



# To and Fro Between Eros and Thanatos: *What Where* and the Death Drive

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## Abstract

This paper tries to read *What Where* as Beckett's realistic and pessimistic presentation of the ontological conditions of the human history, which the play defines as investigation, exploitation and quest for the ultimate truth. Its analysis finds that this presentation has important threads in common with the criticism of civilization in the later Freud's metapsychology, which formulated "an all-embracing, grand theory of the psyche" in terms of the development of the individual as well as the evolution of the entire species on the basis of the maxim that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" *What Where* enacts this Freudian vision in theatrical terms as its theater version foregrounds the phylogenetic scale with the physical subjections happening among the characters and its television version the interior depth of the mind with the maneuvering of the television images. Another important commonality is that the character Bam is presented as a figure pertaining to Freud's concept of the death drive. The resulting theatrical picture is a sobering and realistic testimony to the individual and collective human existence that has always survived on questionings about, exploitation of and quest for a different object. This strikes a chord with how Beckett's characters embody his poetics of 'senility,' and leads to the political implications of freedom without hope or meaning, which is the infinite task of Beckett's senile characters.

**Keywords** Samuel Beckett · *What Where* · Death drive · Freudian metapsychology · Senility

## Introduction

There are five characters appearing in *What Where* (1983), but, with one of them being the voice of another, the actual number becomes four. Reading it now, almost three years after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, it is as though the last

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four of the human species have been left who faithfully abided by the social gatherings ban to the very end. In Beckett's literary world, characters are waiting for their demise while merely attending to their base bodily functions and unsteady stream of feeble consciousness in their desolate den, street gutter or sanatorium. They are overlapped by the figures of an individual, a writer, a civilization and even the humanity itself which now all stand in the way of extinction after having consumed all their resources through repeating the vicious circle of anxiety, questionings, urges and confirmation bias over the lack of fundamental knowledge about some essential 'what' and 'where.' Therein lies the strategy of Beckett's unique poetics of 'vaguening,'<sup>1</sup> which effectively blurs the boundaries between different levels of the subject, pursuit, action and its consequences. It is because Beckett adopts his specific strategy of foregrounding the functions and working of the mind themselves, which ever unite and divide—and not the Proustian memory as a unifying consciousness or the scenes of the ever-unraveling Joycean mind—that his poetics can facilitate such variety and coherence in interpretation. Regarding this specifically Beckettian poetics, Lois Oppenheim points out that "Beckett writes a sense of self into existence" (2008: 195), and Hugh Culik explains that "nothingness, that is, the function of the mind becomes central" in Beckett's work (2008: 142). In depicting throughout his works the affective state of an impotent consciousness per se which perceives indefinitely but fails to express or explain the self owing to some fundamental lack of knowledge, psychosomatic diseases or the infirmity with age, Beckett designs those rarefied hints of body and mind, language and cognition and memory and culture in a way that there would be multidirectional associative relationships at work among themselves, thus satisfying in his own way the formalist assumption, such as specified by Esther Sánchez-Pardo, that "the more powerful the connection between the formal sensory properties of the artwork and basic psychic mechanisms the better the artwork is" (2003: 212). And yet, among all those resultant nonrepresentational but presentational dramatic works by Beckett, *What Where*, which goes so far as to challenge curtly, "Make sense who may" (2006: 476), forms no less than an 'objet art' that assumes the strongest formalist connection and condensation at the same time in a way befitting its status as the very last one.

Having briefly mentioned the timeliness of reading *What Where* in this time of pandemic and uncertainties and about Beckett's unique poetics as above, this paper tries, specifically, to read the play as Beckett's realistic and pessimistic presentation of the ontological conditions of the human history, which the play defines as investigation, exploitation and quest for the ultimate truth. It is remarkable to find that this presentation has important threads in common with the criticism of civilization in the later Freud's metapsychology, which formulated "an all-embracing, grand theory of the psyche" in terms of the development of the individual as well as the evolution of the entire species on the basis of the maxim that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (Goleman). *What Where* enacts this maxim of Freud's in theatrical terms as its theater version foregrounds the phylogenetic scale with the physical subjections happening among the characters and its television version the interior depth of the mind

<sup>1</sup> As for the canonical analysis of this strategy, see Pountney's monograph (Pountney, 1988).

with the maneuvering of the television images. Another important commonality is that the character Bam, who oversees both the progress of the play (with his voice) and the process of the interrogations happening therein, is presented as a figure pertaining to Freud's concept of the death drive, which is described as being originally stirred by the genesis of life and ever provoking the ego's libido investment and its pursuit of a ever-higher-level unity with a different outside object. Thus, the resulting theatrical picture is a sobering and realistic testimony to the individual and collective human existence that has always survived on questionings about, exploitation of and quest for a different object, whether it is a fellow human being, a national group, some important knowledge or a natural resource. This strikes a chord with how Beckett describes senility in his works—Beckett's senile figures also find it impossible to go on (threatened by the death drive), but are obliged to go on (provoked a new libido investment) and go on only to fail (frustration) and repeat the process (seeking another unity with a different object) ever all over again.

