

Vegetating Life and the Spirit of Modernism

in Kafka and Beckett

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At an acute theoretical level, belatedness and recommencement are inherent to modernism's pursuit of the now and the new. As an artistic sensibility dedicated to the ephemeral and elusive flux of modernity, modernism can be conceived as a contradictory spirit that enacts an auto-defeating and therefore auto-sustaining rapid cycle of attempt and failure, purpose and obsolescence. In this essay I argue that the unachievable, self-perpetuating aspiration that modernism contains is refigured as despondent, late modern 'vegetating life' in the works of two limit-modernists, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Despite producing the bulk of their most memorable work over 30 years apart, both Kafka and Beckett repeatedly offer comparable expressions of endlessness – through purgatorial narrative conditions encapsulated by the continuous recontextualization of deictic language – that resonate with the inevitable belatedness and creative recommencement of modernism. Although deictic language is not especially frequent in Kafka or Beckett, it acquires great significance in their evocations of 'vegetation', an underexplored state identified by critics such as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno that encompasses a series of related binaries: activity and stasis, desire and passivity, life and death. In Kafka's proto-form and Beckett's later-form, each writer conveys what Shane Weller calls the 'paradoxical experience of endless ending, an experience that is alien to the Enlightenment conception of progress which underlines the powerful myth of modernity, and that lies at the heart of the late

modernist conception of history'.¹ Through portrayals of such interminable vegetative states, Kafka anticipates and Beckett epitomises a virtually exhausted late modernist life, undergoing the throes of modernism's drive for novelty and immediacy while subject to the pervasive negativity and failure that replaces the possibility of achievement. If modernism's intrinsic tardiness fuels its invention of ever-new forms, the lateness in late modernism manifests as futility, burden and nostalgia. The vegetating life evident narratively and linguistically in Kafka's 'The Hunter Gracchus' (1917/1931) and Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* (1950-51), for example, demonstrates the purgatorial condition of modernism habitually starting anew and converts it into late modernism's protracted ending.

The Spirit of Modernism

It is common for the critical distillation of discrepant modernisms to derive an elemental dynamic spirit that goes back to its etymological roots: modern, *modo*, 'just now'. In his essay 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', first published in German in 1981, Jürgen Habermas portrays modernism as a persistent rebellion kicking against the normative past: 'With varying content, the term "modern" again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from old to the new'.² As an agent of change, modernism appears necessarily retrospective to legitimately and repeatedly disturb sedimented cultural traditions. Likewise, in an earlier 1967 essay, 'The Culture of Modernism', Irving Howe discerns the intense reactivity of modernism, arguing that 'no matter what impasse it encounters in its clashes with the external world, modernism is ceaselessly active within its own realm, endlessly inventive in destruction and improvisation'.³ Howe accentuates the energetic versatility of the modernist spirit to

the point of infinitude, underlining its restless originality in defiance of shifting historical contexts. More recently, Gabriel Josipovici summarises his book, *Whatever Happened to Modernism?* (2010), with the claim that modernism 'will always be with us, for it is not primarily a revolution in diction, or a response to industrialisation or the First World War, but is art coming to a consciousness of its limitations and responsibilities'.⁴ Rather than a specific aesthetic, historical or ideological understanding, Josipovici articulates the enduring spirit of modernism: a diffuse sense of modernist art as an aggressive, resistant dynamic. His present tense phrase, 'coming to', suggests that modernism is a continual process, one of reflection and renewal. Susan Stanford Friedman describes such conceptions of 'modern/modernity/modernism' as the 'relational definition' which 'stresses the condition or sensibility of radical disruption and accelerating change wherever and whenever such a phenomenon appears, particularly if it manifests widely. What is modern or modernist gains its meaning through negation, as a rebellion against what once was or was presumed to be'.⁵ To extend this premise to its logical conclusion, the constant production of a cultural past would guarantee that the spirit of modernism is always emergent and potentially limitless.

However, as early as 1929, modernism's knell was sounding. 'Demands for ceaseless artistic innovation – Pound's injunction to "make it new" – were starting to sound old'⁶; an editorial in *The Times* proclaimed the 'Eclipse of the Highbrow' in 1941, opining 'that age is past, though some of its ghosts still walk'⁷; and by 1955, the outright 'Decline of Modernism' had occurred: no longer would arts be 'brought down to the level of esoteric parlour games'.⁸ Harry Levin's 1960 essay 'What Was Modernism?' and Maurice Beebe's 1974 response 'What Modernism Was' both reflected on modernism in the past tense, able to define a bygone art with more 'detachment and objectivity'.⁹ In

Howe's work from the late 1960s and early 70s, modernism is addressed as a waning sensibility suffering an undignified demise as a residual, inauthentic copy of the radical. Howe asserts that 'there are works in which the outer mannerisms and traits of the modern are faithfully echoed or mimicked but the animating spirit has disappeared—is that not a useful shorthand for describing much of the “advanced” writing of the years after the Second World War?'¹⁰ Similarly, although Habermas recognises modernity as an 'unfinished project', he also deems it a haunting semblance: 'The impulse of modernity [...] is exhausted; anyone who considers himself avant-garde can read his own death warrant. Although the avant-garde is still considered to be expanding, it is supposedly no longer creative. Modernism is dominant but dead'.¹¹ For Peter Bürger, writing in 1984, 'newness' was always a characterisation of modernism as a kind of shallow avant-gardism, not false in its focus on the intensely experimental *per se*, but lacking the 'criteria for distinguishing between faddish (arbitrary) and historically necessary newness'.¹² Such declarations amount to a 'declension narrative' that attests to how modernism's failsafe ethos of rupture and renewal has matured into a weary historical zeitgeist in the second half of the twentieth century.¹³ Its fate was sealed as a victim of inescapable assimilation according to Stanford Friedman, who recognises 'the impossibility of perpetual disruption or revolution as change becomes institutionalized. What begin as multiple acts of rebellion against prevailing hegemonies become through their very success a newly codified, often commodified system'.¹⁴ By virtue of its reactivity to the normative, however, the bizarre suspicion remains that a brand of fundamentalist modernism is able to deal with itself, or previous iterations of itself, as the status quo. Indeed, modernism can promise a paradoxical form of survival by committing suicide or performing a self-conducted post-mortem. Twenty-first century critical studies on modernism's 'futures' and 'legacies' in post-1945 and contemporary

literature give credence to its potential to continue as a sensibility that outlives itself, either as a revived prospect or inherited past.¹⁵

