Princeton PhD Application Writing Sample 2026

Note: Based on a brief conversation with Professor Dennehy during visit day about what you're most looking for in a writing sample, I've opted to include a sample from my ungraduate honors thesis in English literature on Samuel Beckett in lieu of an essay on music. I did this for two reasons: First, I feel it's most representative of my capacity for scholarly work (it was recognized as that year's distinguished thesis), and second, because it reflects an aspect of my background and well-roundedness as a person that isn't as fleshed-out in the rest of the application. That being said, if at a later date you'd prefer to see an essay of mine on a musical subject, I'd be happy to provide one.

Samuel Beckett and the Politics of the Body

Voice, Violence, and the Algerian War in *Comment c'est*

by

Dayton Hare

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I'd also like to thank two former professors of mine, John Whittier-Ferguson, whose suggestion that I draw upon Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* led me to one of my central critical texts, and Marjorie Levinson, whose recommendation that I look into the political and aesthetic debates between Brecht, Lukács, and the rest of that crowd helped frame my thinking throughout this project.

And, of course, any enumeration of debts would be incomplete without mentioning my parents, who have always supported the pursuit of my dreams and ambitions, however financially ill-advised my elected vocations may be.

Abstract

For decades the prevailing view in Beckett scholarship has been that the Irishman's texts work most interestingly at the level of the philosophical and psychological. It is a view that suggests — not incorrectly — that Beckett can be viewed as a dark comedian of modern life, a wry and pessimistic commentator on individual alienation who takes aim at that elusive thing people tend to refer to as "the human condition." While some writers, such as Pascale Casanova, have previously aimed to identify the historical forces which led to the production of Beckett's work (at an ideological and philosophical level), in this thesis I set out with a slightly different approach. Building upon the recent work of scholars such as James McNaughton and Emilie Morin, I contend that an equally valid (and perhaps more useful) approach to Beckett's texts would be to emphasize the ways in which the content of the texts themselves can be located firmly within the historical and political culture of the era in which they were produced. In this way we can appreciate Beckett as a writer who, far from being the apolitical ascetic he plays in the popular imagination, had strong political preoccupations and an intense concern for the plight of the oppressed. By locating his work in the context of disturbing imperial histories we are able to recognize it as politically grounded, and therefore assess its nature as a political object.

In this thesis I set out to examine the last of Beckett's novels, *Comment c'est*, which was written at the height of the Algerian War and, I contend, reflects the brutal repressive violence employed by the French authorities in the course of their imperialist campaign to squash Algerian self-determination. Specifically, the novel engages with the preeminent moral crisis arising from the conflict, the question of torture, and examines the language-destroying effect of physical pain on individuals.

The thesis is composed of two principal parts: Part I deals with the history and origins of the Algerian War itself (as well as Beckett's position in the midst of these historical events), while Part II is a close examination of the text in question, the novel *Comment c'est*. Throughout the second of these parts I make extensive use of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, drawing from it to explain the ways in which pain resulting from torture inhibits language and probing the areas in which Beckett's text is reflective of this very tendency. I examine in detail the middle section of Beckett's book, which is an extended torture sequence, and argue that the author demonstrates this language- and voice-destroying characteristic of pain not only through the developments of the novel's plot but also at the level of the novel's style itself.

Key Words: torture, voice, language, violence, Algeria, imperialism

Author's Note on Texts and Methods

One of the best-known things about Samuel Beckett, aside from his apparently unrelenting pessimism and nightmarish vision, is that he is perhaps the foremost example of the multilingual writer, an artist who has apparently achieved so complete a mastery over the prose of two separate languages as to be recognized for his aesthetic influence on both. Consequently, in the course of this project I will be dealing with a variety of sources and texts (both penned by Beckett and by others) in both English and French. Quotations throughout will be presented in the original language of the physical text I am citing, with translations provided in a footnote. Unless otherwise indicated (such as in the case of the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*, conveniently published as a multilingual edition), all translations in these footnotes are my own. For the analysis of my principal focus, Beckett's novel *Comment c'est* (or *How It Is*), I have opted to work principally with the 1964 English translation of the text, produced by the author himself, with occasional cross-references to the original French text. Nevertheless, I have decided in the main to refer to the novel by its original French title, due to my emphasis on the importance of its composition, in French, during the years of the Algerian Revolution (which ended in 1962).

This project is divided into two parts: The first is a contextualization of Beckett and his work in the political climate of France's late 1950s and early '60s, focusing particularly on the all-consuming issue of the Algerian Revolution; the second is an analysis of Beckett's work itself, an investigation of how the political and moral question of torture (stemming from the Algerian conflict) figures in the novel *Comment c'est*. For the former of these sections, I will draw extensively from works of history about the period, contemporary documents produced by the discourse among intellectuals on the topic of the war and torture, Henri Alleg's memoir *La Question*, and my own research with the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*. For the latter of these sections, in addition to the novel itself, I will make use of several works of theory dealing with the subjects of violence, pain, power, and expression, first among which will be Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*.

