# Labor, Idleness, and Colonial Modern Fiction:
# Reading Claude McKay, Yi Sang, and Samuel Beckett in Relation

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Date: November 16, 2023

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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**Abstract**

This dissertation addresses the entanglement of work, identity, aesthetics, and geopolitics in the writings of three modernist authors: Claude McKay (1890-1948), Yi Sang (1910-1937), and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). It focuses in particular on these writers' explorations of idleness in their narratives, both thematically and formally. As such, it intervenes in scholarly discussions on the importance of labor and work to modernist artists. The contexts of colonial and racial history are foregrounded for their significance to the authors' creative explorations of idleness, and in this way the dissertation also contributes to fields of comparative literature and postcolonial literary studies.

The primary works addressed are Claude McKay's novel *Banjo* (1929), Yi Sang's short fictional narrative "Wings" (1936), and Samuel Beckett's early novel *Murphy* (1938), as well as his later trilogy of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953). The dissertation suggests that, like many twentieth-century modernist writers, McKay, Yi Sang, and Beckett took up work as an important concept for creative investigation. However, it argues that their interests in fact lie less with work itself than they do with idleness—a concept that capitalist ideology would define negatively in terms of the absence of productive labor but which these writers explore as a positive subjective state of being. As such, their writings powerfully critique the place of work in the modern world and challenge readers to question their own valuations of labor and idleness.

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## 1. Introduction

This dissertation addresses the entanglement of work, identity, aesthetics, and geopolitics in the writings of three modernist authors: Claude McKay (1890-1948), Yi Sang (1910-1937), and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). It focuses in particular on these writers' explorations of idleness in their narratives, both thematically and formally. Recent studies such as *Modernist Work: Labor, Aesthetics, and the Work of Art* (2019) have highlighted the significance of work as a "keyword" for literary modernism, and my arguments here will reinforce the idea of work as a concept of central significance to modernist writing in a broad sense. However, my goal is not to provide arguments for these three writers to be categorized together with all of the other modernist authors whose writings explored the role of work in a modern world increasingly structured and regulated by its global capitalist economy. Rather, this dissertation will show that these writers' interests lie less with work itself than they do with idleness—a concept that capitalist ideology would define negatively in terms of the absence of productive labor but which these writers explore as a positive subjective state of being.

I suggest that literary narrative, in the forms of the novel as well as short fiction, serves as an apt means for the writers addressed in this dissertation to artfully engage with the topic of idleness. In a world structured and dominated by an ideology of work, literature serves as an imaginative space that allows for the persistence and drawing out of contradictions and paradoxes. It makes possible extended explorations of idleness that do not need to meet the requirements of logic and rational argument that would be expected of a direct engagement with the topic through political or economic philosophy.

Through literary narrative, McKay, Yi Sang, and Beckett are able to uniquely convey the contradictory experience of living materially within the modern/colonial world while at the same time being incompatible with and excluded from its framing of modern subjectivity.

The following chapters will examine the work of writers from starkly different sociohistorical contexts. While all of them share to some degree an experience of subalternization in the modern/colonial imaginary, their experiences vary greatly in both degree and kind. While it is not a bold claim to make that the experience of being regarded as non-modern informed the aesthetic projects of each of these writers, a comparative study of their work runs the risk of cultural appropriation or exploitation if the articulation of connections and commonalities ultimately functions to construct an identity that conceals or silences cultural particularity and radically different experiences of racialization in the modern/colonial imaginary.

Morag Shiach has written on the idea of "modern labor" and modernist literature's engagement with it:

> The defining aspects of 'modern labour' are found by many writers to lie in the division of labour: that increasing tendency to break labour down into ever-smaller constituent parts. The rapidity with which this fragmentation took hold of many forms of the labour process, and the interaction of this with increasing mechanization led many writers to anxious speculation about the alienating and destructive tendencies of modern labour. (Shiach, 16)

This is undoubtedly true for the authors addressed in this dissertation, but an important distinction emerges in how they respond to this modern anxiety. As Shiach explains, the primary current of the canonical modernist response to this anxiety over labor could be

characterized as a "vigorous organicism" that attempts to reclaim control over labor, often as a means of rescuing the value and ostensibly noble nature of human labor from its modern manifestation. "Here," writes Shiach, "labour is understood as the energy of will, as the process of growth and creativity that drives both the individual and the human species. At its most extreme, this tendency develops into a vitalism that sees a life force driving all of nature and of culture, and also sees labour as the space in which this vital energy could receive its fullest expression" (16).

Suzanne Raitt has written on how efficiency, which emerged as an ideal of central importance to modern labor and industrial production processes, also came to be valued in modernist literary production. In "The Rhetoric of Efficiency in Early Modernism," she explains:

> In the 1909 preface to "The Altar of the Dead," Henry James proclaimed his "earnest aversion to waste" and his belief that "in art economy is always beauty." These ideas develop out of a culture in which efficiency, economy, and the elimination of waste were increasingly heralded as industrial and social ideals. Modernist art, like the industrial cultures of modernity, engages centrally with the rhetoric of efficiency, aiming at, in Ezra Pound's words, "maximum efficiency," but an anxiety about exactly how to identify what was efficient in a work of art meant that the modernists' quest for precision and compression was often a matter of rhetoric as much as of practice. (835)

Raitt goes on to focus in her article on what she accurately identifies as two of modernism's "most characteristic and influential techniques": Imagism and stream of consciousness (835). In spite of the fact that these techniques appear to be in stark contrast with each other, Raitt notes that "both methods aimed at adjusting the economy of the art-work to the economy of the world" (835). "Practitioners and critics of both

techniques," writes Raitt, "emphasized the thrifty nature of each form, arguing that the successful representation of the processes of perception required every word that arrived on the page" (835-836). Thus the dominant overarching perspective of canonical modernist literature was that "Art had to be modern and to be modern meant to be accurate, stream-lined, and efficient" (836). One of the central arguments that I want to put forth in this dissertation is that, among the many modernist writers whose narrative styles might be read in terms of a technique like stream of consciousness, we can identify a countercurrent that actually puts modern efficiency on trial. Their narrative techniques are strikingly "modernist," yet these techniques do not serve as tools for the achievement of a kind of aesthetic accuracy and efficiency that would map onto the social and economic ideals of "modernity" itself. In my reading of each of the writers addressed in the following chapters, formal experimentation enacts a radical reversal of the expectations of what a "modern" work of fiction is supposed to achieve, and each challenges the reader to engage with the text in a mode that is incompatible with the notion of the consumption of the aesthetic art-object.

This dissertation intervenes in discussions of modernism and labor by identifying another vector amidst the canonically recognized modernist responses to work: a reaction that contrasts starkly with the idealization of efficiency and with the organicism or vitalism that attempts to regain control over labor and represent its positive potential. Instead, the writers and works that will be discussed here engage with the concept of labor by exploring its forsaken shadow: idleness. Like many other modernist writers, Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang take up "the complex relations between labour as a

creative and self-creating process and labour as a forced or alienated condition" as a theme and as a motive force for their writing and formal experimentations with artistic expression (Shiach, 33). However, their approach to these relations does not seek to redeem labor from its contemporary and inherently contradictory manifestation. Rather, they experiment with the assertion of idleness as a theoretical zone that destabilizes our understanding of the value of labor. Labor appears as an external force, a pressure, a "forced condition" that is present both thematically and formally as part of the production of the text itself. However, the line between labor and idleness is blurred, and idleness is no longer conceptualized as the absence of labor but an alternative creative space that disrupts the binary set down by social and cultural institutions. While I agree with Shiach and others about the importance of labor as a concept to modernism broadly conceived and that attending to labor "allows us to map the historical and cultural tensions that drove the modernist cultural imagination in quite distinct ways," what I hope to achieve in this dissertation is an expansion and complication of that map (17).

I intend to illuminate a connection between idleness as a thematic concern for Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang and the aesthetics of their "modernist" formal experimentation. Furthermore, I will show that the problems of work in the modern/colonial world are, for these writers, inseparable from problems of identity. And while a crisis of identity is undoubtedly one of the hallmarks of the modern subject, the problems of identity for these three writers are heavily inflected by their liminal position between modern and non-modern subjects within the modern/colonial imaginary—the ways in which the modern/colonial world "described itself through the discourse of the

state, intellectuals, and scholars" (*Local Histories, Global Designs*, 23). Put another way, we can see in the writings of these authors their attention to what Walter Mignolo has called "colonial differences": "the classification of the planet in the modern/colonial imaginary, by enacting coloniality of power, an energy and a machinery to transform differences into values" (*Local Histories, Global Designs*, 13).

These writers' liminal identities, and their refusal to overlook or deny their liminal nature, always entails artistic or expressive failure from the perspective of a modern/colonial aesthetics in which literary production is simultaneously the production or reproduction of the subject itself. Insofar as artistic achievement within this aesthetic frame could only be attained through the repression or disavowal of the non-modern in the construction of the self as universal modern subject, such artistic "achievement" would inherently, and paradoxically, entail an alienation or loss of self. The *production* of "modern" identity for the subject regarded as "non-modern," in other words, entails a labor no less alienating than that of the wage relation.

Each of these writers, I will argue, remains highly attuned to this predicament, gravitating towards idleness as a rejection of wage labor thematically while experimenting with literary forms that are recalcitrant to a modern/colonial aesthetics that would prioritize the production of any identity or subjectivity amenable to capitalism, the state, and the civil society that dominate the modern/colonial world system. They reject modern/colonial aesthetics, then, for what we might tentatively call an "aesthetics of idleness," with idleness to be understood here not from the viewpoint of capitalist ideology purely in terms of lack, but rather as a rejection of the alienating work of literary

production under a modern/colonial aesthetics that serves to regulate the senses in the production and reproduction of the "civilized" subject of the modern/colonial world system.

**On Comparison and Reading in Relation**

I argue through the dissertation that the modernist fiction of Samuel Beckett, Claude McKay, and Yi Sang are loosely interconnected through the themes and techniques of their writing, and triangulating these authors in a meaningful way comes with significant methodological challenges but also carries the benefit of avoiding the implication, intentional or unintentional, that the objects in a one-to-one comparison exist in a relationship that is somehow special and exclusive. In other words, comparative work that addresses two particular contexts runs the risk of fetishizing similarities to the exclusion of other potential points of comparison. The greatest challenge that comes with such a project is to achieve a proper balance between depth of analysis and breadth of scope. A narrower focus would allow for a much more rigorous and richer presentation of any one of these individual authors, and yet it would not succeed in what this dissertation was originally intended to achieve.

At the dissertation's core are the themes of labor and idleness, and its chapters are intended to examine how each of these three writers addresses these themes from their distinct points of view. While the important differences between the cultural and racial backgrounds of these writers must be acknowledged, I believe that in the end a provocative picture of modernist fiction's engagement with labor and idleness emerges

from this comparative perspective. In spite of the works' obvious differences, I hope to highlight how the contexts in which and perspectives from which they were produced were in different but loosely analogous ways impacted by the global processes of colonialism and modernization. Such a view will allow us to consider these texts outside linear canons of national literature, through their particular political stances towards processes that, while their effects are felt locally, are global in form.

While I do not intend for this comparative approach to disregard these texts' national specificity, I believe that reading them strictly within the frames of national or regional literatures can be equally as restrictive. In his essay "'Misplaced Ideas?': Colonialism, Location and Dislocation in Irish Studies," Joe Cleary argues that while instances of colonialism are each unique, they cannot be thought of as hermetically isolated events. "From its inception," he writes, "the colonial process was never simply a matter of the subjugation of this or that territory. It was, rather, an international process through which different parts of the globe were differentially integrated into an emergent world capitalist system" (Cleary, 43). Because colonization itself is an inherently global phenomenon, then, Ireland's particular experience of colonization and postcoloniality ought to be considered within a global context.

Critics in the field of Korean studies have similarly called for the consideration of Korea from a broader, global perspective. In *The Real Modern: Literary Modernism and the Crisis of Representation in Colonial Korea*, Christopher P. Hanscom makes three claims—"Korean modernism is modernism," "Korean modernism is political," and "Korean modernist texts bear formal analysis"—with the hope of "help[ing] us consider

how the rethinking of a non-Western modernist literary practice can be linked to the global situation of the early twentieth century, and how this might expand the scope and methodology of modernist and postcolonial literary studies in the present" (Hanscom, 167). The intention, in other words, is "not to close the book on modernist studies in Korea but to open the Korean case to comparative work in broader literary or modernist studies" (Hanscom, 173). One of the primary motives of this dissertation is to make a serious attempt to place these works and these contexts in juxtaposition with one another in the hope that their affinities might emerge, not to overshadow their important and insurmountable differences, but to mutually shed light on one another's artistic projects from a global perspective. Cleary states this motive very well when he writes:

> The point, finally, is not to adduce whether Ireland is or is not really "just like" any of these situations, since no two colonial sites are ever completely identical. It is, rather, to think the ways in which specific national configurations are always the product of dislocating intersections between local and global processes that are not simply random but part of the internally contradictory structure of the modern capitalist world system. (Cleary, 45)

Beckett's, McKay's, and Yi Sang's narrative engagements with labor and idleness provide common points for comparison and allow us to productively consider these works together, and by doing so, we can see that the conflicts brought by colonialism and modernity at local sites can be more fully understood when approached from a global perspective. Such an analysis ultimately allows us to view these texts as nodes of resistance in a potentially larger transnational constellation of works that profoundly reject the limitations imposed on subjectivity by the modern/colonial world system.

It is not difficult to notice instances of what we might call analogous approaches to narration among these writers. To offer one example, we can find instances in both Beckett's and Yi Sang's work where the "unreliable narrator" is manifest as an explicit admission that the text is composed of the lies of the narrative voice. In *Molloy*, Beckett begins by introducing a narrator who is a writer—a writer who admits, "I've forgotten how to spell… and half the words" and who concludes this first book, "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (*Three Novels*, 7, 176). Beckett's trilogy continuously circulates around an anxiety about writing and the production of narrative, and by the time we arrive at *The Unnamable*, the narrative voice has been completely overcome by this anxiety:

> All this business of a labor to accomplish, before I can end, of words to say, a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end, of an imposed task, once known, long neglected, finally forgotten, to perform, before I can be done with speaking, done with listening, I invented it all, in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway. All lies. (*Three Novels*, 314)

Beckett's writing in the trilogy's incessantly portrays literature as a lie—and as written *by* someone—while addressing the problem of the peripheral modern subject facing a simultaneous obligation and inability to participate properly in the production of Western "literature."

If we turn to Yi Sang's story "Tonghae," we find a narrator recollecting bits of memories and producing mere snapshots of scenes and stories that continuously break off,

never producing any sustained narrative. And like the narrators of Beckett's trilogy, this one too directs our attention to his own mendacity: "I have a habit of lying through my skin, unable to keep it under control, and now it seems that, seizing an opportunity that even I can't sense, I might be falling on my ass telling another groundless lie. If that's the case I'm in big trouble" (283-284; my translation). Yet there is also, again, a sense of a simultaneous obligation and inability to properly narrate:

> My language has already been strewn and wasted across this vast ground, my mind a hollow void which I can't feel, my thoughts indigent. But for the sake of sleeping safe and sound for eternal time, for the sake of rationalizing my wild dreamscape, I cannot shut my mouth and keep silent like a honey jar...
>
> Nevertheless, with my own words, until death's final despair, no, hope, perhaps because of fixing the tense, I'll throw out babble. (299-300; my translation)

We might consider the coexistent anxiety over literary creation and relentlessly "productive" drive of the narrative voice in these texts in terms of what Édouard Glissant calls "forced poetics," which emerge "where a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression" and which "is created from the awareness of the opposition between a language that one uses and a form of expression that one needs" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 120, 121). However, my intention in bringing these texts into conversation with each other in this example (as well as in the dissertation as a whole) is not to simply to say that Beckett's and Yi Sang's writing, or what it is that they were sensing when they were writing, is or was similar. Rather, I would like to ask why this is and what it was that they were sensing. Walter Mignolo has written of "decolonial" projects that they "are not interested in similarities and differences but above all in the mechanisms and

strategies that, within the colonial matrix of power, create similarities and differences and maintain relations and hierarchies between entities, regions, languages, religions, 'literatures,' people, knowledges, economies, and the like" ("On Comparison," 114). In this sense, I see my own line of inquiry in this dissertation as inspired by such a decolonial approach. While each of these writers was responding to his own particular set of circumstances in his own specific context, these circumstances and contexts were themselves engendered by coloniality, which, as a claim to universality, was always and still is global in its effects. Such an approach may allow us to bring writers into conversation with one another in ways that standard disciplines of literary study would not normally accommodate and to explore their work as being particular and at the same time connected as responses to coloniality. In this way, I am interested in, through this dissertation, "uncovering hidden connections and relations between events, processes, and entities in the colonial matrix of power" ("On Comparison," 113-114). I see the kind of engagement that I am describing as cohering with what Mignolo has written about "border thinking"—that it "operates as a connector between different experiences of exploitation" and is "the method that connects pluriversality (different colonial histories entangled with imperial modernity) into a uni-versal project of delinking from modern rationality and building other possible worlds" and that it becomes "the necessary critical *method* for the political and ethical project of filling in the gaps and revealing the imperial complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality" ("Delinking," 352, 353). This articulation of border thinking as a connector gives substance to my own thinking across the borders of global modernism.

For each of these writers, experimentation with literary form emerges partially in response to a form of alienation that they detect as being inherent in literary production itself due to the regulatory intellectual labor that aesthetic production demands. Their modernist writing practices, in other words, strive to delink from the standards and expectations of modern/colonial aesthetics by turning away from the regulatory and alienating intellectual labor of composing "literature" that the ideology of modern/colonial aesthetics entails. In this way, the dissertation also draws inspiration from and joins conversations on what Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez have called "decolonial aestheSis" (as opposed to aestheTics).[1] As Mignolo and Vázquez show, the development of modern aesthetics in European thought—in particular through Kant—"played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving" (Mignolo and Vázquez). In the face of this Eurocentric normativity, Mignolo and Vázquez explain, non-Europeans had to decide "whether to accept, assimilate, reject, integrate, or appropriate European arts and philosophical aestheTics into their own histories, ways of living, and sensing" (Mignolo and Vázquez). From the European perspective, "the rest of the world (following Kant's evaluation) did not reach the state of producing art or literature/narratives, but what they produced was considered "arts-crafts" and 'myths.' These classifications, to which Kant

[1] While Mignolo and Vázquez capitalize the T in "aestheTics" and the S in "aestheSis" in order to mark a clear distinction between the two concepts, I will maintain standard capitalization in my own use of the terms here.

contributed significantly, served to legitimize the 'superiority' of European arts and aestheTics" (Mignolo and Vázquez).

