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A Sense of Time.

Temporal Disorders and Distorted Sensitivity in Samuel Beckett
and Wilfred Ruprecht Bion

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To my beloved grandmothers, Caterina and Maria,
whose time did not let them see where time has taken me.

“She tried to discover what kind of woof Old Time,
that greatest and longest-established Spinner of all,
would weave from the threads he had already spun into a woman.
But, his factory is a secret place, his work is noiseless, and his Hands are mutes”.

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett and Wilfred Ruprecht Bion: two troubled souls within the walls of a therapy room. An analysand and an analyst: “the imaginary twins”,¹ as Bennett Simon has labelled them. Two distant universes, yet so strikingly close; exceptional personalities united by a passion for the mind and its fathomless depths, its workings and disorders, and for the countless ways in which time intersects the psyche and moulds self-consciousness and reality. As keystone of the composite architecture of *being*, the experience of time ensures a chronological order to the world we inhabit, punctuates the unfolding of our existence, gives it meaning, origin, and direction. Revolving around the individual’s sense of temporality, this study sets out to interrogate the ways in which the stream of time is perceived – or misperceived – by the subject, and engages with the multifarious manifestations and representations of the time-mind and distorted sensitivities in the works of Samuel Beckett and Wilfred R. Bion.

Crossing diverse disciplines – philosophy, mental medicine, and literature, – this study stems from a keen interest in psychopathology, a discipline that has guided my work for some years now. Looking at psychic disorders as dysfunctions of the self’s time sensitivity, the *fil rouge* running through this study is the subjective experience of temporality, its deviations, fragmentations, and lacerations. My passion for mental disorders and their phenomenology has indeed prompted me to investigate further into the subject, merge my interest in psychosis with a recent preoccupation with what Virginia Woolf called “the unlimited time of the mind”,² and apply the result of this combination to literature. To this end, this work seeks, first of all, to trace the early-twentieth-century philosophical, clinical, and literary enthusiasm for time and its perception and, second, to shed light on Beckett, Bion and on how frequently mental disorders, questions of time, and distorted consciousnesses coalesce into a single narrative vortex in their works.

¹ See B. Simon, “The Imaginary Twins: The Case of Beckett and Bion”, *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 15, 1988, pp. 331-352.

² V. Woolf, *The Waves*, Penguin, London, 1992 [1931], p. 210.

This research has been conceived and developed in the wake of the studies conducted by Didier Anzieu, Steven Connor, Matthew Feldman, Ian Miller, and Bennett Simon, who have worked on the knotty clinical relationship that bound Beckett and Bion for roughly two years (1934-1935) and on how they supposedly influenced each other. In this respect, Bion's clinical reports on Beckett would have been of great help to my investigation. Nevertheless, as Julian Bion – Bion's son and Professor of Intensive Care Medicine at the University of Birmingham – warned me, his “father never spoke about his patients to anyone. He rarely kept records of analyses, partly because the process of recording interfered with listening, and also because he perceived each session to be largely independent of the preceding sessions. So there will be no recordings for you to interrogate”.³

Having time-(mis)perception as the mainstay of my discourse, in this study my energies are channelled into an attempt to construct a dialogue between the thought and works of Beckett and Bion. As for Beckett, I primarily – yet not exclusively – inquire into his short prose, certainly less frequented than his plays and novels. In fact, in the last chapter I venture a hopefully fresh analysis of *The Unnamable*, a novel that has been largely discussed by critics. On the other hand, I look at Bion not simply as Beckett's psychoanalyst, but as the author of *A Memoir of the Future*, a three-volume endeavour to fictionalise his life and his complicated psychoanalytic thought. By connecting their works and emphasising their engagement with the epistemology and ontological implications of time, I probe into the tangled worlds of two men who, seemingly engaged in a long-distance conversation, proved to be outstanding cartographers of the human psyche and its convoluted interactions with past, future, and present time(s).

The first chapter aims to provide a definition for the subject's sense of time and to delineate a historical and cultural frame within which this study unfolds. My focus lies on the period that spans from the late-Victorian age to the post-Second World War years. Looking at those stormy decades as a hotbed of explorations into the polymorphic nature of time, I study Henri-Louis Bergson's and William James' ideas on the workings of time consciousness, which triggered among Europeans a generalised passion for time. After briefly considering Bergson and James, I concentrate on Edmund Husserl, a leading figure of twentieth-century philosophy and the father of phenomenology, who wrote extensively on how time is perceived and conceptualised by the mind. Besides Bergson's and James' reflections upon time consciousness, Husserl's investigations into the phenomenology of inner temporalities paved the way for other philosophers, who would considerably widen this field of inquiry. In this regard, I explore the ideas on subjective temporality advanced by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

³ E-mail exchange, 21 February 2022.

The fervour and enthusiasm that, in the first half of the last century, drove a considerable number of thinkers, from Bergson and James to phenomenologists, to delve into the intricacies of time consciousness were not exclusive to philosophical speculation. In fact, a major preoccupation with time sensitivity also spread into other fields of knowledge. Time consciousness and its disorders became broadly discussed issues in countless psychiatric hospitals throughout Europe. Acting as a bridge between philosophy and mental medicine, revolutionising late-Victorian psychiatry, and understanding mental pathologies as disruptions of the subject's time sensitivity, phenomenological psychopathology⁴ contributed in significant ways to the investigations into time sensitivity conducted in that "thought-tormented age".⁵ In addition, Freudian psychoanalysis, one of the most influential schools of thought during the first half of the twentieth century, was certainly no stranger to the interest in time that animated the first decades of the last century. In this framework, psychoanalysis is regarded as a discipline aimed at restoring the order of the multiple temporalities that continuously cross the mind.

In the wake of the philosophical and clinical excitement of the early twentieth century for the kaleidoscopic manifestations of temporality at a psychic level, literature of those decades brought further impetus to the cause and reinforced an already heightened concern about time and its phenomenology. By placing the bewitching choreographies of the time-mind at the core of several narratives, a remarkable portion of European modernist literature delves into the character's mind and her/his often disturbed internal chronologies. Inhabited by a constellation of selves that cultivate a growing (un)awareness of existing in the midst of a "multiplicity of times",⁶ a wide body of European literature produced in the first decades of the last century turned into an occasion for writers, readers, and spectators to chart the obscure geographies of the character's psyche, penetrate its innermost corners, and inquire into its encounters with time, understood in terms of memories, expectations, desires, anxieties, and present perceptions.

In this study I insist above all on the disorders that can jeopardise or irredeemably compromise the subject's sense of time. Indeed, it should not be overlooked that much European modernist literature (intended here as traditional high-modernist) was written and published amidst the unprecedented brutality and destructiveness of the World Wars, two colossal events that fuelled an alarming growth

⁴ Phenomenological psychopathology deals with the functioning of consciousness and its disorders, the experience of time and its possible dysfunctionalities, memory, anxiety, attention and associated disturbances, and disorders in bodily experience. Phenomenological psychopathologists are profoundly indebted to the "long tradition of philosophical discussions on the nature of time" of the first half of the twentieth century. The idea at the base of phenomenological psychopathology is "that in the psycho-pathological experience the possibility of temporalization or self-temporalization is impaired". See F. Leoni, "Time", in G. Stanghellini, M. R. Broome, A. V. Fernandez, P. Fusar-Poli, A. Raballo, R. Rosford (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, pp. 390-397, p. 395.

⁵ J. Joyce, *Dubliners*, Wordsworth Classics, Ware, 1993 [1914], p. 146.

⁶ J. May, N. Thrift (eds), *Timespace. Geographies of Temporality*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p. 12.

in number of cases of mental derangement (inside and outside the armies) and that encouraged broadening research into psychic pathologies and time disorders. Mapping the labyrinths of the psyche and inspecting its gears in the chaos of the conflicts compelled writers to seek new narrative strategies, which could successfully portray the incapacity of the human mind to navigate the river of time. Comprehending cognitive disabilities and time dysfunctions as a contingent corollary of a remarkable slice of European modernist literature, in this study I place special emphasis on the widespread tendency among European modernist authors to dissect the character's time-mind and narrate its disturbances.

Having clarified this, I concentrate on Beckett and Bion. After studying their clinical relationship and their alleged mutual influence, I consider the familiarity of the two authors with the European cultural milieu of the first half of the twentieth century and, more specifically, with investigations into time and time perception carried out in those decades. It is not my concern here to discuss Beckett's and Bion's possible affiliation to modernism, in its traditional literary sense. As for Bion, first of all a psychoanalyst, it seems to me senseless to pigeonhole his work into either modernism or postmodernism. I suggest the same for Beckett, whose works respond fairly equally both to modernist and to postmodernist aesthetics. In this respect, Steven Connor elucidates that,

it was clear that he had something to do with modernism. His close association with James Joyce and with some of the leading forms of literary avant-gardism [...] and his relentless efforts to reinvent the forms of literary expression seemed to make him an exemplary modernist. And yet, his strange, obsessive introversion and in the difficulty of generalising his innovations, Beckett seemed also to be awkwardly indigestible to modernism. And then, for a while during the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed to make more sense for critics to use Beckett's works to make the case for some kind of break within modernism, moving beyond the forms of order and authority represented by high and classic modernism into a world of unlimited contingency. Indeed, for a time, Beckett became an exemplary postmodernist.⁷

The closing section of the first chapter thus aims at examining the interconnections between Beckett, Bion and the time-obsession that spread in the first decades of the last century, years in which the 'imaginary twins' laid the foundations of their future careers and shaped their cultural background.

This introductory overview is followed by three chapters, which deal with a different temporal dimension and its phenomenology: the past, the future, and the present. As for the past, the second

⁷ S. Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, p. 2.

chapter pivots around the phenomenon of memory and the notion of trauma, a construct that, owing to the outbreak of the Great War in the mid-1910s, was subjected to an intense process of medicalisation in several psychiatric hospitals across Europe. The historical backdrop against which I project my reflections upon trauma and its corrosive effects on memory is the one offered by the global wars, which engendered a generalised emotional upheaval in society; Beckett and Bion were no exception. After surveying the involvement of the two authors in the two World Wars, I consider the burden of traumatic memories in Beckett's *The End* and Bion's *A Memoir of the Future*, in order to show that the fascinating phenomenology of memory and historical traumas constitute a pillar on which Beckett and Bion constructed a remarkable portion of their work.

While the first part of the second chapter offers a reading of Beckett's and Bion's works from the perspective of trauma and its ruinous repercussions on the self's time sensitivity, the second part of the chapter explores the phenomenology of the ghost, conceived in this study not only as a creepy product of a wounded memory, but also as the inconsistent and paradoxical embodiment of a past trauma. Resorting mainly to Derrida's reflections on the phenomenology of the spectre, this section interrogates Beckett's and Bion's engagement with 'ghostliness' and concentrates on *From an Abandoned Work* by Beckett and on some selected passages from Bion's *A Memoir*, a text replete with diaphanous figures that reappear from the fog of the past to haunt the living.

The third chapter tackles the phenomenology of future time and it is divided into three sections which respectively explore the notions of human degeneration, desire, and birth trauma, all conceived as phenomena that might arouse in the subject psychological destabilisation and fear of the future. As for degeneration, I discuss the sense of human decadence that pervaded the last decades of the nineteenth century and highlight how late-Victorian concerns about hereditary degeneration were reshaped and magnified by the unspeakable levels of savagery attained during the Great War and, later, during the Second World War, when fears of human degeneration turned into terror of annihilation and mass extinction. As Paul K. Saint-Amour argues, under the thick shadow of the two global wars, fear was fixed in routine: "the constant anxiety over war produces by itself a collective psychosis comparable to that which active warfare might develop".⁸ Inheriting the traumas forged by the cruel history of the twentieth century, Beckett and Bion depict a humanity condemned to decay and insanity. The future that the two authors see on the horizon is a time of degeneration and destruction; it is a time that contains perpetuated traumas and that only offers threats and precipices. As Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *One Evening* and Bion's trilogy reveal, Beckett and Bion

⁸ P. K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future. Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2015, p. 6.

inhabited a time replete with portents of death and their ‘tomorrow’ is drenched with an overwhelming sense of an ending.

The second part of this chapter looks into the psychic phenomenon of desire, i.e. the engine that drives the subject towards the unknown of the future, compels her/him to change and hopefully evolve. With regard to Beckett, I interrogate the notion of desire in relation to habit, “the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit”,⁹ and comment on the inability (or unwillingness) of many of Beckett’s subjects to get rid of the obsessive habits that punctuate their plights and to improve their miserable existential conditions. On the other hand, as far as Bion is concerned, I study the concept of desire in relation to change, which, as Bion pointed out, always represents a catastrophic caesura between the reassuring ‘known’ of the present and the frightening ‘unknown’ of what comes next.

The last section of the third chapter explores the phenomenology of birth, the caesura *par excellence*, a gulf, to use Emil M. Cioran’s words, “into which we do not fall but from which, instead, we emerge, to our universal chagrin”.¹⁰ Understanding birth as the beginning of the ruinous exposure of the subject to the flow of (future) time, I analyse Beckett’s *Lessness* and some passages of Bion’s trilogy that deal with the primal trauma of birth. Understood as the first instant in which the newborn is forced to confront with the time of existence and the inevitable threat of the end, in Beckett’s and Bion’s works, birth often becomes tantamount to decadence, putrefaction, and oblivion. The impossibility of restoring the condition of carnal bonding with the maternal womb – the place where time was, in fact, a no-time, – becomes a reason for despair for the infant, who is faced with the boundless unknowability of future time and the ineluctable advent of death.

Finally, in the last chapter I concentrate upon the phenomenology of present time, the temporal dimension of self-consciousness. Thinking of the present as a time devoid of duration and focusing on the notions of ‘nothingness’ and ‘timelessness’, I look at Beckett’s literary universe and explore the incapacity of several of his characters (here prototypically represented by the nameless narrator of *The Unnamable*) to find a location not only in space, but also in the flow of time. Seemingly severed from the phenomenal world and psychologically disturbed, Beckett’s subjects are often depicted by their creator as unrelated to time and pathologically unaware of its passage. I see the temporal emptiness that shrouds numerous works by Beckett as the result of the pathological inability of many of his fictional selves to perceive the stream of time and grasp the nature of the countless temporalities that intersect their minds.

Psychopathology is just one key to understanding the timelessness that cloaks many mindscapes in Beckett’s world. Some scholars have in fact regarded the sense of temporal emptiness that features

⁹ S. Beckett, *Proust*, Grove Press, New York, 1978 [1930], p. 8.

¹⁰ E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, Penguin Classics, London, 2020 [1973], p. 27.

a considerable part of Beckett's work as a contemplative vacuum, where the subject, cut off from the world of phenomena, attains (or tries to attain) the ultimate reality of all things. Resorting to Buddhism and exploring the interconnections between Beckett's thought and the vast universe of Buddhist philosophies, some critics – such as Paul Foster and Angela Moorjani – have regarded the interior journeys of various Beckettian selves as meditative introspection, during which the existential coordinates of time and space vanish in favour of a formless and timeless void. In this context, I pay special attention to the notion of *śūnyatā*, a mystical dimension where the time of self-consciousness (the present) comes to be paradoxically timeless.

After dwelling on the fascinating concept of *śūnyatā*, I venture forth into Bion's O, “the unknown, unknowable, ineffable, inscrutable, ontological experience of ultimate being”,¹¹ a psychic dimension in which memory (the past) and desire (the future) are abandoned to make room for the emptiness of the present. I use Bion's O to probe into the distraught mind of the deranged protagonist of *The Unnamable* and investigate his incapacity to find a position within the flow of time. Following James S. Grotstein, one of Bion's major scholars, in this work I regard Bion's O as a psychic ‘black hole’, “the quintessence of the experience of meaninglessness and nothingness”.¹² As Grotstein contends, in the ‘black hole’ the subject experiences “a catastrophic discontinuity of the self, of falling over the abyss into the void”.¹³ Prey to a maelstrom of unleashed thoughts and condemned to the vortex of madness, the disoriented self of *The Unnamable* is relegated by his creator to a non-world where time is in fact a pathological time of eternal repetition.

To conclude, this investigation into Beckett, Bion and time consciousness was originally prompted by some lines by Connor. Discussing Beckett's engagement with the ontological implications of time, Connor has pointed out that,

the most important aspect of being-in-the-world, for Beckett, is being in time. We find it difficult to think of subjectivity except as living through time, and therefore somehow different from the flow of time that it inhabits. [...] Being-in-time creates the condition of the individual self in the first place. [...] But if time is what constitutes identity, it is also time that unsettles or ‘deforms’ it. [...] Time is therefore both outside us and inside us; indeed, more than this, it is what makes it impossible to speak of outside and inside.¹⁴

¹¹ J. S. Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness. Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, Karnac Books, London, 2007, p. 121.

¹² J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’. The Importance of Nothingness, Meaninglessness, and Chaos in Psychoanalysis” (I), *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 26, 1990, pp. 257-290, p. 274.

¹³ J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’. The Black Hole (II), *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 26, 1990, pp. 377-407, p. 377.

¹⁴ S. Connor, *Samuel Beckett. Repetition, Theory and Text*, The Davies Group, Aurora (Colorado), 2007, pp. 52-53.

This work intends not only to corroborate what Connor has suggested regarding Samuel Beckett, but also to try to demonstrate that what he has maintained about the Irish author can be claimed about Wilfred R. Bion, whose *A Memoir of the Future* is in my view a stunning map of the human mind and its countless paths trodden by time.

I agree with Anzieu, Connor, Feldman, Miller, and Simon, who argue that the relatively short time that brought Beckett and Bion under the same roof at the Tavistock Clinic considerably influenced their future lives and careers. Furthermore, I am convinced that, although their sessions may have often been times of clash and disagreement, Beckett and Bion's therapeutic adventure turned out to be an occasion of mutual help. In fact, one should not forget that, when Beckett went to London in search of psychological support, Bion already bore the heavy mourning for his first wife and the indelible mark of the Great War, during which he had fought in the front line. I like to think that the time that Bion and his patient zero shared in London was an opportunity for both men to express their profound disquiet and cultivate together a passion for the abysses of the mind, its traumas, its failures, and its twisted relationships with the time of existence.

I hope to demonstrate that, to quote Anzieu, there is an impressive “intellectual affinity” “between Beckett and Bion”,¹⁵ two eminent figures of the long twentieth century and excellent philosophers not only of *being*, but most of all of *being-in-time*. What I argue is that, by narrating the ontological repercussions of time consciousness and its disorders, Beckett and Bion found ways to give voice to a profound sense of unease, of psychological pain, and to a deep-rooted pessimism which tormented their limping psyches for almost their entire lives. Pivoting around the catastrophes of time and its limitless power to scar, traumatisise, and annihilate the mind, Beckett's and Bion's works tell the story of many dejected souls that are overwhelmed by a still too present past, deprived of a reassuring future, and victims of interior turbulences that gnaw at their consciousnesses of being-in-time.

In this study I attempt to disentangle the connections between the artistic productions of the two authors and emphasise how they are radically ontological, committed to exploring the nature of time and the complex workings of internal chronologies. Sharing similar views on the atrocity of the past, on the impossibility or catastrophe of the future, and on the alienating effects of present time, Beckett and Bion magnified and prolonged the modernist cult of narrating the unpredictable acrobatics of temporality within the indefinable confines of the psyche, its fragilities, lapses, and disabilities. I regard Beckett's and Bion's works as paradigms of a shared (modernist) passion for the cognitive apparatus, invalid psyches, dyschronicities, and disassembled time sensitivities.

¹⁵ D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, Marietti, Genova, 2001 [1999], p. 55. My translation.

Finally, I look at the literary worlds of Beckett and Bion as faithful renderings of the disoriented mindscapes of the two authors, both engaged in a constant battle against the time of existence, whose essence is made perceptible through the multiple hues and nuances that the mind uses to portray it. I like to think that the dialogue with Wilfred R. Bion that Samuel Beckett decided to break off in late 1935 actually never stopped, but went on in their works. If space and the vicissitudes of life divided them, time and its multifarious manifestations still keep them bound.

Chapter 1

Cartographies of Internal Time(s): Early-Twentieth-Century Time Explorations and the Works of Samuel Beckett and Wilfred R. Bion

Past, present, and future are merely variable appearances of one
and the same disease, identical in its substance,
inexorable in its insinuation, and monotonous in its persistence.
And the disease is coextensive with Being – it is Being.¹

Time and its puzzling elusiveness have plagued countless thinkers for millennia. Ever since human beings started pondering the sense of their existence, several philosophers, theorists, physicians, writers, artists, women and men of science have been grappling with the paradoxical and mysterious essence of time. Nevertheless, no other period in the history of humanity – at least in Europe – has proved as captivated by and as concerned for the nature of time, time consciousness, and time disorders as the first decades of the twentieth century. In this study, I do not mean to provide a history of the numerous philosophical and scientific studies of time or a comprehensive summary of the current approaches to time and time awareness.² I devote the first section of this chapter to outlining

¹ E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, Arcade Publishing, New York, 1949, pp. 52-53.

² The two current main lines of thinking about the structure of temporality are ‘presentism’ and ‘eternalism’. For presentists, time is always experienced as happening in the present even when we perceive memories or anticipate the future. On the other hand, eternalists look at the past, the present, and the future as an undefined agglomeration and the difference between these three temporal dimensions depends exclusively on the subject’s perception of them. In this regard, M. Joshua Mozesky maintains that “the past and future are as much a part of the ‘furniture of reality’ as is the present”. See M. J. Mozesky, “Presentism”, in C. Callender, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2011, p. 122-144, p. 122. Besides ‘presentism’ and ‘eternalism’, in the introduction to *The Concept of Time in Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, Alessandro Arienzo claims the existence of a third line of understanding of the temporal flow: ‘the growing-past theory’. Arienzo argues that growing past

a definition for the subject's 'sense of time' and to offering an introductory overview of the entangled web of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century philosophical and scientific theories, which sought to shed light on the essence of temporality and on the fascinating workings of time consciousness. To this end, the philosophical works of Henri-Louis Bergson and William James,³ phenomenological time explorations initiated by Edmund Husserl, and Freudian psychoanalysis are the foci of my discussion.

Thereafter, I consider the cultural panorama of the early twentieth century – at its height during the years of so-called high modernism⁴ – and the reasons that have led many scholars to look at it as an immense laboratory for the investigation of time, time awareness, and its disorders. Exploring the artistic abundance of the first decades of the last century, the works of art of Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, or Pablo Picasso, as well as the works of literature of Thomas S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ford M. Ford, Thomas Mann, Luigi Pirandello, Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson, Italo Svevo, James Joyce, Herbert G. Wells, and Virginia Woolf are regarded in this context as responses to the philosophical and scientific enthusiasm for the study of time that animated those years. Indeed, time and its kaleidoscopic manifestations at a psychic level became pillars of the artistic and literary aesthetics of those decades.

In a world of constant acceleration, internal time maps became central to the works of several early-twentieth-century painters and writers who, via brushstrokes on canvas or ink on paper, inquired into the dynamics of internal temporalities and the complicated mechanisms of time perception. Treating European modernism as "an exploration of a plurality of different times and kinds of time",⁵ Charles M. Tung emphasises that, "in the face of capitalism's standardisation and regulation of time, the acceleration of changes in social life, and the vertiginous elongation of human and planetary history by evolutionary theory and geology, writers and artists were said to have moved inward to explore the workings of memory, the pathos of finitude and the intensities of fugitive moments".⁶ Nonetheless, I argue that the list of factors that, in Tung's view, prompted a considerable amount of

theorists "attribute reality only to past and present while future, in its indeterminacy, has only a potential nature". See F. Santoianni (ed.), *The Concept of Time in Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy. A Philosophical Thematic Atlas*, Springer, Cham, 2016, p. 32.

³ Started in December 1902 and kept alive by regular correspondence, the relationship between Bergson and James was very close. The esteem between the two was such that in 1909 Bergson proposed to his American colleague to become an associate professor at the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences. James became a member of the Academy on 22 January 1910, but died only a few months later, on 26 August.

⁴ Preceded by the so-called 'early modernism' (covering the years between 1890 and the end of the 1910s) and followed by 'late modernism' (running through the 1930s), 'high modernism', according to Jean-Michel Rabaté, is the period of time which spans approximately from 1912 to 1932. Following the publication of *The Waste Land* by Thomas S. Eliot and *Ulysses* by James Joyce, 1922, *annus mirabilis*, is generally conceived as the pinnacle of European modernism. See O. Beloborodova, D. Van Hulle, P. Verhulst (eds), *Beckett and Modernism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, p. 20.

⁵ C. M. Tung, *Modernism and Time Machines*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2020, p. 4.

⁶ *Idem*, pp. 2-3.

European artists and writers, especially from the mid-1910s, to penetrate what Woolf called the “dark places of psychology”⁷ misses some key entries: the mass experience of death, the overwhelming feeling of disorientation, and a pervasive sense of brutalisation, decay, and human degeneration nourished by the cataclysmic and unprecedented experience of the Great War, soon followed by the outbreak of the Second World War.

The belligerent climate without fuelled wars within and the vulnerability of the world turned into the vulnerability of the mind: as Joseph Valente elucidates, psychological disabilities came to be a distinctive signature of Western modernist literature.⁸ The dizzying growth in number of cases of psychic pathologies brought about by the concussive events inherent in war led many to meditate upon the human experience of time and its elapse. As demonstrated, for instance, by the studies of time perception in psychopathology that were carried out in the first half of the last century by the French psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski (1885-1972), the staggering amount of cases of mental derangement among soldiers and civilians was an occasion for investigating, at very different levels, the essence of time and the (mal)workings of time awareness. Popular culture did not remain unaffected by this process: in an osmotic exchange and continuous dialogue with the philosophy and science of those decades, a remarkable portion of European modernist literature began to investigate (surely with greater intensity between and after the two global conflicts) the phenomena of internal temporalisation, time consciousness, and time disorders.

In *Invalid Modernism*, Michael Davidson underlines that, whenever we consider the issue of disability access, we immediately think of spatial obstacles (ramps, signage, parking spaces), running the risk of disremembering the temporalities of the subject, “temporalities first visited by the philosophical writings of Bergson and James and in the stream of consciousness novels of Joyce, Faulkner, and Woolf”.⁹ In this view, whilst the body inhabits spatiality, the mind inhabits temporality, and this implies that, while the maimed body lacks an encounter with space, the insane and feeble mind lacks an encounter with temporality. Presenting itself as a huge assembly line yielding unhinged subjects suffering from – to use an expression that I borrow from the German psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs – “a psychopathology of temporality”,¹⁰ much European modernist literature reinforced an already consolidated philosophical and scientific commitment to the study of time consciousness and its disorders: as Michael Levenson makes clear, time consciousness was “an unescapable *topos* of

⁷ V. Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Vol. 4: 1925 to 1928*, ed. A. McNeillie, Hogarth Press, London, 1984, p. 162.

⁸ J. Valente, “Modernism and Cognitive Disability: A Genealogy”, in J. M. Rabaté (ed.), *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 2013, pp. 379-298, p. 379.

⁹ M. Davidson, *Invalid Modernism. Disability and the Missing Body of the Aesthetic*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ T. Fuchs, “The Experience of Time and Its Disorders”, in G. Stanghellini et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, cit., pp. 431-442. p. 431.

Modernism”.¹¹ In fact, especially between and after the two World Wars, many European writers started exploring the relationship between time and the mind and progressively implemented what I regard as a practice of distortion of the fictional character’s sense of time, which is often represented as interrupted or fragmented.

Finally, in the last part of this chapter I focus on Samuel Beckett and Wilfred R. Bion. I do not intend to discuss the viable affiliation of the two authors to modernist aesthetics; in this section I investigate Beckett’s and Bion’s closeness to the modernist passion for the ontological implications of time and look at them as two authors who, on a par with many European modernist writers, devoted a remarkable portion of their works to the representation of time in the mind. Beckett’s works and Bion’s *A Memoir of the Future – The Dream* (1975), *The Past Presented* (1977), and *The Dawn of Oblivion* (1979) – are here regarded as exploratory journeys into the polymorphous and dynamic nature of internal time(s). With the aim of studying Beckett’s and Bion’s engagement with the convolutions of inner temporalities, in the following chapters I therefore attempt to demonstrate that, in their literary works, both authors amply explored the haunting shadows of the past, the voidness of the present, the anxiety inherent in the future, and the pathological immobility of the self in time. After discussing the clinical relationship that bound Beckett and Bion in 1934-1935 and the alleged impact they had on one another, I pay attention to the interconnections between Beckett, Bion, and the enthusiasm of the first half of the twentieth century for mapping the geographies of internal time(s).

The Clock Inside: Understanding Subjective Temporalities

By the expression ‘internal time(s)’ I refer to the multiple manifestations of time at a psychic level – primarily conceived in terms of memory, stream of consciousness, and planning of the future – which mark the individual’s existence and allow the subject to find a location in time. “We understand ourselves as persisting selves by understanding ourselves as temporally extended entities existing at different points in time”.¹² Being able to experience internal time(s) means disposing of a sense of temporality, i.e. an ability to measure time and to interpret its anisotropic nature cognitively. To better elucidate the perspective from which I wish to probe the notion of temporality and to explain what the subject’s sense of time consists in, I resort to the three arrows of time that the British physicist and cosmologist Steven Hawking (1942-2018) identified in *A Brief History of Time* (1988), a

¹¹ M. Levenson, “The Time-Mind of the Twenties”, in L. Marcus, P. Nicholls (eds), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2004, pp. 197-217, p. 207.

¹² I. Phillips (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Temporal Experience*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017, p. 263.

milestone of twentieth-century science. Hawking suggests that the nature of time can be apprehended mainly via three different arrows: the thermodynamic arrow, the cosmological arrow, and the psychological arrow.¹³ The latter is the one along which internal time runs and the one on which the subject's time sensitivity depends.

“The psychological markers of the arrow of time are basically just the distinctively temporal elements of experience [...]. The most important of these are memory and our experience of ourselves as agents”.¹⁴ As time is the container of every experience of the individual from womb to tomb, the self exists as a temporalised entity that is subject both to the inexorable passage of time and to the myriad forms through which time articulates life and moulds the perception that the individual has of her/himself and of reality. Even though it is rather complicated to deal with the psychological arrow of time because, as Hawking points out, “we don't know how the brain works in detail”,¹⁵ it can be agreed that human beings organise and construct their existence by means of a sense of time. In this respect, the Austrian-US astrophysicist Thomas Gold argues that “we all have, at the most basic proof of our consciousness, the sensation of the passing of time”, and he emphasises that “we cannot conceive describing the outside world without [...] reference to the passage of time”.¹⁶

Dean Buonomano, US leading theorist on the neuroscience of temporality, regards the sense of time as the self's timing ability, the capacity of the individual to perceive the flow of two distinct kinds of time: natural time and clock time. Buonomano elucidates that, by one's own sense of time, the subject can experience temporality both as the dimension through which one's life continuously evolves (natural time) and as the ruler of the subject's existence, which is punctuated by a multiplicity of different timetables (clock time).¹⁷ Dependent on the functioning of the subject's cerebral activities, the sense of time resides within the brain, a ‘machine’ that, among other functionalities, conceives, perceives, and measures time. In mentally unimpaired subjects, the brain allows the individual to remember the past, foresee the future, and travel back and forth in temporality.¹⁸ Intrinsically inherent in the self's age, state of physical and mental health, feelings, actions, levels of attention, contexts, and surroundings in a specific moment in time, the subjective sense of time is “experienced as a conscious phenomenon by the self-as-subject in two perspectives: one is self-awareness of myself in the act of experiencing and the other is by way of introspection in relation to my self-as-object in my self-representing as time bound”.¹⁹

¹³ S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time. From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Transworld Publishers, London, 2016, p. 164.

¹⁴ J. Harrington, *Time. A Philosophical Introduction*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2015, p. 193.

¹⁵ S. Hawking, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

¹⁶ L. N. Oaklander, *The Philosophy of Time*, vol. IV, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 181.

¹⁷ D. Buonomano, *Your Brain Is a Time Machine. The Neuroscience and Physics of Time*, Norton and Company, New York and London, 2017, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Idem*, pp. 20-22.

¹⁹ W. W. Meissner, *Time, Self, and Psychoanalysis*, Jason Aronson, Lanham, 2007, p. 223.

Dan Llyod and Valterri Arstila point out that subjective time is a complicated structure which is embodied in the world and depends on the subject's capacity of reception of the countless stimuli coming from her/his surrounding reality.²⁰ Based primarily on past experiences collected in memory and on future events that are imagined and expected, the self's sense of time consists, in other words, in the ability of the subject to experience the present while remembering the past and planning for the future, in a continuous sequence of retentions and protentions along the psychological arrow of time. The Canadian psychoanalyst Elliott Jacques underlines that the position of the self in time "is nothing more nor less than the fusion of experience, of anticipation, of need and perception, and of memory".²¹ Organised according to a series of events that run from the past through the present, and then from the present towards the future – and the other way round, – the temporal architecture of existence makes the subject evolve in a constant back-and-forth motion along the arrow of the time-mind.

Nevertheless, the notion of 'sense of time' that I have discussed so far concerns selves that own the capacity to differentiate and categorise the three temporal dimensions: the past, the present, and the future. Things change and become even more labyrinthian and more alluring in cases of mental pathologies, in which the subject's sense of time deviates from these alleged 'norms' to a greater or lesser extent. The US psychologists Melissa J. Allman, Bin Yin, and Warren H. Meck stress that "disorientation in time and inability to coordinate and orientate oneself temporally in the external world is routinely observed in the majority of neurological patients and those with states of mental confusion (e.g., intellectual disability, dementia), who also present with poorly developed abstract concepts of time".²² Due to the fact that the temporal dimension (besides the spatial one) is an imperative coordinate of the self's condition of being-in-the-world, losing connection with one's own internal temporality determines, in a sense, the loss of connection both with one's own self and, of course, with the world.

For example, amnesiacs are unable to record the temporal evolution of their own self and the continuity of the flow of time that links their present condition of *being* to their past selfhood. Existence becomes unrooted when memories are blurred or, even worse, absent. On the other hand, in cases of trauma – one of the major causes of psychic disorders – or in other forms of mental illness, such as schizophrenia, autism, maniac obsessions, depersonalisation, depression, paranoia, anxiety disorders, the individual can manifest a distorted or atypical experience of time and its passage. At the threshold of the 1930s, Aubrey Lewis, Professor of Psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry in London, assumed that mental disorders are originated in disturbances in consciousness, and every

²⁰ V. Arstila, D. Lloyd (eds), *Subjective Time. The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Temporality*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2014, pp. 657-658.

²¹ E. Jacques, *The Form of Time*, Crane, Russak & Company, New York, 1982, p. 63.

²² V. Arstila, D. Lloyd (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 641.

disorder in consciousness “may manifest itself only in a trifling time and reality disorder”.²³ In patients affected by psychic pathologies, the sense of time can be disintegrated to such an extent that fragments of the past, the present, and the future are mixed and most likely indistinguishable one from the other: “as the person loses the time line of past, present, and future through which he has become familiar with his self, he experiences the self as strange, unfamiliar, and depersonalized”.²⁴ Expressed otherwise, whenever the dividing line between the past, the present, and the future becomes imperceptible, “florid psychotic symptoms appear”.²⁵

New Horizons in Time: Early-Twentieth-Century Explorations of Time Consciousness

Having clarified what I mean by the expression ‘internal time(s)’ and what one’s own ‘sense of time’ consists in, I now go back in the history of time explorations until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941) and the Irish-US psychologist and philosopher William James (1859-1910), with their theories on the nature of time and its perception, revolutionised the way temporality and its passage were approached and grasped. “In the 1880s, the two philosophers had insights with surprising similarities and deep affinities”,²⁶ which were soon taken as reference points by several philosophers, scientists, and artists, who began to look into the nature of time and the functioning of time-awareness. As for European literature of the first half of the twentieth century, Randall Stevenson emphasises that the concentration of many modernist writers “on streams of inner consciousness – not ‘chopped up in bits’, but a ‘fluid moving flood’ – bears obvious comparison with the views of Bergson and William James”.²⁷ In light of this, I concentrate, first of all, on Bergson’s *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), translated into English as *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, and on *Matière et mémoire* (1896), known in English as *Matter and Memory*. Thereafter, I explore the concept of duration as addressed in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) by James, father of the ‘stream of consciousness’,²⁸ a psychological construct that exerted a huge influence on the narratives

²³ A. Lewis, “The Experience of Time in Mental Disorder”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 25, 1932, pp. 611-620, p. 614.

²⁴ F. T. Melges, “Disorders of Time and the Brain in Severe Mental Illness”, in J. T. Fraser (ed.), *Time and Mind. Interdisciplinary Issues*, International Universities Press, Madison, Connecticut, 1989, pp. 99-119, p. 105.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ R. Ronchi (ed.), *Henri Bergson e William James. Durata reale e flusso di coscienza. Lettere e scritti (1902-1939)*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2014, p. xxxiii. My translation.

²⁷ R. Stevenson, *Reading the Times. Temporality and History in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2019, p. 100.

²⁸ In the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology*, James contended that consciousness “does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of*

of numerous modernist authors, such as, to name but a few, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson, Nathalie Sarraute, and Virginia Woolf.

To begin with Bergson, the French philosopher played a major role in European modernism, in a very broad sense. The extraordinary success of his ideas was borne out by the number of people that his lectures and seminars managed to bring together throughout Europe. Stevenson argues that the lectures that Bergson held, for instance, at the Collège de France from 1903 up to the outbreak of the Great War in 1915 “embarrassed the lecturer himself. Even standing rooms were often exhausted, leaving excluded admirers struggling at the doors, or trying to watch and listen from outside, through the windows”.²⁹ In this regard, Mary Ann Gillies also observes that “the period of 1909-1911 saw over two hundred articles published on Bergson in English journals, newspapers, and books”.³⁰ Alongside “the triumph of relativity theory”³¹ formulated by Albert Einstein in the 1910s, Bergson produced a radical change in the conception of time by working primarily on the notions of duration and memory, conceived by him as connected phenomena.

As for duration, in *Time and Free Will* Bergson described duration as the ultimate reality of one’s consciousness,³² as the “process of organisation or interpenetration of conscious states”.³³ Owing to the elusive nature of time, Bergson argued that, in order for present time to last and for the subject to perceive it, the immediate past and the present instant should melt one into the other, thereby setting in motion diverse states of awareness that contribute to the formation of a temporal sequence which can be experienced via consciousness. According to Bergson, the subject can perceive duration, which he identified with the adjective ‘pure’, when the immediate past and the present moment are experienced by the individual as if they were occurring simultaneously, “each permeating the other and organizing themselves like the notes of a tune [...]. I shall thus get the image of pure duration”.³⁴ This implies that, when a past and a present moment form a single entity of time, the diverse states of consciousness are no longer lived by the subject as a mere sum of instants disconnected one from the other. On the contrary, Bergson thought that they are perceived by the individual as “pure, simple, irreducible units” which are subject to “an indefinitely continued process of accumulation”.³⁵

*it [...], let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life [original emphasis]”. See W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1890, p. 239.*

²⁹ R. Stevenson, *Reading the Times*, cit., p. 106.

³⁰ M. A. Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Queen’s University Press, London and Buffalo, 1996, p. 28. See also P. Ardoine, S. E. Gontarski, L. Mattison (eds), *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, Bloomsbury, New York and London, 2013.

³¹ W. Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1927, p. 103.

³² D. Balsillie, “Prof. Bergson on Time and Free Will”, *Mind*, 20:79, 1911, pp. 357-378, p. 357.

³³ H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, transl. F. L. Pogson, Dover Publications, New York, 2001 [1889], p. 108.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 105.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 80.

Differently put, ‘pure duration’ is “the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live* [original emphasis], when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states”.³⁶

While in *Time and Free Will* Bergson’s attention was primarily centred on duration, in *Matter and Memory* the French philosopher reflected on the relationship between mind and body and on the phenomenology of memory, understood by Bergson as “the point of contact between consciousness and matter”.³⁷ In Bergson’s view, memory consists in the placeless ‘place’ where the reality of the mind encounters the reality of matter. Bergson made clear that memory plays a crucial role in the subject’s reception of the external world, an amalgam of images perceived by the self as mediated by the filter of memory, the repository of the subject’s lived times. Acting as a glue between the individual’s past and present perceptions, memory is what makes time duration perceivable. Bergson argued that “the qualitative heterogeneity of our successive perceptions of the universe results from the fact that each” moment “extends over a certain depth of duration and that memory condenses in each an enormous multiplicity of vibrations which appear to us all at once, although they are successive”.³⁸

One might conclude that, for Bergson, memory is the psychic phenomenon that, by connecting an immediate past instant to the subject’s present, enables the self to find a position in time. If so, the future would be completely disregarded. In fact, Bergson claimed that the subject finds a position in time through “a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future”.³⁹ While the near past is made up by sensations that are attached to images collected in memory, the immediate future should instead be conceived in terms of movement or “energy not yet spent”.⁴⁰ Bergson emphasised that the subject’s presentness corresponds to the encounter of sensations (the past) and movements (the future), and this implies that “my present is, in its essence, sensori-motor” and consists in “the consciousness I have of my body”.⁴¹ From this perspective, being always present to one’s own self, the body represents “the *place of passage* [original emphasis] of the movements received and thrown back”, “a connecting link between the things which act upon me and the things upon which I act”.⁴²

In line with Bergson’s ideas, in the preface to the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology*, William James highlighted the cruciality of time in the study of mental phenomena by asserting that

³⁶ H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, cit., p. 100.

³⁷ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, transl. N. M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1991 [1896], p. 73.

³⁸ *Idem*, p. 70.

³⁹ *Idem*, p. 138.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, p. 144.

⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 138.

⁴² *Idem*, pp. 151-152.

the science of the human mind (psychology) is “an account of particular finite streams of thought, coexisting and succeeding in time”.⁴³ From James’ standpoint, what the self perceives of the passage of time is the present moment, namely “an empirical portion of the course of time”⁴⁴ that corresponds to a small amount of seconds. James put forward the hypothesis that one’s intuition of temporality is in fact limited to a timespan that does not exceed a minute and “beyond its border extends the immense region of conceived time, past and future, into one direction or another of which we mentally project all the events which we think of as real, and form a systematic order of them by giving to each a date”.⁴⁵ Concentrating on the notion of the ‘specious present’, “*the original paragon and prototype of all conceived times [...], the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible* [original emphasis]”,⁴⁶ James pointed out that “the unit of composition of our perception of time is a *duration* [original emphasis], with a bow and a stern, as it were – a rearward- and a forward-looking end”.⁴⁷

Concurring with Bergson, James suggested that “it is only as parts of this *duration-block* [original emphasis] that the relation of *succession* [original emphasis] of one end to the other is perceived. We do not first feel one end and then feel the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its two ends embedded in it”.⁴⁸ Combined with memory and expectation, respectively the retrospective and the prospective sense of time,⁴⁹ duration consists in “the mere time-form, the ‘bed’ of time”,⁵⁰ and it determines the subject’s intuition of “*the specious present with its content* [original emphasis]”,⁵¹ including the moment that precedes and that which succeeds the present ‘now’. What exceeds the boundaries of the specious present belongs instead either to the world of memory or to the world of imagination.⁵²

Along with Bergson’s and James’ highly influential ideas on the nature of time and the workings of time consciousness, early-twentieth-century phenomenological philosophy positioned the notion of time at the core of its investigations into the essence of *being*. The proto-phenomenological approaches to the study of temporality promoted by Bergson and James were flanked some years later by the philosophical musings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a mathematician originally who went down in history as the founder of phenomenological philosophy. From 1884 to 1886, Husserl studied

⁴³ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, cit., p. 367.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 607.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 643.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 631.

⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 609.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, pp. 609-610.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 606.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 633.

⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 636.

⁵² G. E. Myers, “William James on Time Perception”, *Philosophy of Science*, 38:3, 1971, pp. 353-360, p. 354.

in Vienna under the guidance of the German psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917), who persuaded him to become a philosopher and heartened his “initial impetus to investigate time consciousness”,⁵³ the axis of Husserl’s philosophy. Developed later by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology constitutes an attempt at comprehending and explaining the countless ways in which the individual perceives internal and external realities. In both cases, time dynamics play a predominant role. In this regard, the Irish philosopher Dermot Moran states that “consciousness is the basis for all experience and its mode of appearing seemed to be inextricably linked to the nature of time itself”.⁵⁴ Understood as the keystone of the architecture of the self’s “consciousness, cognition, and action”, temporality has always represented for phenomenologists the essential dimension that “underpins our brain-body-environmental system”.⁵⁵

Even a cursory glance at the table of contents of *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1928) reveals that studying the mechanisms of consciousness in relation to temporality gave Husserl the chance to delve into the nature of several other psychic phenomena connected with time and its perception: memory, duration, phantasy, hope, expectation. Transcribed and edited by Edith Stein (1891-1942), Husserl’s assistant for several years, and eventually brought to press in the late 1920s by Martin Heidegger, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* is a massive collection of lectures that Husserl held from 1893 to 1917 and it represents the extraordinary outcome of Husserl’s investigations into the complicated nature of temporality and its perception.⁵⁶ The ultimate goal of the volume is the study of “appearing time, appearing duration, as appearing” in consciousness,⁵⁷ and the exploration of what Husserl called “the *immanent time* [original emphasis] of the flow of consciousness”.⁵⁸ Like Bergson and James, Husserl established the temporal grounding of consciousness by basing his assumptions on the fact that, in order to be perceived, objects (i.e. reality) must possess duration in time. Husserl argued that “the duration of the object, its temporal extension, is the object’s time”,⁵⁹ and this implies that, devoid of duration, time consciousness is impossible.

What the subject perceives through duration is the elusiveness of the ‘now’.⁶⁰ Husserl wrote that, in duration, “new perceptions arise continuously while the old remain preserved”⁶¹ and pointed out

⁵³ D. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

⁵⁵ S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 219.

⁵⁶ D. Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, transl. J. Barnett Brough, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1990 [1928], p. 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ E. Husserl, *op. cit.*, p. xxv.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

that, lacking duration, ‘now’ needs to be tied to an earlier instant in order for it to be perceived by the self. Husserl maintained that every ‘now’ “turns into its past, since there follows on the perceiving of the now a new perceiving of the now of different form, and the earlier now is no longer the culminating point”.⁶² This means that the ‘now’ “recedes steadily into the past and an ever new point of the duration enters into the now or *is* now; that the elapsed duration moves away from the actually present now-point, which is constantly filled in some way, and recedes into the ever more ‘distant’ past”.⁶³ Due to its transient nature, ‘now’ exists and is perceived insofar as it is accompanied by a past and a future moment that “join the now to form the temporal fringe or horizon in which every temporal object” – self included – “is given”.⁶⁴

After making mention of Book XI of St Augustine’s *Confessions* (397-398), in which the Christian philosopher articulated his ideas about the fleetingness of time and its diverse manifestations, in the opening lines of *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, Husserl asserted that,

Naturally, we all know what time is; it is the most familiar thing of all. But as soon as we attempt to give an account of time-consciousness, to put objective time and time-consciousness into the proper relationship and to reach an understanding of temporal objectivity [...], we get entangled in the most peculiar difficulties, contradictions and confusions.⁶⁵

Husserl claimed the existence of an osmotic exchange between objective and subjective time(s) and assumed that external time is constantly mediated by the subject’s state of consciousness in a specific moment in time. “Interested in mapping the different structures of temporal discontinuity and continuity that structure the life of consciousness”,⁶⁶ Husserl concluded that the subject’s experience of the world has a temporal structure which includes three complementary dimensions: “a retentional reference to past moments of experience, a current openness [...] to what is present, and a protentional anticipation of the moments of experience that are just about to happen”.⁶⁷

Twelve years before the publication of *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, in 1916 Husserl met Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who became his assistant three years later, in 1919. Such was the admiration and level of esteem between the two that Husserl assisted Heidegger

⁶² E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, cit., p. 181.

