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**Vermicular Origins: The Creative Evolution of Samuel Beckett's  
Worm**

**Rachel Murray**

On 12 August 1948, Samuel Beckett wrote to his friend the art critic Georges Duthuit, wondering where to find "the terms, the rhythms" (Letters 2: 102) necessary to go on writing. In the same letter, Beckett describes how, while out walking that evening "among the dripping bracken," he had decided:

we need a motive to blow up all this dismal mixture. It is surely to be sought where everything must be sought now, in the eternally larval, no, something else, in the courage of the imperfection of non-being too, in which we are intermittently assailed by the temptation still to be, a little, and the glory of having been a little, beneath an unforgettable sky. Yes, to be sought in the impossibility of ever being wrong enough, of ever being ridiculous and defenceless enough. (102)

These somewhat oblique remarks occur in the context of a discussion between Beckett and Duthuit about the nature of contemporary art, which developed into a series of published conversations entitled *Three Dialogues* (1949). Here, Beckett appears to be in the process of discovering the distinct rhythms of his next novel, *The Unnamable* (1953). As is also the case in this highly experimental text, there is a distinctly unwieldy quality to Beckett's language as it unfurls and recoils upon itself, manifesting his struggle to hit upon the right combination of words. Intriguingly, although he quickly retracts the phrase, Beckett posits that artistic expression should strive to remain "eternally larval." This phrase, which has yet to receive critical attention, provides a new way of understanding the "the terms, the rhythms" at work in Beckett's post-war writing. An adjective that describes the phase of an insect's development when it resembles a grub or caterpillar, the "larval" also resurfaces elsewhere in the author's oeuvre. In *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (2004), Chris Ackerley lists a series of references to what he terms the "larval stage" (309) in *Murphy* (1938), *Malone Dies* (1951), *The Unnamable* (1953), *Happy Days* (1961), and *How It Is* (1964). Until now, however, the correlation between the presence of life forms such as caterpillars or maggots in Beckett's oeuvre, and his pursuit of a more instinctual, pre-conscious form of artistic expression has largely been overlooked.

This article will trace the origins of the "eternally larval" in Beckett's writing, arguing that the author's fascination with incipient life forms is reflected in the vermicular modalities of his post-war prose, and is bound up with his attempts to evolve a new form of literary representation. Readers of Beckett have already established that his knowledge of invertebrate life partly derived from his reading of entomological texts. Angela Moorjani detects an echo of Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Life of the Bee* (1901), which documents his experiences of beekeeping, in Beckett's description of the hum of Moran's hive in his 1951 novel *Molloy* (165). James Carney concurs with Moorjani that Beckett may also have been alluding to the work of the German ethologist Karl Von Frisch in the 1940s on the dance of the honeybee, concluding that: "Beckett's work is informed, at least partially, by a remarkably prescient awareness of contemporary entomology" (230). More generally, Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon have identified a number of well-thumbed works of biology and natural history in Beckett's surviving library.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Beckett also owned a number of fin-de-siècle works of evolutionary biology, including Ernst Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe* (1899), and Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907), the latter of which influenced a number of other modernist writers. Beckett was particularly drawn to the parts of these texts that focus on the larval stage of an insect's development, characterized by Darwin as the "first condition of an insect at its issuing from the egg" (447).

In conjunction with reading about larval life forms in scientific texts, Beckett also engaged in acts of observational fieldwork. In his correspondence from the late 1940s and early 1950s, he details his "deductions of nature, based on observation" (Letters 2: 162). As well as marvelling at mayflies and beetles, Beckett wrote of his curious fascination for grubs, caterpillars and earthworms, remarking in a July 1951 letter to Duthuit: "Never seen so many butterflies in such a worm-state, this little central cylinder, the only flesh, is the worm" (Letters 2: 271). Beckett's increasingly segmented syntax suggests a slowing down of his thought processes as he hones in on his subject matter, condensing multiple "butterflies in ... a worm-state" into the singular "worm." Tim Parks suggests that these remarks typify Beckett's "renunciation of meticulous description" as well as his "readiness not to understand" (113), while S. E. Gontarski argues that this observation sheds light on his approach to creativity as "only possible through such un-tethered selves or beings" (611-12). Yet, crucially, the emergence of this singular larval "worm" also appears to demonstrate the significance of elementary life forms to Beckett's ideas during this period regarding the stripping away of language to expose the "central" components of artistic expression.

Between proposing an art of the "eternally larval" in 1948 and observing the "worm-state" in his garden in 1951, Beckett wrote *The Unnamable*, which centres on the primordial consciousness of an entity named Worm. This vermicular figure exemplifies the conjunction in Beckett's work between his interest in embryonic forms of life in the natural world and his efforts to represent the nascent stages of human consciousness. After examining the "worm-state" in *Murphy*, this article will argue that the unique rhythms of *The Unnamable* were directly inspired by Beckett's encounters with larval life forms, both in scientific texts and in "the ... flesh." Finally, it will contend that Beckett's direct observations of larvae and worms inspired him to contemplate the persistence of the human subject and its forms of expression in the wake of war.