While this dissertation is transnational and transcultural in nature, it has been written with an ever-present awareness of the inherent Eurocentrism of traditional comparative methodology. As Walter Mignolo has explained, it was "a method to ensure that the observer remains uncontaminated and that Western epistemology remains on top, controlling all other forms of knowledge" ("The Darker Side of the Enlightenment," 340). Some scholars have proposed ways of countering this Eurocentric and universalist perspective. Rey Chow, for instance, has described what she calls a "post-European" perspective on comparison. This perspective, as Aarthi Vadde has written, "does not perform a comparison without analyzing the process of comparison itself—its acts of selection, its instantiation of standards, and its consequent valuations" (Vadde, 52). Raymundo Pannikar has suggested an "*imperative* method," which is "the effort at learning from the other and the attitude of allowing our own convictions to be fecundated by insight of the other" (qtd. in "The Darker Side of the Enlightenment," 340). Unlike the comparative method, which, as Mignolo notes, "privileges dialectics and argumentative reasoning," Pannikar's imperative method "focuses on dialogue, praxis, and existential encounters" (340). Such a method (the imperative) is what I hope to pursue in the dissertation.

In addition, I am sympathetic to Madina Tlostanova's assertion that her own juxtaposition of post-soviet writers with others from diverse geopolitical backgrounds (Australian, South African, Turkish, Azeri, and West Indian) does not imply that her

work "is based on traditional comparative principles, where the point of reference is invariably Western European aesthetics, while the comparison itself is based on the principle of similarity and not difference" (Tlostanova, 10-11). While remaining wary of the pitfalls of the traditional comparative methodology, Tlostanova goes on to articulate a justification for such juxtapositions that I entirely agree with and share with regard to my own work:

> The parallels, echoes and possible connections between the authors from various locales, particularly marked with a complex configuration of imperial and colonial differences, are generated not by influences, affinities and borrowings… but by the fact that all of them… have to share a common lot—living and being in the logic of Western modernity, which determined several centuries ago their specific roles and hierarchical positions. … It is this global community of fate that creates unexpected parallels in their works and is responsible for the birth of a specific border aesthetics and sensibility. (Tlostanova, 11)

Tlostanova's assertion that these diverse writers share a common lot of "living and being in the logic of Western modernity" also echoes Martinician writer Édouard Glissant's remark regarding the commonality that he sees between his own writing and the American novel: "The irruption into modernity, the violent departure from tradition, from literary 'continuity,' seems to me a specific feature of the American writer when he wishes to give meaning to the reality of his environment. Therefore, we share the same form of expression" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 146). After noting the irreducible differences emerging out of the different geographies of their places of enunciation, Glissant remarks succinctly: "But what we have in common is *the irruption into modernity*" (146). My own perspective in the dissertation will likewise acknowledge, on the one hand, that vastly different populations may share analogous historical experiences of relegation

within the racial and ethnic hierarchies of the modern/colonial imaginary, while on the other insisting upon the irreducible particularities of how these diverse populations experienced this relegation. Or as stated by the voice of Beckett's *The Unnamable*, "Ah a nice mess we're in, the whole pack of us, is it possible we're all in the same boat, no, we're in a nice mess each one in his own peculiar way" (*Three Novels*, 372).

I take great care to emphasize the importance of difference, because while cross-cultural gestures of solidarity are generally made with good intentions, they can often emerge from nefarious, even if unconscious, motives—especially when such gestures are made across racial lines. Barbadian writer George Lamming's essay "A Way of Seeing" is particularly helpful in illuminating what is at stake in such gestures. He writes, "Intellectuals take refuge in the absurd habit that it is enough for two people to share similar ideas in order to claim a certain identity of outlook" (Lamming, 73-74). Referring to such intellectuals' outlook, he observes that, "The current phrase is 'talking one's language'; for if you and I talk the same language of ideas, there is no need to wade through explanations; and when the subject is Race, naturally the whole matter is excluded as being no part of our agenda for serious talk" (Lamming, 74). He calls the equality that is offered through such gestures an "abstract" equality because it "does not grow from a felt recognition of my capacity for experience, my particular way of seeing" and goes on to suggest that gestures of solidarity from white working class people that offer such abstract equality are often made because the individual "wants to exempt himself from any responsibility or active involvement in race discrimination" (74, 75). They are motivated, in other words, by self-interest. Lamming calls this "the worst form

of colonisation: colonisation through a process of affection," and his essay makes clear why it is so important not to allow the elucidation of commonality to suppress difference (Lamming, 76).

Finally, my thoughts about the writings of these authors and their constellation in this dissertation have been greatly influenced by the writings of Édouard Glissant, and while I do not seek to fit the authors whom I discuss into a kind of framework based on Glissant's thinking, his writings and the ideas that he develops therein have served as underlying inspiration for how I have thought about both the relationship between the fictional work and its reader and also the theoretical relationships among the writers themselves. While I do propose arguments about what I see as aesthetic affinities among these writers, the dissertation as a whole exhibits, I think, a kind of "errantry" in its resistance to generalizing and reductive claims. Glissant writes that the errant "challenges and discards the universal" and that: "Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it (*Poetics of Relation*, 20-21). While I attempt to bring these authors into a productive juxtaposition that highlights certain affinities and suggests a kind of countercurrent within literary modernism's canonical engagement with the concept of labor, I also want to resist the temptation to redefine these authors and their work in terms of these affinities or to establish this countercurrent as a rigidly defined category. On this point, Glissant writes of "creolization" that, "We propose neither humanity's Being nor its models. We are not

prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relation to everything possible as well—the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations. Creolizations bring into Relation but not to universalize…" (*Poetics of Relation*, 90). If, then, it can be said that what is explored through this dissertation is an identity of "Relation," that is to say that it is "is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures" (*Poetics of Relation*, 144). At various points in this dissertation, it has seemed genuinely beneficial to bring these authors and their cultural contexts directly into conversation with one another, but an effort has been made to explore each of these writers in their respective chapters primarily on their own terms as part of an attempt to acknowledge the irreducibility of differences in their experiences as racialized and colonized subjects. This differentiation within Relation is essential for Glissant, who explains that Relation "neither relays nor links afferents that can be assimilated or allied only in their principle, for the simple reason that it always differentiates among them concretely and diverts them from the totalitarian" (*Poetics of Relation*, 172). As the writer of this dissertation, I hope that I can offer some valuable reflections upon the writers and works discussed in the following chapters without pretending to offer a definitive or "true" account of their meaning and significance or attempting to render them "transparent." Glissant writes that:

> If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce. (190)

As an alternative mode of engagement, he offers the acceptance of "opacity," noting that the "opaque" is "not the obscure" but "that which cannot be reduced" (191). To "conceive of the opacity of the other" means that, "To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image" (193). Likewise, I put these disparate writers and their literary output into relation/conversation…

**On Labor and Idleness as Ideological Concepts**

One of the fundamental distinctions that I draw between the writers with whom I engage in the following chapters and the metropolitan modernist canon is in their turn to forms of idleness in response to the problems and anxieties of modern labor. Their approaches to the topics of labor and idleness in fact bear an affinity to that of Arthur Schopenhauer, who writes that, "whereas everyone would really like to rest, want and boredom are the whips that keep the top spinning. Therefore the whole and each individual bear the stamp of a forced condition" (Schopenhauer, 359). In contrast, Evelyn Cobley has suggested that the anxiety over "the benefits and costs of efficiency" held by modern novelists such as E.M. Forster might be encapsulated in Margaret Schlegel's attitude towards the "efficient" Henry Wilcox in *Howards End* (Cobley, 15). Schlegel reflects that without such individuals there would be "no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in" and that, "More and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it" (qtd. in Cobley, 15). Cobley suggests that while

modernist novelists like Forster "mostly 'sneer' at efficiency and sometimes unequivocally express their hostility to this 'evil of modernity,' they find it difficult to locate any viable sites of resistance to its infiltration of the social fabric. In their search for alternatives, they most often retreat into nostalgic longings for a past they know to be lost" (Cobley, 15). I suggest that by exploring states of idleness as real alternatives to the efficiently laboring modern subject, Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang produce art that is profoundly resistant to the ideology of work in the modern/colonial imaginary.

One of the most significant threads that runs through this ideology of work is the importance and centrality of labor to the conceptualization of identity, so that it is through work that the subject is seen to exist as an individual. Kathi Weeks writes of the ideology of work under capitalism that work is "the primary means by which individuals are integrated not only into the economic system, but also into social, political, and familial modes of cooperation. That individuals should work is fundamental to the basic social contract; indeed, working is part of what is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary" (Weeks, 8). Morag Shiach notes that John Locke, for instance, "produces an account of mankind that puts the necessity of labour at the heart of what it means to be human" (Shiach, 19). Likewise, for Adam Smith, labor and selfhood are so intertwined that, as Kathryn Sutherland has put it, "we are the jobs we do" and "personality is a function of work" (qtd. in Shiach, 21). The same was true for Hegel, for whom, "In the practical activity of making, of producing a finished object, the worker becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to him, and that he thus exists essentially in his own right" (Shiach, 25). These individuals were not ignorant

of the problems of modern labor, but for many, these problems were to be resolved through the function of the state. For instance, Shiach writes that for Hegel, "although modern labour produces isolation and fragmentation it is also the space in which a new version of the social becomes imaginable" (25).

Thomas Carlyle is a figure who is particularly notable in that he is referenced by both Beckett and McKay (indirectly in Beckett's *Murphy* and explicitly in McKay's *Banjo*). According to Shiach, Carlyle strongly develops the idea that "mankind finds both definition and affirmation of himself" in the process of "transforming and subduing nature through the use of tools" (Shiach, 30-31). In *Sartor Resartus*, it is asserted "that committed and arduous work is the most reliable route to spiritual certainty" (Shiach, 31). While Carlyle writes *Sartor Resartus* "in praise of the toiler," he more stridently chastises those he considers to be idle in his 1839 study of Chartism (*Chartism*), in which he "is insistent about the social and the ethical requirement for labour" (Shiach, 31, 32). Shiach quotes from this study: "He writes, for example that 'for the idle man there is no place in this England of ours'; that 'he that will not work according to his faculty, let him perish according to his necessity'; and that 'work is the mission of man in this Earth'" (32). Carlyle's study of Chartism is particularly relevant to Irish writers like Beckett in that it contains, as Shiach describes, "a fervent denunciation of the fecklessness of the Irish and a celebration of the Saxon virtues of diligence," but this cultural dichotomy that he sets up echoes more broadly in that it resonates with colonial and racial stereotypes and serves as an example of how ideas about labor and idleness figure into the modern-colonial imaginary on a global scale (Shiach, 32). Carlyle's writings consistently return to this

ideological elevation of work, so that, "In his 1843 comparative study of medieval and contemporary societies and their institutions, 'Past and Present,'" … he writes that 'idleness alone is without hope: work honestly at anything. … There is endless hope in work'" (Shiach, 32-33). As Shiach points out, however:

> Attentiveness to the concrete social and economic relations of Britain in his study of Chartism had led Carlyle to a practical and theoretical paralysis in the face of willed idleness and unproductive labour. Only by withdrawing from the conditions under which modern labour was being performed could Carlyle retrieve the imaginative possibility of labour as a sacred and secure form of self-realization" (32-33).

Like so many other writers, then, Carlyle struggles with "The complex relations between labour as a creative and self-creating process and labour as a forced or alienated condition" (33).

Karl Marx is of course a figure of enormous importance to any discussion of the theorization of labor in the modern world, and in relation to this dissertation specifically, it is notable that not only did McKay engage with Marxism extensively throughout his writing career, but that Marx is also mentioned by name (though the significance of this is extremely ambiguous) in Yi Sang's "Wings," the work that chapter three of this dissertation primarily engages with. Marx shares with Locke the idea that human labor involves the transformation of nature, writing in *Capital* that, "Living labour must seize on these things, must rouse them from their death-like sleep, must change them from potential use-values into real and kinetic use-values. Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as embodied labour, and, as it were, animated for their functions in the labour process" (qtd. in Shiach, 39). Furthermore, Marx develops the idea that labor is at

the core of what it means to be human. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, he declares that, "the whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character" (qtd. in Shiach, 34). However, as Shiach points out:

> The correlation between labour, consciousness and freedom that Marx sees as expressive of species being is not… what he finds in nineteenth-century industrial society. … Nineteenth-century labour is experienced as a negation of the self, as a curtailment of the relationship between man and nature and as a negation of freedom… And this fundamental transformation of the nature and the significance of human labour is, for Marx, the result of the transformation of the worker into a wage labourer. (Shiach, 36-37)

In Marx's dialectical analysis, this transformation of course contains within it a revolutionary potential. As he writes in *The German Ideology*, "only the proletarians of the present day, who are completely shut off from all self-activity, are in a position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity" (qtd. in Shiach, 36-37). While Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang's explorations of labor are very much coherent with Marx's analysis of modern labor as a forced and alienated condition, they do not regard this condition as being revolutionary within a dialectical structure of human or historical progress. Rather, they significantly turn to explorations of idleness as living alternatives in the present.

There are some other strains of thought that are worth mentioning here, as their approaches to labor and idleness veer much closer to those of Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang than those I have mentioned so far. One of these is the autonomous Marxist tradition, in which the *refusal* of work is central. According to Kathi Weeks:

> In contrast to some other types of Marxism that confine their critique of capitalism to the exploitation and alienation of work without attending to its overvaluation, this tradition offers a more expansive model of critique that seeks to interrogate at once capitalist production and capitalist (as well as socialist) productivism. From the perspective of the refusal of work, the problem with work cannot be reduced to the extraction of surplus value or the degradation of skill, but extends to the ways that work dominates our lives. (Weeks, 13)

The creative narrative investigations of labor enacted by the authors that I address in this dissertation anticipate this autonomous Marxist tradition in that the latter "simultaneously centers its analytical apparatus on work and disavows its traditional ethics" (Weeks, 25). However, this tradition does not account for the colonial differences that I have raised above, and I regard the particular and irreducible experiences of racialization and colonization within the modern/colonial world system to be central to the nature of these writers' explorations of idleness and the refusal of work.

Another theoretical concept that could be regarded as relevant to the argument of this dissertation is Maurice Blanchot's notion of *désoeuvrement*. This concept is not easy to succinctly define, and as Michael Krimper points out, "At one point, [Blanchot] asserts that the concept of *désoeuvrement* is among those in his lexicon that defy all conceptualization" (Krimper, 299). However, its potential relevance to the current study lies in the way it "opposes not only the concept of *travail* in the sense of work as 'productive activity' or 'labor,' but also the concept of *oeuvre* in the sense of the 'literary work' or 'artwork' (*l'oeuvre d'art*)" (299). According to Krimper, the meaning of the term for Blanchot

> … oscillates between the passive pole of idleness, on the one hand, and the active pole of the refusal of work, on the other. The translation of

> *désoeuvrement*, then, must signify the suspension of ordinary work coupled to an altogether different way of (non)working, no longer governed by the dialectical principles of mastery, appropriation, and realization. (300)

Krimper goes on to suggest that the concept "bears on the social predicament and experience of the writer in modernity, which, in Blanchot's view, is characterized by exclusion" (300). The exclusion that Blanchot describes applies to the writer's position in relation to both "the everyday sphere of productive activity and labor" and "the work of literature itself" (Krimper, 300). As such, the modern writer is cast as the "inert idler" (*le désoeuvré*), an image that sounds much like some of my own descriptions of the writers and narrative voices in the following chapters. Likewise, for Blanchot, this idle state is precisely and paradoxically that which drives the narrative process:

> …the activity of writing is paradoxically borne out of such an experience of sheer passivity, powerlessness, and exclusion. To write is to undergo the depersonalizing experience in which the "I" is abandoned to the work, in which "I" am dispossessed, and at which point "one" cannot help but write without end. For Blanchot, it is precisely the impersonal and anonymous experience of *désoeuvrement* that animates the creative production of the work (*l'oeuvre*). (Krimper, 300)

While this kind of theorization resonates with much of the writing that I engage with in this dissertation, categorical claims about writing or "the" modern writer ultimately fail, in my view, to acknowledge the essential particularity of what "work" means in a specific context. While much of how the pressures of modernity are felt to writers across the world has to do with global processes and the economic form of capitalism, the manifestations of those pressures across race, culture, and class are not uniform.

While my investigations of idleness in the writings of Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang will be coherent with Blanchot's suggestion about "the experience of the writer in modernity," they will also suggest that these writers' subject positions within modernity make their engagements with idleness and labor much more complex, so that particular racial and colonial histories are very much intertwined with and inextricable from these engagements. For this reason, a concept like *désoeuvrement* is worth raising but cannot serve as a foundation or frame from which to approach these writers' work.

**The Chapters**

The dissertation begins with an examination of Claude McKay and his work, before moving to Yi Sang and then to Samuel Beckett. This sequence places the writers in chronological order around the respective periods in which they worked. The chapter on McKay focuses mostly on his novel *Banjo*, which was published in 1929; the chapter on Yi Sang deals mostly with his story "Wings," published in 1936; and the chapter on Beckett addresses *Murphy*, published in 1938, as well as his later trilogy of novels ending with *The Unnamable*, which was first published in 1953. This sequence also allows for a reading of Beckett, who has long been considered a canonical European modernist or postmodernist writer, in which the thematic and stylistic aspects of his work that I will discuss have been anticipated by the less widely-read McKay and Yi Sang in ways that deserve attention.

The first chapter addresses work, aesthetics, and geopolitics in the writings of Jamaican author Claude McKay by exploring how the shifts in his literary career respond

to the coloniality of aesthetics and how the tension between literary production as a form of natural expression and literary production as necessary labor changes along with these shifts. McKay's racialized position in the modern/colonial imaginary places him in a double-bind: if his own particular "sensitivity" is "hereditary," then it is racialized and regarded as non-modern; if it is "acquired," then it is inauthentic and (perpetual) work is required to cultivate it to the appropriate level of Western Man (*A Long Way From Home*, 24). McKay struggles against this double-bind, refusing to submit for publication "only such poems as did not betray [his] racial identity" and suggesting that modern/colonial aesthetic ideology renders literary acclaim possible for him only through the erasure of his blackness (27). As such, McKay reveals that the "common sense" underpinning modern/colonial aesthetics entails the erasure of individuality in favor of interchangeability.

