CHAPTER ONE

“The hope of not making me”: Samuel Beckett and the Construction Compulsion

They don’t know who they are either. . . . So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another. . . . is it possible we’re all in the same boat. (The Unnamable 372)\(^1\)

It’s a quick death, God help us all. It is not. (More Pricks than Kicks 22).

Resist though any sane person might the grim vision of human existence implicit in Samuel Beckett’s fiction, his narratives subtly but persistently encourage us to acknowledge kinship with their sometimes abstract, sometimes monstrous creatures. For in the Beckettian view of the world it is not only possible but likely that “we’re all in the same boat” as his protagonists: somehow simultaneously painfully embodied and utterly untethered from materiality, a mess of body-mind condemned to play out an existence that is nasty, brutish, and, what is worse, seemingly unending. Insofar as he posits such a universal human condition, Beckett evinces a certain humanism. Indeed, S. E. Gontarski argues that even the “tendency toward abstraction” in Beckett’s revision process “is finally . . . essentialist . . . a movement . . . toward the universal” (3). And insofar as Beckett uses his instruments of psychological torture to chip away at the barrier between the diegetic reader whom he implicates in this essential human condition and the extratextual readers who project her into the text as their representative, he shakes us out of our safe, intellectual bubble and into that condition as well.

But, perhaps paradoxically, as even this “projection” suggests, Beckett’s “essentialism” disavows the traditional notion of the human essence as inborn, deep, and abiding, for, as his protagonists become increasingly aware, the human condition is a written condition. To live, in Beckett’s
words, is to narrate (oneself). In this sense, Beckett proves himself a proto-constructionist who, like many contemporary theorists, sees the subject, as “engendered precisely by the process of its engagement in the narrative genres” (de Lauretis 106). And Beckett offers us, time and again, a window into the process through which that engendering occurs. If his protagonists narrate themselves, they often “say it as [they] hear it” ([How It Is] 7 and passim), receiving from “others” the stories by which they define themselves. These self-stories generally entail their composition of subnarratives (hypodiegeses) into whose protagonists they project their subjectivities-in-progress. In fact, even the others rumored to originate the stories from their extradiegetic reality invariably (at least temporarily) turn out to be narrative constructs of the protagonist, designed for the express purpose of handing down a self-story. The process thus involves multiple narrative levels that the various creator-creatures expand and collapse by building, violating, and rebuilding boundaries. In other words, metalepsis, the transgression of boundaries between narrative levels, proves to be intrinsic to subject construction. At times, it also proves to be a rather violent event: creators dismember their creatures, torture them into telling their constitutive narratives, carve their identities into their bodies.

In this way, Beckett’s work seems to demonstrate that there is a certain sadism or violence inherent in narrative form. But although the Beckettian protagonist’s death drive (if not his ability to die) can hold its own against any of those explored by such psychoanalytic narratologists as Peter Brooks or Bersani and Dutoit (see Introduction), Beckett locates narrative’s pain-inflicting violent tendencies not in teleology but rather in the constant reconstruction of the subject necessary for continued existence. Being born and ceaselessly reborn becomes the painful process that replaces (or, the protagonist hopes, merely precedes) dying as the object of narrative desire—and, to coin a phrase, of narrative fear. For unlike the deep self posited by the psychoanalytic theorists, a self with drives, desires, and a “natural” life span, a trajectory from womb to final tomb, Beckett’s written subject manifests itself as a never-ending figment(izing) of a sort of universal imagination figured as simultaneously womb and tomb. The psychoanalytic narratologists tend to see the reader, another “deep” subject, as the victim (or willing object) of narrative’s violence or sadism: made of a substance other than fiction, this (humanist) reader stands outside of the story and experiences the teleology of narrative in a violent (and erotic) way. Beckett’s fiction implies a different sort of reading experience—one that paves the way toward the deconstructive reading taught by Brooke-
Rose and the feminist reading recommended by Carter. For in Beckett there is no end, either to narrative’s productive work or to the procession of stories within stories that render us all (at whatever narrative level we exist or participate) narrative’s producers and products—and so, willy-nilly, both violators and victims in narrative’s insistent reconstruction.

Thus, the spiral of narrative in which the subjects of Beckett’s fiction find themselves is itself subject to a powerful force of inertia: once set in motion, it becomes unstoppable, as it carries its creatures along in an unending cycle of destructive creation. Because the cycle appears so seamless, flowing even across boundaries between texts, it is hard to envision a way to break it. And yet, the cycle itself consists of a series of ruptures, as the subject is defined through breaches of narrative boundaries that paradoxically restabilize those boundaries and the narrative that contains them. Working against this obstinately reconstructive effect, the narrator-protagonist who desires to divorce himself from the narrative that is his life has little hope of achieving his aim, especially given that the logical method for escaping narrative is the very device that keeps him entrapped—metalepsis. If we attend to Beckett’s metalepses, we can first discern the discrete steps that violate and thereby paradoxically strengthen narrative structure and that project the appearance of a fluid cycle, and second, examine the hopelessly similar strategies that the narrative subject devises as steps toward self-annihilation. Sure, Beckett’s narratives seem to say, try stepping outside of the narrative. Where do you find yourself? In another narrative, another narrative about narrative, about trying to reach the end of narrative—in effect, in the same narrative, through which you write yourself a life about trying to write yourself to death.

The reconstructive metaleptic moves of the “powers-that-be” take various forms, including bodily violations, as they demonstrate the torture inherent in subject construction. The metaleptic moves of the subject who wishes to rewrite himself follow a discernible pattern: “outward” metalepsis, movement from the diegesis to the more real extradiegetic plane; “inward” metalepsis, encasement in a protective shell of stories within stories; erasure of all boundaries, collapsing all levels into one; and the absorption of the reader into the narrative—ultimately not just the diegetic reader, who is already inside, but even her higher-level counterparts, who, if left outside, would insist on reconstructing the narrative and its subjects. The subject thus rings the changes on metalepsis in a desperate effort to end the narrative that is his life. Each time, he fails, vowing to “Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (WH [Worstward Ho] 7).
If I write of this subject as if he were singular, I do so advisedly. For the eternal nature of the cycle, the open endings of many of the narratives ("I’ll go on," ends The Unnamable; “come on,” beckons Cascando; “on,” echoes Worstward Ho), and the myriad refrains that resound from work to work all suggest that a single project permeates much of Beckett’s oeuvre and that a single protagonist pursues that project along with him, mutating as the need arises. I therefore cautiously amalgamate several of the narratives in order to distill a model of their metaleptic subject-construction process. For although its product-producer may add new twists and turns to its spiral, may drop some strategies and explore others more fully, the process remains essentially the same.

But at the same time as it generates a model of a world without end—no tomb that is not womb, no escape from the vicious cycle—Beckett’s work itself follows at least one kind of trajectory, driven by the same impulse as that which motivates his protagonists. The progression of his novels moves painstakingly toward the goal of nothingness. Paring away layer after layer of narrative trappings, Beckett heads toward a minimalism so much “less,” so much “worse,” that it cannot sustain its productions. It is as if he hopes, by writing less of a subject, to allow it/him to die a “natural” death, almost indistinguishable from those of the depth-model protagonists of more traditional narratives. In this march toward an elusive end of narrative, one can trace the dynamics of Beckett’s metaleptic subject construction from Watt (1953), where the narrative nature of life seems but a small part of the story, to Worstward Ho (1983), where it consumes all else. Along the way, the violent construction of the subject traverses the territory of physical torture and related sociopolitics (most visibly in How It Is, 1964), in variations that add new dimensions to the eternal spiral, but it always returns to the solo subject, projecting others who must in turn construct him and so narrating himself a life about trying to narrate himself to death. In staging repeatedly, relentlessly, this fictional (but mimetic) subject-construction process, Beckett illuminates the operations of metalepsis, its promise and inevitable failure to provide a way out of life’s wretched story, and the painful emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical effects of the boundary violation that may well be intrinsic to the making and unmaking of extratextual subjects as well as their literary counterparts. That so many readers have found Beckett’s works intolerably unsettling, depressing, or nihilistic suggests that, in addition to providing a representation of the wretched human condition, these narratives are capable of disturbing extratextual readers (ETRs) emotionally and psychologically—and thus that the
violations operate not only on the internal boundaries but on the divide between diegetic reader (DR) and ETR as well.

“The long dwindling supposition”: Watt It’s All About

In the procession of Beckett’s novels, Watt comes early, lodging itself firmly in what many critics and postmodern theorists would consider the dark ages of modernism. Gontarski, for example, believes that “Watt . . . remains considerably more referential than the trilogy” (Gontarski 13). And Brian McHale clearly sees Watt as epitomizing modernism’s concern with epistemology rather than as problematizing ontology, which he views as postmodernism’s “dominant” (Postmodernist 12–13). Indeed, he elsewhere treats the novel as exemplary modernism, emphasizing its “cognitivism” — a characteristic he contrasts with postmodern “postcognitivism” (Constructing 34). But as McHale acknowledges, one does not shift dominants by flipping a switch; the transition occurs gradually and results in a continuum of hybrids whose dominant might be “called” either way. Moreover, Watt’s grounding in a more accessible fiction of mere epistemological questioning lends it a stable background against which to frame more radical ontological games, some of which rely on metalepsis. Read for metalepsis, Watt proves a useful introduction to the destabilizing possibilities of breached boundaries and shifting levels, and, in a sense, to the painful cyclicality of narrative subjectivity.

Watt’s slippages among levels and its consequent indeterminacies begin with the novel’s outermost frame, its title. Given Beckett’s penchant for puns, the novel’s title, its protagonist’s name, begs to be read interrogatively: “What?” And given Beckett’s perennial focus on the writing process itself, the further question arises: “Who asks ‘What?’” (As Company’s narrator will query, “Who asks, whose voice asking this? . . . Who asks in the end, who asks?” [Co 24]) One answer is, of course, Beckett himself, but the first pages of the novel introduce a diegetic-level questioner, the humpback Mr. Hackett, and so erect a frame for the Watt narrative. Spying “a solitary figure” across the street, Hackett wonders first what it is (he “was not sure that it was not a parcel” [W Watt] 16), then who it is that his acquaintance, Goff Nixon, crosses the street to see, and then “what it was that so intrigued him” about the figure. Upon receiving some scraps of information (Watt owes Goff six and ninepence, has only four and fourpence, and is setting out on a journey; Goff doesn’t really know him, although he has seemingly always known him), Hackett—as
a hack-Beckett, one of the novelist’s several stand-ins in the novel—begins to speculate on Watt’s thoughts, motives, and actions. In essence, he sets out to write Watt’s story and then, like any “real” author (or author of realist fiction), vanishes, apparently leaving Watt to answer the question of himself.

