Introduction:

Reading Beckett beyond Existentialism

Andrew K. Kennedy points out that there is “a tremendous concern for modes of being and suffering [which] is the force that drives his [Beckett’s] experiments in writing” (12). Likewise, Colin Duckworth speaks of Beckett’s oeuvre as the “sounding board for suffering,” which reveals “not just his own suffering” but also that of “man in solitude imprisoned within the time and space of silent and unresponsive universe” (qtd. in David Pattie). Indeed, Beckett’s works are believed to be humanistic by way of presenting the embodied and real human predicaments. In view of this, there emerges a corpus of studies based on the existential humanism that appreciates the heroic freedom of a man who is able to confirm his existence through the act of will. The man of action has the ultimate responsibility for what he does, and is what he makes of himself, not determined by religious doctrines, social morality, or any other man-made rules. The existence of the individual is the basic fact, no matter how meaningless the universe is. Another major trend in early studies is to align Beckett with nihilism which celebrates the meaningless world by reflecting a pessimistic viewpoint of a fragmented and alienated world.

In the above, they share the common interest on the absurdity of human existence. Whether it is from an existential hero’s perspective or from a nihilist’s perspective, they still lay much claim on the subjective experiences of the individual’s activities. Either to affirm the individual’s freedom of actions or to negate any interaction with the external world, each of them, as David Pattie observes, “begins from the idea that the self and the world are split,” and “places great emphasis on the mind’s ability to form the world” (109). Despite the demolished rules, man can hold onto a coherent selfhood in virtue of the work of mind. This gravity of searching for meaning as a heroic enterprise constrictively shapes the Beckettian study in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

However, as the theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism arose in 1980s, and
come to prominence in the present, the focus on the anthropological idealism is thoroughly threatened. Eric Levy provides that in Beckett's work the human experience cannot be "constructed as a brand of Existentialism or a doctrine of Absurdity," but is "an experience of Nothing: the only reality it knows is the inability to interpret its own structure" (3-4). Marking Beckettian criticism from existentialism or absurdism, Levy thinks that "Beckett expresses the impasse reached by the enterprise of western Humanism" (10). In other words, "the ultimate task of self-consciousness [which] is to know oneself qua man" is questioned, and "to decipher in the contours of personal experience the trace of species in us all” is invalid (ibid.). Moreover, Paul Davis casts a similar point. He observes: "In a humanist couture, […], life is identified with intellectual equipment and the exaltation of competence. In the art to which Beckett aspired, life is identified with none of these things as a first principle, but rather with the unknown as the creative level out of which the vital future unfolds of itself according to its laws, without being manhandled, forced, or engineered into the daylight by humanist intention […]" (13-14, italics original).

Levy's and Davis's viewpoints coincide with the development of poststructuralism and postmodernism, in which the poles of subject and object are blurred, the metaphysics of presence is undermined, and the correspondence with truth is destabilized.¹ Judith Dearlove argues that Beckett's works disturb the self-deceptive illusion of the metaphysical system that has loaded down the western thought with a belief that there exists a relation between the external world and the mind of man who attempts to describe the world with words. In Beckett's sense, there is an absence of rational debates between the individual and the universe. Considering Beckett as "an impotent speaker with an unknowable world," Dearlove speaks of his works as those which are "denied the justification and significations provided by external orders" (5). This argument proves to be effective with reference to Beckett's own

¹ I don’t intend to specify the differentiation between these two theories, but simply refer to them as the trend that breaks from the traditional western metaphysics.
words. Beckett once admits that the theme of his work revolves around the “impotence” of humans (qtd. in Dearlove 6), and that being an artist, he is destined to fail in constructing a rational and harmonious system that is adequate to represent the relation between an artist and his surroundings. According to Beckett’s own verdict, he debunks the myth of the self as an omnipotent “knower” about his occasion. Beckett’s people challenges the norms embedded in the social or cultural identification. He says: “I realized that my own way in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in substracting rather than adding” (qtd. in Uhlmann, 17).

