Samuel Beckett and the Politics of the Body

Voice, Violence, and the Algerian War in *Comment c'est*

by

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2020

Acknowledgements

First among those I must thank is undoubtedly my wonderful advisor, Andrea Zemgulys, without whom this project would have struggled to find focus and direction. Her advice and insight have both been crucial to the development of my ideas over the course of the last year, and for that I owe her a deep debt of gratitude.

Along the way I've been helped along by several additional people, the foremost of whom are professors Cathy Sanok and Scotti Parrish, whose week-by-week guidance through this whole process not only helped feed my ideas but also kept me on schedule (more or less). My gratitude also goes out to all the members of my thesis cohort who were there with me, and whose ideas and feedback never failed to provide a fresh and productive perspective.

I'd also like to thank two former professors of mine, John Whittier-Ferguson, whose suggestion that I draw upon Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* led me to one of my central critical texts, and Marjorie Levinson, whose recommendation that I look into the political and aesthetic debates between Brecht, Lukács, and the rest of that crowd helped frame my thinking throughout this project.

And, of course, any enumeration of debts would be incomplete without mentioning my parents, who have always supported the pursuit of my dreams and ambitions, however financially ill-advised my elected vocations may be.

Abstract

For decades the prevailing view in Beckett scholarship has been that the Irishman's texts work most interestingly at the level of the philosophical and psychological. It is a view that suggests — not incorrectly — that Beckett can be viewed as a dark comedian of modern life, a wry and pessimistic commentator on individual alienation who takes aim at that elusive thing people tend to refer to as "the human condition." While some writers, such as Pascale Casanova, have previously aimed to identify the historical forces which led to the production of Beckett's work (at an ideological and philosophical level), in this thesis I set out with a slightly different approach. Building upon the recent work of scholars such as James McNaughton and Emilie Morin, I contend that an equally valid (and perhaps more useful) approach to Beckett's texts would be to emphasize the ways in which the content of the texts themselves can be located firmly within the historical and political culture of the era in which they were produced. In this way we can appreciate Beckett as a writer who, far from being the apolitical ascetic he plays in the popular imagination, had strong political preoccupations and an intense concern for the plight of the oppressed. By locating his work in the context of disturbing imperial histories we are able to recognize it as politically grounded, and therefore assess its nature as a political object.

In this thesis I set out to examine the last of Beckett's novels, *Comment c'est*, which was written at the height of the Algerian War and, I contend, reflects the brutal repressive violence employed by the French authorities in the course of their imperialist campaign to squash Algerian self-determination. Specifically, the novel engages with the preeminent moral crisis arising from the conflict, the question of torture, and examines the language-destroying effect of physical pain on individuals.

The thesis is composed of two principal parts: Part I deals with the history and origins of the Algerian War itself (as well as Beckett's position in the midst of these historical events), while Part II is a close examination of the text in question, the novel *Comment c'est*. Throughout the second of these parts I make extensive use of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, drawing from it to explain the ways in which pain resulting from torture inhibits language and probing the areas in which Beckett's text is reflective of this very tendency. I examine in detail the middle section of Beckett's book, which is an extended torture sequence, and argue that the author demonstrates this language- and voice-destroying characteristic of pain not only through the developments of the novel's plot but also at the level of the novel's style itself.

Key Words: torture, voice, language, violence, Algeria, imperialism

Author's Note on Texts and Methods

One of the best-known things about Samuel Beckett, aside from his apparently unrelenting pessimism and nightmarish vision, is that he is perhaps the foremost example of the multilingual writer, an artist who has apparently achieved so complete a mastery over the prose of two separate languages as to be recognized for his aesthetic influence on both. Consequently, in the course of this project I will be dealing with a variety of sources and texts (both penned by Beckett and by others) in both English and French. Quotations throughout will be presented in the original language of the physical text I am citing, with translations provided in a footnote. Unless otherwise indicated (such as in the case of the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*, conveniently published as a multilingual edition), all translations in these footnotes are my own. For the analysis of my principal focus, Beckett's novel *Comment c'est* (or *How It Is*), I have opted to work principally with the 1964 English translation of the text, produced by the author himself, with occasional cross-references to the original French text. Nevertheless, I have decided in the main to refer to the novel by its original French title, due to my emphasis on the importance of its composition, in French, during the years of the Algerian Revolution (which ended in 1962).

This project is divided into two parts: The first is a contextualization of Beckett and his work in the political climate of France's late 1950s and early '60s, focusing particularly on the all-consuming issue of the Algerian Revolution; the second is an analysis of Beckett's work itself, an investigation of how the political and moral question of torture (stemming from the Algerian conflict) figures in the novel *Comment c'est*. For the former of these sections, I will draw extensively from works of history about the period, contemporary documents produced by the discourse among intellectuals on the topic of the war and torture, Henri Alleg's memoir *La Question*, and my own research with the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*. For the latter of these sections, in addition to the novel itself, I will make use of several works of theory dealing with the subjects of violence, pain, power, and expression, first among which will be Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*.

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Introduction

> what have I said no matter I've said something that's what was needed
> —Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*

The mid-20th century was a period characterized by immense political instability, violent ideological conflict, and collective traumas experienced on a mass scale. Seemingly spinning out of control from the First World War onwards — with the outbreaks of the Russian and Irish Revolutions, then with the rise of fascism and Nazism, and finally with the bloody anti-colonialist struggles that consumed the beginning of the Cold War era — the political events of the century provoked a tremendous response from the artistic community. More than ever before, artists took up the banner of politics and created their art with the often-explicit aim of promoting an ideological vision, with figures such as the German playwright Bertolt Brecht or the French Existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre perhaps being the foremost examples.

Despite this charged environment, Samuel Beckett has traditionally been excluded from the category of political artists. Perceived as aloof and unconcerned with all but the most abstract of philosophical or aesthetic questions, the taciturn Beckett rarely commented upon political developments in a public manner, shying away from bold, confrontational ideological statements in the vein of his contemporaries with almost the same fastidiousness he employed in avoiding the elucidation of his own work. This impression of Beckett as an essentially non-political figure is one that has

was bolstered early on by influential critics, such as Hugh Kenner in English and Maurice Blanchot in French, who both championed a view of Beckett as a kind of artistic hermit figure, a reclusive writer and metaphysician dedicated to teasing out the subtleties and contradictions of Descartien rationality while paying little heed to the world outside the window. But while Kenner, Blanchot, and other critics of their mindset have offered intriguing ways of considering Beckett's work, they have also, in my view, done a disservice to the scholarship by inadvertently promoting the untenable view that it is possible for an artist to remain unaffected by the material and historical conditions of their era. In spite of the dominance of this image of the metaphysical Beckett, however, there has always been a minority faction within Beckett criticism that has maintained that this idea of artistic isolation is a myth, and upon closer examination of Beckett's goings-on and the writer's personal life (and how these coincided with historical developments), one can begin to see the contour of a far more politically concerned artist take shape.

Speaking of the writer during the 1969 Nobel Prize award ceremony, Karl Ragnar Gierow observed that Beckett's work is about "what happened afterwards," about "when peace came and the curtain was rent from the unholiest of unholies to reveal the terrifying spectacle of the lengths to which man can go in inhuman degradation."[1] A few years earlier the Frankfurt school philosopher Theodore Adorno read Beckett's work in similarly political terms, viewing it as a response to the cataclysmic years of the Second World War and the Holocaust, as well as a repudiation of Existentialist reactions

[1] Karl Ragnar Gierow. "Samuel Beckett 1969." Karl Ragnar Gierow. Accessed March 26, 2020. http://karlragnargierow.se/ambeten/nobelkommitten-1963-1982/samuel-beckett-1969/.

to these traumas. In his famous essay "Trying to Understand Endgame," published in 1961, Adorno makes "the important discovery that Beckett's work invites philosophical interpretations, only to call them to account for obscuring the horror of our historical moment,"[2] as James McNaughton has noted. Above most others, Adorno holds up Beckett as the model of the post-Auschwitz artist, expressing inexpressible horror through its very inexpressibility. At the very least this interpretation of Beckett's work struck its author as one valid reading — after having received a typescript of the essay from Adorno (complete with a handwritten note reading "for S.B. [...] as a small token of heartfelt esteem"), Beckett wrote back warmly: "I am reading your essay on Endspiel and shall write to you again when I have finished it and thought about it… Thank you again, Professor Adorno, for your friendship and for your belief in my work."[3] Frustratingly for posterity, the follow-up letter Beckett so tantalizingly teased never came, but nevertheless the writer makes clear elsewhere that he approved of Adorno's examination of his works, having previously written to the German publisher Siegfried Unseld: "I would ask you to pass on my greetings to Professor Adorno, and tell him how glad I am to have him as exegete."[4]

Hints of a more political reading of Beckett occasionally surface elsewhere as well, though usually in a more limited manner. The esteemed Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, for instance, wrote in his introduction to Pascale Casanova's *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of Literary Revolution* that "if Beckett was a great anti-fascist writer, it is not

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[2] James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7–8.
[3] Samuel Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. III*, 403.
[4] Ibid, 403.

only because he fought with the French Resistance, a bravery for which he was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*,[5] but because every sentence of his writing keeps faith with powerlessness," adhering to what Eagleton characterizes as a "politics of lessness."[6] For Eagleton and others, Beckett's political nature can be read through his persistent privileging of the poor and dispossessed in his texts. Similarly, Beckett's British publisher John Calder viewed him as an inadvertent political actor. "Although Beckett had the reputation," Calder wrote in *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, "of being non-political… he was in fact intensely political in the sense of being always aware of what was happening in the world and thinking about it."[7] While "Beckett was always above party and ideology, and politically above country as well," Calder nevertheless considered him a political writer because he was "in essence" an "ethical philosopher," and seeing as "ethics are indivisible from politics… [Beckett] cannot avoid being seen in political terms."[8] For Calder, though, Beckett's politics hinge primarily upon his view of authority, because while "Beckett was not political in the normal sense, he knew what authority was about, and he had no taste for tyranny."[9]

Despite the pronounced possibility that this more political view of Beckett might have taken hold (especially following after Adorno), in the intervening years between Adorno's study and the present, philosophical interpretations of Beckett's work have continued to dominate and political interpretations have been few and far between.

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[5] Beckett's work in the French Resistance has often rightly been pointed to as evidence of his political positions, but the author himself, in characteristic self-deprecating manner, was prone to dismissing it as "boy scout stuff."
[6] Terry Eagleton, introduction to *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, (London: Verso, 2006), 2.
[7] John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, (London: Calder, 2003), 11.
[8] Ibid, 12.
[9] Ibid, 127.

Over the last several years, however, the view that Beckett developed his signature abstract and impenetrable style as much in response to his contemporary political history as to the philosophical impasses he wrestled with has been steadily reasserting its presence. Since 2017 two book-length examinations of Beckett's politics have appeared, Emilie Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* and James McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath.* Both these works make important headway in re-examining the Irish author in light of his political inclinations and experiences and richen the scholarly discourse surrounding his compositions. Morin's book (the first to be published) walks through a number of political situations in Beckett's life, detailing in its four chapters hints about Beckett's attitude towards a variety of political problems of the day, from censorship to propaganda to violence and war. Morin examines Beckett's friendships with a number of politically active individuals throughout his life — from Zionists to Irish nationalists to more than a few socialists and communists — and inferring from his statements, work, and company, aligns him with the internationalist Left broadly. She uncovers details about his relationship with the Irish Free State, his appalled fascination with Goebbels's propaganda, his interest in studying Soviet film with Sergei Eisenstein, his anti-racist translations, his engagement with (and distance from) post-Shoah testimonial literature, his horror at torture in Algeria, and much more. Stating what should have been obvious,"Beckett's texts," Morin writes, "with their numerous portrayals of violence, torture, dispossession, internment and subjugation, harbour a real political immediacy."[10] Much of the book

[10] Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

functions as a compendium of biographical evidence in favor of a political Beckett, rather than literary criticism, but nonetheless the information Morin has gathered is invaluable in constructing a political reading of the elusive writer's work. This is a fact James McNaughton acknowledges in the introduction to his *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*, where he writes that "most recently, Emily [sic] Morin crowns this approach" of political biography "in her book *Beckett's Political Imagination.*"[11] McNaughton himself, however, dives straight into criticism of Beckett's work. Going through the majority of Beckett's work in the prewar and immediate postwar years — from *More Pricks Than Kicks* to *Watt* to the trilogy to *Endgame* — McNaughton uncovers a writer finely attuned to political details and sensitive to the subtlest of political ironies and deceptions. He places Beckett's work squarely in the context of the Irish Free State's conservative morality concerns, Beckett's wartime resistance activity, and Nazi hunger policies. In doing this, McNaughton persuasively argues for a re-evaluation of the avant-garde author's œuvre. But while his study comprehensively covers the prewar and immediate postwar texts, he leaves it for others to examine the work of Beckett's later years through this political prism.