But even if Hackett serves no other purpose than that of story-framing wonderer, he and his musings might well lurk behind the rest of the novel. For the rambling Watt narrative embedded in the brief Hackett story bears what Gérard Genette categorizes as a “thematic relationship,” “a relationship of analogy,” to its frame (Narrative Discourse 233). More significantly, the specific parallel between the two lies in each protagonist’s propensity to become a narrator in turn and so establishes a pattern that suggests a mise-en-abîme, prefiguring the eternal chain of narrative construction that Beckett will confront head-on in much of his later fiction. Here, the analogy goes like this: If Hackett is a brainchild of Beckett and so resembles his brainfather in his manner of composition or need to compose, Watt likewise resembles Hackett. It is Hackett, after all, who sets the stage for Watt’s indefatigable hypothesizing with his divining of Watt’s purpose in descending from the tram, first proposing that “perhaps he felt like a little fresh air . . . before being pent up in the train” (W 19). Watt, (seemingly) left to his own devices, will later list objections to his own hypotheses in order to arrive at the most plausible story (94–97); Hackett, admittedly, receives help in his Wattian reasoning process from the Nixons, who nix his proposals (19–21). But after a few progressively more refined guesses at Watt’s motives, Hackett feels ready to take the leap into declarative statements. Apparently Watt, now wholly Hackett’s creation, “gets off the tram, determined not to leave town after all. But a little further reflexion shows him the folly of such a course . . . [that is, of] turning back so soon . . . before he was well started on his way. . . . The thought of leaving town was most painful to him, . . . but the thought of not doing so no less so. So he sets off for the station, half hoping he may miss his train. . . . Too fearful to assume himself the onus of a decision, . . . he refers it to the frigid machinery of a time-space relation” (20–21).

But the Hackett frame does not remain stable, for the relationships among Hackett, Watt, and Nixon subtly shift as we read. When Nixon responds to Hackett’s last statement, “Very ingenious,” he may refer equally to Hackett’s solution to the puzzle of Watt and to “Watt’s” solution to his to-go-or-not-to-go dilemma. Although such a linguistic yoking of Hackett and Watt may be unintentional, Nixon goes on to avow that
he has always recognized an unavoidable if inexplicable association between the two men, telling Hackett, “The curious thing is, my dear fellow, . . . that when I see him, or think of him, I think of you, and that when I see you, or think of you, I think of him” (W 19). If we read Nixon’s recognition of the analogy as a vague, intuitive understanding of the narrative structure of Watt (something we cannot put past Beckett, who after all anticipates critical response to the text in Mrs. Nixon’s questions to Hackett—“What does it matter who [Watt] is? . . . What can it possibly matter, to us?” [23]), this awareness seems to place Nixon, at least temporarily, at a higher narrative level than either Hackett or Watt. If we take Nixon’s remark at face value, on the other hand, it seems to flatten any tentative narrative hierarchy we might have constructed, as Goff merely reacts to two somehow similar and equally “real” men.

Still, the Watt we have encountered thus far has been largely Hackett’s invention, and if Hackett authors the next portion of the novel (where we seem to gain direct access to Watt’s mind and body), then its protagonist (Watt) is hypodiegetic, despite the fact that he is inspired by a “real” (diegetic-level) figure. Hackett’s failure to reappear at the end of the novel merely renders the narrative’s frame open, breached at the “bottom,” just like the circle in the picture that Watt finds in Erskine’s room (and which is reproduced on the cover of the Grove edition of the novel). In the picture, “a circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground. . . . Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. . . . How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained” (W 128–29).

This analogy, however whimsical, between Hackett and Watt, on the one hand, and the circle and the point, on the other, raises intriguing questions about the relationship between “Hackett’s” Watt and “Beckett’s” Watt, and exposes the inadequacy of the frame as container. For just as the point lies outside the circle that, so Watt hypothesizes, ought to contain it, indeed to center around it, perhaps Watt lies outside Hackett’s frame. If so, did he escape the frame—by crossing into Hackett’s diegetic realm at the moment we began to read about him as directly as we did Hackett—or was he never inside to begin with—that is, never what Hackett imagined him to be? We are given no frame of reference for answering such questions. Because the apparent loss of Hackett and the consequent reassignment of Watt from hypodiegesis to diegesis are subtle, nearly invisible, moves, the diegetic reader, having first aligned herself
with Hackett, feels at most a vague confusion as she evolves into the addressee of the anonymous, third-person narrator now using Watt as focalizor. If the ETR is conscious enough to notice the change of channels, we may also become aware of the redefinition of our diegetic projection, the DR, and so lose, momentarily, our confidence in our own readerly framework.

If we cling to the circle-and-point analogy, it leads us to question Hackett’s and Watt’s relative importance—and with it the relative importance of the act of narration and the content of the narrative, and so, implicitly, the traditional hierarchy of diegetic levels. For Watt notes that the point and the circle seem to lie on different planes, as Hackett and his creature Watt would lie on different narrative levels, and just as Watt cannot say with certainty which of the picture’s figures forms the background and which the foreground, we may wonder whether we are reading about Hackett’s (Beckett’s) writing process when we watch his character Watt go through all the combinations of possibilities in determining all the ways in which each event might have happened, or whether Hackett is merely a Beckettian Marlow, there to survive and tell the tale of the more remarkable Watt/Kurtz.

Given the already Byzantine design of multiple but unstable circles and skewed “centers,” we may throw down our drafting pencils when we reach part 3 of the novel and run into Sam, the sometimes-first-person narrator of parts 3 and 4 whom some critics view as a “scribe”—clearly yet another of (Sam) Beckett’s stand-ins, another framer vying for Hackett’s already tenuous position. The relations among Hackett’s frame, Sam’s frame, and the tale proper become so muddled as to form a sort of Escherian optical illusion. If Sam in effect transcribes the whole of the novel based on Watt’s confessions (as his sudden introduction would have it—“It was about this time that Watt was transferred to another pavilion, leaving me behind in the old pavilion,” 151), how would he know about Hackett at all, not to mention Hackett’s speculations about Watt? Is Hackett a character invented by Watt? By Sam? Conversely, might Hackett, weary of writing in the mode of the middle or fearing to be disbelieved, invent Sam, adding a level of narrative intermediate between himself and Watt, in the manner of an eighteenth-century novelist in need of an authenticating device (“He told me this himself”)? Or could Sam and Hackett somehow inhabit the same plane and write the rest of Watt from both ends simultaneously? Even the narratologically inclined reader would be hard-pressed to diagram this narrative structure. Although such ambiguity seems less than “central” here (not least
because we are likely to have forgotten Hackett by the time we meet Sam),
it does provide a taste of the metaleptic convolutions to come as Beckett
continues to shed the stabilizing trappings of modernism.

Bersani and Dutoit might argue that all this plane shifting renders Watt
a commendable anti-narrative that eschews the violence inherent in “per-
spective.” Every perspective, they write, is a “structuring event” that
“depends on the establishment of priorities” and forces us to “submit our-
theselves to hierarchical orders of recognition rather than to the mobility of a
forgetful perception which dismisses centers and reconstructs temporary
orders with each of its moves” (Forms 46). In arguing, by contrast, that such
dissimuls of centers require a breaching of the boundaries through which
we make sense of both narrative and the world, I am suggesting again that
it is through mobility rather than stasis that narrative violates (even as it
constructs) the subject. The shifting framework here, for instance, plays
into the narrative’s refusal to allow its reader a firm grasp on Watt (“What?”)—or on Watt, in the kind of gestalt that we have learned to for-
mulate, however provisionally, in the process of reading a novel. Its turbu-
lent building and unbuilding thus forms and deforms the subject that is
Watt, and simultaneously effects a certain intellectual destabilization of the
reading subject. Faced with a focalizor who comes and goes, the diegetic
reader must periodically lose her footing—which is to say herself, given that
she is a construct of the diegetic narration who derives her continuity from
the solidity of the diegetic world. When our diegetic representative flickers
and fades, moreover, gentle ripples of confusion and discomfort may well
spread out toward the extratextual level, where we sit trying to sort out what
is going on and what role we are meant to play.13

In addition to launching Beckett’s exploration of the creative potential
of metaleptically shifting levels, Watt includes a vignette that playfully
indicates both the narrative nature of subjectivity and the pain inherent
in the endless cycle of subject construction. In this segment of the novel,
Watt, through a metaleptic sleight of hand, hypothesizes an entire family,
the Lynches, into (his level) of existence. Moreover, he includes in its
idiosyncratic ranks another Sam, who, at least metaphorically, takes on
the role of the narrating/creating subject played on outer levels by
Hackett, Watt, and the other Sam.

Watt, created in the image of Hackett, who is created in the image of
Beckett, is a big hypothesizer—in effect, a writer. When he encounters a
problem of food and a dog that he need not solve in reality (for someone
has evidently solved it long ago), he feels compelled to study it as if it were
his own—to work it out like a story problem in math—and he “pieces together” a solution in the form of a story. The problem of how to follow orders to give Mr. Knott’s leftovers to “the dog,” when Mr. Knott has no dog and will not tolerate a dog living on the premises, calls, Watt reckons, for “an exceptional[ly] hungry or starving dog [that . . .] considered it worth its while to call at the house, in the manner required” (W 94). The solution further demands dog owners who will bring said dog to Mr. Knott’s house daily to eat any food that may have been left. This “solution,” especially insofar as it answers a now hypothetical question, could easily end there, but Watt-the-writer uses it as an occasion to concoct an extended family of variously ailing and rampantly inbreeding Lynches.