It is a commonplace that the authority of the author is abandoned because the meaning of the text can be shown to overturn itself. It is untrustworthy to establish a self-contained explanation in the textual interpretation. Gabriele Schwab argues that Endgame is a structure of “negation and contradiction [that] frustrates all partial investments of meaning and thereby fundamentally impedes every gesture of interpretation which strives for closure” (91, italics original). Furthermore, because the decentered subjectivity is not only revealed by “presenting the ‘decentered characters,’ but also by challenging all familiar notions of subjectivity,” Schwab remarks that the decenteredness faced by readers or spectators enforces them to be self-reflexive of their confounded experience in interpretation. Endgame is a play that compellingly conveys the rejection of being subsumed into the symbolic order, and is an “endgame” that “plays with the limits of our subjectivity” (97).

Akin to the deconstructive approach mentioned above, Michael Worton places Beckett at the forefront of the major writers of postmodernism for his works consist of elements of pastiche and parody that reflect the fragmented condition of the postmodern world. Taking Endgame and Godot for example, he suggests that they are conflations like a sort of “patchwork of manipulated quotations” derived from other works, and potentially and democratically co-creates the play by “continually changing its shape as we [readers] connect different ideas and images” referring to the materials that reverberate round the play (84-85).
In this way, Beckett makes his readers think and participate in his works by forgoing his authorial power (even though readers will not be certain of anything after the reading).

In this deconstructive fashion, Steven Connor, in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (1988), contends that Beckett’s works are preoccupied with “repetition” that at the same time confirms and mars the original text. It undermines the full presence of the text (or the self), and prevents the fulfillment of a verifiable truth about the world. Connor concentrates his study on the process of Beckett’s writing, the reader’s reading and the audience’s response. In this sense, he argues that each experience is varied from one another, and asserts that Beckett, as the writer who dedicates himself to “the exploration of what is meant by such things as being, identity and representation,” must have in mind the exercise of repetition in order to make present the instabilities in his works.

Consistently inquiring into the legitimacy of the representation in the postmodern grain, Richard Begam, who aligns himself with Steven Connor to a certain extent, tries to make a nuance between himself and Connor. Begam refuses to set a rigorous opposition between poststructuralism and the previous theoretical thoughts, because in this way, poststructuralism is inclined to “essentialize what is antiessential, [and] to foundationalize what is antifoundational” (9). There is not a radical disengagement from the metaphysical tradition. For Begam, the affirmation of non-truth is itself an allegation weakened at its own position. In denying any possibility of truth, poststructuralism reaches another dead end of foundationalism or essentialism (ibid.). Begam quotes Rorty: “To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth” (ibid.). In a nutshell, Begam does not regard Beckett as the writer who radically “stands beyond the human contingency,” simply degrading the cogito as an illusion and the word as a falsifying imposition (ibid.). In Begam’s sense, Beckett seeks a new paradigm to address the idea of being, self, speech, or representation in the aesthetics of play.
Therefore, Beckett abandons the tendency of the modernist aesthetic that draws on the idea of “reparation” by offering a harmonized unity (Steven Connor 1992, 4) and of the modernist act of “finding” the truth of art (Begam 183). For him, “art is generative rather than recuperative” (ibid.). Beckett intends to break from the modernism paradigm by developing his technique away from the “mimetic and dualistic assumptions” of the realistic description that foregrounds the role of consciousness, which allows a subjective apprehension of reality (Begam 37). Yet on the other hand, the “postmodernist acknowledgement of a world beyond repair” (Connor 1992, 5) is not completely acceptable for Beckett. Begam’s study on Beckett aims at engaging critically within the western metaphysical tradition (10), and concludes that Beckett practices a “new writing” that undermines the western tradition from “within” and attacks it from “without” (184).

Akin to Begam, P. J. Murphy says that Beckett tries to find a new access to “reconstructing the referent” by working through the contradictions and impasses of the western systematization, and conversely effects “an affirmation of language and being” (Murphy 237). In “Beckett and the philosophers,” he argues that Beckett attends to the concerns of “the problem of reference” and “of how language relates to reality” instead of dismissing language or the referential system to be downright fallacious. Murphy quotes Carla Locatelli:

Beckett’s writing constitutes a movement from representations to the representation of representations […] by so doing, Beckett is probing into what today seems the elementary structure of our interpretation of reality as the simplest, best mode of our being in the world.

(qtd. in Murphy, 236)

Beckett recognizes the conventions and tackles with the problem of human presence in language by the premise of “nohow” instead of knowing how (ibid.). Indeed, the body image evinces the best example for elucidating Beckett’s attempt. Ulrika Maude mentions that in
Beckett’s oeuvre the body is itself signification, not of significance. The body is “unnegatable irreducibility” (Maude 120). The emphasis on founding the notion of subjectivity upon the physical materiality conveys that Beckett refuses all sorts of possibility of transcendence (ibid.).