⁶³ *Idem*, p. 372.

⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. xxvii.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ N. De Warren, “Time”, in S. Luft, S. Overgaard (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, pp. 190-201, p. 194.

⁶⁷ S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, cit., p. 78.

in the preparation of his *magnum opus*, a huge volume dedicated to the ontological implications of time: *Being and Time*, published in 1927, originally dedicated to Husserl himself.⁶⁸ A captivating insight into phenomenological ontology, Heidegger's *Being and Time* probes the human condition of being-in-the-world by regarding time as "the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being".⁶⁹ In fact, *Being and Time* heralded an ambitious project on Heidegger's part: the conjunction 'and' that grammatically links 'being' and the noun 'time' foreshadows Heidegger's intention to attempt the arduous task to investigate the thread that bounds the self's condition of being-in-the-world and the flow of time. As stressed by Moran, in *Being and Time*, "Heidegger does not want merely to give an existential analysis of human being. His ultimate objective is to understand the meaning of being and its relation to *time* [original emphasis]".⁷⁰ Indeed, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger went so far as to suggest that the human condition of being-in-the-world cannot be condoned off from temporality, that is the existential dimension that underpins the nature of *being*. According to him, time constitutes the essential key to grasp the ultimate meaning of *being* as "the unity of temporality is the unity of the self".⁷¹

Heidegger emphasised that when Dasein – his "central term for human existence"⁷² – understands its condition of beinghood, "it does so with *time* [original emphasis] as its standpoint. Time must be brought to light [...] as the horizon of all the understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it".⁷³ In other words, the primordial sense of Dasein is made up by temporality. Heidegger suggested that, reckoning oneself with the essence of time lies at the base of the human condition of being-in-the-world: "we call the temporal attribute of entities within-the-world 'within-time-ness' [original emphasis]".⁷⁴ Being permeated by time and subject to an unstoppable sequence of different nows, Dasein is directed towards its own realisation within time-to-come and it is transcendent in the sense that it flows in a succession of 'where-from', the past, and 'where-to', the future,⁷⁵ a temporal dimension that in Heidegger's philosophy acquires a predominant position.

To the detriment of the past, for Heidegger the future is the primary temporal mode of human existence. In this regard, he made clear that "the character of 'having been' arises from the future, and in such a way that the future which 'has been' (or better, which 'is in the process of having been')

⁶⁸ D. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, cit., p. 85.

⁶⁹ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1962 [1927], p. 19.

⁷⁰ D. Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

⁷¹ M. A. Wrathall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013, p. 345.

⁷² S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, cit., p. 150.

⁷³ M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁷⁴ *Idem*, p. 382.

⁷⁵ A. Chernyakow, *The Ontology of Time. Being and Time in the Philosophies of Aristotle, Husserl and Heidegger*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2002, p. 198.

releases from itself the Present”.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, while the subject owns memories of the past, there is nothing of the future but desire and expectation. Heidegger claimed that “the future makes ontologically possible an entity which is in such a way that it exists understandingly in its potentiality-for-Being. Projection is basically futural”.⁷⁷ Owing to the subject’s inescapable fate of being-towards-the-future, the subject experiences *Angst*, the German term that Heidegger employed for ‘anxiety’. He assumed that “anxiety arises out of Being-in-the-world as thrown Being-towards-death” and that “the full existential-ontological conception of death may be defined as follow: *death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein’s ownmost possibility* [original emphasis]”.⁷⁸ In view of this, “anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its ownmost Being-thrown”,⁷⁹ that is the subject’s condition of being exposed to the uncertainty of ‘tomorrow’ and to the ineluctable advent of death.

A few years later, several of Heidegger’s reflections became central to another key figure of twentieth-century philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who found in the philosophical tradition initiated by Edmund Husserl and developed by Martin Heidegger the answers to many of his preoccupations.⁸⁰ Sartre “certainly grasps something of Heidegger’s themes of nothingness and thrownness”⁸¹ and the stunning result was *L’Être et le néant*, later published in English as *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, an attempt “to make explicit what must be presupposed for a consciousness to be able to relate as a subject to a world at all”.⁸² Appeared in 1943, amid the din of World War Two, Sartre’s massive work evokes quite clearly Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, a volume that, despite Heidegger’s closeness to Nazi ideologies, Sartre greatly appreciated.⁸³ In 1940, during his wartime imprisonment, Sartre began to study *Being and Time*. Some years later, in 1953, after a lecture that Sartre attended in Freiburg, he met Heidegger in person, an encounter that the French philosopher would later describe “as brief and inconsequential”.⁸⁴

From Sartre’s standpoint, time is twofold in the sense that “temporality is ontologically dependent on consciousness, and consciousness can exist only temporally”.⁸⁵ Sartre maintained that time is a complex structure organised into three diverse, yet interdependent, temporal dimensions: the past, the present, and the future. He suggested that the past is never autonomous since it is intrinsically related

⁷⁶ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., p. 374.

⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 385.

⁷⁸ *Idem*, p. 303.

⁷⁹ *Idem*, p. 393.

⁸⁰ R. Breeur, “Jean-Paul Sartre”, in S. Luft, S. Overgaard (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, cit., pp. 62-70, p. 63.

⁸¹ C. Dupont, *Phenomenology in French Philosophy: Early Encounters*, Springer, London and New York, 2014, p. 150.

⁸² R. Breeur, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁸³ D. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, cit., p. 361.

⁸⁴ C. Dupont, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁸⁵ C. Sommerlatte, “It’s about That Time: Sartre’s Theory of Temporality”, in M. C. Eshleman, C. L. Mui (eds), *The Sartrean Mind*, Routledge, London and New York, 2020, pp. 198-211, p. 198.

to a present moment⁸⁶ which, fleeing from the past, is directed towards the future, the boundless horizon of opportunities for the evolution of the individual within time(-to-come).⁸⁷ In Sartre's view, while the past is the "having-been Present"⁸⁸ and the future "is the possibility of that presence which I have to be beyond the real",⁸⁹ the present consists in "presence to being, and such it is not [original emphasis]".⁹⁰ Due to the fact that, when time is present, it is already past, Sartre asserted that the present is "pure nothingness".⁹¹ According to him, being the present deprived of duration and hence imperceptible, "consciousness is awareness (of) itself as always in movement from prior to subsequent awarenesses".⁹² Sartre thought that what the subject experiences as enduring in time is nothing but her/his own body, which he defined as "the first dimension of being",⁹³ "the instrument that I am".⁹⁴

Understood as the means by which the subject experiences the world, the body and the concept of embodiment became central issues to another crucial contribution to phenomenological philosophy: *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). Inspired by the philosophies of Bergson and Husserl,⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty looked at the body and the world as they are formed in unison, so that the subject's body and the surrounding environment interpenetrate in a way that the body gives meaning to the world and the other way round. It is from these observations that Merleau-Ponty articulated his reflections upon temporality. In his opinion, the present is the primary dimension of the self's existence as an embodied entity: the temporality of the self is the temporality of the body and the self acquires meaning in time exclusively via the body. Merleau-Ponty remarked that "the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be interwoven in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them".⁹⁶

Emphasising the intrinsic connection between body and time awareness, Merleau-Ponty asserted that "my body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present".⁹⁷

⁸⁶ A. Mascolo, "L'évasion de l'être. Jean-Paul Sartre and the Phenomenology of Temporality", in F. Santoianni (ed.), *The Concept of Time in Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, cit., pp. 77-84, p. 82.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. S. Richmond, Routledge, London, 1958 [1943], p. 205.

⁸⁹ *Idem*, p. 214.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, p. 208.

⁹¹ *Idem*, p. 209.

⁹² C. Howells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1992, p. 19.

⁹³ J. P. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, p. 359.

⁹⁵ M. S. Muldoon, *Tricks of Time. Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in Search of Time, Self and Meaning*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 2006, pp. 119-125.

⁹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith, Routledge, London and New York, 1962 [1945], p. 94.

⁹⁷ *Idem*, p. 279.

in his view, consciousness is the subject's awareness of the world and of the flow of time via the body. Nonetheless, it is slightly imprecise to employ the expression 'flow of time' when tackling the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. Distancing himself from the understanding of time as a succession of different instants, Merleau-Ponty claimed that "it is not the past that pushes the present, nor the present that pushes the future, into being".⁹⁸ He made clear that time is "not a real process, not an actual succession I am content to record. It arises from my relation to things. Within things themselves, the future and the past are in a kind of eternal of pre-existence and survival".⁹⁹ In his view, time is "not a line, but a network of intentionalities",¹⁰⁰ understood as diverse ways of relating oneself to the surrounding environment by means of the body and its various senses.

It should be clear so far that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, a passion for the notion of time had spread among Western philosophers, who, by delving into the nature of temporality, ended up studying a multiplicity of ontological issues: time manifestations at a psychic level, the destiny of humankind, the functioning of memory, the finiteness of the subject in time, embodiment, perception of duration, intersubjectivity, and self-consciousness. Furthermore, time consciousness disorders also became major objects of interest for a great deal of thinkers. In fact, philosophy was not the only field of knowledge involved in the exploration of time perception and time convolutions at a psychic level. Early-twentieth-century mental medicine contributed in significant ways to the study of time and the (mal)functioning of temporal perception. Investigating the phenomenology of time from a philosophical standpoint paved the way to new clinical approaches to mental pathologies. It was in the wake of the phenomenological studies of time carried out in the early twentieth century that several European psychiatrists began to look at psychoses as disorders of the self's time sensitivity. In this respect, Fuchs observes that,

the intersection of phenomenology and psychiatry has probably been one of the most fruitful areas of application of the phenomenological approach. This applies to the pathological analysis of mental disorders as well as to their psychotherapeutic treatment where existential approaches derived from Husserl's or Heidegger's philosophy gained widespread importance for at least some decades of the last century.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, cit, p. 478.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 484.

¹⁰¹ T. Fuchs, "Psychiatry", in S. Luft, S. Overgaard (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, cit., pp. 611-622, p. 611.

Alongside Freudian psychoanalysis, phenomenological psychopathology – alternatively called ‘phenomenological psychiatry’ – revolutionised late-nineteenth-century clinical approaches to mental disorders. Originated by the crisis of late-Victorian psychiatry and in stark contrast to the ideas of “neurological-criminological alienists”,¹⁰² like the French psychiatrist Bénédict A. Morel (1809-1873) and the Italian anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), phenomenological psychopathology reconstructed the early-twentieth-century psychiatric field.¹⁰³ Stemmed from the clinical works of Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883-1969), Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) and Eugène Minkowski (1885-1972), mentioned earlier in this chapter, phenomenological psychopathology functioned (and still functions nowadays) as “a bridge between human sciences and clinical sciences within psychiatric knowledge”.¹⁰⁴

Fuchs assumes that, from a phenomenological perspective, psychic disorders “manifest themselves in dimensions such as self-awareness, embodiment, temporality and intersubjectivity, or in short, in an alteration of the patient’s overall being-in-the-world”.¹⁰⁵ As for time, captivated by Bergson’s and Husserl’s insights into time consciousness, phenomenological psychopathologists placed temporality at the heart of their clinical explorations, which looked at mental disturbances mostly as desynchronisations of the subject. I reckon that one of the best examples of this interdisciplinary blending between psychiatry and phenomenological thought is *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies* (1933) by Minkowski, French psychiatrist of Jewish-Polish origin, who became an exponential figure of the European psychiatric panorama of the first half of last century. Inspired by Bergson’s ideas, in *Lived Time*, Minkowski identified the subject’s loss of time consciousness as the main cause for the self’s misperception of reality. He was convinced that a sequence of psychotic manifestations could be apprehended and studied “more thoroughly from the vantage of the phenomenon of time”¹⁰⁶ which, recalling Bergson, Minkowski defined as the “‘fluid mass,’ that shifting, mysterious, imposing, and mighty ocean that I see everywhere around me when I think about time”.¹⁰⁷

Stephen Kern observes that Minkowski’s clinical investigations into the human mind “applied the phenomenological method to understand patients who had acute psychotic disorder and could not reconstruct their lives genetically or historically as the psychoanalytic method required”.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² F. Leoni, “Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychoanalysis, in G. Stanghellini et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, cit., pp. 1042-1052, p. 1042.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ G. Stanghellini et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ T. Fuchs, “Psychiatry”, cit., p. 619.

¹⁰⁶ E. Minkowski, *Lived Time. Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*, transl. N. Metzel, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1970 [1933], p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ *Idem*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 2.

Accentuating the relevance of time (and particularly of the future) to the subject's condition of being-in-the-world, Minkowski observed that every individual is supposed to have *élan vital*, to push forward, to progress towards the future, and maintained that “as soon as I think of an orientation in time, I [...] see the future open in front of me”.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, as Minkowski demonstrated, the natural orientation of the subject towards the future can be marred by the emergence of a mental disease, which may not only disrupt the self’s time sensitivity, but also fragment its sense of space. On this issue, he stressed that “pathological disorientation in time is accompanied by a disorientation in space, as if the two disorientations were only expressions of the same disorder. Thus we find them side by side in cases of mental confusion or in clouded consciousness”.¹¹⁰

Like Minkowski, who put a premium on the questions of time by assuming that psychic disorders affect the subject’s awareness of the flow of time, Freudian psychoanalysis (highly influential among modernist writers¹¹¹ on a par with the theories advanced by Bergson and James) similarly traced psychic disorders to a denied or abnormal access of the subject to the understanding of time.¹¹² Jan Campbell opens his *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life* by underscoring that “psycho-analysis is all about the individual’s experience of time, of the time of her or his life”.¹¹³ Although Freud never studied time perception in a systematic way, since his early gravitations around the unconscious, time has been a foundational element for psychoanalytic investigations into the gulfs of the mind. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud noticed that “the *rapid flux of imaginings* [original emphasis] in the dream corresponds to the *flux of ideas* [original emphasis] in the psychoses. Both are devoid of any *measure of time* [original emphasis]”.¹¹⁴ In 1920, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud insisted on the complicated relationship between time-awareness and unconscious phenomena and remarked that, in the frame of traumatic neuroses, the dream “continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster, from which he awakes in renewed terror”.¹¹⁵ As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, by repeating the exact scene of the traumatic event, dreams can disrupt the self’s sense of chronology and, like hallucinations in wakeful states, compel the individual to go back in time and relive past moments as if they were taking place once again in the present. This means that the pathological intrusion of haunting pasts into the present can compromise the subject’s possibility of glimpsing the future.

¹⁰⁹ E. Minkowski, *Lived Time*, cit., p. 38.

¹¹⁰ *Idem*, pp. 13-14.

¹¹¹ See P. Childs, *Modernism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017, p. 59.

¹¹² G. Pulli, *Freud e Minkowski. L'inconscio e il tempo*, Liguori Editore, Napoli, 2008, p. 35.

¹¹³ J. Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life. Durations and the Unconscious Self*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. ix.

¹¹⁴ S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, First Part, Standard Edition*, vol. 4, Hogarth Press, London, 1900, p. 101.

¹¹⁵ S. Freud, “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*”, in *Standard Edition*, vol. 18, Hogarth Press, London, 1942, pp. 1-64, p. 9.

From this perspective, I look at psychoanalysis, “probably the most significant mentalist school” by the interwar years,¹¹⁶ as a discipline pursuing the restoration of the order of the countless temporalities that intersect the human mind. Due to the fact that reality (the present) and fantasy (the past and the future) respond to distinct flows of time, when the dualism between reality and fantasy dissolves, the subject’s perception of time is severely jeopardised. Campbell asserts that, in mental health states, we situate ourselves “between dream and actual worlds, but when the translation or flow between virtual and actual becomes stuck we suffer mental illness”.¹¹⁷ Letícia Glocer Fiorini and Jorge Canestri stress that, “while we do not ignore the ‘psychological time arrow’, no doubt distinguishing past, present, and future, psychoanalysis reveals that, in analytic experience, time acquires diverse formations in which these distinctions become more complex”.¹¹⁸ For several years, Freud regarded psychoanalysis as an archaeological exercise of retrieval from the self’s past; yet, he did not fail to recognise that the subject has to confront with a huge number of diverse orders of time – e.g., alienation, sense of dis-continuity through time, anxiety about what comes next, morbid repetitions, birth trauma, failed projections, haunting memories, etc. – that could be grouped together under two umbrella terms: ‘memory’ and ‘desire’, psychic phenomena that are imperative for the individual’s self- and world-representations in a specific ‘now’ in time.¹¹⁹

Modernism and Temporal Experience: Mapping Internal Time(s) in Literature

The dense network of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century philosophical and clinical explorations of time and its perception illustrated so far provided European modernist writers with fertile ground for their works. Responding to the philosophical and clinical insights into time, time awareness, and time disorders, much modernist literature – with the same vigour and impetus of other artistic expressions – brought additional perspectives and further creative ferment around the notion of time. Looking at some of the most widely-read works of literature published in those decades, an aesthetics centred on time becomes evident: as Kylie Valentine has emphasised, time “was central to modernism”.¹²⁰ In this frame, some examples are *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) by H. G. Wells, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913) by M. Proust, *The Good Soldier* (1915) and *Parade’s End* (1924) by F. M. Ford, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) by Rebecca West, *Women in Love* (1920) by D. H. Lawrence, *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) by J.

¹¹⁶ K. Valentine, *Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry and Modernist Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ J. Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life*, p. 52.

¹¹⁸ L. G. Fiorini, J. Canestri (eds), *The Experience of Time. Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, Karnac Books, London, 2009, p. xxvi.

¹¹⁹ A. Sabbadini (ed.), *Il tempo in psicoanalisi*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1979, pp. 74-75.

¹²⁰ K. Valentine, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

Joyce, *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) by I. Svevo, *Der Zauberberg* (1924) by T. Mann, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *The Waves* (1931) by V. Woolf, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by W. Faulkner, *In Parenthesis* (1937) by David Jones, *Tropismes* (1939) by Nathalie Sarraute, or, finally, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943), a singular tribute to the nature of time and its different shapes, perhaps the highest expression of the Western modernist adoration of time and its manifestations.

Concentrating his attention on the literary works produced in the years of high modernism, in his thought-provoking essay "The Time-Mind of the Twenties", Levenson observes that it is evident that, from the mid-1910s onwards, in Europe time became "such a dominant concern that it can be taken as a cultural signature".¹²¹ Levenson maintains that, in the period after the Great War, time and its psychic dynamics "ceased to be a background for literary events, an invisible medium surrounding the enactment of a plot. It became rather a fully thematised subject in its own right".¹²² At the same time, looking at the forms and themes of several of the most widely known texts appeared between the two global conflicts, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, "it is clear that the modernist aesthetic called attention to itself not only as a vehicle for experiencing and moving in time, but also as a technique for rethinking that experience and movement".¹²³

In line with Levenson, Dayton Kohler assumes that the evident concern of many modernist writers about the choreographies of time in the character's mind represents "a natural outgrowth of the modern subject, a conscious awareness of the separateness and togetherness of events"¹²⁴ that combine to form the bedrock of human existence. A careful analysis of European literature of the first half of the twentieth century shows that a large body of works that flooded the European literary market in those years forced the polymorphous and captivating nature of time into a position it had never occupied before.¹²⁵ By shining a spotlight on subjective temporalities, on the tortuousness of internal chronologies, on time disorders, and on how present time mingles with time(s)-gone and time(s)-to-come, much European modernist literature gave internal chronologies a central position in its narrative fabric.

Annoyed by this rampant passion for time, in *Time and Western Man* (1927), the English writer and critic Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) commented on the inordinate adoration – time-cult or time-obsession – of time and time convolutions of many of his contemporaries. Taking Marcel Proust and James Joyce as icons of the modernist mania for charting internal time maps, Lewis emphasised that

¹²¹ M. Levenson, "The Time-Mind of the Twenties", cit., p. 197.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ C. M. Tung, *Modernism and Time Machines*, cit., pp. 1-2.

¹²⁴ D. Kohler, "Time in the Modern Novel", *The English Journal*, 37:7, 1948, pp. 331-340, p. 333.

¹²⁵ M. Levenson, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

both Proust and Joyce exhibited “the exasperated time-sense of the contemporary man of the industrial age”.¹²⁶ In a chapter entitled ‘An Analysis of the Mind of James Joyce’, Lewis labelled Joyce’s masterpiece, *Ulysses*,

a *time-book* [original emphasis]; and by that I mean that it lays its emphasis upon, for choice manipulates, and in a doctrinaire manner, the self-conscious sense of time, that has now been erected into a universal philosophy. This it does beneath the spell of a similar creative impulse to that by which Proust worked.¹²⁷

Lewis intended to “unmask the will [...] behind the Time-philosophy”¹²⁸ that was spreading in the years following World War I and denounced the misleading influence exerted by “the time-obsessed flux of Bergson”,¹²⁹ which, in his view, had conspired side by side with Einsteinian physics to generate among European writers an obsession with the phenomenology of inner temporalities.¹³⁰ From Lewis’ standpoint, “a sick anxiety directed to questions of time”¹³¹ had percolated among Europeans.

Offering a very wide range of narratives that tackle the mysterious disjunction between internal and external times, the (mal)functions of memory, time-(un)awareness, and self-temporalisation, a considerable portion of European modernist literature plunges readers into pathological mindscapes, where the order of time is partially or completely dismantled. Writing about what Lewis called the “time-mind” in the throes of the worst period in human history meant for writers interrogating the disorders of the character’s internal chronologies: the overwhelming trauma of the past, the fading away of any possible evolution in the future, the senseless rambling of humanity through time, the pointlessness and meaninglessness of human existence. In this frame, I look at the unhinged Captain Chris Baldry in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*, the cracked Septimus Warren Smith, the World-War-One veteran consumed by war neurosis in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, or the disoriented Christopher Tietjens in *Parade’s End* by Ford as icons of a society that, in Cioran’s terms, discerned in each moment “its exhaustion, its death-rattle, and not the transition to the next moment”.¹³² Chris, Septimus, Christopher, and the wounded post-war society that they typify could only generate “dead

¹²⁶ W. Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1927, p. 101.

¹²⁷ *Idem*, p. 100.

¹²⁸ *Idem*, p. 8.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ J. G. Mansell, “Sound and the Cultural Politics of Time in the Avant-garde: Wyndham Lewis’s Critique of Bergsonism”, in A. Gašiorek, A. Reeve-Tucker, N. Waddell (eds), *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, 2011, pp. 111-125, p. 111.

¹³¹ W. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹³² E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1970, p. 174.

time, wallowing in the asphyxia of becoming”.¹³³ New narrative strategies were needed to represent the perception of time of “a society struggling to understand its position within the chaotic, blood-blurred map the Great War had made of recent history”.¹³⁴

Hundreds of thousands of minds lost their temporal coordinates in the havoc wreaked by the bomb blasts, which made the pillars of the world tremble and fall during the first half of the twentieth century. While the monstrous warfare employed during the Great War – and later in World War II – was meant to showcase the astonishing technological progress of the nations involved in the conflicts, the other side of the coin did not take long to display the boundless ontological and environmental desolation inherent in war. A clear picture of the inner and outer devastation wrought by those gory decades is offered by *The Waste Land* (1922), a long poem written within the walls of a sanatorium in Switzerland by a disoriented poet struggling to recover his mental stability. Magnifying a generalised passion for the dynamics of time, its perception, and, more importantly, for time disorders, the belligerent climate of the First and the Second World Wars ravaged the architecture of every external and internal time. The US historian Robert William Rennie observes that *chronos* “was redefined within the confines of an incredibly dangerous environment, where months represented epochs and the tediousness of a long fight could be punctuated by extraordinary moments of *kairos*, where minute decisions could mean the difference between life and death”.¹³⁵ With their raw images of environmental devastation, ontological annihilation, and psychological derangement, the poems of Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), or Charles Sorley (1895-1915) provide harrowing accounts of what living and experiencing time was like during the conflicts.

If ill and disabled bodies became, as Michael Davidson notices, “a cultural sign” for European modernism,¹³⁶ the same did sick and feeble minds. The dehumanising impact of the war triggered a “fragmentation, passivization, and sense of depletion” in society, fuelled the emergence of feelings of “loss of the self’s sense of unity”,¹³⁷ and caused a dramatic accumulation of psychiatric casualties within and without the armies.¹³⁸ Anxiety, hysteria, war neuroses, neurasthenia, imbecility, dementia, schizophrenia, *alienatio mentis*, and other forms of mental disturbances turned into hallmarks of European modernism. In his essay on modernist aesthetics and cognitive disabilities, Joseph Valente claims that mental disturbances such as autistic spectrum disorder, insanity, traumatic derangement,

¹³³ E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time*, cit., p. 174.

¹³⁴ R. Stevenson, *Reading the Times*, cit., p. 79.

¹³⁵ L. Halewood, A. Luptak, H. Smyth (eds), *War Time. First World War Perspectives on Temporality*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, p. 128.

¹³⁶ M. Davidson, *Invalid Modernism*, cit., pp. 28.

¹³⁷ L. Sass, *Madness and Modernism. Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, p. 15.

¹³⁸ *Idem*, p. 336.

and neurological illnesses identified with Western modernity and that modernism figured “such conditions as the source of legitimate alternative styles of being, vision, and experience”.¹³⁹ Valente adds that “modernism must be counted a seminal moment in the cultural representation of cognitive disability”,¹⁴⁰ and points out that mental disorders came to be “full-fledged literary subjects under the modernist aegis”.¹⁴¹ In Valente’s view, modernism constituted the literary movement that displayed cognitive disorders “as a distinct estate or cluster of conditions that subtends a legitimate alternative perspective on and experience of the everyday”.¹⁴²

In line with Valente, Valentine affirms that, even though “the connection between madness and creativity is not unique to modernism”, this cultural movement saw a new and energetic “aspiration to madness”.¹⁴³ Valentine claims the existence of a close relation between modernist writing and insanity, what she has labelled a “formal resemblance between modernist writing – dislocation, fragmentation, depersonalisation, dissociation – and phenomenological descriptions of madness”.¹⁴⁴ Valentine conceives European modernism as a response to the development of clinical disciplines involved in the study of mental pathologies and remarks that, from a historical perspective, modernism is a cultural phenomenon that is coincident with the emergence of psychoanalysis, a moment in the history of mental medicine when “significant and historically unprecedented creative interest was invested in madness”, and, curiously enough, a moment in history in which a multitude “of artists and intellectuals were recognised as mad”.¹⁴⁵

With the aim of narrating the psychological instability that consumes their characters from within, several modernist writers opted, as Deborah Parsons maintains, for “introspective narratives full of temporal dislocations, associative images and ellipses” that “compare strikingly, for example, with the symptoms of war neuroses and hysteria (amnesia and repetitive memory disorders, fragmented consciousness, paralysis or loss of speech, hypersensitivity and emotional apathy)”.¹⁴⁶ Depicting traumatised and pathological minds meant charting the disorders and dysfunctions of the character’s time sensitivity. What often comes to the fore in modernist literature is not the description on the writer’s part of the undisturbed flow of the character’s consciousness along the psychological arrow of time. Quite the opposite. Acting “as a particularly pertinent means of expressing”¹⁴⁷ the external

¹³⁹ J. Valente, “Modernism and Cognitive Disability: A Genealogy”, cit., p. 390.

¹⁴⁰ *Idem*, p. 379.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ K. Valentine, *Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry and Modernist Literature*, cit., p. 99.

¹⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 100.

¹⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ D. Parsons, “Trauma and War Memory”, in L. Marcus, P. Nicholls (eds), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, cit., pp. 175-196, p. 179.

¹⁴⁷ U. Bear, “Modernism and Trauma”, in A. Eysteinsson, V. Liska (eds), *Modernism, vol. I*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007, pp. 307-318, p. 307.

and internal devastation caused by the unspeakable destructiveness of the two World Wars and as “a kind of post-traumatic discourse”,¹⁴⁸ much European modernist writing explored the self’s “spiritual and emotional wastelands”¹⁴⁹ and the disorders of time that affect the mind of the character.

In “Schizophrenia, Modernism, and ‘Creative Imagination’”, the US psychologist Louis Sass enumerates among the recurring features of the Western modernist stance the loss of the “worldhood of the world”, a pervasive detachment or emotional distancing, and the loss of the subject’s sense of the temporal flow:¹⁵⁰ hopes were swept away, memories obliterated, presents annihilated, minds spoiled, temporalities undone. Frequently afflicted with time disorders, the mind of several modernist characters crumbles under the weight of traumatic pasts and haunting memories, anxiety and the disappearance of any future prospects, the conflict between internal and external time(s), or the loss of any ability to localise oneself in time. Modernist narratives, pathologies of the mind, and disrupted internal chronologies often became an inseparable trio. As a matter of fact, I notice that, with greater intensity from the 1920s, European authors often implemented what I regard as a practice of chrono-pathologisation. I think that this term can in some way delineate one of the primary missions of several works published between and soon after the two global wars: the representation of time in its most varied and distorted manifestations at a psychic level.

Beckett, Bion, and the Early-Twentieth-Century Enthusiasm for Internal Time(s)

Moving slightly away from the circle of writers that are customarily associated with the literary milieu of European (high) modernism, my readings and re-readings of Samuel Beckett’s literature and Wilfred R. Bion’s trilogy, *A Memoir of the Future*, have often made me think of the tendency of many European modernist writers to observe and portray the time-mind and its disorders. The great attention that Beckett and Bion paid to the gears of internal time(s) leads me to hypothesise the existence of a *fil rouge* that links the artistic production of Beckett and Bion to the modernist interest in exploring time, time awareness, and its disturbances. Like in several works published after the Great War, in Beckett’s and Bion’s works, questions of time and time (mis)perception occupy a prominent position. In this frame, I look at the works of Beckett and Bion as exploratory journeys into the character’s psyche and as detailed descriptions of its knotty relationships with time.

Nevertheless, I am aware that, especially in Bion’s case, the fact of juxtaposing his work to the modernist literary canon is quite hazardous. In fact, my intention is not to discuss whether Beckett

¹⁴⁸ U. Bear, “Modernism and Trauma”, cit., p. 307.

¹⁴⁹ D. Parsons, “Trauma and War Memory”, cit., p. 178.

¹⁵⁰ L. Sass, “Schizophrenia, Modernism, and the ‘Creative Imagination’: On Creativity and Psychopathology”, *Creativity Research Journal*, 13:1, 2000-2001, pp. 55-74, p. 63.

and Bion can or cannot be regarded as modernist writers. What I wish to emphasise is that, profoundly touched by the annihilation and psychic fragmentation caused by the war and inspired by the cult of time consciousness and its dysfunctionalities that spread during the first decades of the last century, Beckett and Bion devoted a considerable portion of their works to narrating the time of the mind, haunting pasts, chronic presents, and frightening futures. After providing an overview of the clinical dealings that bound Beckett and Bion for nearly two years (1934-1935), I wish to interrogate the familiarity of the two authors with modernist literary aesthetics and their proximity to early-twentieth-century investigations into time, which arguably constituted the foundations on which these two men built their interest in the choreographies of the time-mind and its pathological articulations.

As for their clinical relationship, what in the mid-1930s brought Beckett and Bion together was a psychoanalytic session, the first of a long series: a hundred and thirty-two meetings followed that initial encounter. In those years, psychoanalysis was frowned upon in Ireland, therefore early in 1934 Arthur Geoffrey Thompson (1905-1976),¹⁵¹ a childhood friend of Beckett, encouraged the latter – twenty-seven at that time – to move to London to undergo psychological treatment at the Tavistock Clinic in Malet Place. This was an awful period for Beckett, “in every way psychologically and emotionally as well as financially”.¹⁵² A series of circumstances had pushed him further and further into a psychic abyss: teaching made Beckett terribly depressed and apathetic; the death in 1933 of his beloved father, William Beckett, had left him mentally destroyed and awfully miserable; lastly, his morbid attachment to his depressed and cantankerous mother, Maria Jones Beckett, whom he detested but could not do without, was definitely not beneficial to his fragile health.¹⁵³ Victim of nocturnal panic attacks, recurrent choking sensations, and obsessed with the dilemma and meaninglessness of existence, Beckett suffered from “severe anxiety complicated by depression”.¹⁵⁴

At the Tavistock Clinic, the stronghold of British psychoanalysis, Beckett was directed to Wilfred Ruprecht Bion, a budding therapist who was taking his first steps in the universe of psychoanalysis. Patient and therapist met three to four times per week. Beckett respected Bion and the two seemed to have much in common. Like Beckett, Bion was an intellectual, an excellent athlete in rugby and swimming, he had taught History and French and was not a ‘true-born’ Englishman. In fact, while Beckett was a native of Ireland, Bion came from India: he had been born in 1897 in Muttra, in the

¹⁵¹ Like Beckett, Arthur G. Thompson attended Portora Royal School. In 1928, he qualified in medicine at Trinity College, Dublin. Thereafter, he became Rockefeller Research Fellow in biochemistry, working mainly in London and Paris. He went back to Ireland in 1930, where he became physician at The Royal City of Dublin Hospital. In 1934 he returned to London, where he began to work at Bethlem and Maudsley Hospitals.

¹⁵² J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett*, Bloomsbury, London, 1996, p. 174.

¹⁵³ D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 51.

¹⁵⁴ D. Bair, *Samuel Beckett. A Biography*, Jonathan Cape Ltd, London, 1978, p. 174.

United provinces of India, where several generations of his family had been serving the Empire in the name of Queen Victoria.¹⁵⁵

In *Damned to Fame*, James Knowlson suggests that Beckett and Bion's "relationship was an unusually friendly one for therapist and analysand".¹⁵⁶ Beckett initially recognised the importance of Bion's help and the positive impact that the treatment was having on him.¹⁵⁷ In effect, he was soon absorbed in the psychoanalytic tradition: he began to read William Osler's *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* (1892), Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (1924), Robert S. Woodworth's *Contemporary School of Psychology* (1931), Karin Stephen's *Psychoanalysis and Medicine: A Study of the Wish to Fall Ill* (1933), and took a great deal of notes on Ernest Jones' *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (1948) and *Treatment of Neuroses* (1963).¹⁵⁸ The most incisive moment of Beckett and Bion's relationship was a lecture held by Carl Gustav Jung on 2 October 1935 at the Institute of Psychological Medicine in London, to which Beckett was invited by Bion himself. Jung's lecture remained in the mind of the Irish author for the rest of his life: in a letter to the British philosopher John O. Wisdom (1904-1993) dated 8 January 1985, at the age of seventy-eight, Beckett admitted that he remembered "Bion from the mid-30s when he helped me get the better of nocturnal terrors. He smuggled me once into a lecture by Jung for specialist[s] only".¹⁵⁹

Although Beckett was aware of his psychological condition and displayed an initial confidence in the treatment proposed by Bion, the Irish author grew progressively hostile to his therapist and their relationship turned into a "never-ending squabble".¹⁶⁰ On this issue, Connor states that "Beckett and Bion were both intractable characters who encountered and provoked considerable resistance in each other".¹⁶¹ Similarly, Anzieu suggests that Bion could hardly tolerate the fact of dealing with a patient that seemed to be too similar to himself.¹⁶² On the other hand, prejudiced against the validity of the therapy and unwilling to "give to Bion's dicta too much importance",¹⁶³ Beckett would later hardly

¹⁵⁵ W. R. Bion, *All My Sins Remembered. Another Part of a Life*, Karnac Books, London, 1985, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., p. 176.

¹⁵⁷ In a letter dated 27 January 1934 addressed to his cousin, Morris Sinclair, Beckett wrote: "three times per week I give myself over to probing the depths with my psychiatrist, which has already, I think, done me some good, in the sense that I can keep calmer, and that the panic attacks in the night are less frequent and less acute". See M. Dow Fehsenfeld, L. More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2016, p. 183. In 1935, in a letter of 20 July to Bennett Simon, who introduced himself to Samuel Beckett as an analyst with a keen interest in literature and, more specifically, with a great passion for Beckett's work, Beckett remembered Bion and wrote: "we had a good relationship and I think of him with gratitude for his help at a difficult time". See G. Craig, M. Dow Fehsenfeld, D. Gunn, L. More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1966-1989*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2016, p. 659.

¹⁵⁸ I. Miller, *Beckett and Bion. The (Im)Patient Voice in Psychotherapy and Literature*, Karnac Books, London, 2013, p. 5.

¹⁵⁹ G. Craig et al. (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1966-1989*, cit., p. 650.

¹⁶⁰ D. Bair, *A Biography, Samuel Beckett*, cit., p. 197.

¹⁶¹ S. Connor, "Beckett and Bion", *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 17:1-2, 2008, pp. 9-34, p. 10.

¹⁶² D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 69.

¹⁶³ D. Bair, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

ever lose one single occasion to comment on the dangerousness of psychoanalysis. Anthony Cronin (1928-2016) has noticed that Beckett “would look back on the London period without any great satisfaction”,¹⁶⁴ even if the novel he was writing in those months in London – *Murphy* (1938) – had somehow benefited from the therapeutic sessions with Bion.

Beckett was probably expecting too much and too quickly from his therapist and the treatment itself. In early October 1935, Beckett wrote to Thomas McGreevy (1893-1967), Beckett’s close friend and poet: “I don’t think I shall go on with the analysis after Xmas. I don’t expect the troubles I hoped first & foremost to get rid of via analysis will be gone then any more than they are now. Tant pis. I must use me to them”.¹⁶⁵ Deirdre Bair, Beckett’s first biographer, reported that every time that Beckett felt he was somehow improving, “his heart pounded erratically, he was unable to breath and he suffered agonizing pains in his chest”.¹⁶⁶ A few weeks before the end of 1935, Beckett informed Bion in no uncertain terms of his irrevocable decision to quit the treatment: the “London torture”,¹⁶⁷ as the US psychologist Ian Miller labels it, was finally over.

While after the end of the therapy Beckett referred to Bion on a few occasions in his correspondence,¹⁶⁸ the British analyst never again mentioned Beckett directly, at least as far as I have been able to ascertain. Nonetheless, despite this detachment, scholars agree that Beckett and Bion’s clinical experience had a remarkable impact on both men. In *Beckett’s Books*, Matthew Feldman contends that for several scholars, “this period is understood as pivotal to their development and later fame”.¹⁶⁹ As for Beckett, Phil Baker stresses that Beckett’s early works are drenched in “the debris of psychoanalytic discourse”¹⁷⁰ and that “psychoanalytic material can be said to be present, in Beckett’s work, in a fully ‘literary’ manner”.¹⁷¹ Likewise, Bion’s career as psychoanalyst and writer was significantly marked by his sessions with Beckett, in whom Bion “must have discovered a great

¹⁶⁴ A. Cronin, *Samuel Beckett. The Last Modernist*, Flamingo, London, 1997, p. 222.

¹⁶⁵ M. Dow Fehsenfeld, L. More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, cit., p. 283.

¹⁶⁶ D. Bair, *A Biography, Samuel Beckett*, cit., p. 197.

¹⁶⁷ I. Miller, *Beckett and Bion*, cit., p. 201.

¹⁶⁸ In a letter to John O. Wisdom of 2 October 1985, at the age of seventy-nine, Beckett wrote: “my analysis with W. B. was I think in 1934. [...] I liked Bion & got on well with him. But feeling rather worse than better I called a halt after 4 or 5 months. Improvement however ensued not long after, as apparently is not unusual, and the alarming symptoms which had led me to analysis (on Geoffrey’s advice) disappeared never to recur. Treatment once terminated I lost all touch with Bion”. See G. Craig et al. (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1966-1989*, cit., p. 662. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasising that, in contrast to what Beckett wrote to J. O. Wisdom, Bair reported that, after the end of his treatment with W. R. Bion, Beckett was far from cured of his psychological disorders: “once again he withdrew from society. [...] He spent his days sitting in his darkened study [...]. He knew he was reverting to the automatous state which first drove him to seek help, but he was powerless to stop himself. Independently of his mother’s constant harping, he was forced to concede that his residence in London had been a waste of time and money”. See D. Bair, *A Biography. Samuel Beckett*, cit., p. 215.

¹⁶⁹ M. Feldman, *Beckett’s Books. A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett’s ‘Interwar Notes’*, Continuum, London and New York, 2006, p. 85.

¹⁷⁰ P. Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, Macmillan Press, London and New York, 1997, p. xi.

¹⁷¹ *Idem*, p. 172.

deal of himself”,¹⁷² as Anzieu stresses. For several months after the end of their clinical relationship, Bion tried to convince Beckett to resume the therapy. In a letter to McGreevy dated 22 December 1936, Beckett remembered his “ultimately departure” from Bion and reported that, still one year after the therapy, Bion looked “forward to getting his hooks into me again”.¹⁷³ Bennett Simon assumed that Beckett and Bion’s therapy is indeed an instance in which “a patient made a profound impact on an analyst, and the analyst spent the rest of his professional career working on, or working out, those personal and theoretic (or theoretic-clinical) issues posed by the work with the patient”.¹⁷⁴

In this regard, Connor contends that “the meeting between Beckett and Bion was a coincidence of prospects, as the path of the man who still had it in him to be Samuel Beckett converged with that of the man who had yet to become Wilfred Bion”.¹⁷⁵ Commenting on the professional and personal relationship between Beckett and Bion, Miller maintains that several issues that were later developed and deepened by Bion’s psychoanalysis can be traced back to Bion’s work with his patient zero.¹⁷⁶ Miller suggests that,

in Beckett’s particular combination of disturbance, somatising, furious silences, boringness, limpness, thought disruption, intellectual power, and the power ability to project, in the necessity of making the patient part of his own subjectivity to the extent of recasting the case as fiction [...], and in the effect on his own thinking and feeling, Bion found the patient zero of postmodern psychoanalysis. That is to say, Bion found himself in this patient, even perhaps to the extent of overwriting the patient’s actual story.¹⁷⁷

Miller insists that “Bion apparently experienced Beckett as profoundly entangled with himself”,¹⁷⁸ while for Beckett “the experience of the London torture gave him an experience of an adversary who provided support through endurance, would not fight and would not run away”,¹⁷⁹ as in the case of the tragicomic and pathologically obsessive relationship that unites the vagabond-couple in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Vladimir and Estragon, or Hamm and his shabby servant, Clov, in *Endgame* (1957).

In an attempt at identifying analogies between Beckett’s and Bion’s works, Feldman suggests that Beckett’s influence on Bion was not that significant during the therapy.¹⁸⁰ Feldman states that, in the

¹⁷² D. Anzieu, “Beckett and Bion”, *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 16, 1989, pp. 163-169, pp. 163-164.

¹⁷³ M. Dow Fehsenfeld, L. More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, cit., p. 402.

¹⁷⁴ B. Simon, “The Imaginary Twins”, cit., p. 331.

¹⁷⁵ S. Connor, “Beckett and Bion”, cit., p. 11.

¹⁷⁶ I. Miller, *Beckett and Bion*, cit., p. 201.

¹⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 202.

¹⁷⁸ *Idem*, p. 211.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁰ M. Feldman, *Beckett’s Books*, cit., p. 93.

mid-1930s, Bion was too concentrated on his professional formation and wartime research “to show any great harmony with Beckett’s concerns”.¹⁸¹ According to Feldman, Bion’s memories of Beckett likely began to play a relevant role during the last years of Bion’s life in Los Angeles, where the British analyst lived from 1968 until he decided to return to Oxfordshire, in England, shortly before he died of myeloid leukaemia at the John Radcliffe Hospital in London on 8 November 1979.

Toward the end of his life, Bion was much less scientific, much more phenomenological and spiritual in his approach, while Beckett had of course achieved worldwide fame; and of greater importance, Bion had retired from practice and started writing his memoirs and quasi-autobiographies by the 1970s. By spending his days going back into his past, as it were, rather than in daily encounters with patients, Bion’s time with Beckett would surely have again become a subject of thought. Finally, there is obviously more experimental writing [...] and an increased attention to what might be understood as ‘mature’ Beckettian poetics [...] marking Bion’s twilight years than at any point previously.¹⁸²

Feldman argues that, it was in the final years of his life, during the writing and revision of *A Memoir*, that Bion got growingly closer to Beckett’s poetics. In addition to what Feldman states, I suggest that it was in that period that the British analyst manifested a considerable fascination with an aesthetics and epistemology of time and its perception. While Beckett expressed his devotion to the ontological implications of time throughout all his forty-five-year career,¹⁸³ Bion made it particularly explicit at the time he was composing *A Memoir of the Future*.

In light of this, I interrogate Beckett’s and Bion’s closeness to the modernist time-cult and inquire into the passion of both authors for the geographies of internal time(s). If on one hand it is easy to situate Beckett within the frame of European modernism as a literary movement, on the other hand, it is less straightforward in the case of Bion. In effect, several scholars regard Beckett as the author that, straddling the line between modernism and postmodernism, most exploited the modernist aesthetics in his works.¹⁸⁴ His passion for Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, his avowed disdain for Eliot’s and Pound’s works, his physical and intellectual closeness to Joyce, and his being a member of some of the most important Parisian cultural circles contributed – more or less significantly – to Beckett’s reception of the modernist literary tradition. In this respect, Jean-Michel

¹⁸¹ M. Feldman, *Beckett’s Books*, cit., p. 93.

¹⁸² *Ibidem*.

¹⁸³ T. Postlewait, “Self-Performing Voices: Mind, Memory, and Time in Beckett’s Drama”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 24:4, 1978, pp. 472-491, p. 474.

¹⁸⁴ P. Childs, *Modernism*, cit., p. 114.

Rabaté claims that Beckett's fiction and drama own several of the principal features of modernism and that the Irish author became a crucial figure in European late modernism,¹⁸⁵ conceived "as a post-World War II – and, above all, as a post-Holocaust – phenomenon".¹⁸⁶

On the contrary, Bion's relationship with literary modernism has hardly been explored, mainly due to the fact that he is traditionally approached in his role as a psychoanalyst. Nevertheless, looking at Bion as the author of *A Memoir of the Future*, some traces of the modernist time-cult and peculiarities of literary modernism can in fact be detected. I am aware that some critics could arguably frown upon my operation of linking Bion's trilogy to modernist literary aesthetics. On this issue, Lissa Weinstein maintains that *A Memoir* departs from the modernist traditional narrative methodology and points out that, "while modernist fiction follows the recognizable prescriptions of the drive with its rising excitement, peak and denouement", Bion's *A Memoir* tends "to ignore the conventions of the plot".¹⁸⁷ On the contrary, Alberto Meotti considers the composite architecture of Bion's trilogy from a different perspective. Implying that there is a *fil rouge* connecting Bion's trilogy and European modernism, Meotti argues that for the structure of *A Memoir* Bion drew heavily not only from Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1925), but also from the works of James Joyce.¹⁸⁸

Any doubt about Bion's familiarity with literary modernism and the modernist passion for the dynamics of internal time(s) can be dispelled if one considers, for instance, the echoing of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* throughout the entire trilogy, the recurrent use of the Joycean technique of the character's splitting in *A Memoir*, the numerous references in the trilogy to the Joycean concept of 'idées mères'¹⁸⁹ or, lastly, the great deal of passages evocative of Lewis Carroll's novels tackling the complicated nature of time, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). In this respect, Matt Ffytche highlights that, in *A Memoir of the Future* there are "running allusions to the Cheshire Cat as personalities start to dematerialise, and *The Dream* itself is framed as the continuing adventures of Alice, who seemingly wakes up from Wonderland into an even more hallucinatory confusion of dream and reality".¹⁹⁰ In addition, Anna Dartington spotlights a fascinating

¹⁸⁵ O. Beloborodova et al. (eds), *Beckett and Modernism*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁸⁶ S. Weller, "Beckett and Late Modernism", in D. Van Hulle (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015, pp. 89-102, p. 97.

