Between Ethics and Aesthetics: The Residual in Samuel Beckett’s Minimalism

In his 1936 essay ‘The Storyteller’, Walter Benjamin predicts the imminent death of the era of storytelling, a decline which he attributes to a decrease in the communicability of experience. Yet the bleak tone of his essay is tempered by the deliberately suggestive assertion that the removal of narrative from the realm of living speech ‘is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing’ (Benjamin, 1936, 87).

Nothing haunts Samuel Beckett’s art more than the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of telling a story, of communicating, of sharing experience. It is this aporia which, in the 1960s, leads Beckett to an altogether different art form in his prose writing, a ‘new beauty’ which is inextricable from the feeling of incommunicability: the minimalist aesthetic.

Focusing on his collection Têtes-mortes, ‘Sans’ (1969)–‘D’un ouvrage abandonné’–‘Assez’–‘Imagination morte imaginez’–‘Bing’ (1972), I wish to explore Beckett’s relation to the artistic trend of minimalism. In these minima, he turns away from the
obcessive accumulation of stories that constitutes the locus of the trilogy (Molloy–Malone meurt–L’Innommable) towards a different approach, which relies on the paring down of the writer’s means of expression, the written word. As indicated by the French and English titles of the collection, Têtes-mortes and Residua, it is the view of the work as an inherent remainder that makes Beckett’s minimalist aesthetics an ethical affirmation of the irreducible residue. His works communicate precisely in their refusal of communication, denotation and meaning: through their inherent excess. Because their lack of communication is also an excess over communication, they are conditioned by the paradox of minimalism, encapsulated by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s famous motto: ‘less is more’.

A movement mainly associated with 1960s American visual art, whose leading representatives reduced their canvases to solid swaths of monochromatic colours or their sculptures to uninflected geometrical shapes, minimalism has been described succinctly by Edward Strickland as an art form ‘that makes its statement with limited, if not the fewest possible, resources’ (Strickland, 2000, 7). Guided by the asymptotic movement toward an irreducible object, minimalism has been seen as an art of rejection (Lucy Lippard), reduction (Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried), and exclusion (Carl Andre). The movement has also engendered more derisory terms, like ‘anti-art’, ‘new nihilism’ and ‘low-boredom art’, coined by the artist and New York Times critic Brian O’Doherty (Strickland, 2000, 17). Even the minimalist masters themselves questioned one another’s premises. For instance, Donald Judd was ambivalent about Robert Morris’s works in his review of the show ‘Black, White, and Gray’: ‘they are next to nothing; you wondered why anyone would build something only barely present’ (Judd, 1964, 117). Morris’s work aroused suspicion because of its liminal position on the brink of nonentity and non-art. Judd continues: ‘Morris’s pieces exist after all, as meager as they are […] but these facts of existence are as simple as they are obdurate – as are Morris’s objects’ (1964, 117). Yet this very liminality, this quasi-absence arguably constitutes a positive affirmation. Only by hovering on the brink of nothingness, by removing so much, can minimalism capitalise on what is obdurate and obstinate because it is a tiny, ungraspable remainder.
This affirmation of the residue is overt in some practical manifestations of minimalism: in Morris’s *Box for Standing* (1961), a coffin-like structure, and in the reclamation of ruins for his famous Land Art piece in Ijmuiden, the Netherlands, entitled *Observatory* (1971); in Anne Truitt’s *Southern Elegy* (1961–2), which suggests a tombstone; in Carl Andre’s *Dogturds* (1962), controversial depictions of animal excrement; in Dick Bellamy’s display of Lucas Samaras’s squalid bedroom contents at the Green Gallery (1964) (Meyer, 2001, 45); in Robert Smithson’s earthwork sculpture, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), which affirms the entropic movement toward nothingness that he theorises in his essay ‘Entropy and the New Monuments’. The celebration of ruins, excrement, death, trash and decay constitutes an affirmation of the residue that resists decay insofar as it is decay.

It is not just the practice of minimalism in the sixties and early seventies, however, that reveals an inextricable relationship with the irreducible residue, but also the theoretical discourse that surrounds it. As James Meyer points out in his brilliant account of the polemics surrounding minimalism, it is because it is defined and conditioned by semiological refusal that it has engendered such a lively, unending critical reception:

> The minimalist refusal of subject matter only provoked successive writers to interpret an art whose aim was to short-circuit and indeed defy the act of interpretation itself. (Meyer, 2001, 150)

A paradox thus inhabits minimalism: the evacuation of content simultaneously incites and thwarts critical reflection. Because at its heart lies an excess that thwarts explanation, critics have striven to theorise it—whether to explain, justify or condemn. I will situate my argument in relation to some of these discourses, but in the paradoxical attempt to theorise that which always-already lies beyond interpretation, beyond meaning, beyond theory: the residue.