Although it is not that the same amount of ink has been spilled on *What Where* as on *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, the recent years have seen some significant contributions to illuminating this challenging last dramatic piece of Beckett's. Anthony Uhlmann cites *What Where*, in the last chapter of his 2006 monograph *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, as an illustration of the Stoic conceptions of the image, which he supposed Beckett must have acquainted himself with through the works of Emile Bréhier during his stay in Paris in the late 1920s (130). According to the Stoic theory of image, the play does not represent any incorporeal event of violence but “creates an ontological image of being of violence” (141). Such a being of violence is an image of a body whose individuating quality is violence, and is itself “composed of ignorance” and perpetuates itself by “the vain desire to overcome it” (Uhlmann, 2006: 144). Although the metaphysical vein in Uhlmann's discussion strikes a somewhat different note, this ontological picture of the vicious cycle of violence certainly chimes in with the thesis made in this paper. Arka Chattopadhyay's, (2017) paper titled “The Lacanian What in the Beckettian Where” evinces a different theoretical reading of *What Where*, applying Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. The paper focuses on the logical structure of the play, which seems to frame a potentially perpetual chain of interrogation and torture but involves a logical contradiction by occluding the fifth character and the master Bam's torture, thus rendering its logical framework untenable as well as unrepeatably (Chattopadhyay, 2017: 146–148). Chattopadhyay relates this auto-deconstructive structure of *What Where* to Lacan's discourse theory in which “the Real is defined as the impossible qua discursive formalization” (142), and argues that the play assumes a political implication of its own by revealing this very inoperativity of the master's discourse. While the discussion revolves around the same psychoanalytic underpinnings, this Lacanian post-structuralist focus has not much truck with the focus of this paper, which is Freud's evolutionary metapsychology, whose interdisciplinary approach combines biology, anthropology and psychology.

In terms of the application of psychoanalytic theory and of ontological interpretation, Laura Salisbury's, (2017) paper “‘I Switch Off’: Beckett, Bion, and Thinking in Tortuous Times” is more relevant to the arguments of this paper. Starting from introducing the case of Beckett's befuddled nonresponse to Kay Boyle's invitation to

comment on the Adolf Eichmann trial, the paper argues that *What Where* reflects the influence of the post-war psychosocial research, whose most famous example was the Milgram experiment of 1962, which tried to understand “how there can be an evacuation of mind and thinking” under adverse conditions such as the totalitarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century (Salisbury, 2017: 53). Salisbury verifies that there was mutual influence between Milgram and the Tavistock Clinic in London around the post-war period, at which Freudian psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion worked, and argues that Beckett’s one-time psychotherapy with Bion during the mid-1930s led him later to develop “his own way of representing how thinking can leak out of a scene” (60) in a comparable manner to Bion’s work during and after the Second World War involved with the development of the idea of thinking as “a space of containment” (58). Thus it is regarded that Beckett stages atrocity and torture as ontological conditions in the play, and that the play shows the ways in which the thinking that might be able to contain “the ambiguities and uncertainties of otherness” can be evacuated in political violence, thus asking its audience to hold it open to remember that we still remain under those adverse conditions (Salisbury, 2017: 63). In that it finds violence and torture to be established as ontological conditions of the human being in the play, and that it applies to the interpretation of the play object relations theory’s explanation of the psyche’s dynamic and specific interactions, Salisbury’s paper tends to pave the way for the discussion proposed in this paper. But, rather than suggesting that the play carries any message of remedial injunction, the argument made in this paper endorses something like Stanley Cavell’s position on Beckett’s work as commented on by Shane Weller, that the task in Beckett’s work is “the reduction to nothing of both hope and meaning in the interests of a freedom that would be the essence of a genuinely ‘human’ existence” (Weller, 2005: 21).

Therefore, Anna McMullan’s pioneering study of the play, included in her 1993 monograph *Theatre on Trial*, is found to provide the best foundation for the discussion with its careful textual and performance analysis across the different versions and media and its philosophical reading of the ontological plight of humanity. Her discussion prepared for and foresaw much of the ensuing ontological, philosophical, psychological and political readings mentioned above with the completeness and wide-range of its account. The upcoming discussion will first generally introduce McMullan’s analysis of *What Where* and highlight her reading of the play as a dramatic diagnosis of the operational principles of human consciousness and history, and then try to relate her arguments to Freud’s metapsychological formulations by introducing and applying the Freudian concept of death drive as a bridging link between them.

### ***What Where* and the Ultimate Predicament of the Human Existence**

Beckett first wrote *Quoi où* for a drama festival held in Graz in autumn 1983, but translated it into English for it to be premiered at the Harold Clurman Theatre, New York, on the 15th of June in the same year, with the resultant *What Where* being published by Faber and Faber in London later in 1984. Despite his irritation over the mixing genres, Beckett showed extraordinary “flexibility and openness” in adding

and accepting a number of modifications to the work throughout its adaptations from theater to television and television to theater (McMullan, 1993: 34). The work underwent significant changes in the text and stage instructions as it was adapted for television broadcasting in collaboration with the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1985 after the initial Graz performance, with those changes being reflected in the French performance at the Petit Rond-Point in Paris in April of 1986, directed by Pierre Chabert, and then in the modified English text for the performance at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in 1987, directed by Stan Gontarski. These three different versions all contain changes in dialogue with only the television adaptation featuring visual and stylistic modifications, the latter providing interesting perspectives as to the issues in space, action and theme that Beckett tried to hold on to across the transmedia crossings.

‘Repetition’ is the focal point on which McMullan analyzes *What Where*. *What Where* shows a major pattern of one controlling figure or voice repetitiously imagining, modifying and repeating a narrative as do *Ghost Trio* (1975) and *...but the clouds...* (1976). The commonality between the theater version of the work, which stresses the physical subjection working between the characters, and the television version, which stresses the control and discipline by technical maneuvers characteristic of the medium, is the repetition as revealed in the cycle of the interrogations, in the similar appearances and names of the characters and in Bam’s double identity as both the voice (v) and one of the characters (McMullan, 1993: 34–35). McMullan connects this repetition to imagination, the space-interrupting function of which originates from the process of memory, which originates then from the absence in the finite mind (35). Through a series of repetitions as such connected with memory, the absent object comes to possess a pure possibility and the phenomenality of a ghost, and to achieve substantiality of persistence and cohesiveness within the mind (McMullan, 1993: 35–36).