Expanding on the work of critics like Emilie Morin and James McNaughton, I contend that Beckett's work, far from existing as a mental abstraction on the periphery of the political and material conditions around him, in fact confronts and ironizes actual political history in such a way as to strip its ideology down to its barest essence, presenting in a distilled manner the fundamental violence at play in 20th century

[11] McNaughton, 3.

history. In this study I will contain my efforts to the work of Beckett's later decades, from the early 1960s onwards, with a particular emphasis on the texts composed during and immediately after the bloody and savage war fought between Algeria and France that ultimately resulted in the former's independence. Specifically, following a chapter explaining the historical context of this important but seldom discussed war, I will make use of *Comment c'est* (or *How It Is*), Beckett's last novel (if such a text can really still be called a novel), to examine the ways in which the author integrated political concerns which arose out of the war into his work. Building off Emilie Morin's assertion that "the Algerian war marked a crucial moment for Beckett as a writer,"[12] I will explore the ways in which Beckett uses this last novel to obliquely examine the horrors of torture (which emerged as the great moral quandary of the Algerian War) in French colonial repression during the conflict, drawing upon notions found in Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* to develop my ideas and demonstrate how Beckett's famously spare style of writing (paradoxically) articulates the relative inexpressibility of physical trauma. I maintain that in this, and other late works, Beckett identifies the body as a specific locus of political trauma and demonstrates how, given that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it,"[13] language itself (and its weaknesses) can be used at once to obfuscate and reveal political violence. More than this, by expressing the nature of political violence through its linguistic negation, Beckett ironizes modes of propaganda prevalent during the height of the 20th century's ideological conflicts and draws attention to the hollowness of imperial political rhetoric, revealing the ways in

[12] Morin, 184.
[13] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

which language can be used to not only describe but remake perceptions of the material world. Through his efforts to cultivate a language of erasure and omission — what in a 1937 letter to Axel Kaun he calls "literature of the non-word" [Literatur des Unworts][14] — Beckett mimics both the psychological processes often found in the coping mechanisms employed by survivors of trauma and the linguistic evasions common among perpetrators of trauma-inducing violence. In this way, both in the immediate aftermath of World War II and during the Algerian conflict, Beckett critiques France's failure, or even incapacity, to come to terms with its own culpability or contend with the legacy of Vichy. Suffused with the grim specter of collaborationism, Beckett's post-war works call to account modes of denialism prevalent in French society and demonstrate how that same failure to confront disturbing truths led to the replication of right-wing violence during the Algerian War. Operating as much by what is not said as by what is, Beckett's literature emerges as a profound indictment of reactionary ideologies and an exposition of language's nefarious capacity for obfuscation.

[14] Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et al, ed., *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume I: 1929–1940*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 512–520.

Part I: Beckett's France and France's Algeria

In order to understand how Beckett's works of the late 1950s and early '60s reflect political developments of the era, it is first necessary to grasp the profound and disturbing effects wrought by France's eight-year struggle to maintain control over its oldest imperial possession. The bloody anti-colonial conflict that raged in Algeria between 1954 and 1962 was much more than one in a long series of independence struggles on the part of those oppressed by European imperialists. In France, the Algerian War provoked nothing short of a crisis of identity; it forced a ferocious self-recognition and moral reckoning that had been simmering beneath the surface of the French body politic for generations but had only recently threatened to erupt into open air, agitated by the experiences of the Vichy regime's collaborationism some fifteen years before and its attempted-erasure in post-war narratives.

Algeria, more than any other French colony, was perceived to be an integral part of France itself. Due in part to its proximity to the *métropole*, the North African country was the first of the major overseas territories to be subjugated by Paris, and in the years following its conquest French authorities went to great lengths to establish a formidable French cultural — as well as political and economic — presence there. While by the late 19th century most French proponents of empire advocated an approach that avoided assimilation of conquered peoples — wherein "natives and their lands were not to be treated as entities that could be made French, but as possessions the immutable characteristics of which required separation and subservience, even though this did not

rule out the *mission civilisatrice*"[15] — the colonial project in Algeria began early enough to predate this exact ideology, and by the turn of the 20th century, efforts had long been underway to make the country more hospitable to its European occupiers. This was a lengthy process. While "Algeria was invaded in 1830… French control was not established securely until the 1870s,"[16] as Marnia Lazreg observes in *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*. Nevertheless, French policy in the intervening century and a quarter before Algerian independence determinedly pursued the goal of creating a French Algeria. As Edward Said notes,

> In Algeria, however inconsistent the policy of French governments since 1830, the inexorable process went on to make Algeria French. First the land was taken from the natives and their buildings were occupied; then French settlers gained control of the cork oak forests and mineral deposits. Then, as David Prochaska notes for Annaba (formerly named Bône), "they displaced the Algerians and peopled [places like] Bône with Europeans."[17]

This physical displacement of native Algerians by French *colons* was paired with the imposition of a harsh legal regimen designed to control the native population. The French colonizers made no secret of this, and "from 1884 until 1946, Algerians were governed by a special legal system—the Code de l'Indigénat—that severely restricted basic civil liberties and criminalized attitudes as anodyne as 'insolence'."[18] Thus, "while 'France reproduced itself in Algeria,' Algerians were relegated to marginality and

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[15] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993), 170.
[16] Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.
[17] Said, 171.
[18] Lazreg, 4.

poverty."[19] This inequitable state of affairs, which prioritized the economic and social interests of the ethnically French in Algeria (nicknamed *Pieds-noirs*, in reference to the black boots worn by the occupying French soldiers) to the enormous detriment of native Algerians, continued well into the 20th century. In fact, Algerians "did not become full-fledged citizens [of France] until 1958,"[20] a concession wrested from the government in Paris only at the height of the Algerian conflict and a move that the newly-returned-to-power president of the Republic, Charles de Gaulle, hoped would take the wind out of the independence movement's sails.

It was against the backdrop of this long and troubling colonial history that the armed push for Algerian independence broke out in late 1954. From the early months of the war the French state was determined to refuse open acknowledgment of the conflict's nature as a "war" — and still less as a "revolution," the characterization favored the principle Algerian independence organization, the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*). Instead, French authorities opted for linguistically evasive terms such as "police action," "pacification," or simply "the Algerian problem." In France, there were those throughout the conflict who knowingly referred to it simply as "la guerre sans nom" (the war without a name),[21] and it wasn't until the 1990s that the war began to receive a degree of official recognition as such. This reluctance to acknowledge the war is indicative, in part, of the guilty consciences many within the French military and

[19] Said 171.
[20] Lazreg, 4.
[21] Dine, Philip. "*A la recherche du soldat perdu*: Myth, Metaphor and Memory in the French Cinema of the Algerian War," in *France at War in the Twentieth Century: Propaganda, Myth, and Metaphor*, ed. Valerie Holman and Debra Kelly (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 144.

state apparatuses lived with during and after the war, and a sense of culpability stemming from the horrific conduct of French personnel at every level.

To a large extent, this was due to the fact that it was during this war that modern France came to recognize the immense evil it was capable of, learning that despite its professed status as a liberal democracy, when under strain it could perpetrate atrocities reminiscent of recent Nazi horrors.[22] It's important to remember that at this time "France was recovering from the humiliating loss of its colonies in what was then called Indochina — Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam — following the defeat of its Army at Dien Bien Phu,"[23] and therefore already on edge about the disintegration of its empire. Paired with the fact that, "to many French people, Algeria was the most highly organized of its colonies, and its loss seemed unimaginable,"[24] French military and civil authorities reacted to revolt with extreme measures of extrajudicial violence, including widespread summary executions, "disappearances," and a broad use of torture. While beginning without official sanction, these practices had nevertheless become a frequent enough occurrence that in March 1955 a senior civil servant, "quite unconnected with the police," penned a report opining that, "like the legalising of a rampant black market, torture should be institutionalised *because it had become so prevalent.*"[25] While initially controversial among colonial authorities, the report's suggestions were implemented

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[22] This is a phenomenon well recognized by figures such as Aimé Césaire, who observed in his *Discourse sur la colonialisme* that Nazism was in effect many of the same practices of European colonialism imported into Europe itself. In this way, Nazism made visible to the French what the French themselves perpetrated in their imperial holdings.
[23] George Craig et al, ed., *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III: 1957–1965*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), xv.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962*, (New York, New York Review of Books, 1977), 197. Emphasis in the original.

over the next several years, until such a point that "torture was not, as was often claimed by military officers, an epiphenomenon of the war. It was central to the army's defense of a colonial empire in its waning years."[26] Anti-imperialist figures of the time, such as Frantz Fanon, went even further in their indictment: "Torture in Algeria is not an accident, or an error, or a fault," he claimed. "Colonialism cannot be understood without the possibility of torturing, of violating, or of massacring."[27] Indeed, "the attitude of the French troops in Algeria fits into a pattern of police domination, of systematic racism, of dehumanization rationally pursued. Torture is inherent in the whole colonialist configuration."[28] The overt appearance of torture in Algeria, then, was no surprise, and it continued unmittigated for years. In the words of Jean-Pierre Rioux, by the height of the war "les forces de l'ordre tortur[ai]ent systématiquement des suspects, dans le silence complice des autorités civiles."[29] Disappearances and extrajudicial murders became routine, and while "the number of such 'disappearances' may never be verified[,] the distinguished secretary-general at the Algiers prefecture, Paul Teitgen, put it at just over 3,000,"[30] a number which includes not only Algerians but also sympathetic French who were unfortunate enough to be picked up by the military or police.

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[26] Lazreg, 3.
[27] Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Face to Face with the French Torturers," in *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 66.
[28] Ibid, 64.
[29] [The forces of order systematically torture[d] suspects, with the complicit silence of civil authorities], Jean-Pierre Rioux, "La torture au coeur de la République." Afterword. In *La Question*, by Henri Alleg. (Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 2005), 90.
[30] Horne, 202.

The use of torture and extrajudicial murder by the French forces provoked a crisis of conscience, first among those involved in the French colonial project directly and later by the public at large. Following the death of the Algerian revolutionary leader Larbi Ben M'hidi in March 1957 — and implausible claims by military authorities that his death was a suicide — people began to discuss "the whole ugly but hitherto largely subterranean issue of the maltreatment of rebel suspects, of torture and summary executions or what, in another context and depending upon the point of view, might perhaps be termed 'war crimes.' " From the height of the conflict onwards torture "was to become a growing canker for France, leaving behind a poison that would linger in the French system long after the war itself had ended."[31]

Initially, dissent to these practices originated within the French military and administrative state. Paul Teitgen, the previously mentioned secretary-general at the Algiers prefecture, was one of the first to do so. A former French Resistance fighter during the Nazi Occupation, in March 1957 — the month of Ben M'hidi death — Teitgen fretted in a letter to his superior, Governor-General of Algeria Robert Lacoste, that "all our so-called civilization is covered with a varnish. Scratch it, and underneath you find *fear*. The French, even the Germans, are not torturers by nature. But when you see the throats of your *copains* [friends] slit, then the varnish disappears… for the past three months we have been engaged… in irresponsibility which can only lead to war crimes."[32] Teitgen further observed that, while visiting two *centres d'hébergement*, he had "recognized on certain detainees profound traces of the cruelties and tortures that [he]

[31] Ibid, 195.
[32] Ibid, 204.

personally suffered fourteen years ago in the Gestapo cellars." More than anything, the secretary-general was deeply afraid that "France risks losing her soul through equivocation."[33] He resigned in protest later in the year.

A few days before Teitgen's letter, a separate and more public protest was lodged by a prominent figure within the French state, in this instance from within the military. A highly decorated French general, Jacques de Bollardière, had been immensely disturbed following his posting in Algeria, particularly by the corrupting influence the culture of terror held for French soldiers. Out of uniform and dressed in plain clothes one day, Bollardière overheard a young French officer in the street unabashedly dismissing the seriousness of Nazi atrocities, at one point remarking, "if I had been in Germany at that moment, I too would have been a Nazi."[34] Horrified, Bollardière wrote an open letter published in *L'Express* warning of "the terrible danger there would be for us to lose sight, under the fallacious pretext of immediate expediency, of the moral values which alone have, up until now, created the grandeur of our civilization and of our army." In punishment for this embarrassing spectacle and breach of military discipline, Bollardière was "sentenced to sixty days of 'fortress arrest,' the most severe punishment meted out to any senior officer during the Algerian war."[35]

Public discontent with the accumulating evidence of torture built throughout the year. In the same month as Teitgen's private complaint and Bollardière's public letter, Hubert Beuve-Méry (the founder and editor of *Le Monde*, a publication which began printing in the wake of the Nazi's ejection from France) penned a scathing article in

[33] Ibid, 204.
[34] Ibid, 203.
[35] Ibid.

which he avowed that "Dès maintenant, les Français doivent savoir qu'ils n'ont plus tout à fait le droit de condamner dans les mêmes termes qu'il y a dix ans les destructions d'Oradour et les tortionnaires de la Gestapo."[36]

But the outcry against the use of torture didn't reach its peak until early 1958, when on February 18th a short little book by the name of *La Question* struck like "un météorite dont l'impact fit tressaillir des consciences."[37] A brief memoir by Henri Alleg — a left-wing journalist who worked as editor of the *Alger Républicain* in Algeria before the state shut it down in 1955, and who was sympathetic to the cause of independence — *La Question* recounts the author's experiences of being tortured by French paratroopers at a Lodi *centre d'hébergement* during the summer of 1957, in explicit detail, [38] all the while relying on the "ton neutre de l'Histoire," as François Mauriac noted.[39] Suddenly, the whole grisly situation was thrown into stark relief and dragged out into the public sphere. Shaking French society to its core, "*La Question* entra-t-elle d'un coup, toute palpitante, dans la conscience morale universelle,"[40] lending truth to Elaine Scarry's observation that "at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief—that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation—the sheer material

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[36] [From now on, the French have to know that they don't have the right anymore to condemn, in the same terms as ten years ago, the destruction of Oradour (a French village massacred by the Nazis) and the torturers of the Gestapo], Rioux, 90.
[37] [A meteorite whose impact shook consciences], Rioux, 93.
[38] I have refrained, here and elsewhere in this thesis, from depicting in much detail the tortures described within Alleg's text. It is enough to know that they are horrifying, and little value is to be gained from their specific reproduction here.
[39] [Neutral tone of history.], Rioux 88.
[40] [*The Question* enters all of a sudden, thrilling, into the universal moral conscience], ibid.

factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty' "[41]

In addition to the horrifying acts of violence and bodily torments perpetrated by French soldiers within its pages, *La Question* garnered recognition for the attention it indirectly channeled towards France's failure to confront the legacy of Vichy or acknowledge the culpability of certain members of French society in Nazi atrocities. In one memorable scene, for instance, a lieutenant by the name of Érulin shouts at Alleg during an interrogation, trying to intimidate him: "Écoute, salaud ! Tu es foutu ! Tu vas parler ! … Tout le monde doit parler ici ! On a fait la guerre en Indochine, ça nous a servi pour vous connaître. Ici, c'est la Gestapo ! Tu connais la Gestapo ?"[42] A moment later he goes on, taunting. "Tu as fait des articles sur les tortures, hein, salaud ! Eh bien ! maintenant c'est la 10e D.P. [Division parachutiste] qui les fait sur toi."[43]

While Érulin's threats are horrific enough on the surface, the deeper implications of his invocation of the Nazi secret police are even more alarming, indicative as they are of the same ugly strain running through French society that the dissident general Bollardière had criticized. That agents of the French state, just over a decade after the liberation of occupied France, gleefully compare themselves to France's former brutalizers and invoke the legacy of fascism as a demonstration of their own power and disposition betrays a gangrene at the heart of the Republic. Indeed, the notion of the

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[41] Scarry, 14.
[42] [Listen, bastard! You're fucked! You will talk! … Everyone has to talk here! We fought the war in Indochina, that's taught us to know your type. Here, it's the Gestapo! You know the Gestapo?], Henri Alleg, *La Question*, (Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 2005), 26.
[43] [You wrote some articles on torture, huh, bastard! Well! now it's the 10th P.D. (Paratrooper Division) who're doing it to you.], ibid.