One of the more subtle but interesting ways in which this double-bind manifests in McKay's writing is through a persistent tension between literary production as a form of natural expression and literary production as necessary labor or professional work. From the Eurocentric perspectives presented in *A Long Way From Home*, writing is always envisioned as a "profession" for McKay, its labor serving both to provide for his material needs and to perpetually bring him closer to the achievement of "universal" (Eurocentric) expression. At times, McKay counters this notion by presenting himself as a passive medium through which writing emerges, while at other times it is counterbalanced by descriptions of the poet as one who will "discipline and compose his emotions into self-expression" (73).

I suggest that McKay's pivot from writing prose to poetry can be understood as a rejection of the intellectual labor of disciplining and composing the emotions that, to him, poetry all too often seemed to require. His most vehement critique of the modern/colonial work-ethic is found in his novel *Banjo*, whose transnational cast of (mostly) black characters work (to paraphrase the novel's eponymous "vagabond") when they must and lay off when they feel lazy. Unlike in the works of Beckett and Yi Sang, where idleness manifests through the body in the obsessive torpor of the characters, the economically "idle" body in *Banjo* is emphatically dynamic—as mobile transnationally as it is on the dance floor. Furthermore, McKay replicates this reimagination of "idleness" in *Banjo* at the level of form by delinking from modern/colonial aesthetics and the regulatory labor of disciplined composition that it demands. Ultimately, though, this narrative "idleness," which contributes to the unique narrative form of McKay's plotless story, is best characterized not in terms of a *lack* of work-ethic, but rather as a plenitude of expression unrestrained by modern/colonial aesthetics.

The second chapter addresses the interconnection between work, aesthetics, and geopolitics in the fiction and essays of Korean writer Yi Sang (Kim Hae-gyŏng). Yi Sang's writing exhibits an obsessive preoccupation with laziness (*keŭrŭm*) that I read as responding to the speed and productivity that he associates with modernity, and contextually against writer Yi Kwangsu's elevating notion of the modern man as marked by his busyness, diligently planning towards his goal, and persistently checking the speed at which he moves. As such, Yi Sang's narrators reject the notion that the colonial subject must work to "catch up" with the subject of modernity. Laziness is transvalued in Yi

Sang's fiction from an absence of productivity into a pleasurable state of non-commodified existence, where it serves as the basis of a life of self-possession.

Yi Sang's writings further complicate this transvaluation, however, through the paradoxical acknowledgment of the commodification of the literary text itself. He observes that wage labor and aesthetics are inherently intertwined through an irreconcilable contradiction between the writer and the commodification of his writing that guarantees his existence—a contradiction, he notes, that produces an ever-present feeling of unease or anxiety in the writer. I suggest that his writings demonstrate this alienating aspect of literary creation in various ways. For instance, while his essay "Ennui" reveals the writer's ever-present compulsion to be producing, his fiction persistently attempts to escape from the commodification of the self by resisting the confessional form of self-narration that defined the I-novel genre in which he is generally regarded as working. At the formal level, the alienation that Yi Sang suggests to be inherent in modern literary production is undercut by various strategies of ambiguity that his texts openly reference, for instance the withholding of secrets or the presentation of narration as a "mask" or "pose" that conceals rather than reveals the self, producing a desire in the reader for a truth that remains the "asset" of the otherwise indigent author. Meanwhile, by disrupting any attempt to construct a coherent, stable subject in the service of colonial ideologies, Yi Sang's techniques of narrative ambiguity grate against contemporary aesthetic discourses that set either the imaginative construction of Korea as a modern nation state or imperial assimilation as the goal of literary expression.

The third chapter, on Samuel Beckett's novels from *Murphy* (1938) to his later trilogy of *Molloy* (French: 1951; English:1955), *Malone Dies* (French: 1951; English: 1956), and *The Unnamable* (French: 1953; English: 1958), addresses two distinct but related binaries that are common to Beckett criticism. First, by illuminating important continuities between the early *Murphy* and the later trilogy, I show that the predominant critical approach of regarding *Murphy* as an immature and wholly separate artistic endeavor from the later novels is misguided. The primary source of continuity that I argue for is these novels' sustained critique of the modern/colonial work ethic, which is enacted on multiple levels: materialist, aesthetic, and geopolitical. In revealing this critique to be central to both the early and later novels, I also show that the aesthetic problems with which the later novels are widely understood to be primarily concerned emerge in nascent form in *Murphy*, while the geopolitical significance of Ireland—which is most *directly* dealt with in *Murphy*—carries through to the later trilogy in a profound way. As such, these readings also dissolve the persistent critical binary between approaches to Beckett that emphasize his status as a postcolonial Irish writer and those that portray him as a placeless modernist or postmodernist aesthete.

As a whole, this dissertation will shed new light on the works of each of the authors that it addresses, and it should be of interest to any reader willing to consider the importance of labor and idleness as concepts to modernist art. Furthermore, it will argue that these writers' works challenge their readers in a powerful way. They invite us to dwell in the imaginative webs of uncertainty and contradiction that they artfully weave,

and to question the place and value of work—as well as the possibilities of idleness—in our own lives.

## 2. Claude McKay's Pretty Nonsense: *Banjo*, Aesthetics, and the Racial Politics of Creative Labor

In the early chapters of Claude McKay's novel *Banjo*, a marked contrast is established between the titular character's rousing musical performances and those of the white itinerant musicians, who "played a hard, unsmiling, funereal way and only for sous" (*Banjo*, 40). The narrator confidently asserts that this playing in exchange for money is "doubtless why their playing in general was so execrable" (40). Such performances, in other words, are degraded by their becoming means to a financial end, akin to the watered-down wine served at cafés in accordance with "the profit way" (7). On the other hand, while Banjo appreciates (and even expects) rounds of wine as signs of "expreciation," he refuses to "take up a collection": "When Banjo turned himself loose and wild playing, he never remembered sous" (8, 40). This early theorization of the relationship between art and the forms of labor that it entails brings together the two focal points of this chapter–aesthetics and labor politics. I will suggest that *Banjo* offers a compelling critique of Western civilization's ideologies of aesthetics and labor, and I will address both because the novel, I suggest, presents them as inextricably intertwined. *Banjo*'s theorization of art, in other words, inherently entails a theorization of labor.

This intertwining of aesthetic and economic theory is in fact much more coherent than it may first appear. As David Lloyd has argued in *Race Under Representation*, there is formally analogical relationship between the subject of aesthetic judgment in the Western philosophical tradition and the subject of wage labor under a capitalist mode of production: with the former's status as representative of *all* judging subjects and the

latter's labor abstracted into economically valuable work-time, both are fundamentally defined by their endless exchangeability. One of my primary arguments will be that *Banjo* is a novel that deeply engages not just with aesthetics in the general sense that it deals with artists (the musical Banjo and the literary Ray) and their art, but also that the novel directly, though subtly, evokes the specific tradition of Western aesthetic philosophy, in particular the foundational writings in this tradition of Immanuel Kant, and also of Friedrich Schiller (whose "schematization and dissemination" of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* "decisively contributed to its generalization and institutionalization in the following century") (Lloyd, 72). While it may seem counterintuitive to focus one's attention on potential references to European philosophy in a text that is so overtly critical of Eurocentrism and Western civilization, allowing for the possibility of such discourses to emerge as fields of reference in McKay's work in fact acknowledges and takes seriously his own stated understanding of his relationship to such material. In his essay "A Negro Writer to His Critics," he writes that, "Whatever may be the criticism implied in my writing of Western Civilization I do not regard myself as a stranger but as a child of it, even though I may have become so by the comparatively recent process of grafting. I am as conscious of my new-world birthright as of my African origin, being aware of the one and its significance in my development as much as I feel the other emotionally" (*The Passion of Claude McKay*, 137). McKay's assertion of his continuous awareness of Western civilization's significance in his development suggests that we might regard *Banjo*'s overt criticism of civilization as part of something more complex than wholesale rejection and abandonment. Rather, we might say that, through *Banjo*,

McKay "delinks" from Western Civilization in the sense described by Walter Mignolo, insofar as McKay acknowledges that "the Western foundation of modernity and of knowledge is on the one hand unavoidable and on the other highly limited and dangerous" ("Delinking," 455).

The uneasy coexistence of those distinct aspects of McKay's individual consciousness–Western Civilization and African ancestry–becomes a significant point of exploration in *Banjo* itself, serving as a prominent source of narrative tension in the form of Ray's struggle to balance the drives of what he refers to as "intellect" and "instinct" within himself as he navigates life as a black artist within a racist and Eurocentric social and cultural landscape. It is significant that the coexistence and mutual tempering of intellect and instinct is a key concept in Kant's and Schiller's writings on aesthetics. For Kant, a commensurate balance between the freedom of one's instinct (or "imagination") and the form-giving "lawfulness" of the intellect (or "understanding") is what makes possible the creation of "beautiful" works of art (*Critique of Judgment*, 188). Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* expands upon these ideas and sees intellect and instinct as making up what he calls man's "sensuo-rational nature" (*Aesthetic Education*, 118). These two opposing forces–the "sensuous drive" and the "formal drive"–he suggests, must be brought into a relationship of "reciprocal subordination" as part of what he calls man's "aesthetic education" (121). In addition, achieving such reciprocal subordination–"the triumph of form"–has for Schiller consequences that go beyond artistic representation to the possibility of political representation, as it is this reciprocal subordination that imparts to the individual a "wholeness of character" that

"must… be present in any people capable, and worthy, of exchanging a state of compulsion for a state of freedom" (95).

I suggest that we read Ray's interior struggle throughout *Banjo* against these analogous processes in order to understand how the novel engages with and diverges from the ideologies of art and politics that emerge out of this tradition of Western aesthetic philosophy. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Ray's struggles–to balance intellect with instinct, to realize his "dream of self-expression," or to achieve full political representation for himself or his race–derive their meaning entirely through "reference" to Western philosophy. My reading of Ray's struggle in relation to this tradition of aesthetic philosophy is rather allegorical, insofar as allegory is here understood not in the classical or traditional sense but rather in the sense described by Fredric Jameson as operating by way of "analogies between systems rather than the isolation of the individual object"; it "does not seek the 'meaning' of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings…" (*Allegory and Ideology*, 59, 10). The "kinship between processes" that I have suggested allows the discourse of Western aesthetic philosophy–one aspect of McKay's intellectual "new-world birthright"–to be summoned forth not as an interpretive master-key, but as a discourse to be dismantled, transformed, and overcome (10). For instance, Kant's subject of aesthetic judgment (what he calls Kant's "Subject without properties") and that which is the culmination of Schiller's aesthetic education are primarily defined, as Lloyd writes, by their indifference:

> This Subject with "unlimited possibilities" is precisely the undetermined subject, what Schiller terms the Person, the individual abstracted from the Condition that determines his particularities, whose infinite potential is a function of a purely formal identity with humanity in general. Its universality is attained by virtue of a literal indifference: This Subject becomes representative in consequence of being able to take anyone's place, of occupying any place, in a state of pure exchangeability. Universal where all others are particular, partial, this Subject is the perfect, disinterested judge formed for and by the public sphere. (Lloyd, 77)

For Ray however, it is difference itself that is valued above all else. This valorization of difference does not require Kant or Schiller as reference points in order to be understood on its own terms in the novel, but acknowledging the possibility that their writings on aesthetics may have a place within the text's "structure of multiple meanings" allows for a closer investigation of McKay's critical engagement with the discourses of Western Civilization that were his "new-world birthright" and of whose significance in his own development he remained ever conscious.

**Plotless Storytelling and "That Vague Thing Called Atmosphere"**

*Banjo* posits the question of its own literary form to readers immediately through its subtitle: "A Story without a Plot," self-consciously drawing attention to what it lacks and bringing itself into an ambiguous relationship with the novel as a literary genre. In other words, the question of what qualifies as "Art," or as a work of "Literature," might be regarded as the point from which the novel begins. Recent criticism has understood *Banjo*'s plotlessness as an approach to thinking about diasporic identity and the possibilities of modern black subjectivity. Aarthi Vadde writes that the plotless novels of Claude McKay (and George Lamming) "rejected the politics and style of realism for

creating illusions of order, which they perceived to be disjunctive with modern black experience," and that McKay's plotless storytelling in particular captures "the energy and vigor of black lifeworlds that do not aspire to cultural assimilation" (Vadde, 112, 116). Brent Hayes Edwards also reads *Banjo*'s vagabondage and plotlessness in relation to deracination and black diasporic identity.

While I agree with these readings, I also want to draw attention to how *Banjo*'s plotless storytelling functions as part of the novel's broader delinking from the specific tradition of Western aesthetic philosophy. In other words, I want to suggest that *Banjo* rejects not only the politics and style of realism, but also the epistemic ground that validates realism as literary art. I also want to draw attention to the labor politics that *Banjo*'s plotless storytelling entails, as the labor logic of capitalist civilization that is so thoroughly rebuffed by the novel's vagabond milieu is, I suggest, disintegrated through the novel's formal experimentation, where concepts such as labor and idleness are wholly reimagined.

Brent Hayes Edwards does note how contemporary reviews of the book highlighted its apparent failure to promote a work-ethic, with Dewey Jones, for instance, claiming that *Banjo* was a "direct assault" on "upward mobility and bourgeois respectability"; Jones, writes Edwards, was "particularly appalled by the characters' disdain for labor: the book features 'a group of tramp sailors who prefer loafing and bumming to working and earning an honest dime'" (Edwards, 200). But as Edwards rightly suggests, the racial and labor politics of "vagabondage" that the novel explores adheres to a different logic, one that does not fit into the ideological frameworks that seek

to define Ray, Banjo, and the rest of the vagabond milieu as "only as a surplus labor population needing to be either pressed into service or absolved into organized labor" (Edwards, 204-205). "In rejecting the principle of wage labor," Edwards argues, the novel's vagabonds "challenge the very logic of civilization itself and, moreover, expose its underbelly, its elusive escape hatch–precisely by proving with 'happy irresponsibility' that civilization can be defied" (Edwards, 205). By pursuing a closer investigation of the different logic that emerges out of *Banjo*'s formal experimentation, I hope to show that the novel reimagines labor's possibilities as self-affirming and life-affirming activity outside of both capitalist and racist ideological frameworks.

The absence of plot is what many critics of *Banjo* pointed to when asserting that it was, as André Levinson wrote in his review for the French periodical *Nouvelles Littéraires*, "not properly a novel, but a suite of episodes aligned at random, of detached chapters that one by one crumble away into anecdotal dust" (Qtd. in Vadde, 120). The degree to which this abandonment of plot involves the novel in a questioning of the very concept of literary art can hardly be overstated. In Western literary criticism, plot was long regarded as the central and defining feature of the novel as a literary form. (As Boris Eichenbaum dogmatically states, for instance, plot "constitutes the specific peculiarity of narrative *art*" (Eichenbaum, 116)). It is in such literary perspectives that the critical views of those such as Levinson can be understood to be rooted, and McKay was by no means ignorant of plot's significance. Through his early education, he was steeped in the novelistic tradition of Dickens and Scott that exemplified this valorization of plot, and he acknowledges in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home* that his struggles with plot

construction had been a source of anxiety as he developed as a writer. The self-conscious abandonment of plot is, of course, a defining feature of the modernist novel, and a broad affinity can certainly be acknowledged between McKay's plotless storytelling in *Banjo* and, for instance, Gustave Flaubert's notions of writing "a book about nothing" and "making each sentence into an aesthetic object in its own right" (*The Modernist Papers*, xx, 69; *The Antinomies of Realism*, 178). However, I want to draw attention to the relationship between *Banjo*'s plotless storytelling and its critical engagement with both Western aesthetic philosophy and the labor logic of capitalist civilization.

McKay was all too familiar with the racism of ostensibly disinterested aesthetic judgment by way of the critical reception of his earlier poetry. While his Jamaican dialect poems "were received not as art but the spontaneous expression of a primitive voice," while his turn to traditional English forms such as the sonnet in *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922) "still resulted in his presentation as a 'stuffed exhibit' for white readers" (Vadde, 116). His keen awareness of the contradictions and inconsistencies of the aesthetic emerges in *Home to Harlem* in Ray's hesitating and uncertain approach to the very idea of "Art," which can be grasped only in "dreams," otherwise persisting merely in the form of a question:

> Dreams of patterns of words achieving form. What would he [Ray] ever do with the words he had acquired? Were they adequate to tell the thoughts he felt, describe the impressions that reached him vividly? … And literature, story-telling, had little interest for him now if thought and feeling did not wrestle and sprawl with appetite and dark desire all over the pages. Dreams of making something with words. What could he make… and fashion? Could he ever create Art? Art, around which vague, incomprehensible words and phrases stormed? What was art, anyway? Was it more than a clear-cut presentation of a vivid impression of life?

> … he still felt more than ever the utter blinding nakedness and violent colouring of life. But what of it? Could he create out of the fertile reality around him? (*Home to Harlem*, 227-228)

Ray's question—"What was art, anyway?"—signals not only confusion but also a well-founded suspicion. In fact, a thorough investigation of this question would lead one beyond the smoke and mirrors of "disinterested" aesthetic judgment to the convoluted history of the term and its role in the very foundation of modernity's racial imaginary and its narratives of human and civilizational development.

As David Lloyd has shown, aesthetic judgments in the Western tradition are not exclusively judgments about art: they are judgments that determine the humanity of the judging subject itself: "The terms put in play by aesthetics establish the set of discriminations and distributions by which the Savage comes to be distinguished from the civil subject, the partial and particular human from the universal Subject, and the 'pathological' or suffering, needing, desiring human from the ethical human Subject" (3). In other words, the foundational works of Western aesthetic philosophy theorized how art and aesthetic experience functioned in society, producing a narrative of human development and establishing criteria for political representation. McKay was intimately aware of the racial imaginary hidden within the supposedly "disinterested" aesthetic ideology, and I suggest that we read his work's engagement with Western aesthetics as always at the same time an engagement with the racism inherent in Western civilizational narratives.