However, the function of repetition running throughout the work is less concerned with the repeated object than with the process of repetition itself, which imagines and perceives across the repeated action, the split between the character and its voice and the separation of the voice and the playing area. Furthermore, by including Bam, who is the owner of the voice, in the playing area, in a gesture of breaking down the hierarchy between the original and its simulation as well as “the status of the author as creator,” it reveals such a repetition to be not a reproduction of the same but the repetition of the different (McMullan, 1993: 36). McMullan points out that the replacement of the voice by the light in the French performance of the work at Paris illuminates the ‘interior’ of the consciousness of the voice, at the same time as indicating a separated space by itself as the gap between body and consciousness and/or between imagination and reality (1993: 37). The proliferation of the adjacent spaces, as suggested by the entrances and exits of the shrouded figures who have been engaging in the same bouts of interrogation, shows that such a repetition reenacts the human history as “a Nietzschean eternal repetition of cycles of domination and submission,” a time cycle well beyond the individual’s life span (McMullan, 1993: 37).

The television version foregrounds the interiority of memory and consciousness further than does the Parisian version. The artificiality and synthesis-facilitating

qualities of the television image offer conditions favorable for Beckett's preferred effects of illusion, duplication and parody (McMullan, 1993: 37). Firstly, there appears a phenomenological gesture in which the camera, as "an active agent of perception," repeatedly tries in vain to possess the ghost-like images in imagination (McMullan, 1993: 38). Secondly, the replacement of the figure of the characters by their facial close-up shots, together with the replacement of their entrances and exits by face-ups and fade-outs, transforms the acting into a much more static form of acting and the stage space into an unspecified, much flatter space (McMullan, 1993: 38). Finally, the blurring of the spaces of the voice and the characters further foregrounds the interiority as the inward space of consciousness, whereas the possible excessive intimacy thereby evoked is counterbalanced by the extremely simplified and depersonalized facial features of the actors<sup>2</sup> as well as by the mechanically manipulated artificial sound of the voice (McMullan, 1993: 39). By all this, it is found that the television version deals with the questions of space, identity, existence and the self in a more concentrated, efficient and effective manner than do the stage versions.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, let us examine the problem of the existential plight of the human being originating from the inexorable and relentless repetition of the eternal return, which is coexistent with the landscape of such an inward space in the work. As McMullan points out, the dialogue in the play proceeds by centering on the absence of a certain text that would reveal the truth and complete the narrative, with the process of repetition and interrogation and the power dynamics in the play all perpetuated by such an absence (1993: 42–43). Throughout Beckett's oeuvre, "the desire for truth is associated with the desire for mastery," and such "will to truth" that gives rise to the master–slave dialectic (and even ventures the self-destruction of humanity) makes the work read not just as a parody of the act of writing but as that of "history as a struggle for mastery over knowledge, or over meaning" (McMullan, 1993: 43). Such a "key phrase" will clarify the truth, confirm the existence and identity and release the victims from the repetition of the eternal return, but the failure in obtaining any statement about its content ('what') and circumstances ('where') brings about a perpetual repetition of torture and exploitation (McMullan, 1993: 43). This structure of différance of the truth also applies to the reality of creative writing which, despite always interrogating and promising the true aesthetic confession through words, sensorial realization or the acting by actors, ends up attaining no more than another mimesis, and to the worlds of direction and criticism which enter into another interrogation over the former's output (McMullan, 1993: 44).

This post-structuralist explanation by McMullan, which underpins her accounts of the technological and aesthetic changes, the dramatic effects and the thematic, offers a canonical interpretation which greatly helps us to understand the play in

<sup>2</sup> In terms of the face of the 'voice,' it creates the effects of an even more distorted and dispersed image, utilizing the mirror image reflected on a warped glass pane as well as the dimmer lighting (McMullan, 1993: pp. 39–40).

<sup>3</sup> Strangely enough, such dull, mechanical acoustic effects as well as flickers of the facial image called upon by the 'voice' remind one of today's Zoom meeting space.

general depth and breadth. But the autonomy of the post-structuralist semiotic system thus involved, with its Nietzschean tenor which recognizes no predetermined truth but only the communication between the series in which differences bring forth differences, has its limitations in terms of its lack of touch with the existential given in light of Beckett's own position that his work "doesn't depend on experience" but "use[s] it" as its very materials (Knowlson, 1980: 17). Would such a constructivist understanding be able to effectively delve into the very nature of the perpetual process of this vicious cycle of power and fear? One weakness in McMullan's explanation is that it fails to clarify the relationship between the 'interrogation in imagination' happening inside the internal space and the 'exploitation by political apparatuses' working outside on the sites of history.<sup>4</sup> It only records the phenomenon of 'repetition' as commonality between them and does not go so far as to ask why the internal interrogation and the external exploitation repeat from the first place, and what the fundamental impulse which drives and binds together their repetitions is. This paper proposes that psychoanalysis, a theoretical system which observes and analyzes human 'behavior' connected to the unconscious in the depth of the 'mind,' is a suitable vehicle for shedding light on such a common fundamental impulse behind their repetitions intricately woven together and thematized in *What Where*. Especially the theory of Freud, who founded psychoanalysis both as a biologically-minded doctor and as a speculatively-minded psychologist and considerably enlarged, in his later construction of metapsychology, the scope of the analysis of the human psyche to include the criticisms on religion and civilization, will provide the proper framework for doing justice to this final and definitive theatrical work by Beckett, which stages the strongest connection and the liveliest drama between the interiority and the exteriority.