¹⁸⁷ G. Civitarese (ed.), *Bion and Contemporary Psychoanalysis. Reading 'A Memoir of the Future'*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018, p. 27.

¹⁸⁸ A. Meotti, "A Dreamlike Vision", in P. Bion Talamo, F. Borgogno, S. A. Merciai (eds), *W. R. Bion. Between Past and Future*, Karnac Books, London, 2000, pp. 155-163, p. 155.

¹⁸⁹ In 'A Key', the final section of *A Memoir of the Future*, Bion specifies that 'idées mères' is "a name used by James Joyce [original emphasis]. In analysis certain ideas, whether expressed by analyst or analysand, are soon seen to provoke breeder-reactions; be it question or answer, it 'breeds' a whole range of new problems and ideas". See W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, Karnac Books, London and New York, 1991 [1975], p. 622.

¹⁹⁰ M. Ffytche, "Investigating Bion's Aesthetic Turn: *A Memoir of the Future* and the 1970s", in N. Torres, R. D. Hinshelwood (eds), *Bion's Sources. The Shaping of His Paradigms*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013, pp. 168-178, p. 176.

correlation between Wilfred R. Bion and Thomas S. Eliot. Dartington underscores that the literary style of the former can be compared to the latter's and to the way in which, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot mixes the concepts of timelessness, memory, and desire repeatedly.¹⁹¹

Insisting on Beckett's and Bion's closeness to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century interest in the ontology and epistemology of time, I wish to emphasise that Beckett and Bion could both boast a remarkable knowledge of philosophy and of investigations into time consciousness that were carried out in their days. As for Bion, James S. Grotstein asserted that he was “one of the greatest philosophers, albeit ‘amateur’, writing in psychoanalytic literature”¹⁹² of his time. “Bion’s passion for philosophy gave him an unusually broad range of knowledge for a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst”,¹⁹³ even if he tended to shroud his philosophical explorations and work on philosophy in obscurity. On the contrary, Beckett’s acquaintance of the philosophies of his time has been widely studied and discussed by scholars. In the preface to *The Shape of Chaos*, David H. Hesla remarks that Beckett’s art is essentially ontological and that the Irish author drew great inspiration “from Schopenhauer and Bergson, and that group of thinkers collected under the heading ‘Existentialist’”.¹⁹⁴ Feldman points out that “Beckett possessed an almost unparalleled first-hand knowledge of many of the major figures in Western philosophy”¹⁹⁵ and his work cannot but be an amalgam of diverse philosophies, including those early-twentieth-century philosophical thoughts centred on the nature of time and its ontological implications.

“The primary scientist and philosopher of consciousness in France and the English speaking world in the first half of twentieth century, and at the very least he outlined the central preoccupations of modernism”,¹⁹⁶ Bergson not only caught the attention of several European modernist writers, but also “infused Beckett and his work” significantly.¹⁹⁷ From 1930 Beckett studied Bergson’s philosophy: at that time Beckett was teaching at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and, during his undergraduate lectures, he often articulated the ideas of Bergson to his students.¹⁹⁸ On the other hand, as for Beckett’s reception of the philosophy of Heidegger, Shane Weller remarks that “the closer one looks the more

¹⁹¹ A. Dartington, “W. R. Bion and T. S. Eliot”, in C. Mawson (ed.), *Bion Today*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, pp. 247-254, p. 252.

¹⁹² J. S. Grotstein, *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe? A Memorial to W. R. Bion*, Karnac Books, London and New York, 1981, p. 427.

¹⁹³ N. Torres, “Intuition and Ultimate Reality in Psychoanalysis. Bion’s Implicit Use of Bergson and Whitehead’s Notions”, in N. Torres, R. D. Hinshelwood (eds), *Bion’s Sources*, cit., pp. 20-34, p. 32.

¹⁹⁴ D. H. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos. An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1971, p. v.

¹⁹⁵ M. Feldman, *Beckett’s Books*, cit, p. vii.

¹⁹⁶ S. E. Gontarski, “‘What Is to Have Been’: Bergson and Beckett on Movement, Multiplicity and Representation”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34:2, 2011, pp. 65-75, p. 74.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁸ U. Maude, “Beckett, Body and Mind”, in D. Van Hulle (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, cit., pp. 170-184, pp. 170-171.

Beckett and Heidegger come to form a strange literary-philosophical pseudocouple. For instance, both exhibit abiding concerns with what Heidegger terms ‘the basic problems of phenomenology’, namely time and temporality, perception, truth and being, and the ‘fundamental moods’ (including anxiety and boredom)”.¹⁹⁹

If Bergson and Heidegger represented two crucial figures for Beckett’s formation as intellectual, novelist and playwright, it was undoubtedly Sartre who played a role of utmost importance for Beckett. Even though he never came to be a close friend of Beckett, Sartre guided the latter through the entangled universe of early-twentieth-century phenomenology and encouraged Beckett’s passion for the notion of consciousness and for the ontological implications of time. Such was the influence of Sartre’s philosophy on Beckett’s work that several scholars agree that, for many years, it was practically impossible to conceive Beckett’s production as unrelated to existential phenomenology,²⁰⁰ whose pillars are based primarily on Sartre’s philosophy.

With regard to Bion and his knowledge of early-twentieth-century philosophies of time, it is rather difficult, as I stressed elsewhere before, to trace Bion’s explorations of the philosophy of his time. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the British analyst did not have any familiarity with the currents of phenomenology or existentialism. As Grotstein argued, some aspects of Bion’s psychoanalysis interface “with Heidegger’s concept of ‘Being’”²⁰¹ and, though Bion never explicitly referred to Heidegger or Sartre in his works, Bion “was attempting to re-position psychoanalytic thinking away from its ontic (deterministic, scientific) roots and recast it in an ontological perspective”.²⁰² With his theories of caesuras and discontinuity of the self, the O-theory, nameless dread, catastrophic change, projective identification, Bion developed what the Italian psychoanalyst Giuseppe Civitarese calls a “modern theory of temporality”,²⁰³ understood in the Heideggerian sense of primal structure both of lived time (subjective time) and of linear time (clock time).

Furthermore, insisting on Bion’s closeness to Bergson’s ideas about temporality, Nuno Torres and Robert Hinshelwood put forward the idea that, although Bion never made unambiguous mention of Bergson, some of the most central notions in Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* “are implicitly present in all of Bion’s work, starting from his 1948 paper ‘Psychiatry at a Time of Crisis’, followed by his papers ‘Experience in Groups’ (1948-1952 [1961]), and throughout his psychoanalytic works (from

¹⁹⁹ S. Weller, “Phenomenologies of the Nothing: Democritus, Heidegger, Beckett”, in U. Maude, M. Feldman (eds), *Beckett and Phenomenology*, Continuum, London and New York, 2009, pp. 39-55, p. 45.

²⁰⁰ See, for instance, U. Maude, M. Feldman (eds), *Beckett and Phenomenology*, and L. St. John Butler, *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being. A Study of Ontological Parable*, Macmillan Press, London, 1984.

²⁰¹ J. S. Grotstein, “Bion’s ‘Transformation in O’ and the Concept of the ‘Transcendent Position’”, in P. Bion Talamo et al. (eds), *W. R. Bion. Between Past and Future*, cit., pp. 117-133, p. 130.

²⁰² *Ibidem*.

²⁰³ G. Civitarese, “The Concept of Time in Bion’s ‘A Theory of Thinking’”, *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 100:2, pp. 182-205, p. 185.

1962 to 1970)".²⁰⁴ Being an undergraduate reading history and philosophy at Oxford University between 1919 and 1921, Bion surely came across Bergson and his much discussed ideas. Following his graduation at the University of Oxford, Bion spent one year (1921-1922) at the University of Poitiers, where "he might have read Bergson since the 'Bergsonian controversies' were very much alive in the intellectual circles in France at that time".²⁰⁵

The interconnections I have outlined so far between Beckett, Bion, and the early-twentieth-century enthusiasm for time perception might explain the origin of the solid engagement of the two authors with the mysterious nature of time and time perception. As for Beckett, in commenting on Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in 1930 the Irish author initiated his explorations of time – "the double-headed monster of salvation and damnation"²⁰⁶ – and asserted that "the individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours".²⁰⁷ After *Proust*, a great portion of Beckett's artistic production was devoted to a search for the nature of time and its various psychic expressions: as Carla Locatelli points out, "the expression of an irreversible and ineliminable temporality has been central to Beckett's artistic concerns since the very beginning of his literary career".²⁰⁸ Postlewait indicates that "time is the heavy medium through which the body and the mind move, and most of Beckett's characters move through it with difficulty, hence crawling and increasing immobility".²⁰⁹ Beckett's characters are often depicted as lost in time and afflicted by dysfunctional time sensitivities. Failing memories, haunting pasts, distressing futures, inability to find orientation within the flow of time, chronic and timeless presents are recognisable motifs in the work of Samuel Beckett.

The same applies to Bion. Engaged throughout all his career as a psychoanalyst in the study of the most extreme cases of mental illness (shell shock, schizophrenia and borderline disturbances), Bion often worked on the temporalities of the psyche and its disorders. Bion's interest in the convolutions of the time-mind climaxed with the writing of his trilogy. An autobiographic-fictional-dramaturgic report of his life and of the numerous theories he had been formulating throughout his long career, *A Memoir of the Future* can be conceived as an extended meditation on Bion's part on the notion of temporality, time awareness, and temporal distortions. By simply looking at the title of his work, an aesthetic and rhetoric of temporality becomes very evident. In the introduction to the Italian edition

²⁰⁴ N. Torres, "Intuition and Ultimate Reality in Psychoanalysis", cit., p. 20.

²⁰⁵ *Idem*, p. 21.

²⁰⁶ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 1.

²⁰⁷ *Idem*, pp. 4-5.

²⁰⁸ C. Locatelli, *Unwording the World. Samuel Beckett's Prose Work after the Nobel Prize*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 7.

²⁰⁹ T. Postlewait, "Self-Performing Voices", cit., p. 475.

of *A Memoir of the Future*, Francesco Carrao underlines Bion's attachment to issues of time. To him, in Bion's trilogy, "the semantic elements, Memory, Future, Dream should be conjugated together to form a 'complex conjugate point'²¹⁰ [...] from which to navigate in the flow of *Time* [original emphasis], according with the incessant courses and recursions in search of the complicate mobile equilibrium between going and returning and going again".²¹¹

To sum up, in this chapter I have looked at the first half of the twentieth century as an immense laboratory where investigations into the architecture of time and the workings of time consciousness were conducted on a massive scale. While under the lens of historians the Victorian age can be seen as a period of intensive European geographical expansion, the first decades of the twentieth century are indeed a period of conquest, not of space, but of time. Early-twentieth-century philosophy and clinical disciplines involved in the study of the human mind placed time, its measurement, perception, and disorders at the core of their theories and explorations. The ideas of Bergson and James and phenomenological and psychoanalytic explorations of the human mind and its relationships with time nourished a fervent passion among Europeans for the geographies of internal time(s).

Writers of the first half of the twentieth century warmly welcomed this philosophical and clinical enthusiasm. In fact, many works of literature that appeared in those years narrate the spectacular choreographies of time in the character's mind, in which the cathedrals of memory, the self's awareness of being in the present, and the anticipation of the future determine the unfolding of the subject's condition of being-in-the-world. In the wake of a modernist passion for exploring the time-mind and portraying it often as disordered, Beckett's and Bion's works magnified and prolonged in time the 'time-cult' dispraised by Lewis by charting the winding, treacherous, and interrupted paths of the inner chronologies of their numerous characters. Looking at Beckett and Bion as two men engaged in a long-distance dialogue and as skilful cartographers of the internal temporalities of their characters, in the following chapters I try to show that time and its iridescences at a psychic level occupy a position of prominence in the works of both authors, whose literatures appear to me portrayals of the human psyche and composite descriptions of its battles and failures against overwhelming pasts, dreadful futures, and void presents.

²¹⁰ "Complex conjugate point" is an expression that Bion borrowed from algebraic projective geometry. It designates the encounter of two points contrasting with "real and distinct" and "real and coincident". See W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 598.

²¹¹ W. R. Bion, *Memoria del futuro. Il Sogno*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 1993, p. xiii. My translation.

Chapter 2

Overwhelming Pasts. The Unbearable Burden of Memory: Trauma and Ghosts in Beckett and Bion

The past [...] follows us at every instant, all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, [...] pressing against the portals of consciousness.¹

In the mid-1880s, the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909) had been a forerunner of the experimental researches into the functioning of memory that were conducted massively at the beginning of the twentieth century. He observed that “mental states of every kind – sensations, feelings, ideas – which were at one time present in consciousness and then have disappeared from it, have not with their disappearance absolutely ceased to exist”.² In *Memory. A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* (1885), Ebbinghaus assumed that, in a certain manner, whatever we experience in our lives continues “to exist, stored up [...] in the memory”.³ In his view, memory represents a container where representations and traces of past experiences, information, and images of the past are encoded and stored for future use.

Memory plays a crucial role in the constitution of the self’s perception of being-in-time. In fact, the consciousness that the subject has of present and future time depends on her/his faculty to establish a permanent bond with her/his lived time(s). In line with Ebbinghaus, in the foreword to Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1907), the US philosopher Irwin Edman pointed out that “memory is life

¹ H. L. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, transl. A. Mitchell, Random House, New York, 1944 [1904], p. 7.

² H. Ebbinghaus, *Memory. A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*, transl. H. A. Ruger and C. E. Bussenius, Columbia University, New York, 1913 [1885], p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*.

cumulated”,⁴ an instrument of the brain that ensures a continuity of the self within the temporal flow. Edman argued that “memory is the living reality, the past felt”,⁵ and it is by means of memory that, to borrow from the US historian and geographer David Lowenthal, we are able to “recover consciousness of former events, distinguishing yesterday from today, and confirm that we have experienced a past”.⁶

Keeping in the background Freud’s and Pierre Janet’s musings on memory, Deborah Parsons asserts that the correct functioning of memory consists in the self’s awareness of being in the present while performing “an act of self-representation”⁷ by recounting the story of its past. This definition outlines a non-diseased memoryscape. Nevertheless, the recollection of the near or far past is not viable in all cases. The individual is in fact neither immune to memory clutters (resulting from ageing, disorders of personality, or structural lesions of the brain), nor insensitive to traumatic events that can jeopardise the subject’s ability to record the passage of time. The US historian Dominick LaCapra maintains that traumatic circumstances may cause “a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it”.⁸ In addition to what LaCapra suggests, trauma can also determine a morbid incursion of the past into the subject’s present, to the point of undermining the psychological stability of the subject who is no longer able to discern the present from the past. This implies that, without memory or control over memories, the shift of the subject along what Hawking called the ‘psychological arrow’ of time is severely damaged.

With this in mind and in the light of what I have outlined in the previous chapter about the effects of war on the self’s time sensitivity, in this chapter I look into, firstly, the functioning of memory and the notion of war trauma. Secondly, I intend to consider Beckett’s and Bion’s personal involvement in the two World Wars and concentrate my attention on the depiction of dysfunctional and traumatised memories in *The End* (1960) by Beckett and in Bion’s *A Memoir of the Future*. In the second part of the chapter I instead explore the nature of the spectre, understood in this context as the product of a traumatised memory and as the inconsistent materialisation of a trauma. For this purpose, I adopt as a theoretical frame Jacques Derrida’s ideas about the phenomenology of the ghost that the French philosopher articulated in *The Specters of Marx* (1993). In conclusion, I consider Beckett’s and Bion’s engagement with ‘ghostliness’ and analyse Beckett’s *From an Abandoned Work* (1957) and some

⁴ H. L. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, cit., p. xiii.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 193.

⁷ D. Parsons, “Trauma and War Memory”, cit., p. 189.

⁸ D. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Cornell University, New York, 1998, p. 9.

passages from Bion's trilogy that deal with the spectre "in its phantomatic or errant dimension as living-dead".⁹

Memory, Trauma, and the Experience of the Past

Assuming that the adequate way of thinking of the subject's temporal flow requires an ontological apprehension of the past, in *Matter and Memory* (1896) Bergson cogitated on the dichotomy between 'perception' and 'memory'. The French philosopher claimed that, whereas perception is the psychic process that allows the subject to be aware of existing in a specific 'now' in time, memory constitutes the subject's perception as it was in a determinate moment in the past. Bergson maintained that the past is the temporal dimension "which acts no longer but which might act, and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality".¹⁰ Whenever the past intersects the present by means of one's memory, the past becomes once again a perception that affects, favourably or adversely, the subject's present. Some years later, in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson concluded that memory is "the prolongation of the past into the present, or, in a word, *duration* [original emphasis], acting and irreversible".¹¹

In line with Bergson's insights into the ontological implications of memory, in his notes on the phenomenology of memory, image consciousness, perception, and phantasy, Husserl remarked that memory consists in the consciousness that a subject possesses of gone time. As Bergson explained in *Matter and Memory*, Husserl suggested that memory is the instrument that allows not only the revival of past objects, but also the reappearance of the whole amount of sensations attached to them.¹² In fact, memory brings to the surface the past object and all feelings that were experienced by the individual in a specific moment in the past. Husserl underscored that "memory is a peculiar modification of perception"¹³ because memory "is also memory of what was perceived".¹⁴ In this respect, the suggestive episode revolving around the madeleine in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* may help figure out the involuntary process of revival of images and feelings that return from the past. The taste of the biscuit soaked in tea deletes the dividing line between past and present time and brings back to the child's memory past images and sensorial emotions that are linked to them.

⁹ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Dept, the Working of Mourning and the New International*, transl. P. Kamuf, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 184.

¹⁰ H. L. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, cit., p. 240.

¹¹ H. L. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, cit., p. 20.

¹² E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, transl. J. Barnett Brough, Springer, Dordrecht, 2005 [1898-1925], p. 367.

¹³ *Idem*, p. 345.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 370.

Nevertheless, as I have claimed before, memory is no stranger to impairments. Focusing on the ruinous effects of trauma on the mechanisms of memory, the direct involvement in (or witnessing of) traumatic events can hinder the smooth-running of one's memory. Conceived as a wound inflicted not only upon one's body but – perhaps more incisively – upon one's mind, according to the Dictionary of Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA), the term 'trauma' refers to every disturbing experience (e.g., natural disasters like earthquakes or tsunamis, or other striking events like aggressions, rapes and wars) which "results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitude, behavior, and other aspects of functioning".¹⁵ In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth stresses that the term 'trauma' applies to "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena".¹⁶

Likewise, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra comments on the shattering impact of trauma on the self's identity and asserts that "trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered".¹⁷ Expressed otherwise, trauma may cause a permanent or temporary cessation of the activities of thought that are responsible for the individual's capacity of self-location within the two existential dimensions of space and time. Caruth acknowledges that trauma compels the self to a pathological reiteration of the injurious reminiscence that provokes "a break in the mind's experience of time",¹⁸ so that past and present time mingle. As often occurs in psychopathological dysfunctions such as depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, and in other cases of psychic disabilities, in a traumatised mindscape, "the unity of temporality is devastatingly disturbed: people are frozen in an eternal present in which they remain forever trapped, or to which they are condemned to be perpetually returned".¹⁹

The US psychoanalyst and philosopher Robert D. Stolorow indicates that, in the region of trauma, all duration "collapses, past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition".²⁰ In the context of trauma, the subject can hence be partially or completely deprived of a linear sense of time. The traumatised subject comes to inhabit a temporality that is just a replica of a

¹⁵ American Psychological Association, APA Dictionary of Psychology, <https://dictionary.apa.org/trauma>. Accessed on 5 November 2021.

¹⁶ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996, p. 11.

¹⁷ D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2014, p. 41.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 61.

¹⁹ F. Breonio, "Befindlichkeit: Disposition", in G. Stanghellini et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, cit., pp. 345-354, p. 350.

²⁰ R. D., Stolorow, "A Phenomenological-Contextual, Existential, and Ethical Perspective on Emotional Trauma", in G. Stanghellini et al. (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 897-907, p. 903.

disturbing ‘yesterday’. Insisting on the effects of traumatic events on the self’s inner temporalities, in their essay “The Intrusive Past”, the Dutch psycho-traumatologists Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart argue that “traumatic memory is produced by the mechanism [...] called *restitutio ad integrum*”.²¹ This means that when one single element attached to the traumatic memory is evoked accidentally, all the other components joined to the trauma follow it and bring to the surface a set of “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences”²² that still need to be processed and digested by the subject.

This should call to mind one of the foundational principles of Freudian psychoanalysis: whole sections of an apparently obliterated past can sometimes reappear and cause a temporal dislocation in the individual. The US sociologist Richard Sennett has remarked that, in the early years of the psychological investigation of memory, physicians busy studying the human mind concentrated upon “disturbing memories, those memoires which might inhabit recall of particular or suppress stories too unsettling to recount”.²³ The first among them was Freud, who regarded memory as the gateway to the unconscious, the region of the human psyche where he placed fears, emotional conflicts, anxieties, and repressed impulses that can recur and disrupt the self’s sense of time.

In 1901, in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud stressed that “we have learned from the study of dreams and pathologic states that even what for a long time we believed forgotten may suddenly return to consciousness”.²⁴ Some years later, in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919), he defined the ‘uncanny’ element as psychologically disturbing and “undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror”.²⁵ In Freud’s view, the uncanny is the repetition of “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind” and “which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression”; in other words, the uncanny is the inconsistent apparition of “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light”.²⁶ The *re-presentation* of the uncanny element spoils the freedom of the subject to move through time and plan for the future in a productive way. Put differently, the *élan vital* of a traumatised self can be held back by what the Italian philosopher and psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti calls a ‘retrospective gaze’. Placing a siege on the present time of the individual, the ‘retrospective gaze’ makes the ‘now’ inhabited by the subject

²¹ C. Caruth (ed.), *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1995, p. 163.

²² *Idem*, p. 176.

²³ P. Fara, K. Patterson (eds), *Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 13.

²⁴ S. Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Standard Edition*, vol. 6, Hogarth Press, London, 1920, p. 135.

²⁵ S. Freud, “The Uncanny”, in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, Standard Edition*, vol. 17, Hogarth Press, London, 1919, pp. 217-256, p. 219.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 241.

“unsuitable for the production of the future as it remains imprisoned in the monotonous re-production of the past”.²⁷

Widely explored since the late nineteenth century, the notion of trauma is hardly evitable when addressing the cruel history of the first half of the twentieth century and the mind-shattering impact of the global wars. As demonstrated by the considerable number of clinical investigations into trauma carried out since the late-1910s, the experience of the global conflagrations fostered a generalised bewilderment in society. Commenting on the brutality of the Great War, in the introduction to *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*, published in 1919 by Sándor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, Ernst Simmel, and Ernest Jones, Freud wrote that, by acting on the structure of the subject’s ego, “the war neuroses, in so far as they are distinguished from the ordinary neuroses of peace-time by special characteristics, are to be regarded as traumatic neuroses whose occurrence has been made possible or has been promoted by a conflict in the ego”.²⁸ Freud noticed that, under the difficult circumstances promoted by the war, the subject finds her/himself trapped in a condition of double personality. He explained that the psychological conflict takes place “between the old ego of peace time and the new war-ego of the soldier, and it becomes acute as soon as the peace-ego is faced with the danger of being killed through the risky undertakings of his newly formed parasitical double”.²⁹ In 1920, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*, he compared the symptomatic picture of hysterics and of subjects affected by war neuroses and he concluded that the psychological instability presented by traumatised patients was more worrisome than the one presented by subjects diagnosed with hysteria.³⁰

If the inner and outer effects of the First World War had been devastating, the horrendous impact of the second global conflict exacerbated an already dire situation. World War Two announced itself as an unfathomable project of colossal dimensions. It is no surprise that the French psychiatrist Gérard Bléandonu stated that it was during “the Second World War that psychology and psychiatry began to be recognised as work of the utmost importance. The most frequent cause by far of soldiers invaliding out of the army was the significance of psychological problems”.³¹ In line with Bléandonu, Lyndsey Stonebridge claims that the Second World War – surely more intensively than any other war in the history of humanity – raised “the question of how war can be held in the mind when the mind is under siege; of what it means to experience a trauma so unrelentingly forceful [...] that it cannot be grasped consciously”.³²

²⁷ U. Galimberti, *Psichiatria e fenomenologia*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2017, p. 304. My translation.

²⁸ S. Freud, “Introduction to *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*”, in *Standard Edition*, vol. 17, Hogarth Press, London, 1919, pp. 205-210, pp. 208-209.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 209.

³⁰ S. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, cit., p. 12.

³¹ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, Other Press, New York, 1994, p. 51.

³² L. Stonebridge, “Theories of Trauma”, in M. MacKay (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 194-206, p. 204.

The US analyst Abram Kardiner (1891-1981), Freud's student in Vienna in 1921-1922, in his 1941 *Traumatic Neuroses of War*, noticed that "the modern military situation with its inexorable weapons creates more difficult situations to escape and thus activates disorganization of the ego".³³ He pointed out that the Second World War, with greater intensity than the First, "brought to the foreground the problem incidental to it":³⁴ an alarming process of dehumanisation and profound despondency not only among combatants, but also among civilians. Kardiner maintained that, "owing to the widespread aerial bombardment of urban centers, the traumatic neurosis is now no longer likely to be confined to combatants. In fact the traumatic neurosis bids to be one of the commonest neurotic disturbances in the world".³⁵ Kardiner insisted that the warfare implemented during World War Two was the main cause of the spread of what he called 'traumatic situations', whose unsettling effects on the human psyche could result in uncontrollable terror, comatose or delirious attacks, paralyses, and other sensory disorders.³⁶ Kardiner concluded that, in cases of severe trauma, such as the traumas provoked by war, the individual is "fragmented beyond recognition" and "all experiential connections which make the world an ordered place are lost".³⁷

In this scenario of total devastation, at the dawn of the Cold War, the world was a dismal wasteland struggling to make its way through the rubble left by the two World Wars. As Frank Kermode observed, the world had "suffered a Fall", it was "a world crying out for forms and stations, and for apocalypse; all it gets is vain temporality, mad, and multiform antithetical influx".³⁸ In such a climate of environmental and ontological dejection, "amid a seemingly endless proliferation of images of wounded bodies, minds, cities, and states",³⁹ the exploration of the human psyche could not refrain from considering the shadow of the past and the psychological deterioration it had brought about. Comprehending the twentieth-century mind "as one driven to the edge by the traumas of an atrocious history",⁴⁰ Stonebridge maintains that "modern war, the marriage of technology with barbarism [...], has become the highly charged emblem of a moral, psychological, and existential paralysis of thought",⁴¹ with memory counting among its primary expressions. Scholars like Caruth and LaCapra have provided ample proof that it is inconceivable to tackle the vicissitudes of twentieth-century history – at its height after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the liberation of

³³ A. Kardiner, *Traumatic Neuroses in War*, Paul B. Hoeber, New York and London, 1941, p. 70.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. v.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ A. Kardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 180.

³⁸ F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 115.

³⁹ L. Stonebridge, "Theories of Trauma", *cit.*, p. 204.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ L. Stonebridge, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

survivors from concentration camps, and the discovery of the hideous atrocities perpetuated by the Nazis – without dwelling on the phenomenon of memory, be it collective or individual.

In the wake of the early-twentieth-century interest in the notions of memory and trauma, memory and its dysfunctions began to occupy a central position in a huge body of narratives produced at that time. In the first half of the twentieth century, memory and its phenomenology became full-fledged hallmarks of European literary modernism. Indeed, a remarkable portion of literature produced between and soon after the World Wars reveals a widespread tendency among European authors to dig into the gulfs of traumatised memories, in an attempt “to come to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context”.⁴² The British historian Bill Schwarz states that at the root of the great classics of modernist aesthetics lies “a perception of temporal dislocation, in which the connections between past and present become a source, not of succor, but of heightened anxiety”.⁴³ Charting the psychological fragmentation of the subject in the present entailed a recollection of the past and a careful reflection on its ruinous effects on time sensitivity. In this context, I agree with Schwarz when he underlines that, even though in “the founding grand narratives of the modern world memory can only be grasped as dysfunctional”, it is “those forms that appear most dysfunctional that provide the most fruitful means for thinking the connections between historical time and the time of the interior life”.⁴⁴

To restrict this preoccupation with memory, its convolutions and dysfunctionalities to modernism only is nonetheless erroneous. In *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, Jeanette R. Malkin remarks that concerns about the past, memory, and its representations are not to be understood as exclusively confined to modernist aesthetics. Malkin elucidates that the modernist engagement with memory and its disorders is very detectable also in the post-Second-World-War European literary panorama. Malkin maintains that “memory has, indeed, been a constantly recurring theme”⁴⁵ until the last decades of the twentieth century and noticed that, after World War Two, “the fragmentation of the experience and the dissolution of a unified self – basic topoi of postmodern thought – banish memory from the security of individual control, rendering it sourceless, without a psychological home”.⁴⁶

In this context, I suggest that Beckett and Bion must be counted in the circle of those authors who, during the twentieth century, dedicated a considerable portion of their works to investigate the phenomenology of memory and the repercussions of the past on the psychological integrity of the

⁴² D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, cit., pp. 179-180.

⁴³ B. Schwarz, “Memory, Temporality, Modernity. *Les lieux de mémoire*”, in S. Radstone, B. Schwarz (eds), *Memory. Histories, Theories, Debates*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2010, pp. 41-58, p. 42.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 43.

⁴⁵ J. R. Malkin, *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1999, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, pp. 7-8.

self. Reflecting a pre- and post-World-War-Two European trend to probe memory and its traumas, in their works, Beckett and Bion offered an archaeological exploration of past time, of the convoluted mechanisms of recollection, and the staggering effects of trauma on the subject's time sensitivity. Frequently depicted as engulfed by the shadow of their tremendous 'yesterdays', several of Beckett's and Bion's characters mirror a society crushed by the weight of the past, in a provisional world transformed into nothing but a mere "vehicle for pain and trauma".⁴⁷

The Two World Wars and the Human Psyche: Beckett's and Bion's Perspectives

Before I concentrate on memory and trauma in Beckett's and Bion's works, I need to consider the direct involvement of the two authors in the two global conflicts. This may help to cast some light on the reasons why the phenomenology of memory occupies such a position of prominence in the works of both authors. For Beckett, the Great War did not represent a remarkable impingement for his childhood in Foxrock, Ireland. Cronin maintained that World War One "did not intrude very much on domestic life in Foxrock and had little effect on the Beckett household".⁴⁸ As for hundreds of other Irish families, for the Becketts "the most immediate concerns of the period were the limitations placed on daily necessities by the events of the war".⁴⁹ The episode that disturbed Beckett most incisively during the First World War occurred in 1916, "when his father took him to see Dublin in flames during the Eastern Uprising",⁵⁰ lasted from 24 to 29 April 1916. The chaos fuelled by the riots in Dublin led Beckett's parents to drive Frank, Samuel's brother, away from home. Frank was sent to Portora Royal School, a renowned boarding institute in Enniskillen, in the northern county of Fermanagh. Still too young, Samuel remained under the family roof until 1919, when, at the age of thirteen, he was sent to Portora too.⁵¹

While the first global conflict had only slightly beclouded his childhood in Ireland, the Second World War played a decisive role for Beckett, both as a man and as an author. After Beckett took the adamant decision to quit the treatment with Bion in December 1935, he left London and crossed over to Cooldrinagh, Ireland. That was a tremendous period for Beckett: Knowlson reported that the latter "fell ill almost immediately with an attack of pleurisy and was obliged to remain in bed for a week. This placed him in the position of being almost totally dependent on his mother who was happy nurse to him devotedly. It was an unwelcome start to his renewed stay at home".⁵² Victim of regular mental

⁴⁷ B. Schwarz, "Memory, Temporality, Modernity", cit., p. 42.

⁴⁸ A. Cronin, *Samuel Beckett. The Last Modernist*, cit., p. 33.

⁴⁹ W. Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War*, cit., p. 184.

⁵⁰ L. Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett, 1906-1946*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996, p. 12.

⁵¹ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., pp. 36-37.

⁵² *Idem*, p. 223.

and physical breakdowns, he remained in Ireland until 28 September 1936, when he decided to travel to Germany, which, though increasingly reluctant to accept foreigners, was still partially accessible at that time.

As Lois Gordon has put it, Beckett had long felt a sense of affection toward Germany and “perhaps this trip was a necessary means of verifying the increasingly terrible reports he had read about the moral descent of the German citizenry”.⁵³ Furthermore, Beckett’s pilgrimage in Germany may have also been inspired by his passion for Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Since the dawn of the 1930s, the German philosopher had provided Beckett with a system that “was remarkably coincident with his own: an essentially negative evaluation of human existence”.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, although Beckett enjoyed the cultural richness that somehow still featured the country, he remained on German soil only until mid-1937. He had a disturbing feeling that a new conflict was brewing in the distance. While he was travelling around Germany in the mid-1930s, Beckett “witnessed at first-hand the impact of anti-Semitism on individual painters whom he had met in Hamburg, persecuted simply because they were non-Aryan”.⁵⁵

The rigidity of the Germans towards the Jewish community was not unknown to Beckett. As he “travelled from city to city, he would have observed the strict enforcement of the Nuremberg laws”.⁵⁶ In *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, Mark Nixon reports that “barely a week after his arrival in Germany he noted down in his diary that he was travelling through a country that might well be at war in the near future”.⁵⁷ In a letter of 13 December 1936 to Mary Manning Howe (1905-1999), Irish novelist, film critic, and playwright, Beckett wrote: “the trip is being a failure. Germany is horrible. [...] And not a the fhart of a book beginning. The physical mess is trivial, beside the intellectual mess”.⁵⁸ At the beginning of April 1937, in the run-up to his thirty-first birthday, Beckett went back to Ireland, tottering in a “mental marasmus”,⁵⁹ awfully miserable, disgusted, and psychologically devastated.

Two years later, it was very clear to the vast majority that a massive international clash was once again inevitable. In mid-March 1939, Germany dismembered what remained of Czechoslovakia and invaded Prague immediately after. The second global conflict began on 1 September 1939, after the Nazi *Blitzkrieg* in Poland. France and Great Britain entered the war two days later, on 3 September. At that time Beckett was in Ireland, which, by decision of President Éamon de Valera (1882-1975),

⁵³ L. Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett*, cit., p. 127.

⁵⁴ M. Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries, 1936-1937*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2011, p. 9.

⁵⁵ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., p. 303.

⁵⁶ L. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁵⁷ M. Nixon, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ M. Dow Fehsenfeld, L. More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, cit., p. 397.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

would remain neutral to the conflict. What Irish people knew about the war fought on the continent was fragmentary. Cronin emphasised that, “if people in Ireland knew anything about the situation, they knew that the war would be fought in France, as the last one had been”.⁶⁰ Dismayed by de Valera’s decision to keep Ireland neutral and scornful of the risk he was about to run, Beckett crossed into France on the following day, 4 September 1939. The *drôle de guerre* lasted until June 1940, when an armistice was signed and France – by that time divided into occupied and unoccupied zones – was meant to be no longer at war. “Life was now returning normal”⁶¹ and Beckett took the decision to return to Ireland. He remained by his mother until October 1940, when the Vichy government announced the immediate implementation of the anti-Semitic laws. Worried for his numerous friends and acquaintances in Paris, Beckett went back to France.

The increasing intensification of restrictions imposed by the war encouraged the setting of a number of resistance groups throughout Europe: Beckett was no stranger to this phenomenon. Cronin maintained that in the 1940s one of the largest among French resistance cells was ‘Prosper’, “which had a certain amount of overlap with Gloria, to which Beckett properly belonged”.⁶² ‘Gloria’ was part of the British Special Operation Executive (British SOE) and received instructions directly from London. As Knowlson underlined, “‘Gloria’ was one of several specialised cells which were centred on the Parisian region but which gathered information widely over the whole area of the occupied zones. The cell grew until it had eighty members”:⁶³ Beckett was one of them; he had joined ‘Gloria’ on 1 September 1941 and his role was “vaguely called liaison or secretarial work”.⁶⁴ Further intensifications of controls from 1942 on the Nazis’ part compelled Beckett to flee. He procured false documents and made his way to Roussillon, Vaucluse, where he eventually arrived in November 1942. Wanted by the Germans since early 1943, Beckett was forced to a clandestine life in Roussillon until late 1944. He returned to Paris only in early 1945. In March, after being awarded the Croix de Guerre with gold star “by order of General Juin, the Chief of Staff, and signed by General de Gaulle as President of the Provisional French Republic”,⁶⁵ Beckett left a war-torn France and returned to his family in Ireland, where he would not stay for long.

Some months later, he in fact returned to France, to Saint-Lô, a small town in Normandy, where in June 1944 the allied bombings had killed eight thousand people and injured thousands more. Cronin reported that “the dead included many of the inmates of the mental hospital, and in a large

⁶⁰ A. Cronin, *Samuel Beckett. The Last Modernist*, cit., p. 310.

⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 317.

⁶² *Idem*, p. 328.

⁶³ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., p. 305.

⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. 307.

⁶⁵ A. Cronin, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

local jail ninety-nine prisoners who had been locked in had been burned to death".⁶⁶ The town was unrecognisable and its inhabitants – those few who remained – were in dire need of help. Gordon observed that what was left of the once-beautiful Saint-Lô was "a city of death and rubble".⁶⁷ In his correspondence, Beckett referred to Saint-Lô as "a heap of rubble, la Capitale des Ruines".⁶⁸ The buildings of the town were "nearly all levelled and the populace reeling from the air and ground assaults".⁶⁹ Gordon stated that "beneath the ruins were the dead and maimed. The town had become, in great part, a living cemetery. In such a world the survivors struggled to go on".⁷⁰

Selected as the location for the construction of a hospital, from mid-1944 the city welcomed hundreds of nurses and volunteers of the Irish Red Cross. In a letter dated 21 June 1945, Beckett informed his friend Gwynedd Reavey, first wife of the Russian-born Irish poet George Reavey (1907-1976), that he was about to travel to France "as (tenez-vous bien) interpreter-storekeeper to the Irish Red Cross Unit in Normandy".⁷¹ Shocked by the unspeakable dejection that he had encountered in Saint-Lô, in mid-1946 he submitted a typescript for Radio Éireann entitled 'The Capital of the Ruins', where not only did he comment on the construction of the Irish hospital in Saint-Lô, but also presented his disconsolate ideas about the precariousness of the world and the profound alienation that, in his view, was suffocating humanity.⁷²

In such a historical frame, as sensitive as he was, Beckett could not avoid addressing in his works the destructiveness of the past. Metaphorically speaking, he transformed his works into a field hospital crowded with invalid bodies and fractured minds. The texture of Beckett's literature is steeped in war trauma and postwar desolation is the background for nearly all his plots: "deeply touched by the nuclear age and its perception of future global crisis", Beckett "suggests global trauma in his calculated, allegorical choice of words and images".⁷³ In his in-depth historical study of Beckett's political commitment during 'the darkest hour' of Europe, William Davies identifies many common traits between Beckett's texts and the war-books that circulated copiously in the 1920s and '30s. Like several of the works of literature emerging from the dust of the First World War, Beckett's works deploy "fragmentary narratives, representatives of the disorientating effects of war in time and

⁶⁶ A. Cronin, *Samuel Beckett. The Last Modernist*, cit., p. 348.

⁶⁷ L. Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett*, cit., p. 190.

⁶⁸ G. Craig, M. Dow Fehsenfeld, D. Gunn, L. More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1941-1956*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 18.

⁶⁹ W. Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War*, cit., pp. 131-132.

⁷⁰ L. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

⁷¹ G. Craig et al. (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷² S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, Grove Press, New York, 1995, pp. 277-278.

⁷³ M. H. Tanaka, "The Global Trauma of the Nuclear Age in Beckett's Post-War Plays", in M. H. Tanaka, Y. Tajiri, M. Tsushima (eds), *Samuel Beckett and Trauma*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2018, pp. 173-193, p. 176.

space".⁷⁴ Insisting on the impact of the war in Beckett's works, Davies acknowledges that Beckett's works are replete with veterans whose bodies – "bodies that hurt, shit and bleed"⁷⁵ – carry the indelible mark of the conflict. In line with Davies, in *Modernism, War and Violence*, Marina MacKay includes the work of Beckett and his "Atomic-Age limbos"⁷⁶ among the modernist "responses to the world-shattering conditions of their times, and as works that enacted the trauma of those times".⁷⁷

If Beckett was mainly affected by the Second World War, both global conflicts had a significant impact on Bion. Nine years Beckett's senior, Bion was in fact actively involved in both World Wars. According to the Belgian psychoanalyst Rudi Vermote, they "played a major role in Bion's development as a persona, as a psychoanalyst and as a thinker".⁷⁸ Vermote emphasises that several of Bion's theoretical concepts "can only be fully understood against this background".⁷⁹ As for the Great War, in *The Long Weekend 1897-1919* (1982), Bion recorded that one morning (presumably it was mid-1915) he presented himself "at the recruiting office of the Inns of Court OTC which, being a territorial unit, had been embodied at the outbreak of the war".⁸⁰ He was standing in a queue with "similar aspiring officers and gentlemen waiting to be interviewed so that our credentials might be scrutinized".⁸¹

Although he was initially rejected by the draft office, he was able to join the army with the support of his parents on 4 January 1916, when he was "sworn in as a member of the armed forces".⁸² He was then sent to the Flanders Fields. In his war diaries he confessed that the fight that troubled him most was the Third Battle of Ypres (31 July – 10 November 1917), also known among British soldiers as 'Wipers', due to the incredible amount of rain that fell during those months. Vermote reports that during that atrocious battle "185,000 soldiers lost their lives only to win two or three kilometres. The front line was a quagmire of corpses, with a small track made of twigs bound together with wire".⁸³ Bion wrote that memories of "the menacing streets of Ypres can return to me and leave a stain of foreboding on the brightest day. [...] The scene in daylight had its peculiar horror, contrasting with the blackness of night and the unknown it covered".⁸⁴

In *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, the British analyst noted down that, when he arrived in Ypres on 31 July 1917, every moment was punctuated by the ear-splitting roar of guns all around him: "it was, of

⁷⁴ W. Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War*, cit., p. 192.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

⁷⁶ M. MacKay, *Modernism, War, and Violence*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2017, p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ R. Vermote, *Reading Bion*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, p. 213.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend, 1897-1919, Part of a Life*, Karnac Books, London, 1982, p. 105.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 111.

⁸³ R. Vermote, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁸⁴ W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 124.

course, terrific fire” and “it had begun to rain – the rain that was to wreck the whole Third Battle of Ypres and Passchendaele, although we did not know it then”.⁸⁵ Bion recounted that “the horizon was simply lit up with gun flashes and flares of all colours”.⁸⁶ Nearly a couple of months after the beginning of the battle, in late September 1917, where the English line had been initially set, “the ground was absolutely torn up, and roads were blown to pieces. No signs of trenches remained at all. The shell-holes were filled with stinking rain water”.⁸⁷ As Vermote remarks, in Ypres “the soldiers plodded through the mud amid the nauseating stench of decaying corpses, chloride and lime, seeking shelter in shell holes left by previous attacks”.⁸⁸ In *War Memoirs*, Bion offers terrifying first-person accounts of those moments on the battlefield:

Fear there certainly was; fear of fear was, I think, common to all – officers and men. The inability to admit to anyone, as there was no one to admit to without being guilty of spreading alarm and despondency, produced a curious sense of being entirely alone in company with a crowd of mindless robots – machines devoid of humanity. The loneliness was intense; I can still feel my skin drawn over the bones as if it were the mask of a cadaver. The occasional words exchanged echoed like conversation from afar. ‘Wipers’ [= Ypres, a city in Belgium], ‘Yes, the Salient’,⁸⁹ ‘Guns sound a bit frisky’, ‘Awful – but cheer up – you’ll soon be dead’. ‘You’ve said it’.⁹⁰

After he survived the atrocities of Ypres, in the following year, the Battle of Amiens (8-11 August 1918) furtherly undermined his already limping balance. In early August 1918, Bion’s “company was ordered to Amiens by General Douglas Haig as part of his offensive to clear the city”.⁹¹ Bléandonu maintains that Bion “had felt his soul, rather than his body, die after the battles of Ypres and Amiens”.⁹² In a commentary to Bion’s war diary, his second wife, Francesca, wrote that, while in the early 1970s she was preparing a typescript of Bion’s war accounts to facilitate any later readings, her husband was tempted to read some passages of his war diaries for the first time after almost fifty years. On that occasion, Francesca jotted down as follows:

⁸⁵ W. R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, Karnac Books, London, 1997, p. 17.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ W. R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, cit., p. 22.

⁸⁸ R. Vermote, *Reading Bion*, cit., p. 215.

⁸⁹ ‘Salient’ is a military term that is employed to identify a strategic triangular-shaped extension of the battlefield into the territory of the enemy. Though necessary for the army’s advance, the ‘salient’ makes the army extremely vulnerable, and this is due to the fact that, in such a way, the army can be attacked from two diverse sides simultaneously.

⁹⁰ W. R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, cit., p. 204.

⁹¹ R. Vermote, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

⁹² G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 261.

[Wilfred's] memories come flooding back, reinforcing his dislike of his personality and poor opinion of his performance as soldier. He says, ‘...I never recovered from the survival of the Battle of Amiens. Most of what I do not like of you [MYSELF] seemed to start then’. Fortunately this lack of self-esteem was offset by his pride in his family and his work as psychoanalyst – the two areas of his life that were of greater importance to him than any other.⁹³

The experience of Amiens had broken every link between him and his own self: since then Bion used to refer to himself as an “insignificant physical and moral space”.⁹⁴ Exhausted and dejected, both physically and mentally, he managed to survive the dreadful hell of Amiens and looked forward to the end of the war, although he had the feeling that the end of the Great War constituted just a new ghastly beginning.

According to Bion, the armistices that followed the Great War brought no hope. As he reported in *The Long Weekend*, by the time the Great War came to an end, he had already perceived that something new, unsettling, unknown, and possibly worse, was moving in the shadow. He thought that, behind the Christmas celebrations that followed the end of the Great War, something devilish was already silently at work. “Nuclear fission or, even more potent, some germ being carefully tended and nurtured by biologists of marvellous skill and foresight”:⁹⁵ the menace of World War II was already looming on Bion’s horizon. The closing lines of *The Long Weekend* clearly reveal Bion’s ingrained pessimism about the future, a pessimism which is the result of “the post-traumatic feelings of many survivors of whatever war who lived the misery and risked their lives”.⁹⁶ In this regard, Francesca Bion noticed that her beloved husband

had entered the army at the age of eighteen soon after leaving school; he was catapulted, like millions of others, from schoolboy to combatant soldiers in a few months. The horror of that war inflicted on such young men did not contribute to their maturity. It destroyed their youth and made them ‘old’ before their time. Bion’s remarkable physical survival against heavy odds concealed the emotional injury which left scars for many years to come. (It was clear that that war continued to occupy a prominent position in his mind when, during the first occasion we dined together, he spoke movingly of it as if compelled

⁹³ W. R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, cit., p. 198.

⁹⁴ W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 279.

⁹⁵ *Idem*, p. 287.