The embedded narrative of the Lynch family echoes at its own level the metalectic shifting of boundaries that we have already examined. At first, the Lynch solution seems to be purely Watt’s invention, a hypothetical family sketched out in bizarre and gory detail. But the family no sooner emerges from the morass of proposals and objections than it earns a name (“The name of this fortunate family was Lynch” [W 100]), and, suddenly, appears to live on Watt’s own narrative level. Either through extraordinary coincidence or because Watt merely “reverse engineered” the steps of the solution from a known endpoint, it seems that the fantastical Lynch mob was precisely the solution hit upon by Watt’s predecessors when the real problem arose. Lifting themselves out of Watt’s hypothesis, at least two of that mob’s vast number manage to cross the boundary between their world and Watt’s in order to interact with him, and, indeed, to “let fall” certain “remarks” from which Watt “piece[s] together” the entire sprawling clan; in a sense, they become diegetic in order to help write their own hypodiegesis.14

The diegetic reader, whose belief in Watt’s reality has now temporarily stabilized, finds herself jolted once again: these hypothetical Lynches have suddenly joined her in “her” reality. And here the ripples out to the extradiegetic level are, ironically enough, intensified by the use of an implied editor, who has confirmed in a footnote for the EDR that some of the Lynches suffer from medically impossible ailments—“Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work” (W 102)—and thereby places these quirky characters in a fantasy realm; when the Lynches are transformed into Watt’s diegetic companions, then, it startles the EDR just as it does the DR, although it may well invoke a purely intellectual, rather than an emotional, reaction. In this sense, incidentally, the boundaries between levels have at first insu-
lated us, as they did with Dermot Trellis’s torture (see Introduction), from any emotional response (pity or compassion, for example) to the (hypodiegetic) Lynches’ suffering; when it becomes clear that they are “real” (that is, diegetic), perhaps there is room for a twinge of guilt about our own callousness. And perhaps this in turn teaches us a bit about the ethics of reading, as, in Beckett’s masterly interweaving of movement and countermovement, the transformative aspect of metalepsis, which operates by uniting DR with EDR and making us *feel* something, works in tandem with the rhetorical aspect, which separates the EDR, allows him to see his own reactions “objectively,” and makes us *learn* something.

But the embedded tale does more than replicate “outer” moves and compound the confusion of levels: it generates an embodied exemplum of the endlessness and pain of the subject-construction cycle. Among the myriad bizarre, debilitated, and perhaps hypodiegetic Lynches lurks the other Sam. Although he lies buried under piles of hypothetical relatives in the midst of a “digression,” Sam Lynch may serve as a metaphor for the quintessential Beckettian man. He earns this position not only by virtue of his name (Sam as in Beckett, Lynch perhaps as in “linchpin”) but thanks to his particular condition in the array of Lynch ailments. “Paralysed by a merciful providence from no higher than the knees down and from no lower than the waist up” (*W* 101), Sam has “no purpose, interest or joy in life” other than “intervening” with many women, all of whom are doubly or trebly related to him in a web of inbreeding, and nearly all of whom conceive and bring forth children, in singles or doubles, as a result (106–7). In a world where all existence is narrative, the age-old metaphor of procreation for narration becomes “literal,” and just as Flann O’Brien’s Dermot Trellis gave “birth” to his fully grown character Furriskey through “aestho-autogamy” (O’Brien 54–55), Sam Lynch’s siring of (still vestigially hypothetical) offspring reads as a kind of writing.15 A written entity, as so many later Beckett characters will be conscious of being—indeed, perhaps trebly written (by Watt, by Hackett, or by the other Sam, and ultimately by Beckett)—Sam Lynch seems condemned to do nothing but “narrate” more characters, continually creating others in his own image. And just as his writers have inflicted bodily harm on him, Sam can only generate more and more broken men and women.16

The abandon with which he propagates his species highlights what Beckett repeatedly depicts as the unending cycle implied by the narrative nature of subjectivity. Not only can Sam do nothing but procreate/narrate; as it becomes clear in Beckett’s later fiction, it is quite likely that so long as
he exists (as a narrative construct) he can’t not procreate/narrate. The Lynches at large seem to have an inkling of this equation between living and “writing”: as a group they aspire merely to reproduce enough so that the combined ages of all extant Lynches add up to a “Lynch millennium” (W 105). So just as Watt creates a family and symbolically “lynches” its members in the same move, torturing them even as he lures them across the boundary into his world, the doomed family relentlessly creates/torments others. In Beckett’s world, subjectivity is a painful, inescapable trap. “Some people are lucky,” the Unnamable will opine, “born of a wet dream and dead before morning” (TU [The Unnamable] 379–80); or, as Beckett puts it most simply in “A Piece of Monologue” (1979): “Birth was the death of him” (70).17 If we wince retrospectively at our own callousness in failing to be moved by the suffering of the Lynches, we may at some level (so to speak) recognize the sad fact that we have become inured to the pain of existence. Since some later characters, such as the Unnamable, come to us minus the elaborate framings of Watt, and since the works they inhabit often erode diegetic-extradiegetic boundaries, their extradiegetic reader becomes more engaged with and compassionate toward the diegetic-level narrator-protagonists and may eventually begin to feel their pain as his own. In part, this empathy is an effect of Beckett’s mimesis. We begin to recognize these creatures’ situations, as bizarre as they may seem, as analogues of our own. In part, the empathy marks an exercising of the transformative power of metalepsis, as the gradual dissolution of the boundary between diegesis and ETR enables diegetic events to touch us directly—with confusion, angst, and pain.

“A pain in the neck, irrefragable proof of animation”:
Whipped into Shape

As the Lynches come into being through narrative, so too the tormented subjects in Beckett’s long procession of lynched beings. Throughout Beckett’s fiction, subjects and even bodies are built of words, and the narrator has the power of the divine fiat: his saying something makes it so. The process stands out in sharpest outline toward the minimalist end of Beckett’s career. In Worstward Ho, for example, Beckett has so emptied out the diegesis of events, even the “memories” or “images” that haunt his earlier protagonists, that his narrative consists solely of the story of the (un)making of a story.18 Here, we watch undistracted as the narrator erects bodies in and through language: “Say a body. Where none”; “That a body? Yes. Say that a body” (WH 7, 11). We live through the composition process in such a way that we cannot suspend our disbelief. We see the
narrator make choices and decisions about the world he is trying to construct (“The dim. The void. Gone too? Back too? No. Say no. . . . Till yes. Till say yes” [15]), and we see him revoke those decisions and go “back” to “unsay” and rewrite aspects of his fictional universe.

Seen in one way, the EDR and ETR are exposed to, indeed are made hyperconscious of, the manufacturing of the diegesis, and, operating from an imposed intellectual distance, cannot project themselves wholeheartedly into the synthetic diegetic reader, who cannot, therefore, quite “materialize” the way more standard diegetic readers can. From another perspective, however, the extradiegetic activity of constructing the shades that people the incompletely realized world here takes over as the diegesis (while the shades that come and go are reduced to a hypodiegesis), and the DR therefore becomes nearly indistinguishable from the EDR, both of whom encounter an essentially unframed narrative about narrating (a description that highlights the novel’s similarity to Brooke-Rose’s prepositional series). But in a sense, perhaps this amounts to the same thing: we can’t (ever, as I argue in the Introduction) “become” the HDR, and giving ourselves over to a story about narrative is not the same emotional experience as giving ourselves over to the “content” of the narrative itself. Hence a distance is established or enforced between the text and the reader.

If this distance is the same one that will, in Carter’s novels, enable metalepsis to produce a rhetorical effect, one of the lessons Beckett teaches here highlights some of the fundamentals of subject construction: specifically, because the denizens of the (perhaps diegetic, perhaps hypodiegetic) universe under construction in Worstward Ho exist only in language—or, what amounts to the same thing, inhabit the skull of the one who imagines them (see page 19, for example)—they require repeated recomposition. Like the constructed subject described by Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis that must be produced through repeated acts, or like the apparently stable images projected by hundreds of discrete frames of a film, the shades of Worstward Ho come and go suddenly, returning first unchanged and then changed (14). Even when it becomes clear to the narrator that the shades with which he peoples his world (a kneeling bowed back that eventually becomes an old woman’s, an old man plodding hand-in-hand with a young boy, and a staring skull) never vanish utterly but leave a kind of after-image—“Shades cannot go. . . . Blur yes. Shades can blur” (40)—he must still sustain them through repetition.

Of course, Beckett’s characters themselves evince an awareness of their narrative constitution as early as the trilogy. They often suspect that there is some safe ground in the light above the mucky plane where they lie or
crawl or squirm; from there, they hypothesize, some more real others dictate to them the stories that they are to believe they live or have lived (for one “could not conceivably create while crawling in the same create dark as his creature” [Co 53]). Here an intriguing parallel with the reader raises threatening specters of unreality. On the one hand, although the diegetic reader in some sense lives in the muck along with these miserable creatures, she is also a projection of the extratextual reader, with whom she retains some kind of connection, and she may thus be seen as haunted by some shadowy knowledge of the extradiegetic and even extratextual world—which may confirm her belief in the extradiegetic world posited by her “fellow” diegetic creatures. But of course, although this safe ground above in the light may be equally haunted by the ED world that the implied author, after all, shares with the EDR, and, more forcefully, the extratextual world that the actual author shares with the ETR, it is not “actually” extradiegetic; on the contrary, it is hypodiegetic, a fantasy of the desperate diegetic characters—a vertiginous twist that can’t but threaten the ETR’s security in our own reality. We come to feel, however vaguely, an uncomfortable sense of our own “writtenness,” à la Borges on the Quixote. Thus we begin to see how the merging of readers leads to an experience of constructedness that lies at the core of the transformative mode of metalepsis.

Along with The Unnamable’s move toward abstraction comes an even sharper focus on narrativity, subjectivity, and the analogy or identity between them. In the stark, undomesticated landscape that Beckett conceives here, devoid of any vestiges of the “real” world, of any houses but the skull/womb/tomb, the relation between narrativity and subjectivity is thrown into relief. “Narration is literally the Unnamable’s life. Each word pushes his existence a little further”; the Unnamable “is a series of hypotheses about himself” (Levy 58, 60–61). As a written being, a creature made of words—“I’m in words, made of words, others’ words” (TU 386)—the Unnamable experiences a subjectivity perpetually under construction.19 (All of this, by the way, applies equally to the diegetic reader, who in some sense exposes the condition of every DR: “she,” too, is hanging on every word, as she and “we” try to figure out who she is, what she believes, and how this diegetic world operates.) Those others, higher up, whose words make our “hero,” appear most commonly simply as “they,” an entity of uncertain form (are they, for example, plural or singular, the Unnamable wonders periodically) but of definite function: they are the Unnamable’s “writers.” “I have no language but theirs,” the Unnamable explains; “It is they who dictate this torrent of balls” (325).20 As powerful
representatives of some kind of social (which is to say narrative) law, the ubiquitous “they” not only dictate stories but determine the very rules of discourse (“inflict[ing] the notion of time on” their subject, for instance, and teaching him “how . . . to proceed,” first saying “what I’m not . . . then what I am” \([TU\ 323, 324]\)).