Though Beckett’s own writings on art focus on the movement that precedes minimalism, namely Abstract Expressionism (*Three Dialogues*), his work constitutes a dynamic dialogue with this aesthetics of exclusion. This is most evident in his direction of
his own plays, encapsulated in the fervently repeated instruction
to Donald McWhinnie of Mies’s motto (Knowlson, 2006/7, 26).
Regarding his play That Time, for instance, he noted: ‘to the
objection visual component too small, out of all proportion with
aural, answer: make it smaller on the principle that less is more’
(Knowlson, 1979, 219). Furthermore, his minimalist works had
a huge impact on his artistic contemporaries and descendants.
Rosalind Krauss notes Beckett’s ‘veneration’ by the 1960s
minimalist visual artists (Krauss, 1985, 258). Morris, in particular,
has acknowledged Beckett’s influence in an interview with Jack
Burnham recorded on November 21, 1975 (Berger, 1989, 45). Much
musical minimalism is based on or inspired by Beckettian texts.
Both Philip Glass and Morton Feldman collaborated with Beckett:
Feldman, who first met Beckett during a rehearsal of Waiting for
Godot in the 1970s, wrote the music for Beckett’s Music and Words
(1962) and the opera Neither (1977); Glass composed the music for
Play (1965), a piece which, according to Robert Schwarz, constitutes
‘the first evidence of his newly reductive, rhythmically repetitive
idiom’ (Schwarz, 1996, 116). However, the empirical evidence of
direct influence – admittedly difficult to pin down given the varied
manifestations of the trend – is in this context of less interest than
the extent to which Beckett’s works follow, articulate and affirm the
broader logic of minimalism.

Too much and too little has been said of Beckett’s relation
to this widespread artistic trend. Some authors make passing
reference to his minimalism. Debra Malina, in Breaking the
Frame, associates it with the nihilistic aspect of his work, the
relentless progression of his texts toward nothingness: ‘paring
away layer after layer of narrative trappings, Beckett heads toward
a minimalism so much “less”, so much “worse”, that it cannot
sustain its productions’ (Malina, 2002, 28). Others use minimalism
as a means of classification, in order to situate him in relation
to broader trends. In Beckett’s Literary Legacies, Friedhelm Rathjen
refers to his ‘literary minimalism’ that influenced Jürg Laederach
and Catherine Morley to his ‘abstract minimalism’ whose traces are
Though these readings are useful, I want to look deeper into the
particular connections between Beckett’s ethics and the aesthetics
of minimalism.
A number of critics look at Beckett’s work in relation to single artists who have been classified as minimalists. Rosalind Krauss in her essay on Sol LeWitt uses quotations from *Molloy* to illustrate LeWitt’s Absurd Nominalism (Krauss, 1985, 244–258). Guy Debrock explores the relationship between Beckett and the minimalist composer Morton Feldman through G. H. Mead’s theory that language is a form of gesture. In the following study, Beckett’s *Têtes-mortes* will be examined in the context of a more open and dynamic artistic field, encompassing the visual arts (Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Richard Tuttle, Anne Truitt and Robert Smithson) and music (Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Morton Feldman), in the attempt not to homogenise this varied group of artists, but rather in order to explore the very residuality that renders them resistant to homogenisation.

This approach differs from previous readings, which have often regarded Beckett’s works as miniatures that are complete, whole, and perfect. Though Enoch Brater, in his article ‘Why Beckett’s “Enough” is More or Less Enough’, starts off by referring to the text ‘Assez’ as an example of his ‘minimalist prose’, or his ‘residual prose’, he then equates this with something that is subtly, but crucially, very different: he calls the text a ‘miniature’ version, a ‘possible abstract’ of the longer *Mercier et Camier*, on the basis that, ‘within the dimensions of its own small boundaries, Enough is […] a whole’ (Brater, 1980, 252, 260, 264). Similarly, Vivian Mercier insists that ‘the brevity of the latter works is not due to any philosophical aspiration toward silence but to perfectionism […] The only perfectly finished piece of workmanship is the miniature’ (Mercier, 1977, 237). Here, the miniature is confused with the minimal, the manifestation of a very different desire: whereas miniaturism aims to produce a tiny version of an original image without any deletions, minimalism’s object is to produce a partial version of an absent whole (Hallett, 1999, 9). As we shall see, it is the second, minimalist logic that governs Beckett’s texts, whose ‘philosophical aspiration towards silence’ is endlessly thwarted, inherently impossible, and thus doomed to incompleteness and imperfection.

In the same vein as Brater and Mercier, S. E. Gontarski regards his short pieces as the ‘distillation of essences’ (Gontarski, 1995, xi). This echoes E. C. Goossen’s view of minimalism in the visual
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arts: writing on his exhibition called ‘Distillation’ (1966), he calls it an ‘intentional distillation’ and consequent ‘essentialization’; ‘each [young artist] is submitting his vision to the alembic in order to reduce it to its best essence’ (Battcock, 1995, 172–3). Against this, however, I will argue that the minimal artwork’s affirmation of the residue makes it resistant to any such essentialising tendencies. An excellent point of departure is Herbert Blau’s ‘“The Commodius Vicus” of Beckett’, in which Blau links Beckett’s entropic vision not only to the ruins of history in and of modernity, but also to the human condition: both are characterised by an endless process of mourning, a process that is endless because of the ‘immitigable impasse of the human itself, which can neither be painted, sculpted, installed, caught on a videodisc, nor [...] somehow performed away’ (Gontarski and Uhlmann, 2006, 37). This impasse—caused by the resistant residue that will never yield—is that which leads Blau to connect Beckett with the minimalist movement of the 1960s. Yet the connection is qualified by Blau:

What may have been missing, however, in the conceptual substance of the artists referred to by Smithson in “Entropy and the New Monuments” (Flavin, Judd, Lichtenstein, LeWitt, Thek) was [...] the residual metaphysics in the diminuendo of being, the mourning in the entropic, so endemic to Beckett. (Gontarski and Uhlmann, 2006, 29)

By relating Beckett’s short fiction from the late 1960s and early 1970s to parallel trends in art and music, I will argue that, whether consciously or not, the aesthetico-philosophical inclination toward lessness—what Blau terms the ‘residual metaphysics in the diminuendo of being’—permeates minimalism.

In order to explore the convergence between Beckett’s aesthetics of minimalism and his ethics of residuality, I will place his minima within the context of the ethical thought of Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou and Jacques Derrida. As we shall see, it is the affirmation of the residue that links the notion of subtraction posited by Adorno in his analysis of Endgame to Derrida’s ‘presque rien’ and Badiou’s ‘différence minuscule’ between ‘fond’ and ‘forme’, ‘lieu et avoir lieu’ (Badiou, 2005, 86). These different theories
of the vanishing remainder, the Beckettian deadhead that resists annihilation, express a common skepticism toward self-identity and a consequent belief that any object (whether in art or life) is always in excess over itself. In turn, this will be related to Derrida’s notion of ‘différance’, a term that constitutes a play on the words difference and deferral, and affirms the perpetual postponement of fixed meaning due to the absent-presence of an unnameable, minimal excess. These diverse philosophies will be brought together through a common strand: the writing of the residue, or the residue of writing.

Adorno’s influential essay ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’ is a good place from which to explore the correlation between Beckett’s minimalism and the content of his work, or rather its lack of content, its evacuation of the traditional categories of subject, identity and meaning. As Adorno insists, existentialist subjectivity constitutes the negation of the particularity and contingency of existence, an ‘unacknowledged abstraction, [to] which Beckett poses the decisive antithesis: an avowed process of subtraction’ (Adorno, 1991, 246). However, the move away from the universal qualities of existentialist ontology—and the consequent subtraction of the subject from existence—requires the emptying out of subjective substance, which in itself constitutes a movement towards extreme abstraction. This evacuation of content grounds Beckett’s minimalism: ‘the strict ration of reality and characters which the drama is allotted and with which it makes do, is identical to what remains of the subject, spirit, soul in view of the permanent catastrophe’ (Adorno, 1991, 251), in view of the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of surviving after the Holocaust.

Yet Beckett’s writing is not governed by a negative focus on ‘what remains’, but by an assertion of the remainder. The title, Têtes-mortes, is a translation of the Latin ‘caput mortuum’, which designates the worthless, irreducible chemical deposit left behind after the process of distillation. At the centre of the collection, then, lies a minimal remainder that blocks the processes of abstraction, universalisation and purification, whose most extreme manifestation was the Holocaust itself. In Derrida’s terms, what remains after the Shoah is the undecidable remainder of holocaustal fire, ‘la restance du reste—la cendre, presque rien’
What is at stake here is not simply absence, but the presence of absence, not loss, but the reminder of that which had taken place, not the ‘rien’, but the ‘presque rien’. Beckett’s abstraction is grounded in the capitalisation of this residue. For Badiou, this residue is the ‘minimal difference’ that is glimpsed through a dual process of purification (which takes the form of abstraction in art) and subtraction:

Épuiser la réalité, non pour l’anéantir dans sa surface, mais en la soustrayant à son unité apparente pour y détecter la différence minuscule, le terme évanouissant qui en est constitutif. (Badiou, 2005, 98)

The formal constraints placed on Têtes-mortes thereby constitute an aesthetic response to an ethical problem: minimalism is a means of formalisation at the point where there is almost nothing, at the edge of the void. As Meyer points out, ‘in refusing to point directly to the world, the minimalist work sublates, and obliquely alludes to, the reality it negates’ (Meyer, 2001, 187). The vanishing remainder can only be sublated, or subtracted, through refusal, rejection and exclusion. Reacting against Lukács’s denunciation of Beckett’s decadent formalism, Adorno expresses the subtractive imperative thus: ‘in all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content’ (Adorno, 2004, 325). Minimalism, defined by this very wiping out of content, allows Beckett to formalise the formless, to locate social critique in the minimal, material residue. Hence the duality of minimalism is captured by Adorno’s description of Beckett’s aesthetic formalism: the simultaneous focus on the ‘paltry materials’ by which subjectivity is expressed and their dissolution, their reduction to ‘geometric forms’ (Adorno, 1991, 250–1).