In lieu of plot, *Banjo* is organized, as McKay himself referred to it, more as a "picaresque," though recent criticism has made use of the term "vagabondage," which the

text offers in its description of the life of its eponymous character, to describe its delinking from novelistic expectations: “His life was a dream of vagabondage that he was perpetually pursuing and realizing in odd ways, always incomplete but never unsatisfactory” (11).[2] The abandonment of plot for a vagabond mode of storytelling seems moreover to be an appropriate gesture in a life that is “so artistically uncompromising” that “it does not care a rap about putting a hard fist through a splendid plan and destroying our dearest artifice” (*Banjo*, 248).

From *Home to Harlem* to the outset of *Banjo*, not much has changed for Ray, who, we are told, has “not renounced his dream of self-expression” (65). Art remains a question for him, though he now feels an ever-increasing pressure as long as self-expression remains a “dream.” He arrives in Marseilles “in one of those violent periods of agitation when he had worked himself up to the pitch of feeling that if he could not give vent to his thoughts he would break up into a thousand articulate bits” (*Banjo*, 66). The pressure that he feels to produce literature together with the difficulty that he faces in doing so—anticipating the simultaneous inability and obligation to express that Samuel Beckett would later describe as the predicament of the modern artist—is well captured here, but the double meaning of “articulate” might be read to hint at the solution McKay found to this dilemma in the form of *Banjo* itself. For Ray, the prospect of “break[ing] up into a thousand articulate bits” seems to be serve as a fearful image of his potential failure to express—a psychological fragmentation resulting from the failure to synthesize his thoughts into a coherent form, either to be expressed or to serve as a unified notion of his own identity. However, Ray’s anxious uncertainty about his ability to produce “Art” is

also counterpointed early on in *Banjo* by the brash self-assertiveness of the novel's titular vagabond, who, in response to Malty's compliment that he is "as good a musician as a real artist," unequivocally proclaims, "I *is* an artist" (*Banjo*, 8). Within Banjo's assertion, emphasis (indicated by the italics in the text) is appropriately placed on his deviation from standard English grammar, further suggesting an idea of the "artist" that will also deviate from the "grammar" of traditional aesthetics. Such deviation may even be hinted at in the double meaning of "articulate," which seems to slip by Ray's own consciousness, and might suggest not only the distinct separation of the thousand bits into which Ray might "break up," but also their status as eloquent expression in and of themselves. Articulate expression, in other words, does not necessarily require the subordination of distinct parts to a singular, unifying structure such as plot. I suggest, then, that we understand the perception of *Banjo* as a failed novel in terms of Ray's remark that, "maybe his apparent failing under the organisation of the modern world was the real strength that preserved him from becoming the thing that was the common white creature of it" (*Banjo*, 323). This "common white creature" of the modern world is a form of subjectivity produced through the universal imposition of "Anglo-Saxon standards" and the reduction of difference to a "familiar formula" (*Banjo*, 314). For Ray, however, difference is "the most precious thing about human life" (*Banjo*,164, 208).

*Banjo*'s vagabond storytelling also challenges capitalist civilization's codification of human activity according to conceptual binaries such as labor and idleness, as well as productive and unproductive labor. With its narrative energy of perpetual motion that exudes its titular character's "unquenchable desire to be always going," though with "no

plan, no set purpose, no single object," the narrative is not at all "idle" in the sense of "inactive," but consciously "idle" in the sense that it is disengaged from narrative "work" in the sense of constructing a superstructural system of signs and meaning, the narrative artifice of "plot" (*Banjo*, 11, 12). *Banjo* may lack plot, but it does not plod, as McKay reinvests his creative energy and artistic labor into diction, phrasing, and atmospheric rendering as means of achieving authentic self-expression.

From a capitalist economic perspective, the labor of plotless storytelling would be considered unproductive. As Karl Marx notes, John Milton's writing of *Paradise Lost* was "unproductive" work, while "the writer who delivers hackwork for his publisher is a productive worker" (*Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*). "Milton," he writes, "produced *Paradise Lost* in the way that a silkworm produces silk, as the expression of *his own* nature." Marx's analogy of the silkworm is particularly interesting in relation to Kant's distinction between "Works of Art," which are produced fundamentally through "reason," and *seemingly* artistic works, such as (according to Kant) the honeycombs produced by bees. The distinction arises for Kant in the fact that the bees' labor "is not based on any rational deliberation" and that their product "is a product of [the producer's] nature (namely, of instinct)" (*Critique of Judgmen*t, §43). From the viewpoint of Kantian aesthetics, the phrase "unconscious artistic capacity," used in *Banjo* to refer to the black boys' linguistic creativity, would be self-contradictory, as "art" is necessarily produced through rational deliberation.

**“Pretty Nonsense” and McKay’s Aesthetics of Difference**

*Banjo*’s subtle evocation of Western aesthetic philosophy is best exemplified in Ray’s reflective digression upon “nonsense and waste” in chapter entitled “Official Fists.” Responding to Latnah’s suggestion that a wreath be purchased for Bugsy’s funeral, Ray initially rejects the idea as “nonsense and wasteful,” yet these notions provide an opportunity for a conspicuous digression:

> Nonsense and waste he had said. But nonsense was often pretty. Who shall gauge or determine the true spirit that lies between the proudest or humblest outward show and the inward feeling? And he really had no rooted objection to waste. …There was something sublime about waste. It was the grand gesture that made life awesome and wonderful. There was a magical intelligence in it that stirred his poetic mind. (259-260)

The likely initial reading of the first sentence, following Latnah’s insistence that giving a wreath of flowers would “look lovely,” would be that “nonsense” (in the sense of “trivial or worthless things,” in this specific case the wreath) was often pleasant to look at (or “beautiful”). But the word “pretty” might also be considered in its original sense of “cunning” or “crafty,” with the second sentence suggesting the possibility of deception. In other words, perhaps what is thought to be “nonsense” (as in “absurd or meaningless words or ideas”) in fact has some concealed meaning. “Pretty” can also mean “cleverly or elegantly made or done; ingenious, artful, well-conceived,” and if read in this way, the notion of “nonsense” is brought even more directly into association with art, as well as the text itself.[9] “Nonsense” is a term that has specific and suggestive meaning in Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, where it is “Taste” that disciplines, civilizes, and guides artistic imagination, or “genius,” towards

the creation of a beautiful work. Bereft of Taste, the product of an imagination "left in lawless freedom" is what Kant calls "nonsense":

> Taste, like the power of judgment in general, consists in disciplining (or training) genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it civilized, or polished; but at the same time it gives it guidance as to how far and over what it may spread while still remaining purposive. It introduces clarity and order into a wealth of thought, and hence makes the ideas durable, fit for approval that is both lasting and universal, and [hence] fit for being followed by others and fit for an ever advancing culture. (188)

In *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller identifies these two opposing drives as the "sensuous" drive, which "proceeds from the physical existence of man, or his sensuous nature," and the "formal" drive, which "proceeds from the absolute existence of man, or from his rational nature" (118, 119). Kant's and Schiller's aesthetics are grounded in a monologic epistemology that universalizes the form of aesthetic judgment that it describes. For Schiller, it is uniquely through the enjoyment of beauty that individuals can act simultaneously "as individual and as genus, i.e., as *representatives* of the human genus" (177). For Kant, judgments of taste, or aesthetic judgments–judgments of what is beautiful–are made from "a deeply hidden basis, common to all human beings, underlying their agreement in judging the forms under which objects are given them" and as such "requires everyone to assent" (17; 79; §19). In other words, whenever we make an aesthetic judgment, "we permit no one to hold a different opinion, even though we base our judgment only on our feeling rather than on concepts; hence we regard this underlying feeling as a common rather than as a private feeling" (§22). As David Lloyd summarizes, "It is through aesthetic judgment, or

Taste, that the empirical individual becomes the autonomous Subject in a universal sense, a movement that is achieved by the judgment's reflection on the formal properties of the object's mode of representation" (*Race Under Representation*, 49).

McKay's possible reworking of Kantian aesthetic terminology suggests that the creative product of an imagination "left in lawless freedom," a "wealth of thought" left unclarified and disordered, may be legitimately regarded as a (beautiful) work of art. What is important here is not simply the presence of a submerged vocabulary of Western aesthetics, but McKay's creative unmooring of that vocabulary from aesthetic philosophy and his coordinating it with original concepts and ideas that offer insight into how he understands his own art as developing not just out of a rejection of Western aesthetics entirely, but out of his acute understanding of where Western aesthetics is inadequate to black experience. To paraphrase Walter Mignolo's explanation of one possible strategy for de-linking, the text de-naturalizes the concepts and conceptual fields of the (ostensibly) universal and totalizing discourse of aesthetics, evoking the terms and concepts proffered by aesthetic philosophy only to repurpose them and, in doing so, subvert that discourse's hegemonic authority (Mignolo, 459).

While admittedly conjectural, my reading of this passage is coherent with comments made by McKay in a letter to W.E.B. Du Bois written in response to his critical review of *Home to Harlem* published in the *Crisis*, in which he claimed that *Home to Harlem* lacked "any artistic unity." McKay makes it clear in this letter that he values the idea of aesthetics, remarking that Du Bois's career as a propogandist leaves

him with a “one-sided” view of life and that this leads him to mistake “the art of life” for “nonsense” (qtd. In Vadde, 117). While Du Bois asks of McKay that his next novel feature a “strong, well-knit as well as beautiful theme,” McKay “prefers to remain unrepentant and unregenerate,” embracing his “utter absence of restraint” (Qtd. in Vadde, 117; *The Passion of Claude McKay*, 150).

> ... you have been forced from a normal career to enter a special field of racial propaganda and, honorable though that field may be, it has precluded you from contact with real life, for propaganda is fundamentally but a one-sided idea of life. Therefore I should not be surprised when you mistake the art of life for nonsense and try to pass off propaganda as life in art!
>
> Finally, deep-sunk in depravity though he may be, the author of *Home to Harlem* prefers to remain unrepentant and unregenerate and he ‘distinctly’ is not grateful for any free baptism of grace in the cleansing pages of the *Crisis*.
>
> Yours for more utter absence of restraint (*The Passion of Claude McKay*, 150)

McKay’s comments here contain several interesting implications for a consideration of his complex view of art. His contrasting of his own work with “propaganda” suggests that he understands what he calls the “art of life” to be an idea of life that is many-sided, weaving together multiple points of view, languages, and ideologies without imposing an overarching monologic organizational structure. Viewed from a one-sided perspective, this dialogic nature may appear as “nonsense,” yet as *art* it expresses life’s unspeakable complexity through the presentation of these inassimilable perspectives. Furthermore, while we should no doubt read into McKay’s comments here a certain degree of sarcasm, his suggestion that the art of life lacks “restraint” is deeply suggestive of how McKay’s artistic vision diverges from traditional aesthetics. This simultaneous assertion of his

work's "aesthetic" value and his "unrepentant" "absence of restraint" clearly undercuts the universal validity of the idea of art articulated in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: that "in all the free arts there is yet a need for something in the order of a constraint, or, as it is called, a *mechanism*. … Without this the *spirit,* which in art must be *free* and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and would evaporate completely" (*Critique of Judgment* §43).[2] We might hear these words of Kant about a work that would "evaporate completely" echoing in Levinson's statement about the chapters in *Banjo* that "one by one crumble away into anecdotal dust." For McKay, however, the formal aspects of a work of art seem to serve a different function than they do for Kant and, following in this tradition, Levinson, as well as Du Bois. While Du Bois asks of McKay that his next novel feature a "strong, well-knit as well as beautiful theme"—in other words, that it be guided by Taste so as to be "civilised," "polished," and "fit for an ever advancing culture," McKay "prefers to remain unrepentant and unregenerate," embracing his "utter absence of restraint" and the "lawless freedom" of an art unbound by "Taste" or "common sense" (Qtd. in Vadde, 117; *The Passion of Claude McKay*, 150).

**The Creative Labor of Plotless Storytelling/Pretty Nonsense**

André Levinson's claim that the "episodes" of *Banjo* are "aligned at random," suggests the novel's lack of plot to reflect a lack of *labor*–an accusation that McKay either could not or refused to do the artistic *work* of forming the story's diverse content

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[2] This "constraint" appears in the Bernard and Meredith translations as "something compulsory" and "something of a compulsory character," respectively.

into a unified whole. McKay's own comments with regard to his artistic craft, and even specifically in reference to the composition of *Banjo* itself, suggest, however, that nothing could be further from the truth. In a letter to Alain Locke in 1926, he writes:

> If you understand how an artist feels about *the word* that he chooses above *other words* to use—if you know that artistic creation is the most delicate of all creative things—if you want to pit against how a craftsman, a goldsmith, an engraver, might feel about someone changing his design—then you will understand how I feel about "The White House." (Qtd. in *The Passion of Claude McKay*, 143-144)

This feeling was not exclusive to McKay's poetry, either. He was outraged when he received page proofs of *Banjo* only to discover the great extent to which his prose had been edited. According to Cooper, "Many words and phrases he had used to capture the rough atmosphere of Marseilles's old port had been deleted. The editors had substituted words and phrases McKay considered to be mere literary clichés that destroyed totally his artistic intent. … He would never accede to *Banjo*'s publication in its altered form and would consider all obligations to Harper at an end if they published it as it stood" (Cooper). As McKay explained to Eugene Saxton:

> I am not a Jim Tully writing roughly and at random … I am a poet and have always striven conscientiously to find words to say exactly what I see and feel. I took a long time to write "Banjo" in the face of real difficulties, writing and re-writing to find the right words to render the atmosphere and the types that moved in it. … And then someone ups and wantonly compromises the character of my writing by replacing my personal words with cheap two-and three-syllabled stock words. … I prefer to be crude and ungrammatical and achieve a clean and clear expression thereby, rather than spill the sap of my thoughts into dead husks of words. (Qtd. in Cooper)

Despite his "absence of restraint," then, McKay's plotless storytelling in *Banjo* is not simply a lawless logorrhea. It is rather a shifting of creative labor away from the

construction of plot-artifice and *towards* a careful, precise engagement at the level of literary language. In other words, *Banjo* relocates artistic labor from plot-production to diction, to a searching and scouring for words to render what is seen and felt in a labor that entails those words becoming "personal." According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "Every novel, taken as the totality of all the languages and consciousnesses of language embodied in it, is a *hybrid.* But we emphasize once again: it is an intentional and conscious hybrid, one artistically organized, and not an opaque mechanistic mixture of languages (more precisely, a mixture of the brute elements of language). *The artistic image of language* - such is the aim that novelistic hybridization sets for itself" (120).

McKay's careful attention to words and his subordination of etiquette and grammar to "clean and clear expression" make it clear that plot is simply not necessary for achieving his aesthetic ends. His creative labor of "writing and re-writing to find the right words" seeks "to render the atmosphere and the types that moved in it," and this valorization of atmosphere in place of plot provides another way of looking at the organizational form of the text. How atmospheric rendering works as a formal alternative to plot construction is furthermore explored, however briefly, in the scene with which *Banjo*'s second chapter, "The Breakwater," begins:

> The quarter of the old port exuded a nauseating odor of mass life congested, confused, moving round and round in a miserable suffocating circle. Yet everything there seemed to belong and fit naturally in place. Bistros and love shops and girls and touts and vagabonds and the troops of dogs and cats–all seemed to contribute so essentially and colorfully to that vague thing called atmosphere. No other setting could be more appropriate for the men on the beach. It was as if all the derelicts of all the seas had drifted up here to sprawl out the days in the sun. (18)

What the narrator describes here is a situation in which the things that make up the content of life exist in ambiguous or inessential relationship to each other and yet all "belong" as essential aspects. While plot subordinates the objects and actions of narrative to their function within an overarching and unifying symbolic system, making their relationships to one another transparent and rationally justifying their presence, "atmosphere" is constituted by essential elements while remaining a "vague thing."

Interestingly, reading Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory from the perspective of McKay's artistic practice can help us to see how his attention to diction and the superfluousness of plot for his aesthetic expression complicates a traditional understanding of the relationship between plot and form in the novel. "Where works are not fully integrated, not fully formed," writes Adorno, "they sacrifice precisely the expressivity for the sake of which they dispense with the labor and effort of form…" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 114). While for Adorno the "labor and effort of form" is that of integration, for McKay, expressivity is achieved through a different kind of labor and effort. McKay's aesthetics, though, is not diametrically opposed to Adorno's. His dedication to the work of diction "repudiates," as Adorno says of "form" itself, "the view that artworks are immediately given," and his view of this creative process seems not to be inconsistent with what Adorno describes as "that in artworks by which they become artworks" (144). McKay's careful practice of selecting words coheres very well with Adorno's remark that "Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. This is confirmed by the artistic labor of forming, which is always a process of selecting, trimming,

renouncing. Without rejection there is no form" (144). Yet his practice does not align with Adorno's description of form as "mediation in that it is the relation of parts to each other and to the whole and as the elaboration of details" (144). In other words, McKay's practice of literary production demands that we rethink and delink from Eurocentric notions of aesthetics and of productive activity more broadly. Intense dedication to the artistic rendering of "that vague thing called atmosphere"

What may have particularly raised McKay's ire towards the editors at Harpers was that *Banjo*, the work that they had expurgated, in fact expresses a deep admiration for the opposite of their imposition of cliche and "stock words"— what Ray calls the black boys' "necromancy of language." This explicitly artistic use of language, though, again rebuts the universality of aesthetic work. "In the States," said Ray, "we Negroes have humorous little words of our own with which we replace unpleasant stock words. And we often use them when we are among white people and don't want them to know just what we are referring to, especially when it is anything delicate or taboo between the races. … The stock is always increasing because as the whites get on to the old words we invent new ones" (*Banjo*, 217).

Here, the creative use of language is intentionally *evasive*. Such language was yet another target for Levinson: "The verbal material is dense and colorful. But the language in which these new black novels are written becomes an obstacle to their diffusion. …The phonetic transcription of speech, with its curious deformations, turns out an illegible scrawl that one can hardly decipher" (qtd. In Vadde, 119). The rich linguistic texture of the novel, in other words, is seen as an impediment to its "transmissibility."

However, creative labor in *Banjo* is a self-affirming, non-assimilative activity, and unlike the construction of plot, the nature of its production is, much like the life-rhythm of the novel's titular character, "always incomplete but never unsatisfactory," finding meaning in that which novelistic plot omits or subsumes. (*Banjo*, 11). McKay's artistic labor, by rejecting the aesthetic end of universal communicability, rejects a vision of rationalized labor itself, which exists under capitalism in the form of wage labor.