⁹⁶ R. Vermote, *Reading Bion*, cit., p. 227.

to communicate haunting memories.) The nightmare to which he refers [...] still visited him occasionally throughout his life. He grew old and remembered.⁹⁷

During the years that followed the end of the Great War, Bion succeeded in graduating twice: in 1922 he received a BA degree in History at Queen's College, Oxford. Two years later, he graduated in medicine at University College, London, where he obtained a gold medal for clinical surgery.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, he became interested in psychoanalysis. He began to attend quite assiduously the Tavistock Clinic in London, where he “was employed initially as an assistant doctor, as he had not yet had sufficient experience in psychiatry and psycho-analysis”.⁹⁹ There he met several of the most prominent figures of the psychoanalytic panorama of those years: James A. Hadfield (1882-1967), Ernest Jones (1878-1958), Melanie Klein (1882-1960), Emmanuel Miller (1891-1951), and John Rickman (1891-1951), Bion’s analyst just before the beginning of World War Two.

The outbreak of the second global conflict in 1939 led Bion to join the army for a second time and “devote himself wholeheartedly to the defence of his country”.¹⁰⁰ This time he did not fight in the front line; instead, he remained in the rear and offered psychological rehabilitation to British shell-shocked soldiers. As Bléandonu claims, all army psychiatrists like Bion were involved in “the treatment of neurosis and behavioural problems. [...] In April 1942 army hospitals were set up specifically for the treatment of ‘war neuroses’”.¹⁰¹ The largest was Northfield in Birmingham, where for a long period Bion worked to try to rehabilitate soldiers “to army life or to assess whether or not they were capable of returning to active service”.¹⁰²

After devoting almost the entire Second World War to trying to heal hundreds of combatants, in mid-1944 he decided to accept a further mission in Normandy. Soon after his decision to move to France, Elisabeth McKittrick Jardine, alias Betty Jardine (1904-1945), Bion’s first wife and famous stage and film actress, informed her husband that she was pregnant. The news helped Bion look at the future with less pessimism and get rid of his concerns with “professional frustrations, and the couple looked forward to the birth of their child. The end of the war was at sight, and a kind of optimism began to emerge”.¹⁰³ He set foot on French soil in early 1945; yet, his stay did not last long. Three days after his arrival in Normandy, on 28 February 1945, he received the news that Betty had

⁹⁷ W. R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, cit., p. 2.

⁹⁸ M. Pines, “Bion, Wilfred Ruprecht (1897-1979), psychoanalyst”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51057?rskey=tlwONA&result=1>. Accessed on 5 August 2022.

⁹⁹ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 42.

¹⁰⁰ *Idem*, p. 52.

¹⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 59.

¹⁰² *Idem*, p. 60.

¹⁰³ *Idem*, p. 64.

died of pulmonary embolism during childbirth and Parthenope, his first daughter, was alone in Bournemouth, in the south of England.

Emotionally drained, he returned to Great Britain straightway. Bléandonu remarks that “he had returned from the war devastated by the death of his wife, worried about his double – paternal and ‘maternal’ – responsibility for his child [...]. Bion never forgave himself of being absent at the birth of his child, even if his presence could not have altered the course of events”.¹⁰⁴ Although one might believe that he withdrew from his professional career and was overwhelmed by grief, nostalgia and repentance, he instead continued to work hard. The end of the war came a few months later, in September 1945. Bléandonu asserts that “Bion’s influence spread further than the situation in which he was working”.¹⁰⁵ Even if he was neither promoted nor decorated, “it could be certain that he had made a magnificent contribution to the army psychiatric service throughout the Second World War”.¹⁰⁶

Shattered Memoryscapes: Beckett’s and Bion’s Art of Narrating Memory and Trauma

Working on memory and trauma in Beckett’s literature entails a careful consideration of *Proust*, the pessimistic essay that Beckett prepared at the threshold of the 1930s as a commentary on Proust’s “monument to involuntary memory”,¹⁰⁷ *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Bearing in mind that, as Connor suggests, “the most important aspect of being-in-the-world, for Beckett, is being in time”,¹⁰⁸ in *Proust* Beckett explored the phenomenology of inner chronologies and probed the intricate nature of time, the “double-headed monster of damnation and salvation”.¹⁰⁹ Enacting a blending of teachings from Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Bergson’s notes on the workings of memory, Beckett positioned the phenomenology of memory – “a clinical laboratory stocked with poison and remedy, stimulant and sedative”¹¹⁰ – at the core of his argumentations.

In his essay, Beckett suggested that “yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday”.¹¹¹ Based on this idea, he drew a dividing line between voluntary and involuntary memory and explained that the former, unlike the latter, is not spontaneous and “presents

¹⁰⁴ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 98.

¹⁰⁵ *Idem*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁷ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 21.

¹⁰⁸ S. Connor, *Samuel Beckett. Repetition, Theory and Text*, cit., p. 52.

¹⁰⁹ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 1.

¹¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 22.

¹¹¹ *Idem*, p. 3.

the past in monochrome”.¹¹² He noticed that the material that voluntary memory “furnishes contains nothing of the past, merely a blurred and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism – that is to say, nothing”.¹¹³ In his opinion, what the individual can recollect with no interference from habit is the material that “has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key”.¹¹⁴ This deepest layer of memory is a “gouffre interdit à nos sondes”,¹¹⁵ which guards the best versions of the self and the individual’s best representations of the world, “the best because accumulated slyly and painfully and patiently under the nose of our vulgarity”.¹¹⁶ Beckett suggested that the content of this psychic gulf can be recuperated only by means of the “explosive, [...] immediate, total and delicious deflagration”¹¹⁷ of involuntary memory.

Strongly committed to the inquiry into the phenomenology of the activities of recollection, after the publication of *Proust*, Beckett dedicated several of his works to a very detailed analysis of the mechanisms of memory. I look at many of them (*Murphy*, *Watt*, the trilogy, *Waiting for Godot* or *Krapp’s Last Tape*, to name but a few) as careful investigations into the gears of memory, which Beckett frequently portrayed as faulty or completely absent. Postlewait notices that those works “dramatize a mind or voice recording in distant isolation the fragmented pieces of memory that tumble out of consciousness as words, words, and more disjointed words”.¹¹⁸ Jonathan Boulter claims that “Beckett’s characters are haunted by the ghost of memory”,¹¹⁹ and this is in view of the fact that “history – loss, trauma – continually works its way into the present moment”: “the subject cannot or will not move past the traumatic moment”.¹²⁰ Likewise, Robert Reginio asserts that “Beckett’s characters repeat, replay, or reconfigure the internal mnemonic traces they carry”; “their memories collapse” and, “in the face of this collapse, his characters [...] return to the harshly delimited space of their internal existence”.¹²¹

I wish here to depart from the works by Beckett that are most frequently explored by critics and focus instead on *The End*, a novella that was written soon after the end of the Second World War. *The End* is the first text of a series of four novellas including *First Love*, *The Expelled*, and *The*

¹¹² S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 19.

¹¹³ *Idem*, p. 20.

¹¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁶ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 19.

¹¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 20.

¹¹⁸ T. Postlewait, “Self-Performing Voices”, cit., p. 484.

¹¹⁹ J. Boulter, “Archives of the End: Embodied History in Samuel Beckett’s Plays”, in S. Kennedy, K. Weiss (eds), *Samuel Beckett. History, Memory, Archive*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, pp. 129-149, p. 129.

¹²⁰ *Idem*, p. 130.

¹²¹ R. Reginio, “Samuel Beckett, the Archive, and the Problem of History”, in S. Kennedy, K. Weiss (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 111-128, pp. 113-114.

Calmative. The first half of *The End* – entitled *Suite* – was published in French in *Les Temps modernes* in July 1946. The entire novella was brought to press some years later, in 1955, and appeared in Minuit's *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*. Ruby Cohn has underlined that *The End* reverberates with Beckett's wartime novel, *Watt*, as in both works the focus is a skullscape.¹²² Whatever happens in this text occurs within the intricate labyrinths of the protagonist's memory. Constructed as a psychoanalytic excavation of the past, *The End* is a story that is unfolded by a first-person narrator who inhabits a universe of ruins. Imbued with the dense gloominess of the Holocaust, the novella opens in medias res. As is often the case in Beckett's literature, the protagonist is not introduced and the few details the reader is allowed to know about him are that he “made people laugh, with that hearty jovial laugh so good for the health”.¹²³

Amidst “the fog of war memory and combat trauma”,¹²⁴ the clownish narrator opens his account by informing the reader that “they clothed me and gave me money. I knew what the money was for, it was to get me started”.¹²⁵ Before leaving the unspecified place that has housed him for some time, he is given “shoes, socks, trousers, shirt, coat, hat” which “were not new, but the deceased must have been about my size. That is to say, it must have been a little shorter, a little thinner, for the clothes did not fit me so well at the beginning as they did at end”,¹²⁶ as if the narrator had undergone a decaying metamorphosis over time. Just released from a charitable institution or, more likely, from a psychiatric hospital, the hopeless self is a war veteran that, as Boulter puts it, experiences the “increasingly desperate discovery that being in the world means never finding refuge”.¹²⁷ Davies asserts that “the impoverishment of the narrator in ‘The End’, and his apparent exclusion from society, readily evokes the soldiers who suffered the violence and humiliation of France’s 1940 defeat”.¹²⁸ Davies adds that “the homeless veteran is a compound for the potentially (or wilfully) unnoticed outcomes of war”.¹²⁹ A victim perhaps of surgical leucotomy – commonly known as lobotomy – “the soldier-turned-pauper”¹³⁰ is invited to sit on his bed and wait. The narrator notices that all bedding has disappeared from the room and his is the last bed left. “Men in white” – physicians or nurses – “came in with mallets in their hands”,¹³¹ perhaps to perform the last lobotomy or, as the nameless protagonist reports, to dismantle his bed.

¹²² R. Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001, p. 128.

¹²³ S. Beckett, *The End*, Penguin Books, London, 1954, p. 6.

¹²⁴ W. Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War*, cit., p. 111.

¹²⁵ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁷ J. Boulter, *Posthuman Spaces in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2020, p. 39.

¹²⁸ W. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ W. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

¹³¹ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 3.

On the threshold of his new life out of the gates of the institution, the narrator acknowledges “that the end was near, at least fairly near”.¹³² Abandoned to a world that he repeatedly fails to recognise, the disoriented protagonist struggles to find a refuge to inhabit. “Almost surrealistically”, he moves confusingly “through temporary shelters – a bedded room, a basement room, a seaside cave, a dilapidated shelter, and a boat, which floats untransitionally into the sea”.¹³³ Amid the chaos of his faulty memory, the wanderer confesses that he feels puzzled: “I had not set foot in this part of the city for a long time and it seemed greatly changed”;¹³⁴ “whole buildings had disappeared, the palings had changed position [...]. There were streets where I remembered none, some I did remember had vanished and other had completely changed their names”.¹³⁵ Emphasising the sense of disorientation that afflicts the deranged self of Beckett’s novella, Séan Kennedy affirms that “the anonymity of the city – the site of modernist alienation par excellence – provides the backdrop to an account of internal disintegration”.¹³⁶ Expressed otherwise, the destabilising lack of recognised and recognisable points of reference in the external world comes to be a mirror of the inner disorientation that torments the feeble-minded walker of Beckett’s text.

I agree with Miller who observes that it is at this point, at the peak of his inner and outer alienation, that the narrator’s “stoical resolve in straightforward storytelling begins to fragment. For the reader, as much as for the narrator, the storytelling reaches an inflexion point of disorientation”.¹³⁷ The recollection of real past events mixes with hallucinatory memories, presumably driven by war trauma. “By keeping the red part of the sky as much as possible on my right hand I came at last to the river,”¹³⁸ where everything seems to be as he left it. The nameless river is in fact very familiar to the protagonist, who recounts that his “bench was still there” and, “flowing between its quays and under its bridges”, the river had not changed at all. On the bank of the watercourse, next to a watering trough donated to the city horses by “a Mrs Maxwell”,¹³⁹ the helpless protagonist is assaulted by a hallucinatory vision – an incursion of the uncanny, – produced by his memory. The narrator recounts that he suddenly found himself surrounded by thirsty and frightened horses watering at the trough. These horses appear to the protagonist distant but, at the same time, disturbingly familiar. In *The Mind’s Eye*, Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy claims that “trauma produces something called ‘iconic images’, “mental pictures that can be stored deep within the brain in certain parts of the limbic system, where they are

¹³² S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 2.

¹³³ R. Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, cit., p. 129.

¹³⁴ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 5.

¹³⁵ *Idem*, p. 6.

¹³⁶ S. Kennedy (ed.), *Beckett and Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 96.

¹³⁷ I. Miller, K. Souter, *Beckett and Bion*, cit., p. 126.

¹³⁸ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 6.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*.

linked to emotions with which they are encoded".¹⁴⁰ In the grip of his traumatised memory, the nameless self of *The End* becomes prey to iconic images, i.e. visual flashes that resurface from the shadows of his 'yesterday' to torment his 'today'. The narrator tells that,

During the short time I rested there horses took advantage of this monument. The iron shoes approached and the jingle of the harness. Then silence. That was the horse looking at me. Then the noise of pebbles and mud that horses make when drinking. Then silence again. That was the horse looking at me again. Then the pebbles again. Then the silence again. Till the horse had finished drinking or the driver deemed it had drunk its fill. The horses were uneasy. Once, when the noise stopped, I turned and saw the horse looking at me. The driver too was looking at me.¹⁴¹

The uncanny memory-vision of noisy and restless horses stamping on pebbles, interspersed with moment of heavy silence, besieges the mind of the deranged narrator: visual hallucinations mix with disorienting phenomena of paracusia. The protagonist "bears the marks of the disaster"¹⁴² which result in a delirious vortex of frightening images and noises. Davies observes that this short passage might refer to "Beckett's encounters with the defeated infantry of the French army, particularly his harrowing journey out of Tolouse in 1940 where he saw exhausted soldiers in tattered uniforms trying to escape the German invasion".¹⁴³ Alternatively, given the number of horses that surround the narrator on the riverbank, I speculate that, while writing these lines, Beckett had in mind the victory of the Germans against the French light cavalry near the river Meuse on 10 May 1940.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, blending reality and phantasy, past and present time, the narrator's involuntary memory brings to the surface traumatic fragments from his "gouffre interdit à" his "sondes",¹⁴⁴ the impenetrable domain of the human mind forbidden to access, that area of the psyche that Freud and Heidegger identified respectively as "the inaccessible" and "the mystery".¹⁴⁵ Picking up on Mesrobian MacCurdy's insights into the phenomenology of traumatic reminiscences, in the act of recounting his story, the narrator of *The End* is victim of "the emotional intensity of

¹⁴⁰ M. Mesrobian MacCurdy, *The Mind's Eye. Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 2007, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., pp. 6-7.

¹⁴² J. Boulter, *Posthuman Spaces in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose*, cit., p. 182.

¹⁴³ W. Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War*, cit., p. 176.

¹⁴⁴ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ See R. Askay, J. Farquhar, *Apprehending the Inaccessible. Freudian Psychoanalysis and Existential Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2006.

trauma” that “produces fragmented, imagistic memories that are difficult to pull together into a coherent narrative”.¹⁴⁶

What Beckett renders in this passage is a dense concoction of distinct temporal levels, which undermines the narrative coherence. The confusion that assaults the mind of the protagonist is the same that destabilises the reader, who is incapable of figuring out the nature of what is recounted by the nameless self, whether it is distorted reality or traumatic hallucination. Mesrobian MacCurdy asserts that “when victims speak of the moments of their trauma, they do not produce clear narrative lines but instead describe pictures and sounds that remain encoded permanently in their minds”.¹⁴⁷ I argue that this is exactly the case of Beckett’s *The End*: the image of frightened and muddied horses brings about a stalemate in the self’s mind, which is victim of what we might call a psychic blackout or cognitive dissonance.

Attesting to his existential bafflement, the narrator informs his reader that, in an unspecified past, he once witnessed an odd scene: “I didn’t see a great deal. I didn’t hear a great deal either. I didn’t pay attention. Strictly speaking I wasn’t there. Strictly speaking I believe I’ve never been anywhere. But that day I must have come back”.¹⁴⁸ The absence of spatial references in these lines furtherly triggers a sense of confusion in the reader. Indeed, I look at this passage as the narrator’s coming back to his persona, to his awareness of being in-time and in-the-world. These lines reminds me of Krapp, who enjoys wandering in the dark and then going back to the spotlight, where he recovers awareness of his condition of being-in-the-world: “I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to [hesitates]...me. [Pause.] Krapp”.¹⁴⁹ Like in Krapp’s case, the narrator of *The End* moves through distinct temporalities: past and present are continuously mixed. Disoriented in time and lost in space, the narrator finally leads his readers back to the bank of the nameless river, where he eventually manages to take up residence in a dilapidated estate packed with rats. From his dump, the protagonist can see “a kind of parade ground [...], where soldiers played football all the year round”.¹⁵⁰

Lost in a maelstrom of blurring memories, the aimless narrator admits that he is haunted by a set of uncanny visions: “I was having visions, I who never did, expect sometimes in my sleep, who never had, real visions”.¹⁵¹ He confesses: “I slept very little at this period, I wasn’t sleepy, or I was too sleepy, I don’t know, or I was afraid, I don’t know”.¹⁵² The recurrent reference to sleep in the novella could evoke the rest cure, also mentioned by Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*. The rest cure was a clinical

¹⁴⁶ M. Mesrobian MacCurdy, *The Mind’s Eye*, cit., p. 33.

¹⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁸ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁴⁹ S. Beckett, “Krapp’s Last Tape”, in S. Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, ed. P. Auster, Grove Press, New York, 2006, pp. 219-230, p. 223.

¹⁵⁰ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 26.

¹⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 30.

¹⁵² *Idem*, p. 27.

practice patented by the US physician Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) and widely used by physicians in the first half of the twentieth century to treat war neuroses. The British sociologist Andrew Scull points out that the rest cure was essential in the specialized practices of nerve doctors, “whether they were psychiatrists seeking surcease from the horrors of life in the madhouse, or neurologists attempting to establish a still tenuous alternative specialism laying claim to expertise in the management of nervous and mental disorders”.¹⁵³

Beckett’s novella draws to a close with the image of the narrator who, wandering the winding paths of his memory, says that while sailing the river out to sea, “all seemed calm and yet the foam was washing aboard. Now the sea air was all about me, I had no shelter than the land”.¹⁵⁴ After reaching the coast, the forlorn vagabond returns to his decayed hole where he swallows a calmative that helps him soothe his memory.¹⁵⁵ Soon before he sinks into sleep (or into death), he tells that “the memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end and the strength to go on”.¹⁵⁶ As Boulter puts it, “perhaps this is a complex description merely of falling asleep; perhaps, even, this is a description of the process of dying”.¹⁵⁷ As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, Beckett had a certain familiarity with the theme of suicide, conceived in this frame as a means of fleeing the tediousness of time and the mind-shattering presence of traumatic memories.

If the study of memory and time in Beckett’s literature calls for a thorough consideration of *Proust*, for Bion, I start by taking into account his clinical notes. Owing to the fact that the trilogy is a fictionalised reworking of Bion’s psychoanalytic thought, it would be indeed restrictive to approach *A Memoir* without first looking at Bion’s clinical writings. What is evident from Bion’s annotations is that, besides the notion of ‘desire’, memory is the pillar on which the entire architecture of Bion’s psychoanalysis is based. Highly complementary for the subject’s psychological integrity, memory and desire are mental expressions that are oriented towards opposite directions in time. While memory delves into the past, desire leans towards the future. Like Beckett, who in *Proust* meditated on the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary memory, Bion discerned two types of memory whose difference depends on how the past trace *presentifies* itself. On the one hand, Bion identified a type of memory that “is born of [...] sensuous experience”,¹⁵⁸ what Husserl called “symbolic memory”, i.e. a memory that resurfaces while staring at a picture, a painting, or a landscape;¹⁵⁹ on the other

¹⁵³ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization. A Cultural History of Insanity. From the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2015, p. 276.

¹⁵⁴ S. Beckett, *The End*, cit., p. 30.

¹⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 31.

¹⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁷ J. Boulter, *Posthuman Spaces in Samuel Beckett’s Short Prose*, cit., p. 64.

¹⁵⁸ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts. Selected Papers on Psycho-Analysis*, William Heinemann, London, 1967, p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, cit., p. 178.

hand, Bion identified a kind of memory that he called “dream-like memory”, “spontaneous, automatic and is a kind of afterglow of conjunctions at an a-sensuous level”,¹⁶⁰ which is a level beyond the senses and beyond consciousness.

Disengaged from the mechanisms of consciousness and intentionality, ‘dream-like memory’ can alternatively be called ‘involuntary memory’. Bion specified that, while memory enables a conscious process of recollection, dream-like memory is dependent on dreams exclusively, is unconscious, and is the goal of every psychoanalytic session. In *Attention and Interpretation*, Bion wrote:

I wish to reserve the term ‘memory’ for experience related to conscious attempts at recall. These are expressions of a fear that some element, ‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts’, will obtrude. Dream-like memory is a memory of psychic reality and the stuff of analysis. That which is related to a background of sensuous experience is not suitable to the phenomena of mental life which is shapeless, untouchable, invisible, odourless, tasteless. These psychically real (in the sense of belonging to psychic reality) elements are what the analyst has to work with.¹⁶¹

Bion makes clear that the goal of every psychoanalytic session consists in the careful observation of oneiric memories, i.e. reminiscences that are brought to the surface by dreams, during a process that exceeds the boundaries of the subject’s rationality. Working on the osmotic interconnections between memory and dreams, Bion observed that “the way in which memory behaves in dreams is undoubtedly of the greatest importance for any theory of memory in general”.¹⁶² He maintained that “the dream symbolization and dream-work is what makes memory possible”.¹⁶³ As the Venezuelan-Canadian psychoanalyst Rafael E. López-Corvo has remarked, Bion regarded dreams of primary importance “for the storage of sense impressions acquired when awake”.¹⁶⁴ He thought that dreams are psychic phenomena that anchor impressions in memory and enable the unconscious representation of past images and repressed sensations.

Nevertheless, Bion did not fail to underline that dreams can be confused with other similar psychic phenomena: hallucinations. In his essay “On Hallucination”, published in 1958 in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, he claimed that “‘dreams’ shared many characteristics of the hallucination”, which he described as an evacuation of psychic material “taken in during waking

¹⁶⁰ R. Vermote, *Reading Bion*, cit., p. 148.

¹⁶¹ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, Karnac Books, London, 1970, p. 70.

¹⁶² W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, Karnac Books, London, 1992, p. 47.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁴ R. E. López-Corvo, *The Dictionary of the Work of W. R. Bion*, Karnac Books, London, 2003, p. 88.

hours”.¹⁶⁵ The effects of trauma on the subject’s psychic stability could be placed within this frame. The traumatised patient may indeed suffer from hallucinations, which reproduce scenes that were stored in memory during waking hours. To be deemed false memories, hallucinations are “a mechanism for unburdening the psyche by the use of the sensuous apparatus in reverse [...], meaning from inside to outside instead of the other way around”.¹⁶⁶ To put it another way, hallucinatory visions are the outcome of the transformation of an object “into pictorial images, extremely minute fragmentation, and ejection through the eye”.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, in *Second Thoughts* (1967) Bion wrote that a patient

described in terms of conversational English as ‘remembering’ something that had *not* [original emphasis] happened would resemble a patient who was described as hallucinated. Conversely the patient who did *not* [original emphasis] remember what *had* [original emphasis] happened, [...] or *remembered* [original emphasis] what had *not* [original emphasis] happened, [...] should likewise be recognized as belonging to the same underlying group of ‘hallucinosis’.¹⁶⁸

This is one of the reasons why Bion came to suggest that memory is never a reliable instrument. In “Notes on Memory and Desire”, published in 1967 in *The Psychoanalytic Forum*, he emphasised that “memory is always misleading as a record of fact since it is distorted by the influence of unconscious forces”,¹⁶⁹ e.g., desires, hallucinations, apparitions, delusions, and other repressed fragments of past events that have not been successfully elaborated by the psyche.

If investigations into the workings of memory had evidently occupied a central position throughout his medical career, memory and its dysfunctions represented a fundamental issue also in his final work. Mostly revolving around the recounting of past events, *A Memoir of the Future* tells of a past time devastated by the horrors of the conflicts. It is undoubted that writing the trilogy several years after the end of the two World Wars forced Bion to rethink of his atrocious experience of the battlefield. Clara Mucci assumes that, in *A Memoir*, “the trauma of reality, after the experience of the War and towards the end of Bion’s life, is investigated – enacted and worked through – intentionally”.¹⁷⁰ As “trauma displaces the subject and her/his awareness to an extreme, to a vanishing

¹⁶⁵ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 78.

¹⁶⁶ R. E. López-Corvo, *The Dictionary of the Work of W. R. Bion*, cit., p. 135.

¹⁶⁷ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 79.

¹⁶⁸ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 144.

¹⁶⁹ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 380.

¹⁷⁰ C. Mucci, “Psychoanalysis ‘at the Mind’s Limits’. Trauma, History and Paranoiasia as ‘a Flower of Speech’ in *A Memoir of the Future*”, in G. Civitarese (ed.), *Bion and Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 147-167, p. 147.

point”,¹⁷¹ in *A Memoir*, Bion made the attempt at (and definitely succeeded in) rekindling “the reader precisely the experience of this ‘estrangement’, of this alienation,”¹⁷² caused by the atrocities of the conflicts he was involved in. From this perspective, the whole trilogy can be regarded as a journey into a traumatised psyche, within which dreams, memories, hallucinations, and thoughts (with and without a thinker) confusingly share the same space. What Bion narrates in the trilogy is a raving insane universe where – to borrow a line from the first volume, *The Dream* – “the world of reality, facts, was no longer distinguishable from dreams, unconsciousness, night”.¹⁷³

Probing “the obscurities of the human mind”, “‘les espaces infinis’ of space *and* [original emphasis] the infinite spaces of human thought”,¹⁷⁴ in the trilogy Bion reserved a key position to the convolutions and mechanisms of memory. The prologue opens with an account by a nameless narrator (possibly Bion himself) whose memory’s clockwork is unsound. The narrator refers to a busy day just passed, of which he nevertheless remembers almost nothing. He only succeeds in calling to mind loose fragments of “a dream about violence and murder. Something about Albert and Victoria, I think”.¹⁷⁵ Some initial references to “the serpent”¹⁷⁶ Alice announce that, like the white rabbit in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the narrator is about to lead the reader into a dreamland, straight down a rabbit-hole of a dream-like memory. Dream, reality and memories are constantly juxtaposed and mixed. It is no coincidence that, in the opening lines of *The Dream*, Alice, one of the main characters of the trilogy, awakes “rubbing her eyes and pushing away the shower of leaves which had awoken her”,¹⁷⁷ as if *A Memoir of the Future* was intended as a continuation of Carroll’s novel.

While writing the trilogy, Bion revisits his gory past and re-experiences the battlefield; before his eyes, the images of the conflict and of his comrades are still vivid. The world that he narrates is a dejected universe devastated by the vicissitudes of the war. The main characters (Alice, Rosemary, Roland, and Robin) are burdened with the weight of an ongoing conflict. Alice is a distracted woman: “her attention had become wayward; since the outbreak of the war she had noticed a deterioration which she supposed must have gone on longer than she knew”.¹⁷⁸ Rosemary, the other major female figure in the trilogy, tells of having been a member of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACS).¹⁷⁹ As for Roland and Robin, both took active part in the conflicts. They are haunted by ghosts and are psychologically traumatised by the war. The Italian psychiatrist Giovanni Foresti

¹⁷¹ C. Mucci, “Psychoanalysis ‘at the Mind’s Limits’”, cit., p. 150.

¹⁷² *Idem*, p. 151.

¹⁷³ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 33.

¹⁷⁴ *Idem*, pp. 232-233.

¹⁷⁵ *Idem*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ *Idem*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁸ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 27.

¹⁷⁹ *Idem*, p. 226.

observes that, from the opening lines of *The Dream*, the protagonists “are buffered by dramatic events that change their lives forever. On the horizon of the small world they have long inhabited, the perennial English nightmare unfurls: a lost war and invaders who submit the country to capillary military occupation”.¹⁸⁰ The war is approaching and everyone is getting ready for fighting: “all the night long the noise of traffic rolled; distant gunfire occasionally flickered, like summer lightening, noiselessly in the clouds”.¹⁸¹

Throughout the three volumes, disturbing memories of his wartime in Ypres continuously resurface. Even if “the author tries to give form to the future by working through the emotional turbulence of the past”,¹⁸² the dark shadow of his ‘yesterday’ obscures any light and hope that appear on the horizon of the characters that populate *A Memoir*. Delving into the gulfs of his memory, Bion gives shape to poignant lines, in which the sense of loss and alienation produced by the war becomes almost tangible for the reader:

When I was a soldier [...], I felt I had death on my brow. [...] I realise now, but did not then, that I was carrying the load of premature death, for I had been awarded a very high decoration which carried with it a sentence of almost certain death. [...] Bourlon Wood¹⁸³ haunted me. Ypres haunted me. The rain, my God the rain! And the sweet smell of rotten flesh. [...] No, I had not got shell shock. [...] But, love had died. Love for anyone and anything. [...] The vast deserts of Ypres with its rain, incessant rain and small groups of heavy-coated figures. They too used to wait – for many years – their impassive, grey faces and khaki suddenly brilliantly illuminated by the gun flashes.¹⁸⁴

While Bion’s experience of an early death in Ypres is often recalled, Amiens is less often mentioned. P.A. (pseudonym for ‘psychoanalyst’ and one among Bion’s alter-egos in the trilogy) remarks that “I would not go near the Amiens-Roye road for fear I should meet my ghost – I died there. For though

¹⁸⁰ G. Foresti, “Bion’s Razor. Reading *A Memoir of the Future*”, in G. Civitarese (ed.), *Bion and Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 85-100, p. 88.

¹⁸¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 10.

¹⁸² G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 253.

¹⁸³ On 20 November 1917, the British army opened a surprise attack against Germans and on that occasion the British deployed an impressive number of tanks, directed towards Bourlon Wood, near Bourlon, in the Hauts-de-France region in northern France. After the British army took over at Bourlon Wood on 28-29 November, Germans prepared a counter-attack and bombarded the enemy with gas-shells. The German attack provoked hundreds of casualties. Corpses were everywhere and the losses for the British army were extremely heavy. In *The Long Weekend*, Bion commented on Bourlon Wood and wrote: “what we were now watching as helpless unharmed spectators [...] was the clever exploitation by the enemy of our disaster”. See W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 175.

¹⁸⁴ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., pp. 149-150.

the Soul should die, the Body lives for ever”.¹⁸⁵ P.A.’s words call to my mind Bléandonu who reported that Bion “had felt his soul, rather than his body, die after the battles of Ypres and Amiens”.¹⁸⁶

Memories of the war return not only to haunt Bion, but also to disturb the present of many other characters of the trilogy. For example, Roland, Alice’s husband, is overwhelmed by war memories and declares: ““that ruddy bullet has spattered glass all over and into me by the look of it””.¹⁸⁷ Psychologically devastated, Roland asks Robin whether the war had eventually ended¹⁸⁸ and warns the reader that, after the conflict, things cannot be fixed as they were before; he in fact remarks: “from that warfare there is no release – no release”,¹⁸⁹ a statement which is curiously repeated three times throughout the trilogy, once in each volume. Fallen prey to hallucinations, Roland speaks confusedly of places he has never visited in his life. He cannot locate himself since he has no memory of the places that he sees. Roland’s memory is dysfunctional and he wonders: “are these streets... of a great city? They seem empty, lonely, deserted. [...] Is this Ur, the Royal Place? Nineveh? Tyre? Babylon?”.¹⁹⁰

Bion’s choice of such places reminds me of some verses from Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: the “cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air/Falling towers” of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London.¹⁹¹ The Royal Place of Ur refers to the city of al-Muqayyar, near Nasiriyah, in Iraq. Legends tell that Ur was destroyed by a windstorm sent by Enlil, the ancient Mesopotamic god of wind, air and storms, that turned the city into a pile of dust around 2000 BCE. As for Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre, the first was razed to the ground in 612 BCE, the second in 593 BCE, and the third was sieged and destroyed in 332 BCE. Roland sees only rubble within and without. His eyes are clouded with the desolation left by the war and his memories are too traumatic to be overcome successfully. Although his characters (and Bion himself) survived the war, it “was the peace” – the reflexive, yet deafening, silence of the aftermath – “that finished them off”.¹⁹²

Like Roland, Myself, another alter-ego of Bion in the trilogy, makes mention of a war fought in a tank (Bion himself had served in France in the Royal Tank Regiment between June 1917 and the beginning of 1919). Recounting his memories of the battlefield, Myself says:

I can remember, faintly, what it is like to go into battle in a tank; I know enough to be able to describe it in terms of terror. I know a companion had the experience of being

¹⁸⁵ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 257.

¹⁸⁶ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 261.

¹⁸⁷ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 58.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 75.

¹⁹⁰ *Idem*, p. 79.

¹⁹¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, Penguin, London, 1998, p. 68, vv. 373-376.

¹⁹² W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 450.

invalided out as schizophrenic; another never regain his skill as soldier. He was said to have been delinquent although he wrote to me in terms of affection years afterwards. Another became disillusioned and desperate and in his last battle was destroyed with the rest of his companions and burned to death.¹⁹³

Emphasising the psychological and physical destruction that the war had fostered, Myself depicts a universe where minds crumble and memories are spoiled by trauma. Robin points out that “no woman, even one as sensitive as Alice, will understand that life cannot be the same for a man who has been in fighting. I remember the night when the enemy front was red with fire. [...] Retreat and disaster I was familiar with; victory not – and it came too late. I had changed”.¹⁹⁴

Like Roland, Bion, and his diverse alter-egos, Robin carries the burden of the past and of the gloomy memories that are attached to it. P.A. states that “‘eyes that have seen colossal storms and terraqueous convulsions’ are not likely to be sought after if they reveal danger and the emotional state appropriate to it”.¹⁹⁵ Sorely disappointed, P.A. notices that nobody told him “that war service would change utterly” his “capacity to enjoy life”¹⁹⁶ and wonders: “are we, even today, prepared to tell our children, or our children’s children, what price they would have to pay if they served their fellows? Are we to tell them not to do it, that it might cost them too much?”¹⁹⁷ The cataclysmic experience of the battlefield made Bion surely better prepared to analyse his psychotic patients – Beckett included – “with precisely this type of extreme and fragmented mental experience [...]. Dissociated fragments of unmetabolized experience would”¹⁹⁸ haunt the mind of Bion forever.

If the unbearable burden of the past does not allow the self to evolve in time, suicide is portrayed by Bion as a means of silencing the disturbing voice of memory. In the third volume, *The Dawn of Oblivion*, Robin tells of a companion that killed himself as he could no longer bear the intrusiveness of his ‘yesterday’ into his present:

A young fellow who *did* [original emphasis] surrender. It seemed to me he was in a hopeless position and was right to surrender. He never recovered from the discovery that he saved his life rather than die for his country. I knew him when he was a charming young man – little more than a boy – but after his surrender his capacity for gaiety was ... well, I can only describe it as ‘dead’. He never recovered; he became more and more

¹⁹³ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 111.

¹⁹⁴ *Idem*, p. 262.

¹⁹⁵ *Idem*, p. 526.

¹⁹⁶ *Idem*, p. 508.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁸ C. Mucci, “Psychoanalysis ‘at the Mind’s Limits’”, cit., p. 164.

depressed, introspective and withdrawn till finally he could not stand and killed himself.¹⁹⁹

Trapped in purgatorial wastelands that lie between the world of the living and the world of the dead, disembodied entities reappear from the fog of the past and revitalise terrifying memories in the living. In the second volume, suggestively entitled *The Past Presented*, i.e. a past that returns over and over again, P.A. confesses that he is “still penetrated by the memory of men whose name did not ‘live for evermore’”,²⁰⁰ an assumption repeated a few pages later by All Souls,²⁰¹ a group of dead spirits that declare that their “name is forgotten for evermore”.²⁰² While their names are obliterated forever, survivors of the war are condemned to perpetual memory. What remains for those who lived long enough to experience the future is a shattered memoryscape haunted by a dead past that still remains so frighteningly present.

Diaphanous Selves: Spectral Encounters in Beckett and Bion

At this point of my discussion, the ghost and its phenomenology become central to my discourse. Conceived in this frame as an intangible product of a wounded mind, the ghost constitutes a traumatic experience, an entity that “comes back as a plague, a repetitive and destructive inheritance”²⁰³ that the self cannot get rid of. In *Specters of Marx* (1993), Derrida maintained that the ghost is just a matter of repetition, by which something remembered comes back to the subject’s consciousness and forces her/him to re-experience the past. Derrida observed that the spectre “is always a *revenant* [original emphasis]”, whose “comings and goings” cannot be controlled: he argued that the ghost “*begins by coming back* [original emphasis]”.²⁰⁴

Derrida wondered how the ghost can “come back and present itself again, anew”, “how can it be there, again, when its time is no longer there?”.²⁰⁵ He explained that for the spectre to *be present* “there must be the return to a body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever”.²⁰⁶ To be perceived

¹⁹⁹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 506.

²⁰⁰ *Idem*, p. 396. ‘Live for evermore’ is a quotation from King James Bible; in ‘Ecclesiasticus’ 44:14 one can in fact read: “their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore”. On the suggestion of Rudyard Kipling (1865-1939), since the end of the Great War ‘their name liveth for evermore’ has been widely employed as inscription on a number of war memorials all around Europe; Bion was surely familiar with this practice.

²⁰¹ ‘All Souls’ is a reference to “an Oxford college founded as a memorial to British dead in the battle of Agincourt in 1415”. See W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 584.

²⁰² *Idem*, p. 399.

²⁰³ S. Frosh, “Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmission”, *American Imago*, 69:2, 2012, pp. 241-264, p. 245.

²⁰⁴ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, cit., p. 11.

²⁰⁵ *Idem*, p. 61.

²⁰⁶ *Idem*, p. 157.

by the haunted self, the ghost has thus to find a bodily envelope that has ineffective boundaries and no corporeal consistency. Derrida called this counterfeit embodiment of the ghostly figure “the spectrogenic process”, which takes the form of “a paradoxical *incorporation* [original emphasis]”.²⁰⁷ Neither alive nor dead, neither present nor absent, the untouchable figure of the spectre “does not belong to ontology, to the discourse of Being of beings, or to the essence of life and death”.²⁰⁸ For these reasons, Derrida devised the notion of ‘hauntology’,²⁰⁹ a noun that finds its root in the verb ‘to haunt’, that is to re-appear from the past causing suffering in the witness of the spectral apparition.

In *Hauntology* (2018), Katy Shaw claims that the notion of “hauntology destabilizes space as well as time, and encourages an ‘existential orientation’ in the haunted subject, making the living consider the precarious boundary between being and non-being”.²¹⁰ “Offering the specter as neither being or non-being alive or dead”,²¹¹ the notion of ‘hauntology’ compels us to postulate the existence of the ghost, whose essence can be grasped more easily by looking at it as a “repetitious compulsion to return”.²¹² On this issue, Derrida maintained that at the core of the spectral apparition lies its ‘natural’ urge to repeat itself, to be present again.²¹³ By means of repetition, the ghost never allows the waters of the past of the self to settle down: past time is continuously agitated and brought to the surface. Questioning every conception of history and pastness, the specter in fact rejects, in Shaw’s terms, “any solidification of the past”.²¹⁴

As Boulter states, the ghost “is always a reminder, a remainder, of a past, of some trace of the past: the shade, while and absent presence, is always a symptom of history”.²¹⁵ Since the intangible, yet visible, figure of the spectre deconstructs all “notions of temporality by signalling the return of the past subject in the present moment”,²¹⁶ the spectre undermines the ontological dichotomy between the gone and the being. Matt Foley stresses that the ‘illusory half-presences’ of ghosts challenge “a series of binary oppositions, previously coherent ontological categories, and critical assumptions”.²¹⁷ Besides the dichotomy of past and present, the spectre in fact shatters the oppositions between the world of the living and the world of the dead, embodiment and disembodiment, corporeality and non-

²⁰⁷ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, cit., p. 157.

²⁰⁸ *Idem*, p. 63.

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁰ K. Shaw, *Hauntology. The Presence of the Past in Twentieth-First Century English Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, p. 1.

²¹¹ *Idem*, p. 2.

²¹² *Idem*, p. 7.

²¹³ J. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²¹⁴ K. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²¹⁵ J. Boulter, *Posthuman Spaces in Samuel Beckett’s Short Prose*, cit., p. 190.

²¹⁶ K. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²¹⁷ M. Foley, *Haunting Modernisms. Ghostly Aesthetics, Mourning, and Spectral Resistance Fantasies in Literary Modernism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017, p. 7.

corporeality, materiality and immateriality, visibility and invisibility, and, finally, memory as past perception and consciousness as present perception.

Within this theoretical frame, I want to analyse Beckett's and Bion's engagement with ghostliness by recalling what Jean-Michel Rabaté emphasises in his "Beckett's Ghosts and Fluxions". Rabaté spots the existence of a sort of hidden correspondence between the two authors, "especially as they are both concerned with 'ghosts'".²¹⁸ Appearing "as the nothing more real than Nothing, as a resilient 'lessness' that manages to survive erasure and oblivion",²¹⁹ the countless ghosts deprived of a tangible body that populate Beckett's literature and Bion's trilogy represent a dead past whose effect on the living appears to be always the same.

Sinéad Mooney underlines that, much inspired by nineteenth-century Gothic writers like Charles R. Maturin (1780-1824), Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), Matthew G. Lewis (1775-1818), or Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), Beckett used many "Gothic tropes".²²⁰ Mirroring a Gothic taste for mysterious and ethereal figures stuck in an in-between world, Beckett's work is replete with selves that inhabit purgatorial wastelands where all marks of life are gone. In this place of undefinable inbetweenness, many of Beckett's characters breathe, haunt, and recount intrusive 'yesterdays'. Gontarski underlines that, in Beckett's literature, and especially in his late works for theatre, what the Irish author often stages "is not fully present, something not quite wholly material, not quite immaterial or ethereal either, something in between presence and absence, [...] between real and surreal, an image between matter and spirit".²²¹ Nevertheless, although several scholars tend to regard mainly Beckett's later works as ghostly and corporeally inconsistent, I agree with Rabaté who suggests that ghostliness "spans the entirety of his production from the early Schopenhauerian essay on Proust to the late minimalist prose pieces and poems".²²²

Bearing in mind that "Beckett's worlds – in his prose and drama – are replete with signs of the human subject having passed over to other planes of existence, or non-existence, being, or non-being",²²³ I focus on *From an Abandoned Work*, a minor text by Beckett which is crowded with diaphanous figures and which reverberates Beckett's interest in spectrality. Completed in 1954 or 1955 and published for the first time in *Trinity News*, this brief text is "the residue of some 'old shipwreck'".²²⁴ Even though scholars now include it in Beckett's short fiction, *From an Abandoned Work* was initially written as a radio play and it was first broadcast on BBC Radio in December 1957.

²¹⁸ J. M. Rabaté, "Beckett's Ghosts and Fluxions", *Samuel Beckett's Today/Aujourd'hui*, 5, 1996, pp. 23-31, p. 25.

²¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 28.

²²⁰ S. Kennedy (ed.), *Beckett and Ireland*, cit., p. 145.

²²¹ S. E. Gontarski, "Samuel Beckett and the 'Idea' of Theatre", in D. Van Hulle (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, cit., pp. 126-141, p. 131.

²²² J. M. Rabaté, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²²³ J. Boulter, *Posthuman Spaces in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose*, cit., p. 1.

²²⁴ R. Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, cit., p. 214.

Subsequently, it was adapted for the stage and it was premiered in 1958. The title of the text is the remnant of what Cohn calls a “residue of a jettisoned work”,²²⁵ an undesired creature. It is not clear whether the story is written or spoken. *From an Abandoned Work* revolves around the memory of its first-person narrator who chronicles (or tries to) his terrible past. Memories of the past mingle with reflections on the detrimental condition in which the narrator lives in his insignificant present. For this reason, the reader is often unable to grasp the temporal frame in which facts take place, and this is due to the fact that sentences in the present tense are continuously juxtaposed with sentences deploying verbs in the past tense. Locatelli argues that “the plot has a linear but curiously reversible development, in the sense that there is no possibility of establishing a before or after”.²²⁶

The story narrated by the protagonist unfolds over a timespan of three days. The vicissitudes of the first day occupy more than half of the narrative, whereas the rest is divided almost equally between the second and third day. Unlike *The End*, in *From an Abandoned Work* Beckett provides readers with more details about the narrator. He is a taciturn and decrepit man, “in pain and weakness murmur”, tormented by his memory: “I never talked to anyone, I think my father was the last one I talked to. My mother was the same, never talked, never answered”.²²⁷ Apparently on the verge of death, the protagonist is haunted by several spectres: “the old thoughts well up in me and over into my voice, the old thoughts born with me and grown with me”.²²⁸ Like in *The End*, the narrative opens in medias res. In a delirious verbal wandering, the protagonist tries to reconfigure the memory of his childhood, when he felt awful and unreasonably violent. The protagonist confesses that, when he was a boy, he found pleasure in killing every living creature standing in his way (snails, slugs, worms, little birds). Regretting his aberrant behaviour and atoning for his countless sins, the protagonist admits that his mind has never been stranger to the idea of committing suicide: “drowned, or in fire, yes, perhaps that is how I shall do it at last, walking furious headlong into fire and dying burnt to bits”.²²⁹

Alongside the killing of myriads of defenceless animals, the geriatric self of Beckett’s text carries the weight of the homicide of his parents, whose spectres haunt him.²³⁰ The protagonist recounts that one day, while he was walking in front of his house, he raised his eyes and “saw my mother still in

²²⁵ R. Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, cit., p. 215.

²²⁶ C. Locatelli, *La disdetta della parola. L’ermeneutica del silenzio nella prosa inglese di Samuel Beckett*, Patron Editore, Bologna, 1984, p. 47. My translation.

²²⁷ S. Beckett, “From an Abandoned Work”, in S. Beckett, *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, ed. P. Auster, Grove Press, New York, 2006, pp. 341-348, p. 344.

²²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²²⁹ S. Beckett, “From an Abandoned Work”, cit., p. 342.

²³⁰ Baker points out that in the 1958 version of *From an Abandoned Work* Beckett leaves “a real and not mimetic lacuna and some puzzling references” to the homicide of the protagonist’s parents. Earlier versions of the text suggest instead that the protagonist killed his mother, and presumably also his father. See P. Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 12.

the window waving, waving me back or on I don't know, or just waving, in sad helpless love, and I heard faintly her cries".²³¹ The deranged protagonist specifies that the window-frame was green and the walls of the house were grey, while the figure of his mother was white, a colour that more than any other represents a spectral figure. The narrator's relentlessness in stating the colour of the things he sees is a detail that should not be overlooked. Insisting on the incidence in his life of the colour white, the nameless self says: "[white] has always affected me strongly, all white things, sheets, walls and so on, even flowers, and then just white, the thought of white, without more".²³² I regard this recurrent reference to the colour white as the subject's attempt at giving a colour to the incorporeal transparency of the many diaphanous entities that populate his miserable existence. This hypothesis is validated if one considers that the mother of the protagonist (or what remains of her) was "white and so thin I could see past her (piercing sight I had then) into the dark of the room".²³³ In my view, these lines dispel any doubt: the mother of the feeble narrator is a spectral figure that comes from the world of the dead.