Republic itself seems to have been held in low regard by the *paras* and Érulin himself, who later in the same interrogation suggests, menacingly, that "ce qu'on fait ici, on le fera en France. Ton Duclos[44] et ton Mitterrand,[45] on leur fera ce qu'on te fait, et ta putain de République, on la foutra en l'air aussi !"[46]

If the invocation of the Gestapo weren't already enough, this sinister right-wing attitude inevitably suggests the legacy of Vichy collaborationism with the Nazis. As no less a figure than Jean-Paul Sartre notes in "Une Victoire" — a review of *La Question* published in *L'Express* newspaper — after enumerating several then-modern examples of torture, "en somme, Hitler n'était qu'un précurseur."[47] The virus of torture isn't unique to the army, or the police, it is "ni civile, ni militaire, ni spécifiquement française,"[48] but has spread throughout the whole of society, infecting the entire body politic. While it is a horror by no means unique to France, Sartre nevertheless links Alleg's book (with a kind of "humeur sinistre"[49]) to both French national shame and pride, simultaneously. Shame because of what was done to Alleg, but pride because he didn't break under the brutal treatment.[50] Put another way, "c'est en notre [the French's] nom qu'on l'a

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[44] Communist politician who went on to win the largest-ever share of the vote for a PCF candidate in the 1969 election, held following the resignation of Charles de Gaulle.
[45] Socialist politician who later was the longest-serving president of France, in office from 1981 to 1995.
[46] [What we do here, we'll do in France. Your Duclos and your Mitterrand, we'll do to them what we do to you, and your whore Republic, we'll fuck that up too!], ibid.
[47] [in summary, Hitler was just a precursor], Jean-Paul Sartre, "'Une Victoire,' Par Jean-Paul Sartre (1958)," Alger 1957 - des Maurice Audin par milliers. Accessed March 27, 2020. http://1000autres.org/une-victoire-par-jean-paul-sartre.
[48] [neither civil, nor military, nor specifically French], ibid.
[49] [sinister humor], ibid.
[50] Incidentally, this stance of Sartre's is evidence that even he, one "sympathetic to those hurt," falls into the conventional attitude that Elaine Scarry identifies as the "covert disdain for confession," which is "one of many manifestations of how inaccessible the reality of physical pain is to anyone not immediately experiencing it." (Scarry, 29).

martyrisé et nous [the French], à cause de lui, nous retrouvons enfin un peu de notre fierté : nous sommes fiers qu'il soit Français."[51]

But the gravest implication of Alleg's book, according to Sartre, lies in what it suggests about the nature of French society. After all, torture was "systématiquement appliquée derrière la façade de la légalité démocratique."[52] The book existed to "mieux tendre à la conscience métropolitaine le miroir des principes bafoués en son nom,"[53] and faced with such a grotesque perversion of the institutions key to the French self-conception, what else could occur but a crisis of identity? When "plongés dans la stupeur, les Français découvrent cette évidence terrible : si rien ne protège une nation contre elle-même, ni son passé, ni ses fidélités, ni ses propres lois, s'il suffit de quinze ans pour changer en bourreaux les victimes, c'est que l'occasion décide seule ; selon l'occasion, n'importe qui, n'importe quand, deviendra victime ou bourreau."[54]

Sartre's damning article was swiftly impounded by the French authorities — though it still circulated "sous le manteau"[55] in left-wing communities — as were other newspaper reports of the book. Oddly, the state was slower to move against the book itself, and it wasn't until some five weeks after its publication that *La Question* was officially banned, the warehouses of the publisher raided, and the remaining copies

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[51] [it's in our name that we martyrized him and we, because of him, finally relocated a little of our pride: we are proud that he is French], ibid.
[52] [systematically applied before the facade of democratic legality], ibid.
[53] [better offer to the metropolitan conscience the mirror of principals flouted in its name], Rioux, 92–93.
[54] [Plunged into a stupor, the French discover this terrible fact: if nothing protects a nation from itself, neither its past, nor its loyalties, nor its own laws, if fifteen years is sufficient to change victims into torturers (executioners), it is circumstance alone that decides; according to the circumstances, anyone, anytime, will become victim or torturer], Sartre.
[55] [literally "under the coat," meaning clandestinely], Rioux, 88.

confiscated. Of course, "by then sixty-five thousand copies had already been sold,"[56] and the cat was out of the bag.

The censorship of *La Question* marked merely the opening salvos of what proved to be a long and bitter struggle between left-wing French intellectuals and the authorities. At the center of this firestorm stood the man who was responsible for the publication of *La Question* in the first place, Jérôme Lindon, editor of Les Éditions de Minuit, a publishing house which was founded as a clandestine Resistance press during the Nazi occupation but subsequently had made a name for itself by publishing avant-garde and experimental literature during the post-war years. Lindon's involvement brought the subject of torture far closer to home for Beckett. Lindon — a man known for "discovering" Samuel Beckett, among others, and promoting authors of the *nouveau roman* school such as Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, and others — was no activist, but was rather drawn to political activity "motivated by principle,"[57] a fact which made his friend Beckett fear for his safety. Lindon soon became a central figure, however, in a struggle over free speech and anti-torture resistance. As James Knowlson states in his biography of Beckett, "Jérôme Lindon's involvement in this battle for people's consciences came in two phases. Along with Les Editions [sic] Maspero, he [first] led the way by publishing at Les Editions [sic] de Minuit a series of *Documents* and books on torture committed by the French military in Algeria," of which Alleg's was merely the best known.[58] Because "torture in Algeria

[56] James Knowlson, *Damned To Fame*: *The Life of Samuel Beckett*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996), 440.
[57] Craig, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, xv.
[58] Knowlson, 440.

was a watershed for French intellectuals,"[59] many public figures in the arts and the academy came to openly support Lindon following *La Question*'s impoundment, and after its seizure "Lindon was backed by the League for the Rights of Man and supported by a number of leading French writers — Roger Martin du Gard, André Malraux, Francois Mauriac, and Jean-Paul Sartre — who signed a protest to the president of the Republic."[60]

If this was all the publisher had done, the matter might have ended there, with few consequences outside of the confiscation of offending publications, but "Lindon followed Alleg's book with others on similar themes: *L'Affaire Audin* on the arrest, torture, and disappearance in Algiers of the Communist mathematician Maurice Audin; [61] *La Gangrene*, the complaints of five Algerian students tortured in Paris; and Francis Jeanson's important *Notre Guerre*."[62] Many of these, too, were banned. All in all, "nine of the Editions [sic] de Minuit *Documents* concerning Algeria were seized"[63] as the French government struggled to control the narrative surrounding atrocities in Algeria.

The breaking point came, however, when Lindon crossed the line from reportage of the goings-on in Algeria to implicit encouragement of desertion by French soldiers, a stance which sent French authorities into a minor panic. Lindon accomplished this through a number of books targeting discontented and disgusted members of the

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[59] Lazreg, 213.
[60] Knowlson, 440. N.B. that the "president of the Republic" mentioned here is René Coty, not Charles de Gaulle, who wouldn't return to power until January of the next year, following what was effectively a coup d'état.
[61] A matter which was particularly shocking to the French public, seeing as Audin was ethnically French. (The French public's tolerance for torture was undoubtably colored by racism in this respect — perhaps there never would have been such a furor had the French authorities confined themselves to merely torturing Algerians).
[62] Ibid, 440.
[63] Ibid, 440.

French military. Of this type of book "the best-known example was a fictional work called *Le Deserteur*, published pseudonymously in March 1960 under a name that Lindon himself invented: Maurienne."[64] As Knowlson observes, "this was an astute choice of name for the author, because it was the name of a region of France next to the Vercors and it was 'Vercors' (another pseudonym) who had founded the Resistance press, Les Editions [sic] de Minuit,"[65] during the Nazi occupation. In this way Lindon linked the plight of anti-torture dissent in the fourth French republic to the anti-fascist struggle of the decade prior.

Le Deserteur was a bridge too far in the eyes of the French authorities, and "in this case not only was the book seized but [legal] proceedings were instituted against Lindon for 'incitement to military disobedience'."[66] In terms of controlling the narrative, this was perhaps a blunder on the state's part, as it thrust Lindon and the question of torture even more into the spotlight. This is a fact which had been realized some time earlier by a military judge tasked with resolving the situation of *La Question*, who understood that investigating the matter thoroughly would require providing another public forum for Lindon and Alleg by putting them on the stand, and furthermore could potentially have led to the extremely embarrassing spectacle of landing torturers in the dock. He closed the investigation into the matter.[67] [68]

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[64] Ibid, 441.
[65] Ibid, 441.
[66] Ibid, 441.
[67] Rioux, 88–89.
[68] Alleg wasn't able to escape the furor surrounding La Question so easily, however, and French authorities prosecuted him to the fullest extent the law would allow without literally involving the claims he makes in his book. Thus Alleg was "condamné au maximum, à Alger même, en juin 1960 : dix ans de prison" [condemned to the maximum sentence, in Algiers even, in June 1960: ten years in prison] for "reconstitution de ligue dissoute — le Parti communiste algérien — et atteinte à la sûreté de l'Etat"

But Lindon's trial proceeded, and attention grew. The international press followed developments closely, and "former French soldiers had for the first time been able to present in public firsthand accounts of acts of torture that they had themselves witnessed in Algeria."[69] Despite all this — and notwithstanding the public outcry — "on December 20, Lindon was fined two thousand new francs." At the end of the day, however, "the revelations that emerged at the trial focused public attention even more sharply on the moral issues involved."[70]

More menacing than actions taken by the French authorities, however, were those by non-government actors. During this time in Algeria "the colonial population had been waging its own counterrevolutionary war through the establishment of a clandestine terrorist movement, the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) targeting Algerians and French advocates of Algeria's independence."[71] Eventually this right-wing terrorist organization (which had close associations with the French military) had become active in the French metropole, and the publicity surrounding Lindon's trial led to his becoming a target. This became apparent when, "on the night of [Lindon's] court appearance, December 7, a bomb exploded outside his apartment in the boulevard Arago, blowing in a door and inflicting damage on the premises."[72] As if the message wasn't already clear enough, "four days later, a Molotov cocktail was tossed

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[reconstitution of a dissolved league — the Algerian Communist Party — and undermining the security of the state]. He escaped from prison the next year and, following a manhunt, managed to cross the frontier into Switzerland and, later, made it to Czechoslovakia. Rioux, 89.

[69] Knowlson, 441.

[70] Ibid, 441.

[71] Lazreg, 5.

