured around the two “poles” of “dish and pot, dish and pot,” an oscillation that is echoed in the novel’s own structural alternation between passages of intense focus on Malone’s body and his surrounds, and flights of imaginative fancy. These structures produce textual form as a byproduct of the starving characters’ subjugation to abstract laws: to the oscillation of *Malone Dies* and the permutation of root vegetables in *Waiting for Godot*. The product is a kind of formal autonomy, the production of fixed, closed systems that develop through movement within the system around a fixed point. Their refutation of freedom is both thematic—these structures are experienced as unchosen and confining by the characters themselves—and structural, negating the possibility of movement beyond the status quo that would be necessary to produce the prospect of freedom.
Such structures pervade Beckett’s writing, constituting one of its most readily identifiable formal characteristics. Their paradigmatic instance is the sucking stones episode in *Molloy*, where the eponymous hero attempts to organize a system for rotating the sixteen stones he has collected to suck on through his four pockets, in such a way that he can be certain to suck every one of the stones in turn. The description of the various systems that (p.101) he devises in his attempt to achieve this takes some six pages in my edition of the novels, a carefully enumerated set of solutions that allows mathematical abstraction to entirely derail plot progression.⁸⁸ The conditions for the permutation of the sucking stones lie in Molloy’s hunger. As he rhapsodizes early in the novel, "A little pebble in your mouth, round and smooth, appeases, soothes, makes you forget your hunger, forget your thirst."⁸⁹ Sucking on stones, for Molloy, is a calmingly sensuous activity, a substitute for food that makes hunger bearable by shifting focus from consumption to bodily sensation. The permutations of sucking stones that so preoccupy him later in the novel prolong his hunger by giving it (mathematical) form.
By conjointing bodily sensation with abstract form, the sucking stones episode—like other hunger-linked permutations in Beckett’s writing—recalls Friedrich Schiller’s influential definition of the aesthetic. Schiller understood aesthetics to reside in what he calls the “play-drive,” that is, “a bond of union between the form-drive and the material drive.” This definition of the aesthetic as a mediation between the recalcitrant materiality of our bodies and the abstract laws of logic and morality would seem to find expression in Molloy’s sensuous but rigorously logical permutations of sucking stones. Schiller differs sharply from Beckett, however, in finding the aesthetic to be the exemplary site of freedom, because “the opposition of two necessities [the form-drive and the material drive] gives rise to Freedom.” For Molloy, in contrast, the multiplication of different modes of necessity produces not freedom but impossibility. Molloy finds himself caught between “two incompatible bodily needs, at loggerheads”: on the one hand, the need for “equal distribution” of stones between his pockets, which he describes as both a “principle” and a “bodily need”; and, on the other, the need “to suck the stones in the way I have described, not haphazard, with method.” Both of these impulses begin as the demands of the form-drive—the demands of principle and method—before being redescribed as “bodily needs,” the demands of the material drive. The move from form to body, however, produces not the “free play” that Schiller finds in the aesthetic, but a greater and more profound sense of necessity—until finally, torn between these two irreconcilable formal–bodily demands, he simply abandons the game entirely, throwing away all the stones but one, “which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed.” This passage, in other words, imagines the aesthetic—the intersection of body and form—as a site of intersecting and competing modes of necessity, soluble only in the admission of the impossibility of the task at hand. Like the aesthetics B. espouses in the “Three Dialogues,” the sucking stones episode uses hunger as the occasion for an aesthetic experience that fails to lead to freedom, collapsing instead under the recognition of its own impossibility.
Beckett’s use of permutation to mediate between matter and form, between the body and the laws of logic and number, predates World War II. In the aftermath of war and in the context of the post-war debates over literature and politics, however, these permutations become much more invested in both hunger as the engine of permutation, and the autonomy of the systems that they produce. The shift can be traced through the difference between the sucking stones episode of Molloy and the well-known “biscuit scene” in Beckett’s major pre-war text, Murphy (1938). In the latter scene, the eponymous Murphy, lunching in a park, considers the five biscuits that he habitually eats after lunch: “a Ginger, an Osborne, a Digestive, a Petit Beurre and one anonymous.” With a preference for the Ginger and a distaste for the anonymous, he despairs of the “paltry six” permutations available to him with the remaining three biscuits and dreams of conquering his preferences and aversions so as to access the full range of possible combinations, to “partake [of the biscuits] in their fullness.” Like the sucking stones scene in Molloy, this passage dramatizes the tension between the exigencies of formal permutation, on the one hand, and of the body, on the other. But while in Molloy the demands of the body always resolve into a question of form (and vice versa), Murphy’s stubborn tastes represent simply the limits of the permutational system, the spoiler that prevents the full realization of the biscuits’ formal potential. For Murphy, unlike Molloy, bodily necessity has no formal potential.
