It's nothing: Beckett and anxiety

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On 11 August 1936, Samuel Beckett wrote the following passage – in German – in his notebook:

How translucent this mechanism seems to me now, the principle of which is: better to be afraid of something than of nothing. In the first case only a part, in the second the whole is threatened, not to mention the monstrous quality which inseparably belongs to the incomprehensible, one could even say the boundless. [. . .] When such an anxiety [*Angst*] begins to grow a reason [*Grund*] must quickly be found, as no one has the ability to live with it in its utter absence of reason [*Grundlosigkeit*]. Thus the neurotic, i.e. Everyman, may declare with great seriousness and in all awe that there is merely a minimal difference between God in heaven and a pain in the stomach. Since both emanate from one source and serve one purpose: to transform anxiety into fear.¹

August 1936 was a particularly anxious time for Beckett. He had been living in Dublin for about eight months, since returning from London just before Christmas 1935, having broken off his two-year course of psychoanalysis with Wilfred Bion. As James Knowlson notes, Beckett had presented himself to Bion with 'severe anxiety symptoms': 'a bursting, apparently arrhythmic heart, night sweats, shudders, panic, breathlessness, and, at its most severe, total paralysis'. However, the fact that these symptoms – which flared up whenever he stayed with his mother in Dublin – continued to plague him in early 1936 perhaps '[led] him to despair that nothing had been resolved by two whole years of analysis'.² The fact that the passage quoted above was written in German is significant: it is one of Beckett's earliest attempts to express himself in a foreign language, part of what Mark Nixon calls a 'personal and cultural

German complex' that was part of an ongoing effort 'to achieve a more personal and direct statement in his writing'.³ Although its purpose is in part a linguistic exercise, it also articulates with admirable lucidity an insight that was clearly important to Beckett, coming as it does during a renewal of his anxiety attacks in the wake of an apparently failed course of psychoanalysis. Indeed, its displacement of anxiety from subjective pathology to ontological condition is inextricable from its German context: as Anna Wierzbicka notes, 'angst' denotes a 'peculiarly German concept', a notion confirmed by its use as a borrowed term in English.⁴ Usually translated as 'anxiety', though some translators prefer 'dread', 'uneasiness' or even 'malaise',⁵ 'angst' is used in English to specify a particular kind of anxiety, as a long-term, deep-seated existential condition, rather than a passing, and potentially treatable emotional state. In this chapter I wish to examine more closely the figuration of anxiety in Beckett's work, using as my primary example a passage from the opening of *Molloy*, in particular in so far as it sheds light on two broader questions: the role of 'feeling' in Beckett's writing, particularly in the postwar period, and Beckett's aesthetic preoccupation with the evocation of an unfathomable 'nothingness'.⁶

A significant debate in modern clinical psychology concerns the degree to which anxiety is treatable, curable. According to Stanley Rachman, 'anxiety' and 'fear' are usually distinguished on the basis that, whereas fear is brief and intense, 'an emotional reaction to a specific, perceived danger', anxiety is 'diffuse, objectless, unpleasant and persistent [. . .] grating along at a lower level of intensity'.⁷ For these reasons, psychologists stake their therapeutic *raison d'être* on the notion 'that anxiety is potentially reducible to fear'.⁸ Rachman continues:

If the cause of the anxiety is potentially knowable and the focus is identifiable, then by diligent work [. . .] it should be possible to convert puzzling anxiety into clear-cut fear. Associated with this assumption [. . .] is the idea that fear is more manageable than anxiety.⁹

In other words, this is a reversal of Beckett's formulation: whereas Hippocratic optimism insists that the apparent objectlessness of anxiety should be traceable to a knowable and manageable object of fear, Beckett's German notebook entry suggests that fear is simply the displacement on to an object – whether 'God in heaven'

or 'a pain in the stomach'— of a more fundamental anxiety whose object is precisely an unfathomable and unbearable nothingness.

It is known that Beckett read widely on the subject of anxiety. Shortly after he began psychotherapy with Bion in late 1933, he embarked on one of his periods of intensive reading and note-taking, compiling 54 typewritten pages of 'Psychology Notes' based on psychological and psychoanalytic texts by Karin Stephen, R. S. Woodworth, Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Stekel, Alfred Adler and Otto Rank. As Matthew Feldman notes, the topic of 'acute anxiety states and accompanying symptoms' comprises 'the overwhelming majority of material transcribed'.¹⁰ Of particular interest are Beckett's notes on Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (1923). The notion of birth as 'the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety' comes originally from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*,¹¹ but in Rank's work the idea is expanded to become an all-encompassing theory whereby an individual's subsequent emotional life is significantly determined by their experience of the birth-event. Freud was later highly critical of the determinism of Rank's theory in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*.¹² Nevertheless, the notion of the trauma of birth as archetype of a lifelong anxiety clearly appealed to Beckett, echoing ideas of his own going back as far as Belacqua's 'womb-tomb' in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*.¹³ In an interview with James Knowlson in the last months of his life, Beckett claimed that during his sessions with Bion he 'came up with extraordinary memories of being in the womb. Intrauterine memories'.¹⁴