But what most vividly characterizes Beckett’s subject is his painful subjugation to these writers, since the metalepsis that lends him subjectivity violently reinforces the power hierarchy that structures their relations. As Watt’s Lynch saga hinted, the repetitive writing process in which “they” engage now clearly entails an element of torture. The Unnamable, struggling to grasp what “they,” the writers who have “blown me up with their voices,” want of him, acknowledges the necessity of suffering to the achievement of subjectivity. Pain, he explains, is “irrefragable proof of animation” (353). “I’m not suffering enough yet . . . not suffering enough to be able to stir, to have a body, complete with head” (412). Such a predicament carries significant implications for the diegetic reader: although it would perhaps be extreme to say that she, too, must suffer, clearly her existence depends on the suffering (and so existence) of the narrator-protagonist. Her subjectivity is wrapped in the cogs of the narrative that tortures him. Insofar as we extratextual readers participate in constituting this subject who can only exist if another suffers, perhaps we feel some guilt, some strain; perhaps we in some sense feel ourselves becoming torturers (even as our diegetic representative somehow both tortures and suffers).

If we do become such torturers, we (as active readers should) share this status with authors (at any level), for if to be is to suffer, then the writer must inflict suffering on his creations if he would have them come to life.\(^{21}\) Insisting on his view of birth as the first and worst inhumanity, Beckett continually depicts the literary birth process as a form of torture, a violent “eruption” required in order to “spew” one’s character forth “into the light” \([TU\ 364]\). Since the Unnamable, like Worm (from whom he cannot always be distinguished),\(^{22}\) is “an idea they have, a word they use,” they pride themselves on his pain: “As long as he suffers there’s hope. . . . They are easy . . . in their minds, he suffers, and thanks to them . . . no one asks him to think, simply to suffer” (366–67).

In this typically Beckettian relationship between a writer and his characters, the written creature requires the torture inflicted by the writer in order to achieve subjectivity, while the writer must write-torture another into a being solid enough to attest to his or her creator’s existence. In Beckett’s fiction, solidity seems to imply embodiment, and stories them-
selves have bodies. “Perhaps I shall be obliged,” remarks the Unnamable, “to invent another fairy-tale, yet another, with heads, trunks, arms, legs and all that follows” (307). More significantly, these bodies are “there to be pained” (322) and, *ergo*, to enable their owners to live (pain being “irrefragable proof of animation,” 353) in order that their creators/tormentors may in turn avoid “peter[ing] out” (307).

So “they” construct a Lynch-like debilitated body from which they remove limbs at will, attempting to torture the Unnamable into *being*. “This time I am short of a leg,” he reports at one point. He is being constructed as “human, to be sure, but not exaggeratedly, lest I take fright and refuse to nibble. He’ll resign himself in the end, he’ll own up in the end, that’s the watchword. Let’s try him this time with a hairless wedge-head, he might fancy that, that kind of talk, With the solitary leg in the middle, that might appeal to him” (315). Having been taught by those on (allegedly) outer narrative levels how to torture their written creatures (“They know how to cause suffering, the master explained to them, Do this, do that, you’ll see him squirm, you’ll hear him weep” [366]), the Unnamable’s writers can maim him with a remark: one “casually let fall that I was lacking not only a leg, but an arm also” (321). Although he remains skeptical that such torture can make him “real”—the endless “paw[ing] and pummel[ing]” is “in vain,” he claims (“The poor bastards. They could clap an artificial anus in the hollow of my hand and still I wouldn’t be there, alive with their life” [348, 315])—he periodically acknowledges that pain is but another name for subjectivity. He who “suffers nothing” never crosses the line into reality, remaining “mere imagination” (360); and if the Unnamable himself never tortured another, then he is “alone here, the first and last” (381).

Beckett will render such torture in gruesomely concrete terms in *How It Is* (1964), the better, figuratively and literally, to “drive home the point”: this subject construction is a painful and violating affair. In the novel’s wretched world “down below” in the mud, metalepsis manifests itself in physical violations, for the boundaries in question now define not only narrative levels and the theoretical bodies that writers may construct and dismantle at will, but far more tangible, more “realistic” bodies, all linked together in a chain of mutually constituting torment. In the physical world of *How It Is*, the text-opening role of such “characters” as Cascando’s Opener has been assigned to a different kind of opener: a can opener that the narrator uses to torture his partner into telling him the story of the narrator’s life “above in the light.” As the novel begins, we find
the protagonist recounting his crawl in mud that may be “nothing more than all our shit” (HII 152) en route to the creature he names Pim (after himself, perhaps). When he reaches Pim, who can be found face down in the mud in part 2, he will mount him from behind and, being mute, invent a system of symbols whereby he can elicit the responses he desires, from songs to cries to descriptions of little “scenes” alleged to have starred him at some indeterminate past time when he may or may not have existed above in the light. The “language” the narrator develops first includes nails dug into the armpit, fists thumped on the skull, can opener jabbed in the buttocks, and opener handle banged on the kidneys. Ultimately he moves on to capital letters scratched into Pim’s back, spelling out words and naming him PIM, literally writing his identity on his body. By part 3, the protagonist has been abandoned by Pim, but, sensing that the procession of torturers is endless and that “justice” must be done, he awaits Bom, who will reenact with and upon him the “same spectacle exactly” as he composed with Pim (131).

Despite its unflinching use and abuse of the apparently palpable body, this system depends as heavily on language and narrative construction as did the Unnamable’s; for here, being named means earning subject status (and so induces “livelier chatter,” HII 59). The narrator insists that he “animate[s]” Pim with the “great ornate letter[s]” scratched into his back—”YOU PIM” (97, 71). And, in return, part 3 finds Bom allegedly en route “to give me a name his name to give me a life” (109). The narrator’s belief that he has given Pim a life by forcibly naming him and “train[ing] him up” through the “language” system he has conceived is a theory worthy of Foucault, who writes that “the soul . . . is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished—and . . . on those one supervises, trains and corrects” (Discipline 29).

But Beckett goes one step further: although the protagonist enacts on the victim’s body the construction of his subjectivity, it sometimes appears that even the body, that apparently tangible and fundamental material of the self, must be constructed. Here, Beckett’s work seems to support Judith Butler’s argument that the body “is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities,” an “active process” of embodying certain cultural stories, an effect constituted “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (“Performative” 272, 270). The narrator of How It Is, for instance, notes that he has “fleshed” Pim’s buttocks “indistinctly” (HII 37). And if he can construct
flesh, he can also destroy it. Like Mahood, who could amputate the Unnamable’s limbs with a remark, Pim’s torturer can inflict bodily harm through language (just as he does with his carved capitals): “no delete the face it’s preferable” (54).

Moreover, the interaction between partners seems to constitute the subjectivity of both the torturously fleshed and, through the stories thereby elicited, the silent torturer. Although the narrator remembers being “more independent” before he hooked up with Pim, “seeing my own little scenes crawling eating thinking even if you insist an odd dim thought” (94), once he has entered phase two, “with Pim,” he delegates much of the work of his subject construction to his victim. It becomes Pim’s task to recount the scenes above in the light that (re)construct his tormentor’s “real” existence. So the torment of narrativity becomes the *sine qua non* of subjectivity.

**“Sadism pure and simple no”**: The Chain of Life

Up to a point, the excruciating song and dance of *How It Is* seems to anticipate Jessica Benjamin’s vision of the sadomasochistic coupling: the masochist relies slavishly on the sadist’s “self-assertion” to define him/her, and the sadist requires the masochist’s “recognition” to affirm his/her sense of self. The two parties must maintain a delicate balance, lest the masochist slip over the edge of the plane of subjectivity, simultaneously depriving the sadist of subject-defining affirmation (Benjamin 64). In a sense, we have already seen this dynamic played out between Beckett’s narrator-protagonist and the reader: although the reader (both DR and EDR) may be said to participate in torturing the diegetic creature, the DR’s existence depends on the continuation of his painful existence.

In Beckett’s more overt version, as the “carnal envelope” of the Unnamable, for instance, passes through progressive phases of “deterioration and dismemberment” (*TU* 330), he “dwindle[s]” (331) but fails to disappear entirely; “they” want him to be *finitely* pained (322, emphasis mine). Like the masochist in Benjamin’s model, his powers must be limited (“No one asks him to think” [367]; “he can’t think anything, can’t judge of anything” [357]), so that victim continues to rely on symbiosis with tormentor, and the two remain locked in a mutually perpetuating struggle; his subjectivity, however, must remain intact, lest the bipartite system collapse. Not only do “they want me to have a pain in the neck, irrefragable proof of animation,” notes the Unnamable; “they want me to have a mind
where it is known once and for all that I have a pain in the neck” (353). Although the head he “sprouts” hasn’t the benefit of reason, it is “required” to transform their torturous sounds “to rage and terror” (356).

A similar requirement beleagueres the creatures of How It Is; impelled by the prodding of can opener and fingernails, Pim must remain capable of interpreting the symbol system through which the narrator communicates and of reciting his master’s constitutive tales. As in Benjamin’s account of sadomasochism, the “intense pain” inflicted on the bottommost crawler “causes the violent rupture of the self” (Benjamin 61), but he must never allow that self to disappear completely. The protagonist himself experiences some kind of rupture as he prepares in part 3 to take on the role of victim and loses the aspects of selfhood that put him on the top half of the master/slave relation. “No more head imagination spent,” he reports (HII 103). He acknowledges that this loss of brain power lowers him in the pecking order of life down here in the mud; “That’s the saddest . . . imagination on the decline having attained the bottom what one calls sinking” (104, italics mine). As a masochist-in-the-making, he would desire this dwindling, and the protagonist evinces the “gratitude” that Benjamin describes, remarking that he has “no more head . . . hardly any no more heart just enough to be thankful for it a little thankful to be so little there . . . the less you’re there the more you’re cheerful” (104). But at root, Benjamin argues, “The violation of the body is a transgression of the boundary between life and death,” so this rupture “must never really dissolve the boundaries—else death results” (Benjamin 64–65). Since the masochist’s “recognition” is what “allows the [sadist’s] self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way” (Benjamin 12), the maintenance of any subjectivity requires the masochist’s presence and servitude; so the masochist approaches but must never reach the nothingness of utter erasure. Thus “nothing left” must immediately be amended to “almost nothing” (HII 104). Here in the mud, after all, enough of a subject must remain intact to retain the power of speech, something that the violator lacks.