The roots of this difference lie in the old aesthetic question of disinterestedness. Where Molloy, aided by the fact that all his stones “tasted exactly the same,” can approach them with an appropriately disinterested attitude, Murphy’s sensuous, material relationship to his biscuits is entirely governed by his deeply interested tastes and preferences. To access the biscuits’ full aesthetic potential, to experience the biscuits as simultaneously form and matter, Murphy needs to learn “not to prefer any one to any other.” But Murphy is too invested in actually eating the biscuits; he cannot approach them aesthetically. The substitution of permutational eating for permutational hunger in the shift from Murphy to Molloy moves, in this sense, towards a more aesthetic—because more indifferent—experience. But Murphy’s lingering attachment to interested consumption also allows him to envisage a liberation-to-come, in which his suppression of bodily wants would unlock the full range of formal possibilities. Unlike Molloy, Murphy retains a desire to be freed from his body, an aspiration that is echoed elsewhere in the novel—perhaps most memorably in Murphy’s penchant for binding himself to a rocking chair, in order to “appease his body” and thus to “set him free in his mind.” Molloy, in contrast, knows that even a state of properly aesthetic disinterest, even a state of contemplation in which the body’s whims and preferences are muted, is not a state of freedom. Instead, as his disinterested appreciation of the stones reveals itself to be subject to multiple, mutually exclusive forms of necessity, he foregrounds the unfreedom inscribed in disinterest. Moreover, because for Kant and Schiller disinterest is the foundation of aesthetic autonomy, he similarly suggests that autonomy too is unfree.
The sucking stone episode expands the site of this disinterested autonomy, from the art object’s reception (where it is primarily located for Kant and Schiller) to the art object’s own internal composition. Disinterested autonomy in Beckett’s post-war writing becomes a formal principle, producing texts that function as closed systems and that collapse only under the weight of their own impossibility. While Molloy’s abandonment of his sucking stones is the result of his system’s internal contradictions, in *Murphy* the dilemma of how to order the eating of the biscuits is only solved through an intrusion from outside the system, in the form of a small dog who eats everything but the Ginger while Murphy is occupied in conversation. *Watt* (1953), which was written during the war, provides an even starker point of contrast to the closed system of the sucking stones. This most permutational and accumulative of Beckett’s novels insistently links these modes to eating. From the character of Mary who “ate all day...I mean that at no moment during this period was Mary’s mouth more than half empty, or if you prefer, less than half full,” to the soup that Watt cooks for his master Mr Knott, “a dish that contained foods of various kinds, such as soup of various kinds, fish, eggs, game, poultry, meat[,] cheese, fruit, all of various kinds, and of course bread and butter, and it contained also...” (and so forth in this vein). *Watt*’s engagement with food repeatedly gives on to lengthy lists and systems for consumption. If Murphy dreamed of a release from taste that would allow the full range of permutation to open before him, *Watt* seems to offer just such an escape. These passages present consumption unrestrained by preference or discrimination, to the point that, as in the description of Watt’s soup, they are often less permutational than accumulative. Whereas Molloy’s sucking stones, in their literal indigestibility, circulate within a closed system to which no new elements are added or subtracted, the food in *Watt* is constantly accumulated and consumed, constantly expanding the bounds of its system. In contrast to both Murphy’s biscuits and Watt’s foodstuffs, then, Molloy’s sucking stones produce a formal image of autonomy, in a system that, governed by indifference, is entirely self-contained, admitting neither ingress nor egress.
In these respects, the sucking stones episode of *Molloy* exemplifies the shift in Beckett’s aesthetics in the post-war period towards a new kind of autonomous art, generated out of the application of an attitude of indifference to closed, self-contained systems that inevitably fail, collapsing under the pressure of their own impossibility. In this, the scene begins to produce a literary art that brings together the non-relational, impossible, inevitably failing aesthetics elaborated in his post-war art criticism, with the emphasis on autonomy as unfreedom that runs through his accounts of both hunger and art in the later 1940s. As in the art criticism, hunger is central to this aesthetic stance, because, imagined as isolated and isolating, opposed to political communities of all kinds, it translates the self-containment of the closed system, the indifference of Molloy’s lack of appetite or taste, into an embodied experience. Molloy’s hunger provides the occasion for permutation and form. In the process, Beckett begins to refigure the “ultimate penury” of the “Three Dialogues” as an experience that takes place at the intersection of formal laws with the body. In doing so, the sucking stones episode recasts the unfreedom of the art of hunger as an experience that is both formal (in the double sense of manifesting at the level of textual form, and obeying the laws of logical, mathematical form) and embodied.