### **"larval and dark": Darwin's Caterpillar**

Set in London in 1935, Beckett's first published novel *Murphy* opens in the protagonist's condemned West Brompton lodgings, a gloomy dwelling "curtained off from the sun" (3). Its protagonist, Murphy, who is characterized as a "seedy solipsist" (53), lies naked in his room after having tied himself to a rocking chair so that he might feel "free in his mind" (4). The narrator later informs us that Murphy's desired transformation is that of metamorphosis in reverse, a state of being that he characterizes as "larval and dark" (115). Those who are closest to Murphy also experience this reduction of consciousness in vermicular terms: when his lover Celia replaces him in the rocking chair, the emptying of her mind is likened to "a peristalsis of light worming its way into the dark" (44). The term "peristalsis" denotes the wormlike movement of the digestive system as food passes through it, and Beckett directly alludes to this phenomenon in his experimental prose text *How It Is*, likening the primordial human figures crawling on their bellies through an endless sea of mud to "a procession advancing in jerks or spasms like shit in the guts" (108).<sup>2</sup> The term peristalsis is also listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as a synonym of the term "vermicular," thus revealing an overt homology between human and worm bodies, and it seems possible that Beckett was cognizant of this parallel.

In *Murphy*, as Celia becomes increasingly withdrawn from her surroundings the light dims to a "vermigrade wane" (85). Intriguingly, the term "vermigrade" is Beckett's own coinage, signalling his playful awareness of the plasticity of both worms and words. Indeed, in the first of Celia's rocking chair reveries, Beckett's use of the verb "worming" conveys the following actions: "to make one's way insidiously like a worm into (a person's confidence, secret affairs, etc); to burrow in so as to hurt or destroy. Also, to wriggle out of (a difficulty)" ("Worm," def. 10a; original emphasis). Just as the aforementioned "peristalsis of light" appears to signify the evacuation of Celia's (and later Murphy's) mind, it also serves a function of interrupted cocooning, puncturing Celia's attempt at solipsistic self-enclosure by worming in and out of her mind and emptying it of its contents. Larvae and worms, therefore, appear to function as cognates in Beckett's writing for a regressive state of existence marked by an absence of mind; in his one-act play *That Time* (1975) an elderly subject is reminded of his first moments of life, during which he resembled a "curled up worm in slime when they lugged you out and wiped you off" (*Dramatic Works* 390). Equally, in *How It Is*, the primordial bodies who migrate on their bellies through an endless sea of mud are likened to "slime worms" engaged in a "scissiparous frenzy" (98).

Given that Beckett first deploys the word "larval" in *Murphy*, it seems necessary to investigate the possible provenance of this term in his writing. Chris Ackerley speculates that Murphy's desire for a "larval and dark" state of consciousness may have been inspired by Beckett's reading of Canto X of Dante's *Purgatorio*, citing the following translation: "Do ye not perceive that we are worms / Born to form the angelic butterfly? ... / You are like defective insects / Like the worm in whom formation is lacking!" (2: 165). This claim is corroborated by Daniela Caselli's discovery that the manuscripts of *Murphy* are densely interspersed with Beckett's reading notes of the *Purgatorio* (81-88). Ackerley also cites the seventeenth-century French philosopher Denis Diderot, whom Beckett read during the early thirties, as a possible source of the larval. In his eighteenth-century philosophical dialogue, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* (*Alembert's Dream* [1769]), Diderot's speaker Bordeu harks back to the embryonic stage of human life, "when you were simply a soft substance, fibrous, shapeless, vermicular substance" (233). This is a

significant discovery, for it suggests that, like Diderot, Beckett is drawing a direct parallel between the larval stage of an insect's life cycle and the nascent or embryonic stages of human consciousness.

There is also evidence in *Murphy* to suggest that Beckett's preoccupation with the larval stage of life was informed by his reading of scientific texts. After *Murphy*'s former lover, Miss Counihan, pipes up with a series of unwelcome pronouncements on Cartesian dualism, a group of his followers attempt to shout her down, and when she pauses briefly to regain her composure one of them, Wylie, quips: "[s]he quite forgets how it goes on.... She will have to go right back to the beginning, like Darwin's caterpillar" (122). Beckett is alluding to the findings of Charles Darwin's contemporary Pierre Huber, which are outlined in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In his chapter on "Instinct," Darwin recounts Huber's discovery that if a caterpillar is interrupted in its attempts to construct a pupation hammock by having the stages of construction completed for it, then "much embarrassed" it attempts to start all over again, re-performing these stages independently (190). Intriguingly, as Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon have stated, Beckett felt compelled to refer to Darwin's observation of the actions of this creature on three separate occasions. In an early short story, "Echo's Bones" (1933), Belacqua asserts that his memory has gone to hell and "if you can't give me a better cue I'll have to be like the embarrassed caterpillar and go back to my origins" (42). Beckett's next novel *Watt* (1953) echoes this sentiment after Mr. O'Meldon is interrupted mid-flow and Mr. Magershon instructs him: "Go on from where you left off.... Or are you like Darwin's caterpillar?" (194). In an echo of the behaviour of the caterpillar, Beckett must have gone back to his *Origin* on more than one occasion. Indeed, Van Hulle and Nixon observe that his copy of Darwin's text contains extensive annotations and dog-ears that indicate multiple readings (202-06). The embarrassed caterpillar may thus be understood as a significant figure of thought in Beckett's work, with these examples together forming what the narrator of *Watt* describes as a "vermicular series" (222).