The position of Beckett’s prose on the brink of artistic nonentity is such that all the traditional components of the literary text—character/subject, plot, setting, symbolism/meaning—are stripped down to a minimum. This reduction is emphasised by the imperative mode adopted by the self-reflexive voice of ‘Imagination morte imaginez’: ‘Iles, eaux, azur, verdure, fixez, pff, muscade, une éternité, taisez’ (Beckett, 1967, 51).1 Deprived of all remnants of a familiar earth, the setting is reduced to a geometrical
shape, ‘une rotonde sans ornement’ (51). This reference, whether conscious or unconscious, to Adolf Loos’ famous aphorism ‘ornament is crime’ (Gontarski, 1995, XV), undoubtedly connects Beckett’s texts with the minimalist trend.

Many critics have regarded this rotunda as a skull. Yet this restrictive interpretation misses the point of the minimalist exclusion of recognisable features: the thwarting of any possible symbolism; the negation of meaning itself. The same can be said of Têtes-mortes as of Endgame: it ‘mocks the [reader] with the suggestion of something symbolic, something which, like Kafka, it then withholds’ (Adorno, 1991, 251). This is made apparent in the three so-called events in ‘D’un ouvrage abandonné’, the vanishing apparitions of the white horse, the stoats and the roadman Balfe. Whilst Beckett tempts us with possible symbolism, he simultaneously deprives us of any such transcendence. As Michael Fried says with reference to Judd in his influential critique of minimalism, ‘the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more’ (Fried, 1967, 165). Indeed, as suggested by the ‘signes sans sens’ that litter ‘Bing’ (61–2), the inner sphere to which the extensional world seems to point in Beckett’s Têtes-mortes no longer exists, leaving the events to hang like empty balloons.

Just like the settings, the characters of Têtes-mortes are pared down to mere geometrical shapes, to form rather than substance. In ‘Imagination’, each body is ‘inscrit dans le demi-cercle ACB’, its extremities treated as geometrical points (55). The body is stripped down to a ‘petit bloc’ in ‘Sans’ (Beckett, 1969, 9),2 or a ‘corps nu blanc fixe un mètre’, ‘talons joints angle droit’ in ‘Bing’ (61). The same geometrical figures characterise the works by the minimalist masters Tuttle and Morris, whose octagons and weighty blocks, respectively, give form to emptiness and thus affirm the medium. As Morris himself asserts, ‘blank form is like life, essentially empty’ (Meyer, 2001, 153). This emptiness, however, is not nothing: it is something. As Judd says of Morris’s works displayed at the Black, White, and Gray exhibition (1964), the ‘pieces exist after all, as meager as they are’ (117). The same can be said of the extreme formal abstraction in Beckett’s ‘Imagination’: the ‘petit bloc’ of the body gives shape to the negation of content; the frames of the shapes (the lines from A to B to C) have a performative
function, making the indistinguishable distinct, giving substance to the insubstantial. Like the oft-misinterpreted *Textes pour rien*, which are ‘for nothing’ not only in a negative sense, in their futility, but also in an affirmative sense, in their asymptotic movement toward nothingness, Beckett’s *Têtes-mortes* affirm the residue in their infinite decay.

Indeed, purification is always followed and counterbalanced by subtraction in the *Têtes-mortes*. At first, it appears that the process of evacuation has left the reader with nothing: ‘nulle part trace de vie’ (*Imagination*, 51); ‘tout su tout blanc’ (*Bing*, 61); ‘tout ce qui précède oublier’ (*Assez*, 33). Through these absolute statements, Beckett gives the deceptive impression of a purified, totalised status quo. Yet this impression, in all cases, is immediately negated, as ‘mille petits signes trop longs à imaginer’ emerge in ‘Imagination’ (17), as traces and figures appear against the white background in ‘Bing’, and as memories come flooding back in ‘Assez’. Yet these traces are always on the brink of disappearance, of nothingness. The murmur in ‘Bing’ is qualified almost out of existence: ‘murmure à peine presque jamais une seconde temps sidéral ça de mémoire’ (63). In ‘Sans’, everything is reduced to fine sand, tiny remnants of disseminated entities: ‘terre sable même gris que l’air le ciel le corps les ruines sable fin gris cendre’ (16). The sand, ash-grey, is the Derridean ‘presque rien’, the miniscule residue that can never be grasped; the Badiouian ‘terme évanouissant’ that resists incorporation. His *Têtes-mortes* affirm what Badiou calls the minimal difference between ground and form, place and taking place (cited above). In ‘Imagination’, white semi-circles, bodies and limbs appear against the white backdrop; in ‘Bing’, we glimpse the ‘traces fouillis gris pâle presque blanc sur blanc’ (61); in ‘Sans’, the earth/sky/body/ruins are simultaneously blended and differentiated through grey tones: ‘même gris partout terre ciel corps ruines’ (8). The merging of white/grey form and white/grey
ground is the literary echo of Malevich’s *White on white* (1918), in which subtle hues are used to allude to an absent-present geometrical form and thus to highlight the Badiouian minimal difference.