Moreover, Anthony Uhlmann also confirms: “The structure of ‘between’ as a kind of ‘not beyond’ is important in Beckett’s work” (174). Based on this, no matter how far Beckett’s works seem to dissociate themselves from the socio-political world, they are saturated in a specific “given milieu” so that they face up to the same “problem-field” as their contemporary works do (34-35). That is, Beckett and the philosophers that lived in France after World War Two would come to terms with a series of complex problems emerging at that period. In doing this, they write in response to similar problems and themes, though they might start with different aspects. Simply put, as Uhlmann paraphrases Deleuze, some events happen around the problems of a given environment and it is the problems that decisively shape this given society (35). His main thesis is that the “problem-filed” confronted by Beckett and his contemporaries is a locus as “no-where” and “now-here” (33), and it is the similar problems that bring together the multifarious discussions from philosophy, literature, or history (32). There is not a problem provincially belonging to any single sphere. We find that there are parallel responses that attend to the similar problems, and we are to believe that the problems, while being broached, enter into a network of correspondence amidst different academic fields. By doing this, each response adds resonance to the problem and even recalls the memory from somewhere else (an event of different sort of material, or an event happens in different historical background, etc.).

On the whole, we see that Beckett’s works parry any kind of antagonism because they are themselves contradictory and complex so that it is difficult to pin them down with any positives or negatives. Refusing the hermeneutic truth and the humanistic verity, Beckett envisions a new human subjectivity. As mentioned, he is a man who blurs the boundary
between any set of oppositions. He stands in a non-place, challenging the limit of human’s knowledge but finding that what is ahead is the unknown. Consequently, equivocation is the hallmark of his works. In view of this, it is my main point of this thesis to look into how Beckett forges his vision of human subjectivity in facing the incomprehensible and alien otherness.

It is impossible to make present the otherness, which can only be reckoned with by absence. Therefore, it is with the incompleteness of the autonomous subjectivity that I might start. From Andrew Gibson’s perspective, to acknowledge the lack in the whole is considered to be ethical. He demonstrates, with referring to morality (which is in complicity with politics and other prescriptive norms), that ethics “operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open, hopes to restrain it from violence or the will to domination, [and] subjects it to ‘a kind of auto-deconstruction’” (15). In doing this, the ethical thinking is to keep the determined authorities open and plural so that the subjective dogmatism of comprehending the otherness is called into question. To speak more specific on the process of reading Beckett, it is important not to claim on the humanistic understanding of the otherness revealed in his works for it would again fall into the pitfall of the existential condition. Rather, my aim is to adumbrate the possibility of an ethical reading of Beckett’s experiments on theatrical performance (in Chapter One) and to address a sequence of ideas that are unorthodoxically presented in his play (in Chapter Three). The ideas concerning being, subjectivity, humanity, and other associative terms are carried together into a close examination in order to read Beckett’s play as an ethical rendition.

In my argument, Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of ethical subjectivity and Beckett’s formation of subjectivity share the similarity by showing the respect for the otherness, and thus have strong resonance with one another. Levinas, as a Jew survived in war, reconsiders the totalitarian ideology by way of exploring the strangeness of the Other (the other). Beckett, being an active participant rather than an indifferent recluse in wartime (Lois Gorden 4),
might have been gravely impressed with the destructive force of totalitarian imperialism. It is germane to bring together Beckett and Levinas because they have congruity in thinking the problems pertaining to the war. Their manner is analogous for they both concern that the relation between the self and the other (the Other)\(^2\) are tightly bound together on the foundation which they must be disparately separate. Unlike existentialism or nihilism, they don’t avert their critical eye from the stark reality to a solipsistic positive or a suspicious negative. They focus their attention on the ambiguity arises from the embodied subject who is called to respond to the relation with the infinite that constitutes itself as a responsive/responsible subject. This kind of subject does not live in the egoistic mirage.