## The Death Drive and the Autonomous Choice of Object

Pointing out that the desire for truth, coupled with the desire for control, is dispersed throughout the entire oeuvre of Beckett, McMullan argues that such Nietzschean 'will to truth,' which can lead humanity on a path to self-destruction, reveals itself, in the initial stage version of *What Where*, most prominently as a parody of the "history as a struggle for mastery over knowledge, or over meaning" (1993: 43). It reminds acquaintances with Freud's theory of his concept of 'death drive.' The death drive is an aggressive drive which constitutes a part of the development of an individual human being and corresponds to a strong urge of an organic life to return to its original inorganic state (Freud, 1984: 308). Libido, which is a psychic drive or energy related to sexual instinct, drastically transfers such a destructive drive towards the outside in order to render it harmless, with the death drive

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<sup>4</sup> It is significant in this connection that, in her later 2010 monograph *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama*, McMullan herself takes an important turn from the premises of the autonomous post-structuralist semiotic system towards more concrete problems of the existential given through basing her analysis on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body.



thereby coming to manifest itself as a drive for control or the will to power (Freud, 1984: 418). In his later theory formed during World War I Freud gives equal status to libido and aggression, the exteriorization of the latter being thus a result of the efforts to reconcile the demand for death coming from the body with the opposed demand for delaying it until an appropriate time in the future (Sánchez-Pardo, 2003: 137–138).

As typical expressions of the death drive, aggression, repetition compulsion and self-destruction are also proper subjects with which to analyze *What Where*. The aggression appearing in the work is manifested in the persistence of the proxy interrogation urged by Bam for the truth related to ‘what’ and ‘where’; Bam’s paranoid denial of the confession of the proxy interrogator concerning the failure in the interrogation; and Bam’s imposition of forced labor to validate his own paranoid obsession with the truth. The repetition compulsion presents itself as that of Bam who, in denial of the result of the proxy interrogation, keeps summoning another proxy interrogator to repeat another bout of interrogation until there is no proxy interrogator and no victim left. Bam’s initial denial reflects his reaction to the possibility of such a traumatic catastrophe as the absence or the inscrutability of the truth. In terms of the thread of the self-destructiveness running throughout the play, a certain development of narrative structure can be seen in the light of the differentiation of the characters in accordance with the color scheme of Rimbaud’s sonnet “Voyelles,” which Beckett once considered during his adaptation work for the television version. When applying this Rimbaudian color scheme according to the vowels a-e-i-o-u, the play’s narrative is as follows: (1) the dark B’a’m symbolizing death, decay and cruelty makes the scarlet B’i’m, who symbolizes the blood and madness and anger, interrogate the blue B’o’m, who symbolizes celestial sharp noises and the silence of the Absolute and (supposedly) has failed in interrogating the green B’u’m, who symbolizes life, peace and mystery; (2) and then Bam makes B’e’m, who symbolizes the sand and the icy spear and the lace patterns, interrogate Bim who has failed therein and then, lastly, takes Bem, who has also failed, to interrogate himself (Beckett, 1999: 449).<sup>5</sup> Such a suppressed storyline cannot fail to give an impression that it represents the development of human history, reminding one of Vico’s four stages of human history Beckett referred to in his early essay “Dante... Bruno.Vico..Joyce.”<sup>6</sup> Translated thus in the Rimbaudian terms, the narrative is that the black symbolizing nothingness, death, decay and the end disposes of the nature-symbolizing green and the celestial blue and the rage-symbolizing scarlet and the ice age-reminiscent white, one by one. Such an entropic development characterizing Beckett’s literary world demonstrates the effects of self-destruction exercised by the drive for control by means of monopolizing knowledge and meaning, and it is precisely this phylogenetic narrative of the play that overlaps with the perspective of the

<sup>5</sup> The descriptions for those differently colored vowels are based on the text of the poem found in the following Wikipedia webpage dedicated to the poem at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voyelles> (accessed: 27/08/2022).

<sup>6</sup> Beckett, (1984).



criticism of civilization in Freud's later theory, which gives a pessimistic overview on the emergence, formation and development of human history.