While the notion of birth as the origin of anxiety had a certain appeal to Beckett, however, it also attributes anxiety to a definite object, depriving it of its character as a confrontation with nothingness. We can read Beckett's German notebook entry as his attempt to formulate his own theory of anxiety, both as a means of self-analysis (or rather, as a means of marking his abandonment of a certain kind of self-analysis) and as part of an ongoing project to define, initially in theoretical terms, the key elements of his artistic vision. As Matthew Feldman observes, while Beckett's voracious 'notesnatching' of the 1930s seems to have begun as a Joycean accumulation of ostentatious erudition, the maturation of his artistic vision involved a process in which 'Beckett's allusions become increasingly opaque and embedded in his later writing, acting as ideas rather than erudite references'.¹⁵

The identification of a reified 'nothingness' at the heart of anxiety inevitably evokes the centrality of nothingness in Beckett's attempts at aesthetic self-definition through this period. In particular, it recalls the famous letter to Axel Kaun, written almost a year later on 9 July 1937 – once again in Dublin, once again in German – after Beckett had returned from his travels:

More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [. . .] To bore one hole after another in [language], until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.¹⁶

If there remains an equivocation between 'something' and 'nothing' in this passage, it is a question soon to be decided in favour of the latter in Beckett's aesthetic, from the 'nothing to express' of the *Three Dialogues* to the question raised in the Addenda to *Watt*, of who may 'nothingness / in words enclose'.¹⁷ Indeed, in a well-known 1967 letter to Sighle Kennedy, Beckett offers two different 'nothings' as interpretative keys to his writing: 'If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the "Naught is more real . . ." and the "Ubi nihil vales . . ." both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational'.¹⁸

What is interesting about the passage in Beckett's German notebook is its association between a reified nothingness and an emotional state of unbearable anxiety. Compared with the truncated philosophical tags somewhat flippantly proffered in the 1967 letter, the earlier passage invests the experience of nothingness with an overwhelming affective urgency. It recalls perhaps the terms of a 'brutally honest, self-critical letter'¹⁹ Beckett sent to Thomas MacGreevy in 1932, distinguishing between those of his poems that are '*facultatif*' (optional) and those that 'represent a necessity', between those 'that I would have been no worse off for not having written', and those 'that seem to have been drawn down against the really dirty weather of one of these fine days into the burrow of the "private life"'. Beckett's figure for the latter is the poem 'written above an abscess and not out of a cavity',²⁰ a corporeal metaphor for expression that cannot but recall Beckett's own psychosomatic afflictions of the period. While it is debatable whether one can or indeed should attempt to construct a coherent Beckettian aesthetic from his *obiter dicta*, particularly when

they are scattered across private letters and notebooks, newspaper interviews and published writings over several decades, it is worth noting the persistence with which a kind of affective or even somatic necessity is invoked in Beckett's statements about his own writing. This is perhaps most starkly evident in Beckett's 1961 interview with Gabriel D'Aubarède:

'I never read philosophers.'

'Why not?'

'I never understand anything they write.'

'All the same, people have wondered if the existentialists' problem of being may afford a key to your works.'

'There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophical terms.'

'What was your reason then?'

'I haven't the slightest idea. I'm no intellectual. All I am is feeling. "Molloy" and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel.'²¹

On one level, Beckett's remark is clearly something of an evasive strategy, a wish to distance his writing from potentially schematic philosophical readings; certainly it is disingenuous for Beckett to claim he never read philosophers. The appeal to 'feeling' here suggests a desire to reposition his work in a domain of subjective inscrutability: 'all that inner space one never sees, the brain and the heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath'.²² By the same token, however, it would be wrong to assume that this statement, or any other of the above statements, give licence to read Beckett, and particularly his postwar work, in narrowly autobiographical terms, simply as a form of confession – or worse, therapy – at either an explicit or an unconscious level. Nevertheless, I think there are good reasons for taking Beckett at his word here, and examining the role of 'feeling' in his work.

This is particularly timely because, despite the evident emotional intensity of Beckett's writing (or perhaps because of it), post-structuralist Beckett criticism has often been characterised, as Nicholas Allen observes, by 'a longstanding insistence to read Beckett in high abstraction'.²³ However, the Beckett Estate's relatively recent – and still incomplete – granting of scholarly access to the 'grey canon' of Beckett's manuscripts, notebooks and letters

has stimulated a resurgence of biographical, empirical and genetic approaches to Beckett, approaches which nevertheless continue to 'productively overlap' with the 'abstraction' of more speculative, theoretical readings.²⁴ It is such a productive overlap of approaches I wish to adumbrate here, reading 'feeling' in Beckett's work – in this case, the feeling of anxiety – in a manner reducible to neither the biographical nor the theoretical, but seeking to draw out and explore the tension between them.