**McKay's Universal**

I have suggested that McKay rejects Western aesthetic philosophy's claims to universality and the universal "transmissibility" of the work of art, but the meaning of the very concept of "universality" for McKay and for his aesthetic vision demands closer scrutiny, especially since McKay's own writings on art may initially seem to contradict my claims. In *A Long Way from Home*, for instance, he attests to the belief that, "whenever literature and art are good and great they leap over narrow group barriers and periods to make a universal appeal" (140). However, I want to insist upon an important difference between this "universal appeal" and the concept of universality as typically invoked in Western philosophical and aesthetic discourses–an *appeal* is by no means a demand (as it is in, for instance, the aesthetic philosophy of Immanuel Kant). Literature and art seem for McKay to have the potential to transcend strict group identities, but their legitimacy as creative and expressive acts does not hinge on their doing so. Ray's explanation of his approach to storytelling in *Banjo* lays this out clearly:

> … if I am writing a story—well, it's like all of us in this place here, black and brown and white, and I telling a story for the love of it. Some of you will listen, and some won't. If I am a real story-teller, I won't worry about the differences in complexion of those who listen and those who don't, I'll just identify myself with those who are really listening and tell my story. (115)

The labor of aesthetic articulation, then, does not have as its end the subsumption of individual particularity into a universal idea of the human; it is rather the precise rendering of individual experience that makes itself available as a point of identification for others. Ray's comment is a response to Bugsy, who bridles at Ray's intention to write and publish about the black boys and their lives in the Ditch: "But the crackers will use what you write against the race!" Ray's attitude is one that acknowledges this possibility but rejects its significance: "Let the crackers go fiddle themselves, and you, too" (115). McKay's "pretty nonsense" of plotless storytelling emphasizes the importance of difference over reducibility and places value on encounters that produce understanding without reducing.

Édouard Glissant's writings on what he calls "relation" are helpful to invoke here. Glissant explains that from the perspective of Western thought, the "process of 'understanding' people and ideas" has as its basis a requirement for "transparency": "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce" (189-190). In *Banjo*, Ray's appreciation of African languages demonstrates a radically different mode of affective relation in which a certain kind of connection is authentically established without the need for the kind of "understanding" that Glissant

sees in the tradition of Western thought: “You would be interested in the native African dialects and, though you don't understand, be humble before their simple beauty instead of despising them” (201). “[Ray] loved to hear the African dialects sounding around him. The dialects were so rich and round and ripe like soft tropical fruit, as if they were fashioned to eliminate all things bitter and harsh to express. They tasted like brown unrefined cane sugar–Sousou, Bambara, Woloff, Fula, Dindie. . . .” Ray loved the environment of the common black drifters” “with the poetical enthusiasm of the vagabond black that he himself was.” Glissant writes, “I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary for me to become the other (to become other) not to ‘make’ him in my image” (193). Commenting upon his own innate introversion and “unattachedness” in a letter to Max Eastman, McKay writes that, “People are not satisfied unless they can get you by the very guts and make you puke up your soul. (*The Passion of Claude McKay*, 213-214).

In the following chapters, I will pursue this entanglement of aesthetic de-linking and the reimagination of labor in the work of two other writers whose engagement with these topics led to the development of unique forms of modernist writing and plotless storytelling.

## 3. "Pretending to Be Human": Idleness and Narration in Yi Sang's "Wings"

In his 1936 review of the recently published works of Pak T'aewŏn and Yi Sang, "The Expansion and Deepening of Realism: On *Scenes from a Streamside* and 'Wings,'" literary critic Ch'oe Chaesŏ commends the latter for what he sees as its "deepening" of literary realism in Korea, but in spite of this, he writes, "when we read this work we cannot conceal the feeling that there is one thing lacking. It might be called a high artistic refinement, or perhaps a strong verisimilitude; in any case, there is an important element lacking in this work" (Ch'oe). He continues:

> I think that this can be explained as the absence of a *moral* element. The author has a definite attitude regarding society. This is a *pose* that appears in each episode of the work. Yet this is no more than a fragmentary *pose*, not a consistent outlook on life. We can confirm that it is [Yi's] habit to hurl contempt upon common sense and desecrate reality. However, I would hesitate to answer lightly the question of whether this has become the author's ethical perspective, guiding principle, or critical standard. He knows how to insult, how to destroy the world, but on the far side of such insults, we cannot as yet discover his own individual world.
>
> This can also be seen as a flaw in the overall composition of the work. Each episode in the work takes the form of a riddle. By understanding the *paradox* that is the writer's starting point we can, with relative ease, use our mental capacity to decipher the riddle of each episode, as if solving an algebraic equation. Further, he has only artificial means to connect the episodes to one another. This work is not formed out of the rhythm of life, a rhythm derived from real life; rather, scenes are artificially linked. Perhaps this is the primary reason for the lack of artistic refinement and verisimilitude in this work. The unnaturally loud laughter and unpleasant jeering expressed on occasion throughout the work do not arise from the author's *morals* but can be considered as triggered by an artificial motivation on a surface level. Acquiring a *moral* element is perhaps a serious challenge that will decide the future of this author. (Ch'oe)

The apparent absence of what Ch'oe calls a "*moral* element," together with the work's failure to afford the reader access to the author's "own individual world," form the basis

for Ch'oe's assessment of "Wings" as a flawed composition.[3] I will suggest in this chapter, however, that these absences, of a "*moral* element" and of an accessible authorial subject, are in fact essential aspects of Yi Sang's artistic writing practice of idle narration, which explores various "idle" or "lazy" states of being not, as from the viewpoint of capitalist modernity, in terms of absence (of productive labor, of "artistic refinement"), but as alternatives to the diligently productive, instrumentalizing and instrumentalized modern subject.

Yi Sang's work is extraordinarily rich in its exploration of the concept of idleness, as the narrators of his texts tirelessly return to the concept, not only stating explicitly and repeatedly that they *are* idle or lazy, but, furthermore, stressing that they are in fact indulging in their state of apparent inactivity. While Yi Sang's writing may not be structured by the kind of "moral element" that Ch'oe discusses, idleness functions as the central motif within many of his individual works and across his writings as a whole. Idleness is so prominent in Yi Sang's work that questions about its narrative function and potential symbolic value consistently emerge as one engages with his writing. I suggest that we read idleness in Yi Sang's writing as both subject matter and structural principle,

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[3] According to Serk-bae Suh: "Drawing on [Herbert] Read, [Ch'oe] argued that morality was the intuitive understanding of values through the intellect. By stressing the importance of these two elements, he attempted to 'restore judgment' to the field of literary criticism: It is necessary, he argued, to call for a literary criticism that would encourage literature capable of providing order for man in a chaotic world. He posited that intellect should hinge on (Western) cultural tradition and stressed that literature should be anchored in the living and historical experience of the people (*minjung).* He further argued that the writers should recognize that they are members of the community of the people, not isolated individuals" (Suh, 80-81).

and in doing so I want to highlight a central paradox in his work: by locating the motive or driving force behind artistic production in (paradoxically) idleness itself, Yi Sang forces a delinking of idleness from the conceptual binary in which capitalist ideology places it: that is, in opposition to productive labor.

My exploration of Yi Sang's writing in this chapter will situate it within this dissertation's constellation of modernist writers for whom idleness is a central concern, but it will also provide a perspective from which we can address some prominent questions that arise specifically in Yi Sang's work. While many, if not most, of Yi Sang's works would allow for an investigation of the concept of idleness, this chapter will focus primarily on the 1936 novella "Wings," as it is his most well-known and widely translated text. After discussing "Wings," I will move on to consider more briefly the 1937 essay "Ennui." Not only is this essay an interesting supplement to "Wings" in that it engages with idleness from a radically different narrative point of view, but these two works are the ones specifically mentioned by Yi T'aejun as being "brilliant works" in his essay "For Whom Do We Write?" In addition, "Ennui" is now generally categorized as an "essay" while "Wings" is regarded as work of fiction, and while I do not entirely object to these classifications (the former is certainly more fiction-like and the latter more essay-like), one of the very hallmarks of Yi Sang's work is the blurring of such distinctions. I want to argue, therefore, that it is significant that Yi T'aejun simply refers to them as "literature" [*munhak*] and I hope that juxtaposing these two works in the chapter will invite us to question generic distinctions in Yi Sang's work.

**Idleness in Context: Capitalism and Colonial Modernity**

Yi Sang's "Wings" was written and published in Kyŏngsŏng (colonial Seoul) in 1936, as life in the city was being transformed by rapid colonial industrialization and an enormous influx of people abandoning the disappearing social structures of rural life on the peninsula. The forced discontinuation of traditional rural labor practices, led to a rural exodus and a near doubling of the urban population between 1935 and 1944, with most of the new employment coming as wage-labor in factory, mining, and construction industries (Park, 133-135). As Jini Kim Watson notes, the incongruity of this rapidly growing urban Korean population with "a burgeoning consumer society, patronized by the local elite and expatriate Japanese community," as well as an increasingly authoritarian colonial administration that was disbanding leftist groups and ramping up censorship while girding itself for war, was central to the background in which *Wings* was written (Kim Watson, 72). It is narrated in the first person by a young man who lives with his wife in "a single room partitioned by a sliding door" and who spends his time lying about, leaving his room only occasionally to wander aimlessly or sit and wait for an appropriate time to return. The story's ambiguous ending has been interpreted variously, with most but not all critics concluding that it signals the narrator's suicide.[4] With such a bare plot, it is the innovative narrative style of *Wings*, which shares much with the

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[4] Kyoung-hoon Lee claims that this is a misreading, while Karen Laura Thornber suggests that the narrator "perhaps" jumps off the roof of the Mitsukoshi department store (Kyoung-hoon Lee; Thornber, 463). While I agree with Lee that it is a misreading to claim that the narrator leaps off the roof of the department store, I also leave such a reading, like Thornber, as a possibility. I am more interested in the ambiguity of the conclusion itself than in trying to come to a definite conclusion about what "happens."

Japanese "I-novel" as well as Western modernism's "stream of consciousness," that has drawn critical attention and led to its canonization.

Critics including Watson, Janet Poole, and John Frankl have all drawn analogies between Yi Sang's protagonists and the Benjaminian "type" of the *flaneur*. However, while Walter Benjamin's analysis of the precarious and fading forms of life in Second Empire Paris is no doubt applicable to some degree to Yi Sang's writing, it is ultimately insufficient, as in Kyŏngsŏng capitalism's transformation of existing forms of life was taking place on the other side of the colonial-modern binary. Here, idleness was not just a "protest" against industriousness and the division of labor, but also a sign for colonial officials of a "deficiency in economic rationality" that was used to legitimize colonial rule, as well as, for instance, flogging as a more effective punitive measure than incarceration ("The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," 30-31; Chulwoo Lee, 34). I will return to Benjamin's writings on idleness later in the chapter, as I believe that they do offer some ideas and concepts that can be read in interesting ways alongside Yi Sang's work, but it is important to highlight the contextual differences here so as not to reduce Yi Sang's work to something that can be grasped entirely and exclusively through a Western frame of reference.

Japanese imperial discourse commonly pointed to what it perceived as laziness when characterizing the colonized Korean people. Peter Duus notes that in travel accounts:

> … laziness ranked with backwardness, poverty, and filth, among the most salient characteristics of Korean life. "In general, the Koreans lack the idea of industriousness and the idea of thrift," said [newspaper editor

> and politician] Arakawa [Goro]. "Everywhere one sees them smoking their long pipes, lounging about with nothing to do…. They appear to have no conception of the importance of time." The Koreans woke late in the morning, they quit early in the evening, and they never worked when it rained. (Duus, 404-405)

Such representations of the colonial subjects as lacking a sense of "the importance of time," or failing to understand that "time is wealth," marked the colonized as incompatible with the temporality of modernity and capitalism. With this incompatibility being used as justification for colonial rule, anti-colonial nationalist movements in Korea, as in many other colonial contexts, sought to legitimize themselves in part through the rejection or overcoming of this stereotype—that is, by adopting a rhetoric of progressive modernization in an effort to show that the Korean people were perfectly capable of being subjects not just of a nation, but of capital.

Crucially, though, by emphasizing this work-ethic as foundational to the new and independent nation, such nationalisms adopted the very logics of progressive modernization and capitalist development inherent to imperialism itself. This is a dilemma that has been pointed out by many postcolonial critics—that entry of the nation state into global modernity demands, among other things, subjection to global capitalism. "As Partha Chatterjee and Benedict Anderson, and Frantz Fanon before them, have pointed out," write Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, "bourgeois nationalism is the form in which colonized societies enter modernity" (Lowe and Lloyd, 3-4). They explain that in this process "Civil society must be re-shaped to produce subjects who might function in terms of modern definitions of social spaces, as the political subject of the state, the economic subject of capitalism, and the cultural subject of the nation, however much the

discreteness of these spaces is contradicted by conditions that are lived as racialized and gendered labor stratification, apartheid, and poverty" (Lowe and Lloyd, 7).

In his 1910 essay "The Value of Literature," Yi Kwangsu writes, "The rise and fall of one nation depends on its people's ability to uphold ideals and thoughts, which cannot be obtained through a school education alone. All we gain at school is knowledge. It is literature that nurtures our ideals and thoughts" ("The Value of Literature," 291). He further develops this theory in his 1916 essay "What Is Literature?" in which he emphasizes its role as the vehicle for the transmission of the "ideas, passions, and modes of living" of the "national community":

> [The] accumulated achievements [of each generation] constitute a country's spiritual civilization, and underpin the nationhood of its people. Certainly, the most effective means to transmit this spiritual civilization is the literature of the people. If the people of a country lack literature, or if they merely transmit their cultural achievements orally, then no matter how lengthy their history, their culture will lack richness, and they will be stuck in a barbaric and primitive state. ("What is Literature?" 301)

In Ireland, W.B. Yeats similarly emphasized the connection between literature and nationhood, declaring in his 1899 essay "The Irish Literary Theatre" that "All literature and all art is national" ("The Irish Literary Theatre," 268). In his earlier 1892 essay "Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature," he writes that in order to transform Irish history and legend into literature: "… we must study all things Irish, until we know the peculiar glamour that belongs to this nation, and how to distinguish it from the glamour of other countries and other races. 'Know thyself' is a true advice for nations as well as for individuals" ("Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature," 260). This objective of literature—to infuse the people of the nation with the a unifying sense of identity—requires the literary

work to function pedagogically as a conduit through which meaning, in this case national character, can be directly transmitted. For both Yeats and Yi Kwangsu, literature functions as the point of access to the "peculiar glamour" or "spiritual civilization" of the country. What we find in "Wings," though, is a text that, rather than formulating or disseminating any kind of national consciousness, enacts the failure of language to represent the colonial or postcolonial subject.

In this way, *Wings* conforms partially to an argument that Christopher Hanscom makes about the modernist writings of Pak T'aewon, Kim Yujong, and Yi T'aejun, but with an important difference. In *The Real Modern*, Hanscom writes that, "For each author, language is understood as containing a constitutive lack, a nonidentity between object and representation; and each author proposes one or more strategies for bringing language closer to its own impossibility, closer to the actual re-presentation of the object-as-such in writing" (Hanscom, 11). While Yi Sang shares this concern with the constitutive lack in language, he seems, much like Samuel Beckett, as discussed earlier, unconcerned with closing that gap and instead focuses on continuing the act of narration in spite of it. The gaps in language are not a problem to be solved through narration, but rather the engine powering narration itself.

For Yi Sang, like for Beckett, narrative style becomes increasingly less concerned with the mimetic representation of character and the development of plot and ever more focused on a flow of language that propels itself continuously towards new states of incompletion. Such an approach can be read as a rejection of the predominant nationalist aesthetics in both Korea and Ireland, which demanded the "authentic"

representation of the fictitious national subject. In addition, Beckett's and Yi Sang's work show that identity itself is constructed around a constitutive gap—it is always an incomplete process rather than a stable essence. In "Wings," rather than try to redress the misunderstandings with his wife and bring their conflict to some kind of resolution, the narrator is satisfied with continuing in their present state. "My wife and I," he says, "are a pair of cripples destined to be out of step with each other. There is no need for me to assign a logic to my wife's behavior or mine. No need to justify it either. Isn't it enough to keep moving through this world, endlessly limping along with whatever truths and misunderstandings in our tow?" ("Wings," 83). This desire to continue "limping along" without reconciliation can be read, I suggest, as a rejection of the need for unification and the completion of identity.

As discussed earlier in the case of Ireland, we see in the construction of national identity in Korea the closing off of possible identities outside that of the factitious national subject for whom there exists this injunction to work under a capitalist labor logic. Against such bourgeois nationalist ideologies, though, writers such as Yi Sang produced texts that in various ways, and significantly in their rejection of the "work" of the nation, imagined alternative colonial and postcolonial identities. The work of Yi Sang in particular emphasizes not a cohesive national identity through the work of national production and development, but the colonial subject who is not assimilable to the commodity capitalism that underpins both imperialism and the predominant forms of anti-colonial nationalism.

Reconsidered in this context, Ch'oe Chaesŏ's remark that readers of "Wings" feel that "something is missing" is insightful, but not quite in the way that Ch'oe himself suggests. In my reading, "Wings" registers the absence of alternative forms of social production as a result of what Fredric Jameson has referred to as the "primordial crime" of capitalism: "not so much wage labor as such, or the ravages of the money form, or the remorseless and impersonal rhythms of the market, but rather this primal displacement of the older forms of collective life from a land now seized and privatized" (*Allegory and Ideology*, 184). In other words, in my reading of "Wings," this feeling that "something is missing" is rather the point. One of Yi Sang's great artistic accomplishments, I suggest, is to have captured this empty zone of being, where the past is unreachable and unknowable, except through lingering fragments, while the social order of the present is rejected. It is a state of lingering at the fringes of this universal social order, with nowhere to go, a state of non-commitment, of idling.

At times the texts arrive at laziness thematically, with the narrator's environment or situation leading into an excursus upon idleness, while at other times comments or commentary regarding the narrator's commitment to or contentment in laziness appear seemingly arbitrarily, with little or no relationship to their immediate context. Yet while irruptions such as these disjoint the text at the level of the sentence or paragraph, they surface with such regularity across Yi Sang's writing as a whole that at this maximal level they constitute a kind of thematic nexus or anchor to which these drifting narratives are tied.