It is apparent from this brief overview that the historical decline of modernism is in conflict with the enduring spirit of modernism as a reactive, resistant sensibility. The very notion of decline seems anathema to modernism as 'a drama of perpetual remaking', best understood as 'a performative process rather than a means to an end'.¹⁶ However, these contradictory narratives – one of constant renewal, one of gradual decline – reveal the possibility of detecting a confluence of activity and stasis, or an enlivening and deadening duality, in the inveterate spirit of modernism. Without a teleological trajectory, modernist art is condemned to immediacy, turning over voided products and restored purpose in a state of perpetual belatedness, that, when viewed panoramically, appears to have stagnancy engrained in its very flux. As Stanford Friedman expresses: 'Like the noun modernity, the adjectival form slips and slides between meanings rooted in the possibility and impossibility of "making it new"'.¹⁷ A double take on Habermas's and Howe's formulations also show that, for all of its investment in the new, their modernism appears to get locked into a stale pattern, forever outmoding itself. Habermas recognises that 'the distinguishing mark of works which count as modern is "the new" which will be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next style'.¹⁸ The onward march of modernism means it only seems as new as its most vanguard front, so that the trailing remainder must appear anachronistic, a static relic by comparison. Although this insistence on innovation might strike one as the precondition of its timeliness and relevance, as a profoundly transient form, modernism seems to anticipate its desolation and inefficacy. Indeed, Howe goes further than Habermas to claim:

modernism does not establish a prevalent style of its own; or if it does, it denies itself, thereby ceasing to be modern. This presents it with a dilemma which in principle may be beyond solution but in practice leads to formal inventiveness and resourceful dialectic—the dilemma that modernism must always struggle but never quite triumph, and then, after a time, must struggle in order not to triumph. Modernism need never come to an end, or at least we do not really know, as yet, how it can or will reach its end. [...]. The essence of modernism reveals itself in the persuasion that the true question, the one alone worth asking, cannot and need not be answered; it need only be asked over and over again, forever in new ways.¹⁹

Modernism's animation principle rests upon an annulment of its recent self, a kind of neutralisation of its productivity, which casts modernist art into a compulsive but unavailing existence, which I elaborate on below as 'vegetating life' in Kafka and Beckett. Notwithstanding the danger of reducing modernism to a ravenous consumer appetite for the latest fashion, the common account of modernism as an avant-garde sensibility, as sketched above, is driven by a forlorn imperative, as each new approach negates the last, to reveal at once a stimulating and numbing process. The 'spirit' of modernism, then, is an apposite phrase in its evocation of both a tenacious life force and spectral lack of substance.

Vegetating Life: Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno on Kafka and Beckett

The enlivening-deadening duality of modernism can be related to Georg Lukács's, Walter Benjamin's and Theodor Adorno's uses of the pertinent word 'vegetate', or derivatives, to describe the works of Kafka and Beckett, as well as Beckett's own critical

evolution of the word 'vegetation' in relation to purgatory in Dante Alighieri and James Joyce. In Georg Lukács's chapter 'The Ideology of Modernism' from *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (German 1957 / English 1962), he identifies several limitations in modernist literature that contribute to an essentially static conception of human society and history, despite its ostensible dynamism. Lukács's criticisms of modernism include the excessive preoccupations with form, style and technique that govern narrative and character; the focus on asocial and ahistorical subjectivity over objectivity that reduces subjects to superficial developments and incoherent experiences; and the perverse accentuation of psychopathology, primitivism and allegory at the expense of perspective. Whereas contemporary bourgeois realism 'has assumed change and development to be the proper subject of literature', Lukács sees an overall sense of fixity in modernist psychological narratives that swing between the phenomenology of the present and recollections of the past.²⁰ Referring in particular to Joyce, he notes that 'the perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory- data, their powerfully charged – but aimless and directionless – fields of force, give rise to an epic structure which is static, reflecting a belief in the basically static character of events'.²¹ Despite the restless movement and manic energy of modernist interiority, Lukács argues that it amounts to a rather myopic and curiously conservative approach, without social context or historical progress.

Lukács's forceful dichotomy of realism and modernism, 'dynamic and developmental on the one hand, static and sensational on the other' is well known.²² Less commonplace is his recourse to the language of purgatory to describe this difference in relation to Kafka and, in more scathing terms, Beckett. Like Robert Musil, Kafka summons 'the ghostly aspects of reality', according to Lukács, whereby even 'realistic detail is the expression of a ghostly un-reality, of a nightmare world, whose

function is to evoke *angst*.²³ This unreality is intensified when adopting the perspective of 'an abnormal subject', or, as in Beckett's case, 'an image of the utmost human degradation – an idiot's vegetative existence'.²⁴ For both writers, Lukács concedes, the immersion into strange psychological worlds is associated with 'life under capitalism', which is 'often rightly, presented as a distortion (a petrification or paralysis) of the human substance. But to present psychopathology as a way of escape from this distortion is itself a distortion'.²⁵ He continues:

This implies the absolute primacy of the *terminus a quo*, the condition from which it is desired to escape. Any movement towards a *terminus ad quem* is condemned to impotence. As the ideology of most modernist writers asserts the unalterability of outward reality (even if this is reduced to a mere state of consciousness) human activity is, *a priori*, rendered impotent and robbed of meaning.²⁶

Lukács perceives a vicious cyclic pattern, with modernists indulging in the symptoms of the problem, descending into the psychic disorders produced by the simultaneously agitating and desensitising repetition compulsions of modern capitalist modes of production. This generates a host of purgatorial conditions that Lukács touches on, including the 'ghostly', 'vegetative', 'petrified', 'paralysed' and 'impotent', although these emerge more concretely as an idiosyncratic, secular form of purgatory in the hands of Benjamin, Adorno and especially Beckett.

In Lukács's reference to 'vegetative existence' in particular, he invokes multiple related meanings. The adjective, 'vegetative', features in Aristotle's philosophy to refer to 'one component of the irrational part of the soul, namely the component responsible

for simple growth and alteration'.²⁷ The vegetative soul is the entirety of plant life and it is an aspect that human and non-human animals possess among others. This basic life spirit of plants, added to their stillness, immobility and periods of dormancy, means 'they "only seem to live"', and yet, reduced to almost non-being, 'after we strip life of all its recognizable features, vegetal beings go on living'.²⁸ In the parlance of the French 'poet of things', Francis Ponge, the imperceptible but persistent biology of vegetation 'gives birth to living crystals, *cristaux vivants*', as if stimulating organic activity in inert mineral substances.²⁹ Through such associations with plants, the word 'vegetate' can be employed to differentiate between bare existence and meaningful life, such as in Colley Cibber's 1740 memoir *Apology for Life of Colley Cibber*: 'The Man who chuses never to laugh...seems to me only in the quiet State of a green Tree; he vegetates, 'tis true, but shall we say he lives?'.³⁰ Indeed, in German, *vegetieren* can literally translate as 'to eke out a bare existence'.³¹ With the advent of psychoanalysis, particularly 1930s Reichian psychotherapy or 'vegetotherapy', "'vegetative" life refers to the "vegetative nervous system". In English this is called the autonomic nervous system, that which governs basic, involuntary functions. It has nothing to do with plant life, despite the awkward resemblance to "vegetables" in English', according to James Strick.³² This modern connection to the nervous system gives rise to terms for related medical conditions, such as 'persistent vegetative state' or 'vegetative dormancy'.³³ Despite Strick's rejection, these names for nervous functions and chronic disorders of consciousness encourage parallels with the basic functions of the vegetative soul and the embedded, passive, relatively diminished life of plants, to the extent that medical researchers have sought more neutral terms, such as 'unresponsive wakefulness syndrome', to avoid pejorative associations and preserve human dignity.³⁴