[72] Ibid, 441.

through the small display window of the Editions [sic] de Minuit office in the rue Bernard-Palissy."[73]

All of this proved to be incredibly distressing for Lindon, of course, but also for his reclusive writer friend. "Torture was the kind of moral issue on which Beckett and [his wife] Suzanne had very strong feelings" in the first place, and compounded with the trial and bombings "both of them were intensely concerned about their friend in his troubles."[74] Even before events came to a head in December, Beckett had been deeply worried. In a letter from Paris dated October 4, 1960, he fretted to his colleague and lover Barbara Bray about the situation: "Lindon as you will have seen was not detained long, but if the cat jumps the wrong way it's the end of Minuit."[75] Later that month he again wrote to her, concerned, this time from his country cottage in Ussy: "I was very worried about Lindon last evening after hearing the reportage on the students' manifestation by Europe I [sic] at 7.30. I rang him up and his wife said he had not come in. Then an hour later and he had - unscathed. He said the police were unprecedentedly brutal, batoning the women as readily as the men." This stress, along with other factors, seemed to be seeping even into his creative work. "I can't make any headway with the play [*Oh les beaux jours* / *Happy Days*]," he wrote in the next sentence, "[I] sit at the table for hours unable to write a line."[76]

Beckett, like most of his social circle and French intellectuals of the time generally, had been anxiously following political developments regarding the Algerian

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[73] Ibid, 441.
[74] Ibid, 441.
[75] Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, 362.
[76] Ibid, 368. This apparent linguistic paralysis is also interesting for its resonance with concerns we will take up in this thesis later, namely the interaction between voice and the silencing effect of violence.

situation for a long time. Due to the war's ramifications for mainland France, the mid-'50s and early '60s "were violent years for anyone living, as Beckett did, in the French capital,"[77] and the tremendous uncertainty experienced by the city's inhabitants was no small thing. On top of the growing discontent within intellectual and artistic circles with the behavior of French authorities in Algeria, there was also a persistent fear about stability at home. Throughout this period a series of political twists and turns had "almost turned into civil war within France" on more than one occasion,[78] and the country was periodically rocked by political earthquakes of a strength rarely seen in democratic nations. One of the most dramatic of these occurred as early as May 1958 — not long after the controversy surrounding the publication of *La Question* — when the celebrated leader of Free France and former Chairman of the Provisional Government of the French Republic during the postwar years, General Charles de Gaulle, "was brought back to politics by a group of generals [who were] staunch advocates of a French Algeria, among whom were Raoul Salan and Jacques Massu (an unabashed advocate for torture), who hoped he would decisively end the [Algerian] war in favor of France."[79] Throughout the month of May 1958 France underwent what was effectively a soft coup d'état, in which French military chiefs formed a junta in Algiers, sent paratroopers to take over Corsica, pressured the President of the Republic, René Coty, to name de Gaulle the head of a new national government, and laid the groundwork for a military takeover of Paris and the complete overthrow of the French government should it refuse to concede to the military's demands. This last preparation proved to be

[77] Craig, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, xiv.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Lazreg, 4.

unnecessary — facing the prospect of open civil war, Coty and the majority of his allies folded, and by the end of the month de Gaulle was swept back into power and eventually swept away the Fourth Republic, crafting a new constitution with a stronger president and proclaiming the formation of the Fifth Republic, with himself at its head.

Characteristically, Beckett was hesitant to comment on French politics, but if the attitude of those in his social circles is anything to go by, he likely regarded this sudden rightward lurch with a mixture of apprehension and horror. Months earlier, "the effect of the overwhelming evidence" of the French military's use of torture "was to divide the nation (in ways dismally reminiscent of the Dreyfus Affair), with conservative opinion on the side of the Army, and the views of intellectuals opposing that,"[80] and Beckett had found himself squarely in the latter camp. Given that de Gaulle's return to power was attributable almost entirely to imperialist anxieties about control of Algeria slipping out of France's grip, and was facilitated by the very military figures responsible for the brutal counterinsurgency practices denounced in *La Question*, one can infer Beckett's likely outlook on the affair with relative ease. The author had long been disgusted by torture, and while he seldom spoke about it explicitly, his actions during the *La Question* controversy give a good indication of his attitude towards this particular surfacing of it. During the earlier "seizure of Henri Alleg's book, [Beckett and Suzanne] had actively helped Lindon by encouraging friends like Marthe Gautier to secrete copies in their apartments so they could not be destroyed,"[81] an action reflective both of their personal loyalty to Lindon and their shared political ideals. Beckett even went so far as to support

[80] Craig, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, xv.
[81] Knowlson, 441.

Lindon financially, and in later days, contemplating the financial strain censorship and seizures had placed on the publishing house, Lindon "stated that his small publishing house would not have survived the Algerian war if it hadn't been for Beckett, who lent him the money necessary to avoid bankruptcy."[82]

Nevertheless, over the course of the next several years Beckett rarely corresponded directly about Algeria or the political repercussions of the conflict, touching on the subject openly only when events began to take a more violent turn closer to home.

Despite this, "Beckett's characteristic reticence about public affairs cannot conceal the fact that these were years of real terror"[83] for many in France. As the instability in the country grew, OAS violence intensified, and Lindon continued to pursue his confrontation with the French authorities, modicums of worry began to appear in Beckett's letters. In late 1959 de Gaulle, contrary to the expectations of both his military backers and leftist opponents, had shown some willingness to consider self-determination as an option for Algeria, much to the displeasure of the *pieds-noirs*, who had been thrown "into transports of rage and despair at what seemed like the certainty of [de Gaulle's] intent to sell out in Algeria."[84] In late January of 1960 France faced yet another crisis, as angry *colon* volunteers of the *Front national français* (a fascistic paramilitary organization founded by anti-independence *pieds-noirs*), feeling betrayed, erected barricades in the streets of Algiers and seized government buildings, hoping to wrest control of the country from de Gaulle. While the military stood by and

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[82] Morin, 199.
[83] Craig, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, xv.
[84] Horne, 349.

largely kept its distance, the FNF occupied the city for around a week, and remained exuberantly confident that a similar uprising in Paris was just around the corner, that the army was bound to join them, and that de Gaulle would have no choice but to give way. But *le général* was nothing if not stubborn. On 29 January, de Gaulle addressed the nation via television broadcast, dressed in uniform and at one point addressing the army directly. "What would the French army become but an anarchic and absurd conglomeration of military feudalisms, if it should happen that certain elements made their loyalty conditional?" he asked. "As you know, I have the supreme responsibility. It is I who bear the country's destiny. I must therefore be obeyed."[85] In no uncertain terms he ordered the army to give no support to the insurrection, and persuaded by de Gaulle's "hypnotic wizardry,"[86] the army obeyed. The wind taken out of their sails, a couple days later the insurrectionists dissipated, their leaders scattered, and the crisis was overcome.

Back in Paris, Beckett had been too anxious throughout the crisis to focus on his work or his current project, the novel *Comment c'est*. In a 4 February letter to Barbara Bray he stressed about the fraught situation of the country for the first time in writing: "I haven't looked at Pim[87] for a week," he complained. "Ear glued to Europe No 1 up to a few days ago - news. We seem to have squeezed through for the moment."[88] Two days later he reiterated much the same point: "8 jours abominables, collés toutes les heures à

[85] Horne, 369.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Protagonist of *Comment c'est*, if such a word can be used for such a book.
[88] Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, 290.

Europe No 1," he wrote to the author Robert Pinget on 6 February. "Ca [sic] se calme un peu."[89]

References to political developments like this are rare in Beckett's correspondence, but their presence nevertheless betrays the fact that not only was Beckett interested in and kept himself informed of the political goings-on of the war, but also that he was deeply affected by them, to the point that his concern would paralyze his creative process. He had not fought the Nazis as a Resistance member only to see French fascists overthrow the government. This kind of anxiety wouldn't surface again for several months, when the trial of Lindon for "incitement to military disobedience" was winding up. A petition in support of the publisher had been drawn up, and was circulating among the influential of the Paris artistic and intellectual circles. "At the time of the trial," Knowlson writes, "Beckett once again showed himself willing to help directly by sending the text of a manifesto initiated by the novelist Claude Simon and supporting Lindon to John Calder[90] (who had earlier published Alleg's book in English) and to Harold Hobson,[91] intending that they should sign it."[92] On the first day of October he brought it up in a letter to Bray: "No talk of anything here but the Jeanson trial[93] and the Manifesto of the 121," Beckett wrote. "If I weren't a foreigner I suppose I'd be in it," he concluded almost ruefully.[94]

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[89] [Dreadful week, the two of us with our ears glued to Europe No 1 every hour. Things a little quieter now.], trans. by George Craig, Ibid, 292.
[90] Beckett's United Kingdom publisher. Notably, Beckett's Italian language publisher, Giulio Einaudi, also published translations of *La Question* and *La Gangrène*.
[91] English drama critic.
[92] Knowlson, 441.
[93] Francis Jeanson was a leftwing intellectual who organized a network of militants in metropolitan France in support of the FLN, providing their agents with money and papers.
[94] Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, 360.

The last point touches upon something quite important in understanding Beckett's political opinions and stances (or, as the case may be, lack of explicitly taken stances). As an Irish expatriate residing in France, Beckett was particularly vulnerable to the wrath of the French authorities, should he publicly take positions at odds with their own policies. Indeed, he had already been on the run from deportation once, when in 1932 — following the assassination of the French president, Paul Doumer — "the French authorities had decided to check the papers of all foreigners living in Paris," and Beckett, not possessing a valid *carte de séjour*, had spent several nights hiding out at a friend's studio before deciding to flee to England.[95] This experience, and the knowledge of how important a valid *carte* was, may have been in Beckett's mind during the time of the Manifeste de 121. As was apparent from his actions and correspondence, "Beckett supported the manifesto but, like another Minuit author, Robert Pinget, who was Swiss, did not sign it because as a foreign resident dependent on a valid *carte de séjour* in order to stay in France, he would have laid himself open to the withdrawal of his residential permit and could have been deported."[96] Indeed, this was a point "Jérôme Lindon stressed" himself. "For a foreigner, signing such declarations and petitions was… simply not worth the risk involved."[97] So "in the end, the signatories were confined to those with French nationality," and Beckett never signed.[98] This was likely wise. Even for the French signatories, things could get hard as a result of the petition. For instance, "the act of signing the declaration was to have serious repercussions for two of the

[95] Knowlson, 156.
[96] Knowlson, 442.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid, 441.

signatories, Roger Blin[99] and Jean Martin,[100] who found it impossible to obtain work for almost a year."[101] For a non-citizen the consequences potentially could have been even greater.

The next several months saw the conclusion of Lindon's trial, and the nerve-rattling bombings of the publisher's apartment and offices. But once that particular storm had blown over, Beckett's anxiety over political events died down for a few months. It wasn't until national tensions again rose to a boiling point, in April 1961, that he made mention of current developments in his correspondence again. Discontent with de Gaulle, and his willingness to compromise, had been growing in the right-wing ranks of the military for some time, and seeing "as de Gaulle appeared less reliable than the hard-line generals [who had put him in power] expected, they staged a short-lived putsch in April 1961."[102] It was "a desperate attempt to wrest control of Algeria from the French government," and "four senior officers rebelled on 22 April, 1961, claiming that Algiers was now under their exclusive command."[103] Over the next three days the situation in France intensified dramatically. De Gaulle called upon the nation to support him in a television address, and there was much anxiety that a landing of rebel paratroopers was imminent at various airports around France. Roadblocks were erected around Paris, tanks were rolled into the streets as a preemptive defense measure, and "on 25 April," in the most frightening moment of the crisis, "an atomic bomb was

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[99] Actor and director who premiered both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.
[100] Actor, originated roles in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Lazreg, 5.
[103] Craig, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, xvi.

exploded in the Sahara to prevent it from falling into rebel hands."[104] The next day, the quartet of rebellious generals surrendered, and the putsch ended. "Here apparently all quiet again. Tanks etc. gone," Beckett wrote to Bray on 26 April, his relaxed language perhaps masking the tremendous stress of the situation."Great sigh of relief on coming back late from Odéon last night and hearing news on radio."[105]

The short-lived putsch was the last large-scale political crisis before the resolution of the war in March 1962 with the Évian Accords, but that didn't mean all was quiet. Earlier that year, in February, another of Beckett's friends — Jean-Jacques Mayoux, an academic, literary critic, and signatory of the Manifeste de 121 — had been bombed by the OAS in an attack that failed to injure anyone but caused extensive damage and terrified Mayoux's daughter. "Maintenant j'apprends par la radio que ces salauds sont passés chez vous," Beckett furiously wrote to Mayoux on 15 February. "Je pense bien fort a vous tous et vous envoie ma très affectueuse sympathie… Une grande poignée de main, cher Jean-Jacques, bon courage, et bien amicalement a vous tous."[106]

Elsewhere in the city, though Beckett did not comment on it, atrocities were ongoing. "Jails throughout France were filled with Algerian political prisoners (many of whom were transferred from Algeria) and their French supporters,"[107] including La Santé, which Beckett had a view of from his Paris apartment, and where numerous Algerian and FLN leaders were held. More disturbingly, "torture was inflicted on

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[104] Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, 409.
[105] Ibid, 408.
[106] [Now I learn from the radio that those bastards moved in on you. My best thoughts are with you all, and I send my warmest sympathy… And to you, dear Jean-Jacques, my hand. With fond wishes to you all.], trans. By George Craig, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, 462. The translator curiously leaves out the phrase "bon courage," or "Good luck."
[107] Lazreg, 5.

suspects in Parisian police stations" and, in October 1961, in response to large scale protests, "over two hundred Algerians were killed and thrown into the Seine… by orders of the police prefect of Paris, Maurice Papon."[108] All this seemed to almost fade into the background, though, and the last mention of anything having to do with Algeria in Beckett's letters comes from an April 1962 missive to Judith Schmidt: "Here it looks a little like Spring at last and from my window I can see the frail green of the chestnut-trees Bld. Arago," Beckett wrote. "The big hulk of Sante prison too alas, which Jouhaud[109] must be just leaving now for the last day of his trial."[110]

Despite his customary reluctance to comment upon public affairs, it is clear from the hints we have that Beckett followed the Algerian situation closely and apprehensively. More than that, I contend, elements of the more disturbing aspects of the conflict, first among them torture, surface in his creative output during this era and the years after, foremost among which is the novel *Comment c'est* (*How It Is*). While none of Beckett's texts are "about" the Algerian War, thematic elements in them nevertheless take on particular significance in light of the anxieties Beckett was feeling about the conflict. While the author's feelings are just as difficult to penetrate in his writings as they are in his life, an examination of these works through the prism of Algeria leads to worthwhile insight, and a specific analysis of the effect of torture upon language within *Comment c'est* reveals the ways in which Beckett's novel mirror the actual situation of

[108] Ibid. Papon was to be convicted much later, in the 1990s, for crimes against humanity, though this charge sprang from his earlier complicity in the Holocaust as a Vichy offcial rather than from his behavor during the Algerian War.
[109] One of the April 1961 putschists.
[110] Beckett, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III*, 475.

the Algerian conflict that consumed so much attention throughout the years of the book's composition.