While the consistency and intensity with which idleness emerges in Yi Sang's writing does not need to be fully demonstrated here, it is worth citing a few of his other works that will not be dealt with in detail in this chapter in order to demonstrate the degree to which the theme of idleness emerges as an obsession across his work. The following passage from "Spider&SpiderMeetPigs," which was published three months before "Wings," is exemplary of these excursuses: "I'm perpetually lazy—let's see how much more lazy I can get while pretending to be human—just want to be lazy—stay endlessly lazy—even when things get noisy around me, all I have to do is stay totally oblivious and lazy. Live, get lazy, then die—it's a piece of cake" (*Yi Sang: Selected Works*, 184).[5] This example also includes the opposition that is consistently made in Yi Sang's work between the idle narrator and the "human."

In his essay "Idiotic Supper," he writes:

> Now I am in a state of satisfaction like a great mountain that cannot move.
> Is it a question of to what degree a human being can become lazy through human effort? In fact, what sort of affair is this lazy and purposeless living [*saenghwal*]? Can it really even be given the name 'living' [*saenghwal*] at all?"[6] (my translation; *Yi Sang chŏnjip 2*, 308)

This passage is of particular interest for the opposition that it introduces between idleness and *saenghwal*. Along with colonial modern Korea's newly emergent class of urban wage-laborers came a new understanding of what it meant to be a member of society,

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[5] In the original version of this text published in the *Jungang Ilbo* (1936.6, pg. 230), most of the spacing between words was left out. For readerly convenience, I have quoted here the version with standard spacing translated by Don Mee Choi and Joyelle McSweeney in *Yi Sang: Selected Works* (2020).

which was captured in the increasingly prominent notion of *saenghwal*. According to Sunyoung Park:

> Everyday life (*ilsang saenghwal*) became a topic of interest in Korean public discourse only in the 1930s. Its emergence coincided with the growth of the urban middle class—industrialists and professionals mostly uninterested in large social issues—and with an intensifying police repression that inevitably weakened the appeal of the grand narratives of liberation or revolution. In the depoliticized commercial culture that ensued, the urban elites started to enjoy a new lifestyle dependent on modern commodities, and the mass media turned that lifestyle into a public ideal by celebrating it in newspapers, magazines, and films. The discursive emergence of everyday life, then, marked the moment when modernity became a mass phenomenon and a popular ideal. (*The Proletarian Wave*, 244)

My readings of Yi Sang differ from Sunyoung Park's remark that "modernist writers such as Pak T'aewon and Yi Sang resisted the more commercialized forms of everyday life, reconfiguring the everyday as a space of private, authentic experiences consciously removed from the commotions of modernity" (*The Proletarian Wave*, 244-245).

Like many of his contemporaries, Yi Sang saw this "modernization" very clearly in terms of its alienation and commodification of workers, recording the alienating feeling of this newly emergent urban wage laborer in works such as "Phantom Illusion," where he describes his life/*saenghwal* working in a printing shop as having "sold [his] life for a daily wage of one wŏn, forty chŏn": "In a dismal looking print shop I stamped out identical todays, tomorrows, and dayafters as if I were a piece of movable type" (*Readymade Life*, 175). Yet while this kind of materialist understanding of social and economic relations is present throughout much of Yi Sang's work, it is rarely expressed so explicitly in these terms. In fact, the quintessential figure of Yi Sang's texts is not the

downtrodden and exploited worker, but rather the idle vagrant who manages to live outside *saenghwal*, and it is not labor but laziness—the practice and idea of which is almost obsessively returned to and indulged in—that is their most recurring idea.

This focus places Yi Sang in stark contrast with a writer like Yi Kwangsu, who wrote in his essay "On National Reconstruction" that the most distinctive characteristic of a civilized individual is the individual's "self-determination of their own goal or objective and striving to proceed along the path that one has planned out for the sake of attaining that goal while measuring their own progress at every moment" (my translation; qtd. in Lee Kyoung-hoon, 564). Elsewhere in this essay, he remarks that, "One who does not work is a sinner against the nation and society" (my translation; qtd. in Lee Kyoung-hoon, 20). Writers were not exempt from this attitude, as he mentions in "What Is Literature?" the "tremendous effort and pains" as well as the "training" that it takes to become a writer: "writers must cultivate their minds for many years by reading and studying great literary works produced by others in order to refine their ability. Through this training, one will sharpen one's observational power and learn how best to portray things. One must study history, society, language, and prose style in order to pioneer ways to incorporate literary materials that can improve one's literary language and style" (307). He compares the process of writing itself to the construction of a building, which must be carefully planned in advance in order to produce something that is "strong, beautiful, [and] original." In contrast, Yi T'aejun writes in "Titles and Other Matters": "Before heroic tales of the ilk of the *Tale of the Three Kingdoms*, it is hard to find anything in Oriental novels that bears resemblance to the solid design, like that of tall

buildings, found in the West. The form of life in the West is dynamic where we are static, and where they are solid we are flat. If a character is anywhere near decent, he will not demand a duel, go horse racing, or play golf, as they do, but will rather lie down in a pavilion to ponder, go fishing, or play *go*" ("Titles and Other Matters"). While this may seem like a reductive binary to contemporary readers, I suggest that we view the constrast that Yi T'aejun establishes here in terms of the identification of Western aesthetics and artistic forms as an encroachment upon already-existing ways of life rather than universal standards. The reference to *go* (or, *paduk*) is of particular interest because it appears at the beginning of "Wings" as a metaphor for the intellectual activity of the writer. (This contrast with the construction of a building is also particularly interesting since Yi Sang worked as an architect before turning to writing.)

Returning to Ch'oe's well-known critique cited above, Yi's 1938 essay "Literature and Politics" may in some ways be read as an oblique response. Here, Yi Sang directly addresses the problematic labor of writers and artists under capitalism and explicitly describes what he calls an "irresolvable contradiction" between the writer and the commodification of writing that guarantees his very existence. He further notes the feeling of uneasiness this brings to the modern writer, directly linking literary production to the alienation of capitalism. Yi Sang was not alone in pointing out this contradiction. Yi T'aejun, a contemporary and associate of Yi Sang's, writes in "Korea's Fiction" that "modern fiction is in general splitting into two paths. To put it from the point of view of the writer, there is fiction that we choose to write and fiction that we are made to write" ("Korea's Fiction"). Pointing out that the relative lack of "continuity" between news

articles from one day to the next, he argues that it is serialized fiction which induces a reader of one day's newspaper to eagerly await and purchase the following day's paper. As such, "Newspaper and magazine editors do not look at fiction as literature, but as the 'crucial bait' that will retain current readers and lure in new ones" ("Korea's Fiction"). "Even if we know we are being used," Yi T'aejun writes, "we have no choice but to pick up out pens for the fiction we are made to write, as we cannot survive financially on the proceeds from the kind of fiction that we choose to write" ("Korea's Fiction"). The same sentiment is also expressed in Pak T'aewŏn's novella *A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist*, when the narrator remarks of Kubo's poet friend (who, incidentally, is widely understood to be based on Yi Sang) that, "With the same pen that is meant for poetry, he has to write run-of-the-mill articles on murderers, robbers, and pyromaniacs. So when he has free time, he pours out his repressed passion for literature" (169).

I suggest that we also read this writerly alienation in relation to literary discourses of the time that stressed the need for Korean writers to produce work formative of a national literature, either independent from or as part of Japanese literature. In Yi Sang's fiction, the alienation of modern literary production is undercut by formal strategies of ambiguity (secrets, masks, poses) that intentionally withhold information from the reader and allow the writer to hold onto some apparent truth as an asset for which desire is produced in the reader but never satisfied. I read these strategies of ambiguity as means granting some degree of self-possession to the writer of the commodified work through the disruption of any attempt to construct a coherent, stable subject for national or imperial ideologies. The pressures of modernity are never fully transcended, though, and

the ever-present compulsion to be producing persists as a companion motive force that interacts with the drives of ambiguity and idleness that drive the text.

**Wit and Paradox: Yi Sang's Idle Narration in "Wings"**

Returning then to Ch'oe's commentary on "Wings," we should note that his lamenting its lack of any "consistent outlook on life," "ethical perspective, guiding principle, or critical standard" is accompanied by his acknowledgment of "*paradox*" as "the writer's starting point." Unlike Ch'oe, I would suggest that paradox in fact can serve as a kind of "guiding principle" in Yi Sang's aesthetics and, moreover, is an appropriate means of approaching a social situation whose internal contradictions pose a fundamental problem for symbolic representation and "meaning."

The reference to paradox comes from the epigrammatical first section of "Wings, some of whose parts seem to be referencing the process of writing itself: "Only when the body crumples in exhaustion is its mind bright as a silver coin. Whenever *nicotine* sinks into the worm-ridden coil of my intestines, a clean sheet of paper is ready in my head. On it I line up *wit* and *paradox* like paduk stones" ("Wings," 66). Here, one of the words that is translated as "line up" is *p'osŏk*, which refers to the act of arranging one's pieces at the beginning of a game of *paduk* so that the player can gain an advantage later in the game. It can have a connotation of disorder, or of haphazardly placing things here and there. However, while it may not be visible to others, the logic guiding the strategic placement of one's pieces is of course known to the player. The verb that is used together with this term, *nŭrŏnot'a*, deepens the comparison, as it can mean not only to put things

here and there in a disorderedly manner, but at the same time, when used with reference to speech or writing, "to speak or write something unimportant in a lengthy manner" ("*p'osŏk*," "*nŭrŏnot'a,*" National Institute of Korean Language's Korean-English Learners' Dictionary). Like the undisclosed strategy of a go player, then, the formal logic of Yi Sang's writing is hidden, appearing only to be the haphazard arrangement of unimportant or insignificant material. Read in terms of this simultaneous or subtle shifting between the insignificant and the covertly strategic, the "artificial means" connecting the episodes of the text, rather than the detriment or aesthetic shortcoming that Ch'oe sees it to be, can instead be considered a site of artistic labor.

The productive nature of this idle disposition is suggested in the narrator's splitting of his collapsed body from his mind, which is described as being "bright" and "clear" in spite of his physically exhausted state ("Wings," 66). We can see in the narrator's splitting of body and mind and in his taking refuge in the mental realm an exploration of the possibilities of forms of labor that do not produce value by congealing labor time into a commodity. The narrator later tells us, "Inside my clammy bedding I have invented such a variety of things and penned many a treatise. I also knocked out a decent number of poems. But these, like detergent, dissolve without a trace in the sluggish air that overflows my room the moment I fall asleep" (70). This narrator, then, is actually quite productive, but what he produces is immaterial and ephemeral; his inventions and poems exist only briefly in his mind and have no exchange value.

This figurative exploration of exchange value also occurs through the narrator's lack of comprehension of money's function in commodity capitalism and as a mediator

of human relations in the modern metropolis. While the narrator's "investigations" into his wife's job circle around the question of what exactly it is that she does with her guests, what they are really getting at is the exchange function of money:

> … why [the guests] would leave her money and why my wife would accept it were notions of Civility completely unfathomable to me. Is it nothing more than mere Manners? Perhaps some type of payment? The fee for a service? Or did they look upon my wife as a pathetic character in need of pity? Whenever I try to think about these matters, my mind just ends up more and more muddled. (72)

When his wife gives him coins, he simply doesn't know what to do with them. They first accumulate in a pile at the head of his bed, and when his wife brings a small savings box in which to store them, he notices their "faintly glimmering in the lamplight" and appreciates them only for the "slight, fleeting sensation that lasted from the moment my fingers touched a coin until it vanished into the bank's slit," in other words not for their exchange function, but for their material and visual qualities (72-73). He later throws the whole savings box into the latrine.

Needless to say, money existed in one form or another in Korea for a millennium before Yi Sang was writing *Wings*, but it is its particular function as the mediator of human relations in the commodity capitalist economy of the modern metropolis that the narrator does not see. Georg Simmel theorizes that the money economy of the modern city alienates individuals from one another emotionally by reducing their relationships to a "rationally calculated economic egoism" (qtd. in Kim Watson, 76). Moreover, as Kim Watson notes, "… because the colonial city facilitates the circulation of commodities from the metropole without allowing for their general purchase, money alienates the

colonial subject even more acutely than in Simmel's theorization" (Kim Watson, 76). The narrator, therefore, "cannot accept even the basic function of money under capitalist organization" (76-77). This is foregrounded when the narrator, after determining that it must be "pleasure" which motivates the movement of money to his wife from her guests, sneaks outside to walk the streets hoping "to experience the presence and absence of this thing called pleasure" ("Wings," 73). He brings the silver coins that his wife had left him and which had accumulated in a pile at his head. The first thing he does on his outing is exchange the coins for paper bills, after which he begins to wander aimlessly through the streets. But unlike the *flâneur* who "goes his leisurely way as a personality" and as a protest, the narrator is overwhelmed by the phantasmagoria of the city and alienated from its relations of exchange ("The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," 30)[7]:

> Soon I was tired. Still, I persisted. As the night wore on, I drifted aimlessly through street after street, forgetting my objective. As for the money, of course, I did not spend a single *chŏn*. I didn't even dare to entertain the thought. It appeared that I had already lost any capacity for spending money. (73)

The word *kinŭng*, which is translated above as "capacity" deserves careful attention, as the word refers to one's skill and competency for accurately and easily performing a certain job. It is also homophonous with the word for a "function" or "role" of a person or thing, suggesting that the narrator was both unable to spend the money but

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[7] As Susan Buck-Morss says, "Benjamin suggests that to be a member of the crowd, rather than positing 'the crowd' as an object of fascination for the self-exempt narrator, is to experience an alienation that can be excruciating. Those who feel it most strongly are outsiders: foreigners and the poor" ("The Flaneur, the Sandwichman, and the Whore," 129).

also unable to perform the role of consumer. In addition, we can see here the narrator's sensorium being completely overwhelmed by phantasmagoria of the streets—"Being back on the streets after so long could not help but excite my nerves to an astonishing degree"—yet the commodity itself never appears in the text (73). In other words, the text reenacts the alienation of the colonial metropolis in that the narration through which we experience the colonial city is conditioned by but never provides access to the commodity on display. The narrator later explains, "the streets were too chaotic and there were too many people swarming about. Who could I grab and give the 5 *wŏn* to? I hadn't a clue. All I managed to do was exhaust myself in the process" (75).

Upon returning home, the narrator gives the money back to his wife and collapses into his wife's bedding. He later thinks that by doing so he has solved the mystery of the "pleasure" motivating the movement of money: "I cannot explain the pleasure I felt when I fell over and put the 5 *wŏn* in my wife's hand. It thrills me like nothing ever has before that I may have discovered the secret psychology behind the guests leaving my wife money and my wife leaving me money" (76).

While Kim Watson interprets this scene by suggesting that the narrator refuses money's symbolic exchange value by "presenting the money as a gift, precisely removing it from circulation," I suggest that rather than staging the narrator's continued refusal of money's exchange function, "Wings" subtly shows the subject's gradual learning of the function of money in a consumer society (Kim Watson, 76). While his wife is perplexed by his not having spent any money, the narrator sees that he has gained something by

returning it to her.[8] He tells us that after collapsing into his wife's bedding he slept in her room "for the very first time since taking up residence at No. 33"; he later interprets the scene as "giving my wife money for the privilege of sleeping in her room," and he will go on to repeat this *quid pro quo* later in the narrative ("Wings," 75, 76). In addition, there is a shift in the narrator's treatment of money that follows this scene. While before, the savings box and the money were "utterly meaningless" to the narrator, he breaks down shortly after this scene, asking, "Why can't money, any amount would be fine, suddenly pour out of the sky? It was so cruel and sad. I knew of no other way to obtain money. I think I wept a while under my quilt, wondering why I have no money" (78). Moreover, after receiving money from his wife again, the narrator does in fact participate, however modestly, in the money economy. We don't see the act of exchange itself, but we know that it must have happened due to his suddenly drinking coffee: "Sitting in a booth across from no one at all, I sip hot coffee" (78). This is a mysterious moment in the text, because the reader, until recently conditioned by the narrator's inability to spend money, is left wondering how he acquired it. Did he simply find it at a table? Was it left by someone else? This is clarified during his later, and final, excursion: "Coffee—. Yes, that's it. But as soon as I set foot in the station hall, I realized that it had somehow slipped my mind that there wasn't a single coin in my pocket" (82). The narrator's unseen purchase of

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[8] The wife's reaction echoes Marx's reference in Volume 1 of *Capital* to the "absurd and without meaning" act of exchanging in the circuit M—C—M two equal sums of money. By exchanging the coins for the paper money, the narrator has done just this while excising the commodity from the equation (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 330).

coffee, therefore, must be understood as a sign of his meagre adaptation to monetary exchange and the consumer economy.

## Yi Sang and the "I-Novel"

In addition to the economic pressures that shaped the environment for literary production and their exacerbation and complication by colonialism, contemporary genre expectations also put pressure on writers and restricted their creative potential. One source of pressure and literary expectations that Yi Sang faced was the genre of the "I-novel," or to be more precise, the ideological expectations for what Nayoung Aimee Kwon has called the "colonized I-novel." Kwon discusses the "colonized I-novel" in reference to the work of Kim Saryang, who was writing a few years after Yi Sang, in the 1940s. In Kim's "Letter to Mother," there is a section "in which he recalls a newspaper advertisement announcing the nomination [of the Akutagawa Literary Prize of 1940]" (Kwon, 54). He writes:

> Below the advertisement for my story was the following critique by the writer Satō Haruo: "A work that is an I-novel which has the tragic fate of an entire people [*minzoku*] squeezed into it." "Is this right? Is it right?" I asked myself. … Even though it is my own work, there is something about "Into the Light" that I couldn't quite make satisfactory [*sukkiri dekinai mono ga arimashita*]. It's a lie. I'm still telling lies, I told myself, even while writing it.'" (qtd. in Kwon, 54-55)

Kwon explains, "Here we glimpse the deep anxiety the writer feels toward the disjuncture between his own writing, which he sees as lies, and the pressure to represent the truth. This burden of truth or authenticity and the writer's self-perceived failure to represent it is at the heart of the minor writer's conundrum" (55). It is this same kind of contradictory

discursive space that Yi Sang's writing registers in its own way. And like Kim Saryang, Yi Sang developed a kind of writing that emerged in opposition to and out of continuous struggle with the formal and ideological expectations of the I-novel itself.