The phylogenetic scope of the play seems to be counterbalanced and complemented by the ontogenetic specificities illustrated in Irish poet Thomas Moore's "Oft, in the Stilly Night" and in Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*, which are known to have been the other two sources of inspiration for the work (Beckett, 1999: 452). In his notes towards the television adaptation, Beckett connected 'the playing area' to "the light of other days" as pined for in the Moore's poem. There the speaker sings about his lonely state after his boyhood days. His experiences of love have all gone and all his friends have disappeared like fallen wintry leaves. Accordingly, the light refers to the radiant glimpses of those happy memories (Tonning, 2007: 251–252). *Winterreise* narrates a young man's story in which, upon finding out that the woman with whom he had a courtship in spring has left him for another richer suitor in winter, leaves the town where she lives and wanders among mountains and wildernesses (Tonning, 2007: 252). While wandering the young man reaches a cemetery, fearlessly passes through a storm, desires for the three phantom suns in the sky to disappear one by one and, finally, mixes with an old man, who is playing a hurdy-gurdy standing barefoot on the ice, and sings his story to the latter's accompaniment (Tonning, 2007: 252–253). The main thematic thread in Moore's poem is the loss of youthful gaiety and friendship, while the one in Schubert's song cycle is the frustration of sexual desire. According to Freudian theory, the former case can be interpreted to suggest that the 'playing,' a means for an individual human being to achieve his or her first great cultural and psychological accomplishment, cannot help being frustrated in the end, and while the latter one depicts the state of extreme persecutory anxiety and self-destructive drive in which a male adolescent suffers as a result of the frustration of his sexual desire which turned away from the mother and towards another woman in the course of the development of the Oedipus Complex. It is as if the death-drive figure Bam is brooding over the dramatic, but ultimately doomed ups and downs of individual and collective human history at the same time after the end of all things in its own proper darkness. The further hint is that the death drive not only swallows up the humanity at the end of things but also, no matter how repressed, sublimated through culture or substituted in social relations, is always already holding out against the individual or collective ego, always threatening and trying to thwart each developmental stage of an individual or an individual group.

What, then, makes the play stage and embody the death-drive-involved phylogenetic development and the death-drive-involved ontogenetic development at the same time? What is the common origin of these two ever-threatened and eventually thwarted developments thus glimpsed via the allusions to "Voyelles," "Oft, in the Stilly Night" and *Winterreise*? Here we find Freud's evolutionary metapsychology of great help and guide. The psychoanalyst-cum-political scientist Werner W. Ernst points out, together with Freud, that drives are not primary forces or sources but originating from "some process of driving forth which reaches back into pre-human nature" (2003: 3). There are some organic and anorganic older formations preceding the descent of human beings, and Freud's theory of drives focuses on this "coherence of human drives descending from older organic nature reaching as far back as

to the anorganic” (Ernst, 2003: 4). The basic drives Eros and Thanatos<sup>7</sup> springing thus from nature are found in every microcosm including humans, and libido and the death drive, which are the specific human forms of these two basic drives, compose the mental apparatus together with the instances of ego and superego (Ernst, 2003: 4). Thus, Freud does not believe in the normalized positivistic approach according to which the mind and consciousness, as a tabula rasa, are the internal equivalent of the external world (Ernst, 2003: 6). The mind possesses its own properties before its contact with the present external world, and humans are already equipped with some physical organization when they are born (Ernst, 2003: 6). It is important to note in this connection that this physical organization is always already connected to the mind, and the instinctual impulses within the physical organization, still without their proper mental representatives, form the undetermined early mind’s raw expression of instinctual impulses, as the physician-cum-psychologist Freud views body and mind as connected to each other (Ernst, 2003: 6–7). Whenever he speaks of physical organization, somatic qualities or instincts, he speaks of their mental representatives, and he also speaks of drives “in the sense of a priori mental necessities” (Ernst, 2003: 7). These mental representatives of drives build up the natural inventory of evolution within human beings which “cannot ever be reached by a culturalistic approach,” since this inventory is not in debt to humans’ own action or to the nature surrounding them but to their “natural pre-cursor” preceding human’s evolution (Ernst, 2003: 7).

Therefore, anthropological analyses which accept this metapsychological insight of Freud’s require further considerations, in addition to their usual account of social behaviors and interactions, not only of “the unconscious of the pre-verbal development” of individual human beings and of the humanity as a whole but also “the unconscious of their guilt and its repression” on both ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels, in order to “explain the behavior in its totality of a person, not to speak of humanity” (Ernst, 2003: 10). According to Ernst, Freud compares phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels and posits a sort of methodological parallelism between them, thereby building a parallelism between the beginning of the history of the humanity and the early stages in the development of an individual human being (2003: 12). Thus the pre-human death drive is also presented both as the death drive of humanity and as an integral part of the development of an individual human being (Ernst, 2003: 12). Ernst argues that many anthropologists and ethnographers are failing, due to their perspective of empiricist culturalism and environmentalism, to conduct “highly concrete and comprehensive studies” such as those conducted by the Melanie Klein school on the early phases in the development of an individual human being by ignoring Freud’s metapsychology because of its speculative theory about phylogenesis (2003: 12–13). Freud presumes that the generations succeeding the first human beings involved in the original murder came to be entrapped in guilt in connection with the death drive (1990: 176–177). Ernst argues that it is

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<sup>7</sup> In Ernst’s own terms, Eros refers to the drive that “brings forth all life and binds it anew in its multifarious forms of growing,” and Thanatos to the death drive that “hinders love and life” and returns life to the anorganic (2003: 4).

regrettable to ignore the primary force of this account, a force which also takes on various aspects over the course of the development of an individual human being, because of speculation in the metapsychological narrative itself, as so doing would discourage one from specifically taking on the problems of instinctual desire (2003: 12–13).