On the flip side of Benjamin’s coin, the sadist, too, comes to rely entirely on his partner for self-definition. As torturer, the protagonist recognizes that the invention of a victim has been the “undoing” of his autonomy, for “ever since nothing left but voice” (HII 94). Moreover, even the voice to which the protagonist here lays claim does not always seem to belong to him; it usually comes to him from without, only occasionally taking up residence within. Indeed, he must extort songs and tales from Pim precisely because he cannot speak. In Benjamin’s terms, the sadist now
requires the submission of the masochist, for “the basic tension of forces within the individual [has become] a dynamic between individuals,” and “each partner represents only one pole in a split unity” (Benjamin 62, 65).

But from Benjamin’s psychoanalytic perspective, the “individuals” engaged in such symbiotic diminution and affirmation both pre-exist and outlive their relations. Even when the partners tip the scale too far, allowing the masochist’s “unreality [to become] too powerful” and threatening the sadist with the “danger of becoming the will-less thing he consumes,” some residue of human essence lingers to encounter the so-called “terrifying void” that results. “When both partners dissolve the boundary,” something of them remains to “experience a fundamental sense of breakdown, a kind of primary existential anxiety” (Benjamin 65, 64). At the same time, if neither their subjectivities nor their bodies are made of words, both masochist and sadist can, however inadvertently, literally be killed in the performance of their struggle, and that, one assumes, would be the end of that: no subject would survive.

In Beckett’s universe, by contrast, the “human essence” is narrative. Subjects are narrated into being and compelled by the very nature of narrative subjectivity to narrate “others” who in turn narrate them. In this Möbius strip of narrative, there can be no cessation of the writer-torturer’s subjectivity—or, therefore, of his compulsion to write and to torture. On the one hand, the protagonist of How It Is claims to see, in retrospect, ways he might have avoided the torturous aspect of his construction of Pim—“how my injunctions by other means more humane . . . my behests by a different set of signals quite different more humane more subtle” (HII 91). He implies that he chose his methods because they gave him pleasure, affording him “the passion of pain,” which he finds “irresistible” (38); he talks of “drink[ing]” the pain of Pim (58), and muses that he and Pim loved each other (74).24 On the other hand, he also suggests that this type of interaction is so normal that one cannot attribute it to any kind of perversion: “I am not a monster,” the torturer insists; “I am not a brute” (64, 65). In a violent narrative world, as Bersani and Dutoit argue of How It Is, “to be tortured is the precondition for being humanized, but this has nothing to do with any sadism on the part of the torturer or any masochism on the part of the victim” (“Sociability” 7). Human existence simply means being forced to assume the identity that society and its narratives inscribe on—or compose along with—one's body. Thus the victim, constructed in and by narrative, becomes a torturer in turn, constructing narrative subjects, and in neither role does he have any choice but to perform as he has been taught.
Unlike the Benjiminian masochist, then, who only fantasies about assuming the sadist’s position “and so enjoy[s] the act of violation” (Benjamin 70), Beckett’s protagonist can (and must) assume both roles in this pas-de-deux. Although much of the time the Unnamable, for instance, appears to fade in and out of his creators’ imaginations as they attempt to force him to materialize, he in turn exercises his own power by creating/torturing others. Like his own creators, who strive to torment him into a life like “theirs,” the Unnamable creates others, and ultimately himself, through gory and painful narratives. He builds pathetic, agonized, hypodiegetic characters—Basil, who “filled me with hatred”; Mahood, who, “weak in the head,” has lost a leg in the Pacific and must hobble through barren nature to reach a family dead from sausage-poisoning; “Worm,” that limbless near-vegetable who “lives” in a jar (TU 298, 316–21, 339)—and creates himself through the stories he tells of them, or, like Pim’s “animator,” compels them to tell of him. If, like Benjamin’s sadist, he thus keeps his victims going so as to validate, or perhaps even extend, his own existence, he does so because he has become both the instrument and the very figure of narrative, which, writes de Lauretis, “endlessly reconstructs [the world] as a two-character drama in which the human person creates and recreates himself out of an abstract or purely symbolic other” (de Lauretis 121). (By now it should be clear that the same goes for “the reader”: the Unnamable’s projection of “himself” into fictional “others” closely resembles our projection of ourselves into the EDR and DR. In this sense, Beckett’s basic mimetic metalepsis, which offers a representation of the way in which we write ourselves, again becomes something more interactive—for, as it makes clear, reading is one of the ways in which we perpetuate our self-construction, and we are of course reading now.)

Seen in this light, as a requirement of narrativity, the construction of “others” proves impossible to halt—a far cry from the fragile, ever-threatened process Benjamin describes. Thus, when the protagonist of How It Is amends his “nothing left” to “almost nothing” (HII 104), he may allude to the facts of written life: one cannot erase a narrative other without a trace, for the gears of narrative never stop grinding, reproducing somethings out of the ubiquitous materials of the self-story.

In a sense, then, narrative has taken over the role of the sadist, enforcing the continuation of inherently pained “existence.” Gabriele Schwab seems to locate narrative’s sadism in the very language of which it is made (and whose structures many narratologists believe it echoes) when she argues that
“The Unnamable reiterates the complex dynamic between master and slave (which commonly characterizes the relationship between Beckett characters) as a dynamic between language and the subject” (160, emphases mine). So long as language and narrative constitute the element in which we live, all subjects, themselves constructed in pain, must continue to torture others into being, whether or not they have a sadistic bone in their (narratively constructed) bodies. Thus, Beckett highlights the paradoxical and insidious restabilization of narrative effected by metalepsis, that device which, in theory, seems to offer a clear avenue to destabilization.

“To snap me up among the living”: Outward Metalepsis

Seeking a way out of this echoing torture chamber, Beckett’s subjects attempt to exploit the more disruptive potential of metalepsis. They often wonder whether the extradiegetic plane of which they’ve heard tell—that place up above in the light, whence they receive their operating instructions—might prove extranarrative as well. If so, the Unnamable, for one, reasons, he might be able to break through to that plane and so escape the compulsion to narrate and be narrated; he might, in other words, become “real,” and so earn the right to die for good and all.

The Unnamable speaks of his creator-torturers’ efforts “to snap me up among the living,” “to coax me out” into their more real world (TU 345, 378, emphases mine)—apparently using the same topological map of narrative I have chosen. At times, he agrees to attempt the climb, to play the sort of mythological hero described by de Lauretis, one who “crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space,” assuming that “in so doing [he will be] constructed as human being” (de Lauretis 119). Moreover, the boundaries breached by the Unnamable in his efforts to construct himself as more “real” stand not only between narrative levels but between narratives and ultimately between narrative itself and extratextual reality: he variously claims to be the subject of Mahood’s stories (and so a hypodiegetic figment of his own text: “I might as well tell another of Mahood’s stories . . . to be understood . . . as being about me” [TU 326]) and the creator of “all of these Murphys, Molloys, and Malones” (and so an author of Beckett’s other novels—that is, the extratextual “Beckett”?—into whose protagonists he projects himself, 303).

The latter form of intra-, inter-, and extratextual body or mind hopping marks the protagonist’s movement outward from the inner realms of fictionality at those moments when he acknowledges the need to become
“real.” “I give in,” the Unnamable concedes, “there is I, it’s essential, it’s preferable. . . . I have . . . taken over my functions” (TU 388). He wills himself to attain “a brand-new soul and substantiality,” writing himself into full subject status. He makes “resolutions” to “ascribe to me a body. Better still, arrogate to me a mind. Speak of a world of my own, sometimes referred to as the inner, without choking” (390). For the Unnamable is haunted by the suspicion that if he never becomes thoroughly real, never takes his place outside the walls, he may never earn the final relief of death (“I’ll sham dead now,” he laments, “whom they couldn’t bring to life” [325, emphasis mine]).

But no sooner does he accept the burdens of existence and incarnate himself as author of other Beckett characters than he recognizes the creator-torturer’s role as a trap as well. First, if it admits him to a higher narrative level, a higher degree of “reality,” it also (therefore) entails a higher degree of pain. Despite his newfound power to torture his creatures, the Unnamable comes to see that “they never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to mine, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it” (303–4). And, second, if he has taken this “promotion” in hopes of earning the right to end, he has been duped: if, as Bersani and Dutoit have it, “devising a self as a story about others [is . . .] the principal activity of subjectivity” (“Sociability” 18), then those stories are precisely what keep the subject going. So the Unnamable discovers that “his” characters “have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone” (303, emphasis mine). And so he periodically rejects the torturer’s role, and with it enhanced subjectivity and pain, and turns in the other direction, aiming to become a creature of his creatures, and hoping thereby to diminish his “tittle” to its “meremost minimum” (WH 9).

The inadvisability of outward metalepsis seems to be one lesson the Beckettian protagonist learns early on. As early as the second page of How It Is, the protagonist notes of the “life the other above in the light said to have been mine” that there is “no going back up there no question no one asking that of me never” (HII 8).

By Worstward Ho, the protagonist has established a clear goal of unwriting himself, and as he works out his modus operandi, he takes a lesson from the Unnamable’s failed attempt at cessation. In his effort at un-narrating, therefore, this narrator first prohibits upward mobility, attempting to confine himself to the prison of fiction. He posits “a place.
Where none . . . no out of . . . Into only . . . Whence never once in” (*WH* 11–12). Restricting himself to a uniformly dim world, rather than a darkness that contrasts with a light “up above,” he refuses to pinpoint, much less anthropomorphize, the source of the words that traditionally filter down to Beckett’s protagonists from an extradiegetic plane. “Whose words?” he asks. “No knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One . . . One? It” (20). Since it offers one key to remaining (at most) diegetic (If there is no *there* up there, he may not go there), he places great value on this sourcelessness: “Dim whence unknown. At all costs unknown” (24); “Worsening words whose unknown. Whence unknown. At all costs unknown” (29). Refusing even to hypothesize an outer world, the protagonist turns in the other direction and retreats inward. Because we can never quite become diegetic here—the DR either never materializes or is merged into the EDR and remains outside the story of the shades—we, too, experience this rift between extradiegetic and diegetic planes. Of course, in one of Beckett’s typical ambiguities, we are thereby allied, in our common alienation, with the protagonist from whom we are separated.