This approach is prompted by a wave of recent theoretical work on feeling, affect and emotion. We may provisionally define 'affect' as the physiological element of experience, 'emotion' as the (even minimal) cognitive interpretation of affect, and 'feeling' as 'a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions)'.²⁵ While recent approaches to affect and emotion differ widely, what they share is the hunch that paying attention to affect as a critical object has the capacity to disturb poststructuralist orthodoxies.

For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank draw on Silvan Tomkins's massive study *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* to challenge what they see as the routine critical habits of post-structuralist theory: its *a priori* suspicion of 'biologism' or the notion of a biological (i.e. non-cultural) aspect of human experience; its privileging of language in its models of subjectivity; and its celebration of anti-essentialist models of difference.²⁶ Tomkins's insistence on 'eight (only sometimes it's nine) distinct affects hardwired into the human biological system' runs counter to contemporary theoretical suspicion of the 'natural' and the 'innate'.²⁷ However, Tomkins argues that the affect system, rather than the biological drive system usually seen to underpin it, is the primary motivator of human behaviour, whereby the 'apparent urgency'²⁸ of supposedly fundamental drives such as hunger, thirst or sexual arousal is in fact dependent on their 'co-assembly' with the affect system, which can act both to amplify and to weaken them. It is also worth noting, in relation to psychoanalytic models of subjectivity, that Tomkins relegates sexuality to 'the least imperious of the drives'.²⁹ In other words, Tomkins's affect system straddles the boundary between the biological and the social, according neither biological process nor social experience a primary role in explaining human motivation and behaviour.

Brian Massumi, following Deleuze and Guattari, more explicitly

privileges 'affect' over 'emotion' as a means of undermining the post-structuralist model of discursively and linguistically constructed subjectivity. For Massumi, affects are non-subjective circulating flows of asignifying intensity – 'intensity is the unassimilable' – whereas emotions require a subject, and are given 'function and meaning' in a narrative and situational context: 'emotion and affect [. . .] follow different logics and pertain to different orders'.³⁰

On the other hand, Rei Terada defends post-structuralism by arguing that, far from being glacially unemotional, 'poststructuralism is *directly* concerned with emotion',³¹ since its primary theme – the decentering of subjectivity – is already evident in classical philosophical accounts of emotion. She argues that theorists such as Deleuze have a rhetorical investment in 'fixing the association between emotion and subjectivity', promoting the circular notion 'that subjects express emotions and emotions require subjects' in order to debunk it, when in fact the history of philosophy has repeatedly described emotion as 'non-subjective experience in the form of self-difference within cognition'. For Terada, 'the classical picture of emotion already contraindicates the idea of the subject': 'theories of emotion are always poststructuralist theories'.³²

Here I wish to sidestep these oppositions between emotion and affect, subjective and non-subjective, discursive and biological, by drawing on the vaguer but also more suggestive term 'feeling', which can simultaneously and seemingly without contradiction evoke both physiological sensation and emotional experience (whether these are consciously registered or not) as well as the problem of the relation between them.³³ This is the approach favoured by theorists such as Sara Ahmed,³⁴ and in particular Sianne Ngai, whose study *Ugly Feelings* treats the distinction between affect and emotion as 'a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind'.³⁵ If the tendency of 'affect theorists' such as Massumi and Sedgwick is to insist, in Massumi's phrase, on the 'autonomy of affect', its quality of being 'unassimilable' to discursive, linguistic or psychoanalytic accounts of emotional experience,³⁶ Ngai sees affects as

less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* 'sociolinguistically fixed', but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* 'organised in response to our interpretations of situations', but by no means entirely devoid of organisation or diagnostic powers.³⁷

Ngai describes *Ugly Feelings* as 'a series of studies in the aesthetics of negative emotions': not the 'vehement passions' of anger and fear – long-privileged topics of philosophical inquiry – but 'minor' and 'unprestigious' feelings such as irritation and envy, paranoia and, significantly, anxiety.³⁸ Ngai might be seen as taking heed of Sedgwick's and Frank's critique of Ann Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings*, where they allege that Cvetkovich deals in abstract terms with a 'reified substance called Affect', where 'there is no theoretical room for any difference between being, say, amused, disgusted, ashamed, and enraged'.³⁹ Accordingly, Ngai devotes a separate chapter to each of her particular 'ugly feelings', drawing out the ways different feelings are organised and expressed through distinctive spatial models or metaphors, in which the relationships between terms such as subjective and objective, inside and outside, surface and depth become the co-ordinates of a structure or arrangement that produces the distinctive 'tone' of each of these ugly feelings.