Van Hulle and Nixon do not speculate as to why Beckett was drawn back to this particular anecdote, but given his subsequent contemplation of a "larval and dark" stage of consciousness in *Murphy*, it seems that he was inspired by Darwin's example of a regressive instinct in nature. Evidently, the resurfacing of the caterpillar analogy in *Watt*, two decades after it appeared in "Echo's Bones," demonstrates that Beckett remained fascinated by this anti-teleological observation for a significant portion of his career. Indeed, despite the fact that he thought that *Origin* was "badly written cats-lap" in 1932 (Letters 1: 111), by 1961 he claimed to be re-reading it "with much pleasure" (Letters 3: 389), suggesting that his estimation of the text had improved during the intervening decades. Beckett's initial disparaging reference to the text has meant that, with the exception of a few critics (Van Hulle and Nixon; Shepherd-Barr, 243-72), Darwin's influence on his work has often been overlooked. In brief but suggestive remarks, Van Hulle and Nixon conclude that the sections of Beckett's copy of *Origin* that show signs of multiple readings share "one characteristic in common: each contains an expression of the limitations of human knowledge" (203). Beckett's multiple encounters with Darwin's embarrassed caterpillar could therefore have contributed to his seminal realization in 1946 that while James Joyce "had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more ... my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (qtd. in Knowlson 352).

Returning to *Murphy*, it is possible to observe certain affinities between the regressive instinct that Darwin identifies in the natural world and the unfolding,



recoiling, and redoubling of literary expression over the course of the text. In a technique that often appears to undermine the possibility of a teleological structure, Beckett's narrator has a tendency to circle back to an earlier train of thought, most notably in the verbatim repetition of Murphy's rocking chair stillness at the beginning of the text – "soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free" (8) – to describe his death at the end (158). Ruby Cohn channels the spirit of the Darwinian caterpillar when she argues that in Murphy: "[t]he narrator's primary stylistic weapon is repetition, and around those repetitions, Beckett weaves those of the characters" (80). The narrator could easily be describing his or her own methods when characterizing Murphy's speech patterns: "each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next" (28). In his post-war writing, Beckett continues his struggle to devise ways of accessing the incipient or larval origins of artistic expression. The next section of this article will argue that this tendency was partly inspired by his reading of an influential work of evolutionary theory that examines the early stages of the creative impulse.

### **The "inadequacy of the word": Beckett and Bergson**

Written after Watt between 1947 and 1950 in what he termed a "frenzy of writing" (qtd. in Knowlson 358), Beckett's Three Novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* (1958) encapsulate what S. E. Gontarski identifies over the course of Beckett's prose as "something of a reverse Darwinism that moves from complex to simple organism" (611). The Trilogy begins with a man travelling through the countryside on a bicycle in search of his mother in *Molloy*, before proceeding to the bedside of a moribund figure in *Malone Dies*. It concludes with the emergence of a series of deterritorialized voices in *The Unnamable* – Basil, Mahood and finally Worm, a "barely protoplasmic" entity (Begam 163). Over the course of the text this succession of life forms begin to merge with and eventually supersede the identity of the anonymous first-person speaker (hereafter referred to as the Unnamable). Julia Kristeva argues that Beckett's post-war prose "refines a syntax that marks time or moves ahead by fits and starts, warding off the narrative's flight forward" (258), while Hugh Kenner contends that *The Unnamable* "carries the Cartesian process backwards, beginning with the bodily *je suis* and ending with a bare *cogito*" (128). In accordance with the physical and psychological deterioration of human characters in the Trilogy, Beckett gradually strips away all but the embryonic features of narrative, with the form of *The Unnamable* approaching what may be termed the pre-narrative, or rather, the larval. Beckett's reading of Bergsonian evolutionary thought may have inspired the backward trajectory from vertebrate to invertebrate – from *Molloy* to *Worm* – over the course of the Trilogy.

The embodiment of all that remains confined to the dark zone of Murphy's mind, *Worm* is preceded by the figure of *Macmann* in *Malone Dies*, who is referred to in the original French version of the text, *Malone meurt* (1951), as "*nu comme ver*" ("naked as a worm"). A primitive creature, *Macmann* is "by temperament more reptile than bird and could suffer extensive mutilation and survive, happier sitting than standing and lying down than sitting, so that he sat and lay down at the least pretext and only rose again when the *élan vital* or struggle for life began to prod him in the arse again" (236). The reference is to Henri Bergson's 1900 text *Creative Evolution*, which coins the term *élan vital* to denote the life force inherent in all living organisms that propels them towards new forms of being. In a move reminiscent of the embarrassed caterpillar, Bergson's definition of the *élan vital* counters the progressive logic of modernity, corresponding to his claim that evolution "is not a movement

forward; in many cases we observe a marking time, and still more often a deviation or a turning back" (109). For Bergson, the view that evolution advances forward in a straight line – a simplified Darwinian notion expounded by the evolutionary biologist Herbert Spencer in the late nineteenth century – omits all that undermines its linear vision. It also introduces a peculiar notion of temporality, raising questions as to the continued presence of elementary life forms in a system that supposedly evolves towards a state of greater complexity.