“I’ll make a place . . . I’ll put someone in it . . . I’ll say he’s I”: Inward Metalepsis

From the outset, the Unnamable hides beneath multiple outer levels: even the characters he invents, such as Mahood, sometimes seem to invent him, and he is simultaneously invented by “them,” who in turn owe their existence to “the master.” Furthermore, the master, some passages suggest, is “written” by God—or something like one (upon whom, according to “them,” the Unnamable “depend[s] . . . in the last analysis” [*TU* 298]). The words that “they” use to compose him “have to be ratified by the proper authority, that takes time, he’s far from here, they bring him the verbatim report of the proceedings, once in a way, he knows the words that count, it’s he who chose them” (369). But should one inquire too closely into the nature of this authority, the Unnamable warns, “he’d turn out to be a mere high official, we’d end up by needing God” (374). And indeed, by the next page, the Unnamable reveals that the master himself has “been told a lot of lies . . . by whom, no one knows, the everlasting third party, he’s the one to blame, for this state of affairs, the master’s not to blame, neither are they, neither am I” (375).

As our protagonist rebels against “this state of affairs,” in which “reality” and subjectivity entail unstoppable pain, he finds the cushion of God,
the master, and “them” insufficient insulation against that reality, and he frantically erects more walls: “We must have walls, I need walls, good and thick, I need a prison” (*TU* 410). And only walls without windows (“We’re done with windows” [405]) will do the trick, remove the danger of sliding, via outward metalepsis, into an equally infinite narrative requiring even greater suffering. In an effort to contain himself and his creatures within fleshless (and, if possible, mindless) words, he constructs more and more inner prisons where he can germinate creatures—and frets when they, like he, escape their bounds: “What is Mahood doing in my domain, and how does he get here?” (315). And if he has failed to enclose himself within Beckett’s other fictional characters—Murphy, Watt, Mercier, et al., “who I must have tried to be, under duress, or through fear” (326)—he will have to start from scratch and shut himself away behind new walls of narrative, rendering himself safely hypodiegetic within his own novel. “I’ll shut myself up . . . I’ll make a place . . . I’ll put myself in it, I’ll put someone in it, I’ll find someone in it, I’ll put myself in him, I’ll say he’s I” (400). At times, he claims enough success in containing himself on the fiction side of the walls to erase any memories of the outside: “I don’t know if I have ever lived, I really have no opinion on the subject” (396).

At other times, apparently fully aware of the differences between the narrative levels that he seems to be able to traverse at will, the Unnamable seeks any escape he can find from the enforced choice between imprisoned fictiveness and the paradoxical liberty of real suffering: perhaps, he ventures, he resides neither in diegesis nor in hypodiegesis, “Perhaps . . . I am . . . the thing that divides the world in two . . . I’m neither one side nor the other, . . . I’m the partition” (*TU* 383). But such aspirations to stasis cannot be fulfilled in a world predicated on a compulsory cycle of construction and de(con)struction. Because he knows, possibly firsthand, the pain of existence (and perhaps because he has seen how it backfires on the torturer), the Unnamable struggles momentarily against his urge to inflict it on others—“The best would be not to begin” to construct a “few puppets,” he avers. Yet in the very next sentence he acknowledges, “But I have to begin. That is to say I have to go on”; it is “impossible to stop” (292, 345). For, once again, to live is to narrate; to hypothesize is “human, a lobster couldn’t do it” (372). So if the Unnamable achieves subjectivity thanks to (the unseen) Them, he must become a link in the chain of torturers and victims—that’s just How It Is.

Once he has invented a seemingly more fictive creature, the Beckettian protagonist often feels drawn to enter it, to become more fictive himself. Like the Unnamable, the narrator-protagonist of *Company* craves such
inward movement, seeking the inner recesses of imagination. He envisions a staring skull and *enters* it, becoming a head inside a head. “Simply be there again. There in that head in that head. Be it again. That head in that head” (*Co* 22). Like the Unnamable, he becomes a creature of his own creature, a hypo-hypodiegetic shade keeping *company* with the other shades: “Be that shade again. In that shade again. With the other shades” (23). He even designs a protective dwelling in which to enclose himself: in his desperate quest for the inmost inner sanctum of unreality, he creates a “pipe or tube” to contain “that selfsame dim” (25). But this new prison resembles the other domes and cylinders of Beckett’s late fiction: its unending circle offers no corners in which to hide, here “where all always to be seen” (25). Throughout Beckett’s work, “to be seen” is synonymous with “to be” (recall the “*Esse est percipi*” of *Film* [1967]). And if the shades the narrator constructs display no eyes in their sunken heads (viewed, just to be certain, from the rear), no matter—as stare within a stare, the narrator can see *himself* into existence; and as the coinhabitant of the plane that generates a diegetic reader, he is subject to the life-affirming glare of her eyes as well.

In a world where the boundary between fiction and reality rises and falls so easily, retreating into “fiction” cannot save one from “reality.” Even if hypodiegetic characters appear from above to experience only a “tittle” of their superiors’ pain, their agonizing existence is sufficient unto their diegetic status. However embedded their narrative level, they must still partake of the unrelenting nature of narrative.

“All those I see are me”: The Collapse into One

Terrified of the implications of this self-perpetuating chain of unwilling *subjects* (the *double entendre* speaks volumes here), the Unnamable strives to collapse it, hoping to find a way to end it all. If outward and inward movement have both failed to provide a way out of narrative, perhaps the construction of subjects at multiple levels itself is to blame for keeping the story going. And if to invent subjects is to live, then perhaps killing them off can provide a quick means of suicide.

First, the Unnamable demolishes all internal boundaries, reassimilating his hypodiegetic projections, each one a “vice-exister” but “not yet” a “subject,” into himself (*TU* 315, 345). Periodically, the Unnamable recognizes that such characters are but manifestations of his own self-stories—“I’ve been [Mahood] an instant. . . . I say an instant, perhaps it
was years” (316); “I . . . baptise him Worm. . . . It will be my name too, when the time comes, when I needn’t be called Mahood anymore” (337). As we watch, he seems to slip in and out of Mahood; as they hobble along together toward some elusive goal, first- and third-person pronouns (like torturer and victim in How It Is) flip back and forth as indications that he has reabsorbed Mahood or vice versa. “But not so fast, otherwise we’ll never arrive. It’s no longer I in any case. He’ll never reach us if he doesn’t get a move on. He looks as if he had slowed down. . . . My missing leg didn’t seem to affect them, perhaps it was already missing when I left” (318, emphases mine).

Next, the Unnamable seems to reason that if the inner walls he has constructed around his hypodiegetic characters have proven flimsy structures, the outer ones he has built around himself might prove so as well. Indeed, when the Beckettian subject catches a glimpse of life above, he seems to discover that any glimmer of “reality” he espied from below flickers and fades under closer scrutiny. Maybe the Beckettian creator who dictates the protagonist’s story only projects the illusion of a solid essence: behind the scenes, his creatures are inventing him even as he invents them. So the Unnamable’s apparent creators suddenly tumble from “above” to become nothing more than his own “puppets” (359)—a reversibility that already lay dormant in their Janus-faced status as hypothetical extradiegetic figures, but of which the Unnamable himself seemed herefore unaware. One creates one’s “master” in one’s own image, after all (“What if Mahood were my master?” he wonders [312, 311]). We “write” others even as they “write” us, in a cyclical, reciprocal process. Perhaps, then, one can purposely cease to vitalize one’s puppets.

So the Unnamable theorizes that perhaps the highest of the high is actually the lowest of the low, the inmost of the hypodiegetic: at one point, the Unnamable proposes that Malone, who “revolves, a stranger forever to my infirmities, one who is not as I can never not be . . . is the god” (TU 300). The protagonist erases boundaries, allowing theoretically higher-level “characters” to meld with each other and with him. “They” join him, for instance: “They don’t know who they are either, nor where they are, nor what they’re doing. . . . So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another. . . . Is it possible we’re all in the same boat” (372). And he seems to join “the master”: rather early on we find “Them” “presenting their report” to him as they will later be said to have to present it to the master (298, 369). Reaching for the outermost level, the Unnamable even speaks of “the master” in terms whose echoes of religious
awe seem to equate the writer with the divinity: “It’s none of my business to ask him questions,” he explains, “even if I knew how to reach him . . . assuming he exists, and, existing, hears me” (313). Next, despite this caveat, he does indulge in some theological questioning, most relevantly wondering whether the divine is singular and solitary like himself . . . or plural and apparently indistinguishable from “them,” the Unnamable’s immediate “superiors,” those “up above” who every day “assemble to discuss me” (313). “Perhaps it’s a multitude,” he suggests, “one after another, what confusion, someone mentions confusion, is it a sin, all here is sin, you don’t know why, you don’t know whose, you don’t know against whom” (403–4).

The Unnamable’s chain ultimately shrinks down to one link, himself, as he declares that none of the characters he has invented have ever existed, “only I and this black world have ever been” (304); “There was never anyone, anyone but me, anything but me, talking to me of me” (TU 344).27

In the flesh-and-blood world of How It Is, this collapse takes physical form.28 Because the protagonist has “fleshed” his projections, reabsorption dissolves the apparently tangible, carvable boundaries that defined bodies: “In reality we are one and all . . . glued together in a vast imbrication of flesh without breach or fissure” (HII 140). However unlikely such a composite monster appears, the narrator often seems inclined to credit its existence rather than embrace the alternative—that the chain of ever-recoupling crawlers extends infinitely. On the one hand, he reasons, since these creatures’ mutually constitutive interaction requires the “justice” of role reversal—each victim becoming a tormentor in turn—perhaps “we are innumerable and no further problem.” On the other hand, the protagonist theorizes that if he constructs others, even their bodies, perhaps he can recollapse his projections into himself, so perhaps “I am alone and no further problem . . . either” (124). Even in the material world of How It Is, the collapse of levels and subjects seems to follow logically from the evident writtenness of the creatures, which here extends even to the body—“not . . . a ready surface awaiting signification, but . . . a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (Butler, Gender, 33). What, after all, becomes of that set of boundaries if the individual and society cease to signify and maintain them? In How It Is, the bodies dissolve—“no more Pim never any Pin” (74)—and we arrive at a one-man show all about its own fictionality (“the whole story from beginning to end . . . completely false yes” [144]). Life is just “an old tale” (133), and words make the man: “The essential would seem to be lacking”
If Beckett rewrites the *Cogito* as “I am narrated, therefore I am,) therefore I narrate,” the revision ultimately boils down to just this: “Narrative is.”