Ngai's chapter on 'Anxiety' is of particular interest here, not least because Ngai sees anxiety as having acquired a 'certain epistemological cachet' in Western intellectual history, having 'gradually replaced melancholia as the intellectual's signature sensibility', indeed becoming 'the distinctive "feeling-tone" of intellectual inquiry itself'.⁴⁰ Moreover, anxiety has a history of being gendered, not least through the influence of psychoanalysis, where the centrality of the castration complex ensures that 'only male subjects are capable of experiencing genuine anxiety or dread, whereas female subjects are allotted the less traumatic and therefore less profound (certainly more ignoble) affects of nostalgia and envy'.⁴¹

Indeed, anxiety emerges as a key concept in the existentialist tradition of Western philosophy. Beckett seems at pains to distance himself from in the interview quoted above, especially in the work of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and, although there is no evidence that Beckett had read either of them before August 1936, there are striking similarities between their formulations of anxiety and the ideas expressed in Beckett's German notebook.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard explicitly conceives of anxiety as a confrontation with nothingness: 'If we ask more particularly what the object of anxiety is, then the answer [. . .] must be that it is nothing'.⁴² For Kierkegaard, this anxiety about nothing is not pathological, 'something that should be taken to

the physician and if necessary suppressed with medication', but constitutive of our being in the world, and 'a primary resource for our spiritual education'.⁴³ It is the state of Adam in the Garden of Eden, aware of God's prohibition against eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but unable to comprehend it because he knows neither good nor evil nor the meaning of death. Adam's innocence gives rise to anxiety as 'the vague experience of being able and forbidden':⁴⁴

In this state [innocence] there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety.⁴⁵

For Adam, as for humans in general, anxiety is 'the possibility of freedom'.⁴⁶ But the future-orientedness of anxiety also conceals its ultimately disempowering function. For if, according to an instrumentalist theory of emotion, emotions 'are closely connected with action',⁴⁷ then anxiety is the emotion of withheld action, of freedom experienced as 'entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself'.⁴⁸

So too, if emotions are often thought of as broadly categorisable in terms of attraction or repulsion, then anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is paradoxically in tension with itself, a '*sympathetic antipathy* and an *antipathetic sympathy*':

Anxiety is a desire for what one fears, a sympathetic antipathy, anxiety is an alien power which grips the individual, and yet one cannot tear himself free from it and does not want to, for one fears, but what he fears he desires. Anxiety makes the individual powerless.⁴⁹

Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety as an ontological ground is taken up by Heidegger:

When anxiety has subsided, then in our everyday way of talking we are accustomed to say that 'it was really nothing'. [. . .] Everyday discourse tends towards concerning itself with the ready-to-hand and talking about it. That in the face of which anxiety is anxious is nothing ready-to-hand within-the-world. But this 'nothing ready-to-hand', which only our everyday circumspective discourse understands, is not totally nothing. The 'nothing' of readiness-to-hand is grounded in the most primordial 'something' – in the *world*. Ontologically, however, the world belongs essentially to Dasein's Being as Being-in-the-world.

So if the 'nothing' – that is, the world as such – exhibits itself as that in the face of which one has anxiety, this means that *Being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious*.⁵⁰

Anxiety functions here as a 'basic state-of-mind', a kind of degree-zero emotion that returns as soon as one relaxes one's involvement in the ready-to-hand and glimpses the underlying nothing that is the world as such, a world that 'has the character of completely lacking significance'.⁵¹ For this reason, anxiety represents for Dasein 'one of the most far-reaching and most primordial possibilities of [self-] disclosure', and is thus a necessary precursor to authenticity: 'Anxiety throws Dasein back upon that which it is anxious about – its authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world. Anxiety individualises Dasein for its ownmost Being-in-the-world.'⁵² From this perspective, the ambition of psychology to convert indefinite and unmanageable anxiety into a definite and manageable fear must restrain itself at the point where anxiety 'bottoms out' as a condition of existence itself.⁵³

Ngai's primary metaphor in her chapter on anxiety is the notion of *projection*, understood in a number of senses. First, given that anxiety is a fundamentally future-oriented emotion, projection clearly refers to the 'temporal dynamics of deferral and anticipation'. But the projection of anxiety has a spatial as well as a temporal aspect, 'as something "projected" onto others in the sense of an outward propulsion or displacement – that is, a quality or feeling the subject refuses to recognise in himself and attempts to locate in another person or thing (usually as a form of naïve or unconscious defense)'.⁵⁴ The link between projection and anxiety is central to Ngai's analysis of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, where the film's fascination with verticality is read as an "objective correlative" for Scottie's mindset',⁵⁵ such that his anxiety manifests itself in the specifically phobic form of a fear of heights. Ngai's argument, developing ideas from Jonathan Lear⁵⁶ and Sue Campbell⁵⁷, is that 'Scottie's anxiety "comes packaged" with its own logical (spatialized) explanation – it is an affect containing its own "theory" or formative principle'.⁵⁸ In other words, the experience of anxiety is produced and shaped by the very mode – projection – by which it is manifested and understood by the subject. The 'objective correlative', far from being an aesthetic formula for the evocation of a particular emotion in a work of art, as it was for T. S. Eliot,⁵⁹ becomes in this