However, in Lukács's account of modernism overall, he actually finds a concomitance of ostensible activity and veritable inertia, which evokes the purgatorial dual meaning already secreted in the verb 'vegetate', as a term that includes vitality and torpidity, liveliness and lifelessness. It means 'to sprout; to germinate; to produce new growth' as well as 'to lead a dull, monotonous life, without intellectual or social activity; to live or spend time in an unchallenging, inactive way'.³⁵ Together, these meanings indicate that 'to vegetate' is to be subject to an ongoing but empty life, caught between renewal and repetition. It is a duality that smacks of Sigmund Freud's speculations on competing life and death instincts in his 1920 essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', although Lukács strongly disagrees with attempts to 'explain man's social relations from his individual consciousness (or subconsciousness)', as an approach that 'turns the essence of things upside down'.³⁶ It is apparent that Lukács considered the psychopathology of modernist literature to share the same systemic errors as Freudian psychoanalysis. And so, the stand-off between activity and inertia underlying Lukács's assessment of Joyce, as well as Kafka and Beckett by implication, resembles what Freud expresses as 'a kind of fluctuating rhythm within the life of organisms: one group of drives goes storming ahead in order to attain the ultimate goal of life at the earliest possible moment, another goes rushing back along the way in order to do it all over again and thus prolong the journey'.³⁷ It is a paradoxically vital and stagnating rhythm that Lukács finds foundational to modernism wholesale, as he accepts the flux of individual sense impressions and loaded subjective experience while detecting a static, unchanging macrocosm. Lukács's 'vegetative existence' effectively identifies both modern conceptions of subjectivity and modernist aesthetics: it connotes a medical assessment of psychological suspension, which, given modernism's focus on the

individual and its merging of form and content, filters into the purgatorial dynamics of the artwork's deep structure.

The phrase that Lukács uses to decry Beckett specifically is one that both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno evoke as champions of Kafka and Beckett. In his 1934 essay for the 10th anniversary of Kafka's death, Benjamin compares the holders of power in Kafka (court judges and castle secretaries) to the depressive Russian statesman Grigory Potemkin, 'who vegetates, somnolent and unkempt, in a remote, inaccessible room'. Benjamin then asks: 'Why do they vegetate? Could they be the descendants of the figures of Atlas that support globes with their shoulders' or 'it is just that the most commonplace things have their weight'.³⁸ Under either the pressure of great responsibility or the gravity of everyday details, such figures of authority are rendered vacant and inert. While these mystifying powers encapsulate the dull, inactive side of vegetating life, the assistants or messengers in Kafka's stories convey the active counterpart, through their contingency and liminality. Benjamin likens the assistants or messengers to 'Gandharvas': messengers between gods and humans in Hinduism, and spirits between death and rebirth in Buddhism.³⁹ Such characters are 'beings in an unfinished state', 'none has a firm place in the world, firm, inalienable outlines', 'none that has not completed its period of time and yet is unripe, none that is not deeply exhausted and yet is only at the beginning of a long existence'.⁴⁰ Benjamin recognises the purgatorial incompleteness of vegetating life in this striking depiction of lives seemingly enervated and not completely terminated. In their imprecise ontological state, these beings are precarious, nebulous and condemned to be. Benjamin goes on to enlist another echelon of character, the 'fool', as part of this 'indefatigable' troop, referring specifically to those in 'Children on a Country Road' (1910).⁴¹ The inclusion of fools, alongside figures of power, messengers and assistants means that from the castles

and courts all the way down to bewildered victims such as K, Josef K and Gregor Samsa, vegetating life infects Kafka's entire world, in both vacuously inanimate and aimlessly wandering forms.

Benjamin's evocations of vegetation add a mythic, spiritual scale to Lukács's structural and psychopathological ideas. He elaborates further still with aesthetic and artistic components, drawing on the infinite meaning of gesture and the provocation of failure. Benjamin writes that 'Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings'.⁴² Lukács co-opts Benjamin's point here to deprecate Kafka's 'transcendental Nothingness', citing the transferability of meaning arising from the deep ambiguity of modernist allegory.⁴³ This proliferation of potential meaning and deferment of stable meaning owing to varying contexts and juxtapositions generates an open, unsettled and unlimited spirit. The fact that many of Kafka's stories were abandoned as unfinished fragments and that he instructed his executor Max Brod to destroy his papers on his death 'says that the writings did not satisfy their author, that he regarded his efforts as failures, that he counted himself among those bound to fail'.⁴⁴ The dissatisfaction and inevitability of failure that Benjamin sees in Kafka can indicate an unyielding obligation to try, which also implies vegetative dynamics, not least those found in modernism's own creative recommencement.

Benjamin's friend and critic Adorno also employs the term 'vegetate' in his essay 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' (1961), in which he defends Beckett's abstract modernism as an appropriate artistic response to the 'damaged life' of a post-Holocaust world that is effectively the culmination of late capitalism's logic of 'abstraction, identification, exchange and use which characterises all human relationships and

relationships to the world, and that allows for no spontaneity or difference to arise', as Alistair Morgan puts it.⁴⁵ The protracted denouement that Hamm and Clov suffer in *Endgame* (1957) attests to an era in which '[h]umankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless'.⁴⁶ In this instance, vegetating life refers to the human condition in the aftermath of a global epistemological and ontological event. People are not really living as they once were and are therefore not survivors in the common sense; although they live on, they are so thoroughly transformed as to be disparate from their prior selves. The power of thought is also impacted, as the catastrophic event ensures it exempts itself from comprehension by leaving people unable to rationalise or represent what has happened lucidly. The subtitle to Adorno's 1951 book *Minima Moralia*, 'reflections from damaged life', underlines this affront to philosophical examination.⁴⁷ The choice of 'from', rather than 'on', shows that all sense-making reflections are now impaired. Only the fragmented, incoherent state of the 'reflections' themselves gives any indication of what they attempted to reflect on or about. Equally, Adorno's epigram to that text, Ferdinand Kürnberger's 'life does not live', repeats one of the dualities of vegetation, exposing the difference between life proper and bare existence. As Morgan explains, 'implicit in the phrase "life does not live" is the assumption that the verb "to live" implies a fuller sense of life which either lies repressed beneath the existence of a life that does not live, or as a suppressed possibility within this deadened form of existence'.⁴⁸ For Adorno, vegetating life, which entails the decay of experience, the impairment of reflection and the immersion in cultural and philosophical ruins, is the malady of modernity.