It’s . . . a compulsory show . . . you can’t leave”: Text-Reader Metalepsis

But Beckett’s narrator seems to recognize that narrative always assumes a narratee. Perhaps, he theorizes, the ongoing reconstructions of the reading process provide the motor for this vicious narrative machine that makes and mars the subject even against its “will.” Although we have already seen Beckett’s texts trap their readers in the cogs of the narrative machine, sometimes theoretically demoting us from extradiegesis to hypodiegesis, it is now the Beckettian protagonist’s turn to assert his paradoxical power over us. And so he attempts to rope the reader into the one remaining narrative level, where, he hopes, s/he can do no further harm. Thus, the meltdown of Pim-Bom bodies, it turns out, destroys not only intradiegetic physical boundaries but the alleged border between diegetic creatures and the witness (reader) and scribe (writer) the narrator has imagined must exist above in the light of extradiegetic day. First Kram and Krim, witness and scribe (dramatized reader and dramatized writer), merge into one, and then the narrator embraces that one in his “one life everywhere” (*HII* 133–34); in other words, “no witness no scribe all alone” (84). Of course, as figments of the narrator’s imagination, Kram and Krim were “really” already hypodiegetic, just as “they” and “the master” were in *The Unnamable*. But insofar as these “characters” stand for “real” extradiegetic and even extratextual readers and writers, we must heed the warning of their dissolution into the single stream of narrative.

Even back in *The Unnamable*, after the protagonist has dragged the hypothetically extradiegetic (which is to say already hypodiegetic) consciousnesses of God and master down into the trenches, he, too, turns his net on the reader. Basil, the reader’s Kram-like (hypo)diegetic-level surrogate, succumbs early on. Although at first Basil seems to have some readerly control over the Unnamable—using his *eyes* rather than his *mouth*, “he changed me a little more each time into what he wanted me to be” (*TU* 298)—he soon metamorphoses into the hypodiegetic Mahood, who is both the Unnamable’s creation and his creator: “It was he told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me” (309). Schwab argues that Basil (and, I would add,
through him the reader) joins the team of torturers, for he “embodies the persecuting and petrifying gaze of the Other” (Schwab 150). And if we are still reading by page 381, we will join Basil, Mahood, the Unnamable, even Worm as victims as well. There, we, in the guise of a new set of dramatized readers or “the audience,” find ourselves blind, deaf, and trapped, “waiting alone, in the restless air, for it to begin, for something to begin, for there to be something else but” us. “That’s the show,” the Unnamable explains, “waiting for the show”; we extratextual readers, like this audience that represents us, may “try to be reasonable,” try to understand what is happening to us, as we, thrust into “the same boat” as the protagonist, struggle like him to piece together the story and grasp its implications for our lives, but in the end we simply lack “the power to rise, the courage to leave” this place, where although “the show is over, all is over,” “it’s only beginning, it hasn’t begun, he’s only preluding” (TU 381–82).

The similarity (or identity) between what this diegetic-level audience is going through and what the extratextual reader is experiencing blurs boundaries between levels of readers and draws us into the textual vortex. Now the reader has joined the Beckettian protagonist in the vicious cycle of destructive construction; metalepsis has breached the final frontier. The process of the reader’s entrapment becomes more insidious in Company, which, from the outset, forces the reader to experience the disturbing psychological effects of fluid narrative levels—effects strikingly similar to those imposed on Brooke-Rose’s reader throughout her “prepositional” novels. Clued in, if we are especially astute, by the very title, “Company,” which means metalepsis, the sharing of space with one’s creatures, we discover that it is now our turn to struggle, as the Unnamable did intermittently, to separate the levels of the narrative, to understand who or what belongs where on the continuum of fictionality. Our perspective and our mental map of the narrative terrain shift and change rapidly, repeatedly seeming to settle and become clear, then inducing renewed confusion. But lest we embrace our disorientation as a new boundary between ourselves and the novel, Beckett assures us that “confusion too is company up to a point”—thus tossing us back into the internal subject’s territory, where we, forced to confuse levels, thereby generate “company” for ourselves. There seems to be no escape, at least insofar as the reader, at any level, participates in the construction of “him,” for “we,” like him, wind up “in the same dark as [our] creature” (Co 43). Such a displacement can prove a rather disconcerting reading experience.
If sharing space with Beckett’s bizarre but benign creatures causes discomfort, we may imagine the pain that might be induced by a reader-text metalepsis in the excruciating How It Is. And indeed, the novel’s graphic descriptions (if anything in Beckett’s later works can be so named!) of the physical violation the torturer effects, in partnership with Beckett’s writing style—“unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection” (HII 70)—makes How It Is somewhat painful (for even extratextual readers) to read. Although our narrator says he cannot represent this painful life from the perspective of the victim (“Of our total life only three [phases] lend themselves to communication,” these being the journey toward Pim, life with Pim, and the preparation for Bom [131]), one sometimes suspects that the whole of the novel “communicates” victimhood by inflicting it on us.33

Teresa de Lauretis argues that narrative always positions its female readers as, in essence, the victims of sadism. She grounds her theory in Freud’s view of femininity, as she explains that the journey of narrative is always the male’s journey; the female is its goal, the hero’s quarry. It is interesting to note, in conjunction with Jessica Benjamin’s argument that sadism and masochism have become inaccurately associated with masculinity and femininity, the parallels between de Lauretis’s woman and Beckett’s victim. Just as the victims in How It Is await their tormentors, the girl, in what de Lauretis sees as the prototypical narrative of Oedipus, awaits the boy at the end of his journey. For, as in the “justice” of life in the mud, “the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of his journey. Thus the itinerary of the female’s journey, mapped from the very start on the territory of her own body . . . , is guided by a compass pointing . . . to the fulfillment of the promise made to ‘the little man’ . . . and to the fulfillment of his desire” (133, emphases mine).34

But of course, in Beckett’s narrative universe, everyone, regardless of gender, must play both roles—hero and quarry, turn and turnabout—and the reader may be no exception. In a sense, this duality heightens the similarity between Beckett’s reader and de Lauretis’s female reader, who must ultimately oscillate between identifications with hero, or narrative movement, and quarry, or narrative closure (de Lauretis 143). But Beckett has significantly transformed both identifications: narrative movement has proven itself not teleological but cyclical, and (therefore) closure has become unattainable. The reading process has thus become implicated in, and the reader swept up into, the violent and unending process of subjectification and subjugation.
“Comment c’est”/"Commencer": No End In Sight

In his doomed but eternal search for closure, the Beckettian protagonist reasons that if he can cease to create those whose existence has validated his own, whose projection onto the scene served the projector’s self-construction, he might well cease the constant (re)construction necessary for subjectivity. “The hope is there, once again, of not making me . . . of ending here, it would be wonderful,” says the Unnamable (TU 302, emphasis mine). In his concerted effort to end, Beckett’s subject sometimes seems to set metalepsis aside temporarily, collapsing the outer levels but maintaining the boundaries around his creatures long enough to allow them to reach the end of their hypodiegeses; he plans, it seems, somehow to translate such embedded endings into a diegetic-level ending of his own.

In these internal drives toward the end, Beckett’s subject anticipates the plot that Peter Brooks will declare essential to all narrative. For according to Brooks, “the organism must live in order to die in the proper manner, to die the right death. One must have the arabesque of plot in order to reach the end” (Brooks 107). But if Brooks is right that “the end is a time before the beginning” (103), the Beckettian protagonist has no hope of escaping the vicious cycle in which he and his creatures are trapped. Still, he hopes. “Long or short, the same silence. Then I resurrect and begin again. That’s what I’ll have got for all my pains. Unless this time it’s the real silence at last. Perhaps I’ve said the thing that had to be said, that gives me the right to be done with speech, done with listening, done with hearing” (TU 393–94). Maddeningly, the Unnamable will not know he has attained the proper ending unless a higher authority, resurrected from the flattened hierarchy “above” him, tells him he has succeeded, until the master examines the “report of the proceedings” and sends a messenger back with the order “to stop everything” (369). And then, ironically, with the invention of another outer authority, the narrative has begun again. “I hear them whispering, some perhaps whispering, It’s over, this time we’ve hit the mark, and others, We’ll have to go through it all again, in other words, or in the same words, arranged differently” (370).

The 1963 radio play Cascando encapsulates the Beckettian protagonist’s strategy of embedding an ending that he hopes will put a stop to his excruciating repetitions. Here, the diegetic-level writer-character, Opener, realizing that the story recited by the narrator, Voice, constitutes his life, decides, “I have lived on it . . . long enough,” and so seeks an end, to “finish . . . [to tell] no more stories . . . [to] sleep” (Cas 13, 18–19).
In order to attain that elusive quiescent state, he believes he must tell the *right* story of his creature Woburn, create him as the *right* subject, and “follow” both to the *right* ending. Like the Unnamable, Opener senses that the compulsion to narrate has retained its hold on him thus far only because he has yet to get “it” right, to say “the thing that had to be said” (TU 393). But even the end that appears to be right turns out to be another beginning: First, Woburn’s goal is figured as “a hole . . . a shelter . . . a hollow [ . . . ] a cave . . . vague memory . . . in his head . . . of a cave” (11), that quintessentially Beckettian skull/womb/tomb where all begins and all ends only to begin again. Then Voice urges Opener to “Follow him . . . to—” and Opener fills in the right ending: “Yes, that’s *right*, the month of May. You know, the *reawakening*” (15, emphases mine). But the trio fails to attain even this end that is also a beginning. Although Voice pleads with himself not to “let go” of the thread of the story or its protagonist (and with Woburn not to let go of his boat or his life) before they have reached the right place (he reports that Woburn “clings on”), he/they achieve no finality—and the play ends *in medias res* with that old two-letter Beckettian goad, “*come on*—” (17, italics mine).