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Introduction

> what have I said no matter I've said something that's what was needed
> —Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*

The mid-20th century was a period characterized by immense political instability, violent ideological conflict, and collective traumas experienced on a mass scale. Seemingly spinning out of control from the First World War onwards — with the outbreaks of the Russian and Irish Revolutions, then with the rise of fascism and Nazism, and finally with the bloody anti-colonialist struggles that consumed the beginning of the Cold War era — the political events of the century provoked a tremendous response from the artistic community. More than ever before, artists took up the banner of politics and created their art with the often-explicit aim of promoting an ideological vision, with figures such as the German playwright Bertolt Brecht or the French Existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre perhaps being the foremost examples.

Despite this charged environment, Samuel Beckett has traditionally been excluded from the category of political artists. Perceived as aloof and unconcerned with all but the most abstract of philosophical or aesthetic questions, the taciturn Beckett rarely commented upon political developments in a public manner, shying away from bold, confrontational ideological statements in the vein of his contemporaries with almost the same fastidiousness he employed in avoiding the elucidation of his own work. This impression of Beckett as an essentially non-political figure is one that has

was bolstered early on by influential critics, such as Hugh Kenner in English and Maurice Blanchot in French, who both championed a view of Beckett as a kind of artistic hermit figure, a reclusive writer and metaphysician dedicated to teasing out the subtleties and contradictions of Descartien rationality while paying little heed to the world outside the window. But while Kenner, Blanchot, and other critics of their mindset have offered intriguing ways of considering Beckett's work, they have also, in my view, done a disservice to the scholarship by inadvertently promoting the untenable view that it is possible for an artist to remain unaffected by the material and historical conditions of their era. In spite of the dominance of this image of the metaphysical Beckett, however, there has always been a minority faction within Beckett criticism that has maintained that this idea of artistic isolation is a myth, and upon closer examination of Beckett's goings-on and the writer's personal life (and how these coincided with historical developments), one can begin to see the contour of a far more politically concerned artist take shape.

Speaking of the writer during the 1969 Nobel Prize award ceremony, Karl Ragnar Gierow observed that Beckett's work is about "what happened afterwards," about "when peace came and the curtain was rent from the unholiest of unholies to reveal the terrifying spectacle of the lengths to which man can go in inhuman degradation."[1] A few years earlier the Frankfurt school philosopher Theodore Adorno read Beckett's work in similarly political terms, viewing it as a response to the cataclysmic years of the Second World War and the Holocaust, as well as a repudiation of Existentialist reactions

[1] Karl Ragnar Gierow. "Samuel Beckett 1969." Karl Ragnar Gierow. Accessed March 26, 2020. http://karlragnargierow.se/ambeten/nobelkommitten-1963-1982/samuel-beckett-1969/.

to these traumas. In his famous essay "Trying to Understand Endgame," published in 1961, Adorno makes "the important discovery that Beckett's work invites philosophical interpretations, only to call them to account for obscuring the horror of our historical moment,"[2] as James McNaughton has noted. Above most others, Adorno holds up Beckett as the model of the post-Auschwitz artist, expressing inexpressible horror through its very inexpressibility. At the very least this interpretation of Beckett's work struck its author as one valid reading — after having received a typescript of the essay from Adorno (complete with a handwritten note reading "for S.B. [...] as a small token of heartfelt esteem"), Beckett wrote back warmly: "I am reading your essay on Endspiel and shall write to you again when I have finished it and thought about it… Thank you again, Professor Adorno, for your friendship and for your belief in my work."[3] Frustratingly for posterity, the follow-up letter Beckett so tantalizingly teased never came, but nevertheless the writer makes clear elsewhere that he approved of Adorno's examination of his works, having previously written to the German publisher Siegfried Unseld: "I would ask you to pass on my greetings to Professor Adorno, and tell him how glad I am to have him as exegete."[4]

Hints of a more political reading of Beckett occasionally surface elsewhere as well, though usually in a more limited manner. The esteemed Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, for instance, wrote in his introduction to Pascale Casanova's *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of Literary Revolution* that "if Beckett was a great anti-fascist writer, it is not

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[2] James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7–8.
[3] Samuel Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. III*, 403.
[4] Ibid, 403.

only because he fought with the French Resistance, a bravery for which he was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*,[5] but because every sentence of his writing keeps faith with powerlessness," adhering to what Eagleton characterizes as a "politics of lessness."[6] For Eagleton and others, Beckett's political nature can be read through his persistent privileging of the poor and dispossessed in his texts. Similarly, Beckett's British publisher John Calder viewed him as an inadvertent political actor. "Although Beckett had the reputation," Calder wrote in *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, "of being non-political… he was in fact intensely political in the sense of being always aware of what was happening in the world and thinking about it."[7] While "Beckett was always above party and ideology, and politically above country as well," Calder nevertheless considered him a political writer because he was "in essence" an "ethical philosopher," and seeing as "ethics are indivisible from politics… [Beckett] cannot avoid being seen in political terms."[8] For Calder, though, Beckett's politics hinge primarily upon his view of authority, because while "Beckett was not political in the normal sense, he knew what authority was about, and he had no taste for tyranny."[9]

Despite the pronounced possibility that this more political view of Beckett might have taken hold (especially following after Adorno), in the intervening years between Adorno's study and the present, philosophical interpretations of Beckett's work have continued to dominate and political interpretations have been few and far between.