case a self-reflexive element of the emotion itself. That is, whereas Eliot's theory assumes 'that the expression of a psychological state is an instance of revealing or disclosing that state and is in no way formative of it',⁶⁰ Ngai argues that the experience of anxiety is shaped by the 'theory' one has about it and the mode by which it is expressed: "Projection" in *Vertigo* thus does not designate a subjective operation whereby pre-existing feelings of the subject are displaced onto others, but rather designates the objective mechanism by which the feeling emerges.⁶¹

Ngai's analysis is useful in its reading of projection as both constitutive and expressive of the feeling of anxiety. However, in tracing the influence of Beckett's formulation of a fundamentally ontological anxiety, I wish to add a further modification to her model. She notes in passing another spatial metaphor operative in *Vertigo*: 'For [Scottie's] notably anxious mindset could be described equally well in terms of a horizontal oscillation between two sites of feminine self-discontinuity, embodied in the figures of "Madeleine" and Judy.'⁶² It is this figure of 'horizontal oscillation' I wish to dwell on here. Despite the main trajectory of Ngai's argument, it is the mode of projection as horizontal oscillation that is, I think, more expressive, more symptomatic of Scottie's anxiety than the film's more explicit vertical mode. The vertical mode lacks, significantly, that element of tension that is perhaps the primary characteristic of anxiety; for vertigo is a fear of something, and in the dysphoria of vertigo one is 'carried' by one's fear towards a course of action: avoidance. Anxiety, on the other hand, as an indefinite fear of nothing in particular, allows no escape through avoidance, just as it impels no specific course of action; it is a tension in which one remains free, but entangled in one's freedom: oscillating, vacillating, powerless to act.

This brings me to the opening of *Molloy*. Much has been made of the doubled quest structure of the novel, where Molloy's quest to reach his mother and Moran's quest to reach Molloy are read as expressive of fundamental drives or desires, or of a divided self embodied in the novel's openness as to whether Molloy and Moran may be in fact two aspects of the same person. What I wish to focus on here, however, are not the journeys but the anxious preludes that precede each character's departure. For Molloy, this revolves around the incident of A and C and occupies about eight pages of his narrative; for Moran, the laborious descriptions of the

preparations for his journey take up thirty-six pages, or a little less than half of his narrative. What each of these passages deal with, I shall argue, is a movement that becomes characteristic of Beckett's work from this point on: the horizontal oscillation of anxiety.

In Moran's case, this involves the way he 'shirked the issue'⁶³ when given the order to find Molloy, and his narrative's restless focus on irrelevant detail is part of a movement of deferral of which Moran himself is only too bitterly aware:

For in describing this day I am once more he who suffered it, who crammed it full of futile anxious life, with no other purpose than his own stultification and the means of not doing what he had to do. And as then my thoughts would have none of Molloy, so tonight my pen.⁶⁴

Moran's foregrounding of his own anxiety inevitably recalls Ngai's claim that anxiety has become 'the distinctive "feeling-tone" of intellectual inquiry itself'. But if Moran is highly conscious of the objectless oscillation of his anxiety – 'Soon I would have to admit I was anxious'; 'I did nothing but go to and fro' – it is Molloy's prelude I wish to focus on here, and the incident of A and C.⁶⁵

From his vantage point Molloy watches the meeting and subsequent parting of A and C, A returning to the town, C 'on by ways he hardly seemed to know'. Watching C recede, Molloy senses that 'the man was innocent, greatly innocent, he had nothing to fear, though he went in fear, he had nothing to fear'. As with Kierkegaard's Adam, innocence provokes a surge of anxiety:

It seemed to me he wore a cocked hat. I remember being struck by it, as I wouldn't have been for example by a cap or by a bowler. I watched him recede, overtaken (myself) by his anxiety, at least by an anxiety which was not necessarily his, but of which as it were he partook. Who knows if it wasn't my own anxiety overtaking him.⁶⁶

Molloy's anxiety here is clearly a projection, first as a displacement of his own anxiety on to C, and then as a self-conscious admission that this may be the case. This blurring of the boundary between inside and outside is signalled by the grammatical structure of the phrase, where the adjective 'overtaken' requires the disambiguation of the interpolation 'myself' to distinguish between first and third person, a disambiguation that is absent in the original French.⁶⁷ So too, even C's anxiety is not necessarily his own, but

may be an external affect, an objective anxiety 'of which as it were he partook'. This blurring of first and third person, in what Molloy later calls 'the long confused emotion which was my life', is signalled in the opening of the scene: 'People pass too, hard to distinguish from yourself.'⁶⁸

This confirms Ngai's observation that in feelings like anxiety 'confusion about feeling's objective or subjective status becomes *inherent* to the feeling'.⁶⁹ If the generally accepted distinction between emotion and affect is that 'the former requires a subject while the latter does not',⁷⁰ then anxiety hovers anxiously on the borderline between emotion and affect, both indubitably subjective, churning away in the gut, while also suspiciously out-there-in-the-world, a contagious, social emotion that can be 'caught' like a cold.