Besides the spectre of his mother, the protagonist is haunted by the memory of his father. He recounts that the latter died when he was young and that his death spared the protagonist from becoming a professor, an occupation that Beckett himself loathed. A certain hostility between father and son is emphasised by the use of the adverb of manner 'fortunately', which makes clear that the relationship between the two did not run smooth: he "never loved anyone".²³⁴ In a kind of repentance loop, the protagonist admits: "my father and mother, to think they are probably in paradise, they were so good".²³⁵ As for himself, he thinks that he deserves to go to hell instead: "that's all I ask, and go on cursing them there, and them look down and hear me".²³⁶ He declares that he is not as crazy as he was in the past and that he is persecuted by obsessive memories, disguised as questions, that keep bubbling up and return to haunt his present with overbearing force: "suddenly they are there, no, they float up, out of an old depth, and hover and linger before they die away, questions that when I was in my right mind would not have survived one second".²³⁷ Amid an emotional turbulence, the narrator wonders: "how shall I go on another day? [...] How did I ever go on another day?":²³⁸ the protagonist wishes to vanish and to be destroyed, once and for all.²³⁹

²³¹ S. Beckett, "From an Abandoned Work", cit., p. 342.

²³² *Idem*, p. 343.

²³³ *Idem*, p. 342.

²³⁴ *Idem*, p. 343.

²³⁵ *Idem*, pp. 344-345.

²³⁶ *Idem*, p. 345.

²³⁷ *Ibidem*.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*.

²³⁹ S. Beckett, "From an Abandoned Work", cit., p. 346.

If up to this point readers think that this is the recounting of memories of an old man on the verge of death, the doubt arises that the neurotic subject of *From an Abandoned Work* in fact does not belong to the world of the living: the nameless individual may be himself a ghost. Like in Beckett's *The Calmative*, in which the narrator is already dead and too frightened "to listen to myself rot",²⁴⁰ the protagonist of *From an Abandoned Work*, relegated by his creator to a world of undefinable inbetweenness, straddles the line between life and death. Seemingly devoid of corporeal consistency, the ravaged self of Beckett's text is the victim of "a long unbroken time without before and after, day after day":²⁴¹ his is a time of eternal circularity. He is condemned to the tedious repetitiveness of memory and seems to be suspended in what Husserl called the "place of air".²⁴² As Locatelli stresses, "in the end the subject flees from himself" and a schizoid split occurs:²⁴³ the connection between body and soul is disintegrated. The (arguably spectral) self of *From an Abandoned Work* fails to make sense of his existential condition. Looking at his "body doing its best without" him,²⁴⁴ the subject of Beckett's text succumbs the morbid perpetuation of his traumatic past, inhabited by all those that he killed, presumably himself included.

Like many of Beckett's works, Bion's trilogy is also replete with spectral figures that speak from beyond the grave, thus breaking the silence of the afterlife and haunting the living. Bléandonu has suggested that *A Memoir of the Future* "may be seen as the author's attempt to re-establish contact with a lost part of himself",²⁴⁵ that part he had been deprived of while attempting to survive in the midst of mud and corpses in Ypres and Amiens. Armies of spectres besiege the trilogy as "visible evidence of absent persons".²⁴⁶ I have here chosen the term 'armies' on purpose: several of the ghosts that populate the trilogy are primarily, yet not exclusively, spectres of soldiers who perished on the battlefield. In fact, chapter seventeen of *The Past Presented* opens with Rosemary who is startled by Apparition, "the shattered ghost of a beggar woman".²⁴⁷ Understood by Bion as "a symptom of a 'mind diseased'" and as a "mental indigestion",²⁴⁸ Apparition admits that, by re-emerging from the memory of its victim, its main purpose is to disturb Rosemary's slumbers. Apparition asserts that "dreams, apparitions, hallucinations may indeed be friends of yours – if you dare to admit the acquaintance".²⁴⁹ Whether illusory, hallucinatory, or pathological, this reconfiguration of the dead

²⁴⁰ S. Beckett, "The Calmative", in S. Beckett, *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, cit., pp. 261-274, p. 261.

²⁴¹ S. Beckett, "From an Abandoned Work", cit., p. 348.

²⁴² E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, cit., p. 337.

²⁴³ C. Locatelli, *La disdetta della parola*, cit., pp. 54-57. My translation.

²⁴⁴ S. Beckett, "From an Abandoned Work", cit., p. 348.

²⁴⁵ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 261.

²⁴⁶ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 615.

²⁴⁷ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 374.

²⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 375.

²⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 374.

performed by memory breaks the order of inner temporalities and spoils the unfolding of the subject in future time.

In *The Long Weekend*, Bion noticed that “the old ghosts [...] never die. They don’t even fade away” and, like a crowd of immaculate Dorian Grays, “they preserve their youth wonderfully”.²⁵⁰ The ghost never degrades and its absent presence continues to bring the subject back to the traumatic moment, whose effect on the haunted self is always the same. In Bion’s view, no elapse of time can in fact heal the wound. As evidence of this, in a transcription of a tape recording dated 8 August 1978, after almost sixty years from the end of the war, Bion mentions several ghosts that remind him of the experience of the battlefield. Opening the recording with a quotation from Alfred Tennyson’s poem ‘The Passing of Arthur’, Bion recounted that,

‘The faces of old ghosts look in upon the battle’,²⁵¹ Tennyson said about that last strange battle in which Arthur took part before he travelled on his journey to the Vale of Avalon [...]. Once more the world has reached the same kind of place in its journey around the sun which it occupied in the battle of Amiens (8 August 1918), which was said by Ludendorff to mark a black day for the German army. The ghosts look in from the battle again; Asser, Cartwright, and Sergeant O’Toole, the poor fellow who complained that he was only an orphan, with his protuberant ears, his red flushed face, his feelings of depression and anxiety, and his confiding to me that this battle on which he was about to embark together with the rest of the tank crew [...] would be his last. He was, of course, quite correct: very soon after the battle started, Cartwright’s tank received a direct hit, and the entire crew were killed. When I came across it, the bodies were charred and blackened, and poured out of the door of the tank as if they were the entrails of some mysterious of a primitive kind which had simply perished then and there in the conflagration [...].²⁵²

This short passage reveals Bion’s deep unease with haunting memories. Much like Beckett’s, Bion’s world is inhabited by numbers of spectral beings that reopen the wound of the traumatic event and hinder the subject’s *élan vital*. In this regard, Man, a character of the trilogy that claims to come from the future, elucidates that in a mind stuffed with “memories’ there is room for nothing more”.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 264.

²⁵¹ A. Tennyson, *Selected Idylls of the King*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, Chicago, 1914, p. 72, vv. 103-104.

²⁵² W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 368.

²⁵³ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 393.

Of the three volumes, *The Past Presented* is the one where more spectral entities reappear: for Bléandonu the second volume “is that of a man” – perhaps Bion himself – “who is psychically dead”.²⁵⁴ Permeated with a gloomy aura of spectrality, *The Past Presented* is the volume in which Bion tries to rehearse and exorcise his experience of the battlefield with more intensity than in *The Dream* and in *The Dawn of Oblivion*. *The Past Presented* is the volume in which he recalls some of the fellows that he met and saw fall during the fights. For instance, Auser was a young officer who was killed on 11 August 1918 during the Battle of Amiens. Auser appears in the trilogy in the form of a spectre. He claims that he lost his tank and was shot to death through his heart. Auser is a ghost persecuted by spectral visions. While he speaks with Rosemary, he admits: “I thought I saw a friend. I thought he had been killed at Ypres”.²⁵⁵ Hoping that his death was not in vain, Auser startles P.A. by asking him what the outcome of the war was: “I wanted to ask you – did we win?”.²⁵⁶ Following this question, chapter nineteen of *The Past Presented* ends with a long silence on P.A.’s part: no victory can heal a memory that has been traumatised by the brutality of the war.

Alongside the spectre of Auster, Bion resuscitates the ghosts of other four fellows that fought with him on the battlefield: Keen, Quentin, Cliff, and Stokes. Although Bion provides no biographical details about Keen, Ghost of Keen informs the reader that “they had to amputate my legs. At first they thought they would save my arms, but they couldn’t. So I can march without fatigue and don’t have to carry a rifle. Luckily the last arm did for me – I died”.²⁵⁷ Like Keen, Quentin died on the battlefield while marching elbow to elbow with Stokes. Bion specifies that Quentin is a “modern disguise for the name of a soldier who ‘broke down’ and never recovered”.²⁵⁸ Stokes remembers that “Quentin was religious; everyone jeered when he broke down – shell-shock they call it – and didn’t return from leave”.²⁵⁹ As for Cliff, I regard this name as an abbreviation for Capt. Clifford, “a dreadful individual” that “behaved like a stable boy”, “unscrupulous and blustered enormously”.²⁶⁰ Finally, Bion recounts that Stokes was “a South African in the days when it was still possible for such a man to fight against oppression”.²⁶¹

As Minkowski wrote in *Lived Time*, “the past does not really appear to us as devoid of life; expressions such as ‘living in the past’ or ‘reliving the past’ are witness to this”.²⁶² The individual who experiences the nebulous apparition of the ghost is forced to relive (in) the past. Constituting the

²⁵⁴ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 258.

²⁵⁵ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 424.

²⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 424.

²⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 289.

²⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 652.

²⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 289.

²⁶⁰ W. R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917-1919*, cit., p. 55.

²⁶¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 665.

²⁶² E. Minkowski, *Lived Time*, cit., p. 151.

intangible materialisation of an absence, the ghost represents simultaneously a false present and a past that has not disappeared yet. In view of this, the spectral apparition constitutes an impingement on the self's sense of time, overwhelmed by a morbid *re-presentation* of past entities or events that are obsessively perpetuated in the present. By unhinging the time sensitivity of the subject, the ghost compels the self into a pathological reiteration of something that has already occurred but, albeit very well hidden, is still vivid in the mind.

To sum up, in this chapter I have focused on the phenomenon of memory and its dysfunctionalities. After commenting on the phenomenology of memory, I have considered the impact of war on the mechanisms of recollection. I have thus concentrated on the history of the first half of the twentieth century and tried to show that, in those gory years, the notion of trauma became central to a number of researches into the human mind. In the wake of a clinical ferment around memory and trauma, many literary works that appeared between and after the two global conflicts gave memory and trauma a prominent position in the narrative fabric. Thereafter, I have studied Beckett's and Bion's involvement in the two World Wars and considered how this cataclysmic experience affected both authors and their works. With this in mind, I have analysed Beckett's *The End* and some passages from *A Memoir of the Future* in order to show that memory and trauma are central issues in the literatures of both authors.

In the second part of the chapter I have investigated the diaphanous figure of the ghost, conceived in this frame as an intrusive product of a traumatised memory. Bearing in mind the notion of 'hauntology' coined by Derrida in the late twentieth century, I have focused on the elusive nature of the spectre and commented on the reiteration of the past that the apparition of the spectral entity entails. Concurring with Rabaté, who affirms that Beckett and Bion were both deeply "concerned with 'ghosts'",²⁶³ I have interrogated the incorporeal *presence* of spectral figures in Beckett's *From an Abandoned Work* and in Bion's *A Memoir* and I have looked at the ghosts that populate these works as representations of traumatic pasts. What emerges is that the phenomenology of the past, memory, traumas and ghostly figures are central to the literatures of both Beckett and Bion, two men that were profoundly scarred by atrocious 'yesterdays'. To recall the epigraph that opens this chapter, the past of Beckett and Bion (and the past of many of their characters) presses against the portals of their consciousnesses and continues to make its voice heard.

²⁶³ J. M. Rabaté, "Beckett's Ghosts and Fluxions", cit., p. 25.

Chapter 3

Dreadful Futures. Degeneration, Desire, and the Trauma of Birth: Fears of What-Comes-Next

It is the orientation of our life toward the future
which gives it a meaning, a direction; when this orientation is missing,
everything seems to amount to the same thing, seems stupid,
without rhyme or reason.¹

By foregrounding the centrality of future time in the process of self-temporalisation, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that the actual apprehension of the world on the subject's part is grounded in her/his inner sense of futurity.² In a succession of distinct 'nows', future time plays a role of utmost importance for the subject's condition of being-in-the-world. Without the unfolding of future time, the process that enables the present to be experienced and the past to be progressively accumulated would in fact be interrupted. Heidegger thought that, "when one understands oneself projectively [...], the future underlies this understanding, and it does so as a coming-towards-oneself out of that current possibility as which one's Dasein exists".³ He clarified that future time is the temporal dimension that makes feasible the realisation of the subject in her/his full "potentiality-for-Being",⁴ so that the self exists as a result of its projection towards future time. Heidegger argued that self-

¹ E. Minkowski, *Lived Time*, cit., p. 303.

² M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., p. 390.

³ *Idem*, p. 385.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

projection “is an essential characteristic of *existentiality*. *The primary meaning of existentiality is the future* [original emphasis]”.⁵

Employed by Heidegger to refer to the self’s orientation towards future time, the term ‘projection’ designates the process that works in the exact opposite direction to ‘retention’, i.e. the consciousness that the subject has of past time by means of memory. As stressed in the previous chapter, while past time contains what the subject knows about the evolution of the self in time, the future is instead a great unknown. Nevertheless, this is only partially true. Although the subject has no (or very limited) knowledge of ‘tomorrow’, what the self does actually know about future time is its inherent finiteness. On this issue, Heidegger suggested that, being subject to an unescapable condition of being-toward-death, “Dasein, as thrown Being-in-the-world, has in any case already been delivered over to its death. In being towards its death, Dasein is factically and indeed constantly, as long as it has not yet come to its demise”.⁶

In Heidegger’s view, being a human animal implies to own – for better or for worse – not only time awareness, but also a consciousness that existence is bounded, on the one hand, by birth and, on the other hand, by death. Anticipating Heidegger’s ideas on Dasein as being-toward-death, in the early nineteenth century, Schopenhauer had commented on the finiteness of human existence in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818), translated into English as *The World as Will and Representation*, where he had pointed out that,

the human individual finds himself in endless [...] time as finite, and consequently as a vanishing quantity compared with these. [...]. His real existence is only in the present, whose unimpeded flight into the past is a constant transition into death, a constant dying. [...] Ultimately death must triumph, for by birth it has already become our lot, and it plays with its prey only for a while before swallowing it up.⁷

Starting from this idea of the future as a time limited by the event of death, I divide this chapter regarding the perception of future time into three sections, which respectively pivot around three diverse issues: degeneration, desire, and birth. The first part of the chapter looks into the deep sense of human decay that, from the late-Victorian age, was embedded in European society. I thus concentrate on the phenomenon of human degeneration that, from the last decades of the nineteenth century, represented one of the major European – or I should rather say Western – concerns about

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., pp. 375-376.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 303.

⁷ A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, transl. E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, New York, 1969 [1818], p. 311.

future time. I look then at the way in which the late-Victorian notion of human degeneracy was reshaped, firstly, by the bloody theatre of the two World Wars and, secondly, by the constant threat of a nuclear apocalypse during the Cold War. Thereafter, I focus my attention on Beckett's and Bion's ideas about 'tomorrow' and analyse two minor works by Beckett, *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965) and *One Evening* (1979), and some passages from Bion's *A Memoir of the Future* that foreground the pessimism of both authors about the destiny of humanity. The second part of the chapter is instead constructed around the notion of 'desire', a psychic phenomenon that, by fuelling emotional turbulence, forces the subject to tackle the unknown of the future and implement the necessary changes. In this context, I dwell on Beckett's ideas about 'desire' in relation to 'habit' and consider Bion's notes on 'desire' not only as opposite of 'memory', but also as a catalyst of change. Lastly, the third part of the chapter is centred on the event of birth, regarded not only as a catastrophic caesura from the figure of the (m)other, but also as the starting point of the subject's exposure to the erosion enacted by the passage of time. With this in mind, I analyse Beckett's *Lessness* (1969) and some passages of Bion's trilogy that deal with the trauma that birth entails.

Portents of the End: Traces of Human Degeneration in Beckett and Bion

In *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, Vincent Sherry remarks that, although a feeling of decay has recurred, to a greater or lesser extent, in various moments in the history of humanity, a sense of human decline "is concentrated with particular intensity in European cultural history in the mid-late nineteenth century".⁸ According to Sherry, the late-Victorian age was a period that fostered, especially in Europe, a generalised dread of 'tomorrow': as Sherry suggests, 'decadence' turned into a distinctive hallmark of European modernism.⁹ As evidence of this, a great portion of literature produced since the late-Victorian age has reflected a generalised concern about the future, a preoccupation that was exacerbated in the twentieth century by the outbreak of First World War, soon followed by the Second, by the levels of unspeakable savagery reached by Nazis in concentration camps, the nuclear detonations that brought Japan to its knees and, finally, by the terror of a nuclear apocalypse during the Cold War. For such reasons, I strive not to look at European modernism as a cultural movement that, to use Sherry's words, "works most indicatively within an imaginative concept of time interrupted",¹⁰ of a time that appears provisional and futureless. In fact, "the technology hitherto associated with Progress was coming to its appealingly inverse apocalypse

⁸ V. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015, p. 30.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 148.

and revelation in the day-by-day mayhem of the several fronts".¹¹ In this frame, Charlie Chaplin's tragicomedy *Modern Times* (1936) clearly shows the high levels of destabilisation that modernity had brought about.

At the core of that pervasive sense of decadence that, from the late-Victorian age, oppressed the West was the far-flung conviction that mankind was undergoing a process of degeneration. William Greenslade has asserted that "the growth of degeneration into fully fledged explanatory myth, with widespread applications, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is bound up with the huge economic, social and cultural changes which took place in the major industrialised European states".¹² Rather than actual growth, progress encouraged pauperism, degradation, and social inequalities. The future of humanity took on a sombre hue: the world turned hectic and insanity became rampant. Developed primarily around the figure of the insane, the late-Victorian notion of 'human degeneration' was rooted in the idea that insanity was spreading too rapidly in society. This was blamed on the lower classes, conceived by mid- and late-Victorian physicians as naturally more prone to inherit and spread mental diseases.

As the Canadian historian Edward Shorter claims, by the turn of the century, a large cadre of Western psychiatrists was convinced that mental pathologies were transmissible from parents to their offspring.¹³ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the social phenomenon of degeneracy, as Shorter remarks, "passed from an object of discussion within the closed world of academic psychiatry to the boulevard press".¹⁴ The conviction that humanity was experiencing a dangerous phase for its survival was in the public domain. The alleged inheritance of mental pathologies became a major preoccupation among late Victorians. "The public seized with horror on the concept of degeneration" and "the educated middle classes began believing that European society was doomed".¹⁵ At the threshold of the twentieth century, an oppressing rhetoric of hereditary human degeneration had turned into a leitmotif for many, both within and without psychiatric hospitals. The fear that humanity was about to collapse was almost palpable in late-Victorian society.

Although the figure of the insane was at the core of many discussions on hereditary degeneration, late-Victorian concerns about degeneracy were not limited to the propagation of mental disorders in society: the phenomenon of human degeneracy went far beyond the plague of insanity. In *Madness and Civilization*, Scull notices that the term 'degeneration' was "invoked to explain far

¹¹ V. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, cit., p. 147.

¹² W. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994, p. 15.

¹³ E. Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry. From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1997, p. 94.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

more than insanity alone".¹⁶ Criminality, prostitution, onanism, suicidal instincts, pornography, homosexuality, epilepsy, alcoholism, nymphomania, neurasthenia, dementia, hysteria, physical disabilities, and a huge number of other symptoms that still had not been categorised by late-nineteenth-century physicians were all gathered under the umbrella term 'degeneration'.¹⁷ Not only did degeneration theory serve as an indicator and reminder of differences between social classes and 'races', but it also served to remind everyone that humanity was at risk of succumbing.

In *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, the US historian Arthur Herman underscores that "degeneration theory presented a pessimistic picture of the outlook for modern civilization [...]. By the turn of the century, degeneration theory had cut deep into European [...] confidence in the future".¹⁸ Huge cities like London and Paris turned into highly dangerous places, perfect hideouts for "criminals, paupers, and debased humanity, a world of Draculas and Jack the Rippers".¹⁹ A threat to the future of mankind, degenerates were understood by the majority not only "as members of an alien 'race' but also as monstrous freaks of nature who belied humanity's claim to evolutionary perfection".²⁰ For the sake of the upper classes, this unrestrained social deterioration had to be curbed via the prompt implementation of a cordon sanitaire. To this end, a considerable number of late-Victorian public health institutions began to champion "the elimination of slums and poor environments"²¹ to bolster national strength, stem degeneration, and preserve mankind from extinction.

Promoters of a dangerous rehash of the musings on adaptation, natural selection, and struggle for existence that Charles Darwin (1809-1882) had presented in *The Origin of Species* (1859), the prime architects of degeneration theory²² applied Darwinian ideas to human beings, in order to address a series of cultural and ethnic issues. This clumsy manipulation of Darwinian theories attained their highest levels of brutality with the spread of the eugenics movement²³ at the turn of the century and,

¹⁶ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 245.

¹⁷ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder, c. 1848 – c. 1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1989, p. 21.

¹⁸ A. Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, The Free Press, New York, 1997, p. 110.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 124.

²⁰ S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, p. 3.

²¹ R. Clifford Engs, *The Eugenics Movement: An Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Press, Westport (Connecticut) and London, 2005, pp. 43-44.

²² In chronological order of birth, the most representative among late-Victorian proponents of degeneration theory were the French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustine Morel (1809-1873), the British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the British anthropologist Francis Galton (1822-1911), the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), and the Hungarian doctor and journalist Max Nordau (1849-1923), author of the widely-read *Entartung* (1892), a massive volume translated into English as *Degeneration* in 1895.

²³ Herman suggests that the father of eugenics, Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, insisted that the eugenic movement, whose motto was 'the survival of the fittest', was nothing but the practical side of Darwin's theories. "Along with other Darwinians such as Thomas Huxley, Galton worried about the 'retrogressive' dark side of the evolutionary process, but his concerns were more specific and socially grounded. Galton was concerned that the intellectual talents and abilities that made for civilization's progress were very unevenly distributed in modern society and were under direct threat". See A. Herman, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

later in time, with the dissemination of Nazi ideologies throughout Europe from the 1930s.²⁴ In the service of an ideal future and “in the name of achieving a superior human race, scholars and politicians in Germany destroyed the lives of millions of Jews, Roma, people with mental illnesses and other who were classified as having inferior constitutions”.²⁵ Inspired by the eugenics policies that were gaining ground in the USA,²⁶ the rise of Hitler to leadership in Germany in early 1933 was soon followed by the passage in the Reich of the Eugenics Sterilization Law. Sterilization was made compulsory for a huge number of physically and intellectual (or regarded as such) impaired subjects.²⁷

Besides the necropolitical measures promoted by eugenicists and Nazis during the Shoah, the inhuman and unutterable violence unleashed during the two World Wars proved that degeneration had by then become much more than a matter of genetic inheritance of mental disorders and physical faulty traits. The mind-blowing number of corpses burnt, dumped in mass graves, or piled up in the trenches and along streets during the two global conflicts, alongside the numbers of subjects psychologically traumatised or physically wounded by the war, turned fin-de-siècle fears of human degeneracy into terror of human annihilation. Despite the fact that at the beginning of the Great War the conventional response to mental disorders was to regard their “effects as symptoms of the old enemy, hereditary degeneration”,²⁸ the tendency to call the insane ‘degenerate’ was to be gradually abandoned by European psychiatrists.

Indeed, even if the term ‘degeneration’ continued to resonate in psychiatric wards across Europe at the beginning of the last century, the unexpected scale and brutality of World War I gave way to the formulation of the notion of ‘trauma’. The rapid growth in number of deranged subjects in society was directly proportional to the escalation of conflicts. Scull remarks that, most of the time, the countless cases of mental pathology that arose during the first half of the twentieth century were the immediate product of “concussive effects of high explosiveness”, which had “traumatised

²⁴ Eugenics reached its peak in contrasting the social phenomenon of human degeneration with the deliberate genocide that was performed by Nazis in concentration camps. Herman makes clear that “the fate of German eugenics and race sciences illustrates how the fear of degeneration, and appeals for collective state solutions, could drive progressive practitioners into the arms of those willing to marshal the forces of the state to ‘save’ civilization – regardless of the cost. Eugenics, after all, made heavy demands on the powers of government: identifying ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ human types, selecting and matching suitable specimens for breeding, sterilizing or destroying the weak and infirm, and restraining those who for religious or moral reasons refused to cooperate”. See A. Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, cit., pp. 139-140. See also F. Galton, “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims”, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 10:1, 1904, pp. 1-25.

²⁵ L. Hölscher, ‘Future-Thinking: A Historical Perspective’, in G. Oettingen, A. T. Sevincer, P. M. Gollwitzer (eds), *The Psychology of Thinking about the Future*, The Guilford Press, New York and London, 2018, pp. 15-30, p. 24.

²⁶ See E. Black, *War Against the Weak. Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*, Dialog Press, Lincoln, 2012.

²⁷ S. P. Hinshaw, *The Mark of Shame. Stigma of Mental Illness and an Agenda for Change*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 76-77.

²⁸ W. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, cit., p. 226.

the brain and the nervous system, inflicting invisible injuries".²⁹ Shocked by the conflicts, legions of psychotic subjects (soldiers as much as civilians) became the new faces of human degeneration.

In this context, Freudian psychoanalysis represented a turning point in the history of mental medicine. By discrediting late-Victorian theories of human degeneration, psychoanalysis served to highlight that insanity was not forcibly a hereditary trait.³⁰ In 1915, in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, Freud wrote: "we cannot but feel that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest".³¹ Similarly, at the threshold of the 1930s, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud lamented that "men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man".³²

It should thus be no matter of much amazement that, voicing generalised concerns over the future of humanity, much literature produced in those years abounds with lifeless wastelands and apocalyptic scenarios. Paying homage to the impressive accuracy of panic-laden predictions for the new century presented by H. G. Wells, for instance, in *The War of the Worlds* or in *The War in the Air*, in 1945, in "You and the Atomic Bomb", George Orwell noticed that, "for forty years past, Mr. H. G. Wells and others have been warning us that man is in danger of destroying himself with his own weapon, leaving the ants and some other gregarious species to take over".³³ If the Great War had made clear that mankind could play catastrophically against itself and its own future, the Second World War brought humanity on the verge of the abyss. Much in line with Orwell, in his political-historical treatise entitled *The Future of Mankind* (1958), Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883-1969) commented on "the threatened annihilation of mankind",³⁴ and observed that the experience of World War II, followed by the nuclear terror that tormented the world during the Cold War, had showed humanity that "war had assumed dimensions beyond the power of men to grasp, to shape, to direct – it had become a chaos of human abasement".³⁵ From Jaspers' perspective, the atomic bomb represented "the greatest of all menaces to the future of mankind".³⁶

²⁹ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 295.

³⁰ See J. M. Dupeu, "Freud and Degeneracy: A Turning Point", *Diogenes*, 25:97, 1977, p. 43-64.

³¹ S. Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", in *Standard Edition*, vol. 14, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 273-288, p. 275.

³² S. Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents", in *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, Hogarth Press, London, 1930, pp. 59-145, p. 144.

³³ S. Orwell, I. Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. IV – *In Front of Your Nose, 1945 -1950*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1968, p. 6.

³⁴ K. Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, transl. E. B. Ashton, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961, p. 59.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 47.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 4.

Likewise, in *Change and Habit* (1966), the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975) claimed that, to save “mankind from either committing suicide in atomic world-war or poisoning itself with atomic waste”,³⁷ greater control was needed over the (ab)use of atomic weapons. Toynbee emphasised that “the two post-Second-World-War super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, are still playing the dangerous game of power-politics – a game that has wrecked one civilisation after the other”.³⁸ Toynbee pointed out that, “since 1945, the human race has been living under the threat of extinction”.³⁹ Only a few years later, in 1969, in his essay “Death in War”, he remarked:

there is no precedent in past human experience for even a guess at the intensity of the feelings of horror, grief, fear, and, above all, guilt that ritual murder of the atomic scale would bring to the surface of a human being’s consciousness from the dark and deep abyss which the progress of the genuine science of psychology is revealing to us.⁴⁰

Toynbee’s concerns (and those voiced by Orwell, Jaspers, and many others) are more than plausible if one considers that, “during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union each accumulated tens of thousands of warheads, the world’s nuclear arsenals becoming the equivalent of Hiroshima bombs”.⁴¹ Since the end of the second global conflict, humanity has had an ever-growing nuclear arsenal: human beings were – and regrettably still are – far from secure from the threat of extinction. Made public by the disconcerting images that came from Japan, the destructiveness of nuclear weapons put the spotlight not only on the feasibility of a general fall-out, but also on the fact that the planet could potentially be destroyed within a few hours, once and for all.

In the aftermath of World War II, writers and artists had then to struggle to be optimist for the future of humanity; for many of them, the future was nothing but a container for the iteration of past traumas.⁴² Among them, Beckett and Bion could hardly avoid portraying their ‘tomorrow’ by reusing the same colours provided by their turbulent ‘yesterdays’. That the future is driven by what precedes is made clear by Gema Martin-Ordas, who argues that “the images that we construct to think about the future heavily rely on past experiences [...]. Humans are able to reminisce about the

³⁷ A. J. Toynbee, *Change and Habit. The Challenge of Our Time*, Oneworld, Oxford, 1966, p. 54.

³⁸ A. J. Toynbee et al. (eds), *Man’s Concern with Death*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1968, pp. 150.

³⁹ *Idem*, pp. 151.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, p. 152.

⁴¹ J. Leslie, *The End of the World. The Science and the Ethics of Human Extinction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1966, p. 26.

⁴² See P. K. Saint-Amour’s *Tense Future. Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, cit., p. 14.

past and to use such recollections to transcend the present and wander the upcoming times".⁴³ Disoriented by the history of their days and carrying the heavy burden of war memories, in their works Beckett and Bion offer an exploration of the future and describe the *condition humaine* as devoid of any hope. Beckett's and Bion's humanity is dramatically doomed to failure.

As for Beckett, his deep-seated pessimism about the destiny of mankind becomes very evident in the apocalyptic horizons that he stages in his theatrical plays, in the dark settings of his novels and short prose, or in the pathological conditions that afflict a great deal of his characters. Similarly, widely voiced in his war-diaries, Bion's pessimism about future time occupies a central position in *A Memoir*, and especially in the third volume of the trilogy, whose suggestive title, *The Dawn of Oblivion*, speaks volumes regarding Bion's worries about time-to-come.

In light of this, I suggest that both Beckett and Bion should be encompassed in the group of those writers for whom fin-de-siècle dreads of human degeneracy had turned into a pitiless reality of their days, in which representations and visions of the end of time and of the world were definitely not uncommon. Marina MacKay stresses that "many modernist works have long since been understood by critics as [...] responses to the world-shattering conditions of their time, and as works that enacted the trauma of those time".⁴⁴ In the wake of a European modernist tradition to depict and allegorise "a total ending",⁴⁵ as MacKay calls it, Beckett's and Bion's literary output reveals that both authors look at the future of humanity with disheartening disillusion and paralysing fear of what is to come.

Employing an apocalyptic terminology that conveys human annihilation, psychic breakdown, and environmental deterioration, in their works Beckett and Bion draw the silhouette of a society teetering on the brink. The universes that the two authors narrate in their works go adrift: they do not proceed, but alarmingly regress. I agree with Victoria Stevens who points out that what can be inferred from Beckett's and Bion's works is that both authors reached the very "same conclusion about the ultimate helplessness of the human being".⁴⁶ I look at Beckett's and Bion's works as enquiries into the (im)possibility of a future and into the effective habitability of the Earth, whose humanity is for both authors a shepherdless flock going towards the abyss. For Beckett and Bion, 'tomorrow' is the end of the line, and the portents of impending catastrophes become in their works major causes for the self's psychological paralysis in the present.

⁴³ G. Martin-Ordas, "With the Future in Mind. Toward a Comprehensive Understanding of the Evolution of Future-Oriented Cognition", in K. Michaelian, S. B. Klein, K. K. Szpunar (eds), *Seeing the Future. Theoretical Perspectives on Future-Oriented Mental Time Travel*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, pp. 306-327, p. 306.

⁴⁴ M. MacKay, *Modernism, War, and Violence*, cit., p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 136.

⁴⁶ V. Stevens, "Nothingness, No-thing, and Nothing in the Work of Wilfred Bion and in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*", *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 92:4, 2005, pp. 607-635, p. 608.

As for Beckett, his familiarity with the late-Victorian theory of degeneration has been widely explored by scholars. Indeed, investigations into Beckett's library show that, an avid reader that he was, Beckett could not help but pore over Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, which had a significant imprint on his production. In this regard, Chris J. Ackerley writes that, in the early 1930s, Beckett read *Degeneration*, which influenced his "imaginary and thinking in surprising ways"⁴⁷ and from which the Irish author took a great deal of "images, medical terms and curiosities".⁴⁸ Insisting on Nordau's impact on Beckett's work, Ackerley remarks that Beckett's anti-heroes were "shaped by Nordau's images of degeneracy".⁴⁹ Concurring with Ackerley, I regard Beckett's troubled and physically impaired selves as members of that portion of society persecuted by degenerationists, eugenicists and Nazis. In a futureless world in which everything stinks of death, Beckett's selves – stuck in "the madhouse of the skull"⁵⁰ – slowly fade away, victims of an unstoppable regression. They experiment a time that, instead of proceeding, goes backwards. Theirs is a time that does not offer evolution, but rather involution. Victim of a degenerate and degenerating time, Beckett's subjects are entitled to no fruitful afterness. As Kathryn White remarks, Beckett's "characters exist in an environment devoid of meaning where everything appears to be gravitating towards extinction".⁵¹ In Beckett's view, the future harbours the seeds of an ultimate decay.

With this in mind, I delve into Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*, published as *Imagination morte imaginez* in *Minuit* in the mid-1960s. Beckett's intriguing choice of combining the noun 'imagination' with the adjective 'dead' is what caught my attention. Imagination is a brain activity that enables the subject to produce images in total absence of real data, i.e. data that the self has not experienced yet. While the verb 'remember' and the noun 'remembrance' refer to the subject's awareness of the past, the verb 'imagine' and the noun 'imagination' refer to the subject's ideation of the future. 'Imagination' is a cerebral activity that, on a par with desires, allows the self to foresee, plan and conceptualise what may come next.

Imagining the future by means of an imagination that is per se dead might mean looking into a 'tomorrow' that itself is lifeless. My assumptions are borne out by the first lines of the text. By conveying a profound sense of environmental degeneration, ontological decadence, and future-deprivation, Beckett opens this short prose by informing his readers that there is "no trace anywhere of life".⁵² As is often the case in Beckett's literature, the world of *Imagination Dead Imagine* is a

⁴⁷ A. J. Ackerley, "Samuel Beckett and Max Nordau. Degeneration, Sausage Poisoning, the Bloodied Rafflesia, Coenaesthesia, and the Not-I", in S. E. Gontarski, A. Uhlmann (eds), *Beckett after Beckett*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2006, pp. 167-176, p. 167.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, 168.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 169.

⁵⁰ S. Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, John Calder, London, 1982, p. 20.

⁵¹ K. White, *Beckett and Decay*, Continuum, London and New York, 2009, p. 44.

⁵² S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, cit., p. 182.

universe where the markers of life have disappeared completely. The world that Beckett portrays in this text is a place where time stagnates like the waters of a stinking pond, a time that rots while remaining immobile. The river of the present does not flow towards the sea of the future: Butler stresses that this is a world of post-mortem visions.⁵³ What Beckett narrates in *Imagination Dead Imagine* is a planet where “islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit”.⁵⁴ Employing the “recurrent themes of degeneration, isolation, death”,⁵⁵ Beckett closes *Imagination Dead Imagine* by informing the reader that time is over, “life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere”.⁵⁶

Much like *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *One Evening* announces an imminent (or already ongoing) apocalypse. Regardless of its brevity, I think that this is one of Beckett’s works that best encapsulate the gist of Beckett’s pessimism about the impossibility of future time. Validating what Baker observes, that Beckett’s worlds are often “haunted by dark female figures of reified loneliness, mourning, sterility and death”,⁵⁷ *One Evening* recounts the story of a black-dressed and lonely widow who, while looking for yellow flowers for the grave of her husband, comes across a corpse lying on the grass in the middle of a field. The lifeless body that opens the text triggers in readers feelings of decay and decomposition: the corpse is “found lying on the ground. [...] He lay inconspicuous in the greenish coat”,⁵⁸ a possible allusion to the uniform of a combatant.

The gloomy aura that surrounds the dead man and the widow contrasts with the whiteness of lambs, whose absence is much lamented by the widow. Although in the world of *One Evening* it is lambing time (the time of the year in which lambs are expected to be born bountifully), there is not even a trace of lambs: “a long black shadow. It was lambing time. But there were no lambs. She could see none”.⁵⁹ The woman “remarks with surprise the absence of lambs in great numbers here at this time of year”.⁶⁰ At the end of its – very likely – last day, *One Evening*’s universe is about to be devoured by the darkness of an eternal night.

In this tableau vivant, the symbol and the symbology of the lamb is, in my view, crucial. In her investigation into sheep in Beckett’s literature, Julie Campbell contends that “sheep are owned, tended, protected from predators, fed and watered, and this is all done for what they can give to humanity”.⁶¹ Campbell adds that “the ubiquity of sheep [...] has given them a strong cultural

⁵³ L. St. J. Butler, *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being*, cit., p. 169.

⁵⁴ S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, cit., p. 182.

⁵⁵ K. White, *Beckett and Decay*, cit., p. 134.

⁵⁶ S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵⁷ P. Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 153.

⁵⁸ S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 253.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁶¹ J. Campbell, “Beckett and Sheep”, in M. Bryden (ed.), *Beckett and Animals*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013, pp. 188-202, p. 189.

significance, and there is a wealth of symbolism with them in mythology, religion, literature and art".⁶² From a Christian perspective, the lamb is a powerful symbol in the Bible; it abounds in the Old and the New Testament, texts which Beckett was sorely familiar with.⁶³ Interestingly, Mary Bryden elucidates that "the Bible continues to provide an inter-textual pulse" throughout Beckett's work and underscores that Beckett's allusions to religious issues "originate both in the Old and in the New Testaments, with the Old Testament now slightly predominant". It is indeed to the Old Testament that, in Bryden's view, a number of Beckett's lines tackling "the transience of human life and of the material world"⁶⁴ must be traced back. Bryden insists that it is from the Old Testament that Beckett learnt the lesson that "deterioration and death" are "an inevitable corollary of life".⁶⁵

To go back to the figure of the lamb, in the Bible the lamb acquires diverse meanings: purity, meekness, innocence, abundance, sacrifice, the Paschal lamb, Christ. Wielding the symbolism of the lamb to my discourse on Beckett's idea about future time, I regard the lamb as the embodiment of the future. I in fact look at the lamb as the materialisation of the necessary generational continuity that enables the survival of the flock, a term which is very often employed in Christian contexts to refer to humanity as a whole. If we accept the interpretation of the lamb as a guarantee of the future of the flock and of all those that live of the products provided by the flock itself (meat, milk, fleece), if no lamb is born, no regeneration is performed and no continuity in time is hence possible. From this standpoint, the lambless flock is futureless and condemned to extinction. In my reading of *One Evening*, 'unborn lamb' is synonymous with 'unborn future', a future that, imitating Godot, will never come.

The same sense of futurelessness that I detect in *One Evening* also permeates *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1980), where the image of the missing lamb returns, besides the lonely and black-dressed woman looking for flowers: "it will always be evening. Always winter. When not night. Winter night. No more lambs. No more flowers. Empty-handed she shall go to the tomb".⁶⁶ Although I agree with Connor who argues that, "in most cases Beckett's presentation of animal life, even though it often involves domesticated animals, or animals living close to man, is free of [...] anthropomorphism",⁶⁷ in *One Evening*, I rather highlight Beckett's alleged desire to anthropomorphise the lamb, whose absence might allude to a futureless humanity doomed to the tomb. Depicting a time that crystallises, Beckett closes *One Evening* with a bad omen and warns the reader that "all [will be] silent from now on. [...] The sun disappears at last and with it all shadow. All shadow here. Slow fate of

⁶² J. Campbell, "Beckett and Sheep", cit., p. 189.

⁶³ See I. Bailey, *Samuel Beckett and the Bible*, Bloomsbury, London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney, 2014.

⁶⁴ M. Bryden, *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, Macmillan Press, London, 1998, p. 102.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 103.

⁶⁶ S. Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, cit., p. 45.

⁶⁷ S. Connor, "Beckett's Animals", *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 8, 1982, pp. 29-44, p. 30.

afterglow. Night without moon or stars".⁶⁸ Like in *Endgame*, in *One Evening*, time is over, "reckoning closed and story ended".⁶⁹

As often happens in Beckett's work, in *Imagination Dead Imagine* or *One Evening* the narrative pivots around a dense feeling of desolation resulting from the war. But, even though the catastrophic scenarios resulting from the war almost always serve as a backdrop to his texts, Beckett never makes direct reference to a specific conflict.⁷⁰ What Beckett offers to his readers and spectators is just a resigned ascertainment of the devastation caused by the war, the same boundless devastation that he had found in Saint-Lô. What Beckett's literature often renders is the harrowing aftermath of the conflict. On the contrary, as for Bion, what the British analyst narrates in *A Memoir* is the temporal span that lies between the end of the two World Wars and the imminence of a new nuclear apocalypse. Like Beckett that portrays a world that is provisional,⁷¹ Bion tells of a frightened humanity that glimpses the threshold of the precipice. Given the ingrained pessimism of both men, I speculate that the collapse of humanity, fears of 'tomorrow', the end of the world and of the self were issues that, during their sessions at the Tavistock Clinic, Beckett and Bion discussed, and probably on more than one single occasion.

A prophet of pessimism on a par with Beckett, in his war-diaries and trilogy Bion makes no secret of a total lack of confidence in the future of mankind and in the capacity of human beings to take wise decisions in order to preserve the species. Bion's disillusionment with future time can be traced back to his experience on the Flanders Fields and to his familiarity with the pessimism of William Trotter (1872-1939),⁷² British pioneer in the field of neurosurgery, and of Arnold Toynbee, mentioned earlier in this chapter. In fact, excellent connoisseur of Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1934), in *Cogitations* Bion observed that "the growth and decline of civilizations has always excited the curiosity of mankind and has recently been studied in great detail by Arnold Toynbee".⁷³ Studying history at Oxford allowed Bion to learn about the atrocities which mankind had been capable of over the centuries. What Bion narrates in his trilogy is the story of a humanity suffocated by the shadow of an impending catastrophic future; this is a humanity that suffers from "individual and collective alienation, political degeneracy and social self-destruction".⁷⁴

⁶⁸ S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, cit., p. 254.

⁶⁹ S. Beckett, "Endgame", in S. Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, cit., pp. 89-154, p. 133.

⁷⁰ For an examination of catastrophic scenarios in Beckett's works, see *Samuel Beckett and Catastrophe*, published in January 2023 and edited by Michiko Tsushima, Yoshiki Tajiri and Mariko Hori Tanaka.

⁷¹ W. Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War*, cit., p. 173.

⁷² N. Torres and R. D. Hinshelwood point out that "Bion speaks admiringly of Trotter and his Darwinian-inspired apocalyptic suggestions, as Bion was ardently interested in the factors leading to social and individual development and evolution and also to social and individual decadence and catastrophe". See N. Torres, R. D. Hinshelwood (eds), *Bion's Sources*, cit., p. 40.

⁷³ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 346.

⁷⁴ N. Torres, R. D. Hinshelwood, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

The last volume, *The Dawn of Oblivion*, best reveals Bion's anxiety about 'tomorrow'. It is in this volume that the author foresees an Armageddon of colossal dimension and makes clear that the world is nothing but "a grain of cosmic dust" fated to "disappear in a puff of smoke",⁷⁵ an expression that I regard as an allusion to the mushroom-clouds that hid the sky over Hiroshima and Nagasaki for several days in August 1945. Convinced that human beings are fated to become extinct due to their incapacity to opt for evolution rather than degeneration, in *The Dream* Bion wrote that "the Future will do for a sort of royal cemetery as well as the Past".⁷⁶ He thought that every human can potentially represent "a clever monkey who can produce an atomic bomb that is a potential menace to his existence".⁷⁷ In Bion's opinion, humanity will not be able to survive unless an atomic war is avoided. In his view, human beings must make a final and irreversible decision: wisdom (life) or oblivion (death by war).

P.A. [...] Unless the human animal learns to become expert in discrimination, he will be in imminent danger of the wrong choice.

Alice: Nuclear war, for example.

P.A.: There are no labels attached to most options; there is no substitute for the growth of wisdom. Wisdom or oblivion – take your choice. From that warfare there is no release.⁷⁸

In this regard, Jonathan Schell seems to have Bion in mind when, in the 1980s, in *The Fate of Earth*, he wrote:

Two paths lie before us. One leads to death, the other to life. If we choose the first path – if we numbly refuse to acknowledge the nearness of extinction [...] – then we become the allies of death and in everything we do our attachment to life will weaken [...]. On the other hand, if we reject our doom, and bend our efforts toward survival – if we arouse ourselves to the peril and act to forestall it, making ourselves the allies of life – then the anaesthetic fog will lift.⁷⁹

Proving determined to desert the world before the nuclear apocalypse gets started, in the closing section of *A Memoir* Bion takes leave of his readers and wishes them a "Happy Lunacy and a

⁷⁵ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 540.

⁷⁶ *Idem*, p. 59.

⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 61.

⁷⁸ *Idem*, p. 576.

⁷⁹ J. Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1982, p. 231.

Relativistic Fission”,⁸⁰ the chemical process underlying every nuclear detonation, the technological Koi-I-Noor of twentieth-century warfare. Regardless of the possibility of opting for wisdom and evolution, Bion’s humanity will very likely end up choosing oblivion and despair, as bluntly announced by the title of the last volume of the trilogy. Bléandonu emphasises that in the trilogy Bion “saw the approach of a final catastrophic change”:⁸¹ “human beings must face a decision: either they choose wisdom and a capacity for a choice, or there is oblivion and physical destruction such as a nuclear war”.⁸²

The Italian analyst Violet Pietrantonio maintains that Bion’s *A Memoir* is “a Guernica born under the bombs, crying for help and finding no peace or container for a horror and terror that rack and shred the mind”.⁸³ “From cycle to cycle”, like in Dante’s *Inferno*, “Bion seems to have been drawn towards the truth – that is, towards death”.⁸⁴ Throughout the entire trilogy, a prophetic terror is very discernible. In Bion’s opinion, entropy, chaos, madness, randomness, and meaninglessness will condemn human beings to a never-ending damnation. Victim of an unstoppable “decay and degeneration”,⁸⁵ the world that Bion has in mind is on an “uncontrollable journey to the grave”:⁸⁶ the future in store for Bion’s humanity is hellish. Going back to the image of humanity as a flock, I wish to conclude this first section by quoting a verse from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which Bion appreciated and often mentioned in *A Memoir*. The humanity that Bion envisages – very much like the humanity that Beckett portrays in his work – is a futureless flock whose lambs and shepherd are missing: “nameless in dark oblivion let them dwell”.⁸⁷

The Dynamics of Desire in Beckett’s and Bion’s Works

What I have discussed so far is that the ontological and environmental devastation caused by the brutal history of the twentieth century is the background against which Beckett’s and Bion’s representations of degeneration and lack of future time stand out. Dodging degeneration means evolving; and evolving means implementing changes to one’s own existence, changes that have to be felt as necessary and have to be desired by the self. In this respect, Minkowski argued that “we

⁸⁰ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 578.

⁸¹ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 263.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 263.

⁸³ V. Pietrantonio, “Memories of the Future, Realisations in the Present. The Oneiric Destiny of Pre-Conceptions that Turn Up in the Midst of Dreamers”, in G. Civitarese (ed.), *Bion and Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 101-119, p. 102.