Part II: *Comment c'est* and Bodily Pain

This milieu of anxiety and despair formed the backdrop against which Beckett's work on *Comment c'est* trudged ever onwards. The last of the author's major works that could by any stretch of the imagination be called a novel, Beckett had started the long process of the book's composition in December of 1958 (months after the *La Question* controversy but long before any resolution to the questions raised by it). Despite the fact that of all Beckett's creative outlets the novel "seemed to him most important,"[111] work on this particular foray into the genre proceeded at an agonizingly slow pace. Splitting his time between his cottage in Ussy and his apartment in Paris, "by March 1959, after what he felt had been months of false starts and rewriting, he had only about ten pages" which "were a mere approximation to what he wanted."[112] He continued working on the novel fitfully throughout the year, interrupted by travels to London and Dublin (where his alma mater Trinity College had decided to give him an honorary doctorate), but by the time autumn leaves were being tossed around by the wind the book was still giving him enormous trouble. Facing acute writer's block, Beckett "had now decided that it might take another year at least"[113] to finish the novel, and had adopted a far more disciplined and rigorous approach to writing than he had previously employed, "trying to achieve at least half a page a day, though on some days he stopped working without achieving this."[114] The work went on, and each day it became more and more evident

[111] Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*, (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 488.
[112] Ibid, 489.
[113] Ibid, 496.
[114] Ibid, 496.

that "none of his extended prose works gave him so much trouble as this comparatively short last novel."[115]

Despite the difficulty of the process, by October 1960 Beckett had managed to finish a full draft of the novel and hand it over to Lindon, and *Comment c'est* was published by Les Éditions de Minuit early the next year. Though by this time Beckett was an author well-known for bizarre and unnerving scenarios, his vision in *Comment c'est* is particularly disturbing and strange, in addition to its being the most stylistically experimental of the extended prose works. The novel takes shape in three sections, "before Pim with Pim after Pim,"[116] in which an unnamed first-person narrator recounts fragmentary "bits and scraps"[117] of memory from his "life life the other above in the light said to have been [his]"[118] and of his new (presumably after-)life crawling "in the mud" over a "vast stretch of time" in an unknown purgatorial space filled with darkness. This setting bears some similarity to other of Beckett's works (such as the later short story "Le Dépeupleur," or "The Lost Ones"), a phenomenon attributed by the critic Pascale Casanova to the fact that "the dim and the void are Beckett's response to the spatial conventions posited by the whole literary tradition as conditions of possibility of literature,"[119] opening up an area where, in her view, Beckett has freedom to invent rules of language as existence.

From the first page of *Comment c'est* it becomes clear that, while the narrator may be the one speaking to us, the words themselves are dictated by a mysterious other, "an

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[115] Ibid, 496.
[116] Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, (New York: Grove Press Inc,1964), 7.
[117] Ibid, 7.
[118] Ibid, 8.
[119] Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, (London: Verso, 2006), 19.

ancient voice in [the narrator] not [his]."[120] The voice decides the words, and the narrator merely repeats after, as if taking dictation. Throughout the book, the reader learns all about the bizarre arrangement of this creature's existence there in the eternal, hellish darkness. The first section, "before Pim," chronicles the narrator's journey through the darkness, crawling on his belly through the mud towards Pim, "a fellow-creature more or less"[121] who leads an apparently identical existence in the darkness. The narrator drags along with him a sack filled with tins of food, as well as a can opener initially used to access the tins. Throughout the journey the creature recounts memories of his previous life, including memories of his parents and a woman, and makes clear through his descriptions that his current situation is some variety of Hell. The second section, "with Pim," details the stationary "life in common"[122] of the narrator and Pim once the narrator has reached his destination. The narrator, in his corporeal manifestation, is apparently without language, and cannot communicate with Pim save by physical interactions, which more often than not manifest as specific routines of torture, with the narrator tormenting Pim with a series of injuries such as thumping his head, scratching his buttocks, and stabbing him in the ribs with the can opener.[123] Pim, on the other hand, is able to sing and grunt and offer utterances, and it strongly appears as if Pim's access to language is an ability desired by the narrator, who feels the need to have

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[120] Ibid, 7.
[121] Ibid, 54.
[122] Ibid, 55.
[123] The title of the novel, *Comment c'est*, or *How It Is*, takes on a certain grim irony when one considers the presence of torture within its pages and the prevailence of torture in Algeria and France at the time of its composition. It is also worth noting briefly that the use of the tin opener (an everyday object) as a weapon here is vaguely reminiscent of the appropriation of everyday objects such as batteries and bathtubs for the purposes of torture by the French soldiers in Algeria.

a record or testimony about his experiences, and make Pim's voice his own (indeed, perhaps the book itself is this appropriated voice and record). The torments the narrator inflicts upon Pim then have the ostensible aim of attempting to teach Pim to respond to certain tortures with particular verbal reactions. These tortures continue until such a time as Pim makes up his mind to abandon the narrator, stranding him in the darkness again. In "after Pim," the once again solitary narrator ruminates on the arrangement of this purgatorial world while awaiting his own hypothesized tormenter-to-be, which he names Bom. There are, he speculates, many others like him and Pim, out there in the mud-dark, because the principle of justice requires that every torturer is himself tortured by another in turn, and seeing as Pim has abandoned the narrator rather than torture him (and, presumably, gone off somewhere to torture someone else), there must be another being, that which he calls Bom (though this name is also used to refer to the narrator, at times), destined to torture the narrator. And, of course, there must also be someone destined to torture Bom, and someone to torture Bom's torturer, and so on, and so on, forever, in an endless series of ad hoc hypotheses of increasing unlikelihood. [124] In addition to this, the narrator speculates that there is another being, outside of the purgatorial realm, named Kram, who fastidiously observes the goings-on of the narrator, acting as a witness, assisted in this task by a scribe named Krim, who makes a record of all that has happened, a record we are perhaps reading. Of course, while the book is partitioned into three distinct sections, the structure of the plot clearly implies a

[124] The pun of the novel's title ("comment c'est" is pronounced identically to "commencer," the French verb for "to begin") takes on a kind of grim irony here: if this principle of justice holds true, once this violence begins, it can never end.

fourth (with Bom), but the reader is left to imagine what events may take place in such a section on the basis of the previous three.

Comment c'est is a work intimately concerned with the interaction of language and physical pain. As Adam Piette has observed, "at the core of Beckett's novel, even from its inception, there is a relationship between extorted speech and torturing power as an act of violent appropriation of voice."[125] In his reading, as in my own, the novel operates as a response to (or at least strongly mimics) the human rights violations carried out by the French in Algeria, and "explores an extreme form of rights summoned by the plight of stateless victims of hegemonic violence and control."[126] Through the central episode of Pim's torture in part II, Beckett teases out the interplay between violence and voice, and broaches the politics of the body in a far more explicit way than he had in his previous work, infusing the novel with a consciousness of both contemporary political history and phantoms of recent historical traumas (such as the experience of the Vichy years), all the while engaging in a dialogue with those voices, like Sartre's, who were most forceful in their opposition to torture. Through his scenario — in which there is potentially a vast system wherein each participant alternates roles as torturer and tortured — Beckett makes visible Sartre's observation in "Une Victoire" (discussed in Part I) that the nature of torture is such that anyone, according to circumstances, can be transformed into "victime ou bourreau."[127] But perhaps even more importantly, Beckett also demonstrates the psychological framing

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[125] Adam Piette, "Torture, Text, Human Rights: Beckett's *Comment c'est* / *How It Is* and the Algerian War," in *Around 1945: Literature, Citizenship, Rights*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 154.
[126] Ibid, 152.
[127] [victim or torturer].

Sartre claims is necessary to sustain colonial oppression and justify the infliction of pain upon colonial subjects, namely the relegation of the colonized to a sub-human status by the dominant group.

To the narrator, Pim is perceived as an Other. While he may be a "fellow-creature more or less"[128] — a formulation which itself sows doubt about Pim's equal claim to humanity, even while acknowledging it — from the very beginning the narrator suspects him as someone potentially foreign. Listening to Pim mumble indistinctly shortly after encountering him, the narrator realizes that he "can't make out the words the mud muffles or perhaps a *foreign* tongue perhaps he's singing a lied[129] in the original perhaps a *foreigner*."[130] A line later the narrator images Pim to be "an oriental,"[131] further removing him to a realm of otherness (at least from the narrator's presumably European perspective). Even earlier than that, when the narrator is imagining how he could have "dug [his fingernails] in[to Pim's buttock] if [the narrator] had wished" and how he "longed to dig deep furrows drink the screams" and imagined "the turbaned head bowed over the fists the circle of friends in their white dhotis," the narrator demonstrates his immediate conceptualization of Pim as some form of exoticized oriental figure.[132] [133] This perceived difference between Pim and the narrator is made

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[128] Beckett, 54.
[129] The inclusion of the word "lied" here is a fascinating choice, introducing, as it does, the idea of Germanness, which in the light of the context and historical background puts one in mind of the Gestapo torturers and Beckett's own experiences in the Resistance during the war, as well as the frequent comparisons to Vichy that critics of torture were employing during this period to condemn the practices of the French torturers in Algeria.
[130] Ibid, 56. Emphasis mine.
[131] Ibid, 56.
[132] Ibid, 53.
[133] Interestingly, a "dhotis" is a garment worn by Hindus, not Muslims, and consequently it would be difficult to read the inclusion of a reference to this article of clothing as something contributing to Pim's characterization as somehow Algerian, except insofar as Beckett — ventriloquizing the colonialist

even greater in the next few pages, and with even less justification. Mirroring the structure of the absurd logics oppressors always use to justify their dominance, the narrator explains why he believes Pim is exempted from the kinds of rights usually granted to people by virtue of their personhood: "I always say when a man's name is Pim he hasn't the right and all the things a man hadn't the right always said when his name was Pim."[134] [135] Of course, it was the narrator himself who named Pim, inventing the name for ease of reference, and as such created the very ground upon which he stands to defend his exploitation of his "fellow-creature," an action not dissimilar to the way in which colonizers often invent pretexts to justify their imperialistic actions, such as the French notion of a "*mission civilisatrice*" in the colonies, discussed in Part I.

While the parallels are by no means explicit or unique, given Pim's perceived status as a "foreigner" — and especially as "an oriental" — it is impossible to avoid reading this type of differentiation and othering as reminiscent of the treatment Algerians and other colonized peoples received at the hands of the French, particularly during the legal state of exception that marked the Algerian War, whether they were being explicitly designated as less protected by the law (as in the Code de l'Indigénat, also discussed in Part I) or more subtly discriminated against in everyday interactions.

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mindset through the narrator — may be demonstrating one of the myriad ways in which orientalizing Westerners have a tendency to lump together disparate groups on the basis of superficial similarities, a tendency which is still seen today in the occasional histrionics surrounding the misattribution of traditional Sikh dastars to Islam.

[134] Ibid, 59.

[135] Curiously, this passage is presented far less forcefully in the original French, given as: "je dis toujours quand on s'appelle Pim on ne doit jamais tout ce qu'on ne devait jamais disait toujours quand on s'appelait Pim." Absent is any direct equivalent to the word "right" (which in French is "droit") as one finds in the English, and Beckett's later decision to translate the text as he did may be an indication that he intended for the paragraph to have greater political resonance. Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1961), 74.

Even setting aside the revelations of *La Question* and the other anti-torture literature published by Les Éditions de Minuit, Beckett was not unaware of the forms of colonial violence undertaken in the name of empire. The author had previously researched various colonial projects as he worked on earlier books, initially focusing on the behavior of the English in Ireland, but subsequently becoming aware of other imperialist projects throughout the world through contact with a variety of anti-colonial literature contained within Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology, to which Beckett contributed a sizeable number of translations (which often, as Emilie Morin has pointed out,[136] come across as more politically forceful than the originals). More than that, as Morin later goes on to write, "Beckett was familiar with the role of torture [specifically] in the longer history of colonisation: [Roger] Casement's *Black Diaries*, which [Beckett] read upon their publication by Grove Press in May 1959, describe techniques later emulated in Algeria, and evoke the Putumayo Indians of Peru submitted to torture."[137] Beckett's biographer Anthony Cronin goes even further, noting that Beckett "read [the diaries] with [what] he called 'great absorption,' and came to the conclusion that they were 'quite authentic,' " further observing that it is "not fanciful to see the sedulous anatomical thumpings and pokings of [*Comment c'est*] as deriving to some extent from the Casement Diaries,"[138] given that Beckett read them at the same time he was hard at work with his novel.

Beckett's statement that he regarded the *Diaries* as "authentic" should be understood in the context of numerous accusations of forgery leveled against them.

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[136] Morin, "Another War Entirely: Internationalist Politics," in *Beckett's Political Imagination*, 79–129.
[137] Morin, 222.
[138] Cronin, 495.