The condition of this minimal differentiation is suggested in ‘Imagination’ by Beckett’s descriptions of the rotunda’s whiteness, ‘se fondant dans l’environnante’, and of the body, ‘se confondant avec le sol’ (55). As an ever-unfinished process of paring down, emphasised here by the continuous present tense, the minimal artwork only ever verges on nonentity, the figure is never completely indistinguishable from the background. Purgation is therefore a never-ending, and therefore necessarily incomplete, process. Mies’s ‘less is more’ motto thus acquires ethical weight: only by paring the artwork down to a state of deficiency can there be a manifestation of the unnameable excess. In this light, the narrator’s acknowledgement that the barely visible body is ‘finalement de femme’ (55), recognisable in spite of everything, gains particular relevance: only the presentation of the distinct within the indistinct can affirm the minimal difference.

Importantly, though, the Beckettian ‘forme’ is only ever barely distinguishable from the ‘fond’. This is made explicit by the flowers in ‘Assez’, which are revealed to be literally ungatherable:

*Il faut dire qu’il n’y avait rien à emporter. Les fleurs elles-mêmes étaient sans tige et plaquées au sol à la manière des nenuphars. Plus question qu’elles brillent à la boutonnière.*

(45)

Lacking stems, the flowers are located on the boundary between ‘fond’ (the ground) and ‘forme’ (the flower). The fact that there is nothing to be swept away shows the flowers to be stubborn survivors of the storm’s attempt to wipe the space clean. This is surely due to the status of the flowers as scraps of the narrator’s past life: they are no longer real flowers, but figments of the imagination; they are two-dimensional because they have become mere images in the narrator’s memory; images that cannot be framed or captured.

The final sentence thus gains ethical significance: the stemless quality of the flowers, their inability to decorate the buttonhole, is
due to their residual status; their loss of use-value renders them ungatherable and thus invulnerable; like the old man’s ‘ruines sacrées’ (41), which are sacred, untouchable and immortal only because they are ruins, the flowers are ungraspable. Beckett thus overturns the Romantic image of the flower as the affirmation of finitude, death and decay. As an image qua image, the flower becomes irreducible, located as it is within the timeless space of the imagination. In this vein, the ending of ‘Assez’ can be read as one of affirmation rather than despairing negation: ‘Je m’en vais maintenant tout effacer sauf les fleurs. Plus de pluies. Plus de mamelons. Rien que nous deux nous trainant dans les fleurs’ (47). This capitalises on the Badiouian notion, quoted above, that reality is purified not to achieve, but rather to block, its annihilation, to isolate the ‘vanishing term which constitutes it’. The flowers constitute precisely such a ‘vanishing term’, the fragile figments in the narrator’s fragile memory of a fragile relationship with a fragile man. Their disappearance causes constant reappearances: as figments, they constitute the lovers’ reality, their only ‘sustentation’ (47), their means of survival.

Beckett can in this context be compared with Truitt, whose two-dimensional works affirm the residuality of remembered experience. Her works conjure up the seventeenth and eighteenth-century architecture of her childhood town of Easton in Maryland: First and Southern Elegy (1961–62), for example, are reminiscent of a picket fence and a tombstone, respectively; her drawings from that period conjure up portals, columns, trellises and colonnades (Meyer, 2001, 68). As Meyer notes, ‘they are not the direct result of an empirical perception (“I am drawing a building”) but forms recalled from her memory’, abstracted and sublated renditions of diverse architectural forms (Meyer, 2001, 68). Like Beckett’s flowers, these fragments or figments are not representative but suggestive; they are flattened out and emptied of function; they are the remnants of memories, which are themselves residues of experience. And it is paradoxically their status as vanishing remainders that renders them irreducible and invulnerable. Her minimalism, in this sense, serves not to reduce, but on the contrary to block reduction.

As Fried points out in ‘Art and Objecthood’, the minimal artwork—the material as material—resists incorporation and
annihilation through its materiality, its objecthood. Because the material always remains as nothing but the material, the experience of the minimal object is ‘one of endlessness and inexhaustibility, of being able to go on and on’ (Fried, 1967, 165). Central to the concept of minimalism, then, is the Beckettian finitude without end, the infinitude which is at once an impossibility and an imperative. As Morris affirms, the viewer is tied to the object and freed from it forever:

Once it has been established it does not disintegrate. One is then both free of the shape and bound to it. Free or released because of the exhaustion of information about it, as shape, and bound to it because it remains constant and indivisible. (Morris, 1966, 228)

In the same vein, Beckett’s reader is simultaneously free (because the texts refuse to represent or symbolise) and bound (condemned to an infinite process of reading the indivisible, indissoluble, irreducible residue). Because there is almost nothing to exhaust, the object is inexhaustible.