⁸⁴ G. Bléandonu, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁸⁵ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 521.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2005 [1667], Book VI, v. 380, p. 180.

can say that the ‘further’ of desire is germane to the future”.⁸⁸ Conceiving desire as the “original intentionality, as the hinge or pivot of the experience of movement”,⁸⁹ the French philosopher Renaud Barbares claims that existence “is only given as *direction* [original emphasis]”.⁹⁰ Barbares asserts that life is a process in which desire triggers in the self a need to change and progress: “beneath all motion”, i.e. every evolutionary step that the individual takes forward, “is nothing other than desire itself”.⁹¹ Desire projects the subject towards the realisation of the self, and thus towards what comes next. Barbares adds that, “insofar as life’s work in the phenomenalization of the world, life is best characterized as desire”,⁹² that is an impulse that orients the individual towards the future and unknown other-self. Desire fosters “a form of alienation”⁹³ because, by means of the fulfilment of a desire, the subject takes distance from what s/he knows, implements a change, and experiences the *terra incognita* of the future. Deprived of desire, i.e. the fuel of the machine that we conveniently call ‘existence’, the subject falls into death, which, as Barbares argues, “is not the disappearance of life, but the end of desire”.⁹⁴

With this in mind, I focus on Beckett’s treatment of the notion of ‘desire’ and, once again, I cannot but turn to *Proust*. Influenced by the pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer and Giacomo Leopardi, in his juvenile essay, Beckett implies that the self who follows desires and implements changes accordingly is fated to experience sorrow and psychological disorientation. Conceiving desire as the opposite of habit, “the presumed return of sameness”,⁹⁵ Beckett believes that the existential change that results from the fulfilment of a desire has a bewildering effect on the self. Even though habit is “the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit”,⁹⁶ habit is a (reassuring) “compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities”.⁹⁷ Beckett looks at life as a “succession of habits” and explains that the temporal gaps that separate one habit from the other are the temporal zones that stir the waters of the self’s existence and force the self to change. In Beckett’s view, the habit-less gaps that the individual experiences in life represent the “perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious, fertile, when the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of

⁸⁸ E. Minkowski, *Lived Time*, cit., p. 98.

⁸⁹ R. Barbares, “The Phenomenology of Life: Desire as the Being of the Subject”, in D. Zahavi (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, pp. 94-111, p. 101.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, p. 99.

⁹¹ *Idem*, p. 100.

⁹² *Idem*, p. 101.

⁹³ *Idem*, p. 102.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, p. 110.

⁹⁵ C. Locatelli, *Unwording the World*, cit., p. 141.

⁹⁶ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Idem*, pp. 7-8.

being”.⁹⁸ To use Frederick J. Hoffman’s words, it is “in the transition to one phase of habitual life to another” that “the genuine *crisis* [original emphasis] of being occurs”.⁹⁹

Paying close attention to the adjectives that Beckett chose to define these habit-less gaps, except for ‘fertile’ and perhaps ‘mysterious’, all present a negative connotation. Fostered by the emergence of a desire and the will (or necessity) to fulfil it, the existential gale that befalls the individual between the loss of a habit and the formation of a new one is what compels the subject to face sufferance and bewilderment. It is thus no surprise that, in *Proust*, Beckett reminds readers that “all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi”, teach that wisdom “consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire”.¹⁰⁰ In line with Leopardi, Beckett thought that the need to fulfil desires consumes the self from within and he emphasised that human wisdom consists in “obliterating the faculty of suffering”,¹⁰¹ by attempting to free oneself from the urge to establish new habits.

If Leopardi played a relevant role for Beckett’s reflections on desire, the same can be said for Schopenhauer, whose philosophical thought underpins Beckett’s *Proust*. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer commented on the meaninglessness of fulfilling desires and, to do so, he referred to the myth of the Danaïdes, the five daughters of Danaus, all condemned by Zeus to carry amphoras full of water to a perforated jar, in the useless attempt at filling it. Stressing the pointlessness of the Danaïdes’ efforts, Schopenhauer wrote that humans “untiringly strive from desire to desire, and although every attained satisfaction, however much it promised, does not really satisfy us, but often stands before us as a mortifying error, we still do not see that we are drawing water with the vessel of the Danaïdes, and we hasten to ever fresh desires”.¹⁰² Devoured by the urge to fulfil ever new desires, human beings are for Schopenhauer condemned to endure a never-ending dissatisfaction.

Avoiding desire and change, and disregarding the natural orientation of the self towards the future would nevertheless mean surrendering to a life punctuated by habit, to the morbid repetition of a circular ‘now’ that never varies. While desire makes the individual stretch towards the future and compels her/him to become ‘other’ from one’s own present self, habit blocks the individual in a changeless presentness. As Connor argues, “habit is what enables us to witness change in ourselves without *being* [original emphasis] that change”.¹⁰³ Where no change occurs, life turns into “a form of automatism”,¹⁰⁴ like in the case of the tedious routine that engulfs Winnie in *Happy Days*. Like

⁹⁸ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 8.

⁹⁹ F. J. Hoffman, *Samuel Beckett. The Language of Self*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1962, p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 7.

¹⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 46.

¹⁰² A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, cit., p. 318.

¹⁰³ S. Connor, *Samuel Beckett. Repetition, Theory and Text*, cit., 54.

¹⁰⁴ U. Maude, “Beckett and the Laws of Habit”, *Modernism/Modernity*, 18:4, 2012, p. 813-821, p. 813.

Winnie, buried up to the waist in the first act of the play and up to the neck in the second, several Beckettian characters appear deadly paralysed in their ossified presents, existential times punctuated by useless rituals. Though he complains that his life is nothing but always “the same questions, the same answers”,¹⁰⁵ in *Endgame* Clov admits that he feels “too old, and too far, to form new habits”.¹⁰⁶ In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt claims “that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin”,¹⁰⁷ to act, to tackle the future, and always to put something new into motion. What Arendt suggests is to me totally inapplicable to Beckett’s characters: they have no initiative, desire and future. Theirs is an existence spent in the vain waiting for a demise that, just like Godot, will likely never show up. Beckett’s subjects have been born not to live and evolve, but to endure an existential stalemate, an eternal death-in-life.

Like Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, the tragicomic and bizarre pseudo-couple of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be dispossessed of any capacity to plan for the future and implement evolutionary changes. The only way that the two protagonists have to flee from the sufferance caused by desire and to get rid of the shadow of the future is an induced death. A close reading of Beckett’s literature shows that several characters that inhabit Beckett’s fictional world appraise the possibility of demise rather than tackle an existence whose future is no longer worth waiting for. In response to Vladimir’s question, “what do we do now?”, Estragon replies: “What about hanging ourselves? [...] Let’s hang ourselves immediately”.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in a dying (or already dead) world that “stinks of corpses”,¹⁰⁹ Hamm asks Clov “why don’t you kill me?”,¹¹⁰ “put me in my coffin”.¹¹¹

Disenchanted with their future time, a number of Beckett’s selves suffer from hopelessness, “the cognitive variable most extensively studied by suicidologists”.¹¹² The clinical psychologists Amy Wenzel and Megan Spokas underline that, in the midst of a suicidal crisis, “those who have difficulty identifying positive future events would be at a particularly high risk for attempting suicide because they see few reasons for living or future events to which they can look forward”:¹¹³ “people who experience high levels of hopelessness have excessively negative expectations for the future, lack

¹⁰⁵ S. Beckett, “Endgame”, cit., p. 94.

¹⁰⁶ *Idem*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁷ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1958, p. 246.

¹⁰⁸ S. Beckett, “Waiting for Godot”, in S. Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, cit., pp. 1-87, p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ S. Beckett, “Endgame”, cit., p. 114.

¹¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 96.

¹¹¹ *Idem*, p. 130.

¹¹² A. Wenzel, M. Spokas, “Cognitive and Information Processing Approaches to Understanding Suicidal Behaviours”, in M. K. Nock (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Suicide and Self-Injury*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, pp. 235-254, p. 236. See also E. S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1996.

¹¹³ A. Wenzel, M. Spokas, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

positive expectations for the future, or both”.¹¹⁴ Likewise, the US philosopher Michael Cholbi points out that a subject that contemplates (and then commits) suicide has already surpassed the state of pessimism that is typical of depressive states and has slipped into an existential nihilism, where the self believes that the time of life, that is the future, has stopped offering a *raison d'être*. Put otherwise, the suicidal mind lacks curiosity towards ‘tomorrow’. Cholbi contends that “most research on the psychology of suicide echoes the idea that suicidal behaviour is triggered”, besides mental disorders, “by hopelessness”, a feeling of apathy that “stems not simply from the sense that the future looks difficult or challenging, but rather from the sense that the future looks dauntingly difficult and challenging and that there is no prospect that could change”.¹¹⁵

In light of this, I look at suicidal instincts in Beckett’s works as the last desperate desire of the self to flee “the vicious circle of existence”,¹¹⁶ an existence that has become nothing but the perpetuation of a prospective-less and void present. I agree with Maude who, emphasising the prominence of suicide in European modernist literature, states that Beckett’s late prose and drama “radicalizes modernist representations of suicide by [...] representing it not merely as a natural but as an unexceptional occurrence”.¹¹⁷ Paraphrasing Cronin’s words, in Beckett’s real and fictional world, ‘suicide is very much in the air’.¹¹⁸ Like numerous of his contemporaries, Beckett was no stranger to the idea of death by suicide. In a letter to the Irish poet Thomas MacGreevy of 10 March 1935, he commented on his psychological treatment with Bion and wrote: “I have tried to face the possibility of its failing to render the business of remaining alive tolerable, & I have not been able to”.¹¹⁹

I reckon that what the Irish author wishes to convey with his frequent references to suicide is that the deliverance from existence by means of the voluntary act of getting rid of one’s own life can in fact represent the escape of his helpless and impaired subjects from the tediousness of going on living, most of the time, pointlessly, in an absurd and provisional world that has become definitely too inhospitable to every form of life and to every form of hope. But, although the possibility of suicide is often contemplated in Beckett’s world, suicide is never actually performed. It seems that the existence of many of Beckett’s characters has become such an ossified habit that life itself is too inflexible and utterly unfit for the irreversible and huge transformation that death would in fact represent.

¹¹⁴ A. Wenzel, M. Spokas, “Cognitive and Information Processing Approaches to Understanding Suicidal Behaviours”, cit., p. 244.

¹¹⁵ M. Cholbi, *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*, Broadview Guides to Philosophy, Toronto, 2011, p. 167.

¹¹⁶ A. Hamilton, K. Hamilton, *Condemned to Life: The World of Samuel Beckett*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 177.

¹¹⁷ U. Maude, “‘Temporary Sane’: Beckett, Modernism, and the Ethics of Suicide”, in O. Beloborodova et al. (eds), *Beckett and Modernism*, cit., pp. 223-237, p. 224.

¹¹⁸ See A. Cronin, *Samuel Beckett. The Last Modernist*, cit., p. 79.

¹¹⁹ G. Craig et al. (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, cit., p. 259.

If discussing desire in relation to future time in Beckett implies a reflection on the notion of ‘habit’, on the other hand, the fact of dealing with desire in Bion’s work compels us to meditate on ‘change’ and on the catastrophic repercussions that the latter may have on the psychological stability of the individual. Much in line with Beckett’s ideas about ‘desire’, Bion thought that desire and the change that it entails exert an annihilatory power over the individual. In *Transformations* (1965), he stressed that the self’s health “may be more easily associated with being passive [...] rather than with being active”.¹²⁰ In an incessant process of becoming(-in-future-time), the self is afflicted by what Bion called the “nameless dread”, a “sense of frustration intrinsic to appreciation of the gap between a wish and its fulfilment”.¹²¹

According to the Brazilian psychoanalyst Paulo C. Sandler, Bion’s ‘nameless dread’ is the “most basic human situation” of “anxiety about personal annihilation, out of human helplessness against the hostility (to the preservation of life) of the environment”.¹²² The ‘nameless dread’ is the feeling of psychological discontinuity that the individual experiences between the action of breaking routine and the need to face the unknown of the future, in order to reach the object of her/his desire. In *Cogitations*, the British analyst stressed that, while the object of memory is always “past, internal and possessed”, the object of desire is “future, external and coveted”.¹²³ This implies that, to attain the object of desire, the self has to implement changes and project itself towards the future. Change is the *conditio sine qua non* for the fulfilment of a desire and, at the same time, it is catastrophic,¹²⁴ as P.A. warns Man in the trilogy. As Bion put it, becoming ‘other’ from one’s own self and changing over time are two acts that are always “accompanied by feelings of disaster”: change “is catastrophic in the sense that it is sudden and violent in an almost physical way”.¹²⁵

“Change is feared and is then felt as good to bad”.¹²⁶ In this respect, Man argues that “some think that change is effected by a violent, ugly, catastrophic process of change”.¹²⁷ Myself, another character of the trilogy, recognises that “change is feared”,¹²⁸ even though human existence is founded, as Man suggests, on “the ability to change”¹²⁹ and hopefully evolve. Bion explained that every human being has “to deal with changes in his affairs by making decision” and, whenever the subject encounters the unknown that is inherent in the future, this instant “is comparable with the game of Snakes and Ladders. The patient’s choice may fall on the head of a snake and he returns to

¹²⁰ W. R. Bion, *Transformations*, cit., p. 149.

¹²¹ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 113.

¹²² P. C. Sandler, *An Introduction to W. R. Bion’s ‘A Memoir of the Future’*, vol. II, Karnac Books, London, 2015, p. 117.

¹²³ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 294.

¹²⁴ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 417.

¹²⁵ W. R. Bion, *Transformations*, cit., p. 8.

¹²⁶ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 128.

¹²⁷ *Idem*, p. 129.

¹²⁸ *Idem*, p. 128.

¹²⁹ *Idem*, p. 163.

an apparently unfortunate state of affairs which he deplores and regrets".¹³⁰ Change is felt "as a catastrophe to the self by the individual who fears getting in touch with his or her psychic reality as it really is".¹³¹ In Bion's terms, every change is a 'caesura', a term that the British analyst employed recurrently with regard to birth, the change *par excellence*, the original and "catastrophic change of the foetus and his (her) mother".¹³²

The Weight of the Future: Beckett's and Bion's Views on Birth

With this idea of caesura in mind, in this last section of the chapter I consider the phenomenon of birth in Beckett's and Bion's work, both replete with references to the event of birth and the trauma that it entails. One might probably question the relevance of interrogating 'birth' and the resulting trauma in a chapter dealing with future time and its perception. Nevertheless, phenomenologically speaking, birth marks the beginning of the self's condition of being independently embodied and thrown-into-the-future and into-death. Birth determines the self's becoming-corporeal not only in the spatial dimension, but also in the temporal one. While death marks the end of the subject's existence, birth is the starting point of the self's condition of *being* in the fullness of time. Besides death, birth limits and shapes the temporal character of the existence of the self in the world. On this issue, the British philosopher Alison Stone indicates that "birth is the necessary anchor-point to which my life runs back or, looked at from the opposite direction, out of which each of my life's successive events and situations flows down".¹³³ Alison adds that "since my past comes down from my birth, the latter is always involved in my anxiety about possible actions and futures".¹³⁴

The action of 'becoming' occurs in and via birth. In his thought-provoking collection of essays entitled *The Birth to Presence*, Jean-Luc Nancy asserts that 'to be born' "is the verb of all verbs: the 'in the midst of taking place' that has neither beginning nor end".¹³⁵ According to Nancy, birth exposes, out of the womb, the subject to a worldly existence, where the infant is defenceless and forced "to ex-ist",¹³⁶ namely 'to be outside'. To *ex-ist* means "to hold one's 'selfness' as an 'otherness'".¹³⁷ By using the term 'otherness', Nancy refers to 'the otherness of existence', i.e. the "nonpresence to itself, which comes from [...] birth and death",¹³⁸ "the two supreme events of appearance and

¹³⁰ W. R. Bion, *Two Papers: 'The Grid' and 'Caesura'*, Karnac Books, London, 1989, p. 48.

¹³¹ P. C. Sandler, *Dreaming, Transformation, Containment and Change*, Karnac Books, London, 2009, p. 315.

¹³² *Idem*, p. 314.

¹³³ A. Stone, *Being Born. Birth and Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, p. 213.

¹³⁴ *Idem*, p. 169.

¹³⁵ J. L. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1993, p. 2.

¹³⁶ *Idem*, p. 4.

¹³⁷ *Idem*, p. 154.

¹³⁸ *Idem*, p. 155.

disappearance within the world”,¹³⁹ as Arendt calls them. Nancy argues that in birth, just like in death, the self is other from itself because it realises its condition of finitude,¹⁴⁰ which is linked to the self’s awareness of the limitedness of future time. “My beginning and my end are precisely what I cannot have as mine. [...] What results is that we happen – if to happen is to take place, as other, in time, as otherness”.¹⁴¹

Inquiring into the feeling of ‘otherness’ originated by the encounter between the future and the self, Nancy wonders: “what is time, if not the radical otherness of each moment of time?”.¹⁴² Separated from the (m)other and abandoned to the passage of time, the newborn experiences “the oblivion of being”,¹⁴³ the distressing feeling of disorientation and existential void that stems from the abandonment of the subject into an existence whose essence and direction are unknown to her/him. Once born, the infant is left to the “being-there of man”¹⁴⁴ and, as Nancy maintains, “being is the being of abandoned being”¹⁴⁵ that is finite in its condition of finite beinghood. “Finitude does not mean that we are noninfinite, [...] but it means that we are infinitely finite, infinitely exposed to our existence”,¹⁴⁶ which develops in projection, that is towards the future. “To be born means precisely never to cease being born, never to have done with never fully attaining to being, to its status, to its stance, or to its standing, and to its autonomy”.¹⁴⁷ Birth is the starting point of a finite series of attempts on the self’s part at meeting its other future selves, at processing the dramatic caesura from the mother and at being fully one’s own self in a time-limited *ex-istence*.

Although ‘birth’ is synonymous with ‘beginning’, birth always implies also an end. Consisting in a catastrophic change and an irreparable caesura from the mother, birth is both the origin of one’s being-in-the-world and, at the same time, the end of the self’s intrauterine life. The US psychoanalyst Judy K. Eekhoff suggests that “the first experience of relationship to other and to self occurs in utero and is experienced as a physical holding of the skin within the watery depths of the womb”,¹⁴⁸ namely the ideal shelter. Furthermore, not only is birth the end of the carnal link between the foetus and the mother. As I have argued before, birth represents the beginning of the journey of the individual towards her/his own death: “human beings certainly suffer from the burden of finitude and of death,

¹³⁹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, cit., p. 97.

¹⁴⁰ J. L. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, cit., p. 155.

¹⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 156.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ J. L. Nancy, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 155.

¹⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁸ J. K. Eekhoff, *Trauma and Primitive Mental States. An Object Relations Perspective*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, p. 49.

because its weight is, when all is said and done, unbearable".¹⁴⁹ It is from the event of birth that humans acknowledge the finitude of their condition of *being* within the flow of future time.

The fact of being ex-posed to the great unknown of the future triggers anxiety and feelings of an upcoming catastrophe, whose real nature remains beyond the reach of the self's knowledge. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggested that, in anticipating "the indefinite certainty of death, Dasein opens itself to a constant *threat* [original emphasis] arising out" of its Being-towards-the-end.¹⁵⁰ Faced with the vastness and unknowability of 'tomorrow' and stuck in a destabilising provisionality, the human animal experiences fears of failure and an overwhelming terror of what comes next. For Eigen, "birth anxiety is an old theme. In one or another way, it is with us all our lives. There are many ways to be born and fail to be born. Death anxiety is part of birth".¹⁵¹ Deprived of the carnal bond with the mother, the infant is assailed by a sense of uneasiness that arises from the fantasied anticipation of something that s/he thinks it is frightening and dangerous for her/his physical and psychic integrity.

In *All We Have to Fear*, the US sociologist Allan V. Horwitz and the US psychiatrist Jerome C. Wakefield claim that "fear is an anticipatory emotion: we fear what might happen to us, not what has already occurred. People are fearful when they anticipate [...]. Likewise, they become anxious regarding general uncertainties about the future".¹⁵² Oriented towards the future, anxiety is a feeling related to the visions that the subject has of the future. Engulfed by feelings of abandonment and despair, and by unsettling sensations of falling into the river of time and into the boundlessness of uncertainties that birth unfolds, the infant can manifest an impulse to flee death by wishing to return to the mother's womb. Put otherwise, the newborn can feel the urge to restore the condition of wholeness with the mother, when and where all was before time. As Cioran argued, "the rejection of birth is nothing but the nostalgia for this time before time",¹⁵³ when time was in fact a no-time.

With this in mind, I zoom in on Beckett and commence by quoting Knowlson, who underscored that Beckett

claimed to have clear prenatal memories of life within his mother's womb. The womb is commonly thought of as a sheltered haven, where the foetus is protected from harm. [...] Yet the memories that, as an adult, he claimed to have of the womb [...] were associated more often with feelings of being trapped and unable to escape, imprisoned and in pain.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ E. Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude. An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2012, p. 65.

¹⁵⁰ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., p. 310.

¹⁵¹ M. Eigen, *The Challenge of Being Human*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018, p. 58.

¹⁵² A. V. Horwitz, J. C. Wakefield, *All We Have to Fear. Psychiatry's Transformation of Natural Anxiety into Mental Disorders*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, p. 57.

¹⁵³ E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁵⁴ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., p. 2.

While the image of the womb, as Knowlson pointed out, is generally associated with shelter and maternal protection, the uterus is for Beckett a cage from which the latter is unable to escape, as if he had never come to light fully. The psychic sorrow that tormented the adult Beckett was the result not only of a birth deemed a traumatic change which had to be processed, but also of a birth regarded as the first challenge of a troubled existence marked by depression and illness. It is not by chance that, in Beckett's work, birth and death often become simultaneous instants. Conceived as a tragic moment on a par with death, birth is for Beckett the explanatory key to grasp the real nature of human suffering. For many Beckettian selves, birth stinks of death, decay and putrefaction: as Hamm informs the spectator in *Endgame*, “the end is in the beginning and yet you go on”.¹⁵⁵

Replete with images of flawed births, Beckett's works provide readers and spectators with visions of birth as a moment imbued with pain, “associated not only with the single event of a difficult childbirth, but with the beginning of a long and painful Odyssey”, “a painful road to be trod”.¹⁵⁶ In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo suggests that “one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, it that not enough for you? [Calmer.] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more”.¹⁵⁷ In Beckett's work, life, light, consciousness and birth are tantamount to death, entombment, darkness and grave. In Beckett's world, being conscious of existing is synonymous with being born in and for death. The idea of birth as a highly traumatic moment saturates Beckett's works with a sense of tediousness and meaninglessness of everyday life.

Frequently unable to die because their existence is, paradoxically enough, already a death in life, several of Beckett's selves feel nostalgic for the (no-)time of gestation, as if they do not accept having been born and thrown into time. After all, their lives can offer nothing but decay and psychological disintegration. Beckett opens *A Piece of Monologue* by pointing out that “birth was the death of” the protagonist,¹⁵⁸ a line that questions the binary opposition between birth as the beginning of life and death as the end of one's existence. The boundary between coming to light and vanishing into darkness disappears. In Beckett's work, birth and death are no longer polar opposites: they interpenetrates like a foetus does with a womb. Birth is abortion and the infant's cries is the first manifestation of protest against the time(-to-come) of existence.

Beckett's interest in gestation and birth grew considerably while he was undergoing psychological treatment in London, when Beckett and Bion necessarily worked on the morbid relationship that the former had with his peevish mother. As Eigen suggests, “Beckett sought help, in part, because his

¹⁵⁵ S. Beckett, “*Endgame*”, cit., p. 141.

¹⁵⁶ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ S. Beckett, “*Waiting for Godot*”, cit., p. 83.

¹⁵⁸ S. Beckett, “*A Piece of Monologue*”, in S. Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, cit., pp. 451-458, p. 453.

attachment to his mother hampered finding his own life more fully".¹⁵⁹ His thirst for knowledge about the mechanisms of creation was partially quenched by a lecture – already mentioned in the first chapter – that Jung held in London on 2 October 1935. From 30 September to 4 October 1935, Jung delivered five lectures. During the third one, the one that Beckett was allowed to attend with Bion, Jung mentioned a young girl, a patient of his, who suffered from a number of psychic disorders. Emphasising that she had never been born completely, on that occasion Jung asserted:

recently I saw a case of a little girl of ten who had some most amazing mythological dreams. Her father consulted me about these dreams. I could not tell him what I thought because they contained an uncanny prognosis. The little girl died a year later of an infectious disease. She had never been born entirely.¹⁶⁰

Beckett appropriated this last sentence and reused the same diagnosis to explain a set of psychic disorders that had been tormenting him for so long. What Beckett found in Jung's words was the explanation for his feeling that something was missing in his life. He felt as if there was an obscure and embryonic presence in himself, a sort of missed-missing counterpart. Bair reported that Beckett "was able to furnish detailed examples of his own womb fixation, arguing forcefully that all his behaviour, from the simple inclination to stay in bed to his deep-seated need to pay frequent visits to his mother, were all aspects of an improper birth".¹⁶¹ Beckett felt the existence of an unbreakable rope – an umbilical cord – that joined his adult self and the not-yet-born one. As Eigen claims, "to be unborn all one's life is not unusual. In various ways we remain embryonic. [...] The image of being stuck in a mound touches a sense of not being fully born, half in and half out".¹⁶² This image recalls Winnie in *Happy Days*, who, in the first act of the play, is presented as unreasonably half-buried in the soil.

Beckett's passion for the issue of birth is also proved by his passionate reading of *The Trauma of Birth* (1924) by the German philosopher and psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1884-1939), soon before Beckett began to write his London novel, *Murphy*, in the mid-1930s. As Rank asserted, the core of psychoanalysis lies in the attempt at leading the patient to relive and surpass "the separation from the mother".¹⁶³ Rank remarked that "the analysis finally turns out to be a belated accomplishment of the incompletely mastered trauma of birth".¹⁶⁴ Recalling Freud, who in *The Interpretation of Dreams*

¹⁵⁹ M. Eigen, *The Challenge of Being Human*, cit., p. 51.

¹⁶⁰ C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, vol. I-XX, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p. 7945.

¹⁶¹ D. Bair, *A Biography, Samuel Beckett*, cit., p. 209.

¹⁶² M. Eigen, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁶³ O. Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, Martino Publishing, Mansfield Centre (Connecticut), 2010, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. 5.

had made clear that “*the act of birth is the first experience of anxiety and thus the source and prototype of the effect of anxiety* [original emphasis]”,¹⁶⁵ Rank stressed that every infant feels anxiety that can result in neurotic discomfort¹⁶⁶ and suggested that “for the neurotic has only remained fixed in the birth trauma [...], and all we can ask of Psychotherapy is that it should bring him up to the ‘short clothes’ stage, at which the bulk of humanity had remained to this day”.¹⁶⁷ He maintained that to be dead has “the same meaning for the child as to be away [...] – that is to be *separated* [original emphasis] – and this directly touches in the primal trauma. The child thus accepts the conscious idea of death by unconsciously identifying it with the primal trauma”.¹⁶⁸ From this standpoint, birth constitutes the mirror image of death. On this issue, Moorjani emphasises that “readers of Beckett are familiar with the reiterated Beckettian theme of the tomblike womb and the womblike tomb in the darkness of the mind in which the living are unborn and the dead do not die”.¹⁶⁹ This is the dim space occupied by the partially-purged protagonist of *Malone Dies*, who imagines a dead womb, within his head, from which he seems to have been born and then thrown into a death-oriented existence.

Bearing in mind that, to use Gontarski’s words, “in Beckett’s world, birth, creation, and breath itself are punishments”,¹⁷⁰ I analyse Beckett’s *Lessness*, first appeared in French as *Sans* in 1969 and published in English in *New Statesman* in May 1970.¹⁷¹ In a letter of 21 November 1969, addressed to the Romanian painter Avigdor Arikha and to his wife, the poet Anne Atik, Beckett informed his two friends that he had just “gone back to the desert of *Sans*, where darkness has just fallen. Don’t know how it’s going to turn out, but maybe it’s not without a future”.¹⁷² In a later letter to John Fletcher, dated 4 December 1969, Beckett wrote that “*Sans* will undoubtedly appear”.¹⁷³ From early-1971, the British press commented widely on this short piece of prose. In an article dated 18 February 1971 appeared in the British magazine *Radio Times*, an anonymous journalist wondered: “what then is *Lessness* about? The title clearly refers to some loss: words like *endlessness*, *hopelessness*, *helplessness* all contain the two syllables of the title. And all images refer to such a sense of loss: it

¹⁶⁵ S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, Second Part, and On Dreams, Standard Edition*, vol. 5, Hogarth Press, London, 1900-1901, pp. 400-401. In 1926, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud claimed that birth is the first experience of anxiety in view of the fact that it represents the loss of and separation from the mother. For the first time in life the child experiences distressing feelings of dispossession and caesura; Freud maintained that “the trauma of birth overtakes each individual with a different degree of intensity, and the violence of his anxiety-reaction varies with the strength of the trauma”. See S. Freud, “Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety”, in *Standard Edition*, vol. 20, Hogarth Press, London, 1936, pp. 75-176, p. 136.

¹⁶⁶ O. Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, cit., p. 11.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*, p. 216-217.

¹⁶⁸ *Idem*, p. 24.

¹⁶⁹ A. Moorjani, *The Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1992, p. 175.

¹⁷⁰ S. E. Gontarski, *Revisioning Beckett. Samuel Beckett’s Decadent Turn*, Bloomsbury, New York and London, 2018, p. 278.

¹⁷¹ R. Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, cit., p. 305.

¹⁷² G. Craig et al. (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. IV, 1966-1989, cit., p. 201.

¹⁷³ *Idem*, p. 205.

is the loss of a lost refuge, a landscape of utter desolation".¹⁷⁴ Three days later, 21 February 1971, David Wade wrote in *The Observer* that, in *Lessness*, "Beckett conjures up a cool sterile interior landscape in which there appears to be movement and passage of time, but this is all contained within some scheme which is absolutely static"¹⁷⁵ or, in other words, futureless. "Samuel Beckett's *Lessness* projected a world that could not have been more real in its sterile timelessness".¹⁷⁶ And it is on this absence of (future) time and desolation that my analysis of *Lessness* concentrates.

Resorting to insistent repetitions and employing a kind of language that is reminiscent of the babbling of an infant (or of a deranged subject), in *Lessness* Beckett portrays a dead – or about to perish – self that lays on the ground in a trance-like state and remembers his (intrauterine?) past. In *Beckett*, Anzieu remarks that "only after entering time and venturing into space does the self acquire a feeling of lack", a sentiment of lessness.¹⁷⁷ What *Lessness* presents is a dead 'tomorrow', the plight of a humanity disoriented and compelled to exist after the cataclysmic experience of the two World Wars. All is rubble and the self struggles to *ex-ist* in the face of an endless suffering. *Lessness* depicts a dark and deserted land inhabited by a fragmented subject – perhaps Beckett himself – whose time is stagnant. I agree with Jan Alber who suggests that, in *Lessness*, "time seems to have come to rest in a transitional period",¹⁷⁸ which might be exactly the transitional moment of birth, in which the infant is forced to leave the mother's body and adjust her/himself to the time of existence, outside of the womb.

The French word 'sans' and the English term that Beckett chose as a title for this short prose, 'lessness', both identify a lack. I look at the recurrent use in the text of terms like 'refuge' and 'light' and expressions like 'four walls'¹⁷⁹ and 'little body' as references to the original caesura of birth, the catastrophic event that, anatomically speaking, detaches the newborn from the uterus and forces the infant to experience a sense of 'absence'. Lacking logic and abounding in incommunicability, the text stages the eternal suffering of an individual who is abandoned at the mercy of existence and his future time. Even a superficial reading of the text reveals the grief of the protagonist. Presented as a disconsolate human-like creature, the self of *Lessness* is devoid of any (maternal) shelter and victim of the inexorable passage of time.

¹⁷⁴ Anon., *A Landscape of Desolation*, Radio Times, 18 Feb. 1971.

¹⁷⁵ D. Wade, *Lessness I. Radio 3*, The Observer, 21 Feb. 1971.

¹⁷⁶ Anon., *The Inward Eye*, *The Tablet*, 6 Mar. 1971.

¹⁷⁷ D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 22. My translation.

¹⁷⁸ J. Alber, "The 'Moreness' or 'Lessness' of 'Natural' Narratology: Samuel Beckett's 'Lessness' Reconsidered", *Style*, 36:1, 2002, pp. 54-75, p. 61.

¹⁷⁹ In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud claimed that "boxes, cases, chests, cupboards and ovens represent the uterus, and also hollow objects, ships, and vessels of all kinds. Rooms in dreams are usually women". See S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, Second Part, and On Dreams*, cit., p. 354.

This sense of dejection that permeates the text is strengthened by the recurrence of the colour grey. The despondent universe that Beckett portrays in *Lessness* is a grey universe in which all is ‘ruin’, a term that is repeated twenty-six times in few pages. As Alice and Kenneth Hamilton observe, *Lessness* “suggests infinite repetition by its form”, while its title “suggests diminution”¹⁸⁰ and degradation. This is a life that feeds upon abortion; this is a world in which the little-bodied protagonist will “curse God again”, “face to the open sky the passing deluge”,¹⁸¹ a term that I read as an allusion to the Great Flood that God sent to exterminate humanity and wash away all sins. *Lessness*’ world is one in which “unhappiness will reign again”,¹⁸² a wasteland where (future) time is about to finish. In *Lessness*, all is nothing but tedious repetition: “he will live again the space of a step it will be day and night again over him the endlessness”.¹⁸³ The future of this helpless self is the mirror of a traumatic ‘yesterday’, when the subject was deprived of the “paradise of selfhood”,¹⁸⁴ as Philip H. Solomon labels it.

Being born into darkness, being made of shadow, birth-as-death, life-in-death and death-in-life, womb-as-coffin, birth in futurelessness, and death as return to the womb-crypt are pivotal themes in Beckett’s literature. The spring of future time, birth comes to be the call of Death, the deadline of the self’s existential time. Exiled into a life and into a time(-to-come) that only promise degradation and ontological impoverishment, Beckett’s selves lack the womb-refuge from which they were pitilessly driven out. Reminding me of the expulsion of Eve and Adam from the Garden of Eden, Beckett’s subjects are rejected from an imaginary uterus and forced by their own creator to survive (or try their best to) in “an underworld realm of death, a tomb, a turbulent sea, or alternatively a state of anxiety or of numbness, sleep, and drunkenness. These too are the familiar sites of the inner exile from which the Beckettian voice speak”,¹⁸⁵ often meaninglessly, like in the case of the hopeless protagonist of *Lessness*.

As far as Bion is concerned, ‘birth’ is a central issue both in his psychoanalytic thinking and in his creative works. In his paper “The Imaginary Twin”, read on 1 November 1950 for membership of the British Psycho-Analytical Society in London, Bion referred to some sessions with an ill-humoured patient, probably Beckett himself.¹⁸⁶ In the paper, Bion delineates the conflicting relationship with this patient, who felt that the treatment was getting nowhere and was doing nothing good to him. Bion reported: “the patient is apparently unaware of any existence outside the consulting room; there is no report of any external activity. There is merely an existence away from the analyst of which nothing

¹⁸⁰ A. Hamilton, K. Hamilton, *Condemned to Life*, cit., p. 191.

¹⁸¹ S. Beckett, “*Lessness*”, in S. Beckett, *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, cit., pp. 375-379, p. 375.

¹⁸² *Idem*, p. 376.

¹⁸³ *Idem*, p. 377.

¹⁸⁴ See P. H. Solomon, “Purgatory Unpurged: Time, Space, and Language in ‘*Lessness*’”, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 6, 1980, pp. 63-72, p. 66.

¹⁸⁵ A. Moorjani, *The Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness*, cit., p. 192.

¹⁸⁶ I. Miller, K. Souter, *Beckett and Bion*, cit., p. 106.

is known except that he is ‘all right’ or ‘better’ and a relationship with the analyst which the patient says is bad”.¹⁸⁷ Persecuted by distorted visions of the womb, the patient is uneasy on the couch and, retreating into a sort of imaginary uterus, he fears being born.¹⁸⁸ He grows tense and asserts that, “if I stretch out I shall become rigid and touch the pillow and contaminate it and get contaminated back again. I feel as if I were in the womb”.¹⁸⁹ The walls of the womb imagined by the patient are contagious; infection is in the uterus itself. Looked at from this angle, the womb becomes an incubator of degeneracy and decay.

Like for Beckett, in Bion’s view, birth is a traumatic event that exposes the self to the scary unknowability of ‘tomorrow’. In Bion’s opinion, birth brings about a number of transformations that always have a catastrophic impact on the integrity of the self: like death, birth represents in fact the change *par excellence*. Birth is not only performed in the act of being born and becoming a body; birth implies other countless origins. Birth foreshadows the birth of time, of anxiety, memory, sufferance, of a body and a mind. In *Two Papers. ‘The Grid’ and ‘Caesura’* (1942), Bion argued that birth is a painful separation.¹⁹⁰ In Bion’s view, birth is a dramatic caesura between the pre-natal and the natal state and it represents a terrifying passage from “a liquid environment to a gaseous one”.¹⁹¹ He thought that birth is a contact-barrier that unites, yet separates irredeemably, the not-yet-born from the newborn. Birth is a linking-separating line and, for its being a sharp separation, it represents the first catastrophic transformation that the infant has to tackle. Like Beckett, Bion looks at birth as tantamount to loss, detachment from and absence of the (m)other, and as a cause of disorders in the subject’s temporal perception.

In “Theory of Thinking”, Bion elucidated that, threatened by nagging feelings of an imminent death, the newborn needs to be able to tolerate high levels of frustration and tension both in body and mind, which are inherent in the condition of being in time and in the world. Bion suggested that a tormenting sense of foreboding “can obstruct the development of thoughts and a capacity to think”.¹⁹² In and through the event of birth, the infant realises her/his subjectivity in (the future) time which “is conditioned on the presence of a catastrophe [...], which has both *already happened* [original emphasis] and is going *to happen* (*is imminent*) [original emphasis]”.¹⁹³ Bion believed that, to help the infant digest anxiety, the mother should, firstly, receive and introject (Bion called this process ‘*reverie*’) the unbearable aspects of existence that the infant projects onto her; secondly, the mother

¹⁸⁷ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 32.

¹⁸⁸ *Idem*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁹ *Idem*, p. 10.

¹⁹⁰ W. R. Bion, *Two Papers: ‘The Grid’ and ‘Caesura’*, cit., p. 43.

¹⁹¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 470.

¹⁹² W. R. Bion, *Two Papers: ‘The Grid’ and ‘Caesura’*, cit., p. 113.

¹⁹³ G. Civitarese, *Sublime Subjects. Aesthetic Experience and Intersubjectivity in Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017, p. 49.

should bear the infant's projections upon her mind and body as long as needed to process, elaborate and return them to her child, detoxified and dismantled.¹⁹⁴

As Civitarese elucidates, "while the infant admittedly seeks the object – and in this seeking the future-directed tendency characteristic of temporality can be glimpsed – it is equally true that much will depend on the object's receptivity and its capacity to allow itself to be found".¹⁹⁵ To cope with the harshness of the time(-to-come) of existence, the infant needs a (m)other that guides her/him out of a state of anxiety and towards a state of self-consciousness and serenity. The infant feels that the only possibility that s/he has of surviving is to remain attached to the mother's breast.¹⁹⁶ But, if the mother lacks *reverie*, the infant's dreads are not elaborated and the newborn has to re-introject "not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread",¹⁹⁷ an overwhelming terror of what-comes-next. With no maternal *reverie*, the infant undergoes physical and psychological suffering and her/his existence is reduced to a spasmodic search for the external object: the individual thereby loses "recognition of a distinction between subject and object", namely "between the self and the external object".¹⁹⁸

In the opening lines of *The Dawn of Oblivion*, Bion makes clear that the third volume is an "attempt to write an embryo-scientific account of a journey from birth to death overwhelmed by pre-mature knowledge, experience, glory and self-intoxicating self-satisfaction".¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, in *The Past Presented*, P.A. argues that "death is not a disease any more than birth. Disease is constantly joined to both; so is life – and human beings are liable to think and cause the other".²⁰⁰ In the trilogy, the maternal womb is described as a container of disease and decadence. In this respect, Alice informs readers that the cataclysmic phenomena of birth and death are always intertwined: "most people must be aware that the birth of a child is [...] one of the few experiences which bring home the fact that issues of life and death are never far away".²⁰¹

In addition, more clearly than in his clinical notes, in *A Memoir* Bion draws a dividing line between the birth of a body and the birth of a mind. P.A. explains that "with our individual birth the mother's womb would be the silo in which pressure built up till the child burst forth or the mother got sick of carrying such a load of amniotic fluid, fetus, meconium and junk. But now is the Birth of Mind".²⁰² From Bion's point of view, birth is by no means the mere coming-into-being of a body; for him, birth

¹⁹⁴ C. Mawson (ed.), *Bion Today*, cit., p. 225.

¹⁹⁵ G. Civitarese, "The Concept of Time in Bion's 'A Theory of Thinking'", cit., p. 188.

¹⁹⁶ *Idem*, p. 190.

¹⁹⁷ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 116.

¹⁹⁸ *Idem*, 113.

¹⁹⁹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 429.

²⁰⁰ *Idem*, p. 414.

²⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 563.

²⁰² *Idem*, p. 486.

is the “incarnation of the psyche”, and of everything that birth entails.²⁰³ In P.A.’s view, birth is above all a psychic birth, which consists in the origin of a mind that looks back at birth as an event marked by feelings of extinction, separation, and anxiety. Interestingly enough, Mind reminds Body, both characters of the trilogy, that it suffers anxiety as much as Body has pain and, turning to the latter, it says: “I have pain about which you know nothing. I suffered intensively when we were rejected. I asked you to call me Psyche and I promised to call you Soma”.²⁰⁴ Dropped from the womb-paradise, Mind and Soma, the two entities that compose the newborn, are thrown into (future) time and doomed to failure.

Insisting on birth as an irreparable caesura from the mother, P.A. describes the phenomenon of birth as a contact-barrier between night and dawn (of oblivion?):

Partly a chance recapitulation of Freud’s description of the impression created on him by Charcot’s insistence on continued observation of facts – unexplained facts – until a pattern began to emerge; partly his admission that the ‘trauma of birth’ might afford a plausible but misleading reason for believing that there was this caesura between natal and prenatal. There were other impressive ‘caesuras’ – for example, between conscious and unconscious – which might be similarly misleading. [...] It was as if, literally as well as metaphorically, light began to grow, night was replaced by dawn.²⁰⁵

The transitions occurring between intrauterine life and existence-in-the-world, unconsciousness and consciousness, dream and reality, darkness and light, are all diverse, yet similar, instances of caesuras. The “light began to grow, night was replaced by dawn” may function as a reference to ‘the dawn of oblivion’, an expression that Bion employs to refer to the cataclysmic future in store for humanity. In this frame, I suggest that the expression ‘the dawn of oblivion’ can also function as an allusion to the phenomenon of birth, the moment in which the self leaves the darkness of the womb, encounters the blinding light of *ex-istence*, and starts tackling her/his finiteness in time. From this standpoint, war and birth share the same feature of being catastrophic: both foster a nameless dread of what comes next.

In conclusion, as in several of Beckett’s works, in Bion’s *A Memoir*, birth is often depicted as a refusal, an expulsion, and as a death sentence. For both authors, birth is a ruthless eviction from the original refuge. I argue that, in Beckett’s and Bion’s works, birth is portrayed as the anchor-point of

²⁰³ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works 1897-1979*, cit., p. 211.

²⁰⁴ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 434.

²⁰⁵ *Idem*, p. 560.

the subject's decadence and the springboard into her/his own demise. In a century scarred by wars and by the ever-present possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, the image of the womb becomes in Beckett and Bion incubator of decadence and death. Coming to light is for both authors synonymous with being condemned to the finiteness of existence, to pain and to an inevitable process of decadence.

To sum up, in this chapter I have interrogated the representations of futurity in Beckett's and Bion's literatures. I have considered the notion of 'human degeneration', a phenomenon that, in the late-Victorian age, engendered concerns about the future of humanity. The ever-growing number of people diagnosed with mental disorders led several late-nineteenth-century physicians (and pseudo-physicians) to ponder on the necessity to limit the spread of insanity through the implementation of cordons sanitaires. Redefined within the historical frame of the two World Wars, late-Victorian fears of human degeneration turned into terror of human annihilation. The necropolitics promoted by eugenics and Nazism and the brutality of the global conflicts made degeneration a tangible reality: the risk of mass extinction was (and still is) very much in the air.

In addition to the destruction and dehumanisation that resulted from the World Wars, the nuclear threat that held (and continues to hold) the world in check during the Cold War was also decisive in shaping the perception that humans had of future time: the feeling that humanity was at the verge became part of everyday life. Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine, One Evening* and some passages from Bion's *A Memoir* reveal the pessimism that the two authors had towards the future. Reflecting on the effective habitability of the planet and the unfavourable conditions for human life triggered by modern warfare, Beckett and Bion portray a universe and a humanity that, devoid of a 'tomorrow', are irrevocably doomed to the tomb.

Subsequently, I have turned my attention to the notion of 'desire', a psychic phenomenon that leads the subject to lean towards the future and implement changes. Both authors look at desire as the heart of human sufferance, as it forces the self to face the great unknown that is the future. In their works, Beckett and Bion convey the view that desire destabilises the self and both seem to imply that, for this reason, desires should be shunned. Unable or unwilling to change and form new habits, Beckett's selves appear to me futureless. Swallowed up by a vortex of hopelessness, many characters that populate Beckett's literary universe contemplate suicide as a way to escape the morbidity and tediousness of their lives, punctuated by futile habits and marred by existential boredom. Much like Beckett, Bion considers desire as a catalyst of change, which, in his view, is always perilous to the subject's psychological stability. For Bion, desire exposes the self to the unbearable vastness of future time and incites changes, namely caesuras between old and new versions of the self.

With this idea of caesura in mind, I have ventured into the phenomenology of birth, understood as the original break-up from the (m)other and the beginning of the self's exposure to the future. In this

last section of the chapter I have analysed Beckett's *Lessness* and some passages from Bion's *A Memoir* that tackle birth and the trauma that the latter entails. In Beckett, birth and death are often portrayed as simultaneous moments. Coming into light (or rather into darkness) is for Beckett to be born astride of a grave and be exposed to the harshness of future time. Reader of *The Trauma of Birth* by Rank and influenced by Jung's lecture, Beckett looks at birth as the beginning of the end. Likewise, Bion conceives birth as the change *par excellence*, as the source of feelings of frustration, abandonment, and anxiety that torment the newborn. In Bion's view, being born means being condemned to the nameless dread that is inherent in the finiteness of existence and in the destabilising unknowability of 'tomorrow'. I argue that both authors regard birth as the entrance door to 'the heart of darkness' of existence. In their view, doomed to degeneration and decay, eternal dissatisfaction and exposed to the harsh elapse of time, the self exists in the exhausting wait for the blinding light of the 'dawn of oblivion', whose advent decrees the end of all things.