Casement's writings have been controversial for as long as they have been in the public eye. A fascinating and contradictory figure, the Irishman's story is exactly the kind of tale that interested Beckett, dealing as it does with questions of conflicting truths and taboo subject matter. Made famous in his own lifetime, Casement rose to prominence as one of the earliest human rights campaigners and Western critics of imperialism, exposing horrific and dehumanizing practices employed by Belgian colonial authorities throughout the Congo in a damning document, the so-called *Casement Report* of 1904, assembled at the behest of British authorities eager to undercut their Belgian rivals. Several years later, Casement authored a similar report, this time regarding the brutal labor practices of a British rubber company operating in the Amazon, in which he documented the widespread abuse of indigenous Peruvian workers by the company's representatives, ultimately concluding that he found the conditions there to be just as sickening as those in the Congo years earlier. For this and his previous work, Casement was knighted by the British government, an honor which the authorities came to regret bestowing years later when Casement emerged as one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, an Irish rebellion that aimed to expel the British colonizers from the country and establish an independent Irish republic.[139] References to the *Diaries* first appeared in the wake of Casement's trial following the uprising. Because they contain frank

[139] Interestingly, this uprising would have likely been one of the first major political events of which Beckett would have personally been aware. As a ten-year-old student at a private Dublin school Beckett's ordinary routine was disrupted dramatically following the rebels' occupation of public buildings throughout the city. As the days of fighting went on and civilians regained confidence that the British military would prevail, Beckett's father took him and his brother one night to a vantage point where the flames of the battle could be clearly seen, a memory which Beckett later recalled "with horror" (Cronin 36). In this way Beckett's earliest political attention was directed towards an example of anti-colonial resistance, a theme which seemed to recur throughout his life, whether in his antipathy towards the Nazis or his unease over French repression in Algeria.

reflections on Casement's homosexual encounters and his sexuality, Casement's defense counsel had hoped to use the *Diaries* to achieve clemency from the court, predicting their use would result in the revolutionary being found "guilty but insane." However, Casement refused to allow their admittance, and was subsequently sentenced to death. Prior to his execution, British authorities secretly circulated some of the more lurid passages of Casement's *Diaries* in quarters that might otherwise have been more vocal in calling for clemency on behalf of the famous human rights campaigner, leading to diminished sympathy for the Irishman and accusations by his supporters that the *Diaries* were forgeries fabricated by the Crown. This dispute over their authenticity continues even until the present day, as numerous studies have failed to unearth definitive proof one way or another. Though the fact of their existence had been commonly known for decades, large segments of the *Diaries*' text were not made available publicly until the late '50s, and it was these recently published excerpts upon which Beckett was commenting.

The coincidence of Beckett consuming Casement's *Diaries* at the same time as he was writing *Comment c'est* is too striking to pass without comment. While any assertion about links between the two texts necessarily veers into the speculative, it's difficult to reject out of hand the possibility that Beckett was influenced by the life and supposed writings of Casement while putting together his last novel, particularly given the pressing questions of human rights violations and anticolonial struggles that were present among Beckett's social circles during the early '60s. It is entirely possible that Beckett did make use of elements of the *Black Diaries* just as Cronin asserts, making

opaque references to the humanitarian and anti-colonialist Irishman in a book that was (at least to some extent) an outgrowth of anxieties surrounding the same unresolved problems to which Casement dedicated his life.

Regardless of its potential sources, it is clear that *Comment c'est* consists of a scenario steeped in repressive otherizing violence. The narrator identifies Pim as someone outside of the narrator's own identity, and visits violence upon him partially in response to this fact. But despite the narrator's suspicions that Pim may be an Other, he remains attracted to him for a few simple reasons. One, of course, is that the total isolation of the purgatorial environment makes any form of human interaction appealing, which leads to the kind of codependence the narrator eventually develops in a kind of manifestation of the classic Hegalian master/slave dialectic. But another, more important reason, is the allure of Pim's language. This begins almost immediately after the narrator first encounters Pim, as Pim — after some initial grunts and cries — sings "a little tune suddenly he sings a little tune suddenly,"[140] marking him as someone capable of complex vocal expression, a trait which cannot be applied to the narrator himself. The narrator is therefore excited at the prospect of there being "a human voice there within an inch or two,"[141] and despite Pim's perceived foreignness, "he can speak then that's the main thing."[142] This fascination with Pim's voice arises out of the apparent lack of the narrator's own. It is through Pim's possession of something that the narrator lacks, yet desires, that he becomes interesting to the narrator, and in this way the Other is made to take on significance in the form of his usefulness to the

[140] Beckett, 55.
[141] Ibid, 56.
[142] Ibid, 56.

narrator, just as a colonial subject takes on significance (in the mind of a colonizer) principally through what stands to be gained by the colonizer through their exploitation of the colonial subject. While Pim "has the use [of a voice] without having really thought about it," and is able to express himself in song[143] (one of the most engaged uses of a voice), for the narrator, "not having [the use of a voice] personally," his own song is "quite out of the question."[144] An interesting power dynamic is thus established: The narrator (initially a more mobile entity than Pim) emerges as the dominant figure in the interaction, but in order to do so he must appropriate the use of a resource Pim possesses and he lacks, namely the capacity for vocalization. This is achieved through the establishment of a torturer/victim relationship, as the narrator torments Pim into giving utterance to the narrator's own life story, and it is this "pseudo-couple of torturer and victim, created by the relation of power to subject, [that] generates text."[145] Indeed, as the novel progresses, and the reader learns about the supposed existence of the witness Kram and the scribe Krim, we begin to suspect that the very text we are reading may by the record of this torture, that this novel may be the coerced "confession" given by Pim. It becomes, after a point, impossible to distinguish between what text may belong to the narrator himself and what text may be appropriated from his victim.

This relationship between torturer and victim, and their contest over control of language, subsumes every other aspect of the novel, forming what appears to be a dark,

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[143] Given the context of the narrator tormenting Pim, it is difficult to avoid recognizing, in this invocation of "song," the popular euphemism "to make [somebody] sing," which is used to signify the act of forcing someone into a confession, whether that confession is coerced through torture or some other less overtly violent method.
[144] Beckett, 56.
[145] Piette, 154.

indissoluble bond between the two principal characters. This, as Piette has noted, perfectly illustrates Sartre's observations about the relationship between torturer and victim in "Une Victoire,"[146] and "Beckett's nightmare vision of the narrator torturing the story of his own life from his victim Pim stages the inseparability of torturer and tortured."[147]

More important than this, however, is the crucial role played by the power of voice itself, which Piette mentions but fails to fully explore as the underlying mechanism by which this interdependence of torturer and tortured ultimately operates. The entire relationship between Pim and the narrator depends upon the indispensable importance of voice when it comes to establishing power through narrative. As Elaine Scarry observes in her pathbreaking work *The Body in Pain*, the role of torture almost always is ultimately to force "one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, [to allow] real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power."[148] In Scarry's view, to be subjected to the brutal experience of torture is to have one's world destroyed, to have everything else in existance blotted out by the sheer, overpowering immediacy of extreme pain, and through this blotting-out the torturer is able to appropriate the voice of his victim (through "confession") and apply it to his own ends, often (at least in part) in the service of legitimating the torture itself. In this way "the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words,"[149] which for the prisoner is an experience akin to the total annihilation of

[146] Itself reminiscent of Hegel's famous formulation of the master/slave interdependence.
[147] Ibid, 152.
[148] Scarry, 18.
[149] Ibid, 36.

selfhood, as "even [their] voice, the sounds [they are] making, no longer form [their] words but the words of another."[150] All of this is accomplished through the recognition and exploitation of a duality best formulated as "the body [as] the locus of pain, and the voice [as] the locus of power,"[151] an understanding which lends the torturer a world- and language-destroying power over their victim, the ability to ventriloquize another human being for their own ends. Ultimately, "the goal of the torturer is to make the one [aspect of the dyad], the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it,"[152] and through rendering the voice absent facilitate its reconstruct as a parrot for the torturer and the regime they represent.

The power of voice is undeniably central to the scenario of *Comment c'est*, and many of Scarry's observations about the interaction between torture and voice find themselves borne out, and in a certain sense literalized, by Beckett's text. Most immediately, of course, is the fact that Pim lacks any serious characterization for nearly the entire novel. Save for his first and final act of defiance — namely his abandonment of the narrator at the end of part 2 — Pim appears to have no agency, no volition, and no specific characteristics except for his possession of a voice (which, again, is almost immediately co-opted by the narrator for his own ends). Were this a more conventional novel this feature would almost certainly be a target of criticism, indicating as it does that Pim more or less exists solely for the purpose of providing the narrator with opportunities for character development and an avenue for giving voice to his story.[153]

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[150] Ibid, 35.
[151] Ibid, 51.
[152] Ibid, 49.
[153] Pun intended.

Be that as it may, Pim's absence of characteristics is in accord with Scarry's claim that torture possesses the power to rob a person of selfhood, annihilating their personality. Once brought into the relationship of torturer and tortured, Pim ceases to exist as an independent person, his selfhood having been destroyed.

But more subtly than this aspect of their relationship, the narrator — and the text itself — is also preoccupied immensely with voice itself, and specifically with its capacity to render personhood and power onto the subject who possesses it. The word "voice" appears in the novel no fewer than 34 times, and its frequency is indicative of the paramount importance it holds for the narrator. In a few moments of self-awareness, the narrator even identifies the product his torturing Pim produces as "extorted voice"[154] (at other moments he moves even further towards self-awareness, almost pleading with the reader that he is "not a monster"[155]), but constantly the matter truly at stake is how the use of a voice is what gives one power. From the first page of the novel the narrator struggles with what appears to be voices in his head, stating that the text we are reading is a record of "how it was," which "he quote[s]… [saying] it as [he] hear[s] it" said by a "voice… on all sides then in [him],"[156] seemingly unable to resist the compulsion to speak, to repeat after, to make a record of his existence on the page. Giving utterance to what this voice says is of the utmost importance, but despite this "words won't come no word not even soundless," even though the narrator is "in need of a word… dire[157]

[154] Beckett, 92.
[155] Ibid, 64.
[156] Ibid, 7.
[157] One wonders if the use of the word "dire" here is a bit of bilingual punning on Beckett's part, given that "dire" is also the French verb for "to say."

need."[158] In short, the character of the narrator lacks the capability, lacks the power, to speak as he feels compelled to, and must seek out that power elsewhere. Of course, one way to interpret this aspect of the narrative is to suggest that the narrator is not, in fact, the narrator, but it is rather Pim, under torturer, giving voice to "the narrator's" story. In this way the need to give utterance is very dire indeed, as the cessation of Pim's torture is contingent upon it, and as a result the continuous refrain that "[he] say[s] it as [he] hear[s] it every word always"[159] can be read as both a statement of fact but also a protestation that he, Pim, is fulfilling what is demanded of him by his torturer. In this way the text can be read as the narrator's words but with occasional material from Pim himself, which inevitably seeps into the text, clouding the perspective and complicating our understanding of its origin.

Regardless of precisely whose voice it is we are reading, throughout the course of part two and part three (the latter of which is to be regarded as the present) there is a transition from Pim alone possessing voice to the narrator alone possessing voice, a transformation achieved through the process of torture. At times there appears to be an explicit recognition that this is the object of the ordeal, such as when the narrator observes "the use of speech it will come back to [him] that much is true it has[160] come back to [him]."[161] And because throughout the entirety of part two Pim alone possess the capacity for speech, there is "no voice only his only Pim's,"[162] and by part three "[the

[158] Ibid, 18.
[159] Ibid, 54.
[160] From the vantage point of the present, in part three.
[161] Ibid, 60.
[162] Ibid, 74.

narrator will] have a voice no voice in the world but [his],"[163] it stands to reason that in this literalizing space — where implicit language-destroying and language co-opting structures are exaggerated — this transformation could have occured only by the narrator robbing Pim of his access to language by appropriating his voice through violence, an action undertaken in order to allow the narrator to tell his own story, to "talk[] of [himself]"[164] through the voice formerly belonging to Pim.[165]

Part two comes to an end when Pim, in his sole act of resistance against his oppressor, abandons the narrator and crawls away into the mud and darkness, lost forever in the incomprehensibly vast stretch of space. But the process of torture acomplished its aim, and now only the narrator has the ability to give utterance to language. "Pim is finished he has finished," the narrator states at the beginning of part three, and there exists only "[him] now part three not Pim [the narrator's] voice not [Pim's] saying this these words."[166] The narrator's voice has now become the "voice quaqua of us all," eclipsing Pim's, expanding in scope and power to such an extent that the narrator claims that it is the only voice to have ever existed, that since the beginning there "was only one voice my voice never any other,"[167] despite the clear anteriority of its absence found in his other statements, such as how at the beginning of part three "[his] voice no objection" is "back at last a voice back at last in [his] mouth [his] mouth no objection a voice at last in the dark."[168]

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[163] Ibid, 76.
[164] Ibid, 61.
[165] And, again, the entire novel is told from the present of part three, after the torture sequence in part two.
[166] Ibid, 86–87.
[167] Ibid, 87.
[168] Ibid, 106.

It's not difficult to understand the reasons for the narrator's insistence on the preeminence of his own voice. Not only have we been witnessing his obsession with the power of voice for the first two thirds of the novel, but throughout part three it becomes increasingly apparent that he is deeply fearful of fading out of existence and into silence, that once he is gone, if he doesn't leave some kind of record of his voice behind (perhaps the very text we are reading), it will be as if he never existed. In this dark purgatorial realm he has "nothing left but voice,"[169] for all his struggles he has "nothing left but words."[170] There is simply "[his] voice otherwise nothing."[171]

This preoccupation remains throughout part three of the novel. While the narrator devotes a significant amount of time to a discussion of Krim, Kram, Bom, Bem, and all the numerous potentially imagined others needed to preserve some sort of semblance of justice in this bizarre world (which we will consider in greater detail later), by the final pages of the narrative he returns again to the centrality of "all this business of voices yes quaqua yes."[172] At the end of the book, the narrator claims, there is "only one voice here yes [his] yes"[173] after "the surprise [of finding] [himself] alone at last no more Pim [him] alone in the dark the mud."[174] While it may be "hard to believe too yes that [he] [has] a voice yes in [him] yes" after his long struggle with Pim, nevertheless, he claims, "it must be believed."[175] But of course it should not be believed. The reader knows where the narrator's voice originates, and however much he may assert that there

[169] Ibid, 94.
[170] Ibid, 95.
[171] Ibid. 95.
[172] Ibid, 145.
[173] Ibid, 144–145.
[174] Ibid, 99.
[175] Ibid, 145.

is "only [him] yes alone yes with [his] voice yes [his] murmur yes,"[176] we know that his in an "extorted voice," a language robbed from Pim through torture. While the narrator stridently maintains that there is only "[his] voice yes [his] yes not another's no [his] alone yes,"[177] we, the readers, know that he is only able to make such a claim at all by virtue of the violence he visited upon Pim.