5. Starving The Text: Bodily Rhythms In The Late Prose
The sucking stones episode translates Beckett’s theories of aesthetics—his commitment to a mode of autonomy that is unfree and that takes hunger as its model—into form. In this, it lays the foundations for the late prose, written between the 1960s and the 1980s, which experiments with texts that are formally unfree and produce closed systems. This move aligns with the critical commonplace that Beckett’s writing is starved, that it goes hungry. As Terry Eagleton has it, in keeping with a broadly held consensus, Beckett writes “anorexic texts,” crafted from “starved words, gaunt \( \text{p.105} \) bodies and sterile landscapes.”\(^1\) The late prose exemplifies this textual emaciation, doing away with character and plot, radically narrowing its vocabulary and simplifying its grammar, and stripping bodies and settings back to their bare, geometric minima. But this starved writing also implements the art of hunger in the narrower and more complex sense of the sucking stones episode, working on this poverty of literary resources to produce a permutative form that reflects the subjugation and manipulation of the body by rigid principles of logic and form. Taking the permutations of sucking stones as its model, the late prose explores what an unfree but autonomous art—an art of hunger—might look and feel like.

The exemplary text of this shift is \textit{How It Is}, published in French as \textit{Comment c’est} in 1961 and then in Beckett’s English translation in 1964. Like much of Beckett’s writing of the post-war period, \textit{How It Is} depicts a world in which food and appetite vanish in step with one another: a world built around a foundational condition of hunger. It follows an unnamed speaker who crawls through the mud of the text’s grim demi-monde, seeking out a companion, Pim, to torture into speech. Like all the inhabitants of the mud, the speaker drags with him a sack containing tins of food and a can-opener, prized possessions that, with no obvious method of restocking, point towards the speaker’s eventual starvation. His finite, ever-diminishing food stock, however, does not seem to pose a problem for the speaker, for whom, “my tins all sorts dwindling but not so fast as appetite.”\(^1\) In fact, the speaker’s lack of appetite is a constant refrain, beginning as early as the second page where the observation “no appetite” is accompanied by the reassuring claim, more explicit in the English, “no need to worry I won’t die I’ll never die of hunger.”\(^2\)
Like Malone and Molloy, the mud-dwellers of *How It Is* tend towards an “ultimate penury” in which starvation is accompanied by indifference, lack of nutrition by a lack of desire. More explicitly than earlier texts, however, *How It Is* imagines this gathering penury as a question for form and language, as much as it is a question for the text’s wider relationship to context or politics. Comparing his language (that is, the language of the text), to Pim’s, the speaker observes, “I talk like him I do we’re talking of me like him little blurs midget grammar.” The speaker’s “midget grammar” redescribes his language through his starving body, which we learn earlier weighs “four stone five stone” and which he imagines shrinking further as he projects himself into an increasingly tin-less—that is to say, increasingly starved—future: “centuries I can see me quite tiny the same as now more or less only tinier quite tiny no more objects no more food and I live the air sustains me the mud I live on.”

His “midget” stature, in other words, is a function of his starvation, shrinking as his need for food passes. Speaking a “midget grammar,” the narrator of *How It Is* translates his shrinking, starving body into language.