Chapter One delineates that Beckett ventures on an experiment on the theatrical performance that severely challenges the director, the actor, and the spectator, wherein the sense of indeterminacy, which brings forth terror and desire, deprives them of their subjective freedom and maintains their subjectivity at the same time. This kind of subjectivity comes into being on the ground of the relation between the self and the Other that is mutually reliant and absolutely alienated. By doing this, we find that Beckett desires an aesthetic experience that is far from self-enjoyment. The relation of the self to the Other contributes to the freedom that is relevantly free. In the conditioned freedom, the self is conversely given the regenerative energy as encountering the alien otherness.

To further account for the strangeness of the Other encountered by Beckett, I would like to look into the theatricality presented in Beckett’s theatre by referring to a certain feasible ways of putting *Endgame* on stage. Beckett wrote *Endgame* after *Waiting for Godot* in the post-war period (first written in French in 1957), and he places more limitations on the mise-en-scenes and the character’s physical and mental capability. Moreover, the play is a watershed in his career as a playwright. Roughly after *Endgame*, Beckett extended considerable experiments on other theatrical forms that were facilitated with the development

\(^2\) The full account of the other and the Other is in my chapter two.
of the electronic media, such as radio or television (David Pattie 78). It is noteworthy to have a careful discussion on the impact of these new tools applied in his later works, but it will not be my focus of this thesis. Hence *Endgame* is a theatrical piece that inheres in the more basic elements of performance, such as sound/silence, and movement/stillness (ibid.).

Beckett, after a performance in Paris, called *Endgame* a small and finite theatre where “the hooks went in” (Brater 85), and “fundamental sounds” were made (*Disjecta* 109). That is, the play calls forth an immediate encounter in the theatrical experience, and it is far from a self-complacent aesthetic experience in the viewing process. Either from the theatrical devises or from the “intersubjective”\(^3\) relation of director/character/spectator, *Endgame* sets a good example for us to enter into the proximity with what Beckett endeavors to present in theatre. Jonathan Kalb, in *Beckett in Performance* (1989), pays his attention to the part of performance in practice that is relatively rarely discussed in comparison to the analysis of the textual content. He describes the theatrical performance as a dramatic text that requires of a specific style to enact it. Yet he somewhat dismisses the idea of linking the conditioned freedom and the incomprehensible otherness in Beckett’s theatre. Thus it is the main aim of the chapter to read this paradoxical relatedness (how to account for the infinite in finitude?) through Levinas’s idea of sameness and otherness in *Totality and Infinity*.

Chapter Two particularly addresses Levinasian ethics that is more augmented and intensified in his work *Otherwise than Being* (2000) as compared to *Totality and Infinity* (1979). The ethics of alterity is the primary ground of *Totality and Infinity*, in which the asymmetrical relation between the self and the Other disrupts and inverts the seamless totality underpinned by reason and knowledge. Thus in Chapter One, the stress lies in the irreducible infinity of the Other proposed in *Totality and Infinity*, and towards which Beckett works with his restlessly aesthetic search. Chapter Two shifts from the strangeness of the Other to a

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\(^3\) The intersubjective relation, proposed by Levinas as an ethical relation between the self and the Other, will be discussed in detail in Chapter One.
moral sensibility, which is taken into a further and serious account in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas amplifies the moral sensibility as an ethical relation based on an ethical subject who is incarnated and awakened by encountering the other or the neighbor. Richard A. Cohen wisely points out that in this later work, “Levinas’s focus is now on the asymmetrical repercussion, the shock, the implosion of that alterity on a subjectivity subject precisely as moral subjection to and for the other.” Moreover, another theme of this chapter is to point out the ethical dimension of language as a saying in Levinas’s sense, which helps to elaborate the interminable response of the ethical subject in facing the other.

The discussion of the ethical subject and the ethical language brings Levinas and Beckett in proximity of thinking the question of being and its associative issues. Therefore, in Chapter Three, I’d like to probe into the intricate problems referring to the question of being through exigencies of the ethical sensibility. I would focus my discussion on *Endgame* for it reveals the modality of dying as a suffering which the ethical subject has no choice but to undergo. I argue that the ethical imperative, exceeding the characters’ intellectual understanding, presides at the play, and thus the play is itself an ethical rendition without a definite or decidable termination.