Yet, in contrast to Lukács, it is crucial for Adorno that this malady spreads through modernist art too, particularly post-Holocaust late modernism. In Adorno's

essay on 'Metaphysics', he notes: 'the cheap jibe that Beckett can never get away from urns, refuse bins, and sand heaps in which people vegetate between life and death – as they actually vegetated in the concentration camps – this jibe seems to me just a desperate attempt to fend off the knowledge that these are exactly the things that matter'.⁴⁹ Referring to Beckett's *Play* (1963), *Endgame* and *Happy Days* (1961), Adorno's comment highlights the human potential to suffer limbo on earth, as an interstice between animate and inanimate, between life and death. His conception of vegetating life after Beckett, then, intensifies the condemned existence that he already saw in Kafka. Adorno writes in his 'Notes on Kafka':

In the concentration camps, the boundary between life and death was eradicated. A middle ground was created, inhabited by living skeletons and putrefying bodies, victims unable to take their own lives, Satan's laughter at the hope of abolishing death. As in Kafka's twisted epics, what perished there was that which had provided the criterion of experience – life lived out to its end.⁵⁰

Adorno takes the absence of an end point, or '*terminus ad quem*', that Lukács criticised in Kafka and Beckett's non-progressive, dystopian modernism, and refigures it as a form of ethically engaged literature congruous to the times. Therefore, damaged life, of which vegetation is a part, is not merely an escape from the social and historical concrete world of realism. It is the ubiquitous product of the context that art must also imbibe. In the strongest terms, anything else would not be a remedy; it would be a travesty.

Adorno's use of 'vegetate' to describe an endless limbo between life and death recalls Beckett's own earlier use of the term 'vegetation' in his 1929 essay, 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', written to support Joyce's 'Work in Progress' (later *Finnegans*

Wake). Beckett compares Dante's temporary and Joyce's permanent forms of vegetation to relate two conceptions of purgatory. He writes: 'In the one there is an ascent from real vegetation – Ante-Purgatory, to ideal vegetation – Terrestrial Paradise: in the other there is no ascent and no ideal vegetation'.⁵¹ Beckett notices that Dante presents a progressive model from real to ideal vegetation, which follows the purgatory outlined in the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church. In this rendering, 'purgatory offered the soul a post-mortem second chance to satisfy the debts due to its redeemer for its bodily and spiritual sins'.⁵² A spiritual sorting process identifies the penitent souls required to undergo this purifying period of vegetation owing to their unpaid venial sins. This is a process that is conveyed elsewhere in Christian scripture through a harvesting analogy, although the Bible does not explicitly support the notion of a provisional afterlife before admittance to heaven. Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew, the Parable of Tares or Weeds, teaches of the angels dividing humanity into either the heaven-bound good or the hell-bound evil. After a man sowed his field with good seed, 'his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way'. On discovery, the man announces: 'Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn"'. The act of separating the good wheat from the unwanted tares (to burn in an act of purification) brings to mind the proverb 'separating the wheat from the chaff', or its variation, the grain from the husks.

The harvesting analogy presents an image of divine judgement that Beckett knows well as a raised Protestant and utilises occasionally over the course of his career, most famously in the opening part of *Krapp's Last Tape* through the reference to a 39 year-old Krapp 'Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks'.⁵³ The image takes its most Beckettian form in his 1951 novel, *Malone Dies*, the

middle text of his post-war trilogy. A bed-ridden Malone passes away time telling himself stories, including the narrative of Macmann, who has 'a cast-iron vegetative system' and 'sat and lay down at the least pretext and only rose again when the élan vital or struggle for life began to prod him in the arse again'.⁵⁴ Despite living on a farm, Macmann's ability to identify the wheat from the weeds deserts him: 'suddenly all swam before his eyes, he could no longer distinguish the plants destined for the embellishment of the home or the nutrition of man and beast from the weeds which are said to serve no useful purpose, but which must have their usefulness too, for the earth to favour them so'.⁵⁵ Macmann is not damning in his assessment of weeds because he is unable to distinguish between plants types and assumes the ubiquity of weeds must evidence their usefulness somehow. This more inclusive, indiscriminate stance presumably applies to the symbolic equivalent of weeds, the lost souls, which problematises the binary judgement of heaven or hell and raises the prospect of a more complex spectrum ranging from good to evil, valuable to worthless, that tallies with Beckett's evocations of a purgatorial middle ground in his corpus that confuses the boundaries of life and death.

Similarly, Kafka raises a purgatorial state from a Biblical symbol through plants and fire in his earlier parabolic fragment, 'The Thorn Bush', probably written in 1922, in which a man gets stuck in a thorn bush and must wait for the park directors to get permission to release him. The agitated man is literally trapped in vegetation; in this prickly suspension he can think but not act, speak but not move. The fragment alludes to Exodus 3:2, Moses and the Burning Bush, which Kafka aphorises as: 'The thorn bush is the old obstacle in the road. It must catch fire if you want to go further'.⁵⁶ As Richie Robertson acknowledges, through the symbol of the thorn bush, Kafka shows that '[s]piritual progress must be through the fire, an image recalling purgatory'.⁵⁷ These

allusions to burning bushes and weeds in Kafka and Beckett are reminders that parts of the discourse of the final judgment are loosely entwined with plant life, and that a non-binary vegetating life germinates from them.

While an implicit grey area between heaven and hell, amidst the wheat and the weeds, and within the thorn bush, reinforces the connection between temporary forms of vegetation and purgatory, in Joyce's 'no ascent and no ideal vegetation', the prevailing image is not of climbing towards a summit to achieve cathartic release, but one of cyclic, perpetuating activity. In his reading of Joyce, Beckett draws on the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico's notion of the ideal eternal history from *Scienza Nuova* (1725), which Beckett articulates as 'all humanity circling with fatal monotony about the Providential fulcrum'.⁵⁸ Having identified this cyclic pattern, Beckett argues that there is 'a continual purgatorial process at work' in Joyce owing to its structural preclusion of totality and stylistic revolutions.⁵⁹ He writes of 'the absolute absence of the Absolute' and locates this characteristic in miniature in his compatriot's late style: 'There is an endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction, the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate'.⁶⁰ The indeterminacy and recurrence that Beckett reads in Joyce are analogous with the constellation of restless vegetative dynamics expressed in Benjamin and Adorno's reflections on Kafka and Beckett, particularly the sense of an unfinished or endless condition. The interrelation between vegetating life and purgatory is founded on such dynamics, and does not exclude the plant-like overtones of vegetation because of the perceived infinite drive of plant life, as Michael Marder notes in *Plant-Thinking*: 'if incompleteness means open-endedness, then vegetal growth fully satisfies this rendition of *ateles*, in that it knows neither an inherent end, nor limit'.⁶¹ Although Marder cites passivity and torpor as other vegetal characteristics, the process of reproduction 'by replacing what goes off or is antiquated with something other' leads to 'pure

proliferation bereft of a sense of closure'.⁶² The peculiar incompleteness of plants, together with the activity and stasis in vegetation more broadly, is strangely evocative of modernism's acts of self-preservation through prolific transformation. It is via Joyce, then, that Beckett identifies a suitably modern model of vegetation that challenges the linearity implied in Dante's ascending spiral and replaces it with an idea of movement as 'non-directional – or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back', which seems to conflate or collapse notions of progression and retrogression.⁶³ Although the esteemed mythologist Joseph Campbell argues that Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is like Dante's vision of purgatory in that it 'is written in a circle with a break: there is an out', for Beckett, Joyce has a regenerative and therefore interminable quality that extends purgatory beyond an intermediate zone indefinitely.⁶⁴ It is this distinct state of suspension without deliverance that emerges as vegetating life in the works of Kafka and Beckett.