The “midget grammar” translates the “grammaire d’oiseau” (bird grammar) of the French, which also contains the implication that the language of the text is a language of hunger. Birds have a strong idiomatic connection to small appetites, both in the English expression “to eat like a bird” and in the French “manger comme un oiseau” or “comme un moineau” (to eat like a bird or like a sparrow) and “avoir l’appétit d’un oiseau” (to have the appetite of a bird). Beckett draws extensively on this trope in the *Trilogy*, where we hear that Molloy “ate like a thrush,” that Moran’s chickens are refusing to eat, that Malone has “all sorts of birds” at his window which come “asking for food...I never give them anything,” and that Macmann overhears “the dreadful cries of the gulls that evening assembles, in paroxysms of hunger, round the outflow of the sewers.” In this context, the “grammaire d’oiseau” of the French, like the “midget grammar” of the English, imagines the peculiar rhythms of the text to emanate from hunger, from the dwindling of food and the diminishment of appetite.
How It Is’s “midget grammar” formalizes the art of hunger as a kind of textual indifference that combines the permutational logic of the sucking stones with the diminution of textual resources of Eagleton’s “anorexic texts.” Both How It Is and Comment c’est are entirely unpunctuated, with small phrasal sense units instead organizing meaning. As Leslie Hill observes, these units tend to omit “hierarchical relations between clauses or phrases.” The result is a text composed of a highly simplified grammar whose key feature is a relative sameness of individual components, and whose interpretability relies heavily on recapitulation, repetition, and recombination. The grammar of How It Is therefore replicates some of the key features of the permutations and combinations that characterize Molloy’s sucking stones: the lack of preference, the lack of hierarchy, and the reliance on a repetitive recombination of diminished resources. In How It Is, this non-hierarchical, indifferent, repetitive language—this “midget grammar”—becomes the decisive textual feature, inscribing the art of hunger at the level of form.

This textual repetition is amplified by the pervasiveness of permutation to the construction of the world of How It Is, and consequently to the structure of the text itself. In part three of the novel, the dyadic act of torture between the speaker and Pim, which is the main content of part two, opens outwards, revealing itself to be one link in a vast chain of torturing couples. Before Pim, the speaker recalls there was Bem: “another part two before part one except that me Pim Bem me Bem left me south I hear it murmur it in the mud.” And if there is Bem, then Bem, leaving the speaker, goes onwards to be tortured in turn, so that beyond the individual couples in which the speaker participates there are, he realizes, “millions millions there are millions of us.” Much of part three, in fact, is dedicated to parsing the permutations and structures necessary to imagine this vast network of torture, carefully tracing the logical and mathematical strictures to which such a system must be subject. Like the sucking stones, the whole world of How It Is unfolds as a vast permutational system, governed by abstract formal laws.
Like Molloy’s permutational stones, the mud-dwellers of *How It Is* torture their way through a closed system. Their permutational world ultimately turns back on itself, producing a closed system of torture, “as for example our course a closed curve and let us be numbered 1 to 1000000 then number 1000000 on leaving his tormentor number 999999 instead of launching forth into the wilderness towards an inexistent victim proceeds towards number 1.”\(^\text{109}\) This self-containment mutates into a form of self-consumption, as the characters drink “this so-called mud” which, it’s speculated, might be “nothing more than all our shit.”\(^\text{110}\) Consuming its own waste, the slowly starving world of the text is imagined as self-consuming—a world that embodies the “ever-reducing, self-devouring thought” that Beckett praised in the 1940s. Textual permutation, therefore, produces the text of *How It Is* as a closed system that eats itself, in an act that Daniela Caselli describes as the “‘top to bottom’ digestive circularity of the text, in which shit and vomit are food and nourishment.”\(^\text{111}\) Passing through an emaciated language that Ruby Cohn has described as “peristaltic,” the text devours itself, \textbf{(p.108)} producing a form of textual autonomy through the self-cancellation of the closed system.\(^\text{112}\)
How It Is replicates the unfree autonomy of the sucking stones, with characters subjected to abstract formal laws and confined within a closed system, but it also goes further, imagining the text’s unfreedom as a graphic, visceral kind of torture. Part two provides a detailed account of the speaker’s violence against Pim, as he hits, beats, and scratches his companion, sticking his can-opener and his nails into various orifices. These scenes of violence are the nodes around which the vast permutational system described in part three is built, literalizing the violence and powerlessness of the more abstract subjugation to formal laws. No character is free from this vicious system, each moving on to helplessly either continue the cycle of violence, or become the tormented in turn, and each perpetuating the cycles of starvation and unfreedom associated with the art of hunger. The process is amplified and underscored by Pim’s hunger; as the speaker observes, “Pim has not eaten...if he’s still nourished it’s on mud.” In these scenes of torture, Pim (and, in his turn, the speaker himself) becomes an exemplary node in the larger permutational networks, starving but also, by drinking the mud, becoming absorbed into the digestive circularity of the text’s closed system.
The torture in these scenes is pedagogical, focused on coercing Pim to speech, as his cries of pain develop slowly into “song,” words, and finally narrative. Language and literature in How It Is are imagined as the horrifying issue of coercion and violence, an abusive, oppressive form of socialization. The “midget grammar” that both Pim and the narrator speak is reconceived as literally unfree, the direct product of this process of starved torture. In this context, the speaker’s repeated insistence that his speech is not his own, but rather a form of quotation—as he says in the opening lines, “how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it”—positions the text as a whole as a kind of forced, unfree speech. In this, it continues the trope of language as a kind of force-feeding, something which has been “rammed down my gullet” and which will, inevitably, be regurgitated and vomited back up, a trope that extends back as far as The Unnamable. But whereas the attitude of The Unnamable is one of disgust and desperation, animated by the frantic impulse to purge oneself of the alien intrusion of language, How It Is is indifferent and resigned, reproducing the exemplary attitude of the art of hunger. Unfree and indifferent, How It Is speaks the language of the art of hunger.
While *How It Is* is unusual in both its violence and the explicitness of its connection to hunger, the emaciated syntax, indifferent rhythms, and claustrophobic repetitions of its “midget grammar” are everywhere evident in Beckett’s late prose. After *How It Is*, the bodies portrayed in the late works become increasingly devoid of consciousness, ever more subject to the coercive control of the text’s internal patterns. In the 1967 text *Ping*, for instance, the “bare white body” at the heart of the text moves only in response to the word “ping,” making movement into an effect not of mind or consciousness, but of textual patterns. In *Worstward Ho* (1983), Beckett’s last sustained prose work, the text highlights the body’s existence as an effect of the text: “First the body. No. First the place. No. First both.” As the highly repetitive, highly patterned language of these late texts generates its own formal rules and as the body is increasingly treated as inert material to be worked on, any possibility of agency is increasingly identified with the permutational patterns of the text itself. Extrapolating the sucking stone’s sense of the aesthetic as the conjunction of competing necessities of body and form, and *How It Is*’s vision of language as a product of bodily violence, these late texts void their worlds of any possibility of aesthetic or human freedom.