Crucially, in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson turns his attention to the "crowd of minor paths in which, on the contrary, deviations, arrests and setbacks are multiplied" (109). Beckett's shared interest in moments of evolutionary deviation is suggested by his marking out of a subsection of Darwin's *Origin* titled "Rudimentary, Atrophied, and Aborted Organs," which details a series of anomalous life forms that have somehow thwarted the usual path of development (*Samuel Beckett's Library* 203).<sup>3</sup> It is also demonstrated by the contents of a course on French literature that Beckett taught at Trinity College Dublin during a brief stint as a lecturer in 1931. Hints as to the course material, which drew heavily on Bergsonian thought, can be found in the surviving lecture notes of one of his students, Rachel Burrows, who transcribed: "interested in his [Bergson's] idea of inadequacy of the word to translated impressions registered by instinct" (qtd. in Uhlmann 29; original emphasis). In his reading of *Creative Evolution*, Beckett would have been confronted with the idea that the development of intelligence in human beings was at the expense of a form of pre-conscious knowledge, or "instinct," which is "nowhere so developed as in the insect world" (141). Consequently, while the intelligence of human beings is such that we are able to utilise objects such as a spade as tools, creatures of instinct such as beetles or wasps are able to utilise their own forms to achieve similar ends.

Defining intelligence as an essentially inferior mechanistic apparatus, Bergson argues that instinct is a highly sophisticated form of behaviour "moulded on the very form of life" (141). Bergson's definition of instinct is itself moulded on popular French entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre's 1882 account of the fate of the turnip-moth caterpillar (*Agrotis segetum*) at the hands of the hairy sand-wasp (*Ammophila hirsuta*). Fabre reports that, rather than simply killing its caterpillar prey, the wasp has developed an instinct to paralyse it with its sting in nine separate places, before laying eggs in its body that feed on the living host once they have hatched into larvae. After marvelling at the extraordinary precision of this technique, Fabre concedes: "We suffer to-day, more than we ever did, from an itching to explain what might well be incapable of explanation" (15), adding: "A paltry insect bequeathes its skill to its offspring; and a man does not!" (21). In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson echoes Fabre's assessment of humankind's inferiority to invertebrates, describing how his own account of instinct is necessarily parasitic on a mode of intelligence: "science cannot do otherwise," he laments, but express instinct in terms of intelligence; however, "in so doing it constructs an imitation of instinct rather than penetrates within it" (168). Bergson's choice of language suggests that he is cognizant of his inability to be the wasp that penetrates the caterpillar at exactly the right spot in order to paralyse it; for Bergson, as for Fabre, intelligence lacks the precision of expression displayed by creatures of instinct.

In his lecture on French literature, Beckett appears to be adapting Bergson's account (via Fabre) of instinct versus intelligence to distinguish between two kinds of artistic expression. By opposing the "inadequacy of the word" to "impressions registered by instinct," Beckett therefore proffers what may be described as a pre-linguistic or larval form of expression. Indeed, elsewhere in *Creative Evolution*,

Bergson argues: "in the course of embryonic life itself (especially when the embryo lives freely in the form of a larva), many of the acts accomplished must be referred to instinct" (166). This observation may account for Murphy and later the Unnamable's yearning for the freedom of a kind of evolutionary atavism. In his post-war writing, Beckett begins to experiment with a nascent stage of creativity that is lost as soon as words begin to harden into a state of finality, thus resembling the textual equivalent of the adult or imago form of the insect. This resistance to development corresponds to Beckett's 1948 letter to Duthuit quoted earlier, in which he opposes the "eternally larval" to what Duthuit refers to as the "closed, achieved worlds" of existing art forms (Letters 2: 102). As the next section will explore, *The Unnamable* reflects Beckett's struggle to cultivate a form of expression that evades the workings of intelligence, aiming instead to evolve a series of "impressions registered by instinct."

### **"infinitely plastic forms": Bergson's Worms and Beckett's Worm**

In *The Unnamable*, Beckett's movement towards a more instinctive form of expression is represented by the figure of Worm, who represents the origins of the Unnamable's own life in a state of preconscious simplicity: "I was he, before all became confused" (345). However, as Lawrence Miller observes (153), as soon as Worm is assimilated into language the "various stages" (*The Unnamable* 345) of his development begin – he grows an ear, a head and finally eyes, causing the speaker to remark with horror: "he's getting humanized!" (353). The trajectory of Worm appears to be bound up with Beckett's aversion to the process of narrativization, coupled with his awareness of the impossibility of shedding sequential structures entirely. It is also possible to discern a parallel between this process of humanization and the attempts of Beckett scholars to try and press Worm, and indeed the text as a whole, into the service of a coherent argument.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of representing an essentially pre-linguistic entity through language is such that many readers characterize Worm as an extension of the agency of the narrating subject. Noteworthy exceptions to this include Richard Begam's account of Worm as a nonhuman entity who functions as a "mediating slash" between "subject/object" (176), and James Reid's post-humanist observation that, as an animal, Worm functions "as a narrating voice that is neither individual nor social" (150).