Molloy's pointed reference to C's hat, at the beginning of the passage quoted above, is significant, foreshadowing a materialisation of the metaphor of projection as horizontal oscillation. For Molloy's hat, as he later informs us, is fastened to the lapel of his greatcoat by a long lace. Later in the novel, when he removes his hat, it becomes just such an oscillating projectile: 'I threw it from me with a careless lavish gesture and back it came, at the end of its string or lace, and after a few throws came to rest against my side.'⁷¹ So too, in the passage that we are concerned with here, he speculates that C's hat is attached 'by means of a string or an elastic'. This movement of projection and recoil is evoked in a startling metaphor when Molloy returns to the subject of C:

I repeat I watched him recede, at grips (myself) with the temptation to get up and follow him, perhaps even to catch up with him one day, so as to know him better, be myself less lonely. But in spite of my soul's leap out to him, at the end of its elastic, I saw him only darkly, because of the dark and then because of the terrain, in the folds of which he disappeared from time to time, to re-emerge further on, but most of all I think because of other things calling me and towards which too one after the other my soul was straining, wildly.⁷²

Here Molloy's anxiety in watching C recede is figured as 'my soul's leap out to him, at the end of its elastic', a horizontal oscillation in which the hat serves as synecdoche for the self, a figure already evident in the novella *The Expelled*, where the narrator's hat stands for an identity confirmed, and indeed conferred by the symbolic order:

When my head had attained I shall not say its definitive but its maximum dimensions, my father said to me, Come, son, we are going to buy your hat, as though it had pre-existed from time immemorial in a pre-established place. He went straight to the hat. I personally had no say in the matter, nor had the hatter. [. . .] It was forbidden me, from that day forth, to go out bareheaded, my pretty brown hair blowing in the wind. Sometimes, in a secluded street, I took it off and held it in my hand, but trembling. [. . .] When my father died I could have got rid of this hat, there was nothing more to prevent me, but not I.⁷³

Angela Moorjani suggests that the narrator's hat here functions as the 'mark of the law of the father', a 'paternal imprint' that is 'indelible'.⁷⁴ So too in *Molloy*, Moran, who is so firmly committed to the patriarchal order, arranges the elastic on his own hat such that 'however great my exertions, my boater stayed in its place, which was on my head'.⁷⁵

Of course it is possible to read the oscillation of anxiety not as a fear of nothing, but as a fear, according to the Freudian model, of a repressed instinct emerging into consciousness;⁷⁶ in such terms, the ambivalence of anxiety is an expression of Kierkegaard's 'sympathetic antipathy', a distressing desire for what one fears and fear of what one desires. Such indeed is Molloy's emotional response to C, 'the fellow-convict you long to stop, embrace, suck, suckle and whom you pass by, with hostile eyes, for fear of his familiarities'.⁷⁷ This extreme ambivalence prefigures Molloy's encounter with the charcoal burner, 'sick with solitude probably', whom Molloy admits he 'might have loved [. . .] if I had been seventy years younger', but whose attempts to keep Molloy near him result in Molloy giving him a savage beating.⁷⁸

Molloy's anxiety in watching C recede expresses precisely this entangled freedom: 'I knew I could catch him, lame as I was. I had only to want to. And yet no, for I did want to'. This wanting which is a wanting-not-to is apparently ended the following morning by a peremptory decision: 'But talking of the craving for a fellow let me observe that having waked between eleven o'clock and midday [. . .] I resolved to go and see my mother.' The quest narrative that ensues represents, of course, an end to vacillation and thus a kind of antidote to anxiety. But even then, in the midst of a journey sustained by an imperative such that 'I seized with a trembling at the mere idea of being hindered from going there', Molloy must

confront again the ambivalence of anxiety, the wanting-not-to at the heart of wanting:

And in this command which faltered, then died, it was hard not to hear the unspoken entreaty, Don't do it Molloy. [. . .] And of myself, all my life, I think I had been going to my mother, with the purpose of establishing our relations on a less precarious footing. And when I was with her, and I often succeeded, I left her again without having done anything. And when I was no longer with her I was again on my way to her, hoping to do better the next time.⁷⁹

Molloy's projected reunion with his mother is not, then, a homecoming, but merely the apogee of an oscillating trajectory, the moment of stillness at the apex of a throw.