Chapter 4

Void Presents. Existential Nothingness and Timelessness: Reading Beckett's *The Unnamable* through Bion's O

The present is not [...] a temporal concept
Except as something infinitely lacking content,
Which again is exactly the infinitely vanishing.
[...] The life that is in time, and is only that of time, has no present.¹

In this last chapter I explore the way in which Beckett and Bion deal with the phenomenology of the present, the third dimension of time that, besides the past and the future, forms the temporal architecture of the self's existence. If tackling the ontological implications and multifarious psychic manifestations of past and future time has sometimes proved tricky insofar, it seems to me that, in its apparent triviality, handling the nature of the present is even more complicated. If we were to attempt to say what present time is, it could be asserted that the present is either the temporal dimension in which phenomena occur and the self is at the full potentiality of its beinghood, or, as Bergson explained in *Matter and Memory*, 'nothing' but the "indivisible limit which divides the past from the future".²

From this second standpoint, the present is viewed as nothing but the unstoppable sliding of the future into the abyss of the past, as an infinitesimal span in which time is, in fact, deprived of time. Being inconsistent and perennially absent, 'now' is a temporal dimension that never realises itself in

¹ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety. A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin*, transl. A. Hannay, Norton & Company, New York and London, 2014 [1844], pp. 105-106.

² H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, cit., p. 150.

time. Connor rightly observes that, “stranded as they are in their agonizing space of waiting, Vladimir and Estragon seem to encounter the paradox of all time; that is, that [...] the present, the here-and-now, is in fact never here-and-now”.³ Devoid of any perceptible duration, the present is mere ‘nothingness’, as Sartre elucidated in *Being and Nothingness*.

Emphasising that, for him, “pure being and pure nothingness are the same thing”,⁴ Sartre suggested that the ‘earlier’ (the past) is separated from the ‘later’ (the future) by ‘nothing’, a timeless bubble where the self is ontologically suspended.⁵ Sartre remarked that “what is present is opposed to the future which is not yet, and also to the past, which is no longer”,⁶ and underscored that present time consists in “nothing more than [...] the ideal term of an infinitely pursued division: a nothingness”.⁷ He claimed that the present is the timeless dimension in which time cannot be; and it is thereby “impossible to grasp the present in the form of an instant, because the instant would have to be the moment at which the present *is* [original emphasis]. Yet the present *is not*”.⁸ It follows that, in a time that does not exist, neither can the subject be: Sartre assumed that what is present to me is definitely other from me.⁹ In Sartre’s view, the present *is* the “cavity of non-being that”, within the temporal nothingness of the ‘now’, realises the indispensable encounter between past and future time and the “total synthetic form of temporality”, which is the internal structure of the being and, at the same time, its own nihilation.¹⁰

Bearing in mind this idea of present time as a temporal (and ontological) nothingness, I commence this chapter by exploring Beckett’s tendency to relegate his characters to void presents, in which the ‘now’ is nothing but psychotic eternity and distressing repetitiveness. In the devastated universes portrayed by Beckett, the present – the time of self-consciousness – is the temporal dimension in which the self loses connection with its own persona and with the phenomenal world. In Beckett, the present is where time crumbles and becomes equivalent to zero. Often affected by severe incapacity to perceive time and its elapse, several Beckettian characters give the impression of being suspended on the brink of an existential abyss, where all converges towards nothingness and ultimately fades away into darkness. In the disorienting emptiness of their present times, Beckett’s subjects lack essence and self-consciousness, everything grazes inconsistency, time becomes timeless, and what in fact remains is despair, sterile incommunicability, emotional void, and the infinite disorientation of a pathological mind devoid of an ‘I’ and its existential time.

³ S. Connor, *Samuel Beckett. Repetition, Theory and Text*, cit., p. 134.

⁴ J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 46.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 65.

⁶ *Idem*, pp. 180-181.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 181.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 184.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 247.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 208.

Psychopathology is nevertheless just one of the possible ways to study the aura of nothingness and timelessness that enshrouds a great portion of Beckett's production. Indeed, I cannot fail to recognise that some scholars have looked into Beckett's passionate engagement with nothingness, voidness and timelessness not from a clinical perspective, but from a mystical one. In view of this, I turn to some of those works that, looking to the East and its rich philosophies, have offered fascinating analyses of Beckett's "timelessness of Nothing"¹¹ from mystical angles, and more specifically from the perspective of Buddhism. What emerges is that Buddhist visions of the self as mystically estranged from time (*śūnyatā*) are valuable keys to approaching the sense of temporal emptiness that permeates many of Beckett's texts.

Finally, I concentrate upon Bion's theory of O, the unknown and ineffable psychic hole where the ballasts of memory (the past) and desire (the future) are abandoned in favour of the infinite emptiness of the present. Some of Bion's scholars have pointed out that, for the formulation of the concept of O, the British analyst drew from Buddhism and, in more detail, from the way in which Buddhism deals with notions like 'timelessness', 'placelessness', and 'emptiness'. Before exploring the polymorphous and mutable nature of O (often mentioned also in *A Memoir of the Future*), I consider the interconnections between O and Buddhism and use Bion's O as a lens through which I look into the plight of Beckett's subjects, here prototypically represented by the nameless narrator of *The Unnamable* (1950). Victims of a container-less O and deprived of a spiritual or psychological guide that can rescue them from the chasm of their minds, Beckett's psychotic selves appear to me – to borrow two expressions from Grotstein – "existential vagabonds" that wander pointlessly within a "black hole",¹² a shattered mindscape where all is boundless chaos and gloomy shadows.

Beckett's and Bion's Portrayals of Void Time(s)

Whenever I think of Beckett's characters, from the depressed Murphy to the clownish Vladimir and Estragon, from Belacqua to Watt, Mrs. Rooney, Winnie, Hamm, Clov, Krapp, Molloy, Malone, the nameless narrator of *The Unnamable*, and up to the bodiless selves that populate Beckett's short fiction and late-theatre, they all appear to me lost in time and deprived of time sensitivity. Raymond Federman remarks that, "unable to cope with the material world and the natural function of their bodies, tormented by objects, habits, memory, time", Beckett's selves "retreat into private asylums (minds or madhouses) from which they gaze out in stupefied perplexity".¹³ In Beckett's inhospitable

¹¹ R. N. Coe, *Beckett*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh and London, 1964, p. 60.

¹² J. S. Grotstein, "Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos and the 'Black Hole' (I)", cit., p. 263.

¹³ R. Federman, *Journey to Chaos. Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction*, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1965, p. 18.

wastelands, all grows dark and the self, unable to cope with an environment “of utter destitution, of utter indigence”,¹⁴ progressively loses inner equilibrium and connection with the world.

“Praised by some for its brilliant artistic evocations of various forms of madness”,¹⁵ Beckett’s works portray the mental blackout of a subject reduced to an ontological minimum and whose head “doesn’t work anymore”.¹⁶ Mental disorders and psychological deterioration are the archetypes that spectators and readers can find in profusion in Beckett’s work. To use a line from *Worstward Ho*, Beckett’s work is a portrayal of a mind “at bounds of boundless void”.¹⁷ Replete with delirious psyches, vulnerable and troubled minds, Beckett’s corpus lacks moments of lucidity: his literature is a destabilising picture of a mental fiasco, a psychic collapse. I look at Beckett’s art as the “place of all black void”,¹⁸ where chaos amounts to nothing. After all, it was Beckett’s strong passion for ‘nothing(ness)’, besides its diverse variants (mindlessness, timelessness, placelessness, selflessness, absence, void) that earned him the title of nihilist. In this regard, Nathan A. Scott notices that it was in the bizarre figure of Samuel Beckett that “the dark, seedy, claustrophobic universe of” nihilism found “its most ingenious and resourceful cartographer”.¹⁹

In his works, Beckett enacts the absurd game of existence of a psychotic self that, obsessed with an elusive and distorted temporality, lives an agonising Calvary in the aftermath of the two World Wars. Ontologically arid, Beckett’s universes are mere residua, dejection and shadows, and at the heart of being is a timeless nothingness, a boundless emptiness that, notwithstanding its inherent vacuum, is paradoxically anything but devoid of life. In the existential emptiness of Beckett’s worlds, a crowd of mentally unsound subjects meet, breathe, eat, drink, speak, sleep, wake up, stand, sit, walk, wait, hear, shit, quarrel, and then repeat themselves *ad nauseam*. Beckett’s literature mirrors what Sass refers to as a modernist tendency to depict the world as “derealized [original emphasis], robbed of its substantiality and objectivity”,²⁰ a withering universe in which the subject is dispossessed of an ‘I’ and incapable of locating itself – physically and temporally – within the dim void. In this frame, the closing lines of *That Time* well convey the sense of loss of reality which Beckett’s selves are compelled to experience again and again:

¹⁴ N. A. Scott, “The Recent Journey into the Zone of Zero: The Example of Beckett and His Despair of Literature”, *The Centennial Review*, 6:2, 1962, pp. 144-181, p. 161.

¹⁵ B. Simon, “The Fragmented Self, the Reproduction of the Self, and Reproduction in Beckett and in the Theatre of the Absurd”, in J. H. Smith (ed.), *The World of Samuel Beckett – Psychiatry and Humanities*, vol. 12, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1991, pp. 157-180, p. 176.

¹⁶ S. Beckett, “Molloy”, in S. Beckett, *Novels, vol. II*, ed. P. Auster, Grove Press, New York, 2006, pp. 3-170, p. 4.

¹⁷ S. Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, John Calder, London, 1983, p. 46.

¹⁸ S. Beckett, “Frizzles”, in S. Beckett, *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, cit., pp. 401-422, p. 418.

¹⁹ N. A. Scott, “The Recent Journey into the Zone of Zero”, cit., p. 161. For a thorough investigation into Beckett and nihilism, see S. Weller, *A Taste for the Negative. Beckett and Nihilism*, Legenda, London, 2005. See also D. Caselli, *Beckett and Nothing. Trying to Understand Beckett*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2010.

²⁰ L. Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, cit., p. 252.

not a sound only the old breath and the leaves turning and then suddenly this dust whole place suddenly full of dust when you opened your eyes from floor to ceiling nothing only dust and not a sound only what was it it said come and gone was it something like that come and gone come and gone no one come and gone in no time gone in no time.²¹

Disrupted up to the point of becoming a no-self in a “no time”,²² the Beckettian subject struggles to maintain a link with the reality that surrounds her/him, where time and its perception are cornerstones of the integrity of selfhood. Federman asserts that, “in Beckett’s universe, time, clocks, and those elements of nature that mark the passing of time [...], are closely associated with the characters’ notion of reality”,²³ a reality that, alongside Beckett’s deranged protagonists, is eternally sinking. Exiled in unendurable settings, Beckett’s grotesque, irrational, and barely human subjects appear perplexed, devoid of self-consciousness, traumatised and severed from the time that they should be inhabiting: the present. Many of Beckett’s narrators embody what Eugene F. Kaelin calls “the nothingness of human aspiration when a consciousness has become alienated from its world”.²⁴ They populate a “cheerless, hopeless world of Zero”,²⁵ in which time and the self are dispossessed of essence and meaning. Sass writes that Beckett’s are “solipsistic and devitalized protagonists” that experience “the loss not only of a vibrant or solid external reality, a world outside the head, but also of any feeling of volition and personal integrity”.²⁶

In effect, what is often missing in Beckett’s literary world is the self, its present and presence, its consciousness and its ability to hold the pieces of its beinghood together. John Pilling claims that, in Beckett’s works, “any attempt to transform a looming and shapeless absence into a cut-and-dried presence” is utterly foreclosed.²⁷ Beckett puts the spotlight – literally, in the case, for instance, of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *Not I* or *Play* – on fragmented selves that have lost consciousness of being and possibly any *raison d’être* in (present) time. Leading existences that are mere cul-de-sacs, Beckett’s individuals are victims of an eternal and “lingering dissolution”,²⁸ as Mrs. Rooney calls it in *All That Fall*. Whether corporeal, phantasmal, or simply vocal *presences*, Beckett’s protagonists are equipped with a mind that, most of the time, appears to me not (in the) present. This is made very evident by

²¹ S. Beckett, “That Time”, in S. Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, cit., pp. 415-424, p. 424.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ R. Federman, *Journey to Chaos*, cit., p. 49.

²⁴ E. F. Kaelin, *The Unhappy Consciousness. The Poetic Plight of Samuel Beckett*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht and London, 1981, p. xviii.

²⁵ N. A. Scott, “The Recent Journey into the Zone of Zero”, cit., p. 162.

²⁶ L. Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, cit., p. 286.

²⁷ J. Pilling, “On Not Being There: Going on without in Beckett”, in D. Caselli (ed.), *Beckett and Nothing*, cit., pp. 20-27, p. 24.

²⁸ S. Beckett, “All That Fall”, in S. Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, cit., pp. 155-194, p. 160.

Mrs. Rooney, who declares: “I do not exist. The fact is well known”,²⁹ “I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on”.³⁰ Similarly, on the verge of death, in *Malone Dies* – originally titled *L’Absent* – Malone admits: “I have lived in a kind of coma. The loss of consciousness for me was never any great loss. All [...] belongs to the past. Now it is the present I must establish”.³¹

Inveterate observer of the multifarious synaptic dysfunctionalities of his protagonists, like a skilled orchestra director, in his texts Beckett blends hallucinations, incomprehensible lines, linguistic loops with no connectives, subjects or verbs, punctuationless sequences, infinite paragraphs, pointless dialogues, and whirlpools of schizoid deliriums. In the midst of this maelstrom of utter absurdity, everything verges, individuals included, towards a psychotic abyss – a ‘black hole’,³² – where the dynamics of time are torn down completely. In *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self*, Hoffman has assumed that “the Beckettian residual man is a ‘fin de partie’ [original emphasis] specimen of the breakdown of” a rational machinery.³³ Employing the powerful metaphor of a defective turntable, Hoffman has claimed that, in Beckett’s works, everything resembles “a record moving at the wrong speed or suffering from a stuck needle”.³⁴ Mental disorders and their grievous effects on the subject’s consciousness of being in present time continuously form, or rather deform, the ontological background of Beckett’s production.

The origin of Beckett’s passion for narrating mental illnesses can be traced back to a variety of sources: first of all, the precariousness of his own mental stability, threatened by a number of recurrent breakdowns. Alongside the fragility of his psychological health, the crippling depression of his loved-hated mother, the diagnosis of schizophrenia of Lucia Joyce at the psychiatric hospital Burghölzli in Zurich, his clinical experience with Bion in London, and the mind-shattering experience of the Second World War surely played a crucial role in alimenting Beckett’s interest in mental pathologies and their phenomenology. Lastly, the various visits between February and October 1935 that Beckett paid to his close friend and physician A. G. Thompson at the Senior House Physician in Bethlehem Royal Hospital in Beckenham³⁵ made it possible for Beckett to observe, at a very close distance, the complicated and fascinating universe of brain and behaviour pathologies. Beckett’s knowledge of the world of psychopathology was so thorough that, as Knowlson pointed out, a myth spread that Beckett worked for some time as a nurse in a psychiatric hospital.³⁶

²⁹ S. Beckett, “All That Fall”, cit., p. 166.

³⁰ *Idem*, p. 172.

³¹ S. Beckett, “Malone Dies”, in S. Beckett, *Novels, vol. II*, cit., pp. 171-281, p. 177.

³² See J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos and the ‘Black Hole’” (I and II).

³³ F. J. Hoffman, *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self*, cit., p. 63.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ L. Salisbury, “‘What Is the Word’: Beckett’s Aphasic Modernism”, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 17, 2008, pp. 78-126, p. 86.

³⁶ J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, cit., p. 209.

The result of this familiarity with mental illnesses was that Beckett's fiction and drama turned into a laboratory in which, by dissecting and probing his characters' minds, Beckett abundantly worked on psychosis and its varied manifestations. Stuffed with "voices in the head, split personalities, compulsive rituals [...] and, above all, withdrawal symptoms",³⁷ Beckett's literature is an asylum whose wards are saturated with unstable, fragmented and alienated selves, speaking gibberish, devoid of memory – or equipped with a very faulty one – and incapable of planning for their future productively. In Beckett's shattered worlds, everything has gone mad; all is drenched in a sickening sense of ontological nullification, spatial and temporal lessness, what Murphy "conveniently called Nothing".³⁸

In this frame, Moorjani claims that Beckett's work abounds with multiple instances of '-lessness': selflessness, placelessness, and timelessness.³⁹ Concentrating my attention on the latter, in *Time and Timelessness*, an insightful psychoanalytic inquiry into the multiformity of temporal experience, the Greek-US psychoanalyst Peter Hartocollis compares time perception in mental illness and in mental health and asserts that, in conditions of cerebral stability, temporality remains in the background as an implicit element of existence.⁴⁰ Things change radically in psychotic patients, for whom the passage of time is a major existential concern. For instance, such are the levels of depersonalisation⁴¹ in borderline patients that temporality is perceived by them as chaotic and, in worse cases (especially in patients affected by schizophrenic disorders) as practically still.⁴² In psychopathology, the perception of time can be so disrupted that time and its elapse risk disappearing from the existential horizon of the subject. Hartocollis points out that patients are often tormented by a feeling that their capacity to perceive time is dysfunctional and that their ability to distinguish external and internal reality is intermittent or definitely absent. In a diseased mind, the boundary between the outside and the inside can in fact dissolve, with very little chance of restoring it.

Hartocollis claims that the time of a psychotic mind is a time that moves "in an erratic way, now too fast, then slowing down to halt; becoming interrupted, confused, or entirely absent; without future or past, present-oriented or without awareness of distinctions between past, present, and future".⁴³

³⁷ M. Esslin, "Telling It how It Is: Beckett and the Mass Media", in J. H. Smith (ed.), *The World of Samuel Beckett – Psychiatry and the Humanities*, cit., pp. 204-216, p. 208.

³⁸ S. Beckett, "Murphy", in S. Beckett, *Novels, vol. I*, cit., pp. 1-168, p. 148.

³⁹ A. Moorjani, *The Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness*, cit., p. 175.

⁴⁰ P. Hartocollis, *Time and Timelessness or the Varieties of Temporal Experience*, International Universities Press, New York, 1983, p. 111.

⁴¹ In *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, the phenomenon of 'depersonalization' is defined as "a state of mind in which the self appears unreal. Individuals feel estranged from themselves and usually from the external world, and thoughts and experiences have a distant, dreamlike character. In its persistent form, depersonalization is observed in such disorders as depression, hypochondriasis, dissociative states, temporal lobe epilepsy, and early schizophrenia. It also often occurs as a result of a traumatic experience". <https://dictionary.apa.org/depersonalization>. Accessed on 21 May 2022.

⁴² P. Hartocollis, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁴³ *Idem*, p. 121.

Fuelling an erosion of the integrity of the internal ‘I’, mental pathologies bring about diverse disorders in time sensitivity. Hartocollis argues that “the disintegration of time consciousness has obviously serious psychopathological consequences for the way one experiences the phenomenal world and relates to oneself”.⁴⁴ In some cases, the disorganisation of time consciousness in certain patients can result in a regressive deficit and dramatic slowdown of the subject’s experience of time. Due to the fact that, in a diseased mind, internal clocks tick irregularly – or do not tick at all, – the psychotic subject can find her/himself confined in an eternal present, where s/he is unable to “estimate duration with any degree of accuracy, to detect succession and temporal association, or to note seriation”.⁴⁵ Hartocollis concludes that, for many patients affected by psychosis, “time as an experience ceases to exist: one then speaks of timelessness”,⁴⁶ that is a dimension of time in which the present (the time of self-consciousness) turns into a dead-end prison.

I believe that what Hartocollis explains about time misperception and timelessness in psychosis applies very well to the poor clinical picture of many of Beckett’s selves. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir informs Pozzo that his “time has stopped”⁴⁷ or, similarly, in *Endgame* Hamm warns the spectator that, in his deserted world, time is over.⁴⁸ Elizabeth Barry has stated that, “strikingly portrayed in Beckett’s fiction and theatre”,⁴⁹ distortions of time diagnosed in patients affected by schizophrenia are very frequent in Beckett’s literature. I regard Beckett’s world as one in which the self’s perception of the ‘here-and-now’ continuously dissolves and the liminal line between the past, the present, and the future is obsessively called into doubt. Deprived of time consciousness and suffering from psychotic disorders, Beckett’s selves are concerned “with their failure to distinguish remembered and imagined events and experiences”.⁵⁰

In this respect, Hartocollis points out that “the less one is conscious of time, whether as duration or perspective, the more likely one is to be free from psychopathology”.⁵¹ I argue that this is definitely not the case of Beckett’s characters. Beckett’s selves are in fact psychotic precisely because they are terribly conscious of their being unaware of their ‘now’ and of their navigating the flow of time. They know that their capacity to perceive and categorise diverse temporal layers is alarmingly close or equivalent to zero. And, in the desperate attempt to regain at least a semblance of control over their sense of time, they turn schizoid, repetitive, and exaggeratedly self-reflexive, to the point of

⁴⁴ G. Stanghellini et al. (eds), “Psychopathology of Lived Time: Abnormal Time Experience in Persons with Schizophrenia”, *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 42:1, 2015, pp. 45-55, p. 46.

⁴⁵ P. Hartocollis, *Time and Timelessness*, cit., p. 122.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 124.

⁴⁷ S. Beckett, “Waiting for Godot”, cit., p. 30.

⁴⁸ S. Beckett, “Endgame”, cit., p. 153.

⁴⁹ E. Barry, “All in My Head: Beckett, Schizophrenia and the Self”, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 37, 2016, pp. 183-192, p. 188.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 187.

⁵¹ P. Hartocollis, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

perceiving themselves as others from their own personae. Barry notices that several patients hosted in Beckett's asylum are suffocated by a maniacal hyperreflexivity, a psychotic form of self-consciousness "in which a subject or agent experiences itself or something that would normally be inhabited as an aspect or feature of itself as a kind of external object".⁵² The hyper-reflexive patient embarks upon a journey of erratic introspection – very noticeable in schizophrenic subjects – that estranges the individual from her/his own self and from the spatial and temporal reality that the subject inhabits. The result is the activation of a dangerous process of depersonalisation and self-alienation, which jeopardises the individual's consciousness of existing 'here' and 'now'.

Sass emphasises that "people with schizophrenia may well become perplexed and confused, lost in endless recursions of an isolated and abstract journey into the interior",⁵³ in the desperate attempt at (re-)encountering an elusive non-traceable self and assign it a spatial and temporal position in the world. In this compulsive search of a counterpart that is buried within, what the Beckettian subject attains is just an ontological vacuum. As stressed by Shira Wolosky, divested "of everything, every figment, every figure and voice, one finds no centre, no unity; divesting the self of everything one indeed is left nothing at all, no self at all",⁵⁴ no place, no time. What remains in the end is nothingness, the same nothingness experienced by Watt during his tedious stay at Mr. Knott's house, during which he learns that "nothing had happened, that a nothing had happened, learned to bear it and even, in a shy way, to like it".⁵⁵ Applying Grotstein's clinical annotations to my reading of Beckett, his selves suffer "not only from psychologically meaningful conflicts and deficits per se, but also from extreme form of disorganization, randomness, entropy, or chaos in regard to conflict, and nothingness and/or meaninglessness".⁵⁶

In the grey worlds of Beckett, where all tastes of nothingness and the self is a no-self, the time-mind becomes distorted. Sandwiched between overwhelming pasts and dreadful futures, the present in Beckett's work is often deserted by the self and, as Connor claims, its solidity "vanishes, for every moment of time is shadowed and inhabited by the other times which preceded and succeed it".⁵⁷ Present time is reduced to an infinite emptiness, where past and future times elusively meet, collide, collapse, inexplicably disappear, leaving no trace. Albeit insubstantial, the only trace that is left in Beckett's work is the desolating void of a disordered mind struggling to find a place and time in the

⁵² E. Barry, "All in My Head", cit., p. 186. For a thorough investigation into the phenomenon of hyperreflexivity, see M. Pérez-Álvarez, "Hyperreflexivity as a Condition of Mental Disorder: A Clinical and Historical Perspective", *Psicothema*, 20:2, 2008, pp. 181-187.

⁵³ L. Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, cit., p. 196.

⁵⁴ S. Wolosky, "Samuel Beckett. Figural Evasions", in S. Budick, W. Iser (eds), *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989, pp. 165-186, p. 182.

⁵⁵ S. Beckett, "Watt", in S. Beckett, *Novels, vol. I*, cit., pp. 169-379, p. 231.

⁵⁶ J. S. Grotstein, "Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos and the 'Black Hole'" (I), cit., p. 265.

⁵⁷ S. Connor, *Samuel Beckett. Repetition, Theory and Text*, cit., p. 151.

world. As Simon affirms, in Beckett's worlds, the self is "an entity that has to make the best it can of living in an absolutely senseless world",⁵⁸ where all is pure chaos. Likewise, in *The Shape of Chaos*, Hesla stresses that for Beckett's selves 'nothing' "is the word for what is to be, for what is to be hoped is to be. [...] There is no other way of dealing with a world which is irrational, senseless, absurd. There is no other way of escaping the mortifying recurrence of empty hours and days and years".⁵⁹ In Beckett's barren universes, 'now' is "silent and empty and dark";⁶⁰ it is the temporal space where emptiness feeds on emptiness, the self and its consciousness crumble, and everything – which in fact is nothing – is filled with "infinite and formless" void.⁶¹

The lens of psychosis is, nevertheless, just one of the possible tools through which to examine the temporal emptiness experienced by several of Beckett's subjects. Some scholars have in fact regarded the temporal void that so often punctuates the existence of the Beckettian self as the outcome of a spiritual journey, which makes the subject disconnect from spatial reality and, of course, from present time. At first glance, this mystical approach to Beckett's works and the clinical one that I have proposed above might appear far apart. Nonetheless, a closer look proves that psychopathology and mysticism are fields that are not that distant from each other. On this issue, the British cognitive neuropsychologist Caroline Brett observes that "it has long been recognized that there are similarities between spiritual and psychotic experiences".⁶² Brett claims that psychosis and mystical experiences are both altered states of consciousness that produce similar effects on the self and its perception of inner and outer reality, here and now. Mental disorders and mystical experiences equally provoke

the shift of attention away from practical and social worlds and away from sensorimotor activity, the loss of distinction between subjective and objective worlds, the concurrent erosion of the experience of the self, and the loss or serious weakening of the prior ontology that depends on the cognitive structural framework.⁶³

In altered state of consciousness, time disorders are regularly experienced. The US psychiatrist Arnold M. Ludwig points out that, in states of altered consciousness, the subject's time sensitivity is considerably deviated.⁶⁴ Ludwig remarks that, when the self's consciousness is altered, "feelings of

⁵⁸ B. Simon, "The Fragmented Self", cit., p. 162.

⁵⁹ D. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos*, cit., p. 162.

⁶⁰ S. Beckett, "Texts for Nothing", in S. Beckett, *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, cit., pp. 295-339, p. 339.

⁶¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 161.

⁶² C. Brett, "Psychotic and Mystical States of Being: Connections and Distinctions", *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, 9:4, 2002, pp. 321-341, p. 321.

⁶³ *Idem*, p. 334.

⁶⁴ A. M. Ludwig, "Altered States of Consciousness", in C. T. Tart (ed.), *Altered States of Consciousness*, Anchor Books, New York, 1969, pp. 11-24, p. 16.

timelessness, time coming to a standstill, the acceleration or slowing of time” are very common and, in some cases, “time may also seem of infinite or infinitesimal duration”.⁶⁵ In psychosis and in mystical experiences, the individual can lose self-consciousness, find her/himself hibernated in time(lessness), and all becomes immobile. Put differently, the sense of timelessness that besieges a psychotic mind can similarly be experimented by subjects who embark upon a mystical journey, during which, as the US analyst Kathrine Olivetti writes, “the individual psyche, without a regressive loss or erosion of [...] healthy ego, is able to lose itself and merge with what is felt as an encompassing other”.⁶⁶

In this mystical dimension where the subject perceives her/himself split into an ethereal self and a worldly one, time *presents* itself as void. Applied to the fields of psychosis and mysticism, the term ‘void’ acquires a double meaning. While in psychopathology the noun ‘void’ is frequently associated to expressions such as ‘mental oblivion’ or ‘psychic vacuum’, in mysticism this term does not always have a negative connotation. Quite the contrary. Richard N. Coe claims that “the Void is not simply negative; it is not ‘the obliteration of an unbearable presence,’ nor is it defined by simply being indefinable”.⁶⁷ In Coe’s view, by stuffing his works with a deep sense of emptiness, Beckett sought “to create and to define that which, created and defined, ceases to be what it must be if it is to reveal the truth of the human situation: Man as a Nothing in relation to all things which themselves are Nothing”,⁶⁸ time included. Coe remarks that, “the Self, in Beckett’s world, is infinite and void”,⁶⁹ it is cyclical and eternal; and eternity is a perennial (timeless) ‘now’. Coe maintains that “in eternity (infinite time, timelessness), there can be no end and no beginning, there can be no movement, there can be no thought (since thoughts are words, and words exist only in duration, in time), no memory, no personality. No ‘I’. And yet”, in the existential emptiness that permeates Beckett’s wastelands, “the ‘I’ exists, or seems to”.⁷⁰

In line with Coe, John Calder, Beckett’s publisher and friend for several years, suggests that, in many of his works, Beckett ended up depicting “the void before creation, the great emptiness that had to be filled”.⁷¹ Calder emphasises that what Beckett portrays in his literature is the nothingness that belongs to the state of being before existence, even before God,⁷² where time was in fact a no-time. Following what Coe and Calder suggest, Beckett casts light on individuals who, after an inexplicable

⁶⁵ A. M. Ludwig, “Altered States of Consciousness”, cit., p. 16.

⁶⁶ K. Olivetti, “Letting the Light Get in”, in W. Pearson, H. Marlo (eds), *The Spiritual Psyche in Psychotherapy. Mysticism, Intersubjectivity, and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London and New York, 2021, pp. 23-43, p. 24.

⁶⁷ R. N. Coe, *Beckett*, cit., p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Idem*, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 69.

⁷⁰ *Idem*, p. 70.

⁷¹ J. Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, Calder Publications, London, 2001, p. 122.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

ontological transmutation, have attained – or are very close to attain – their zenith, the ultimate realisation of the Self, beyond the flow of time, where void is “united with void”⁷³ and where the self faces, to use Coe’s words, the “timeless Totality to which it truly belongs”.⁷⁴ In this view, Beckett seems to dismantle the façade of the phenomenal world in order to interrogate what lies beyond the perceptible, namely the ultimate reality of being, where all is pure nothingness and boundless void.

This sense of nothingness, timelessness, and selflessness that hangs over several mindscapes depicted by the Irish author is what has led some scholars to look at Beckett’s work from a Buddhist angle. Notions like ‘nothingness’, ‘timelessness’, ‘emptiness’ are in fact of paramount importance in Buddhism, a religion that impacted significantly on Beckett and, by extension, on his works. In her thought-provoking *Beckett and Buddhism*, Moorjani reminds us that “there are very clear traces of Buddhist influence in Beckett’s postwar writing”.⁷⁵ Similarly, Archie Graham assumes that readers of Beckett and Buddhist Zen can easily spotlight traces of Buddhism in Beckett’s literature and recognises that what the author describes with such acuity and maniac precision in his literature is, in Buddhist terms, the self’s “experience of awakening to ultimate truth”.⁷⁶ And, in this dimension of beyond-ness, the subject is selfless and time is timeless.

It was Beckett’s passionate engagement with selflessness, timelessness, unbornness, existential nothingness, and other numerous instances of lessnesses what prompted Moorjani – and others before her⁷⁷ – to investigate the congruence of Beckett’s literature with the world of Buddhism, an immense universe of notions that, as Moorjani stresses, Beckett approached via his reading of Schopenhauer’s works at the dawn of the 1930s.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, I do not intend here to discuss Beckett’s reception of Buddhism as a whole. Among the several lessnesses that Moorjani spots both in Buddhism and in Beckett’s literature, I wish to focus on timelessness, a notion that is absolutely central to Buddhist meditative practices. But, to deal with Buddhism is not easy task: as Robert Sharf, Chair of the

⁷³ R. N. Coe, *Beckett*, cit., p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Idem*, p. 63.

⁷⁵ A. Moorjani, *Beckett and Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2021, p. 3.

⁷⁶ See A. Graham, “Art with Nothing to Express: Samuel Beckett and Zen”, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 11:2, 2002, pp. 20-50, p. 23.

⁷⁷ One could see also J. L. Kundert-Gibbs, *No-Thing Is Left to Tell: Zen/Chaos Theory in the Dramatic Art of Samuel Beckett*, Associated University Presses, London, 1999.

⁷⁸ A. Moorjani, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Moorjani explains that the great interest of Arthur Schopenhauer in Buddhism was aroused when, at the end of the eighteenth century, translations of Brahmanic and Buddhist texts were made available all around Europe. “An astonishing number of philosophers, writers, musicians, artists, psychologists and analysts were influenced by or took up the relay of this rediscovery of Eastern thought”. Schopenhauer worked hard on those texts and his transmission of them was crucial to the work of many; Beckett was one of them. See A. Moorjani, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer wrote: “if I wish to take the results of my philosophy as the standard of truth, I would have to privilege Buddhism above all other religions. [...] Until 1818, when my work appeared, there was very little information in Europe about Buddhism, and that little was very incomplete and problematic”. See A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, transl. J. Norman, A. Welchman, and C. Janaway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018 [1818], p. 178.

Berkeley Centre for Buddhist Studies, has warned me, Buddhism is an enormous area of knowledge, on a par with the vast universe of Western philosophy.⁷⁹

Therefore, with the aim at clarifying what I mean in this context by the term ‘Buddhism’, I resort to *Beckett and Zen* by Paul Foster, who clarifies that Buddhism “is neither a religion nor a philosophy”;⁸⁰ Foster articulates that Buddhism is rather “a path of liberation” from the heavy anchors and the overwhelming dilemmas of existence, “from which Beckett’s characters, and perhaps also Beckett himself, suffer”.⁸¹ Buddhism is a mystical experience, “the pure, unitary consciousness where an awareness of the world’s multiplicity has been completely obliterated”. Foster argues that Buddhism “is ultimately a state of mind. It is the completion of a process of disentangling the mind from craving and its associated snares”,⁸² an assumption that acts as a pillar of Beckett’s *Proust*, where, influenced by Schopenhauer and Leopardi, Beckett stressed that wisdom lies in the subject’s capacity to get rid of desires.⁸³

In Foster’s view, Buddhism takes the form of an inward turn, of an intense process of introspection that engenders the self’s distancing from reality and, consequently, from the time of existence: the present. Foster suggests that “the idea of Time, according to Buddhist experience, is a subjective conception, which develops [...] with the formation of the ego and the notion of self”.⁸⁴ In Buddhism, the subject looks at her/his own self as an object among other objects and, in this entangled web of osmotic relationships, the three dimensions of time – the past, the present, and the future – are oriented towards the full realisation of the self in a specific ‘now’ in present time.

Foster claims that, in order to attain the ultimate realisation of her/himself, the individual has to experiment “the nonsensical leap into the void that is not a void”,⁸⁵ where the real nature of being lies in the nowness of the meditative practice. It is in this dimension where everything turns out to be nothingness that, in Foster’s view, the Beckettian self rests in the emptiness of an absolute presentness. The fact of being fully in the present and, at the same time, alien to the dynamics of (present) time is to reach an existential dimension out of the world of phenomena, a dimension that reverberates with what Moorjani calls the “Buddhist ultimate emptiness and unknowable beyond”,⁸⁶ which is not a sterile vacuum, but a creative and contemplative emptiness.

⁷⁹ E-mail exchange, 23 May 2022.

⁸⁰ P. Foster, *Beckett and Zen. A Study of Dilemma in the Novels of Samuel Beckett*, Wisdom Publications, London, 1989, p. 28.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² P. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁸³ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 7.

⁸⁴ P. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁸⁵ *Idem*, p. 69.

⁸⁶ A. Moorjani, *Beckett and Buddhism*, cit., p. 3.

In this mystical dimension of spatial and temporal emptiness discussed by Foster and Moorjani, many of Beckett's narrators appear estranged from their own selves and from the environment that surrounds them. In this contemplative bubble, time is without beginning or end, what in Buddhist terms corresponds to *mushi mushū naru toki*,⁸⁷ an endless time of eternal circularity. In this dimension of a-temporality, the Beckettian subject appears to be in contact with "the real Form of his existence",⁸⁸ and self-awareness is "at one with the real Form of all other things in the world".⁸⁹ Moorjani asserts that the state that is achieved by some of Beckett's selves – what I prefer to regard instead as psychotic estrangement from one's own self and from the surrounding world – resembles the "inner void and timelessness confluent with *śūnyatā*".⁹⁰

In Buddhist terms, *śūnyatā* is the "Absolute Emptiness",⁹¹ a dimension where time is before the origination of time.⁹² As the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990) explained in his absorbing *Religion and Nothingness*, *śūnyatā* is "absolute negativity", "absolute transcendence of being",⁹³ "true infinity".⁹⁴ Attained by means of a profound meditation, *śūnyatā* is the name for the mystical dimension where the self gets acquainted with "the real form of reality".⁹⁵ To use some lines from *Watt*, in this mystical dimension, the being is "so light and free that it is as the being of nothing".⁹⁶ In *śūnyatā*, the individual is at every moment in time(lessness) ecstatically out of the dynamics of time; *śūnyatā* is "the absolute freedom that bottomlessly makes being and time to be being and time",⁹⁷ where the void is, most of all, an opportunity of self-knowledge, "the standpoint of an insight that knows everything in its true suchness".⁹⁸ So frequent in Beckett's literature, these "mystic visions of the soul emptied of self and world" could lead someone to think that, to borrow from Moorjani, they are "a preliminary for the advent of divinity".⁹⁹ This is inapplicable to Beckett's works: arguably embodied in the disembodied figure of *God(n)ot*, God will never visit the purgatorial wastelands inhabited by Beckett's selves. Beckett taught his readers and spectators that no parusia will disquiet the lethargic slumber – be it psychotic or mystical – that cloaks his narrators.

⁸⁷ K. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, transl. J. Van Bragt, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles, London, 1982, p. 304.

⁸⁸ *Idem*, 175.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ A. Moorjani, *Beckett and Buddhism*, cit., p. 160.

⁹¹ K. Nishitani, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

⁹² *Idem*, p. 197.

⁹³ *Idem*, p. 97.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, p. 177.

⁹⁵ *Idem*, p. 76.

⁹⁶ S. Beckett, "Watt", cit., p. 200.

⁹⁷ K. Nishitani, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁹⁸ *Idem*, 160.

⁹⁹ A. Moorjani, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

Viewed from a mystical perspective, the timeless presentness in which the Beckettian self rests could correspond to the exact point of intersection where, to pick up on Nishitani, “the unlimited past and a boundless future become a circular wholeness”, where the ‘now’ is both “infinite regression and [...] infinite progression, as something without beginning or end”.¹⁰⁰ Here, in the infinite finiteness of the *śūnyatic* ‘now’, past and future time come together to form a perfect circle, an *ensō*, the Zen Buddhist sign designating eternity, illumination, infinite, mindedness, and self’s wholeness. And, the roundness of the Zen *ensō* soon brings to my mind other two different circles: on one hand, the Ouroboros, the ancient alchemical symbol depicting a serpent or a dragon that, biting its own tail, gives shape to a perfect ring, a symbol standing for eternity and time completeness; on the other hand, remaining closer to my field of research, the flawless roundness of the *ensō* makes me think of Bion’s O, a letter and, at the same time, a powerful symbol that the British analyst employs to indicate “the ultimate, ineffable, infinite reality”¹⁰¹ of being in the spaceless spatiality of ‘here’ and in the timeless temporality of ‘now’, destitute of the ballasts of memory (the past) and desire (the future).

The Zen Buddhist priest Seiso Paul Cooper spots a fascinating correlation between the Buddhist *ensō* and Bion’s O. Looking at the shape of *ensō* and the letter O, Cooper elucidates that Bion’s O “circles endlessly like the Zen *enzo*, a symbol and expression of emptiness and becoming; full and complete, yet translucent, almost transparent, simultaneously opening and closing; [...] between somethingness and nothingness; [...] self, no-self; [...] the cosmic infinite everythingness; the nothing”.¹⁰² O is infinite presentness. In line with Cooper, López-Corvo affirms that, even though Bion never explicitly admitted that his clinical thought was influenced by Buddhism, “it is not difficult to establish a relation between” the Buddhist “form of thinking and some of Bion’s ideas”¹⁰³ and theories.

After all, Bion was no stranger to the Eastern world and its philosophical/religious thought. One should not forget that he had been born in India, in Muttra, in the Punjab, where he lived until 1905, when at the age of eight he was sent to England to attend preparatory school.¹⁰⁴ After that, he never went back to India. Only towards the end of his life, did he accept an invitation to return to Bombay, yet it was not meant to be: he died in England on 8 November 1979, two months before leaving.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, time and distance never remove India and its culture from Bion’s mind.¹⁰⁶ In *The Long*

¹⁰⁰ K. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, cit., p. 224.

¹⁰¹ S. P. Cooper, *Zen Insight, Psychoanalytic Action. Two Arrows Meeting*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, p. 98.

¹⁰² *Idem*, p. 100.

¹⁰³ R. López-Corvo, *Wild Thoughts Searching for a Thinker. A Clinical Application of W. Bion’s Theories*, Karnac Books, London, 2006, p. 174.

¹⁰⁴ W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works*, cit., p. 268.

¹⁰⁶ V. Gairola, “On Wilfred R. Bion’s Way of Being: Linking Truth, Thought, and Nostalgia”, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 39:1, 2022, pp. 78-84, p. 78.

Weekend, Bion confessed: “I loved India. The blazing, intolerable sun – how wonderful it was! The mid-day silence, the great trees with leaves hanging motionless in the breathless air, the brain-fever bird with its rising reiterated call, [...] then silence again”.¹⁰⁷

Bléandonu claims that “India made an indelible impression on the young Bion”, so much so that the analyst maintained a great passion for the country throughout all his life.¹⁰⁸ The grey and rainy days in London accentuated a feeling of nostalgia for his sunny and colourful homeland, which he sorely missed and cherished. Grotstein writes that “Bion, though English by heritage, was Anglo-Indian culturally; he undoubtedly brought with him many of the overt and hidden values of that mysterious land and integrated them with his later-to-be-acquired English and European left-brain”.¹⁰⁹ Grotstein asserts that Bion’s “venture into O is understandably thought by many to have issued from his Indian transcendental roots”.¹¹⁰

Likewise, Yichi Zhang observes that Bion’s passion for the East is proved by the great amount of annotations and underlinings in his personal copy of *The Way to Zen*, published in 1957 by Allan Watts (1915-1973), British philosopher who worked on the connections between psychoanalysis, spirituality, and Oriental thought. Zhang affirms that it was through Watts’ work that Bion became familiar, among other things, with the contemplative emptiness and timelessness of *śūnyatā*, a notion that “helped Bion to corroborate and think through his theorization of ‘O’”,¹¹¹ the heart of Bion’s psychoanalysis¹¹² and the ultimate objective of every psychoanalytic session.

In his theory of O, Bion condensed all his clinical and cultural background. Civitarese notices that, when tackling Bion’s clinical thought, matters are complicated by the fact that “Bion draws heavily on his knowledge of literature, mathematics, philosophy, and mysticism”, and in the case of O, “this stance becomes hyperbolical”.¹¹³ When the US psychoanalyst Robert Caper asked Bion ‘what is O?’, the latter replied that O is “everything we know nothing about”.¹¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, the US analyst Annie Reiner remarks that “there are far more questions about O than answers”.¹¹⁵ O is the boundless

¹⁰⁷ W. R. Bion, *The Long Weekend*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁰⁸ G. Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion. His Life and Works*, cit., p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ J. S. Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness*, cit., p. 25.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹¹ Y. Zhang, “Wilfred Bion’s Annotations in *The Way of Zen*: An Investigation into His Practical Encounters with Buddhist Ideas”, *Psychoanalysis and History*, 21:3, 2019, pp. 331-355, p. 349.

¹¹² Some scholars suggest that the core of Bion’s psychoanalysis is the Grid, “a diagram which he evolved in order to distinguish and display the range of different kinds of thought, statement or cognitive operation employed in the course of psychoanalysis”. S. Connor, “Beckett and Bion”, cit., p. 30. For an insight into Bion’s Grid, see W. R. Bion’s *Two Papers: ‘The Grid’ and ‘Caesura’*, any edition.

¹¹³ G. Civitarese, “The Names of O: Is Bion a Mystic?”, *The Italian Psychoanalytic Annual*, 2020, pp. 1-20, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ A. K. Alisobhani, G. J. Corstorphine (eds), *Explorations in Bion’s “O”: Everything We Know Nothing About*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ A. Reiner, “O’ – Bion’s ‘Catch-22’”, in A. K. Alisobhani, G. J. Corstorphine (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 31-38, p. 37.

“reality [original emphasis] of the psychic experience”,¹¹⁶ but it “is not a mental phenomenon”.¹¹⁷ O is the most profound layer of the human psyche: “its presence can be recognised and felt”,¹¹⁸ but it cannot be known or apprehended. From Bion’s standpoint, O can just be been.¹¹⁹ Encountering O means be(com)ing “one with our *aliveness* [original emphasis] or with our *being-ness* [original emphasis]” in a specific ‘now’ in time.¹²⁰ O is the Unknown that lies beyond the world of phenomena, where the self acknowledges the vastness of undiscovered mindscapes.

In *Attention and Interpretation*, Bion wrote: “I shall use the sign O to denote that which is the ultimate reality, absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself. O does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can be ‘become’, but it cannot be ‘known’”.¹²¹ O is Milton’s “void and formless infinite”,¹²² from which “the rising world of waters dark and deep” was eventually won.¹²³ O is a bottomless psychic abyss, what Grotstein calls “an implosive, centripetal pull into the void”.¹²⁴ O is the placeless place in which ‘thoughts are without a thinker’¹²⁵ and reality is nothing but absolute and immaculate truth. In *Who Is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream?*, Grotstein remarks that it was the formulation of the theory of O that earned Bion a reputation as a fully-fledged “navigator of ‘the deep and formless infinite’”.¹²⁶ Among twentieth-century psychoanalysts, Bion is the one “who charted waters even unknown to Freud”.¹²⁷ The mysterious and hitherto unexplored landscape that Bion was able to navigate and map is O, in which psychoanalysis and the individual, Grotstein states, “have always dwelled without realizing it”.¹²⁸

Constituting one of the main pillars (if not the main one) of Bion’s psychoanalysis, O is frequently referred to also in *A Memoir of the Future*, Bion’s last attempt to outline the silhouette of his intricate

¹¹⁶ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, Karnac Books, London, 1970, p. 71.

¹¹⁷ W. R. Bion, *Transformations*, Karnac Books, London, 1965, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 30.

¹¹⁹ W. R. Bion, *Transformations*, cit., p. 148.

¹²⁰ J. S. Grotstein, *Who Is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream? A Study of Psychic Presences*, The Analytic Press, Hillsdale and London, 2000, p. 300.

¹²¹ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 26.

¹²² *Idem*, p. 88.

¹²³ “Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice/Of God, as with a mantle didst invest/The rising world of waters dark and deep,/Won from the void and formless infinite” See J. Milton, *Paradise Lost, Book III*, vv. 9-12, any edition.

¹²⁴ J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 257.

¹²⁵ With the odd expression ‘thoughts without a thinker’, Bion referred to the Absolute Truth. In Bion’s view, thoughts without a thinker are faithful portrayals of reality as it is. Thoughts lose their inherent truthfulness when a thinker finds and takes possession of them. Once they have been selected by a thinker, thoughts become “an attribute of the human being”, are divested of their purity and turn into bearer of falsehood. In *Attention and Interpretation*, Bion pointed out that “in any situation where a thinker is present the thoughts when formulated are expressions of falsities and lies. The only true thought is one that has never found an individual to ‘contain’ it”. See W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 117.