Worm's slippery ontological status stems from the fact that he is designed to function less as an entity than as a "peephole" (*The Unnamable* 350) to the creative instinct that lies behind the form in which he is expressed. Through Worm, Beckett attempts to access the *élan vital* of the writing process, the origins of creative inspiration that are lost as soon as language intervenes. In contrast to teleological models of evolution, Bergson argues that the *élan vital* is most prominent in the earliest living organisms, which were:

endowed with a certain freedom of action, and, above all, with a shape so undecided that it could lend itself to any future determination. These animals may have resembled some of our worms, but with this difference, however, that the worms living to-day, to which they could be compared, are but the empty and fixed examples of infinitely plastic forms, pregnant with an unlimited future. (130)

Bergson makes an important distinction between worms as embryonic ancestors of all existing life forms and "the worms living to-day," which have retained their embryonic status by failing to evolve beyond a certain point. These two kinds of



worms can help readers of *The Unnamable* to develop a clearer understanding of Worm as a figure that mediates between the potential expression of the idea "pregnant with an unlimited future," and the inevitable rigidity of its formal manifestation. Crucially, Bergson's distinction provides a way of conceptualizing the "eternally larval" in Beckett's work as a form of representation that signposts its own failure to develop, while also retaining a sense of infinite possibility about what it might become.

Throughout *The Unnamable*, Worm embodies the convulsive logic at work in the text's simultaneous need for, and resistance to, form, a paradox expressed by the Unnamable as: "the inability to speak, the inability to be silent" (389). As is apparent from this example, the language of the text continually turns back on itself in a manner akin to Murphy's speech patterns: "each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next" (Murphy 28). Worm is complicit in this process of undoing, what Beckett characterized in 1937 around the time that he was writing *Murphy*, as a "language of rupture," to be achieved by boring one hole after another into language "until what lurks behind it, be it something or nothing – begins to seep through" (Letters 1: 518). This method is exemplified by the Unnamable's attempts to describe Worm: "to say he does not know what he is, where he is, what is happening, is to underestimate him. What he does not know is that there is anything to know.... Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, he exists nevertheless" (340). The insistent repetition at work in this passage exposes the absence or even the negation of knowledge – "know" may be heard aloud as "no," while "nothing" is juxtaposed with "knowing." The result is a kind of semantic fluidity, which is compounded by Beckett's syntactical iterations ("what he is, where he is, what is happening"), and which induces a kind of seepage of expression that makes it difficult to retain the sense of statements as they unfold. Steven Connor notes that *The Unnamable*, "stippled as it is with fly-speck commas, becomes more etymologically entomological (en-tomos = 'internally divided')" (278) over the course of the text. Beckett's frenzy of commas resembles Bergson's "infinitely plastic forms," proliferating over the course of the text in a manner akin to the "scissiparous ... slime worms" (from the Latin *scissus*, meaning to split, and *parere* to bring forth) of *How It Is*. Consequently, when sentences, such as the one above, begin to run across the boundaries of pages, as they do towards the end of the text (396-99), it is easy to lose all sense of their beginnings. This forces the eye back to the start of each utterance as the reader is forced to continually break off and begin sentences again (and again) in a manner reminiscent of Darwin's embarrassed caterpillar.

Although once assimilated into language "Worm no longer is" (342), the progressive degeneration of narrative coherence in *The Unnamable* suggests that Worm is also complicit in the undoing of both the human and textual corpus, subsuming the brain of the speaker and reducing the language of the text to little more than digestive murmurs: "nyum, hoo, plop, pss" (401). In his reading of the entry on the brain in his copy of the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Beckett would have become aware, if he wasn't already, that the brain is already inhabited by a worm, namely the "cerebellar vermis," a region responsible for locomotion and bodily posture (*Samuel Beckett's Library* 192-93). Throughout the *Trilogy*, Beckett's subjects relate the sensation of being invaded by vermin, a phenomenon that reduces human motility to a crawl while also engendering an involuntary frenzy of tics and convulsions (Salisbury 77-112; Maude 44-53), anticipating the "jerks" and "spasms" of *How It Is* (108). At one point Mahood likens himself to a convulsive dog "suffering from worms" (315), at another he is devoured by flies (347), and elsewhere he cries

out: "What to still this gnawing of termites in my Punch and Judy box?" (333). The Unnamable also remarks that Worm is one minute "in the skull and the next in the belly, strange" (324). The mobility of this vermicular figure amid both the physical and textual corpus is consistent with his formal plasticity; in another futile attempt to describe Worm, the Unnamable refers to him as "nothing but a shapeless heap" with "no face but no doubt expressive" (350). Again, the repetition of the word "no" produces an effect of semantic rupture, as though the contents of these statements are literally seeping out through wormholes made by the letter "o."

In the midst of this atmosphere of disintegration, Beckett draws attention to the Unnamable's longing to retreat into some sort of hard outer shell, as though he wishes to shelter from the progressive formlessness of the text itself. He expresses a "longing to be in safety, surrounded on all sides by massive bone" (344), or "embedded in it, like a fossil in the rock" (386). Early on in the text, after likening himself to "mucilage," a viscid fluid secreted by plants and animals, the Unnamable admits: "I would gladly give myself the shape, if not the consistency of an egg ... round and hard, rather than of some irregular shape and subject to the dents and bulges incident to shock" (299). The Unnamable's desire to insulate himself against irregularity is reflected in his tendency to shelter in the framework of narrative, deriving comfort from "ever murmuring my old stories" (296). In particular, he clings to the tale of Mahood, a human figure who gradually degenerates into a limbless and immobile creature, before being "stuck like a sheaf of flowers in a jar" (321), a glass structure akin to a wormery. In relation to the text as a whole the story of Mahood appears designed to function in a manner akin to the jar, providing moments of containment for a narrative that is constantly on the verge of collapse. Instead of developing a shock-resistant outer shell, however, the Unnamable continues to shed any hint of formal fixity, with him at one point remarking: "my monster's carapace will rot off me" (319). The text increasingly comes to resemble what the Unnamable refers to as "liquefied brain" (287), an outpouring of disintegrating thought processes and dissolving signifiers.