Lee Kyoung-hoon has discussed Yi Sang's work in relation to the I-novel and argued that his idiosyncratic style emerges from his refusal to choose between the generic expectations of this form, which Tomi Suzuki has described as a "single-voiced, 'direct' expression of the author's 'self,'" and the striving for totality characteristic of the 19th century European novel, and to which the I-novel was itself opposed (qtd. in Lee, 572). According to Lee, Yi Sang moved dialectically between these alternatives—avoiding the compositional impulses of the 19th century European novel through I-novelesque representation, while at the same time weaving the text so as to conceal the narrator's authentic self (Lee, 573-574). His writing, as Lee shows, continuously blurs the lines between writer and character and between life and fiction. Such techniques of mutual negation, contradiction, and paradox enacted the unique experience of being both writer and character, subject and object under Japanese colonialism.

It is important to acknowledge that criticism has shown how the "I-novel" itself was more of an idea than a coherent historical object, and while it is important to recognize that Korean writers such as Yi Sang had to approach this literary system from the colonial difference, Japanese writers struggled within and against the expectations of "I-novel" discourse as well. In "Confession as a System," Karatani Kōjin suggests:

> that the self or interiority which the novelistic "I" was supposed to express did not exist a priori but was constituted through the mediation of a material form, through the establishment of *genbun itchi.* The same can be

> said of modern Japanese literary confession. It was the literary form of the confession-confession as a system-that produced the interiority that confessed, the "true self." Rather than examine how or what was confessed, we should examine this institution. For it is not the existence of hidden secrets that necessitates confession but the compulsion to confess that produces an "interior" which must be hidden. (77)

I suggest, like Lee, that Yi Sang's work can be read as emerging from a similar dialogic engagement with the idea of the I-novel genre, in which any and all disclosure about the narrating "I" of the text is counterbalanced by a withholding of information. What I call his idle narration works in conjunction with the formal expectations of the I-novel by generating text that continuously withholds information and frustrates expectations for a stable and ultimately knowable or graspable narrative voice. Moreover, by refusing to articulate a clear, linear narrative or unified subjectivity, his texts negatively register the centrifugal pressures of colonial modernity, by which the colonized population are "rationalized" into subjects of capitalism and the state.

The narrator of "Wings," like all of Yi Sang's narrators, obfuscates the events of the narrative while adopting various "poses" and "masks" to render his true "self" or "identity" unintelligible to the reader. The degree to which the withholding of information is important to Yi Sang's narrative style is further suggested by the remark, which appears in nearly identical terms in both "Lost Flowers" and "19$^{th}$ Century Style," that "a person with no secrets is poorer and worse off than one with no assets" (my translation; *Yi Sang chŏnjip 1*, 386; *Yi Sang chŏnjip 2*, 242-243).

**Yi Sang's Incongruent Representation: Idle Narration and The Dialectical Image in Colonial Korea**

In this section, I hope to demonstrate how Yi Sang's idle narration in "Wings" allows for a kind of social critique through what I call "incongruent representation." Incongruent representation is a kind of disharmony between the social and material reality that is presented to the reader and the narrative treatment of that reality in the text. One of the fundamental interpretive problems that readers are confronted with in "Wings" is how to understand the mental state of the narrator, whose mentioning of Dostoevsky, Hugo, Marx, and Malthus betrays an educated and globally aware consciousness, yet who at the same time seems oblivious to the social and material realities in which he lives. One example of this is the narrator's perception of his interior. His descriptions of his existence in his bare room provide what could be an abject caricature of the bourgeois interiors of nineteenth-century Paris that Walter Benjamin describes in the *Arcades Project*, while, unlike the "private individual" that Benjamin describes in the Exposé of 1939, the narrator's interior is opposed not to the office or the workplace, but to the streets (*AP*, 19). He owns a single black corduroy suit, which serves as his "pajamas, casual clothes, and dress suit all combined," and a black high neck sweater that he wears as an undershirt ("Wings," 69). His room contains nothing but "clammy bedding" that is infested with bedbugs, and it gets no sunlight. We might imagine his room as the "basement apartment of the poor man" that "can never feel like home," which Marx describes in *Der historische Materialismus* and which Benjamin cites in convolute I (qtd. in *AP*, 223). Yet the narrator's own description of his room is

much closer to that of the bourgeois interior of the nineteenth century, which, Benjamin writes, "… conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case…" (*AP*, 220). While entirely lacking in appurtenances, it otherwise suits the narrator as a kind of "shell" (*AP*, 220):

> Every part of my room… pleases me. The room's temperature suits my body's and its degree of dimness is agreeable to my eyesight. I never hoped for a room cooler of warmer than mine. Nor have I wished for one that is brighter or cozier. I have always been grateful to my room, which seems to constantly maintain these conditions for me alone, and I am delighted that it may be for the sake of this room alone that I was born into the world. … To lounge around in a room that hugs my body and mind like comfortable clothes, free of such worldly calculations as happiness or unhappiness, is an absolute convenience and ease. One might even say it is the ideal state. I liked being in such a state. ("Wings," 68)

The narrator stands in utter contrast to Marx's "poor man," who is "aware of the contrast in quality between his dwelling and a human dwelling—a residence in that other world, the heaven of wealth," and to those invoked by Baudelaire when he asks in the introduction to his translation of Poe's "Philosophy of Furniture," "Who among us, in his idle hours, has not taken a delicious pleasure in constructing for himself a model apartment, a dream house, a house of dreams?" (qtd. in *AP*, 223, 227). Except for the bed bugs that pester him, the narrator could not be happier with his abject dwelling.

While he does admit the "simplicity" of his room," where "not a single nail protrudes from the walls," he says that his wife's "has always been lavish": "there are hooks all around her room just below the ceiling, [and] gorgeous skirts or blouses hung on each one. The varied patterns are pleasing to the eye" ("Wings," 69, translation

modified). Here, he plays with a magnifying glass and his wife's hand mirror, and when he opens the window,

> the sun streams in and shines upon her makeup stand, speckling the array of colored vials and making them glow. … I draw close to my wife's makeup stand and gaze at the assortment of cosmetic vials lined up in a row there. The vials are more captivating than anything else in the world. Selecting just one, I gently remove its stopper, bring it to my nose, and inhale lightly, almost holding my breath. (69)

And later, "A patch of sunlight, smaller than the size of a wrapping cloth, dazzled my eyes. In it, countless dust particles danced riotously like microbes" (76). Together, his wife's clothes, her hand mirror, her cosmetic vials, and even dust particles enliven the narrator's sensorium, producing an effect much like that of the interior Baudelaire describes in *Le Spleen de Paris*, which Benjamin cites in convolute I:

> Sunsets cast their glowing colors on the walls of dining room and drawing room, filtering softly through lovely hangings or intricate high windows with mullioned panes. All the furniture is immense, fantastic, strange, armed with locks and secrets like all civilized souls. Mirrors, metals, fabrics, pottery, and the works of the goldsmith's art play a mute mysterious symphony for the eye. (qtd. in *AP*, 225).

In the absence of such wealth and abundance, the universe of the narrator's barren interior is no less phantasmagorical. But what is the reader to make of this narrator's disavowal of, and moreover his seeming indulgence in, what we clearly see to be his abject and impoverished condition?

I suggest that if Marx's poor man's perceptions of his own dwelling are conditioned by the alienation of his labor, then the narrator's can be read as an effect of his total disconnection from wage-labor, and that the disjunction between the narrator's perceptions and his material reality are part of a broader narrative technique of

incongruent representation in “Wings,” one that, in its structure and effects, is analogous to Benjamin’s “dialectical image,” but with the essential difference that while, for Benjamin, the awakening from the dream-world of capitalism brought about by the dialectical image entails “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past,” Yi Sang’s technique of incongruent representation brings into focus the colonial intellectual for whom the exploitation of capitalism and its uneven development is intensified to the point where revolution is unimaginable (“On the Concept of History,” 396). While Rolf Tiedemann notes that Benjamin’s “dialectical image” “never achieved any terminological consistency,” Susan Buck-Morss draws on Benjamin’s own formulations to explain it as, “The presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present, which produces political electricity in a ‘lightning flash’ of truth… Unlike Hegel’s logic, it is ‘dialectics at a standstill’” (Tiedemann, 942; *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 38). In colonial Kyŏngsŏng, where modernization has compressed time and development is inherently uneven, the narrator of “Wings” is himself a kind of historical object, whose inassimilable presence in the present produces a political electricity. Yi Sang’s incongruent representation is then inherently one of temporal disjunction, but rather than positing a need to “catch up” with modernity, it critiques the ideology of progress by foregrounding the inequity inherent to modernity itself. That Yi Sang would seek to give literary form to such a critique of progress is not surprising given that he saw himself as a kind of remnant of the past, referring to himself in a letter to poet and critic Kim Kirim as “a vagrant who slipped into a crack between the centuries with the sole intent of collapsing there” (qtd. in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*,

659). Unlike Benjamin's dialectical image, then, which, Buck-Morss writes, was to "jolt the dreaming collective into a political 'awakening,'" Yi Sang's incongruent representation is a protraction of this dialectics at a standstill until it is exhausted (*The Dialectics of Seeing*, 38). It is "a constellation saturated with tensions," but one that contains little hope for blasting the historical moment out of the continuum of history and sparking revolution (*AP*, 475).

While the narrator's perceptions of his interior and his incomprehension of the commodity and the function of money (though he can be seen to "learn" these things, however minimally) serve to characterize him as a kind of historical residue out of place in the commodity capitalism of colonial Kyŏngsŏng, his grotesque (or glorious) idleness makes him utterly incompatible with a capitalist mode of production. This idleness is also an essential characteristic for the critique of progress that I suggest we locate in "Wings," as well as the point at which Gregory Dobbins's Benjaminian reading of Irish modernism becomes relevant to Korean modernism as well. In his book *Lazy Idle Schemers: Irish Modernism and the Politics of Idleness*, Dobbins argues that while idleness is found in the works of many modernist writers, it functions in a very particular way in the context of Ireland. He makes a clear case for idleness in Irish modernism as a form of dissent from the work-ethic central to the Irish Literary Revival and the post-colonial Irish Free State, while also making a persuasive argument for its functioning "as a basis for a Benjaminian hermeneutics of the trace that provides evidence of the differential nature of modernity within Ireland" (25). While I think that Dobbins successfully positions idleness as a factor that distinguishes Irish modernism from other national modernisms or

modernism more broadly conceived—he specifically mentions Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and T.S. Eliot as modernist writers who engage with idleness but for whom it does not carry this particular political function—I suggest that by expanding the geographical scope of modernism, we can see the politics of the "lazy idle schemer" not as being entirely unique to Ireland but in fact as a possible link between Irish and certain other modernisms. I suggest that in the case of Korea during its colonial period, idleness functioned in the writings of Yi Sang analogously to the way in which Dobbins argues that it did in the case of Ireland—not only as a form of dissent from the work-ethic that was central to predominant anticolonial nationalist writings, but also as enabling a Benjaminian critique of progress. Ultimately, then, Dobbins's Benjaminian critical framework proves just as useful for the consideration of idleness in Korean literary modernism.[9]

For Benjamin, idleness is distinct from "leisure" in that, while the latter fills the gaps between and is therefore dependent upon regular sessions of work, idleness was completely separate from the regular work-time of capitalism (*AP*, 803). This distinction is essential to Dobbins's argument in that the fundamental irreconcilability of idleness

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[9] Of course with idleness being fundamentally recalcitrant to a capitalist work ethic, it is not surprising that the need to overcome or eliminate it was standard to colonial narratives, a point which Dobbins acknowledges, but the degree to which Imperial Japan itself saw (and feared) the parallel between its relationship to Korea and that of the British Empire to Ireland is worth noting in the context of the present argument. For Imperial Diet member Togo Minoru's engagement with this comparison, see Michael A. Schneider's essay "The Limits of Cultural Rule: Internationalism and Identity in Japanese Responses to Korean Rice" in *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (121-122); for colonial scholar Yanaihara Tadao's engagement, see Mark R. Peattie's essay "Japanese Attitudes toward Colonialism, 1895-1945" in *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945* (114).

with capitalist work-time affords it a "subversive potential" (Dobbins, 21). More than just being recalcitrant to a capitalist work-ethic, though, idleness in Dobbins's reading and application of Benjamin's work becomes the context in which a particular form of perception can make possible a critique of modernity's entire narrative of historical progress.

Benjamin associates idleness and work with distinct forms of experience, with *Ehrfahrung*—"long" or "connected" experience—being "the outcome of work" and *Erlebnis*—"immediate" experience—being "the phantasmagoria of the idler" (*AP*, 801). Dobbins explains that, while Benjamin's notion of *Erlebnis* "refers to particular or individual experiences of a given moment" and "entails a sense of the discontinuity of the present from the past," *Ehrfahrung* "evokes notions of tradition and continuity"; its various forms "transmit the sorts of traditions, stories, and tropes that provide a sense of stability, as well as a guarantee of one's connection to a shared past; they provide a rationale for one's place in the world" (Dobbins, 22, 23). In Benjamin's writings on nineteenth-century Paris, though, wherein "the appearance of places, commodities, and things take priority over the history that produced them," premodern forms of *Ehrfahrungen* that would root the individual in an organic, communal tradition are "shattered by the shocks of modernity" (Dobbins, 23). But if the structure of experience in the modern city is one in which *Erlebnis* pulls the rug of continuity from under premodern forms of *Ehrfahrungen*, "long experience" does not disappear entirely. Rather, Benjamin suggests that modernity's narrative of historical progress is itself understood as a "chain of events," and thus the *Erlebnisse* of the modern city, where "exposure to shock

[*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm," coexist with the *Ehrfahrung* of historical progress ("On the Concept of History," 392; "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 318).

As the narratives of modernity and historical progress were utilized around the globe as justification for colonialization, anticolonial nationalisms often adopted these same narratives in order to legitimize their own claims regarding their capacity for self-government. In this process, the stereotypes and popular practices that the colonizer had marked as signs of backwardness or inferiority had to be what David Lloyd has called "transvalued"—recast as positive marks of cultural distinctiveness entirely compatible with modernization—or suppressed and denied ("Counterparts: *Dubliners*, Masculinity, and Temperance Nationalism," 131-132). As Dobbins says, "Tradition itself in these terms presents just another mode of modernization" (69). In the case of Korea, perhaps no work exemplifies the anticolonial adoption of a progressive, teleological notion of history as much as Yi Kwangsu's enormously influential novel *Mujŏng* (*The Heartless*). *Mujŏng*, which was serialized in 1917, can be characterized as a *bildungsroman*, as it follows its main characters through their individual development and culminates in their dedication of self to the building of the nation. While national construction is felt to be a fulfilment of responsibility to the great generations of the past, it is to be achieved by embracing wholesale Western modes of progress and development. Such a vision of historical progress thus links Korean tradition to a global modernity through, among other things, a particular work-ethic, the apparent abandonment of which is portrayed as a cause of Korea's current state of oppression. Idleness is chastised throughout the novel, for instance by the idolized Principle Ham when he declares in a speech: "Your ancestors

did not have rotted, deteriorated minds and hearts and were not lazy and listless like you. Our ancestors who built P'yongyang Fortress had grandeur of character. Our ancestors who built Ulmil Look-out and Pubyok Pavilion had great ambition..." (*Mujŏng*, 151).

Needless to say, in joining a pre-modern greatness to a vision of a national future through a narrative of historical progress, the novel overlooks the violence inherent to modernity itself, for instance portraying the struggles of the Korean peasantry as resulting from ignorance and degeneracy while ignoring the enforced colonial policies that, through the commodification of land and restriction of domestic food production, were completely restructuring forms of rural life (Chulwoo Lee, 25, 40-41). The example of Yi Kwangsu's *Mujŏng* is important to the present argument, because it does in the context of early twentieth-century Korean literary production precisely what Dobbins argues the Irish Literary Revival did in the context of Ireland by providing "what Benjamin would call the *Ehrfahrung* of a national(ist) conception of history—those narratives that serve as a record of historical continuity and provide a rationale and justification for national belonging" (Dobbins, 82). While the adoption of the notion of progress in such nationalist articulations of *Ehrfahrung* eliminates any truly revolutionary potential, Dobbins suggests that a critique of progress and an alternative conception of history is enabled by the temporality of *Erlebnis* and what Benjamin calls the "trace" (*Spur*), which "refers to the imprint of objects or concepts that persist as fossils of prior, outmoded commodities and therefore as vestiges of prior moments in history" (Dobbins, 24). As Benjamin writes in convolute m:

> With the trace, a new dimension accrues to [*Erlebnis*]. … the one who undergoes [*Erlebnis*] can follow the trace that leads there. Whoever follows traces must not only pay attention; above all, he must have given heed to a great many things… In this way there comes into play the peculiar configuration by dint of which [*Ehrfahrung*] appears translated into the language of [*Erlebnis*]. (*AP*, 801)

In other words, as Benjamin clarifies in a note, the "trace" makes possible "tradition translated into the language of shock" (*AP*, 1007). And idleness plays an important role in this process:

> The [*Erfahrungen*] of one who attends to a trace result only very remotely from any work activity, or are cut off from such a procedure altogether. … They have no sequence and no system. They are a product of chance, and have about them the essential interminability that distinguishes the preferred obligations of the idler. (*AP*, 801-802)

For Dobbins, then, the trace "offers a key to an alternative hermeneutics that would enable the knowledge of a history once provided by *Ehrfahrung* but now repressed by the teleology of progress" (24).[10]

Although Benjamin wrote in notes connected to "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that "experiences in the sense of *Erlebnisse* are 'by nature unsuitable for literary composition,'" in Dobbins's reading, "following the trace" allows "the otherwise unrepresentable qualities of *Erlebnis*" to "become legible for narrative purposes" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 345; Dobbins, 24). In addition, "… the repressed knowledge of the historical process that shattered the possibility of *Ehrfahrung* becomes discernible

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[10] If the "teleology of progress" is itself a form of *Ehrfahrung*, as explained above, the conflict between modes of historical knowledge presented by Dobbins here must then be interpreted as one form of *Ehrfahrung* repressing another.

as well" (Dobbins, 24).[11] In this way, *Erlebnis* has the potential to be much more than a "reactive (consumerist) response" to *Ehrfahrung* that is particularly amenable to the "political phantasmagoria" of fascism ("The Flaneur, the Sandwichman, and the Whore," 105-106, 117). Bringing this theoretical possibility back to the specific context of Ireland, Dobbins claims that "the post-Joycean Irish modernist novel delineates *Erlebnis* in a manner that enables one to discover a repressed history of trauma and conquest omitted from progressive narratives complicit with the national work-ethic" (Dobbins, 24-25).