Resolution: Renewable Deixis in Kafka's Short Stories

The vegetating life composited from Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno and Beckett is restlessly static, incomplete, residual and cyclic. These dynamics resound in Kafka's diaries, not only in blatantly negative expressions, such as '[o]nly this everlasting waiting, eternal helplessness', in which Kafka chronicles his depressive feelings of incarceration, but also when he articulates the complex duality of vegetating life, as it vacillates between or otherwise conflates activity and passivity, continuation and termination.⁶⁵ In an entry dated 6th August 1914, Kafka notes 'my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. [...] I waver, continually fly to the summit of the mountain, but then fall back in a moment. [...] I waver on the heights; it is not death, alas, but the eternal torments of dying'.⁶⁶ Kafka acknowledges an infinite capacity to diminish in a manner

akin to Zeno's dichotomy paradox, as he becomes less and less but never nothing. In a different but still interminable process, he also describes traversing the poles of ecstasy and misery, with the implied adverbs 'continually' and 'eternally' preventing his end. Dying is not death, Kafka is well aware. Later in the same year, he expresses a similar plight, this time in relation to his literature: 'I can't write any more. I've come up against the last boundary, before which I shall in all likelihood again sit down for years, and then in all likelihood begin another story all over again that will again remain unfinished. This fate pursues me'.⁶⁷ By 'can't write any more', Kafka means he has stalled on this story and is unable to conclude. As the repetition of 'again' shows, he actually has a strong urge to create and will write much more in other attempts, although, like his many unfinished stories, Kafka is consigned to the infinite process as much as the finite product.

Examples of 'vegetative existence' are plentiful in Kafka's fiction too, from the judicial vortex of *The Trial* (1914-15) to the unobtainable goal in *The Castle* (1922). He consistently centres on forsaken protagonists floundering in the perplexing mechanisms of authority, which leads Howe to assert that Kafka 'presents dilemmas; he cannot and soon does not wish to resolve them; he offers his struggle with them as the substance of his testimony; [...]. After Kafka it becomes hard to believe not only in answers but even in endings'.⁶⁸ No instance of Kafkaesque vegetation is more compelling than the story of the mysterious Hunter Gracchus, who fell to his death while hunting deer in the Black Forest. Written in 1917, it begins with Gracchus arriving in Riva by boat, supine on a bier, to tell his tale to the Mayor, or Burgomaster:

'Are you dead?'

'Yes,' said the Hunter. 'As you see.' [...]

'But you are alive too' said the Burgomaster.

'In a certain sense,' said the Hunter, 'in a certain sense I am alive too.'⁶⁹

There is a note of humour in Gracchus's 'as you see' comment, which presumes that him being dead is self-evident, despite him walking and talking. Gracchus being alive, on the other hand, is demoted to the vague 'in a certain sense'. If the deathly element seems foremost, it is not fatally so, as Gracchus remains suspended in a limbo that contravenes both life and death. It is not exactly a petrified, standstill existence either. In fact, he notes twice, 'I am always in motion', although the repetition of this statement betrays its etiolated quality too. Gracchus explains: 'I am forever, on the great stair that leads up to it [the other world]. On that infinitely wide and spacious stair I clamber about, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, always in motion'.⁷⁰ Despite Harold Bloom's attempt to define the Gracchus myth as a parable for Kafkaesque writing as 'repetition, labyrinthine and burrow-building', Gracchus's erratic movement here, ranging indiscriminately in all directions eternally, inevitably does evoke purgatorial myths, including the Wandering Jew and the ghost ship, the Flying Dutchman.⁷¹ Gracchus repeats: 'I am always in motion. But when I make a supreme flight and see the gate shining before me I awaken presently on my old ship, still stranded forlornly in some earthly sea or other'.⁷² Kafka reveals a more mundane inspiration for the story in his diary entry from 6th April 1917 where he recalls witnessing a boat arriving at the port and no passengers disembarking.⁷³ In that experience, Kafka presumably thought the helmsman was destined never to leave the boat. In the written story, it is striking that Gracchus emphasises his restless movement, to ensure that being stranded is understood as a sentence to be active, which pertains to the vegetative life in Lukács's readings of modernism suspended in animation,

Benjamin's exhausted, unfinished beings and Adorno's broken creatures in quasi-survival.

Although Gracchus's movement is constant, it is not linear or progressive and therefore will not amount to salvation or redemption. His world is 'a meaninglessly revolving carrousel on which the end flows again and again into the beginning'; he is an 'eternally living-dead man, who can neither live nor die', subject to the 'durable presence of catastrophe, which becomes a normal, permanent condition'.⁷⁴ It is a state of being he recognises in himself: 'I am here, more than that I do not know, further than that I cannot go. My ship has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death'.⁷⁵ Gracchus is apparently adrift, devoid of agency and at the mercy of external forces. In this existential crisis, he is divested of a teleological trajectory and therefore shackled to the immediate context, the place currently occupied. Kafka reinforces this 'eternal present' through his narrative tense, according to Dorrit Cohn, who argues that the 'present tense used by the ghostly narrators is the grammatical signal for their unrelieved survival'.⁷⁶ But 'here' is felt as a more specific limit too, as the boundary of Gracchus's knowledge in his mobile prison, which suggests he is restricted to the present in more ways than one. Early in the story, Gracchus implies he has comprehensive knowledge of the world, yet it transpires he is forgetful and must be reminded 'in the first moments of returning to consciousness', signalling his deficient powers of recall.⁷⁷ Without a reliable, self-initiated memory, the rich contexts of the wider world and past experience are oddly unavailable to him.

The emphasis on 'here' in Gracchus's 'I am here', with its sense of being anchored in a spatial and temporal present, lends significance to Kafka's later micro piece, 'The Departure', written between 1920 and 1921. The last lines read:

"Where is the master going?"

"I don't know," I said, "just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it's the only way I can reach my goal."

"So you know your goal?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "I've just told you. Out of here – that's my goal."⁷⁸

Clearly, the master's imperative is to leave, but as a deictic word dependent on context, 'here' can exceed a singular place. It has the peculiar ability to follow the master, pointing to each current situation. The goal to get out of here is therefore foiled infinitely as it is repeatedly reset, which evokes the unachievable, self-perpetuating aspiration of modernism. Readers are made aware of this indexical regeneration at an acute level through the repetition of the word 'here' four times in quick succession. Logically speaking, the reference point in the first utterance is minutely different to the last utterance; indeed, escaping begins as a means to reach his goal, before transmuting into the goal itself. This deictic mobility reveals the renewability of 'here', while simultaneously appearing and sounding rather hackneyed owing to its frequency. It conveys both a fresh context and a nagging imperative. In a little over a hundred words, then, Kafka evokes modernism's transformation from a single, historically necessary departure in 'out of here to reach my goal' to an abortive and persistent spirit in 'out of here – that's my goal'.