On the ontogenic level the antagonism between libido and the death drive is already working in the infant who develops an instinctual bond with the mother. Freud uses a similar context of a family environment when phylogenetically conceptualizing the death drive (Ernst, 2003: 14).<sup>8</sup> Such aggression is found in the narratives about primitive human beings. In the light of a family context which is highlighted in those numerous myths about the origin of human life, generative violence is directed to none other than the ‘Father’ (Ernst, 2003: 14). Every crime or murder unconsciously follows that original crime and is a repetition of such a primal patricide as “resistance, opposition, and the attempt of getting rid of the father to replace him” (Ernst, 2003: 14–15). Ernst argues that, according to Freud’s ontogenesis-phylogenesis parallelism, the mental disposition which led Adam and Eve to give into the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge is the ‘narcissistic desire’ which desires not God’s will but their own selves (2003: 15). This mental disposition corresponds to the second of the mental developmental stages of the infant which are as follows: “symbiotic dependency on the mother, narcissism, auto-eroticism, object cathexis, and finally: autonomous choice of object” (Ernst, 2003: 10). The narcissistic desire is a wish always directed toward one’s own self as well as a desire that does not hesitate to take control of fellow humans and to prepare, consume and destroy them according to one’s own purposes (Ernst, 2003: 16). As an instinctual desire or greed, it entails that everything around one’s own self only reflects his or her own needs, and, if any part of his or her environment does not yield to his or her own desire, it turns such an erotic desire into hatred for that part (Ernst, 2003: 16). And what signals the departure from this self-referential narcissistic desire is the very “formation of the object wish” (Ernst, 2003: 16). It is when the object wish is formed that the libido cathected to one’s own self is redirected toward the object world, and that one becomes able to love others and strangers. But such object love does not coincide with charity in the culturalist sense of it, because, contrary to the dualistic point of view of Christianity, Freud’s monistic point of view does not consider human freedom and drives as opposite concepts but understands the former to be the freedom in which humans can freely find out about, turn with and “move freely within their fates of drives” (Ernst, 2003: 16). If that is not the case, love and freedom become opposite concepts, which can hardly be supported even by common sense intuition (Ernst, 2003: 16). It is a good development when one dissolves the libido, which is the love drive, from his or her own desire and redirects it toward objects, and it is a good relationship when one’s own wish, instead

<sup>8</sup> Here Ernst does not cite where he finds such a family environment among Freud’s works, but it seems that he refers to the familial drama happening around the primal parricide discussed in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

of being directed toward his or her own self, freely “picks up challenges or stimuli from the world of things and humans” (Ernst, 2003: 17).

To recapitulate the early developmental stages of a human individual in this regard, the death drive as an ineffaceable fundamental drive originating from the inside of the organism arises as its primal inorganic condition is disrupted by the genesis of life. Subsequently the human organism undergoes its first narcissistic stage of passivity as an unconditionally loved embryo, which neutralizes such death drive by being injected with libido unilaterally from the outside inside the mother’s womb. As the infant comes to experience the primal emotion of fear through the traumatic experience of birth, he or she realizes that it needs to take certain actions, such as summoning the breast by crying, in order to satisfy his or her need of libido. Such conditionality in libido investment stirs again the death drive, and the infant now takes the initiative of taking his or her own body as the object of desire and neutralizes the death drive by thus reaching the secondary narcissistic stage called ‘autoeroticism.’ As the infant as an individual human organism is the subject as well as the object of libido investment here, the libidinal economy is internalized as a whole. But even here the death drive is stirred again owing to dissatisfaction in such autoerotic pleasures, the expansive tendency of the libidinal economy and the prohibitions coming from the surrounding. The infant then acquires satisfaction by managing to form a higher-level unity with another individual or a specific object. It is thus found that libido and the death drive keep trying to disrupt and displace each other throughout the course of the development of an individual human organism. The human being is enabled to neutralize his or her own self-destructive tendency caused by the death drive by the injection of libido into the ego—which is being loved—and, at the same time, realizes the impossibility of unconditional love through the aggression of the death drive, thereby coming to seek higher-level ego-object unification instead.<sup>9</sup>

To return to *What Where*, it can now be said that the play stages and embody the phylogenetic and ontogenetic human development at the same time because it shares with Freud’s metapsychological theory a profound and realistic insight into the pre-human nature. And the figure standing for the death drive springing from such pre-human nature is the character Bam, who urges and thwarts the ego’s successive unifications with different object over the course of its doomed development until there is nothing left and the pre-human darkness resumes. When this Freudian metapsychological insight is applied to the aforementioned Rimbaudian-Vicoian reading of the play, it is specifically found that a certain sequence in the development of the humanity (bliss, authority, anger, disenchantment and self-destruction) overlaps with the pattern in the sustained failures in the ego’s attempt to unify with the object. The first and last lines of the play read as following:

<sup>9</sup> The account of this paragraph is indebted to the stimulating as well as useful discussion in the Timofei Gerber’s webpage “Eros and Thanatos: Freud’s two fundamental drives” at: <https://epochmagazine.org/20/eros-and-thanatos-freuds-two-fundamental-drives> (accessed: 27/08/2022).

V: We are the last five.

In the present as were we still.  
It is spring.  
Time passes.  
First without words.  
I switch on.

(Beckett, 1983: 470).

[...]

V: Good.

I am alone.  
It is winter.  
In the present as were I still.  
Without journey.  
Time passes.  
That is all.  
Make sense who may.  
I switch off.

(Beckett, 1983: 476).