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[5] Beckett's work in the French Resistance has often rightly been pointed to as evidence of his political positions, but the author himself, in characteristic self-deprecating manner, was prone to dismissing it as "boy scout stuff."
[6] Terry Eagleton, introduction to *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, (London: Verso, 2006), 2.
[7] John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, (London: Calder, 2003), 11.
[8] Ibid, 12.
[9] Ibid, 127.

Over the last several years, however, the view that Beckett developed his signature abstract and impenetrable style as much in response to his contemporary political history as to the philosophical impasses he wrestled with has been steadily reasserting its presence. Since 2017 two book-length examinations of Beckett's politics have appeared, Emilie Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* and James McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath.* Both these works make important headway in re-examining the Irish author in light of his political inclinations and experiences and richen the scholarly discourse surrounding his compositions. Morin's book (the first to be published) walks through a number of political situations in Beckett's life, detailing in its four chapters hints about Beckett's attitude towards a variety of political problems of the day, from censorship to propaganda to violence and war. Morin examines Beckett's friendships with a number of politically active individuals throughout his life — from Zionists to Irish nationalists to more than a few socialists and communists — and inferring from his statements, work, and company, aligns him with the internationalist Left broadly. She uncovers details about his relationship with the Irish Free State, his appalled fascination with Goebbels's propaganda, his interest in studying Soviet film with Sergei Eisenstein, his anti-racist translations, his engagement with (and distance from) post-Shoah testimonial literature, his horror at torture in Algeria, and much more. Stating what should have been obvious,"Beckett's texts," Morin writes, "with their numerous portrayals of violence, torture, dispossession, internment and subjugation, harbour a real political immediacy."[10] Much of the book

[10] Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

functions as a compendium of biographical evidence in favor of a political Beckett, rather than literary criticism, but nonetheless the information Morin has gathered is invaluable in constructing a political reading of the elusive writer's work. This is a fact James McNaughton acknowledges in the introduction to his *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*, where he writes that "most recently, Emily [sic] Morin crowns this approach" of political biography "in her book *Beckett's Political Imagination.*"[11] McNaughton himself, however, dives straight into criticism of Beckett's work. Going through the majority of Beckett's work in the prewar and immediate postwar years — from *More Pricks Than Kicks* to *Watt* to the trilogy to *Endgame* — McNaughton uncovers a writer finely attuned to political details and sensitive to the subtlest of political ironies and deceptions. He places Beckett's work squarely in the context of the Irish Free State's conservative morality concerns, Beckett's wartime resistance activity, and Nazi hunger policies. In doing this, McNaughton persuasively argues for a re-evaluation of the avant-garde author's œuvre. But while his study comprehensively covers the prewar and immediate postwar texts, he leaves it for others to examine the work of Beckett's later years through this political prism.

Expanding on the work of critics like Emilie Morin and James McNaughton, I contend that Beckett's work, far from existing as a mental abstraction on the periphery of the political and material conditions around him, in fact confronts and ironizes actual political history in such a way as to strip its ideology down to its barest essence, presenting in a distilled manner the fundamental violence at play in 20th century

[11] McNaughton, 3.

history. In this study I will contain my efforts to the work of Beckett's later decades, from the early 1960s onwards, with a particular emphasis on the texts composed during and immediately after the bloody and savage war fought between Algeria and France that ultimately resulted in the former's independence. Specifically, following a chapter explaining the historical context of this important but seldom discussed war, I will make use of *Comment c'est* (or *How It Is*), Beckett's last novel (if such a text can really still be called a novel), to examine the ways in which the author integrated political concerns which arose out of the war into his work. Building off Emilie Morin's assertion that "the Algerian war marked a crucial moment for Beckett as a writer,"[12] I will explore the ways in which Beckett uses this last novel to obliquely examine the horrors of torture (which emerged as the great moral quandary of the Algerian War) in French colonial repression during the conflict, drawing upon notions found in Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* to develop my ideas and demonstrate how Beckett's famously spare style of writing (paradoxically) articulates the relative inexpressibility of physical trauma. I maintain that in this, and other late works, Beckett identifies the body as a specific locus of political trauma and demonstrates how, given that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it,"[13] language itself (and its weaknesses) can be used at once to obfuscate and reveal political violence. More than this, by expressing the nature of political violence through its linguistic negation, Beckett ironizes modes of propaganda prevalent during the height of the 20th century's ideological conflicts and draws attention to the hollowness of imperial political rhetoric, revealing the ways in