Kafka expresses vegetating life in different terms in his fragment 'Resolutions' (1911), translated from the German title '*Entschlüsse*' (decisions), a relative of *Entschlossenheit* (determination). The title itself holds connotations of finitude, in the way something can be *resolved*, as well as connotations of purpose, as in something steadfast or *resolute*. Like the related word 'determination', resolution is at once an

expression of closure and perseverance. Kafka's short piece utilises this duality in the narrator's failure to integrate socially and his recourse to a more hermetic, solipsistic existence. It finishes on the following note:

perhaps the best resource is to meet everything passively, to make yourself an inert mass, and, if you feel that you are being carried away, not to let yourself be lured into taking a single unnecessary step, to stare at others with the eyes of an animal, to feel no compunction, in short, with your own hand to throttle down whatever ghostly life remains in you, that is, to enlarge the final peace of the graveyard and let nothing survive save that.⁷⁹

Kafka's narrator describes conditions associated with a vegetative existence in his recourse to passivity, inertia, emotional austerity, suppressed ghostly life and deathly peace. The difference in this example is that the narrator articulates a contradictory state of willed lifelessness involving a decision to become a nonentity, so that apathy is actually desired as a facility to be used. Curiously, there is resistance to life at work in this instance in which the very act of resisting life would contain some of the vitality that is supposedly resisted. In other words, the volition implied in 'making yourself', 'not letting', 'throttling down' and 'letting nothing' constitutes a paradoxical process of 'self-denial', wherein the presence of self is reinforced in the act of self-effacement. However, considering the combination of activity and stasis outlined in the forms of vegetating life above, it is arguably this impulsion with designs on passivity that ensures the endless end of vegetation is more thoroughly achieved. Kafka effectively reveals a quirk of vegetative life through the narrative voice actively pursuing inactivity and expending energy on a lacklustre state. This dynamic appears to be a negative

formulation of the utopian progress that underpins modernism, where the spirit is redirected into neutrality and indifference. It is a perverse appropriation that presages the intersection of modernist élan and late modernist fatigue.

The vegetating life in renewable deictic language and the paradox of self-denial can therefore be added to Weller's identification of Kafka's 'linguistic negativism' as a 'proleptic' realisation of late modernism.⁸⁰ In 'Performing the Negative: Kafka and the Origins of Late Modernism' (2016), Weller examines the frequency and variety of negative language components and modifiers in Kafka's stories, particularly the 'un-' affix as a 'morphological enactment of a negation', to argue that Kafka is a precursor to Beckett's late modern 'literature of the unword'.⁸¹ After referring to Adorno's and Blanchot's reflections on Gracchus's experience of '*undeath*' as a 'terrifying vision of the living death to be experienced by so many in the Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags', Weller concludes that:

The emergence of late modernism in Europe owes so much to Kafka precisely because his is a literature of the dark times, in which being (above all, human being) can only be defined negatively, and in which, ironically, no amount of negativity can, for all its justification, reduce being to nothing, the animate to the inanimate, the properly living to the properly dead.⁸²

Weller refers to Kafka's historical relevance for post-Holocaust late modernists here and yet the surviving, purgatorial dynamic he describes also relates to the spirit of modernism's own persistence as a vestigial presence in late modernism. If late modernism is, as Weller states elsewhere, 'perhaps best understood precisely as such an art of impotence and ignorance, an art that no longer trusts the power of the

aesthetic to achieve epiphany, that no longer believes art can', one of the ways this takes shape in Kafka's nascent form is an exposure to the renewability of a failing moment.⁸³ The elusiveness of 'here' transforms from multiple rousing opportunities to wretched eternal toil. To adopt Kafka's title 'Resolutions', the active component, or 'resolve', of modernism appears to attend and protract its closure, or 'resolution', leaving traces of modernist life compelling the negative, attenuated formulations of late modernism.

'No Ideal Vegetation': Void Deixis in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*

While Kafka envisions the suspended animation implicit in high modernist dynamics, Beckett exemplifies it as an author writing predominantly after 1945, during modernism's plateau. The endlessness of vegetating life pervades Beckett's writing from his last prose text, *Stirrings Still*, in 1989, back to his first published novel, *Murphy*, in 1938, in which the title character pursues a remarkably similar kind of 'will-lessness' to that expressed in Kafka, in the third, dark level of his mind where there is 'nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change'.⁸⁴ *Texts for Nothing*, a series of 13 short texts written between 1950 and 1951, is a particularly pertinent example given the title's indication of activity without prospect or progress. Bearing in mind that Kafka found himself stuck in a creative loop of starting but never ending stories, *Texts for Nothing* is significant as a response to Beckett's own creative impasse after *L'Innommable*, written between March 1949 and September 1950. In a letter to Jerome Lindon in April 1951, he confides: 'it has left me in a sorry state. I'm trying to get over it. But I am not getting over it. I do not know if it will be able to make a book. Perhaps it will have all been for nothing'.⁸⁵ Over the course of 1951, Beckett describes his texts 'for nothing' variously as 'a few little turds'; 'a whirling dervish'; 'little fly-splashes against the window'; and 'the

afterbirth of *L'Innommable* and not to be approached directly'.⁸⁶ These wry formulations offer an insight into the status of the texts as not singular or fully-fledged in their own right; they exist as excess, waste and remains in Beckett's mind, closely related to past endeavours. For Louis Oppenheim, this intertextual relationship is characteristic of Beckett's work as 'a discourse that self-reflectively focuses on its own undoing of narrative, its unwriting of writing – in writing. Beckett's creative process is said to have been "decreative" in the sense that it was motivated by the need to rewrite and continually fine tune previous texts in new ones'.⁸⁷ In his negative inclination to 'undo' and 'unwrite', Beckett evokes an alternative vision of modernism's creative wellspring, which, as we have seen, also contains a form of neutralisation of its productivity in its resistance to the past and insistence on the immediate.

Beckett's 'decreative' drive exists within single texts as the familiar Beckettian process of 'unwording', involving affirmation, reflection, revision, negation and repetition. This process contributes to the collocation of activity and stasis that constitutes the vegetating life in Beckett. For example, the narrative voice in *Texts for Nothing* utters: 'What variety and at the same time what monotony, how varied it is and at the same time, what's the word, how monotonous. What agitation and at the same time what calm. What vicissitudes within what changelessness'.⁸⁸ The narrator achieves the monotony, calm and changelessness of which he speaks by repeating a basic syntactical structure: the rhetorical 'what' in conjunction with 'and at the same time'. In keeping, there are also permutations of the core theme to achieve the variety, agitations and vicissitudes, namely the use of 'how' instead of 'what'; the reflection and hesitation in the questioning 'what's the word'; and the move to a new configuration through the preposition 'within'. Beckett's narrator does loosely practice what he observes in this largely repetitive and yet refreshed passage, although, admittedly, describing his

changes as 'variety' and 'vicissitudes' is a humorous exaggeration.