Seeing that the voice of Bam says in the first line that it is spring and that they are the last five now as in the past and in the last line that it is winter and that Bam is left alone now as in the past as the remaining, essential part of the ego (Beckett, 1983: 476), the play indicates that Bam is the death drive which is symbolized by the 'death, decay and cruelty,' the primal darkness which is ever present throughout the passing time, driving the 'journey' of the four seasons and even preceding the generative spring as a pre-human nature.<sup>10</sup> Then the death drive Bam's voice summons (the blue) Bom, which reminds of Vico's 'age of gods' characterized by man's fear of the supernatural and has already interrogated without success the supposed (green) Bum, which reminds of the 'bestial condition' and of the lost primordial harmony or the forever-bygone state of bliss inside the womb.<sup>11</sup> Here the process of interrogation itself signifies the libido investment, but, considering its purpose to extract the information about the specific memory as the combination of knowledge (what) and image (where), the interrogation is ultimately not to meet a simple need

<sup>10</sup> It is important here to note that the death-drive figure Bam does not enter the interrogation room to be labored, weeping, screaming, begging or even passing out. Even after it switches off the life of an ego it remains as the pre-human nature and, with the germination of another ego in spring, it will reappear therein to stir a whole new set of interrogations again. Again, this ego may refer to the collective ego of humanity, or to the ego of an individual human being. Humanity or an individual human being, all is repetition along the line of evolution, as suggested in the above mentioned first and last lines. Furthermore, humanity and an individual human being undergo similar stages of development, according to Freud's theory. The statement "[w]e are the last five" may imply humanity's position in the evolution of life, possibly as its final stage, or the fixedness of these interrogatory stages an individual human ego undergoes.

<sup>11</sup> This interrogation design makes sense in that any human era or developmental stage exploits and stands on the carcass of the previous one and its resources.

originating from a drive but to appease a narcissistic desire to retrieve the past experience of perfect satisfaction. But the death-drive figure Bam is involved throughout this whole process, this time denying the failure of Bom's interrogation on the pretext of the latter's untruthfulness and stirring the ego to summon this time another object instead, the scarlet Bim reminding of Vico's 'age of heroes,' which is characterized by internal and external wars of the clans, in order to deny, and neutralize the threat of, the truth of the irretrievability of the first narcissistic stage. This libido investment on and ventured unity with the scarlet Bim is frustrated in the end again, and Bam denies this failure and stirs another venture of unification with (the white) Bem, which reminds of Vico's 'age of men' featured by class conflict, corruption and dissolution. But (the white) Bem fails again, and finally (the dark) Bam takes (the white) Bem to exploit it and knock it out.<sup>12</sup> A similar sequence is also found in the development of an individual human ego, with Bam standing for the same death drive: bliss(Bum), infancy(Bom), adolescence (Bim), maturity (Bem). It may be pointed out that the cyclical context of the four seasons, together with those lines which reveal that the four characters do not appear in the playing area for the first time but "[r]eappear" (Beckett, 2006: 476), stands at odds with the apocalyptic reading that the history of humanity comes to its end by this final direct interrogation of Bem by Bam. But the first written French version of the play, in its characteristically phylogenetic setting (McMullan, 1993: 37), suggests a denouement in this last bout of interrogation by the line "[p]uis on arrête ?" (Beckett, 1982: 97), which strikes a note of common fate by the indefinite subjective pronoun "on," while the preceding corresponding cases foreground an individual context repeating the same line, "[p]uis j'arrête ?" (Beckett, 1982: 92) Whereas Beckett revises the play toward a more interiorized and ontogenetic mise-en-scène (McMullan, 1993: 39), the subsequent English version introduces a further ambiguity as to whether this last question by the last victim suggests a common fate or an individual's demise by repeating the same, even more truncated line in the corresponding cases, "[t]hen stop?" (Beckett, 2006: 473) The word "[r]eappear" may imply then that, in terms of the phylogenetic setting, the death drive belonging to the pre-human nature existed before and will persist after the history of humanity, triggering a similar doomed developmental process for every microcosm it is involved with. In terms of the ontogenetic setting, it may imply that individual human organisms come and go but the death drive ever persists, or it may refer to the feeble state of consciousness of an old, death-drive-ridden mind, which has nothing else to do but ruminate on the past scenes of the person's fruitless development in its memory field.

This reading of *What Where* according to Freud's metapsychology addresses those issues that McMullan's analysis leaves to be solved. Read in the light of the aforementioned Freud's theory of psychic structuring and functioning from biological evolutionism, the play is found to have a firm anchorage in the bare existential,

<sup>12</sup> The references to Vico's division of human history and the characterizations of those periods included in the paragraphs are based on the content of this Britannica webpage on Vico by Jules-Marie Chaix-Ruy at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giambattista-Vico/Period-of-the-Scienza-nuova> (accessed: 27/08/2022).

even deeper than the level of human species. The ‘interrogation in imagination’ happening inside and the ‘exploitation by political apparatuses’ working outside are related to each other and share the same impulse because they are no more than two different performances of the death drive’s urge to give up the old libido investment and try a higher-level ego-object unification in its stead, respectively happening in the scope of an individual or of an entire species. The reason that the death drive repeats and is repeated is that, according to the late Freud, every living organism has a strong urge to return to its original inorganic state, and that the ego needs to keep fending off this threat of the death drive, posed whenever the ego fails in fully uniting with a given object, by investing libido in another object and seeking gratification thereby. This overlapping picture between personal curiosity and political torture is utterly grim and pessimistic, but this may be linked to the ultimate, naked truth about humanity and human history Beckett sets the audience to face. The play’s concluding injunction, “[m]ake sense who may,” may be less an invitation to “hold open the time and space to remember” genocide and atrocities still happening in the world, as Salisbury views, than an extremely realistic exhortation against making any naive reparative gestures for, and any dignified sense of, this bloody human truth (2017: 63). It rather exhorts us to penetrate behind these bloody actualities into the fundamental part that fear and anxiety have ever played in this life-or-death game of the individual or collective human ego. It is not, however, that this grim exhortation leaves no room for action, notwithstanding. This leads, finally, to the question of the characteristically Beckettian poetics of ‘senility.’