[12] Morin, 184.
[13] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

which language can be used to not only describe but remake perceptions of the material world. Through his efforts to cultivate a language of erasure and omission — what in a 1937 letter to Axel Kaun he calls "literature of the non-word" [Literatur des Unworts][14] — Beckett mimics both the psychological processes often found in the coping mechanisms employed by survivors of trauma and the linguistic evasions common among perpetrators of trauma-inducing violence. In this way, both in the immediate aftermath of World War II and during the Algerian conflict, Beckett critiques France's failure, or even incapacity, to come to terms with its own culpability or contend with the legacy of Vichy. Suffused with the grim specter of collaborationism, Beckett's post-war works call to account modes of denialism prevalent in French society and demonstrate how that same failure to confront disturbing truths led to the replication of right-wing violence during the Algerian War. Operating as much by what is not said as by what is, Beckett's literature emerges as a profound indictment of reactionary ideologies and an exposition of language's nefarious capacity for obfuscation.

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[14] Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et al, ed., *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume I: 1929–1940*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 512–520.

Part II: *Comment c'est* and Bodily Pain

This milieu of anxiety and despair formed the backdrop against which Beckett's work on *Comment c'est* trudged ever onwards. The last of the author's major works that could by any stretch of the imagination be called a novel, Beckett had started the long process of the book's composition in December of 1958 (months after the *La Question* controversy but long before any resolution to the questions raised by it). Despite the fact that of all Beckett's creative outlets the novel "seemed to him most important,"[111] work on this particular foray into the genre proceeded at an agonizingly slow pace. Splitting his time between his cottage in Ussy and his apartment in Paris, "by March 1959, after what he felt had been months of false starts and rewriting, he had only about ten pages" which "were a mere approximation to what he wanted."[112] He continued working on the novel fitfully throughout the year, interrupted by travels to London and Dublin (where his alma mater Trinity College had decided to give him an honorary doctorate), but by the time autumn leaves were being tossed around by the wind the book was still giving him enormous trouble. Facing acute writer's block, Beckett "had now decided that it might take another year at least"[113] to finish the novel, and had adopted a far more disciplined and rigorous approach to writing than he had previously employed, "trying to achieve at least half a page a day, though on some days he stopped working without achieving this."[114] The work went on, and each day it became more and more evident

[111] Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*, (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 488.
[112] Ibid, 489.
[113] Ibid, 496.
[114] Ibid, 496.

that "none of his extended prose works gave him so much trouble as this comparatively short last novel."[115]

Despite the difficulty of the process, by October 1960 Beckett had managed to finish a full draft of the novel and hand it over to Lindon, and *Comment c'est* was published by Les Éditions de Minuit early the next year. Though by this time Beckett was an author well-known for bizarre and unnerving scenarios, his vision in *Comment c'est* is particularly disturbing and strange, in addition to its being the most stylistically experimental of the extended prose works. The novel takes shape in three sections, "before Pim with Pim after Pim,"[116] in which an unnamed first-person narrator recounts fragmentary "bits and scraps"[117] of memory from his "life life the other above in the light said to have been [his]"[118] and of his new (presumably after-)life crawling "in the mud" over a "vast stretch of time" in an unknown purgatorial space filled with darkness. This setting bears some similarity to other of Beckett's works (such as the later short story "Le Dépeupleur," or "The Lost Ones"), a phenomenon attributed by the critic Pascale Casanova to the fact that "the dim and the void are Beckett's response to the spatial conventions posited by the whole literary tradition as conditions of possibility of literature,"[119] opening up an area where, in her view, Beckett has freedom to invent rules of language as existence.

From the first page of *Comment c'est* it becomes clear that, while the narrator may be the one speaking to us, the words themselves are dictated by a mysterious other, "an

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[115] Ibid, 496.
[116] Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, (New York: Grove Press Inc,1964), 7.
[117] Ibid, 7.
[118] Ibid, 8.
[119] Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, (London: Verso, 2006), 19.

ancient voice in [the narrator] not [his]."[120] The voice decides the words, and the narrator merely repeats after, as if taking dictation. Throughout the book, the reader learns all about the bizarre arrangement of this creature's existence there in the eternal, hellish darkness. The first section, "before Pim," chronicles the narrator's journey through the darkness, crawling on his belly through the mud towards Pim, "a fellow-creature more or less"[121] who leads an apparently identical existence in the darkness. The narrator drags along with him a sack filled with tins of food, as well as a can opener initially used to access the tins. Throughout the journey the creature recounts memories of his previous life, including memories of his parents and a woman, and makes clear through his descriptions that his current situation is some variety of Hell. The second section, "with Pim," details the stationary "life in common"[122] of the narrator and Pim once the narrator has reached his destination. The narrator, in his corporeal manifestation, is apparently without language, and cannot communicate with Pim save by physical interactions, which more often than not manifest as specific routines of torture, with the narrator tormenting Pim with a series of injuries such as thumping his head, scratching his buttocks, and stabbing him in the ribs with the can opener.[123] Pim, on the other hand, is able to sing and grunt and offer utterances, and it strongly appears as if Pim's access to language is an ability desired by the narrator, who feels the need to have