Deictic language further increases the sustainability of Beckett's 'literature of the unword'. Similar to the Kafka short stories discussed above, Beckett draws attention to the infinite present of the here and now, as well as highlighting the challenges to immediacy and identity inherent to context-dependent language. Early in *Texts for Nothing*, Beckett's narrator underlines the temporal and psychological aspects of his purgatorial condition, although he sarcastically links them to a celestial sphere initially: 'And now here, what now here, one enormous second, as in Paradise, and the mind slow, slow nearly stopped'.⁸⁹ In text three, 'Here, depart from here and go elsewhere, or stay here, but coming and going' is representative of the complexity of 'here' in relation to a speaking subject.⁹⁰ The first half indicates that 'here', once uttered, is vacated and severed from the subject. It is originary and cannot be occupied through reflection. The second half indicates that 'here' can be experienced as a live moment but must remain an ineffable, reoccurring activity. This combination of delay and performativity resurfaces when Beckett's narrator insists 'I say it as I hear it', which is a line repeated several times in Beckett's later novel-length work *How It Is* (1964).⁹¹ In an acknowledgement of the creative process and the registering of inspiration, 'I say it as I hear it' professes immediacy, like 'here' does, but it actually intimates either an internal dialogue or dictator-scribe relationship, in which what is thought or heard must be computed and then verbally repeated, thereby resulting in a minute schism between the heard and said. In Beckett, then, 'here' is purgatorial because it is transient and elusive; it is repeatedly voided and therefore not entirely available to the 'I' other than as a form of being. Hence, the narrator says 'I'm here that's all I know and that it's still not me, it's of that the best has to be made. There is no flesh anywhere, nor any way to die'.⁹² While the beginning of this example is remarkably similar to the Hunter Gracchus's comment

'I am here, more than that I do not know', Beckett also conveys the non-identity arising from the delay in self-reflective utterances, in which the acute distance between 'I' and 'here' reveals the speaker is inevitably overdue or behind time in terms of the presence afforded by the first person pronoun and deictic language.

Beckett is attracted to the contradiction in 'where you are will never be long habitable', which, as far as the here and now goes, means the impossibility of realising one's self in the moment, as opposed to experiencing the lived moment itself.⁹³ This revelation is evident in a series of remarks on the emptiness of the present, such as 'Here, nothing will happen here, no one will be here, for many a long day' and 'how is it nothing is ever here and now? [...] What else can there be to this infinite here'.⁹⁴ The present appears empty because the gap between consciousness and self-consciousness means apperception must happen retrospectively and thus imperfectly. Cognizance of the present is actually shown to be an exercise in assimilating the recent past, and the upshot for identity in Beckett is that the temporal now feels untenanted. Consequently, Beckett's narrator relates with the singular past tense, as text six suggests in a reference to Dante's *Purgatorio*: 'I was, I was, they say in Purgatory, in Hell too'.⁹⁵ Beckett mentions this purgatorial non-existence to George Duthuit in an earlier 1948 letter, making the reference to Dante more explicit by using the original Italian: 'Do you know the cry common to those in purgatory? *Io fui*'.⁹⁶ In contrast to the more unified presence of 'I am' found in the Cartesian axiom *je pense, donc je suis*, the phrase 'I was' reveals that Beckett realises a Dantean form of self as something already passed, ensuring that the ipseity spoken in the present, 'I', has elapsed upon detection, 'was'. If for Habermas, modernity's 'new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present', Beckett demonstrates the impossibility of pursuing 'nowness' as

uncontaminated immanence.⁹⁷ Through narrative figures riveted to self-reflection on their potential or pending creation and desired termination, *Texts for Nothing* reveals the unshakable void that coexists with attempts at the conscious representation of modern perceptions of subjectivity in time and space.

However, Beckett's 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce' essay discussed earlier indicates that although his later narrative voices might conceive of a Dantean purgatory, they actually suffer a Joycean one. Beckett's 'last word' on purgatories reads:

Dante's is conical and consequently implies culmination. Mr Joyce's is spherical and excludes culmination. In the one there is an ascent from real vegetation – Ante-Purgatory, to ideal vegetation – Terrestrial Paradise: in the other there is no ascent and no ideal vegetation. In the one, absolute progression and a guaranteed consummation; in the other, flux – progression or retrogression, and an apparent consummation.⁹⁸

Dante's purgatory posits an end, a way out at the top of the spiralled mountain into Earthly Paradise. It is a transitional place 'in which the human spirit cures itself / And becomes fit to leap up into heaven'.⁹⁹ In contrast, Joyce's purgatory is a closed system, protean and provisional inside, but lacking the prospect of catharsis. As Daniela Caselli explains: 'Joyce's and Dante's Purgatories are similar because both move; in Joyce, however, the movement has lost its redemptive guarantee, its fixed structure, its character of space-in-between. It has become a sphere, a vicious circle in which a step forward is a step back'.¹⁰⁰ Yet the impetus to end, and, moreover, to end in the right way, keeps Beckett's narrator going. It is as though the promise of graduation from real vegetation to ideal vegetation remands the narrator in his place of no ideal vegetation:

'No, something better must be found, a better reason, for this to stop, another word, a better idea, to put in the negative, a new no, to cancel all the others, all the old noes that buried me down here, deep in this place which is not one, which is merely a moment for the time being eternal, which is called here'.¹⁰¹ Despite being stuck in the perdition of the deictic instant, Beckett's narrator clings on to a form of totality in the way he recognises his existence as a 'pensum', a task to be completed.¹⁰² The early Beckett commentator Walter Strauss argues that:

The heroes of Beckett's universe really vegetate, and, since this fate is unendurable, they try to vegetate ideally, i.e., they persuade themselves that there is an ascent and wait for some sort of angel to beckon them on, like Dante's pilgrims. But the angel, the epiphany, never comes, and they finally return to real vegetation. Like the vegetable, they wilt and disintegrate.¹⁰³

It is this ideal of finality that maintains the narrator's reality of infinitude in *Texts for Nothing*, as it recurrently posits an alternative means to an end that prevents him from reconciling with his endless situation. Beckett effectively conveys vegetating life that is nourished by the purgatorial narratives of movement and development but is actually rooted in its cyclic patterns, and therefore relentlessly denied fruition.

If the task is to produce a consummation of negation, or 'a new no' as Beckett's narrator expresses, it nevertheless requires vestigial willpower and desire. David Watson claims that, '[a]t a primary level, narratives are about desire: all stories concern the drive to resolve a state of disruption, discover a missing object, achieve a fulfilment of ambition, and so on'.¹⁰⁴ It is fair to claim that Beckett's narratives are replete with ways in which such desires are invalidated, not least because of his open, self-cancelling

structures and provisional, hypothetical registers that repeatedly thwart progress and resolution, often at the expense of individual autonomy. As Ruben Borg argues in his essay on Beckettian afterlife and the posthuman, Beckett is 'staging the exhausted, impracticable afterlife of that enduring Enlightenment ideal—the self-determined subject', in which 'the sense of being not only mortal, but in excess of one's own death, corresponds to a state of *infinite passivity*—precisely that "limbo purged of desire" in which Beckett's characters are always suspended'.¹⁰⁵ Borg extrapolates this principle from Belacqua Shuah in Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), who, like Murphy, is able to access parts of the mind he calls 'the cup, the umbra, the tunnel' for months at a time, 'where there was no conflict of flight and flow and Eros was as null as Anteros'.¹⁰⁶ However, it is worth noting that while Belacqua is 'uniquely at home in the middle-ground' of passivity and 'is in no hurry to be redeemed', even his purgation of desire is temporary and incomplete.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, it is impossible to completely expunge desire in Beckett's world, precisely because Beckettian vegetative life is often a product of the unfulfilled desire for such indifference, which is what makes it both active and static. As with Kafka's self-denial that reinforces the self that it effaces, and akin to Beckett's narrators' urges to speak into silence, the desire for apathy is another example of aporia as it must ultimately use what it wants to negate. In this way, the resulting vegetating life is not another path to the contented equilibrium implied in Beckett's reading of Dante, despite resorting to a Dantean quest structure that projects an end. As Alistair Morgan suggests: 'the figure of exhaustion in Beckett precludes a time of peace or rest. The point at which the end comes becomes an endlessly vanishing moment'.¹⁰⁸ Desire emerges as a revenant in Beckett, the hardy but hollow leftover of genuine possibility that nevertheless continues to propel his shattered subjects.