Elsewhere in Beckett's post-war writing, the imposition of an artificial exoskeleton to house subjects who are, in his own words, "falling to bits" (qtd. in Shenker 148) is suggested by the urns which contain the subjects of *Play* (1963), the dustbins that house Nagg and Nell in *Endgame* (1957), as well as the earth in which Willie and Winnie are buried up to their waists and subsequently their necks in *Happy Days* (1961). An insight into the convulsive movement of the post-war writing towards and away from ontological fixity can be found in one of Beckett's published conversations with Duthuit in *Three Dialogues* (1949). Written while he was struggling with *The Unnamable*, Beckett defines contemporary art at one point as "a thrusting towards a more adequate expression of natural experience" (101). Often understood to be a comment on his own aesthetic procedures, Beckett's use of the verb "to thrust" means "to exert the force of impact upon or against (a body) so as to move it away.... To push against something" ("Thrust"). Just as the instinct of the larva is to force its way out of an egg, *The Unnamable* could be said to resemble the emergence of the larval stage of life, with its shape deriving from the act of pushing against an outer shell, and with it able to emerge only after it has broken through an outer layer of resistance.

Beckett's use of the verb "thrusting" is consistent with the Unnamable's repeated use of the verb "squirm" (360) and "squirming" (332, 360). As Arthur Rose observes, Beckett also uses the word "squirming" in a letter to Duthuit to characterize the torturous process of composing the text (222). The vermicular rhythms of *The*

Unnamable could therefore be said to reflect Beckett's struggle to return subject and text alike to a more elementary, instinctive form of expression, a movement continually thwarted (or rather embarrassed) by his awareness of the impossibility of this endeavour. After breaking off in the midst of his contemplation of Worm to consider the path of evolution, the speaker remarks: "to have floundered, however briefly, however feebly in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans, that I, no, parenthesis unfinished. I'll begin again" (315). This is one of several examples of aposiopesis in *The Unnamable*, with Beckett frequently deploying a rhetorical figure designed to produce an effect of textual rupture. Significantly, this example also encapsulates Beckett's attempts to transport the subject and text alike back towards a more elementary stage of existence, a process that entails resisting, often unsuccessfully, the pull of "the great life torrent" of narrative.

Another way of interpreting the vermicular convulsions at work in *The Unnamable* may be found in Freud's 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a text that Beckett demonstrated his familiarity with during an interview with Gottfried Buttner (qtd. in Baker 139). Examining the instincts of "elementary organisms that survive the individual being" (50), Freud identifies a tension between Eros (the will to live; the survival instinct) and Thanatos (the death-drive; the instinct to regress) in all living beings, a tension reflected in the wavering self-cancellation of *The Unnamable*'s final gasps: "I can't go on, I'll go on" (407). Over the course of the text, Freud draws on his knowledge of embryology, identifying "an oscillating rhythm in the life of organisms":

the one group of instincts presses forward to reach the final goal of life as quickly as possible, and the other flies back at a certain point on the way only to traverse the same stretch once more from a given spot and thus to prolong the duration of the journey. (50-51)

There is something undoubtedly wormlike about this torturous movement back and forward that anticipates the distinct rhythms of *The Unnamable*. Like Darwin, and later Bergson, Freud displays a curious fascination with the instincts of vermicular organisms, devoting a significant portion of the text to the lowly slipper animalcule (59-64). In one of several studies that recognise the influence of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* on Beckett's writing (Moorjani 174-75; Salisbury 162-69; O'Hara 133-35), Phil Baker argues that the Beckettian subject gravitates "towards the mineral state before and after life" (128). Although, in reality, the subject only ever gets as far as what Malone refers to as "well-meaning squirms that get me nowhere" (218), it is perhaps precisely in getting nowhere that the text is able to move beyond existing forms of expression.