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[120] Ibid, 7.
[121] Ibid, 54.
[122] Ibid, 55.
[123] The title of the novel, *Comment c'est*, or *How It Is*, takes on a certain grim irony when one considers the presence of torture within its pages and the prevailence of torture in Algeria and France at the time of its composition. It is also worth noting briefly that the use of the tin opener (an everyday object) as a weapon here is vaguely reminiscent of the appropriation of everyday objects such as batteries and bathtubs for the purposes of torture by the French soldiers in Algeria.

a record or testimony about his experiences, and make Pim's voice his own (indeed, perhaps the book itself is this appropriated voice and record). The torments the narrator inflicts upon Pim then have the ostensible aim of attempting to teach Pim to respond to certain tortures with particular verbal reactions. These tortures continue until such a time as Pim makes up his mind to abandon the narrator, stranding him in the darkness again. In "after Pim," the once again solitary narrator ruminates on the arrangement of this purgatorial world while awaiting his own hypothesized tormenter-to-be, which he names Bom. There are, he speculates, many others like him and Pim, out there in the mud-dark, because the principle of justice requires that every torturer is himself tortured by another in turn, and seeing as Pim has abandoned the narrator rather than torture him (and, presumably, gone off somewhere to torture someone else), there must be another being, that which he calls Bom (though this name is also used to refer to the narrator, at times), destined to torture the narrator. And, of course, there must also be someone destined to torture Bom, and someone to torture Bom's torturer, and so on, and so on, forever, in an endless series of ad hoc hypotheses of increasing unlikelihood. [124] In addition to this, the narrator speculates that there is another being, outside of the purgatorial realm, named Kram, who fastidiously observes the goings-on of the narrator, acting as a witness, assisted in this task by a scribe named Krim, who makes a record of all that has happened, a record we are perhaps reading. Of course, while the book is partitioned into three distinct sections, the structure of the plot clearly implies a

[124] The pun of the novel's title ("comment c'est" is pronounced identically to "commencer," the French verb for "to begin") takes on a kind of grim irony here: if this principle of justice holds true, once this violence begins, it can never end.

fourth (with Bom), but the reader is left to imagine what events may take place in such a section on the basis of the previous three.

Comment c'est is a work intimately concerned with the interaction of language and physical pain. As Adam Piette has observed, "at the core of Beckett's novel, even from its inception, there is a relationship between extorted speech and torturing power as an act of violent appropriation of voice."[125] In his reading, as in my own, the novel operates as a response to (or at least strongly mimics) the human rights violations carried out by the French in Algeria, and "explores an extreme form of rights summoned by the plight of stateless victims of hegemonic violence and control."[126] Through the central episode of Pim's torture in part II, Beckett teases out the interplay between violence and voice, and broaches the politics of the body in a far more explicit way than he had in his previous work, infusing the novel with a consciousness of both contemporary political history and phantoms of recent historical traumas (such as the experience of the Vichy years), all the while engaging in a dialogue with those voices, like Sartre's, who were most forceful in their opposition to torture. Through his scenario — in which there is potentially a vast system wherein each participant alternates roles as torturer and tortured — Beckett makes visible Sartre's observation in "Une Victoire" (discussed in Part I) that the nature of torture is such that anyone, according to circumstances, can be transformed into "victime ou bourreau."[127] But perhaps even more importantly, Beckett also demonstrates the psychological framing

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[125] Adam Piette, "Torture, Text, Human Rights: Beckett's *Comment c'est* / *How It Is* and the Algerian War," in *Around 1945: Literature, Citizenship, Rights*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 154.
[126] Ibid, 152.
[127] [victim or torturer].

Sartre claims is necessary to sustain colonial oppression and justify the infliction of pain upon colonial subjects, namely the relegation of the colonized to a sub-human status by the dominant group.

To the narrator, Pim is perceived as an Other. While he may be a "fellow-creature more or less"[128] — a formulation which itself sows doubt about Pim's equal claim to humanity, even while acknowledging it — from the very beginning the narrator suspects him as someone potentially foreign. Listening to Pim mumble indistinctly shortly after encountering him, the narrator realizes that he "can't make out the words the mud muffles or perhaps a *foreign* tongue perhaps he's singing a lied[129] in the original perhaps a *foreigner*."[130] A line later the narrator images Pim to be "an oriental,"[131] further removing him to a realm of otherness (at least from the narrator's presumably European perspective). Even earlier than that, when the narrator is imagining how he could have "dug [his fingernails] in[to Pim's buttock] if [the narrator] had wished" and how he "longed to dig deep furrows drink the screams" and imagined "the turbaned head bowed over the fists the circle of friends in their white dhotis," the narrator demonstrates his immediate conceptualization of Pim as some form of exoticized oriental figure.[132] [133] This perceived difference between Pim and the narrator is made