For the problem is *systemic*; it lies not in the product, the right story, subject, or ending, but in the *process*, whose circularity derives from the very nature of narrative. David Watson explains that “without difference there can be no narrative, without an object there can be no possibility for the predication of the subject. Ultimately, without difference there is no language and no subject: indifference is death” (Watson 96). De Lauretis illuminates the circular nature of this causal chain: The function of the subject, or of the mythical hero, is to *create* differences (and with it narrative); he does so by crossing boundaries, penetrating other spaces, acts that can be interpreted *both as death* and as *conception* and that construct him as human being (de Lauretis 118–19). In other words, the subject engenders narrative, which in turn engenders the subject; Beckett’s narrators are thus perpetually reborn in spite of themselves—they cannot die so long as language remains possible. Moreover, insofar as the protagonist *desires* something, he provides the impetus for narrative—even, paradoxically, if what he desires is an *end* to narrative.35 As Carla Locatelli writes of *Worstward Ho*, “the thought of a ‘nohow’ (a dynamic version of the thought of ‘death’) indicates the irreducible intentionality of thinking, still there, at the extreme end of thinking” (Locatelli 233). One cannot stop narrating the self as long as there is a self to do the narrating. So it happens that after all the Unnamable’s work, he discovers that he has
made his way only, once again, to the beginning, to the boundary he must cross: “Perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story . . . if it opens, it will be I . . . you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (414, emphases mine).

Such grand cycles, sweeping back from end to (a time before the) beginning, rely in turn on myriad smaller repetitions (repetition indisputably being the forte of Beckett and his narrator-protagonists). From the psychoanalytic perspective, these iterations are symptomatic of the death instinct, which “operates in the text through repetition,” as it seeks to “restore an earlier state of things” (Brooks 102). Seen from a constructionist perspective, however, they become the very stuff of which the subject is made, what makes it live, not die. Because, as de Lauretis explains, the process of constituting a self “is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed” (de Lauretis 159), because identities that appear stable may actually be “tenuously constituted in time,” “institutioned through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, “Performative” 270), the story that generates the subject must be reiterated ad infinitum lest the illusion of a solid identity flicker and fade. Moreover, even those who would choose to cease the reiteration cannot escape, for, as Judith Butler argues, “To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside” (Gender 148).

For this reason, the mud-crawling creatures of How It Is who torture and thereby “animate” their fellow creatures have failed to find a way to avoid repeating the acts that “institute” those creatures’ identities. In this way they resemble their god, the writer (the “intelligence,” “not one of us,” to whom it is “not unreasonable to attribute exceptional powers” [HII 137–38]), who sustains his creatures continually by providing sacks of tinned food (and can openers) to keep them alive for the next repetition of the same torturous tale. The narrator notes that this manna-provider “must sometimes wonder if to these perpetual revictuallings narrations and auditions he might not put an end without ceasing to maintain us in some kind of being without end” (139). Thus far, neither god on high nor crawlers below have discovered a way out of “the repetitive practices of this terrain of [violent] signification.” If this narrative about narrative can serve as any kind of paradigm, then it seems clear, here where the process has been depicted in such physical terms, that it is the relentless repetition of subject construction rather than Brooks’s (Freud’s) drive toward the end, that lends narrative its disturbing or violent edge.
It is during the violent course of *How It Is* that the Beckettian protagonist realizes that perhaps he has erred in attempting to “get it right”: perhaps he must instead get it *wrong*. For he sees that the obstacle to ending the vicious cycle of eternal and violent reconstruction lies in *language* (that terrain of signification): “these words,” he laments, “not weak enough” (*HII* 127). If to live is to narrate, then perhaps one must weaken—or *worsen, unnarrate, uncreate, unsignify*—one’s story to some limit of narrativity before one can achieve finality. Perhaps getting it so wrong that one’s creations lose all semblance of reality can so destroy the creator’s own (symbiotic) identity that it puts him out of his misery. If language *makes* reality, after all, destroying language’s constructions might *unmake* reality. And so the narrator of *Worstward Ho* aims to *worsen* his fictional creations until they can no longer support him-as-writer. He reaches for a limit (worst) he knows he cannot attain, in the hope that the “meremost minimum” (*WH* 9) inventions will lead him at least asymptotically toward the zero degree of existence.

Recognizing the danger of constructing others as *subjects*, the narrator of *Worstward Ho* tries to turn his skull-cohabitants into mere objects. He “worsens” his creatures bit by bit, truncating them first by hiding their heads and limbs from view (*WH* 15–16) and later, like the Unnamable’s tormentors, by deleting body parts entirely, leaving “Nothing from pelves down. From napes up”—only “topless baseless hindtrunks” (43). At first, like the good Benjaminian sadist, the narrator insists on “remains of mind . . . to permit of pain” (8)—that proof of animation. But since he wants to leave no subject standing, the narrator soon reports that the shades have lost even their ability to think: “Head in hat gone” (22). Eventually, he discovers that this objectification does not accomplish his aim, that the first two shades (one, the kneeling bowed back, now woman; two, the twain, man and child) may go, but the skull (shade three) must continue its life as creator-subject (albeit creator of Nothing), that even its destruction of the others, like the metaleptic moves that create all Beckett’s subjects, reaffirms its power and hence its existence. By the same token, the refusal to allow the diegetic reader to “materialize,” as we have seen, does not eliminate the EDR or his power to help construct the diegesis and the hypodiegesis.

Acknowledging this impasse, the narrator reimagines the other two shades the better to diminish them, to try again (and “fail better,” *WH* 7)—“The others . . . sudden back. Unchanged” (26). Now, in one last, desperate metaleptic strategy for escape, he insists that *these other shades*
make the outward metaleptic move, seize control of their creator’s power, and reciprocate his mercy destruction. He declares that they have been “preying since last worse said on foresaid remains [of mind]” (31). All his inventions must now “gnaw” away at him, and the stronger they remain (the less he has worsened them), the more they can gnaw—hence the old man and the child, because “least worst failed of all the worse failed shades,” prey on him “worst of all” (31). In a sort of perverse revision of the torture of Dermot Trellis by his characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, this narrator seeks an end to all—the shades, himself, the dim, and ultimately even the void—but he encounters a Catch-22: the more he worsens the shades, the less they can prey on him; already, with backs turned and heads bowed, they lack the eyes that in Beckett always stand for “I”s and hence can neither perceive their creator into existence (à la Beckett), nor recognize him “into” subjectivity (à la Benjamin), nor, despite their gnawing, threaten him the way even the objectified female of myth could do (à la de Lauretis, 110). Moreover, he wonders, once he destroys or diminishes the shades entirely, won’t the “void then [be] that much more?” The minimalist credo “less is more” seems to have jumped off the page and bitten the hand that feeds it, and the narrator declares “A pox on void. Unmoreable unlessable unworseable evermost almost void” (*WH* 43).

If the Beckettian protagonist has rejected the usual hierarchical dominant-submissive relationship in favor of something he hopes will end the chain of “justice” forever by destroying the subjectivity of both parties simultaneously, he has, in the process, landed in something akin to Benjamin’s “terrifying void.” But whereas Benjamin’s essentialist subjects seek to avoid at all costs the almost void where they would “experience . . . a kind of primary existential anxiety” (Benjamin 64), the subject of *Worstward Ho* craves the true void, where no “he” would survive to experience the nothing there would be to experience, but finds instead only an almost void perpetually refilled with narrative traces. The Beckettian protagonist discovers that, like Benjamin’s sadomasochism, the oscillating metalepsis of the sado-sadistic relationship “leaves the self encapsulated in a closed system”—here perhaps, as in Benjamin, “the omnipotent mind,” but certainly the cycle of subject construction and de(con)struction (Benjamin 65, 67). It is impossible to break free of all narrative when one must necessarily do so through narrative; the Beckettian protagonist’s last metaleptic gambit has failed. Even when he reduces his creatures to the scale of “three pins,” the skull’s stare continues to provide the “one pin hole” necessary for seeing them into being. And so Beckett’s subject marches on . . .
rather ghostly diegetic reader, who, as a function of the text, must go on playing her role in seeing the narrative subject into its agonizing existence.

Beckett apparently thought, at least temporarily, that *Worstward Ho* represented some kind of end: upon its completion, he told Charles Juliet, “The writing is over. Finally, one no longer knows who is speaking. The subject disappears completely. That’s where the crisis of identity ends” (quoted in Brater 145). But, like Watt listing objections to his own narrative proposals, Beckett proffered a counterdemonstration that seems to validate his theory of the perpetual reconstitution of narrative subjectivity: he continued to write beyond that “end,” producing works that, in addition to producing reading subjects, belie the purported disappearance of the narrative subject. That constructed being could be found, in a 1988 publication, manifesting optimistically oxymoronic “stirrings still”—the title of a short prose piece, which does manage to end without the heretofore requisite “on,” instead entreating “Time and grief and self so-called. Oh all to end.” But even after that text’s preparation, as Brater describes it, “for the sound of . . . one last word struggling to get itself first *said*, then *unsaid*, then *ununsaid*, ‘etc.’” (Brater 163), Beckett produced yet more last words, in a final poem that reveals him continuing the struggle of his wor(l)d-weary protagonists, still searching in spite of himself for the right language in which to perpetuate the everlasting story. Here, he asks repeatedly “what is the word,” and seems to conclude that, after all, *what* is the word—an ending that brings us full circle to *Watt* and so, (lack of) punctuation notwithstanding, to an answer that keeps asking the same old question—“What?” In the end, as in the beginning, is “the word”—or, as Beckett put it in *Murphy*, “In the beginning was the pun. And so on” (*Murphy* 65).

And so Beckett generates a closed system of his own, dooming readers to eternal repetition of (boundary building and breaching) interpretation in their torturous efforts to (re)construct—and thereby finalize—the writing subject that is “Beckett,” the fictive subject he writes, and the reading subject who sustains the other two.

Although the metaleptic efforts of Beckett’s subject have failed to result in a jailbreak, however, they have made gestures toward at least two different escape hatches. In the dissolution of the boundaries between levels of readers and therefore between text and ETR hinted at in *The Unnamable* but more fully actualized in *Company*, Beckett invokes a kind of deconstructive metalepsis; this is the route Brooke-Rose takes, via increasingly destabilizing enactments of metalepsis on the reader—the
device’s intellectually transformative extreme—toward a deconstruction of narrative itself. More obliquely, as Beckett sketches the violent, embodied, and apparently intersubjective construction arrangements of How It Is, drawing the DR emotionally into the painful and muddy world, he also separates her from the EDR, who may stand back and read the scenario metaphorically, applying its lessons about power politics to his own world. In this, as in Beckett’s insistence that these torturer-sufferers cannot cease the repetition of their acts, he paves the way for Carter’s feminist-politico-metaleptic program, which will ultimately propose subversive forms for such inevitable repetitions.