This erasure of the violence necessary to acquire the power of voice, however, takes on a more complicated role when one considers it concurrently with one of the secondary preoccupations of the text, namely with the notion of justice. The phrase "our justice" appears in the novel at five different points, and from what one can gather through the "bits and scraps"[178] of the text, justice here is conceived of as a system founded upon the notion of reciprocity. The narrator believes, for instance, that because he has tormented Pim (and there does seem to be a recognition that doing so was morally bad, seen in the narrator's protestations that he is "not a monster"),[179] he is destined in turn to be tortured by another, an entity who "is coming ten yards fifteen yards who for [the narrator] for whom [the narrator] what [the narrator] for Pim Pim for [the narrator]."[180] The narrator has taken to calling this supposed entity Bom, or else Bem, but regardless of the name used for him, the important fact is that he is coming "to cleave to [the narrator] where [he] lay abandoned to give [the narrator] a name his

[176] Ibid, 146.
[177] Ibid, 146.
[178] Ibid, 7.
[179] Ibid, 64.
[180] Ibid, 60. Admittedly a confusing passage, but the intent is clear enough.

name to give [the narrator] a life make [him] talk of a life said to have been [his] above in the light,"[181] just as the narrator did for Pim.

The imperative, in the narrator's mind, that each individual in this purgatorial space exists in relation to a series of others in equivalent relations of violence drives the narrator to imagine increasingly bizarre arrangements of people in mud dark: Each having both a victim and a tormentor, each moving towards and away from each other by crawling through the mud, establishing an infinite chain of relationships extending into the vast space of the mud dark. But justice, and all that it entails, also seems to feature more indirectly in the text than just this egalitarian distribution of pain, appearing as systems of violence and record keeping. As Piette has noted, at various points throughout the novel there are references to a mysterious "they" who seem to exist, in a hierarchical relationship above the narrator and the purgatorial realm itself, making decisions and observations about its inhabitants. The narrator observes about particular pleasures, for instance, that "they haven't left [him] that this time,"[182] that "they have taken that away from me this time,"[183] revealing both the narrator's resentment towards the powers that be and their domination over him. More than that, the presence of these authority figures inevitably forms "a *judicial* relationship,"[184] which entails considerations of how Beckett's text makes allusions to or deals with the notion of repressive state violence. There are numerous indications throughout the text

[181] Ibid, 109.
[182] Ibid, 14.
[183] Ibid, 16. The repetition of the phrase "this time" additionally suggests the cyclical nature of the torture system in the mud dark, implying that, since justice demands each has a victim and a tormenter, the process will go on forever, repeating itself endlessly.
[184] Piette, 165. Emphasis in the original.

of some variety of bureaucracy at play in the interrelations between the narrator, Pim, and "they," for instance. The narrator is incredibly concerned, for example, with the fact that "all [he] hear[s] is that a witness [he'd] need a witness,"[185] a concern which increases and grows more detailed as the novel proceeds, until such a point that the narrator even imagines a name for this witness, "the witness bending over [the narrator] name Kram bending over [him].[186] In addition to this witness the narrator imagines a record keeper who dutifully takes down what transpires, "ballpoint at the ready,"[187] a "scribe name Krim" who comes from "generations of scribes keeping the record."[188] Krim carefully records the narrator's actions and utterances, keeping "one notebook for the body,"[189] "a second for the mutterings verbatim," and a "third for [the narrator's] comments."[190] This type of record keeping, and the bureaucratic apparatus it requires, is central to the underlying political structure of torture, and regimes which make use of brutal interrogation methods seldom fail to include some form of documentation or record keeping bureaucracy of this variety.[191]

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[185] Beckett, 18.
[186] Ibid, 80.
[187] Ibid, 81.
[188] Ibid, 80.
[189] Ibid, 81.
[190] Ibid, 82.
[191] Indeed, there is perhaps something to be said for an interpretation of this bureaucratic system in Beckett through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's well-known analysis of bureaucracy, in which there is "a continual adaptation of the organisation to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience" (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 188–189). While Beckett's scenario is obviously far too abstract to apply this critique of state organization directly, it is possible to see the slight acts of resistance (Pim's flight from the narrator, for instance) undertaken by the inhabitants of the mud dark (who, in their dual roles of torturer and victim, can be read as the bottom tier of the bureaucratic system designed to generate text from torture) as Gramsci's "thrusts from below," in constant competition with "orders from above" issued by the likes of Krim and Kram.

But most interesting, in the context of these bureaucratic and state-like features, is the way in which violence here (in pantomime of real-world violence) serves to create new relationships of power and (for lack of a better term) legality between the characters of the novel. As Walter Benjamin observed in his "Critique of Violence," "law sees violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system,"[192] and consequently strives to incorporate all violence into the framework of that system. One method for achieving this is, of course, eliminating violence between private individuals, but another method is to take violence between people and systematize it, as we see in Beckett's text, where conflicts between characters such as the narrator and Pim are turned into methods for generating text with the aid of a bureaucratic structure. In a certain sense, then, the torture and violence between the narrator and Pim serves to "establish new law,"[193] becomes "lawmaking violence" (to use Benjamin's expression), which in turn (like in all instances of torture) is used to legitimate the torture itself. This was most certainly the case in Algeria during France's struggle to hold onto its colony, and the military's most egregious acts were eventually to be regarded as legal in the eyes of the state (the Evian Accords for instance, which ended the war and granted independence to Algeria, essentially swept all wrong-doing on the part of the French torturers under the rug and issued a blanket protection from prosecution for acts committed during the war years). This lawmaking character of violence, both in the real world and Beckett's text, not only permits the violence itself to be committed but also expands its frequency, which in a sense undermines the

[192] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 238.
[193] Ibid, 242.

narrator's quest for justice and equality through its continuous expansion. For as Benjamin observes, "from the point of view of violence, which alone can guarantee law, there is no equality, but at the most equally great violence,"[194] and in Beckett's text the endless cycle of equally great violence prevents the development of true justice or equality.

But Beckett's text goes far beyond the interplay between torturer and victim noted by Piette, and even beyond the part voice and violence play in this relationship (indispensable though it may be, as we have seen). While Piette's observations regarding the relationship between the narrator and Pim are valuable, the critic falls short of fully appreciating one of the most radical aspects of Beckett's novel. Namely, Piette fails to observe the way in which Beckett's text represents the effects of torture not only through the actions and the linguistic capacity of the characters within the book but also *at the level of language itself*, that is to say, in the very words and structures used to construct the novel. It may be difficult to grasp what exactly I mean by this without a familiarity with the recurring characteristics of the text. As an example, the following paragraphs are taken at random from the novel:

> nothing too to be sure often nothing in spite of everything dead as mutton warm and rosy always inclined that way ever since the womb if I may judge by what I know less and less that's true of myself since the womb the panting stops I murmur it

[194] Ibid, 249.

> even Pim with Pim in the beginning part two first half first quarter more lively when I think that I could as I did train him up as I did conceive that system then apply I can't get over it make it work my undoing for ever since it's clear eyelids part close again quick I've seen myself quite clear ever since nothing left but voice[195]

In a certain sense this novel is Beckett's most linguistically adventurous, standing out amongst the œuvre of an author already known for his aesthetic temerity for its radical construction (and, perhaps not coincidentally, the novel remains one of the author's least popular).[196] In it, Beckett presents the reader with a prose style that is stripped down to its barest elements, a dry and spare technique that purges all extraneous material from its pages and leaves behind only the faintest residue of aestheticized language, in some ways like a skeleton separated from the tissues, nerves, and systems that make up a complete organism. Syntax is mangled and broken, phrases are stitched to one another with little regard for flow, capitalization is reserved for proper nouns and emphasis, punctuation is done away with entirely. Adjectives are few and far between, and adverbs are fewer and farther. Prepositions and small linking words such as "to," "in," "on," and others of the kind are absent more often than not.

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[195] Beckett, 94.

[196] Indeed, writing for the *New Yorker* upon the publication of the English version of *How It Is*, the novelist John Updike penned a review panning the novel, mimicking its style in what was perhaps a then-funny parody but today strikes one as cliché and gimmicky. Even one of Beckett's biographers, Anthony Cronin, has reflected with regret upon his own enthusiastic review of the book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, remarking that he now believes Beckett was "perhaps reaching a point when the aesthetic satisfactions, the incidental beauties of sound and sense, even the illuminations of human existence, seemed insufficient reward for the pains and difficulties the reader was asked to undergo." (Cronin, 536–38).

Divisions in the text (in lieu of the neat, punctuated divisions one finds in conventional sentences) come in the form of frequent paragraph breaks, always left without indentation. What remains at the end of this process is merely the barest structure of the language, minimal signification. *Comment c'est*, like the three novels of the Trilogy, functions essentially as a stream-of-consciousness narrative, but unlike those three books the consciousness in question has been reduced to a kind of simple-mindedness, or at the very least lacks the expressive capacity of any of the narrators found in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* or *The Unnameable*. The words used are as a rule very basic, common, and unliterary. The book attains the nearest thing possible to a record of grunts and sounds without abandoning language completely. It's a process that Pascale Casanova (when writing about a later text, *Worstward Ho*) attributes to Beckett registering "the impossibility of completely 'dissolving' the inevitable bond between word and thing and announc[ing] the kind of compromise that is the unsound rule of 'somehow on': he abstractifies language as much as possible, to the point where there is 'nohow on.'"[197] Simply put, its prose is ugly.

But to understand the significance of this minimalistic style in the context of the book's torture scene (and in the context of the questions surrounding torture being furiously debated during the time of the novel's composition), it would be valuable to turn once again, in greater detail, to Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain.*

Scarry begins her book with the seemingly-insignificant recognition of "the difficulty of expressing physical pain,"[198] observing that pain evades straightforward

[197] Casanova, 103.
[198] Scarry, 3.

description and consequently cannot be adequately conveyed, in any meaningful sense, to another person through language. Pain thus remains something which "has no voice,"[199] and this basic fact has a number of far-reaching effects which spider ever outward from the empathy-inhibiting nature of this incommunicability. Though Scarry directs her energy throughout *The Body in Pain* towards the significance this holds for the most extreme types of circumstances — e.g. for torture and war — we are also able to observe the effect this phenomenon has on a number of more mundane experiences. For example, it is a common occurrence even today (likely due to factors stemming from centuries of patriarchal domination and the ideology which that entails) that physicians frequently underrate the severity of pain experienced by female patients, believing women's expressions of pain to be exaggerated or otherwise incorrect. Similarly, the racist notion (frequently employed historically by slave-owners to justify the brutal labor conditions in which they kept their slaves) that people of African descent have a higher tolerance for (or perhaps a lesser capacity to experience) physical pain endures among racists.[200] One can even encounter this problem in the simple emergence of the various pain scales used in the medical profession to try and gauge the extent of a patient's agony, which (as anyone who has ever had to answer a doctor's on-a-scale-of-one-to-ten questions could tell you) is a inadequate means of discussing hurt, and is moreover reflective of the asinine supposition that something as subjective as a person's experience of pain is somehow quantifiable.[201] All these examples stem from the same

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[199] Ibid, 3.
[200] Kelly M. Hoffman, "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs About Biological Differences Between Blacks and Whites." Proceedings of the National Academy of Science 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296–4301.
[201] For a creative treatment of this problem, see Eula Biss's personal essay "The Pain Scale."

fundamental issue: Language itself is incapable of giving utterance to the experience of pain, causing pain to take on an "unsharability" stemming from "its resistance to language."[202]

But this unsharability of pain is more than simple resistance to language: In fact, "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[203] In this light Pim's initial utterances in *Comment c'est* — his first "faint shrill cry,"[204] his "second cry of fright,"[205] and all his other continuing "cries"[206] — take on new significance, each elicited, as they are, through the narrator's application of violence to Pim's body, first by scratching with his nails and later with the help of the can opener. While the violence visited upon Pim at this point is comparatively light in the context of torture, and even by the standards of the book (after all, the narrator himself observes that he "could have dug [his nails] in [deeper] if [he] had wished [he] longed claw dig deep furrows drink the screams"[207] of Pim), this moment nevertheless demonstrates one of Scarry's key insights about the nature of pain, specifically that "to witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language."[208] By portraying Pim's torture sequence in the way that he does, Beckett demonstrates this

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[202] Scarry, 4.
[203] Ibid, 4.
[204] Beckett, 51.
[205] Ibid, 52.
[206] Ibid, 54.
[207] Ibid, 53.
[208] Scarry, 6.

phenemenon both through Pim's cries and the style of the written narrative itself. Both inhabit an ill-defined space somewhere in the realm of pre-language, explicitly in the case of Pim's cries and symbolically in the case of the text. Through this destruction of language Beckett approaches a long-held aesthetic goal of his, what years earlier, in a letter to Axel Kaun, he called "literature of the non-word" [Literatur des Unworts],[209] or the unwinding of language and the construction of a literature on the basis of language's failings. While long a project of the author's, I contend that it is here in *Comment c'est* that Beckett's striving for an unlanguage reaches its apotheosis, aided by pain's incommunicable nature.