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[128] Beckett, 54.
[129] The inclusion of the word "lied" here is a fascinating choice, introducing, as it does, the idea of Germanness, which in the light of the context and historical background puts one in mind of the Gestapo torturers and Beckett's own experiences in the Resistance during the war, as well as the frequent comparisons to Vichy that critics of torture were employing during this period to condemn the practices of the French torturers in Algeria.
[130] Ibid, 56. Emphasis mine.
[131] Ibid, 56.
[132] Ibid, 53.
[133] Interestingly, a "dhotis" is a garment worn by Hindus, not Muslims, and consequently it would be difficult to read the inclusion of a reference to this article of clothing as something contributing to Pim's characterization as somehow Algerian, except insofar as Beckett — ventriloquizing the colonialist

even greater in the next few pages, and with even less justification. Mirroring the structure of the absurd logics oppressors always use to justify their dominance, the narrator explains why he believes Pim is exempted from the kinds of rights usually granted to people by virtue of their personhood: "I always say when a man's name is Pim he hasn't the right and all the things a man hadn't the right always said when his name was Pim."[134] [135] Of course, it was the narrator himself who named Pim, inventing the name for ease of reference, and as such created the very ground upon which he stands to defend his exploitation of his "fellow-creature," an action not dissimilar to the way in which colonizers often invent pretexts to justify their imperialistic actions, such as the French notion of a "*mission civilisatrice*" in the colonies, discussed in Part I.

While the parallels are by no means explicit or unique, given Pim's perceived status as a "foreigner" — and especially as "an oriental" — it is impossible to avoid reading this type of differentiation and othering as reminiscent of the treatment Algerians and other colonized peoples received at the hands of the French, particularly during the legal state of exception that marked the Algerian War, whether they were being explicitly designated as less protected by the law (as in the Code de l'Indigénat, also discussed in Part I) or more subtly discriminated against in everyday interactions.

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mindset through the narrator — may be demonstrating one of the myriad ways in which orientalizing Westerners have a tendency to lump together disparate groups on the basis of superficial similarities, a tendency which is still seen today in the occasional histrionics surrounding the misattribution of traditional Sikh dastars to Islam.

[134] Ibid, 59.

[135] Curiously, this passage is presented far less forcefully in the original French, given as: "je dis toujours quand on s'appelle Pim on ne doit jamais tout ce qu'on ne devait jamais disait toujours quand on s'appelait Pim." Absent is any direct equivalent to the word "right" (which in French is "droit") as one finds in the English, and Beckett's later decision to translate the text as he did may be an indication that he intended for the paragraph to have greater political resonance. Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1961), 74.

Even setting aside the revelations of *La Question* and the other anti-torture literature published by Les Éditions de Minuit, Beckett was not unaware of the forms of colonial violence undertaken in the name of empire. The author had previously researched various colonial projects as he worked on earlier books, initially focusing on the behavior of the English in Ireland, but subsequently becoming aware of other imperialist projects throughout the world through contact with a variety of anti-colonial literature contained within Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology, to which Beckett contributed a sizeable number of translations (which often, as Emilie Morin has pointed out,[136] come across as more politically forceful than the originals). More than that, as Morin later goes on to write, "Beckett was familiar with the role of torture [specifically] in the longer history of colonisation: [Roger] Casement's *Black Diaries*, which [Beckett] read upon their publication by Grove Press in May 1959, describe techniques later emulated in Algeria, and evoke the Putumayo Indians of Peru submitted to torture."[137] Beckett's biographer Anthony Cronin goes even further, noting that Beckett "read [the diaries] with [what] he called 'great absorption,' and came to the conclusion that they were 'quite authentic,' " further observing that it is "not fanciful to see the sedulous anatomical thumpings and pokings of [*Comment c'est*] as deriving to some extent from the Casement Diaries,"[138] given that Beckett read them at the same time he was hard at work with his novel.

Beckett's statement that he regarded the *Diaries* as "authentic" should be understood in the context of numerous accusations of forgery leveled against them.

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[136] Morin, "Another War Entirely: Internationalist Politics," in *Beckett's Political Imagination*, 79–129.
[137] Morin, 222.
[138] Cronin, 495.

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Conclusion

As we have seen, Samuel Beckett's work is far from the isolated aesthetic ideal imagined by most of his mainstream critics. While the ontological issues conventionally identified as the focus of his work are undeniably present, my hope is that this thesis may serve to act as some small corrective to the narrow view of Beckett as Philosopher Artist, and contribute to the slowly growing body of criticism identifying the author's writings as both productions of and responses to the political circumstances of his era, which in my view is not only a fuller interpretation of Beckett's œuvre but an ethically necessary stance towards literary criticism in general. Rather than existing in some kind of artistic vacuum, insulated from the world around it by the sheer force of the author's intellect, texts like *Comment c'est* demonstrate clearly how Beckett not only drew from the events and attitudes of the world around him but, after his own fashion, engaged in veiled dialogue with the political culture he found himself surrounded by. While avoiding the kinds of polemical stances and banner waving taken up by many of his politically inclined predecessors and contemporaries (the Surrealists and Brecht come to mind, respectively), he nevertheless demonstrated a keen political sense and an acute concern for the plight of the victim. While he never produced political art in the same pedagogical vein as figures like Brecht, his work is perhaps nevertheless capable of producing a kind of subconscious shock of recognition that has the potential to lead to political change, far-fetched though the actualization of this fact may be.