At one point the *Unnamable* likens himself to a worm on a hook, remarking: "[t]he essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line" (332). As well as demonstrating the subject's identification with vermicular organisms, this statement aptly describes just how difficult it is to pin *The Unnamable* down. For instance, regardless of its striving towards a state of elemental simplicity, few readers of *The Unnamable* could mistake it for anything other than a highly evolved and complex organism. The text is undoubtedly central to Beckett's exploration of the larval, its resistance to figuration, not to mention its persistence beneath the strictures of form. However, it also marked the end of a period of intense post-war productivity for Beckett, with critics agreeing that it functions as a point of "terminus" (Preface xviii)

in his oeuvre; "the inevitable and terrifying end" (191), as Michael Robinson puts it, to the "frenzy of writing" in the late 1940s. In the 1950s, Beckett's prose output reduced to a mere trickle: between 1950 and 1958, Beckett published only two short fragments – *Texts for Nothing* (1954) and *From an Abandoned Work* (1956) – the titles of which signpost their apparent incompleteness and failure. From this point onwards, Beckett began to channel his creative energies into other artistic media, including theatre and radio plays, and subsequently film and television. One possibility is that he began to find a more apposite expression of the "larval and dark" stage of consciousness in the black void of radio, in minimalist set design, or perhaps even in the "monstrous quivering tadpole" (350) that Virginia Woolf identified at the end of a reel of celluloid. The final section will contend that Beckett's inability to fully relinquish prose form, regardless of the growing struggle entailed in its usage, suggests that it remained a fitting medium with which to represent the intractability of the "eternally larval."

### **Forms of Resilience: The Earthworms at Ussy**

After finishing *The Unnamable* in 1949, Beckett spent much of his time in the remote village of Ussy-sur-Marne, forty miles or so from his apartment in Paris. Following the death of his mother in 1950, he and his partner Suzanne bought a plot of land there and, in 1953, Beckett moved some of his possessions over to the small house that they had built on it. Although it was intended to be a space in which to write without interruption, Beckett could usually be found outdoors ground-clearing and digging holes to plant trees. Amid the Marne mud, he embarked on a series of "observations of nature," documenting his findings in letters to friends (*Letters 2*: 162). During the spring of 1951, the same year that he remarked to Duthuit that he had "never seen so many butterflies in the worm-state," Beckett wrote to his friend Maria Péron:

Between the April showers I scratch the mud and observe the worms, an observation entirely devoid of scientific detachment. I try not to hurt them, with the spade. All the while knowing that, cut in two, they at once fashion a new head, or a new tail, whichever is the case. (*Letters 2*: 241)

Beckett is mistaken in his belief that earthworms are able to regenerate in this way; in fact, only certain flatworms are capable of this scissiparous feat. That this popular myth had captured his imagination is perhaps less surprising if we recall Macmann of *Malone Dies*, who is able to "suffer extensive mutilation and survive" (236), not to mention the "infinitely plastic" Worm. Shortly before launching into this anecdote, Beckett wonders to Péron in what was by now a constant refrain of his letters: "How to go on after [*The Unnamable*]?" (*Letters 2*: 241). A few months later, Beckett referred to himself in a letter to Duthuit as "an invertebrate," adding: "I shall have to try to work, go back to the wriggings and twistings and chains of smoke" (*Letters 2*: 274). Seemingly, Beckett's encounters with earthworms helped to inspire him with ways of wriggling out of this creative impasse.

In a section of *Texts for Nothing* (1950-52) that Beckett wrote at Ussy in between digging holes, an anonymous speaker meditates on his dark surroundings:

Perhaps we're in a head, it's as dark as in a head before the worms get at it, ivory dungeon. The words too, slow, slow, the subject dies before it comes to the verb, words are stopping too. (*Complete Short Prose* 106)

These lines recall the "peristalsis of light worming its way into the dark" in Murphy but, following Beckett's encounter with live worms, the analogy is now that of a literal infiltration of the mind by vermicular organisms. As a testament to the fact that these life forms had begun to infiltrate the "ivory dungeon" of Beckett's own thought processes, the speaker's mind slips between "worms" and "words," pulverizing the distinction between these signifiers. At the same time, by forging an association between the process of bodily putrefaction and the decay of language, Beckett appears to be contemplating a form of textual afterlife in which the decline of the human subject is concurrent with the lively proliferation of wormlike entities capable of "go[ing] on" after words stop. In his next prose text, *From an Abandoned Work* (1958), a fragment that Beckett wrote at Ussy in the mid-1950s, an elderly speaker fantasizes about the redistribution of his body after death:

Just under the surface I shall be, all together at first, then separate and drift, through all the earth and perhaps in the end through a cliff into the sea, something of me. A ton of worms in an acre, that is a wonderful thought, a ton of worms, I believe it. Where did I get it, from a dream, or a book read in a nook when a boy, or a word overheard as I went along, or in me all along and kept under till it could give me joy. (*Complete Short Prose* 160)

Although the origins of this "wonderful thought" are lost to the speaker, this fact originated in Darwin's final book-length study, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms* (1881), in which he estimated that there are approximately 53,767 worms in an acre (54). Darwin's discovery lay dormant until towards the end of the Second World War when several studies of soil fertility were published with the view of increasing national food production (Billington; Balfour; Barrett), and Beckett may have discovered this fact when he began cultivating his garden at Ussy in the early 1950s.

Regardless of the actual "book" in which Beckett encountered this statistic, Darwin's worms play a key role in the fertilization of thought processes in this passage. The speaker's imagination of himself "separate and drift" amid a multitude of elementary life forms resonates with Beckett's contemplation of the regenerative powers of the earthworms at Ussy. Throughout his *Abandoned Work*, Beckett's emphasis is on the formlessness of existence, and yet the focus now shifts into a kind of larval afterlife in which a remnant of the self – "something of me" – is carried over into this "ton of worms." The endurance of the divided subject is also suggested by the speaker's account of his own psychological fragmentation and physical impairment – "breaking up I am" (160). In the above passage, Beckett suggests that the process of division may function as a precursor to syntactical reproduction, as each comma splice sprouts new combinations of existing ideas. By demonstrating a remarkable ability to survive in what Beckett describes in his 1948 letter to Duthuit as a "ridiculous and defenceless" state (*Letters* 2: 102), both the subject and the text display the same surprising quality of resilience that Beckett identifies in the worms "cut in two" at Ussy.