Despite their oddly still, inhuman moods, the late texts are surprisingly affecting—and affective. They seek, as Beckett famously said of his 1972 play *Not I*, “to work on the nerves of the audience, not the intellect.” Or as Elisabeth Bregman Segrè says of the experience of reading *Ping*, “On a first reading, one comprehends next to nothing; yet on a first listening (Beckett’s texts must primarily be heard), one feels something intensely, something ineffable and far more musical than verbal in quality.” As both of these accounts suggest, Beckett’s late texts solicit an affective response, distinct from processes of interpretation, which registers first of all as a bodily sensation, an experience that acts “on the nerves.” The chief engine of this affect is the language of the late prose, which, with its highly repetitive use of a severely restricted vocabulary and grammar, achieves the quality that Segrè describes as musical, an effect of the principle articulated by the speaker of *How It Is*: “first the sound then the sense.”
These texts, privileging language as sound and resonance over its intellectual, hermeneutic, or signifying dimensions, produce what Brian Massumi has called the “autonomy of affect.” In Massumi’s account, affect describes an autonomous system of intensity, “associated with nonlinear processes: resonation and feedback which momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future” and which register as autonomic bodily responses. Like the “midget grammar” of Beckett’s late prose, affect for Massumi emerges independent of and prior to language’s capacity to generate meaning and narrative. It therefore constitutes a self-sufficient system, to which emotion—“the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward identified as personal”—is opposed. The intensely affective qualities of Beckett’s late prose, emerging from systems outside of narrative and explicitly named emotions, therefore restage his commitment to autonomy at the level of linguistic resonance. Autonomy in this account becomes a property of aural language acting on the body, restaging and relocating Beckett’s emphasis on a mode of aesthetic autonomy that will act on and through the body by placing bodily needs in tension with—and subject to—the demands of a text, itself bound to the abstract, formal rules of permutation.