## Conclusion: Toward Freedom Beyond Hope and Meaning

This drama of the ego’s ongoing fluctuations between libido and the death drive finds itself to be in line with Beckett’s characteristic poetics of senility.<sup>13</sup> This poetics can be encapsulated in Beckett’s own words found in one of his art criticisms: “to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation” (1984: 145). The human ego, whether collective or individual, is forever doomed to admit failure in uniting with its libido-invested object due to the aggression of the death drive, thus presenting this submission to failure as the ultimate human truth. And this stark truth tends to be more foregrounded in cases of old age than in those of younger age, in which it is capable and even desirable to affect composure out of social interests and to dispel the effects of the loss with help of its relative resourcefulness. But the specific drama of old age, on which Beckett’s literature

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<sup>13</sup> There are found some other descriptions about Beckett’s poetics across a variety of studies, which similarly center on the images of impotence and deprivation. But, in consideration of the specific conditions and situations of Beckett’s characters who exemplify and embody such a poetics, it is found that these images are ultimately related to their old age and concomitant infirmity, as Adorno famously and aptly points out regarding *Endgame* (1957) (Adorno, 2003: 286).



mainly capitalizes, lies in the fact that aged persons are, even if they are unable to act, obliged to keep acting and failing because that is the only way to act and go on with their remaining few capabilities, resources and motivations, as in the case of the aphasiac speaker in Beckett's poem, "What is the Word," who is forced to keep stuttering searching for the particular word in vain because that is the only appropriate word, as he or she feels but does not know, to denote the object at hand, which is an elementary and unavoidable cognitive activity.<sup>14</sup> This makes *What Where* the ultimate dramatic embodiment of this Beckettian poetics of senility, whose psychosomatic struggles are both enlarged to the scale of the history of the human species and internalized to the depth of the inner workings of the individual human psyche, the most concise and powerful artistic connection between the exteriority and the interiority.

To discuss briefly the possible political implications drawn from this Freudian metapsychological reading of *What Where* before finishing off: does this inexorable world filled with death-ridden interrogators and proxy interrogators leave any room or sense of necessity for political action? As pointed out above, the play is about the awareness of the grim reality of human existence and condition consisting of persistent questioning and violence without any attempts at rationalizing or moralizing about it. Beckett's aged and moribund characters are found to stay distant from the influence of civilization and culture, and his bleak world filled with death-ridden moribunds crawling around in a miry bog, as in *How It Is* (1961), to look for something or someone onto whom to release their instinctual drives, is no more than a proper jungle. Certainly, Beckett seems, in *What Where*, to hold no hope for the future of humanity and to believe that human beings are doomed to waste their resources and chances and to abuse one another and be wiped away as a whole. This perspective may seem contradictory with Beckett's own political actions rendered during his lifetime in support of the politically persecuted such as Vaclav Havel and Salman Rushdie (Morin, 2017). Beckett chose to take these actions even if he apparently did not believe that the world can change for better and did not subscribe to any large ideological movement, but why? The Freudian metapsychological reading of the play holds out a possible answer: for the sake of freedom uninvolved with hope or meaning. From the above mentioned account of the development of the ego, it is seen that the ego is destined to suffer constantly and precariously fluctuating between Eros and Thanatos until the end, but, notwithstanding, it is in exchange for more freedom consisting of more understanding of itself and its environment and more sensibleness in utilizing its given, even scanty resources for dispelling the adverse effects from its failure in unification. Shrewdness and sagacious judgement—they characterize agedness as well. The hopeless Beckettian aged moribunds will usually be crawling around apart from each other, but, in cases one adversely interferes in the way of another, there will be a most violent fight happening between them. And, as this universal struggle itself is for the sake of more freedom, it would be more becoming, should it ever happen, to find the freer one prevail against the

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the relationship between aphasia and "What is the Word," see Salisbury's "'What is the Word': Beckett's Aphasic Modernism" (2008: 78–126).

less free as in the case of Molloy's merciless killing of a charcoal burner, contrary to what is currently happening in the world at this moment. To choose and live freedom without having hope or attaching meaning until the end—this is how Beckett's characters achieve their “infinite tasks” of “solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence,” as Cavell explained regarding *Endgame* (1969: 156).

It may be regarded that, in this minimalist coda of his theatrical art, Beckett stages a history of the world in a way comparable to that in which Joyce's grand finale offers a history of the world as the parlour game in which the whispered word spreads on and on in an ever-transformed fashion (Van Hulle, 2008: 55–56). They share a similarly circular structure inspired by Vico's ideas, but the latter is incredibly wordier than the former and the latter's setting of witnessing and rumor is replaced by the former's one of interrogation and torture. At the end of *Finnegans Wake* Anna Livia Plurabelle finally flows through Dublin on her way to the sea as a resuscitating life-force, but, at the end of *What Where*, the death-drive figure Bam is, while similarly executing his own soliloquy, standing alone in the void shortly before switching off. It seems that *Finnegans Wake*'s baroque world is founded on the belief in the resuscitating force of the mankind and its civilization, whereas *What Where*'s bleak, apocalyptic world is founded on the negation of such a belief. In Joyce's world, the sea turns about and flows past Adam and Eve and the distant shore and the inhabitable bay area and ultimately back into the familiar ancient civilisation settlement. In Beckett's world, the human death drive, having swallowed up the humanity itself and finding no more to devour, only withdraws into its proper pre-human nature realm with it head bowed and waits. It may be, after many years, that a higher life similar to humans will see it reoccupy the central stage of its psyche and drive its host ever towards the same doomed freedom.

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