Yet it is not through wholeness, but rather through perpetual fragmentation, that Beckett’s minimalism thwarts annihilation. This is made clear in ‘Imagination’, where any wholeness is denied through occlusion. The narrative voice, with the dry tone of a property surveyor, observes that ‘les corps paraissent entiers […] à en juger d’après les parties offertes à la vue’ (56–7; my emphasis). The serious assertion of their wholeness is undermined by the ironic qualification (emphasised), and the consequent parody of any figural representation, which can only ever be metonymic. Because of the flickering light, the observer’s vision is blinkered and the ‘inspection est malaisée’ (56). This emphasises the futility of any human aspiration to wholeness: just like the body parts concealed from the gaze, there is always-already an excess, a residue that escapes human knowledge. This fragmentation of vision can be likened to the minimalism of Carl Andre, whose styrofoam works *Crib, Coin* and *Compound* (1965) filled the room and therefore obstructed vision. As Lippard observed, ‘no attempt was made to make [the works]…visible at all. There was only room for the determined viewer to edge around the forms, and
vantage points were denied’ (Meyer, 2001, 132). The exhibition, like the bodies in ‘Imagination’, thus thwarted any unification, wholeness or totalisation.

Meyer is right to question, on this basis, the equation of minimalism with literalism by critics like Fried and artists like Stella – encapsulated by his famous tautology, ‘what you see is what you see’ (Battcock, 1995, 158):

Decisively suggested by Judd and Fried, the premise that minimalist work makes itself visible in its entirety masks the ambiguities of that experience and, what is more, the distinctive ways in which these practices are seen. Literalism is a good starting point, but it is no longer an adequate model for describing how we actually experience the art. Would minimalism continue to attract viewers decades later if the works were as transparent to vision as we are told? (7–8)

The ambiguity, indeterminacy and inscrutability of minimal art thus prevent any self-identity, which in turn prevents wholeness and completion. In this sense, it is as ever-incomplete, minimal fragments – rather than whole, miniature objects – that the Beckettian Têtes-mortes continue to end again and again, at once depriving and nourishing the reader ad infinitum.

This logic is rendered beautifully by Derrida’s famous pun, ‘différance’, the idea that meaning is always deferred and differed due to the absent-presence of an unnameable, minimal excess. While deferral entails deprivation, difference means perpetual nourishment. Because the Têtes-mortes affirm the absent-present remainder, they are renewed through every new context and any meaning is perpetually delayed. This is reflected within the texts themselves. It is due to the transformative power of context, for example, that the melancholic retracing of old steps through old fields in ‘Assez’ is a journey of perpetual renewal: ‘Je vois les fleurs à mes pieds et ce sont les autres que je vois’ (39). The flowers refuse self-identity: homogeneity produces heterogeneity; the same is subject to flux. In this vein, I would like to propose an alternative reading of ‘Assez’ to that offered by Brater in his article ‘Why Beckett’s “Enough” is More or Less Enough’. While Brater argues that ‘Enough’ is indeed enough on the basis that the text
is a complete, self-contained miniature, I would suggest that it is because the text is the minimal remainder of an absent whole, and therefore inherently incomplete, that—in Brater’s own words—‘no two encounters with this text can ever be exactly alike’ (Brater, 1980, 265).

Because of the logic of ‘différance’ that underpins minimalism, the sameness, monotony and repetition that characterise the minimal artwork is paradoxically an affirmation of difference, renewal and change. In ‘Bing’, for example, the same repeated words (like ‘blanc’, ‘gris’, ‘murmures’) create a mesmerising effect, which is punctured by the impingement of the ‘bing’ and ‘hop’ sounds, and by single, outstanding words, such as ‘cicatrices’ and ‘chairs blessées’ (64). The text thus invites comparison with the music of Beckett’s contemporaries, Feldman and Reich, for whom repetition is a vehicle for development and change. This connection is underlined by Feldman’s lengthy, monotonous piece that the composer dedicated to Beckett: For Beckett (1986). As Guy Debrock puts it, ‘the sound is always the same, yet never quite the same’ (Debrock, 1991, 71); maximal sameness highlights minimal difference. Similarly, the maximal sameness of Reich’s Pendulum music (1968), achieved through constant, hallucinatory repetition of identical melodies and rhythms, serves to highlight non-identity, and to accentuate the minimal differences in the music: the tiny, barely audible changes in length, colour, rhythm and intensity. The rigid corset of the music has the same effect as the tight gloves worn by the lovers in ‘Assez’: ‘loin d’amortir les formes ils les accusaient en les simplifiant’ (36). The evacuation of difference through repetition thus allows the accentuation of the minimal, residual difference.

While Art Lange’s description of Feldman’s For Beckett as a ‘Beckett-like punishment’ rings true in this context, the following conclusion might be qualified: ‘it could be one of Beckett’s static dramas; since continuity, unasked for, is inevitable, there’s no need to invent anything. Everything simply is, and continues to be’ (Debrock, 1991, 71–2). On the contrary, it is arguably only through perpetual re-invention that the artwork continues to be; only through constant recontextualisation that the ending is deferred. This is suggested obliquely by Feldman himself. Regarding his music for the opera Neither written by Beckett, he says that ‘it is
not directional. Time makes the line, the connection. Time itself becomes what is lyrical’ (Debrock, 1991, 72). This is because time entails the perpetual change of context, and therefore difference and deferral; the experience of hearing the music in time produces the line, the connection, the artwork itself.