These texts rely for their affective qualities on what Enoch Brater has described as the eminently “speakable” quality of Beckett’s late prose—that is, the demand for vocalization and performance that they seem to place on the reader by virtue of their highly regular, highly metrical patterning. Indeed, the speakability of the prose from How It Is onwards is necessary for producing not just textual affect, but also meaning. The parsing of the texts’ semantic units relies on their organization according to verbal rhythms, and as a result, the production of meaning requires the reader to speak the text or imagine it spoken. Given the significance of the motif of citation to How It Is’s indifferent narrative voice and its general pervasiveness in the post-Trilogy prose, this verbalization implicates the reader from the outset in the proliferation and collapse of narrative and textual voices that mark these texts, as the reader becomes yet another iteration of the voice that “say[s] it as I hear it.”
As we have seen, the production of speech in *How It Is* is by no means a free act. Instead, coerced and tortured into language, *How It Is*'s speakers literalize the “obligation to express” that Beckett locates at the heart of [p.111](#) aesthetic production in the “Three Dialogues.” The intense speakability of these texts therefore implicates the reader in these chains of coerced speech, making them subject to the requirement to speak, and to the irresistible link between bodily sensation and linguistic production. Even in other late texts where speech is not linked explicitly to violence and torture, Beckett’s privileging of “nerves” over “intellect” locates textual effects at the site of autonomous bodily reaction that precedes and escapes the “free” operation of the mind, and that produces language and meaning as an after-effect of sound. Like the starving figures of the art of hunger, therefore, readers of Beckett’s late prose experience themselves as subject to the dictates of the body, forced on through the texts by the demands of insistent metrical progression (“On. Say on. Be Said on.”), experienced as the compulsion to speak and thus to embody the text. Staging the irresistible compulsion to produce and reproduce language as a kind of “bodily need,” these late prose texts make the autonomy of affect into a practice of unfreedom, embedded within the experience of reading.
Beckett’s art of hunger therefore stages aesthetic autonomy as the subjugation of both writer and reader to abstract laws of text and form, establishing the autonomy of the text at the expense of the autonomy of the reader. This late prose of obligation and unfreedom is the elaboration of ideas that emerged in Beckett’s writing of the 1940s, arising as a reaction against the demand that both art and hunger be made political and made to serve the ultimate end of liberation. Beckett’s response is the development of an art whose forms and processes bear witness to art as a site of constraints and limitations, of coercion and embodied necessity. In place of a vision of hunger as a collectivizing experience, preparatory to a great liberation, Beckett reimagines it as producing isolated individuals or viciously antagonistic relationships, which foreground the static, unameliorable state of an art that is at once autonomous and unfree. The absorption of this aesthetic stance into a set of formal principles is Beckett’s peculiar innovation, one which later authors do not follow in precisely the same way. But his development of the art of hunger into a position that allows aesthetic autonomy to outlive its delegitimization sets an important precedent for late twentieth-century writing. Writing out of the aftermath of the 1968 student protests and the late years of apartheid respectively, both Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee return to the art of hunger to provide a way of imagining art as autonomous from political demands, in social contexts where such positions appeared irresponsible or unreasonable. In these new contexts, the art of hunger leaves open a space for art that persists through its impossibility, by imagining art as a practice of unfreedom.

Notes:


(2) Tyrus Miller, Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 32.


(4) Ibid.,
Hunger in a Closed System


(6) Ibid.,

(7) Ibid.,


(10) Ibid.,


(12) Ibid.,


(14) Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 81.

(15) Ibid.


(17) Quoted in Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 50.


(19) Ibid.,

(20) Ibid.,


(36) Sartre, What is Literature?, 7.


(38) Ibid.,

(39) Sartre, What is Literature?, 38–9.

(40) Beckett, Disjecta, 135.

(41) Ibid.,
Hunger in a Closed System

(42) Ibid.

(43) Ibid.


(46) Ibid.

(47) Beckett, Disjecta, 139.

(48) Ibid.

(49) Ibid., 136.

(50) Ibid.


(52) Ibid.


(54) “l’École de Paris (sense à déterminer) est finie ou presque”: Beckett, Disjecta, 134.


(56) Beckett, Letters, 2:156.

(57) Beckett, Disjecta, 131.

(58) Ibid.

(59) Ibid.

(60) Ibid.

(61) Ibid.

Hunger in a Closed System

(63) Beckett, *Disjecta*, 144.

(64) Ibid.,


(78) Ibid.,

(80) DisjectaEmilie Morin, Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 103.


(83) Ibid.


(85) Beckett, Disjecta, 144.

(86) Goldstone, Fictions of Autonomy, 113, 112.

(87) Beckett, Trilogy, 185.

(88) Ibid.

(89) Ibid.


(91) Ibid.

(92) Beckett, Trilogy, 74.

(93) Ibid.

(94) Samuel Beckett, Murphy (Montreuil: Calder, 1938), 57.

(95) Beckett, Trilogy, 74.

(96) Beckett, Murphy, 57.

(97) Ibid.

(99) Ibid.,


(102) Ibid., *Comment c’est*


(104) Ibid.,


(108) Ibid.,

(109) Ibid.,

(110) Ibid.,


(114) Ibid.,


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