This oscillating movement of projection and retraction might recall the famous *fort/da* game from 'Beyond the pleasure principle', where Freud describes watching his grandson playing with a spool of string, throwing the spool away with a cry of *o-o-o-o*, which Freud identifies as the German *fort*, meaning 'gone', and then retrieving it with a joyful *da*, 'here'. Freud speculates that the boy, who was very attached to his mother, was able to master the distressing experience of her departure by repeating it in the form of a game.⁸⁰ The child's playful re-enactment of a negative experience leads Freud to posit the notion of a death instinct, 'a compulsion to repeat [. . .] more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides'.⁸¹

However, while acknowledging the importance of the *fort/da* game as a structural element in Beckett's work⁸² – indeed Moran himself draws attention to Freud's essay in his quip on 'the fatal pleasure principle' – there are significant differences between the *fort/da* game and the oscillation of anxiety I am concerned with here.⁸³ Most notably, whereas in the *fort/da* game the subject is fixed, mastering the coming and going of the loved one through projection and retraction of its surrogate, in anxiety it is the subject (or its surrogate) who is in motion, projected back and forth in an oscillation in which the fixed point is precisely the nothingness at the heart of anxiety. So too, where in the *fort/da* game the child desires the mother's presence, using the game as a means of coping with her absence, the forces that set the anxious subject in motion are more ambivalent: on the one hand a need to escape the 'utter unfathomableness' of anxiety, and on the other a deeply

ambivalent relation to the object, the mingling of fear and desire at the heart of Molloy's 'craving for a fellow'.

The 'nothingness' of anxiety is thus the anchor-point of this oscillation, and the movement itself a means of disclosing a central absence. Beckett's claim 'All I am is feeling' might be seen as a way of saying that feeling (rather than reason, or language) is all there is to subjectivity, and that the ground zero of feeling, for Beckett as for Kierkegaard or Heidegger, is anxiety. Moreover, as a fundamentally projected feeling – a feeling structured by projection on to the outside of an inner tension that may in turn be merely the internalisation of an external affect – anxiety is notably unsuited to forming the basis of a stable subjectivity or a coherent ethical agency. Hence the importance of figures of oscillation in Beckett's later work, from the shuffling of *Footfalls* to the shuttling of *neither*, where the spatial structure of anxiety provides a means for disclosing the nothingness at its core, its 'unspeakable home'.⁸⁴ If anxiety endlessly seeks objects through which to convert itself into fear, fear of something as an escape from the unbearable fear of nothing, then the structure and the movement of anxiety must be capable, not of representing that nothingness, which by definition must remain unrepresentable, but of providing a kind of 'objective correlative', eliciting an emotional state in which that nothingness may be felt without being known.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Beckett, 'Clare St Notebook', Reading University Library MS 5003, 3r–4r. Translation by Mark Nixon from "'What a tourist I must have been": the German diaries of Samuel Beckett' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, 2005), p. 50; emphasis in the original. The original German reads: 'Wie durchsichtig klar kommt mir dieser Mechanismus heute vor, dessen Prinzip heisst: Lieber um Etwas Angst haben, als um Nichts. Im ersten Fall wird nur ein Teil, im zweiten das Ganze bedroht, von dem Ungeheuren, welches zum Wesen des Unbegreiflichen, fast dürfte man des Unbegrenzten sagen, unzertrennlich gehört, nicht zu reden. [. . .] Wenn eine solche Angst zu steigen anfängt, muss ein Grund schleunigst dafür erfunden werden. Da es keinem gegönnt wird, mit ihr in ihrer absoluten Grundlosigkeit leben zu können. So mag der Neurotische, d.h. Jedermann, mit den grössten Ernst u. mit aller Ehrfurcht behaupten, dass zwischen Gott im Himmel u. Schmerz im Bauch der Unterschied bloss minimal ist.

Da beide von einer Quelle herrühren u. zum einen Zweck dienen: Angst in Furcht zu verwandeln.' Nixon, "What a tourist", p. 49. I wish to thank here Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon for their assistance with details concerning Beckett's 'Clare St Notebook' and his readings in psychology. Any errors of fact or interpretation are, necessarily, my own.

- 2 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp.176 and 224.
- 3 Nixon, "What a tourist", p. ii.
- 4 Anna Wierzbicka, *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 123.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), p. 227n.
- 6 This notion of anxiety as a fear without an object is famously challenged by Jacques Lacan, but interestingly through recourse to the notion of the unnameable: 'Look at everything that has ever been written about anxiety, it's always this that is insisted upon – fear has reference to an object, whereas anxiety is said to have no object. I say on the contrary that anxiety is not without an object. [. . .] It's very precisely the [. . .] I am unable to say the name, because, precisely, it's not a name. It's surplus *jouissance*, but it's not nameable, even if it's approximately nameable, translatable, in this way.' Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), p.147.
- 7 Stanley Rachman, *Anxiety* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1998), pp. 2–3 and 7.
- 8 Rachman, *Anxiety*, p. 7.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 96.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 526n.
- 12 Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, trans. Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), pp. 131–6.
- 13 Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: Calder, 1993), p. 133.
- 14 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 177.
- 15 Feldman, *Beckett's Books*, p. 113. See also John Pilling, *Beckett Before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).
- 16 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), p.172.