The focus of this thesis has obviously been Beckett's last novel, *Comment c'est*, but the same types of bodily concerns that preoccupy him in this text can be traced

throughout his entire corpus, starting with the earliest English short stories and novels but continuing (and in fact expanding) in his later works for theatre. As the critic S. E. Gontarski notes (though he neglects to register the political implications of his observation), "what drove (or lured) Samuel Beckett to theater—as a retreat, a haven, or even a sanctuary—was the body, the shape or form that text takes in performance."[217] More often than not, the body in Beckett is somehow restricted, mutilated, or otherwise incapacitated, and appears variously "as material object, shade, specter, or voice" in such a way as to be demonstrative of "what Ruby Cohn has called 'afflicted bodies' or what might be deemed spectacles of pain."[218] The ways in which this occurs shed light on, among other things, various forms of political violence, whether overt, as in the case of torture, or subtle, as in the power relations established through access to scarce resources. (See James McNaughton's facinating reading of *Endgame* as a product of Nazi-era famine politics and an example of Foucault's concept of biopower, for instance).[219]

The subject of torture, in particular, and the imposition of power onto the physical body, in general, surfaces in a few later plays most obviously. As Emilie Morin has observed, two minor texts from around the time of the Algerian Revolution, the radio play *Rough for Radio II* and the stage play *Rough for Theatre II*, "borrow heavily from the conventions of the detective enquiry, and both examine the figure of the

[217] S.E. Gontarski, " 'He wants to know if it hurts!': The Body as Text in Samuel Beckett's Theater," in *Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 195.
[218] Ibid, 195.
[219] James McNaughton, " '*Prophetic Relish*': Famine Politics in Beckett's Endgame," in Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 137–165.

torturer and its common recasting as investigator."[220] In *Rough for Radio II* the scenario features three characters attempting to extract information from a fourth, who "comes to them wearing a hood, a blind, a gag and earplugs."[221] The trio are apparently "aware of the need to scrutinise their report before submission to their superiors," and this and some of the implied methods of torture echo "the explanations given in testimonies such as Alleg's *La Question* concerning the practice of varying interrogation methods to obtain a confession."[222] *Rough for Theatre II*, by contrast, is even clearer in its references to contemporary political events, and perhaps as a consequence was not published until 1975. The early 1960s perversely "saw the transformation of the leaders of the Battle of Algiers into national icons upholding the values of the French Republic,"[223] and given that Beckett's play features an erudite, Dante-loving antagonist who is but a "short step"[224] from Paul Aussaresses, an infamous French general and torturer who participated in the battle, it is understandable that the work failed to appear at the height of the repressive years of the conflict. More than this, the play "engages the same political euphemisms" as those employed by the French forces of the era, in addition to imagining "protective hierarchies and administrations keen to legitimate their practices,"[225] all of which strongly suggest the political inspiration for the work.

Beckett maintains an interest in control over bodies even beyond the scope of the Algerian Revolution. One can locate this fascination in works like the short 1983 play

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[220] Morin, 220.
[221] Ibid, 221.
[222] Ibid, 221.
[223] Ibid, 222.
[224] Ibid, 222.
[225] Ibid, 224.

What Where, for instance, with its invocation of the torture euphemism "give him the works."[226] Or in Beckett's eerie monologue *Pas moi,* or *Not I*, which is one of the clearest demonstrations of a writer/director's control over the physical form of an actor. In it an illuminated mouth hovers suspended midway in the air above the stage, the rest of the actor's body obscured, while the actor delivers a strenuous and frightening speech. This positioning requires quite a bit of set up: The actor's body and head must be fastened into an apparatus such that they are immobilized, allowing the mouth to remain visible through a hole in a wall while preventing it from moving from that spot. Beckett further extends — and makes explicitly visible — this dictatorial control over actors' bodies in one of his last completed plays, which is also conventionally read as his most political, 1982's *Catastrophe*. In this short play a director and their assistant position and reposition the body of an actor posed on stage, sometimes in uncomfortable positions, in this way literalizing and making visible the tyrannical authority of the playwright and director in theater, acknowledging the inherent hierarchies of the genre, and drawing parallels to real-world authoritarians (a parallel made evident by Beckett's dedication of the play to the Czech dissident writer Václav Havel, who later went on to become his country's president but was in prison at the time of the play's composition).