At this point, it is necessary for me to make a distinction between myself and Simon Critchley, who has discussed *Endgame* through its relevant critical essays and part of his analysis is from Levinas’s perspective of “there is.” In *Very Little … Almost Nothing* (1997), he has a seminal discussion on the interpretative problem about the play. He contends that in *Endgame*, what is told is that the world is overloaded with meanings that comply with various promises of redemption from religious, political, socio-economic, aesthetic or philosophical realms. The end is that we are suffocated by these “illusory narratives of redemption” (Critchley 1997, 179) unless we acknowledge the “limitedness of the human condition” by paying attention to the “achievement of the ordinary or the everyday” (ibid.). Thus in the play,

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4 The wordings are quoted from the foreword written by Cohen for *Otherwise than Being*, in page xii.
the “very extraordinary ordinariness” tells itself in the neutral voice as a resistance to any interpretation (ibid.). Critchley starts from the standpoint that there is impossibility of redemption, which seeks the state of silence from any interpretation. However, he admits that we still need a kind of deceptive narratives because we cannot face the dying process in a world empty of meaning. Therefore to acknowledge the impossibility of salvation on the contrary impels us to invent the stories under the injunction of imagination (ibid.), “for the sake of the possible” (1997, 19). According to Critchley, story-telling in the meantime provides a rose-tinted illusion taking on meaning and reminds us of the world devoid of meaning as we find that it is the emptiness that reveals itself.

Critchley uses Levinas’s idea of “there is” not only to account for the suffocated phenomenon of cluttered interpretations, but also to refer to the neutral voice through which the emptiness speaks itself. He asserts that in Beckett’s world, it is “there is” that is fully accountable for the characters’ angst of and desire for speaking without the intrusion of goodness in Levinas’s sense. However, he jumps into conclusions too quickly by negating the energy of “goodness” that exerts in the play. In consequence, there is differentiation in my presupposed hypothesis as well as my subject from his. Whereas Critchley, partially accompanied by Levinas’s idea of “there is,” reads Endgame from some previous critiques to make his conclusion, I focus my attention on reading the play directly in the hope of reexamining the possibility of the ethical goodness that is revealed in the play but is bypassed in Critchley’s concerns.

To sum up, I’d like to give a brief account of why this thesis contains the analysis that is from two aspects of Endgame: the performance and the textual interpretation. In fact, the excessive surplus, revealed in Clov’s unraveling Hamm, characterizes Endgame as a meta-play, in which the characters are of full consciousness about their dramatization either of themselves or of the others, which fashions an imaginative world where the borderline between life and theatre is obscure (Abel, 59-86). Since the metatheatrical play is “a type of
play about playing, about theatricality, about the human impulse to create fictions and revise reality,” it designates the essence of our nature as “pretense” (Barranger, 443). Thus a metaplay draws our attention to the acting process and alienates us from completely indulging in the scenes or events. It is not so much to tell us what is about the play as to impress us what the play would be by telling us how to stage the play. Beckett’s *Endgame* is characteristic of metaplay with its unique way of acting and viewing, which at the same time calls forth a specifically textual reading that focuses on the living force manifested through the ethical relation between the characters. To a great extent, *Endgame* is still full of possibility as we get engaged in the textual reading. It is a play that can be treated as an ethical rendition for its auto-deconstructive nature in Levinasian way. As we find access to the textual analysis, we are interrupted and interrogated by the irreducible element that takes on otherness which undoes the so-called interior meaning of the play. Yet, as *Endgame* displays the impossibility of interpretation due to its potential destruction, the textual analysis paves the way for us to encounter the otherness that liberates us rather than restricts us. As discussed, there is not a struggle-freed ecstasy in the artistic enjoyment or a redeemable certainty on a decisive meaning in the process of reading the play, for they both imply the condition of a complete subjugation and submission of one side. The surplus, telling the most theatricalized action—to view the play as the one about “playing,” contributes to the correlative discussions of the theatrical performance and the textual reading. I think it would be irreducible as we approach the play in a sustaining tension without taking advantage of a single view either from the theatrical performance or from the textual reading. Since the two separate domains of performance and text are relating to the play as such, each of them enriches the imagination of one another. Therefore, instead of diminishing *Endgame*, probably we are able to recognize more aspects of Beckett by associating both perspectives. They are linked within this thesis with the hope to give more associations about Beckett’s world. Seeing from different perspectives of the biographers, the philosophers, the theatrical
practitioners, and even Beckett himself, as they influence and reshape one another, we find that every single view lends resonance to the entire picture of Beckett.