By implication, the temporal experience of the listener or reader is the condition of the minimal work of art. This is clearest in ‘Bing’, where the central concern of the work is not its substance or content, but rather its performance, its rhythm and tone, pulse and accentuation. The prose text becomes a piece of music, or more simply a collection of noises, to be perpetually written and re-written, combined and re-combined. This focus on the materiality of language—on words as sounds rather than signifiers—is again characteristic of Feldman’s music. As Debrock puts it in his essay on Beckett and Feldman, the composer exploits notes just as the writer uses words, in all their non-communicative materiality: ‘the music is not telling a story, nor is it expressing sentiment. It is a gesture, begging us, commanding us to react in some way’ (Debrock, 1991, 80). The residue that is always beyond communication, meaning, and fixity is therefore the excess of performance, of walking through the same fields time and again, of telling the story anew.

In ‘Imagination’, the performative element is emphasised self-referentially, as the reader is interpellated through quasi-stage directions: ‘faites seulement ah à peine, dans ce silence, et dans l’instant même pour l’œil de proie l’infime tressaillement aussitôt réprimé’ (57). Here, the ambiguity of the ‘infime tressaillement’, the almost imperceptible excess, derives from the blurring of the categories of subject and object, reader and character. The reader is forced not only to perceive the minimal difference, but also to perform or effect it through minimal intrusion, and therefore to become a residue, the affective excess that cannot be incorporated by language. By virtually dissolving the reader into the text, by creating the illusion of a shared physical sensation, a shudder, Beckett’s ‘Imagination’ ruptures Benjamin’s incommunicability, communicating (through) the residue.

This immediate, physical connection between the artwork and its viewer or listener is characteristic of minimal art and music. In an interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, Philip Glass asserts that
the main artistic inspiration he drew from Beckett’s work was its 
active relationship with its audience: ‘when an audience looks at 
Beckett’s work, the work is no longer an independent thing. It’s the 
relationship between the work and the audience that we’re talking 
about’ (Oppenheim, 1999, 147). In the visual arts, it is Morris’s 
sculptures that best encapsulate this blurring of the artwork with 
the viewer’s experience. For his Tate labyrinth installation aptly 
entitled *Bodymotionspacethings* (1971), Morris invited visitors to 
climb, crawl on, balance in, and touch the object, thus subverting 
any distanced, reverential relation to the museum institution. 
Emphasis was placed on the physical, the visceral, and the sensual. 
As Morris said himself,

Deeply skeptical of experiences beyond the reach of the body, 
the more formal aspect of the work in question provides a 
place in which the perceiving self might take measure of 
certain aspects of its own physical existence. (Berger, 1989, 147)

This celebration of the bodily is also an affirmation of what Morris 
himself called the ‘unfixed variables’, the contextual factors like 
light, space and physical vantage-point that affect the experience 
of the work of art (Morris, 1966, 234) – factors that produce 
Derridean ‘différance’. Presentness, then, or even experience itself, 
is thus the irreducible element that allows the artwork to be 
reconfigured through every new viewing. Morris’s sculptures, like 
Beckett’s texts and Feldman’s music, affirm the necessary residue 
that always-already exceeds the artwork: present experience, the 
experience of the immediate present, and thus experience of/in 
time, the body in time, the time of the body. The key, then, lies not 
in what the work of art means, says or communicates, but rather in 
what it does.

The ending of Beckett’s ‘Imagination’ thus gains significance: 
‘Laissez-les là, en sueur et glacés, il y a mieux ailleurs. Mais non, 
[…] il n’y a rien ailleurs’ (57). There is nothing but the frozen, 
sweating body, the material manifestation of the endless storm. 
Like the steam left on the mirror by the seemingly lifeless bodies 
in ‘Imagination’ (56), or the scar highlighted within the neutrality 
of ‘Bing’ (64), the excess of the human body is the affirmation of the 
minimal difference within maximal sameness, of the residue that
resists incorporation. Scraps of tortured bodies are finally the only possible remainder of an ineffable disaster, what Adorno terms the ‘permanent catastrophe’.

It is therefore not just the subject – reader/writer/character – that is reduced, as Adorno rightly observes, to a ‘“here and now”, a “whatchamacallit”’ (Adorno, 1991, 246). It is also the experience of the artwork, the aesthetic affect. Indeed, the material constraints placed on Beckett’s *Têtes-mortes* lead to the emergence of the sensory from the conceptual, the momentary from the accumulative. The texts’ constant repetition highlights the difference of the same and therefore the single, present instant, whether the instantaneously repressed flinch in ‘Imagination’, the intermittent interferences in ‘Bing’, the fleeting visions of the horse, stoats and roadman in ‘D’un ouvrage abandonné’, or the single step, ‘encore un pas un seul’, in ‘Sans’ (12). The resistance of the instantaneous to annihilation is twofold. As a mere sensation, a ‘vanishing term’ *par excellence*, it defies totalising knowledge and thus cannot be captured, gathered or appropriated. Always new, always ‘encore un’, it is infinite in its very finitude, endless because it has always-already ended.