¹²⁶ J. S. Grotstein, *Who Is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream?*, cit., p. 281.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

clinical thought. It is in the first volume of the trilogy, *The Dream*, that a ‘thought without a thinker’ offers a description of what O looks like:

You would not know that the direction in which I was robbing you would lead from nothing of unconsciousness to sleep to dream to waking thoughts to dream thoughts to nothingness to O = zero, from O = zero to O which is O = oh! to O which is a picture which is a picture of a hole or greedy mouth or vagina which offers perfect freedom which is death which is perfect freedom which is perfect pitch or absolute colour or Eternal Life or Eternal Death or Perpetual Motion or Perpetual Inertia or Absolute Space or space like mental space in which there exist objects so compact that they are like white dwarfs or so sparse and rare that they can only be grasped by finite means like Poisson’s law governing exceedingly infrequent events or so absolute a space that your mental life is itself destroyed as in a body which is anaemic because mind is lost like blood in a body whose capillaries are so greedy that there is not enough blood to be shared. Who are you? [...] I am the eternally alive, indestructible, indispensable, adorable. I am the force that makes the books. My last triumph is the Mind. The mind that is too heavy a load for the sensuous beast to carry. I am the thought without a thinker and the abstract thought which has destroyed its thinker Newtonwise, the container that loves its content to destruction; the content that explodes its possessive container.¹²⁹

O is (the) void; it is the presence of an absence; O is an overflowing content that can hardly be contained.¹³⁰ Grotstein points out that “O is a mathematical sign of ancient Greek origin to which Bion assigned many seemingly disparate roles and functions although united by their mystery ominousness, and premonitory terror”.¹³¹ O is everythingness and, at the same time, it is nothingness;

¹²⁹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., pp. 36-38.

¹³⁰ According to Bion, ‘container’ and ‘contained’ are complementary elements. In *The Dictionary of the Work of W. R. Bion*, López-Corvo has elucidated that “the concept of ‘container-contained’ corresponds to an abstraction model of psychoanalytic realizations, representing a psychoanalytic element to which Bion bestowed the signs of ♀: ‘container’ and ♂: ‘contained’, meaning feminine and masculine respectively”. A container-contained relation can be commensal, symbiotic, or parasitic. It is commensal if container and contained benefit from each other: “for instance an invention could benefit from a thinker and *vice versa*”. The relation of psychical interplay between container and contained is instead symbiotic if the container destroys the contained, or the other way round. Finally, it is parasitic if container and contained destroy one the other. See R. E. López-Corvo, *The Dictionary of the Work of W. R. Bion*, cit., pp. 70-72. For an insight into the ‘container-contained’ relationship, see W. R. Bion’s *Learning from Experience* and *Elements of Psychoanalysis*.

¹³¹ J. S. Grotstein, “Bion Crosses the Rubicon. The Fateful Course – and Curse – of ‘O’ in Psychoanalysis and the Furies Left in Its Wake”, in A. K. Alisobhani, G. J. Corstorphine (eds), *Explorations in Bion’s “O”*, cit., pp. 16-30, p. 18.

O is the psychic dimension where the subject experiences *nil*, zero, a number and a mathematical sign whose emptiness – in terms of value and shape – encapsulates in fact the whole.

Most likely referring, in my view, to Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*, in *The Dawn of Oblivion*, Bion speaks of O as ‘le Néant’,¹³² the emptiness from which everything commences. O is O-igin and fruitful vacuum. O is explosive creativity. It is a pearl and an egg, symbols of regeneration and creation. O can be a symbol to designate the infinite wisdom of Krishna, so recurrently mentioned in *A Memoir*. O is eternal life and eternal death: it is flawless circularity. In *The Psychoanalytic Mystic*, Eigen contends that O is the realness of anything, and “nothing is more threatening or nourishing than the realness of anything”.¹³³ O shares “with dreams the quality of being fully present or accountably and suddenly absent”.¹³⁴ O can be experienced “just above sleep”,¹³⁵ when consciousness and the unconscious brush against each other. To apply the words of the British philosopher and mathematician Brian Rotman to my study of O, Bion’s O can be “the mystical O of the Kabbalah, the Hollow Crown which served as an icon of *ex nihilo* creation; the great circle of white light signifying infinity for Traherne; the origin and place of birth [...]; [...] the icon of de-creation and self-annihilation in the shape of the circle made by a snake”¹³⁶ (the Ouroboros) that bites its own tail. With O, Bion was able to theorise the essence of ‘nothingness’.

Focusing on the temporal dimension of and in O, Bion explained that the experience of O is made possible only via an exercise “in discarding memory and desire”,¹³⁷ conceived by him respectively “as past and future ‘senses’”.¹³⁸ In his clinical annotations, Bion elucidates that attaining O means getting rid of the burden of memory, whose object is past,¹³⁹ and of the constraints of desire, whose object is future.¹⁴⁰ O is boundless and pure presentness. Bion thought that, acting as filters for the reception of what is occurring in the infinite timelessness of the ‘now’, memory and desire are harmful elements not only for the mental fitness of the analyst, but also for the success of the psychoanalytic

¹³² W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 431.

¹³³ M. Eigen, *The Psychoanalytic Mystic*, Free Association Books, London and New York, 1998, pp. 81-82. See also D. Merkur, *Explorations of the Psychoanalytic Mystics*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2010, pp. 227-256.

¹³⁴ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 381.

¹³⁵ W. R. Bion, *Los Angeles Seminars and Supervision*, Karnac Books, London, 2013, p. 56.

¹³⁶ B. Rotman, *Signifying Nothing. The Semiotics of Zero*, Macmillan Press, London, 1987, p. 60.

¹³⁷ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 33.

¹³⁸ See W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 294.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁰ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 143.

treatment itself.¹⁴¹ Bion remarked that, “while we are thinking about the past and the future, we are blind and deaf to what is going on at the present moment”.¹⁴²

On this issue, Anna Dartington maintains that “memory and desire, nostalgia and anticipation [...] obscure the awareness of the present working in us”¹⁴³ and “when we do experience the present in its intensity, then the past and the future are powerfully brought together to produce a ‘timeless’ state”.¹⁴⁴ According to Bion, memory and desire have to be denied in order for the self to experience the present in its full timelessness, which is the atemporal dimension of O, of *śūnyatā*, and the same atemporality of a dream or, more generally, of the unconscious, “fluid, intimate, rhythmic and alive with pulsations of inchoate thoughts and feelings, sensations and intuitions. The unconscious” – like O – “eludes our full conscious grasp and does not hold still”.¹⁴⁵ O is a psychic hole; it is “the quintessence of Being”¹⁴⁶ with which, as Vermote asserts, “the mind-wandering/daydreaming ego is in contact”.¹⁴⁷

O can be many things, all at the same time. As Eigen has recently pointed out to me, “O can take many forms – as many as you can think of and more”.¹⁴⁸ Encountering O can be as immensely good as it can be extremely direful. In *Cogitations*, Bion portrays O as “the terrifying unknown”,¹⁴⁹ in *Attention and Interpretation* as “darkness and formlessness”;¹⁵⁰ in *The Dream* as “whirling, swirling chaos to infinite and formless darkness [original emphasis]”.¹⁵¹ O can be what Beckett in *Proust* called the “gouffre interdit à nos sondes”, where the essence of our own self lies.¹⁵² Curiously enough, the roundness of O is the same roundness of Murphy’s mind, pictured by Beckett as a “large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without”,¹⁵³ “a sphere full of light fading into darkness”.¹⁵⁴ O is “the dark of absolute freedom” and the “matrix of surds”¹⁵⁵ that torments the limping psyche of the depressed Murphy. O can be the dark at its full that Mercier experiences when Camier abandons

¹⁴¹ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 42. In addition, in “Notes on Memory and Desire”, published in 1988 in *Psychoanalytic Forum* (2:272-273), Bion underscored that “the psychoanalyst should aim at achieving a state of mind so that at every session he feels he has not seen the patient before. If he feels he has, he is treating the wrong patient. [...] The psychoanalyst must aim at a steady exclusion of memory and desire and not be too disturbed if the results appear alarming at first”. See W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 382.

¹⁴² W. R. Bion, *Brazilian Lectures. 1973 – São Paulo, 1974 – Rio De Janeiro/São Paulo*, Karnac Books, London, 1990, p. 67.

¹⁴³ A. Dartington, “W. R. Bion and T. S. Eliot”, cit., p. 252.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁵ R. Bagai, “Thoughts on Mystery, Paradox and Doubleness”, in W. Pearson, H. Marlo (eds), *The Spiritual Psyche in Psychotherapy*, cit., pp. 44-68, p. 54.

¹⁴⁶ J. S. Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness*, cit., p. 283.

¹⁴⁷ R. Vermote, *Reading Bion*, cit., p. 150.

¹⁴⁸ E-mail exchange, 4 June 2022.

¹⁴⁹ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 371.

¹⁵⁰ W. R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 26.

¹⁵¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 161.

¹⁵² S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁵³ S. Beckett, “Murphy”, cit., p. 67.

¹⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 68.

¹⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 70.

him in *Mercier and Camier*. O is the “volcano of the mind”;¹⁵⁶ it is the rabbit-hole through which Alice gets into the mind-blowing world of Wonderland, where clocks are still and, as Bion reminds us, is “always four o’clock”.¹⁵⁷

O is the unsettling vacuum that is experienced by a mind deprived of self-consciousness, “the *sine qua non* of personality”.¹⁵⁸ O is the anguish felt by a child destitute of maternal *reverie*; it is an inner force that bursts in search of a container; it is the eternal repetitiveness that punctuates the time of Dante’s Inferno. O can be the lair of self-alienation and psychosis. I look at O as the tornado that disrupts the psychic balance of many of Beckett’s characters. Bion’s O is not merely the unknowable dimension in which, mystically speaking, the subject acknowledges the Ultimate Reality of the self. The roundness of O can be to the roundness of a panopticon, a prison of the mind. O can take the shapeless shape of a “black hole”, in which the individual makes “experience of floorlessness, boundarilessness, a sense of extreme precariousness, of imminent disaster”.¹⁵⁹

I agree with Grotstein who suggests that Bion needed the roundness and bottomlessness of O to embrace, exorcise, and conceptualise “the inner cosmic uncertainty that plagued him all his life and ghastly, traumatic ‘black holes’ which his fate had placed him”.¹⁶⁰ Tantamount to ‘nothingness’ and other similar phenomena, “such as ‘meaninglessness’, the ‘void’, the ‘abyss’, the ‘abject’, ‘entropy’, ‘randomness’, and ‘chaos’”,¹⁶¹ O can ultimately evolve into what Grotstein calls a ‘black hole’, the extreme experience of a psychological zero-point and “the ultimate traumatic state of disorganization, terror, chaos, randomness, and entropy”.¹⁶² In this regard, Grotstein writes:

In the zero dimension, time (like space) is infinite. One of the terrors of patients suffering from psychosis, melancholia, or similar conditions is that they cannot endure time gaps (e.g., those between analytic sessions), either because they cannot partition time without dissociating or splitting off from it or because they cannot represent it symbolically in terms of object faith and trust (object constancy and permanency). Thus, the melancholic feels trapped in a ‘black hole’ in time without end. Hell is conceptualized as an eternity of suffering. Panic sufferers similarly say that while they are in the state of panic they believe it will last forever. The psychoanalytic concept of traumatic fixation predicates a time factor, a virtual arrestment of one’s being. A trauma becomes inscribed [...] in

¹⁵⁶ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 100.

¹⁵⁷ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 113.

¹⁵⁸ W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*, cit., p. 77.

¹⁵⁹ J. S. Grotstein, “The ‘Black Hole’ as the Basic Psychotic Experience: Some Newer Psychoanalytic and Neuroscience Perspectives on Psychosis”, *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 18:1, 1990, pp. 29-46, pp. 39-40.

¹⁶⁰ J. S. Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness*, cit., p. 40.

¹⁶¹ J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 264.

¹⁶² J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (II), cit., p. 378.

forever, or infinite, time (zero dimension) [...]. Parenthetically, the zero dimension is also a way of describing the locale of Bion's O.¹⁶³

In this dimension of zeroness which is experienced by the self in psychosis and, similarly, by the self who encounters O, subjects can be victims of “a deep sense of insignificance of self and of their place in the world”.¹⁶⁴ In the darkness of this bottomless gulf, all becomes selfless, timeless, and placeless. Swallowed up by the chaos of her/his O and “trapped in a time warp”,¹⁶⁵ the subject becomes, as Grotstein contends, an “existential vagabond”,¹⁶⁶ an expression that brings to my mind Vladimir and Estragon and many other characters that populate Beckett’s wasteland.

The subject who encounters her/his O experiences emotional turbulence and, if the latter is not efficiently restrained, the chaos that resides in O can evolve into a black hole, a psychological state so often experienced by Beckett during his panic attacks and by Bion himself, devastated by the experience of Ypres and Amiens. In the unfathomable depths of the black hole, “the quintessence of the experience of meaninglessness and nothingness”,¹⁶⁷ the individual loses all points of reference, in terms of self-consciousness, space and, of course, time.¹⁶⁸ What could contain the self’s experience of emptiness and mediate its encounter with the “world of darkness”¹⁶⁹ is either a psychoanalyst¹⁷⁰ or a spiritual guide, two figures that find no place in Beckett’s universe. Bereft of any psychological and spiritual support, Beckett’s creatures are abandoned by their creator to the chaos of their mind, full of void and “formless Infinite”.¹⁷¹ In their existential emptiness, they experience the disintegration of the matrix of their inner realities and, to pick up on Grotstein, “a violent, implosive pull into a ‘black hole’”,¹⁷² where all is “spaceless, bottomless, timeless”.¹⁷³

¹⁶³ J. S. Grotstein, *Who Is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream?*, cit., p. 98.

¹⁶⁴ J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 263.

¹⁶⁵ J. S. Grotstein, *Who Is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream?*, cit., p. 99.

¹⁶⁶ J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 263.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*, p. 274.

¹⁶⁸ *Idem*, p. 270. The ‘black hole’ “represents, not merely the psychotic catastrophe and the cataclysmic regression, implosion, introversion, and disorganization which heralds its onset, but it also represents the altered imploding, distorting, and perversely reconstructing laws of the new, perverse (and reverse) domain of madness”. J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (II), cit., p. 389.

¹⁶⁹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 275.

¹⁷⁰ In *Beckett*, Anzieu defines the psychoanalyst as a container that is meant to help the patient find sense in the chaos of her/his mind. Anzieu labels the figure of the psychoanalyst “container of everything, of words, container of every sense. [...] Basin offered to the vomits, to the excrements that the analysand has to get rid of. Spermatic word that pierces, violates, fills, perhaps heals and perhaps fertilises the sick mind”. D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 15. My translation.

¹⁷¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 275.

¹⁷² J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 281.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*.

At the Heart of Delirium: Exploring *The Unnamable* through the Lens of O

Looking at Bion's O as a psychic 'black hole', I read now Beckett's *The Unnamable*, a novel that tells of a selfless, timeless and placeless universe inhabited by a disquiet nameless human-like figure. First appeared in French in January 1950 as *L'Innommable*, the novel is a journey into the depths of an alienated mind busy exploring "the territories of Self, its boundaries, its fluctuations, its invasions".¹⁷⁴ Scott emphasises that *The Unnamable* represents "perhaps the most difficult and the most exasperating [of Beckett's works], for all we encounter is the disincarnate imagination of the artist churning away, over the Void".¹⁷⁵ Epitomising Beckett's passion for the phenomenology of timelessness and nothingness, the novel overflows with schizophrenic chaos and everything lacks meaning and essence.

As Foster assumes, Beckett's novel lacks "characters worthy of the denomination 'character' as this is usually understood with respect to a novel".¹⁷⁶ In line with Foster, Milton Rickels suggests that, in this novel, "there are no stable, defined, humanly possible characters: there is only a voice communicating the experience of existence, which is the experience of the self".¹⁷⁷ In addition, Foster points out that, in *The Unnamable*, Beckett problematises the issue of self-consciousness and the notions of space and time, existential coordinates that are in fact reduced to dust. This is definitely nothing new in Beckett's literature, in which "time and space are never clearly defined, and hence the continuity of the self in time and the fixity of the person in place are problematic".¹⁷⁸

The sensation the reader gets from the first pages of the novel is one of spatial and temporal absence, absolute lack of a narrative line and, no less, of ontological inconsistency. It seems as if the narrator, its milieu, and the absurd story that he recounts are suspended over an undefinable vacuum where everything is in fact 'nothing', a term that is repeated over one hundred times in less than two hundred pages. The text is an insane blather which transmits nothing but psychological fragmentation and emptiness. What Beckett voices in the novel is the existential vacuum that is experienced by a questionably humanoid self, incapable of finding space and time in the world, if 'world' can be spoken of in the case of *The Unnamable*. Paul Sheehan claims that, "although the book is nothing but voice, or rather voices, the effect is not one of fullness: these voices are always emptying themselves out, quickened with denials and counterassertions".¹⁷⁹ I regard *The Unnamable* as a picture of a psychic

¹⁷⁴ D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 102. My translation.

¹⁷⁵ N. A. Scott, "The Recent Journey into the Zone of Zero", cit., p. 174.

¹⁷⁶ P. Foster, *Beckett and Zen*, cit., p. 203.

¹⁷⁷ M. Rickels, "Existential Themes in Beckett's 'Unnamable'", *Criticism*, 4:2, 1962, pp. 134-147, p. 136.

¹⁷⁸ B. Simon, "The Fragmented Self", cit., p. 159.

¹⁷⁹ P. Sheehan, "Births for Nothing. Beckett's Ontology of Parturition", in S. E. Gontarski, A. Uhlmann (eds), *Beckett after Beckett*, cit., pp. 177-186, p. 183.

failure; it is the description of an existential paranoia. Repudiating any rationality and exceeding all boundaries of realism,¹⁸⁰ the novel narrates a synaptic catastrophe. As Allen Thiher labels it, *The Unnamable* is “a schizo-text”.¹⁸¹

In her engaging *Subjects without Selves*, Gabriele Schwab writes that in *The Unnamable* Beckett “probes the very limits of dissolution and disintegration”.¹⁸² What comes to be deconstructed in the novel is the integrity of the speaking subject: in a 1956 interview with the US journalist Israel Shenker, Beckett affirmed that in this text “there’s complete disintegration. No ‘I’, no ‘have’, no ‘being’. No nominative, no accusative, no verb”.¹⁸³ As Eileen H. Watt remarks, “*The Unnamable* displays the most radical loss of boundaries: time, space, personality, paragraph, sentence, and finally, thought”.¹⁸⁴ Everything collapses and the nameless self gives the constant idea of being vanishing into an ocean of darkness: the only thing that proves the presence of the narrator is what Beckett called in *Proust* an “insane inward necessity”,¹⁸⁵ a necessity to keep speaking, albeit most of the time pointlessly. “A never-ending chain of affirmations and negations withdraws the ground for any utterance at the very moment it threatens to become even minimally assertive”;¹⁸⁶ everything is doubted and disturbed; all is psychotically distorted and baffling. Mario Martino has argued that “the prose of *The Unnamable* consists of very short statements, which follows one another without pause. They often contradict themselves, immediately after being made. They are often hypothesis, shaky starting points, unstable conclusions”.¹⁸⁷ Such is the level of linguistic and narratological deconstruction that, as Schwab stresses, many scholars have convincingly argued that the way in which the nameless speaker fulfils his task of narrating his story “have strong affinities to psychological dispositions of ontological insecurity or even a psychotic disintegration of the self”.¹⁸⁸

Despite his physical immobility, the self of *The Unnamable* is a perfect sample of what Grotstein called ‘existential vagabond’,¹⁸⁹ a subject lost in his torn internal world, of which he proves to be an outstanding cartographer. As indicated by Maurice Blanchot, this is the story of “a being without a being who can neither live nor die”, a being who inhabits an “empty space in which the listlessness

¹⁸⁰ See S. Katz, *Saying I No More. Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1999, pp. 95-124.

¹⁸¹ A. Thiher, *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 131.

¹⁸² G. Schwab, *Subjects without Selves. Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1994, p. 132.

¹⁸³ I. Shenker, “An Interview with Beckett”, in L. Grawer, ER. Federman (eds), *Samuel Beckett. The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London, 1979, pp. 146-149, p. 148.

¹⁸⁴ W. H. Watt, “Beckett’s Unnamables: Schizophrenia, Rationalism, and the Novel”, *American Imago*, 45:1, 1988, pp. 85-106, p. 105.

¹⁸⁵ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 62.

¹⁸⁶ G. Schwab, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹⁸⁷ M. Martino, *Samuel Beckett e il romanzo modernista: ‘Murphy’*, Adriatica Editrice, Bari, 2003, p. 185. My translation.

¹⁸⁸ G. Schwab, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁸⁹ See J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 263.

of an empty speech speaks".¹⁹⁰ Had Bion been asked to diagnose the psychic disorder that affects this nameless subject, he would have probably remarked that the patient "moves, not in a world of dreams, but in a world of objects which are ordinarily the furniture of dreams".¹⁹¹ At the core of his abysmal O, the individual's perception of inner and outer reality is compromised. This individual is, to pick up on Bion, "imprisoned in the state of mind he has achieved and unable to escape from it because he lacks the apparatus of awareness of reality which is both the key to escape and the freedom to which he would escape".¹⁹²

The non-spatial and atemporal position occupied by this schizo-self between "I and Not-I, life and death, body and disembodiment, time and eternity, speech and silence, reality and imagination" resembles, as Schwab writes, the position of a transitional place,¹⁹³ what Beckett might have called a 'perilous zone', where the boredom of living has been replaced by the suffering of being.¹⁹⁴ Amidst a vortex of emotional turbulence, the subject straddles the line that separates consciousness and the unconscious continuously.¹⁹⁵ The narrator seems to occupy a position "just above sleep",¹⁹⁶ where consciousness and the unconscious blur. And, in this (non-)place of inbetweenness, on the brink of a cosmic abyss, the narrator "walks on a tightrope toward the impossible, suspended across time and space".¹⁹⁷ Moorjani suggests that "this *dehors*, between nonbeing and being, is likened to an endless dying or to a void having become a neuter, or impersonal, utterance, both penetrating and relentless, without beginning, without end".¹⁹⁸

Unending circularity and timeless presentness overwhelm the disoriented narrator; the flow of time loses its reassuring linearity and turns instead into a wheel of perennial tediousness. The sequence of past, present, and future time is pulverised and everything boils down to omnitemporal repetition, which ultimately disappears into nothingness. Anzieu writes that the protagonist "gets in touch, and stays in touch, with his hidden self, with feelings of existential despair, misery, loneliness, hatred but also with joy, albeit evil, of glee, albeit sarcastic".¹⁹⁹ And it is during this alleged encounter with his inner self that the disoriented narrator, as Connor puts it, "discovers itself to be constituted in the

¹⁹⁰ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, transl. C. Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 213.

¹⁹¹ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 51.

¹⁹² *Ibidem*.

¹⁹³ G. Schwab, *Subjects without Selves*, cit., p. 169.

¹⁹⁴ S. Beckett, *Proust*, cit., p. 8.

¹⁹⁵ G. Schwab, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁹⁶ W. R. Bion, *Los Angeles Seminars and Supervision*, cit., p. 56.

¹⁹⁷ G. Schwab, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁹⁸ A. Moorjani, "Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable. The Novel Reshaped", in D. Van Hulle (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, cit., pp. 19-32, p. 22.

¹⁹⁹ D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 102. My translation.

midst of a shadowy dance of repetitions”,²⁰⁰ where – engulfed in a psychic abyss – he is compelled to face an *unnamable* and “nameless dread”.²⁰¹

In *Beckett*, Anzieu elucidates that the paradox of this impossible naming (the same experienced by the schizo-narrator of Beckett’s novel) “was resolved by Bion, Beckett’s psychoanalyst, with the inclusion of a variable called ‘nameless dread’ in the context of the psychotic part of the personality; an experience of primitive agony, an experience anterior to the acquisition of language, of psychic death. An experience that had invaded Beckett and led him [...] to consult a psychoanalyst”.²⁰² In the wake of what Anzieu suggests, in his “Beckett and Bion”, Connor observes that in the absence of a container, the non-contents ejected by the nameless protagonist of *The Unnamable* “come to seem more and more toxic and persecutory. They form what Didier Anzieu, who has developed Bion’s notions of the container-contained in his work on the skin ego, calls a toxic skin, a shirt of Nessus, a tormenting carapace which denies permeation and interchange, asphyxiating its victim”.²⁰³ Lacking a container that can restrain his anxieties and his existential concerns, the narrator of *The Unnamable* reprojects his existential torments and experiences an unsettling terror, fuelled by the threat of silence and, at the same time, by the great unknown of his forthcoming death, the end of every wor(l)d and, of course, of every time.

Surely two of the most skilful scholars of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* in relation to Bion’s clinical thought, Anzieu and Connor have concentrated on the failed projective identification and containerlessness experienced by the nameless self of Beckett’s novel. I wish here to try to contribute with a further tile to this colourful mosaic. Looking at the timelessness that engulfs the nameless narrator of Beckett’s novel, I analyse his plight by using Bion’s concept of O, conceived in this frame as a Grotsteinian black hole, as a nameless dread that, taken to the extreme, overwhelms the narrator and condemns him to the vortex of madness.

In *Transformations*, Bion stated that, confronted with O, “the unknown, ‘the void and formless infinite’, the personality of whatever age fills the void (saturates the element), provides a form [...] and gives boundaries to the infinite”.²⁰⁴ In order to stuff the void of his O, Beckett’s narrator resorts to an endless series of – most of the time senseless – ‘verbal thoughts’,²⁰⁵ which help the deranged self cope with his oppressing *horror vacui*. The great dread that paralyses the speaker is in fact the eventuality of running out of words; he wonders: “what if I went silent? What would happen to me

²⁰⁰ S. Connor, *Samuel Beckett. Repetition, Theory and Text*, cit., p. 86.

²⁰¹ W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 113.

²⁰² D. Anzieu, *Beckett*, cit., p. 27. My translation.

²⁰³ S. Connor, “Beckett and Bion”, cit., p. 27.

²⁰⁴ W. R. Bion, *Transformations*, cit., p. 171.

²⁰⁵ See W. R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, cit., p. 26.

then? Worse than what is happening?”.²⁰⁶ The self would ultimately disappear if silence came.²⁰⁷ to put it in Locatelli’s terms, silence “engenders oblivion, and the invisibility of the ‘I’”.²⁰⁸ Silent, the narrator would in fact “lose his existence as a voice (subject) and as a possible object of perception. Nothing would remain”.²⁰⁹ If the voice of the subject became voiceless, words would be wordless; and a lack of words would mean silence, and silence would ultimately bring inconspicuousness and death.

Like during a psychoanalytic session, if words ran out or no longer conveyed messages, the session would lose its *raison d'être*. Just as Beckett was terrified of the possibility that the analysis with Bion failed – a possibility that in fact materialised,²¹⁰ – the narrator of *The Unnamable* is obsessed with the idea of falling into silence, of being unheard by his readers that, at the same time, play the role of invisible analysts. Nonetheless, the simple fact of speaking is not enough to communicate and convey meaningful messages. Whenever words are unable to communicate, the sound that they produce is to the listener’s ears equivalent to the sound of silence. In this respect, Adorno claimed that Beckett’s is a language that is often remote from meaning, and “a language remote from all meaning is not a speaking language”, it is a language that verges on muteness.²¹¹

Lacking communicative efficiency, the avalanche of words vomited by the nameless narrator of *The Unnamable* slips into a linguistic void. Everything appears senselessness and converges towards nothingness, which is the nothingness of existence, the nothingness of words, of silence, of being here, of being ‘now’, a word that appears three times in the first line of the text. In fact, the perception of the ‘now’ and the concept of time(lessness) occupy a position of prominence in the novel. Beckett opens the novel with three subject-less and verb-less questions that the speaker asks to a hypothetical own self and each of them contains the adverb ‘now’: “Where now? Who now? When now?”.²¹² The first question interrogates the spatial position of the self in a specific ‘now’ in time, the second probes the self’s consciousness of being here-and-now, and the third looks into the temporal dimension in which the subject performs its presence to the world and to her/himself: the present.

This trio of questions posed by the speaker catapults readers into a dimension whose indeterminacy is to me reminiscent of O, whose essence cannot be known, but just be been. Everything is unhinged and vague. The only few data that, as readers, we know quite for sure is that the narrator is seated,

²⁰⁶ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, in S. Beckett, *Novels, vol. II*, cit., pp. 283-407, p. 301.

²⁰⁷ For a study of ‘silence’ in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, see A. A. Nojoumian, “Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*: The Story of That Impossible Place Named Silence”, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 14, 2014, pp. 387-404. See also H. L. Baldwin, *Samuel Beckett’s Real Silence*, Pennsylvania University Press, Philadelphia, 1990.

²⁰⁸ C. Locatelli, *Unwording the World*, cit., p. 184.

²⁰⁹ E. P. Levy, “Existence Searching Essence: The Plight of the Unnamable”, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 10:1, 1976, pp. 103-113, p. 113.

²¹⁰ See G. Craig et al. (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940*, cit., p. 259.

²¹¹ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London and New York, 1997, p. 79.

²¹² S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 285.

his hands are on his knees, his spine is unsupported, and his eyes gaze straight into the blackness that surrounds him. All is immersed in thick dark, in which the self says to be alone: “not a human one in any case, there are no human creatures here”²¹³ – but, “how can one be sure, in such darkness?”²¹⁴

In *Condemned to Life*, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton stress that “the narrator is completely ignorant of his present state, of where he is, or who he is. Possessing only the vestiges of a body, he suffers continually. Dwelling in all but complete darkness and in silence broken only occasionally”.²¹⁵ His chaotic soliloquy is a tornado of suppositions, mere improvisation, an account of hallucinations. Nothing sounds certain or provable. All merges into the chaos of schizophrenic fragmentation and elision. Every word loses truthfulness and readers cannot be sure of what has already happened, what is about to happen, and what is happening in any specific ‘now’ in the novel, if ‘now’ can be spoken of in the case of *The Unnamable*. Such is the level of disarray that the temporal dimension of the ‘now’ is disintegrated at the root, and days, the dimension of time that the individual immediately perceives and inhabits as a living being, end up disappearing: the narrator informs the reader that “there are no days” there.²¹⁶

In this world made of shadows of an eternal night, the speaker says that he occupies the heart of a “circumference”,²¹⁷ what Connor calls “the paradigmatic position of the centre”.²¹⁸ Like O, this non-place cannot be known, but just be been. The narrator declares: “if I could describe this place, portray it, I’ve tried, I feel no place, no place around me, I don’t know what it is, it isn’t flesh, it doesn’t end, it’s like air, now I have it, [...] like gas, [...] then I will find me in it, I’ll put me in it, [...] in the middle”.²¹⁹ At the core of this dusky and limitless space, the narrator feels troubled and anxious, although there is no reason for being troubled²²⁰ and no cause for anxiety.²²¹ It seems that, to use Blanchot’s words, “he has entered a circle where he turns obscurely, led on by a wandering speech, [...] deprived of center, that does not begin, does not end, [...] will never stop”.²²² Here, all is “going nowhere, coming from nowhere”.²²³ All rests, except for the unstable mind of the subject, victim of “incomprehensible uneasiness”,²²⁴ an expression that I regard as synonymous with what Bion called ‘emotional turbulence’, an amalgam of diverse forces pressing the self “from inside”, “as a state in

²¹³ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 290.

²¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 286.

²¹⁵ A. Hamilton, K. Hamilton, *Condemned to Life*, cit., pp. 83-84.

²¹⁶ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 286.

²¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 289.

²¹⁸ S. Connor, *Repetition, Theory and Text*, cit., p. 89.

²¹⁹ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 392.

²²⁰ *Idem*, p. 287.

²²¹ *Idem*, p. 296.

²²² M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, cit., p. 210.

²²³ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., pp. 287-288.

²²⁴ *Idem*, p. 289.

which there is this kind of churning going on and all kinds of elements keep on obtruding”; the emotional turbulence is a state of mind that can destroy the individual’s “accepted method of behaviour”²²⁵ and the subject’s spatial and temporal reality loses every meaning.

In the undefinable world of *The Unnamable*, all passes, but nothing changes: everything remains the same. Equipped with a faulty time sensitivity, the self is confined by Beckett within a timeless bubble in which he vegetates, incapable of perceiving any form of temporality: “I am incapable not only of measuring time, which in itself is sufficient to vitiate all calculation in this connexion, but also of comparing their respective velocities”.²²⁶ Time loses essence and inner and outer confusion attains destabilising levels when, overwhelmed by a crazy stream of thoughts, the narrator reveals:

These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don’t know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be. But I have never been elsewhere, however uncertain the future. [...] Another thing. What I say, what I may say, on this subject, the subject of me and my abode, has already been said since, having always been here, I am here still.²²⁷

In the face of such disorientation and psychotic havoc, it is hard not to adopt an empathetic attitude towards this subject, who, exiled in a psychic “dungeon”,²²⁸ lives a pseudo-existence of chronic repetitiveness. The narrator is stuck in a dead-end mental jail and, at the centre of his psychic black hole, he goes on murmuring his old stories, his “old story, as if it were the first time”.²²⁹ He wonders: “has my head lost all feeling? Or did I have a stroke, while I was meditating? I don’t know. I shall be patient, asking no more questions, on the *qui vive*. Hours have passed, it must be day again, nothing has happened, I hear nothing”.²³⁰ As Federman has observed, “Beckett’s people begin and end their fictional journey at the same place, in the same condition, and without having learnt, discovered, or

²²⁵ W. R. Bion, *Clinical Seminars and Other Works*, Karnac Books, London, 1978, pp. 247-248.

²²⁶ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 293.

²²⁷ *Idem*, pp. 295-296.

²²⁸ *Idem*, p. 362.

²²⁹ *Idem*, p. 296.

²³⁰ *Idem*, p. 338.

acquired the least knowledge about themselves and the world in which they exist”,²³¹ whatever this verb might mean in Beckett’s wastelands.

Dispossessed of every point of reference he can rely on, in this non-place, the speaker has nothing to do – assuming he has ever done anything – but wait for the end of his agonizing existence, emptied of meaning, origin (the past), direction (the future), presence (the ‘now’): “and there is nothing for it but to wait for the end, nothing but for the end to come, and at the end all will be the same, at the end at last perhaps all the same as before, as all that livelong time when there was nothing for it but get to the end”.²³² In *The Unnamable*, the self can do nothing but wait for the liberating bliss of the eternal “coma”.²³³ Victim of the same cyclical wait entrapping Murphy, Watt, Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, Clov, and many other characters the inhabit Beckett’s asylum, the self experiences a ‘now’ that is void and insignificant. And it is exactly in the midst of this existential meaninglessness that the self witnesses the fading of its own integrity and content.

No more stories from this day forth, and the stories go on, it’s stories still, or it was never stories, always any old thing, for as long as you can remember, no, longer than that, any old thing, the same old thing, to pass the time, then, as time didn’t pass, for no reason at all, in your thirst, trying to cease and ceasing, seeking the cause, the cause of talking and never ceasing, finding the cause, losing it again, finding it again, not finding it again, seeking no longer, seeking again, finding again, losing again, finding nothing [...].²³⁴

This morbid repetitiveness, accentuated by the recurrence of the adverb ‘again’, is the same repetitiveness pushed to the extreme that Beckett stages in *Waiting for Godot*. In both works, the relentless fact of waiting cancels the present moment and, in both cases, to use Hesla’s words, present time is “in the fullness of its nothingness”.²³⁵ In Beckett, ‘now’ turns out to be mere void; in Beckett’s literature, ‘now’ is the *imago mortis* of temporality. It is the timeless instant in which the individual perceives the filling emptiness of existence in all its destructiveness; in Beckett’s literature, ‘now’ is the time in which the self encounters the “Void and Formless Infinite” of its O.²³⁶

The formless void that besieges the mind of Beckett’s narrator is the same that overwhelms, for instance, Paranoid-Schizoid in Bion’s *A Memoir of the Future*, a work that, according to Connor,

²³¹ R. Federman, *Journey to Chaos*, cit., p. 4.

²³² S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 364.

²³³ *Idem*, p. 342.

²³⁴ *Idem*, p. 378.

²³⁵ D. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos*, cit., p. 132.

²³⁵ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 388.

²³⁶ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 286.

“moves towards the pluralising of consciousness and cognition achieved in *The Unnamable*”.²³⁷ Like the nameless self of Beckett’s novel, Paranoid-Schizoid is bombarded with unknown voices, images, and fragments of disordered thoughts, and he struggles to no avail to dominate a sick mind, in which memories and premonitions have become utterly indistinguishable:

It is like being bombarded with chunks of feeble puns, bits of Shakespeare, imitations of James Joyce, vulgarizations of Ezra Pound, phoney mathematics, religion, mysticism, visions of boyhood, second childhood and visions of old age. Possibly, it could be old age itself. All these myths of Atlantis, all these visions of heaven and hell, are they reminiscences? Are they premonitions? Are reminiscences and premonitions, in fact, both the same thing, only seen so long as a domain in which measurement of temporal and spatial time is proper to a constant conjunction of helplessness, omnipotence, idealization, embryonic sense of reality, embryonic sense of sense, transformed for use in a non-sensuous domain of thought without a thinker, from thoughts in which a thinker is itself of the essence of thought.²³⁸

In the darkness of his “black hole”,²³⁹ confusion opacifies the ‘now’ to the point of deleting it. Like Paranoid-Schizoid, the demented narrator of *The Unnamable* becomes the target of infinite images and, as Simon writes, “each image drives out the image before it, as if the imagination’s perfection consisted not in creating images but in extinguishing them”.²⁴⁰ Unable to master his thoughts and estranged from the flow of time, the self exists

with no memory of anything, no hope of anything, no knowledge of anything, no history and no prospect, buried under the seconds, saying any old thing, [...] time is one thing, I another, but the question may be asked, why time does not pass, just like that, off the record, en passant, to pass the time, I think that’s all, for the moment, I see nothing else, I see nothing whatever, for the time being.²⁴¹

Where the self is absent in time, nothing can have been, nothing is, nothing will be. If there is no conscious self in present time, there can be neither perception of the origin, nor perception of the end.

²³⁷ S. Connor, “Beckett and Bion”, cit., p. 32.

²³⁸ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 51.

²³⁹ See J. S. Grotstein, “Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Chaos, and the ‘Black Hole’” (I), cit., p. 263.

²⁴⁰ B. Simon, “The Imaginary Twins”, cit., p. 346.

²⁴¹ S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 395.

In the dystopic and psychotic world portrayed in *The Unnamable*, the end of the self will never come because, at the threshold of the end, the self and its voice “will resurrect and begin again”.²⁴² “All comes right, nothing comes right, nothing, nothing, this will never end, this voice will never stop, I’m alone here, the first and the last, [...] I’ll never stir, I’ll never know peace”.²⁴³ By beginning again like the tape of the scruffy-looking Krapp or the morbid routine of the alienated Winnie, the voice of *The Unnamable* is trapped in a present that resembles eternity, which is not a long time, but a no-time. ‘Eternity’ is another name for the timeless presentness that reigns in the psychic dimension of O. Eternity is the no-time in which the ‘now’ is nullified and existence turns into a mad wheel that goes on turning. “I will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, can’t go on, I’ll go on”:²⁴⁴ as Blanchot pointed out, this self “has fallen into the absence of time, there where he must die from an endless death”.²⁴⁵ Recalling what the Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier suggested with regard to *The Unnamable*, “we might describe this novel as a curve having one of its axes as an asymptote. [...] As y (the length of the novel) approached infinity, x (the content of the novel) would approach nearer and nearer to zero. Content zero, length infinity”.²⁴⁶

In conclusion, although I find the readings of Foster and Moorjani and the notion of *śūnyatā* highly appealing, I have to strive to look at the timeless dimension inhabited by the nameless self of *The Unnamable* as the outcome of a mystical journey. Such is the level of schizophrenic confusion in the novel that I cannot but dissent from Foster who argues that *The Unnamable* “is the incorporation of a spiritual journey”, centred on the never-fully-attainable essence of ‘I’,²⁴⁷ and from Moorjani who writes that the emptiness of “speech, thought, feeling, hearing, knowing, and saying” experienced by Beckett’s narrator is strikingly evocative of the emptiness inherent in *śūnyatā*.²⁴⁸ In my view, what the feeble-minded self of Beckett’s novel is experiencing is not a meditative vacuum or thoughtless contemplation. I believe that the temporal voidness that punctuates his existence has nothing to do with the subject’s mystical estrangement from reality and from time, as happens in *śūnyatā*.

On the contrary. I suggest that the eternal ‘now’ of *The Unnamable* is the infinite time(lessness) of an uncontained O. Victim of an irreversible process of psychological deterioration, the narrator of *The Unnamable* is enmeshed in a schizo search of reference points in an interior and exterior world that is perennially elusive. From my standpoint, what Beckett depicts in *The Unnamable* is not a

²⁴² S. Beckett, “The Unnamable”, cit., p. 387.

²⁴³ *Idem*, p. 374.

²⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 407.

²⁴⁵ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, cit., p. 216.

²⁴⁶ V. Mercier, “The Mathematical Limit”, *Nation*, 14, 1959, pp. 144-145, p. 145, quoted in D. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos*, cit., p. 113.

²⁴⁷ P. Foster, *Beckett and Zen*, cit., p. 211.

²⁴⁸ A. Moorjani, *Beckett and Buddhism*, cit., p. 183.

journey of the subject towards his zenith: *The Unnamable* is the story of a psychic implosion of the self; it is the story of a psychological vertigo. The self is lost, not in a mystical dimension, but within the bottomless void of a psychic black hole, a chasm of the mind. What the troubled narrator of Beckett's novel encounters is, in my view, not his most profound essence, in which the world and the self are finally at one. I argue that the speaker of *The Unnamable* is making experience of the deepest and unfathomable chaos of his (uncontained) O.

From this perspective, the temporality that underpins Beckett's novel is not divine or mystical eternity. This is the eternal present of a deranged self, the demolishing morbidity that punctuates the (non-)passage of time in a psychotic mind. The process of logorrhoic outpouring of the speaker of Beckett's novel is, as Connor puts it, "the reflex of a process of unwilled introjection"²⁴⁹ of a subject that has been rejected by his own creator and is about to be abandoned by his words and, last but not least, by his readers/analysts. *The Unnamable* deals with the spreading agony of a psyche suffocated by the sufferance of an existence made of nothingness, where there are no yesterdays, no todays, and no tomorrows. This is a novel pivoting around the eternity that punctuates the temporality of a hellish O, in which "seconds pass, one after another, jerkily, no flow, they don't pass, they arrive, bang, bang, they bang into you, bounce off, fall and never move again, [...] I have to keep on saying the same thing and each time it's an effort, the seconds must be all alike and each one is infernal".²⁵⁰ The present of this deranged self has turned into "formless infinite – the void".²⁵¹

To sum up, looking at present time as pure 'nothingness' and as a temporal dimension in which time appears devoid of time, in the first part of this chapter I have ventured into the absurd world of Beckett's literature and concentrated upon the sense of nothingness and timelessness that features the existence of many of Beckett's creatures. Equipped with minds that are frequently unable to perceive time and its elapse, a number of Beckett's selves are raving unaware of existing here-and-now and severed from their present. Lacking temporal consistency and dispossessed of a self that can perceive and experience it, the present becomes in Beckett's world a time in which everything is reduced to nothingness and what is left, in the end, is just a handful of void.

This sense of existential vacuum that permeates a great portion of Beckett's literature and the impression that the Beckettian subject exists outside the phenomenal world have led scholars like Foster and Moorjani to approach Beckett's work from a mystical perspective, a perspective that only apparently is far off from the world of psychopathology. In effect, psychotic disorders and mystical experiences constitute altered states of consciousness, which foster the self's distancing from its own

²⁴⁹ S. Connor, "Beckett and Bion", cit., p. 25.

²⁵⁰ S. Beckett, "The Unnamable", cit., p. 388.

²⁵¹ W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*, cit., p. 430.

persona and from the time that it should occupy in a specific ‘now’. Resorting to Buddhism, some scholars have regarded some of Beckett’s texts as mystical journeys, via which the subject reaches (or tries to reach) the ultimate reality of being, where all is immaculate nothingness and immense void.

Subsequently, I have turned my attention to Bion’s notion of O and considered, firstly, its affinities with Buddhism and, secondly, its polymorphous nature. Absolute truth and ultimate reality of all things, O is a symbol that Bion uses to identify the psychic dimension where, devoid of memory and desire, the subject encounters her/his own real self within the boundless emptiness of the present moment. Yet, O does not forcibly correspond to a blissful reunification of the subject with her/his own inner self. O unleashes emotional turbulence and, if this is not properly contained and efficiently mastered, the emptiness and nothingness of O can turn into a black hole, i.e. an abyss of entropic dissolution in which the self loses any perception of reality. This implies that the subject becomes an existential vagabond, lost in the chaos of a pathological psyche.

With this in mind, I have explored Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and looked at its narrator as a self that is sucked into his psychic O. Lacking a psychological (and spiritual) guide that can rescue him from the abyss of his distorted mind, the speaker of Beckett’s novel is portrayed as a self who is destitute of a place and a time. In the highly dystopic world of *The Unnamable*, the emptiness that the subject experiences in his present time (O) becomes the void of an entire existence, in which every second is equivalent to the instant that precedes and follows it. Instances of existential vagabonds, several of Beckett’s subjects are psychotic individuals who, bombarded with overwhelming pasts and dreadful futures, cannot find the sense of existing in the time(lessness) encapsulated in their ‘now’. Sinking into the vortex of their Os and condemned to live with no purpose or orientation, Beckett’s selves lead apathetic existences in which all flows towards nothingness and everything, time included, is saturated with eternal void.

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Abstract

Revolving around the individual's sense of temporality, this study interrogates the ways in which time is perceived – or misperceived – by the self and investigates the representations of the time-mind and disordered sensitivities in the works of Samuel Beckett and Wilfred Ruprecht Bion.

The opening chapter is devoted to an overview of the philosophical and clinical theories of the early twentieth century and the modernist passion for time and the way it is perceived by the human mind. This first part is then followed by a survey of the clinical relationship between Beckett and Bion and their proximity to the investigations into the nature of time conducted in the first decades of the last century. In this study, Wilfred R. Bion is not regarded only as Beckett's psychoanalyst, but he is taken into consideration mainly as the author of *A Memoir of the Future*, a trilogy in which Bion fictionalizes parts of his life and his intricate psychoanalytic thought.

This introductory overview is followed by three chapters. The second chapter revolves around the phenomenology and representations of past time in the works of the two authors, and focuses on the mechanisms of memory, on the concept of trauma and on the notion of 'ghost', understood here as the product of a traumatised memory. The third chapter considers the phenomenology of future time and develops around the notions of human degeneration, desire and the trauma of birth. Lastly, the fourth chapter concentrates on the concepts of timelessness and existential nothingness, considers the representations of present time in Beckett's and Bion's works, and offers a reading of Beckett's *The Unnamable* through Bion's theory of 'O'.

What emerges from this study is that Beckett and Bion have a strong intellectual affinity and that they share a pessimism that permeates their writings in very similar ways. My research has led me not only to confirm that Beckett's literature is radically ontological, but to highlight this characteristic also in Bion's works. In this study, I look at Beckett and Bion as two authors who, united by a strong passion for time and the way in which the latter shapes the subject's perception of her/his own persona and the surrounding reality, guaranteed temporal continuity to the modernist passion for interrogating the character's inner temporalities and their disorders.