More than that, this particular aesthetic preoccupation of Beckett's, so evident in *Comment c'est*, is also a novel approach to solving an expressive problem observed by Scarry. While it is easily ascertainable that pain possesses a certain quality of incommunicability when it comes to those in pain attempting to express their experience, the same interestingly holds true for the artist, a person "whose lifework and everyday habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech" yet nevertheless "ordinarily falls silent before pain." [210] Moreover, according to Scarry, "the rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature is most striking when seen within the framing fact of how consistently art confers visibility on other forms of distress,"[211] namely forms of psychological discomfort. While Beckett, of course, addresses these questions throughout his work as well (the problem of individual alienation in the

[209] Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et al, ed., *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume I: 1929–1940*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 512–520.
[210] Scarry, 10.
[211] Ibid, 11.

modern world above all), it is his treatment of this specific problem, that of physical pain's inexpressibility, that sets Beckett apart from his fellow artists. What the author manages to do so creatively in *Comment c'est* is find a backdoor into the expression of pain, by attempting to portray it not explicitly, through its presence, but rather implicitly, through the conspicuous absence of its adequate expression. Through the action of lumping together the acts of torture detailed in the narrative and the bare, broken language of the text itself, Beckett manages to create a noticeable void onto which the reader is forced to impose meaning, an absence that, in the manner of dark matter, serves to reveal significance.

But the fact of Beckett's ability to do this takes on a higher degree of moral importance in light of the widespread usage of torture by French forces during their attempt to suppress the Algerian Revolution. After all, it was the fight over prisoners' freedom to express their own pain, pain being visited on them by the French state, that resided at the core of the censorship trials in which Jérôme Lindon and Les Éditions de Minuit found themselves enmeshed during the war years. This question of the ability to express pain is therefore crucially important politically. As Scarry observes, "the failure to express pain… will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power."[212] It was thus that the application of torture in Algeria was able to run rampent not only "dans le silence complice des autorités civiles,"[213] but in fact *because* of this silence and the prohibition on pain's expression. But by the same token the inverse is also true, and "the successful expression of pain will always work to

[212] Ibid, 14.
[213] [with the complicit silence of civil authorities], Rioux, 90.

expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation,"[214] which is why the exposure and expression of pain through texts like *La Question* had such an immediate and substantial impact on the hearts and minds of the French public. And it is for this reason, too, that artistic undertakings such as Beckett's are of such significance. For while his particular style and his avant-garde tendencies have a propensity, in many ways, to regard the problems of the real world through a veil, to obscure and abstract them, they nevertheless act as subconscious revealing agents, drawing attention to issues without ever being explicitly "about" them, giving a voice where there would otherwise be silence.[215] And just "as torture consists of acts that magnify the way in which pain destroys a person's world, self, and voice, so these other acts that restore the voice," such as the representation of pain in literature, "become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a dimunution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself."[216] And it is through this reality, this revelation of pain's presence through its linguistic absence, that Beckett's novel takes up the mantle of a quiet radicalism, challenging not only literary conventions but also the rotten political order which held the French Republic in its thrall.

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[214] Scarry, 14.
[215] This abstraction, and perceived distance, perhaps even worked in Beckett's favor when it came to the censors — no one was banning his books, after all, for political reasons. Where he did experience conflicts with censorship (in the United Kingdom and his home country of the Republic of Ireland, for the most part) the point of contention was usually the perceived obscenity of his works, which rubbed the socially conservative sensibilities of the state the wrong way.
[216] Scarry, 50.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Samuel Beckett's work is far from the isolated aesthetic ideal imagined by most of his mainstream critics. While the ontological issues conventionally identified as the focus of his work are undeniably present, my hope is that this thesis may serve to act as some small corrective to the narrow view of Beckett as Philosopher Artist, and contribute to the slowly growing body of criticism identifying the author's writings as both productions of and responses to the political circumstances of his era, which in my view is not only a fuller interpretation of Beckett's œuvre but an ethically necessary stance towards literary criticism in general. Rather than existing in some kind of artistic vacuum, insulated from the world around it by the sheer force of the author's intellect, texts like *Comment c'est* demonstrate clearly how Beckett not only drew from the events and attitudes of the world around him but, after his own fashion, engaged in veiled dialogue with the political culture he found himself surrounded by. While avoiding the kinds of polemical stances and banner waving taken up by many of his politically inclined predecessors and contemporaries (the Surrealists and Brecht come to mind, respectively), he nevertheless demonstrated a keen political sense and an acute concern for the plight of the victim. While he never produced political art in the same pedagogical vein as figures like Brecht, his work is perhaps nevertheless capable of producing a kind of subconscious shock of recognition that has the potential to lead to political change, far-fetched though the actualization of this fact may be.

The focus of this thesis has obviously been Beckett's last novel, *Comment c'est*, but the same types of bodily concerns that preoccupy him in this text can be traced

throughout his entire corpus, starting with the earliest English short stories and novels but continuing (and in fact expanding) in his later works for theatre. As the critic S. E. Gontarski notes (though he neglects to register the political implications of his observation), "what drove (or lured) Samuel Beckett to theater—as a retreat, a haven, or even a sanctuary—was the body, the shape or form that text takes in performance."[217] More often than not, the body in Beckett is somehow restricted, mutilated, or otherwise incapacitated, and appears variously "as material object, shade, specter, or voice" in such a way as to be demonstrative of "what Ruby Cohn has called 'afflicted bodies' or what might be deemed spectacles of pain."[218] The ways in which this occurs shed light on, among other things, various forms of political violence, whether overt, as in the case of torture, or subtle, as in the power relations established through access to scarce resources. (See James McNaughton's facinating reading of *Endgame* as a product of Nazi-era famine politics and an example of Foucault's concept of biopower, for instance).[219]

The subject of torture, in particular, and the imposition of power onto the physical body, in general, surfaces in a few later plays most obviously. As Emilie Morin has observed, two minor texts from around the time of the Algerian Revolution, the radio play *Rough for Radio II* and the stage play *Rough for Theatre II*, "borrow heavily from the conventions of the detective enquiry, and both examine the figure of the

[217] S.E. Gontarski, " 'He wants to know if it hurts!': The Body as Text in Samuel Beckett's Theater," in *Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 195.
[218] Ibid, 195.
[219] James McNaughton, " '*Prophetic Relish*': Famine Politics in Beckett's Endgame," in Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 137–165.

torturer and its common recasting as investigator."[220] In *Rough for Radio II* the scenario features three characters attempting to extract information from a fourth, who "comes to them wearing a hood, a blind, a gag and earplugs."[221] The trio are apparently "aware of the need to scrutinise their report before submission to their superiors," and this and some of the implied methods of torture echo "the explanations given in testimonies such as Alleg's *La Question* concerning the practice of varying interrogation methods to obtain a confession."[222] *Rough for Theatre II*, by contrast, is even clearer in its references to contemporary political events, and perhaps as a consequence was not published until 1975. The early 1960s perversely "saw the transformation of the leaders of the Battle of Algiers into national icons upholding the values of the French Republic,"[223] and given that Beckett's play features an erudite, Dante-loving antagonist who is but a "short step"[224] from Paul Aussaresses, an infamous French general and torturer who participated in the battle, it is understandable that the work failed to appear at the height of the repressive years of the conflict. More than this, the play "engages the same political euphemisms" as those employed by the French forces of the era, in addition to imagining "protective hierarchies and administrations keen to legitimate their practices,"[225] all of which strongly suggest the political inspiration for the work.

Beckett maintains an interest in control over bodies even beyond the scope of the Algerian Revolution. One can locate this fascination in works like the short 1983 play

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[220] Morin, 220.
[221] Ibid, 221.
[222] Ibid, 221.
[223] Ibid, 222.
[224] Ibid, 222.
[225] Ibid, 224.

What Where, for instance, with its invocation of the torture euphemism "give him the works."[226] Or in Beckett's eerie monologue *Pas moi,* or *Not I*, which is one of the clearest demonstrations of a writer/director's control over the physical form of an actor. In it an illuminated mouth hovers suspended midway in the air above the stage, the rest of the actor's body obscured, while the actor delivers a strenuous and frightening speech. This positioning requires quite a bit of set up: The actor's body and head must be fastened into an apparatus such that they are immobilized, allowing the mouth to remain visible through a hole in a wall while preventing it from moving from that spot. Beckett further extends — and makes explicitly visible — this dictatorial control over actors' bodies in one of his last completed plays, which is also conventionally read as his most political, 1982's *Catastrophe*. In this short play a director and their assistant position and reposition the body of an actor posed on stage, sometimes in uncomfortable positions, in this way literalizing and making visible the tyrannical authority of the playwright and director in theater, acknowledging the inherent hierarchies of the genre, and drawing parallels to real-world authoritarians (a parallel made evident by Beckett's dedication of the play to the Czech dissident writer Václav Havel, who later went on to become his country's president but was in prison at the time of the play's composition).

All of which is fascinating, and the excavation of these political resonances has proven to be an engrossing intellectual endeavor, but nevertheless it has left a fundamental question to be addressed. I began this project, at least in part, because I was curious about the viability of the literary avant-garde serving as a vehicle for

[226] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2006), 473.

political criticism. I wanted to know if abstract and cutting-edge art could, in any kind of concrete way, influence the social and material conditions of the world in which it was produced. I wanted to know, in Frank Lentricchia's words, whether it is possible for "a literary intellectual… [to] do radical work *as* a literary intellectual."[227] While it would take a much farther-reaching and non-author-specific inquiry to discover an answer to this question (in the unlikely case that it's possible for this question to be settled at all), it's difficult to walk away from the body of Beckett's work feeling as if one could answer in the affirmative. If one looks back at the concluding paragraph of Part II, which deals with the way in which literature can give voice to the voiceless and thereby acquire political force, I have laid out my best argument for the stance that a novel such as *Comment c'est* can take on real-world issues in a meaningful way. However, it's difficult to escape the unshakable suspicion that the road of abstraction leads inevitably to a political dead end. While Beckett's art may in fact be political, its politics are often plunged into such an obscurity that they are all but indiscernible. If it takes writing a study to determine whether or not a book has identifiable political content, perhaps the answer to that inquiry is ultimately of little real-world consequence.

One would ironically be hard pressed, of course, to come up with a more Beckettian image than that of an artist shouting impotently into the void, driven to give utterance but unable to communicate their point, but this is all the same the image that comes to mind. Certainly, many of Beckett's contemporaries viewed him as insufficiently engaged in the political struggle, and some resented his artistic

[227] Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2.

dominance for this reason. The British playwright John Arden, for one, "denounced Beckett's failure to write plays 'about Algeria' publicly."[228] For another, the German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht was sufficiently incensed about the supposed political neutrality of *Waiting for Godot* that he planned to write "a play deliberately intended as an antidote to"[229] it before his death in 1956. The case of Brecht, especially, is a striking contrast. Particularly during his later period, almost everything he wrote was intended to carry an easily identifiable political message, and despite the fact that they both revolutionized theatre — albeit in different ways — Brecht's realist approach to art stands in stark contrast to Beckett's abstraction. "True realism," after all, "of which Brecht considered himself to be a staunch champion and practitioner, was not merely an aesthetic optic: it was a political and philosophical vision of the world and the material struggles that divided it,"[230] and it participated in the class struggle to bring about the end of capitalism. Beckett's art, then, with its strange and cerebral plays, stands not only as an aesthetic opposite but consequently, in Brecht's view, served to impede political progress. "To reach the exploited classes in the tempestuous era of their final struggle with their exploiters," Brecht thought, "art had to change together with their own revolutionary change of the world and of themselves,"[231] but Beckett's avant-garde revolution served only to alienate people and was perhaps just another manifestation of bourgeois decadence. It's easy to see where Brecht is coming from,

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[228] Ibid, 184.
[229] Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson, and Francis Mulhern, Presentation II to *Aesthetics and Politics,* (London: Verso, 2007), 67.
[230] Ibid, 63.
[231] Ibid, 64.

even if, at the same time, it's difficult to shake the feeling that Brecht's own approach somehow condescends to his audience.[232]

Not all those who were engaged in the vigorous mid-century aesthetic debate Brecht was involved with (Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Lukács, etc.) held Beckett in such low regard. Adorno, in particular, suggested "that it is Beckett who [was] the most truly revolutionary artist of [his] time," stemming from the Frankfurt school philosopher's "assertion that the greatest modern art, even the most apparently un- or anti-political, in reality holds up a mirror to the 'total system' of late capitalism,"[233] and is thus best situated to address the philosopher's famous question of how one is to continue making art after Auschwitz. It is perhaps not coincidence, then, that Adorno was the earliest of Beckett's major critics to identify him as a political writer. Beckett's abstraction itself, in Adorno's view, was a political creation.

Far be it from my responsibility to settle the ongoing debate between these two camps of political aesthetics, but I would venture to suggest that the resolution likely lies (aggravatingly) somewhere in between them. Brecht's realism and didactic theatre stand as one poll of political action, but run the risk of impotence due to their potentially condescending tone and excessive preoccupation with making a forceful political point. Beckett and his art of failure stand as the other poll, which hazards sinking into political irrelevance due to their impenetrability. Both could benefit from aspects of the other, but the truly crucial thing for us — as critics, as creators and consumers of art, striving to manifest change in the world — is to recognize the

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[232] Perhaps such an obvious parable of Hitler's rise as found in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* isn't strictly speaking necessary, for instance.
[233] Fredric Jameson, afterword to *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2007), 209.

absolute necessity of treating our work, and the materials which feed into it, as political objects, to acknowledge the imperative of placing any work of art or any artist in dialogue with their material and social conditions so as to fully grasp their political nature. We have to realize that even someone as supposedly socially remote as Beckett is incomprehensible without a consideration of the political landscape he lived within. Only then can we begin to understand the importance of this art. Only then can literature begin to lay the foundations for a more just world.

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