The notion of resilience encompasses two distinct qualities: elasticity, or the "action or an act of rebounding or springing back; rebound, recoil," and robustness, or "being able to recover quickly or easily from, or resist being affected by, a misfortune, shock" ("Resilience"). There is something paradoxical about the dual nature of this term – the combination of pliancy and intractability – that recalls the rhythmic oscillation between fixity and flux in *The Unnamable*. Just as Bergson



apprehended worms as the "fixed" remnants of "infinitely plastic forms," Beckett's 1950s writing exhibits an unusual combination of pliability and robustness. Responding to the decaying post-war subjects of his play *Endgame* (1957), Theodor Adorno argues that "Beckett's figures" (he hesitates to call them characters) resemble "flies that twitch after the swatter has half smashed them" (128). In Adorno's eyes, Beckett's one-act play, much of which was written at Ussy, exemplifies the inability of post-Holocaust art to deal with materials of representation in the unified manner of nineteenth-century practice:

After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state (122).

This account of post-war life, in which the human subject is reduced to a "crawling," wormlike state, recalls Beckett's direct confrontation with the vestiges of human existence when he worked as an Irish Red Cross volunteer in Saint-Lô in autumn of 1945. Along with his French countrymen, Beckett referred to the heavily bombed Saint-Lô as "the capital of the ruins" formed of a "sea of mud" (Letters 2: 18). However, in a 1946 article for the *Irish Times*, Beckett also reflected that the city had revealed to him "a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again" (Prose 278). There is thus an important distinction to be drawn between these accounts of post-war destruction: while for Adorno there is little chance of recovery, Beckett's "inkling" is that amid the ruins of civilization there is also the faint possibility of renewal, both of the human subject and its forms of expression. Similarly, in *The Unnamable*, the speaker draws our attention to Worm's survival against the odds: "He has survived them all, Mahood too" (331). Simon Critchley has argued that "Worm is that which somehow remains, he is a remainder, what Blanchot calls 'une survivance' outside of life and the possibility of death" (198; original italics). By apprehending Worm as a "remainder," it is necessary to consider the extent to which, for Beckett, the larval is not only what precedes but also exceeds existing forms of expression, offering a glimpse of new life and "resurrected culture."

This article has traced a "vermicular series" in Beckett's writing: beginning with the embarrassed caterpillar in *Origin* it moves through Bergson's worms before circling back to Darwin. In a somewhat fitting trajectory, Beckett's reading of scientific texts corresponds to a Bergsonian model of evolution as "not a movement forward" but rather a "deviation or a turning back" (109). Considering that his writing is so often about its own survival against the odds, it seems apt that the unaccountable liveliness of Beckett's post-war writing was inspired by elementary life forms, the continued existence of which defies narratives of evolutionary progress. At one point in *Three Dialogues* (1949), in remarks that evolved out of his discussion of the "eternally larval" with Duthuit, Beckett writes that the contemporary artist "seems literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression. Yet, he continues to wriggle" (101). Despite often being reduced to an abject, crawling state, in Beckett's post-war writing subject and text alike are able to exceed the form in which they are contained, persisting as shattered, twitching remnants that can't go on, but somehow do.

## Notes

1. Beckett owned the Penguin Dictionary of Natural History (1967), the two volume Larousse edition of *La Vie des Animaux* (The Lives of Animals [1952]), Konrad Z. Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways* (1965) as well as Jean Rostand's *Inquietudes d'un Biologist* (Concerns of a Biologist [1967]). See Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (199-210).

2. The subject of *How It Is* is a wormlike figure crawling naked on his belly through an endless terrain of "primeval mud impenetrable dark" spanning "fathoms of time" (7). Like an earthworm, he is partly nourished by mud, which he ingests and excretes. See William Hutchings on *How It Is* as a "peristaltic pilgrim's progress" (73); see also Laura Salisbury on the relationship between peristalsis and habit in Beckett's writing (108-10).

3. Shortly after reading Bergson in 1931, Beckett read Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1982; Beckett read the 1895 edition) and was therefore exposed to his concept of "degeneracy." Nordau argues that fin-de-siècle art and society were exhibiting symptoms of psychic regression and moral decay, a concept that counters late-nineteenth-century narratives of progress, and parallels Bergson's account of a kind of evolution in reverse. Beckett made extensive notes on *Degeneration* in his *Dream Notebook*, held in the archives at the University of Reading. According to Yoshiki Tajiri, these notes demonstrate his preoccupation with "the intrauterine state" and "prenatal consciousness," which could also be described as the larval stage of human existence (98).

4. As Steven Connor notes in his preface to *The Unnamable*, readers of the text tend to fall into the trap of either summarizing the text (see: Fletcher 179-94, Webb 123-29 qtd. in Connor, Preface) or of allegorizing its contents (see: Adelman 84 qtd in. Connor, Preface).

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