- 17 Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder, 1965), p. 103; Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove, 1953), p. 247.
- 18 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 113. 'Naught is more real . . .' alludes to Democritus of Abdera, as quoted in *Murphy*: 'Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite, naught is more real'. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 138. 'Ubi nihil velis . . .' alludes to the 'beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*'. See again Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 101: 'Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing'. See also Shane Weller Chapter 6 above and his *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005).
- 19 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 222.
- 20 Samuel Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 18 October 1932, quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 222. See also Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 134, and Laura Salisbury, Chapter 12 below.
- 21 Gabriel D'Aubarrède [1961], 'Interview with Samuel Beckett', in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (eds), *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 217.
- 22 Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 10.
- 23 Nicholas Allen, 'Review of Paul Stewart's *Zone of Evaporation: Samuel Beckett's Disjunctions*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54:2 (2008), 445.
- 24 Ulrika Maude, 'Centennial Beckett: the gray canon and the fusion of horizons', *Modernism/Modernity*, 15:1 (2008), 180.
- 25 Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 4.
- 26 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 'Shame in the cybernetic fold: reading Silvan Tomkins', in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 93–4.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 94 and 109.
- 28 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Introduction', in *Touching Feeling*, p. 20.
- 29 Sedgwick, 'Introduction', pp. 21 and 20.
- 30 Brian Massumi, 'The autonomy of affect', in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 28 and 27.
- 31 Terada, *Feeling in Theory*, p. 3.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 3.
- 33 The subject of affect in Beckett's work is treated at length in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: L'Affect dans l'oeuvre Beckettienne*, eds

- Yann Mével and Michèle Touret, 10 (2000). However, the majority of these essays employ psychoanalytic methodologies, and are primarily concerned with the discursive, and especially linguistic, construction of subjectivity. The approach I am sketching out here, through focusing on the spatial metaphor of horizontal oscillation, seeks to understand affect primarily through a corporeal rather than a linguistic mode.
- 34 See especially Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 40, n. 4.
 - 35 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 27.
 - 36 See Clare Hemmings, 'Invoking affect: cultural theory and the ontological turn', *Cultural Studies*, 19:5 (2005), 565.
 - 37 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 27.
 - 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 1 and 6.
 - 39 Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame', pp. 111 and 110.
 - 40 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 213–15.
 - 41 *Ibid.*, p. 213.
 - 42 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 96.
 - 43 Gordon D. Marino, 'Anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*', in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 309.
 - 44 Marino, 'Anxiety', p. 317.
 - 45 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 41.
 - 46 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
 - 47 Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 135.
 - 48 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 49.
 - 49 Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, I–VII, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), I: 42 and 39; quoted in Marino, 'Anxiety', p. 321.
 - 50 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 231–2.
 - 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 227 and 231.
 - 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 226 and 232.
 - 53 It is worth noting that Lacan, though he rejects the notion of anxiety as 'without an object', nevertheless insists on it as 'the central affect, the one around which everything is organised'. Lacan, *The Other Side*, p. 144. Indeed Lacan's *Seminar X* is dedicated entirely to anxiety, bearing the French title *L'Angoisse*.
 - 54 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 210.

- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 56 Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990).
- 57 Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 58 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 222.
- 59 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked'. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 100.
- 60 Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal*, p. 52.
- 61 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 221.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 226
- 63 Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 132.
- 64 Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 122.
- 65 *Ibid.*, pp. 97 and 98.
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10–11.
- 67 Beckett, *Molloy* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1951), p. 13.
- 68 Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 25 and 9.
- 69 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 19.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 71 Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 14 and 61.
- 72 Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 14 and 11.
- 73 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995), p. 48.
- 74 Angela Moorjani, *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 109 and 110.
- 75 Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 127.
- 76 For Freud, 'phobias have the character of a projection in that they replace an internal, instinctual danger by an external, perceptual one'. By locating the object of fear in an external object, the subject can avoid that object, thus 'enabl[ing] the ego to cease producing anxiety': 'One cannot get rid of a father; he can appear whenever he chooses. But if he is replaced by an animal all one has to do is to avoid the sight of it [. . .] in order to be free from danger and anxiety'. Freud, *Inhibitions*, pp. 85–6.
- 77 Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 12.

78 *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.

79 *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 16 and 87.

80 Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the pleasure principle', trans. James Strachey, in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 284–7.

81 Freud, 'Beyond', p. 294.

82 Moorjani's *Abyssal Games* uses the structure of repetition-as-play as a key concept in an illuminating reading of Beckett's novels.

83 Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 99.

84 Beckett, *neither*, in *Complete Short Prose*, p. 258.