Whether the residual desire in Beckett's work produces the invigorating

differences of renewal or stultifying sameness of repetition is a critical point of contention when regarding Beckett as a late modernist. H. Porter Abbott suggests that Beckett's centre of gravity is in modernism, precisely owing to a spirit of opposition that runs through his whole oeuvre, from text to text and within texts. He argues that Beckett affords himself new creative opportunities through a 'deliberate process of recollection by distortion', which produces 'deliberate metamorphosis, a kind of misremembering'.¹⁰⁹ As Beckett revisits and crucially revises previous territory, he is 'recapitulating an antagonism to habit one can trace well back in Baudelairean modernité'.¹¹⁰ In Porter Abbott's reading, Beckett retains the experimental, innovative modernist status, albeit, a late modernist status since, after the initial aesthetic shocks of the post-war period, Beckett's oeuvre displayed more constrained innovations. Mark Perdetti, however, argues that Beckett's is a knowing modernism, which upsets the dominance of the modernist gravity that Porter Abbott identifies. For Perdetti, Beckett's 'self-awareness represents a fundamental inversion of the modernist ideology of perpetual innovation: instead of novelty, late modernism presents us with the tedium of the already-said'.¹¹¹ The impetus of the oppositional spirit has seemingly been exhausted in this view, and '[i]n the absence of an alternative aesthetic, the late modernist writer is condemned to occupy that limit position, and to write from its weariness'.¹¹² Perdetti raises the idea of Beckett in an artistic no-man's land between modernism and postmodernism, having to perform an inauthentic rendition of an expiring aesthetic. In conjunction, however, the genuine development and the ironic reiteration in Porter Abbott's and Perdetti's respective analyses show that Beckett gives off the impression of both *resuming* modernism, as an ongoing resistance to the same, as well as consciously *returning* to modernism, as a jaded, anterior form without an established successor. Beckett's work can support both of these positions because he

conveys the enlivening-deadening duality of vegetating life that already exists in the auto-defeating and auto-sustaining spirit of modernism, especially as perceptions of modernism's dynamism mature to detect restless stasis and nostalgia for productivity. Beckett's late modernism is therefore with and without modernism: the experimentation involved in excavating the modernist ruins of originality and immediacy, as well as its narratives of individual subjectivity and the idea of progress, appears to bear its spiritual hallmark while bearing witness to its ideological demise.

Conclusion: The Late Modernist Execution of Modernism

The vegetating life in Kafka and Beckett is a compulsion to be active while anchored in a spatial and temporal present that inhibits salvation or totality. Critical orthodox after Benjamin, Lukács and Adorno is to relate these purgatorial conditions to the dehumanising forces of industry, technology, urbanity and war in early twentieth-century modernity or the decay of culture, experience and subjectivity in the damaged life of post-Holocaust later modernity. However, vegetative life also chimes with the dynamics of modernism as a sensibility, particularly the duality that emerges from a conception of modernism as an unfulfilled spirit consisting of compulsive activity and overall inertia. As with deictic language, however, the value of modernism's pursuit of the now and the new is a matter of perception, as it can present both infinite potential and endless emptiness. Kafka and Beckett are receptive to the latter cycle of attempt without prospect, and subsequently their modernist life spirit shifts to a negative teleological or eschatological project to terminate itself, whereby the effort invested into ending is ironically the cause of its continuation. Kafka's prescient literature forecasts the later application of modernism's vestigial spirit to pore over its own remains, in the way Beckett's post-war art of failure does so assiduously. The lack of

authentic or original life that this vegetating life implies is properly associated with late modernism, if understood as a designation that covers 'the empty spaces left by high modernism's dissolution' in which 'late modernists reassembled fragments into disfigured likenesses of modernist masterpieces: the unlovely allegories of a world's end'.¹¹³ Despite his narrow periodization of late modernism as the late 1920s to the 1930s, Tyrus Miller recognises the important point that 'in such works the vectors of despair and utopia, the compulsion to decline and the impulse to renewal, are not just related; they are practically indistinguishable'.¹¹⁴ Late modernism therefore formalises the abortive but enduring kernel that exists within the spirit of modernism; it enacts the chronic belatedness and persistence endemic to its oppositional, experimental forbearer. Kafka and Beckett invoke and perform this sense of protracted failure present in their own supposed modernist artistic sensibility to expose the burdensome, atrophied side of its dynamism. In doing so, these two writers effectively 'execute' the spirit of modernism as they are both engaged with and consciously going beyond it. Subject to the frisson of the creative process but without convincing progression, Kafka's and Beckett's vegetating figures are emblematic of late modernism, lingering on the loss and possible renewal of self, community and meaning, but from a greater self-reflective position of dejection and incredulity.

¹ Shane Weller, 'Performing the Negative: Kafka and the Origins of Late Modernism', *The Modern Language Review*, 111:3 (2016), 775-794: 784.

² Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 3.

³ Irving Howe, 'The Culture of Modernism', *Commentary*, November 1967.

<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-culture-of-modernism/> (accessed July 30, 2017)

⁴ Gabriel Josipovici, 'Modernism still matters', *New Statesman*, 6 September 2010: 67.

⁵ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism', *MODERNISM/modernity*, 8:3 (2001), 493-513: 503.

⁶ David Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 53.

⁷ 'Eclipse of the Highbrow', *The Times*, 25 March 1941, 5.

⁸ 'P. R. A. On Decline of "Modernism"', *The Times*, 1 June 1955, 8.

- ⁹ Maurice Beebe, 'Introduction: What Modernism Was', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3:5 (1974), 1065-1084: 1065.
- ¹⁰ Howe, 'Culture of Modernism'.
- ¹¹ Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', 6.
- ¹² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1984), 63.
- ¹³ Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 7.
- ¹⁴ Stanford Friedman, 'Definitional Excursions', 503.
- ¹⁵ For example, see David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012) and David James, ed., *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁶ David James, *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), 15.
- ¹⁷ Stanford Friedman, 'Definitional Excursions', 505.
- ¹⁸ Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', 3.
- ¹⁹ Howe, 'Culture of Modernism'.
- ²⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1969), 35.
- ²¹ Lukács, *Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 18.
- ²² *ibid.* 19.
- ²³ *ibid.* 26.
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- ³⁰ "vegetate, v.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.
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