In *Beyond Minimalism*, Brater attempts to release Beckett’s later plays from pejorative associations with the 1960s art form. He argues that Beckett’s late plays are ‘beyond minimalism’ because they tend toward ‘something far more concrete: what remains in the theatre, live and palpable and real, after so much has been taken away’ (Brater, 1987, ix). Yet as we have seen, at the very centre of the minimalist movement lies a desire to pare down the object in order to reduce it to physical presence. Moreover, Beckett’s minimalism is not just an incidental aspect of his work, but rather the constitutive condition of his ethical stance. It is only by paring the artwork down to the minimal remainder that he is able to subtract the particular, the singular, the ‘presque rien’ – the irreducible material excess that always-already prevents self-identity.

In trying to take Beckett beyond minimalism, Brater unwittingly reaffirms the achievement of the movement: ‘Beckett’s plays demonstrate an aesthetic which goes far beyond the limited and often de-humanised sphere we recognise in the chilling reticence of minimalist art’ (Brater, 1987, ix). Yet as it has been argued, minimalism is characterised by its excess over itself: its limitations
are its potential, because the effect of the work necessarily lies beyond its content, because the artwork refuses self-identity. Minimalism, then, is intrinsically ‘beyond minimalism’.

Only recently has Beckett criticism shifted from a negative focus on Beckett’s negation of language, meaning, communicability to a rather more positive view of his works’ affirmation of the body, of presence and of performance. This theoretical shift arguably coincides with a necessary order in Beckett’s own artistic project, whose affirmation of the excess is possible only after the negation of language: only the material constraints imposed on the artwork allow it to achieve the immediacy and directness of that which is perhaps best described as experience; only after the artwork has been stripped of character, setting and meaning can language regain its own material half-life.

Benjamin’s prophecy of incommunicability is fulfilled in Beckett’s art, as the storyteller is disembodied, emptied out and reduced to a ghostly remainder. The focus is turned back on the text itself, which henceforth becomes an unstable process rather than a given entity: the story is not told once by an identifiable subject, it tells itself again and again; words gain a half-life of their own through Derridean ‘différance’. Benjamin’s use of the present continuous in his hint that there may be a ‘new beauty in what is vanishing’ captures the nature of beauty in Beckett’s prose, which lies precisely in the Badiouian ‘vanishing term’, the excess over communicable reality that is always-already disappearing.

The ending of ‘Imagination’ is thus deceptive:

Mais non, la vie s’achève et non, il n’y a rien ailleurs, et plus question de retrouver ce point blanc perdu dans la blancheur, voir s’ils sont restés tranquilles au fort de cet orage, ou d’un orage pire, ou dans le noir fermé pour de bon, ou la grande blancheur immuable, et sinon ce qu’ils font. (57)

This seemingly nihilistic statement is in fact an affirmation of the minimal difference. While the possibility of locating the minimal difference of the ‘point blanc’ is negated by the speaking voice, it is simultaneously affirmed by the syntax. The structure of the prolix sentence, and the repetition of the conjunction ‘ou’, manifest an unfolding of the existential void – the storm, darkness
and whiteness—in endless permutations. The very possibility of
a ‘worse storm’, the possibility of difference, contradicts the
assertions of closure (‘noir fermé’) and immutability (‘blancheur
immuable’). With seismic force, the minimal excess produces tiny
cracks, which in turn induce eternal openings and shifts.

The minimal artwork can therefore never be a perfect whole,
a complete miniature, or a distilled essence. Nor is it simply
the art of the negative, a nihilistic statement, a pure vindication
of nothingness. The minimalist stance is an affirmative one. By
capitalising on the residual, the decaying, the vanishing, the
minimal artwork affirms the almost nothing, the barely present, the
something that resists annihilation. The processes of abstraction,
repetition and homogenisation that permeate Beckett’s art, like
that of his minimalist contemporaries, invariably unleash equal,
opposite forces of subtraction, difference and heterogeneity.

Beckett’s Têtes-mortes thus counteract the derogatory origins of
the term ‘minimalism’. The immediacy of the minimalist artwork,
its focus on the phenomenological ‘here and now’, allows lightning
to strike through the thunderstorm, creating flashes of insight into
another dimension, the space of the void. Benjamin’s ‘new beauty
in what is vanishing’ thus gains an additional meaning: beauty is
that which vanishes; it is the only truth we can be sure of; that of
the residue, of the present moment.

NOTES

1. All subsequent references to Têtes-mortes are from this edition.
2. All subsequent references to ‘Sans’ are from this edition.
3. James Knowlson’s brilliant biography contains various interviews
   in which the actors and directors with whom Beckett collaborated recall
   the musical nature of Beckett’s view of his own work. According to
   Duncan Scott, ‘there is no doubt that he treated words musically when
   composing his sentences’; Alan Mandell, likewise, was ‘fascinated by
   Beckett’s description of action in musical terms’ (Knowlson, 2006, 215,
   200).
4. The most significant contributions in this area are found in the
   following critical works: Leslie Hill, Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Words
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The Residual in Samuel Beckett's Minimalism


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