All of which is fascinating, and the excavation of these political resonances has proven to be an engrossing intellectual endeavor, but nevertheless it has left a fundamental question to be addressed. I began this project, at least in part, because I was curious about the viability of the literary avant-garde serving as a vehicle for

[226] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2006), 473.

political criticism. I wanted to know if abstract and cutting-edge art could, in any kind of concrete way, influence the social and material conditions of the world in which it was produced. I wanted to know, in Frank Lentricchia's words, whether it is possible for "a literary intellectual… [to] do radical work *as* a literary intellectual."[227] While it would take a much farther-reaching and non-author-specific inquiry to discover an answer to this question (in the unlikely case that it's possible for this question to be settled at all), it's difficult to walk away from the body of Beckett's work feeling as if one could answer in the affirmative. If one looks back at the concluding paragraph of Part II, which deals with the way in which literature can give voice to the voiceless and thereby acquire political force, I have laid out my best argument for the stance that a novel such as *Comment c'est* can take on real-world issues in a meaningful way. However, it's difficult to escape the unshakable suspicion that the road of abstraction leads inevitably to a political dead end. While Beckett's art may in fact be political, its politics are often plunged into such an obscurity that they are all but indiscernible. If it takes writing a study to determine whether or not a book has identifiable political content, perhaps the answer to that inquiry is ultimately of little real-world consequence.

One would ironically be hard pressed, of course, to come up with a more Beckettian image than that of an artist shouting impotently into the void, driven to give utterance but unable to communicate their point, but this is all the same the image that comes to mind. Certainly, many of Beckett's contemporaries viewed him as insufficiently engaged in the political struggle, and some resented his artistic

[227] Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2.

dominance for this reason. The British playwright John Arden, for one, "denounced Beckett's failure to write plays 'about Algeria' publicly."[228] For another, the German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht was sufficiently incensed about the supposed political neutrality of *Waiting for Godot* that he planned to write "a play deliberately intended as an antidote to"[229] it before his death in 1956. The case of Brecht, especially, is a striking contrast. Particularly during his later period, almost everything he wrote was intended to carry an easily identifiable political message, and despite the fact that they both revolutionized theatre — albeit in different ways — Brecht's realist approach to art stands in stark contrast to Beckett's abstraction. "True realism," after all, "of which Brecht considered himself to be a staunch champion and practitioner, was not merely an aesthetic optic: it was a political and philosophical vision of the world and the material struggles that divided it,"[230] and it participated in the class struggle to bring about the end of capitalism. Beckett's art, then, with its strange and cerebral plays, stands not only as an aesthetic opposite but consequently, in Brecht's view, served to impede political progress. "To reach the exploited classes in the tempestuous era of their final struggle with their exploiters," Brecht thought, "art had to change together with their own revolutionary change of the world and of themselves,"[231] but Beckett's avant-garde revolution served only to alienate people and was perhaps just another manifestation of bourgeois decadence. It's easy to see where Brecht is coming from,

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[228] Ibid, 184.
[229] Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson, and Francis Mulhern, Presentation II to *Aesthetics and Politics,* (London: Verso, 2007), 67.
[230] Ibid, 63.
[231] Ibid, 64.

even if, at the same time, it's difficult to shake the feeling that Brecht's own approach somehow condescends to his audience.[232]

Not all those who were engaged in the vigorous mid-century aesthetic debate Brecht was involved with (Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Lukács, etc.) held Beckett in such low regard. Adorno, in particular, suggested "that it is Beckett who [was] the most truly revolutionary artist of [his] time," stemming from the Frankfurt school philosopher's "assertion that the greatest modern art, even the most apparently un- or anti-political, in reality holds up a mirror to the 'total system' of late capitalism,"[233] and is thus best situated to address the philosopher's famous question of how one is to continue making art after Auschwitz. It is perhaps not coincidence, then, that Adorno was the earliest of Beckett's major critics to identify him as a political writer. Beckett's abstraction itself, in Adorno's view, was a political creation.

Far be it from my responsibility to settle the ongoing debate between these two camps of political aesthetics, but I would venture to suggest that the resolution likely lies (aggravatingly) somewhere in between them. Brecht's realism and didactic theatre stand as one poll of political action, but run the risk of impotence due to their potentially condescending tone and excessive preoccupation with making a forceful political point. Beckett and his art of failure stand as the other poll, which hazards sinking into political irrelevance due to their impenetrability. Both could benefit from aspects of the other, but the truly crucial thing for us — as critics, as creators and consumers of art, striving to manifest change in the world — is to recognize the

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[232] Perhaps such an obvious parable of Hitler's rise as found in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* isn't strictly speaking necessary, for instance.
[233] Fredric Jameson, afterword to *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2007), 209.

absolute necessity of treating our work, and the materials which feed into it, as political objects, to acknowledge the imperative of placing any work of art or any artist in dialogue with their material and social conditions so as to fully grasp their political nature. We have to realize that even someone as supposedly socially remote as Beckett is incomprehensible without a consideration of the political landscape he lived within. Only then can we begin to understand the importance of this art. Only then can literature begin to lay the foundations for a more just world.

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