While I agree with Dobbins's overall argument, I believe that his conclusion that the particular political function of idleness that he articulates is "one of the main differences between Irish modernism and that of other national traditions" is too narrow and that idleness in "Wings" can be read in precisely the same terms. That is, in its representation of idleness, and by giving textual form to *Erlebnis*, "Wings" stands in political opposition to writings such as those of Yi Kwangsu that promoted a national work-ethic while adopting the narrative of historical progress that was central not only to the discourses of Imperial Japan, but to Imperial Britain and the predominant voices of anticolonial nationalism in Ireland as well.[12]

Returning to the text of "Wings," idleness, as we have already seen, is the narrator's single most distinguishing characteristic. Early on he declares, "Everything

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[11] This would refer to a type of *Ehrfahrung* outside the progressive narrative of modernity, not the form of *Ehrfahrung* that is the progressive narrative of modernity itself.

[12] While Yi Kwangsu is the only "progressive nationalist" writer that I explicitly deal with here, the entire *sinsoseol* ("new novel") genre in early twentieth century Korean literature similarly promotes nationalism through modernization and the notion of historical progress.

was okay as long as I wasted each day in utter idleness," and "Rather than try working as a fairly competent member of society or listen to my wife's lectures, I enjoyed being lazy, like the most slothful animal" ("Wings," 68, 70). During the few excursions he makes outside his beloved room, he spends his time sitting and waiting in a tearoom at the Kyŏngsŏng railway station, observing travelers and listening to the train whistles (78-79). Recounting one of his visits there, he says, "I read many times over, backward and forward, the names of the few dishes scrawled on the menu. … I don't know how long I sat there, my mind drifting off" (79). Unbound by labor-time, the narrator drifts through existence in an idleness of "interminability" (*AP*, 802). In this state of idleness, *Erlebnis* is his phantasmagoria. He echoes precisely Benjamin's comment in convolute O (in reference to gambling) that "the ideal of the shock-engendered experience <*Erlebnis*> is the catastrophe" when he declares that, "Everything is a nuisance, but sudden [catastrophe] is a joy! (*AP*, 515; "Wings," 77, translation modified).[13]

Just as Dobbins writes in reference to Irish modernism, though, the narrator's idleness is "not a condition defined by the absence of any work or activity whatsoever, but rather the context that enables a new form of intellectual labour committed to different forms of representation and analysis not yet recognized as legitimate or productive" (Dobbins, 24). So too does the narrator's idleness enable a kind of intellectual play and creativity: "Inside my clammy bedding I have invented such a

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[13] While the Lew and Ryu translation quoted above uses "calamity" in the place of "catastrophe," *chaenan* can of course also be translated as "catastrophe," and this is in fact the word used in the Ahn translation; I have opted for "catastrophe" here merely in order to emphasize the parallel with (the English translation of) Benjamin's comment.

variety of things and penned many a treatise. I also knocked out a decent number of poems. But these, like detergent, dissolve without a trace in the sluggish air that overflows my room the moment I fall asleep" (70). In fact, more than merely enabling such productivity, idleness is presented as a prerequisite for it: "*Only* when the body crumples in exhaustion is its mind bright as a silver coin. Whenever nicotine sinks into the worm-ridden coil of my intestines, a clean sheet of paper is ready in my head. On it I line up wit and paradox like paduk stones" (66, emphasis mine). This assertion of the necessity of idleness (or nicotine) for intellectual production is entirely consistent with Benjamin's theorization of idleness in convolute m when he says, "idleness, in the bourgeois society that knows no leisure, is a precondition of artistic production. And, often, idleness is the very thing which stamps that production with the traits that make its relation to the economic production process so drastic" (*AP*, 805-806).[14] The narrator's intellectual productivity is not written down (unless one considers the text of "Wings" itself to be so produced), nor is it commodified in any way, making it yet another sign of the narrator's incongruity with his surroundings, in this case with colonial Kyŏngsŏng's increasingly rationalized labor market.

Through its first-person narration, the text of "Wings" formally reproduces "the phantasmagoria of the idler" by way of the narrator's own *Erlebnisse*, while its plot and

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[14] Additionally, we can note the significance for this narrator of solitude, which Benjamin notes as being of particular importance among the conditions of idleness in convolute m, when he is on one of his excursions: "The *tearoom* was a big discovery for me. First of all, no one I know ever came here. And even if they did, they would soon be on their way. I made a mental note to pass time here every day" (*AP*, 805; "Wings," 78).

character development are minimal. To the extent that "Wings" has a plot at all, it is mostly structured by the narrator's poor timekeeping, and the conflict that is introduced between him and his wife arises from his returning home at inopportune times (when his wife is with "guests") and eventually "seeing exactly what [he] should never have laid eyes upon" ("Wings," 82). Meanwhile, the narration shifts between present and past tense, while the connection between various events is often omitted, so that we are left with a text that is often more of a montage of monadic episodes than it is a linear sequence. This feature of the text is what Ch'oe Chaesŏ references in his critique referenced earlier. I would argue, however, that in this way the text replicates the "synchronic conception of temporality" inherent in idleness, as "its sensation of an unending duration of the moment displaces an ordered awareness of the succession of temporal units in the progressive and regimented manner characteristic of labour-time" (Dobbins, 70-71).

Susan Buck-Morss writes that, for Benjamin (in contradistinction to Marx), "the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore" (Buck-Morss, 81). In the urban phantasmagoria of "Wings," though, where, as noted above, the colonial city of Kyŏngsŏng "facilitates the circulation of commodities from the metropole without allowing for their general purchase," it is significant that the commodity-on-display is never truly available to the narrator (Kim Watson, 76). "Wings" formally replicates these circumstances by barring the reader from accessing them, excising commodities-on-display from the text so that, ironically, we *never* see them. For instance, when the

narrator ends up on the roof of the Mitsukoshi department store, it is as if he has been teleported there: "I wandered around and around, I didn't know where. But when I found myself a few hours later on the roof of the Mitsukoshi, it was almost noon" (82). Compare this with Yi Sang's description of the department stores in his essay "Tokyo," with their "mountainous piles of merchandise," their "specially priced items, markdown items, discount items," and their jewelry and furs ("Tokyo," 343). In this way, not only does the text of "Wings" formally replicate the narrator's idleness and *Erlebnisse*, but it also foregrounds the abject material conditions of the colonized intellectual in the modern colonial metropolis.

Yi Sang's incongruent representation in "Wings" culminates in the text's final scene, when the narrator is thinking about his relationship with his wife: "But now the only difficult thing for me to decide was whether I should trudge back to my wife. Should I go? And if so, where? At that moment, the noon siren wailed: *Tuu-u*—!" (83). At this moment, the narrator's idleness is interrupted by the rationalized temporality of work-time and of modernity in the form of the noon siren, a shock-experience for the narrator that brings forth a vision of the colonial metropolis in which it is perceived as a frenetic intermingling of its component parts: "People extended their four limbs and flapped around like chickens, while all sorts of glass, steel, marble, money, and ink seemed to rumble and boil up—right then, the noon reached the zenith of its dazzling splendor" (83). In contrast to this vision of modernity and the raw materials of capitalist development stands the idle, jobless narrator himself, who suddenly perceives a "trace" of his own past:

> All of a sudden, I feel an itch under my arms. Aha! The itching is a trace of where my artificial wings had once sprouted. Wings that are missing today: pages from which my hopes and ambition were erased flashed in my mind like a flipped-through dictionary. (83)

The image of artificial wings here connects notions of transcendence to narrative itself, while the erasure of hope and ambition from the narrator's lexicon indicates the harsh reality of Korean writers living under late Japanese imperialism.[15] The ability to envision and narrate a future have been lost, while modernity carries on its relentless progress of "glass, steel, marble, money, and ink."

In the Walter K. Lew and Youngju Ryu translation, "Wings" then concludes:

> I want to halt my steps and shout out for once:
> "Wings! Grow again!"
> "Let's fly! Let's fly! Let's fly! Let's fly just one more time."
> "Let's fly once again!" ("Wings," 83-84)

The translation of the line immediately preceding the invocation of wings deserves careful attention. While the Lew and Ryu translation (above) projects the desire to halt and shout into the future, Ahn Jung-hyo's translation adheres more closely to the original text by retaining the past tense of the verb "want": "I stopped my pace and wanted to shout" (*The Wings*, 40). Here, the desire to shout is not projecting into the future but is rather something unfulfilled in the past (40). In the original text, though, the apparent invocation of wings is buried under yet another grammatical hedge—that of a try or attempt. What the narrator in fact says is that he "*wanted* to *try* to shout." This

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[15] As Karen Thornber points out, "Wings are also linked to words, writing, and narration in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's stories 'A Fool's Life' and 'Hagurumu,' or 'Cogwheels,'" which Yi Sang intertextualizes at various points in *Wings* (Thornber, 348).

grammatical distancing of the invocation of wings suggests then that even the *hope* for a utopian transcendence is foreclosed and cannot be expressed. In this way, *Wings* is able at a formal level to pose the utopian image of transcendence while stressing the overwhelming difficulty of its realization.

In this way, my reading of "Wings" differs from that of Karen Thornber, who sees it as "a text that rather than drawing attention to the suppression and destruction of the autonomous subject in colonial Korea instead bears witness to his robust persistence," and is more consistent with Janet Poole's readings of other writers in late-colonial Korea (Thornber, 354). Poole writes that the work of Korean writers at this time "was fueled by the sense of a disappearing future and the struggle to imagine a transformed present. Haunted by the paradoxical disappearance of that which was yet to appear, their works turned to the past and the repetitive present of the everyday just as that past was being consigned to the museum by an imperial state at war" (Poole, 1). "The disappearing future," continues Poole, "suggests a profound loss of faith in the ideology of progress and modernization as the industrialization of the peninsula speeded up. The industrial societies of Europe shared such a loss of faith, but what also disappeared with the future in late colonial Korea was the idea, or hope, of postcolonialism itself" (Poole, 1). The social and material realities of late-colonial Korea, then, short-circuit the revolutionary possibility that Benjamin describes as a "weak messianic power… on which the past has a claim" ("On the Concept of History," 390).

In its foregrounding of the abject state of the Korean intellectual in the Japanese empire rather than a transformative or revolutionary potential, Yi Sang's incongruent

representation in “Wings” can be considered not only as an impoverished form of Benjamin’s dialectical image, but also in relation to the epiphanies around which James Joyce structured the stories of *Dubliners*. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen Dedalus describes epiphany in aesthetic terms as the moment of discovery of *claritas*, or Aquinas’s third quality of the beautiful object. As David Lloyd explains, though, when Joyce employs the epiphany as a narrative technique in *Dubliners*, its “intensified moment… refuses to be a symbol of something and embeds instead a profound resistance to incorporation, a recalcitrant particularity that refuses to be subsumed into the narrative of representation” (“Counterparts: *Dubliners*, Masculinity, and Temperance Nationalism,” 146-147). Rather than “the soul of the commonest object” appearing “radiant,” as in Stephen’s formulation, Joyce acknowledges with regard to the colonial city he limns in *Dubliners* that the “odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs around my stories” (*Stephen Hero*, 218; *Letters: Volume I*, 63-64). Lloyd acutely suggests that Joyce’s reformulation of the epiphany for the organizing technique of *Dubliners* “refuses to redeem colonial paralysis by subordinating it to a transformative sense of history” (147). Likewise, Yi Sang’s technique of incongruent representation in “Wings” sets the narrator and the colonial metropolis in a temporal opposition much like Benjamin’s dialectical image. Yet while Yi Sang’s incongruous representation allows for a critique of progress, in both its imperial and nationalist forms, it lacks the revolutionary potential that Benjamin ascribes to the dialectical image.

As David Lloyd writes with regard to what he calls the “recalcitrant grain of cultural difference” in Ireland, “The cultural forms of the colonized do not simply

disappear; in the turbulence of the encounter with colonization, they become *something other that retains the traces of the violence of that encounter*, preserving it in the very form of a persistent damage, and yet survives" (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 107-108, emphasis mine). In other words, the recalcitrant practices that Dobbins formulates as Benjaminian traces and which we can encounter in the work of Yi Sang are not to be understood as authentic remainders of an otherwise erased tradition, but as practices and ways of being that have been *disfigured* by the colonial encounter itself. As such, while pointing to that which modernity has attempted to erase, they simultaneously attest to the violence of this attempted erasure, supplementing Benjamin's critique of progress from the colonial periphery.

**"Ennui"**

Having looked closely at how idleness functions in "Wings," I would like to turn to Yi Sang's later piece "Ennui." Yi wrote "Ennui" in December of 1936, shortly after the publication of "Wings" in September of the same year, but it was published posthumously in the *Chosŏn ilbo* from May 4th to May 11th, 1937. John Frankl describes "Ennui" as "an anti-nostalgic revisionist account" of his experience that he had written about earlier in his essay "Lingering Impressions of a Mountain Village" (256). However, Frankl himself notes that the first part of "Ennui" that was published in the *Chosŏn ilbo* on May 4, 1937 was accompanied by a footnote explaining that "[Yi's] close friend Pak T'aewŏn, while looking through Yi's effects, discovered this unpublished manuscript" and forwarded it to the *Chosŏn ilbo* for publication ("Ennui," 261). I believe that this is

an important detail to highlight, as the unpublished state of "Ennui" already brings into question what kind of writing it is. In other words, I do not approach "Ennui" under the assumption that we should regard it, like "Lingering Impressions of a Mountain Village," as a travel essay; nor do we necessarily have to view it through the same critical lens. Moreover, in his essay "For Whom Do We Write?"—written in response to the deaths of Yi Sang and Kim Yujŏng—Yi T'aejun lists "Ennui" and "Wings" as two works of "literature" and "fine works of the like previously unseen" (*Eastern Sentiments*).

As with "Wings," idleness serves as a thematic center in "Ennui," but its presentation is very different. This contrast between the ways that idleness functions in these texts, especially when considering the close proximity of their writing, makes "Ennui" particularly interesting supplement to "Wings." Even the essay's title signals a departure from the idleness of "Wings." The Korean word *kwŏntae* refers to a feeling of dislike, boredom, or laziness that emerges due to one's loss of interest in something or a situation. Because the feeling presented in the essay is very much one of dislike towards one's state of having nothing to do, the French/English "Ennui," which has its etymological roots in the Latin for "annoyance" (*in odio*) is an apt translation.[16] This polar shift reveals the degree to which Yi Sang himself felt the pressure of modernity and *saenghwal* to be actively engaged in productive activity, a pressure that most of his fiction—including "Wings"—imaginatively eliminates. The pleasure of idleness expressed by the narrator of "Wings" is turned into an anxiety over one's lack of

[16] *mihi in odio est* ("it is hateful to me") (*New Oxford American Dictionary*).

productivity in “Ennui”: “I finish breakfast. There is nothing to do. But “Today” is laid out before me like a ridiculously broad blank page, and it demands a story, any story. I must do something, anything. I must research what it is I must do” (260). Interestingly, the point of action is distanced through language here much like it is at the conclusion of “Wings.” The impasse generated by the demand to do something and the fact that “there is nothing to do” is broken by the emergence of a new pressure to “research,” or take up a new active process in order to find a task to then perform.

“Ennui” also reveals Yi Sang’s own self-aware distance from rural Korean life and the degree to which his perceptions are shaped by life in the urban environment of the colonial modern city. One of the many striking features of “Ennui” is that much of it demonstrates a kind of anthropological gaze that seems to analyze and produce knowledge about rural Korean life from the viewpoint of an obvious outsider. Much of the text is made up of statements like, “These farmers who spend entire winters looking out upon these barren and hideous plains, and yet manage not to resign themselves to suicide, are at once pitiful and enormous idiots.” Considered in conjunction with the narrators of his fictional texts, who seem hopelessly inassimilable to the colonial-modern city, the liminal position of the colonial-modern subject emerges more clearly: never fully assimilable to “civilization” and at the same time cut off from any organic connection to whatever social formations and cultural histories that “civilization” displaced or destroyed.

While the feeling of boredom, Yi points out, typically affords an opportunity for introspection, the rural landscape and the remoteness of the village, which doesn’t get

newspapers from the city, are felt to be so stifling that he is unable to even to turn his thoughts inwards. Here emerges the displeasure of *kwŏntae:* "Could there be any state more agonizing," he asks, "than the state of not being able to think of anything?" (267).

The local villagers, however, which were so disparaged at the beginning of the essay, slowly begin to be seen as an alternative possibility:

> Why can't I exist, like Mr. Ch'oe's nephew, in a state of eternal blissful ignorance? Am I enthralled by desire for trivial victory even amidst this stifling ennui? Can I not just become a fool?
> This petty human desire remaining in me is singularly repulsive. I must escape this final thing. I must eliminate the very nerves that perceive ennui, and completely prostrate myself. (263)

Yi continues to assume the position of condescending modern urbanite towards the villagers:

> Tomorrow. Tomorrow, again, they must continue the work they did today. Why do these tomorrows of endless ennui go on so endlessly? But they are unable to fathom such things. And even on those rare occasions when an inkling of doubt passes in their minds like a flash of lightning, the very next moment, owing to the day's slave-like drudgery, it is terminated by sleep. Thus, peasants are tremendously miserable. Well then, just how happy has my ability to apprehend this heinous ennui made me? (265)

However, the essay concludes with what seems to be a significant shift in Yi's perception of his situation:

> Well then, exactly how have I spent today? There is no need to think of such things. Let's just sleep! When I, unfortunately, no, fortunately, wake again, I'll play another round of chess with Mr. Ch'oe's nephew. Returning to the pool, I'll be able to see the minnows, and, ruminating like a cow upon those few remaining memories, do I not have a method of enjoying endless idleness? (274-275)

At this point, a subtle shift occurs in the narration:

> A tiger moth rushes in and extinguishes the flame. The tiger moth will surely be either dead or burned. But that rascal called a tiger moth is a rascal that knows how to live. Seeing the flame, it knows to jump in—I'm talking about a creature of passion that understands the importance of spending its life frantically pursuing the flame. But out here is there passion to pursue the flame, or even a flame to jump into? No. I have nothing, and through the eyes of I who have nothing, nothing can be seen.
> Inasmuch as darkness is darkness, whether it be in this tiny room or filling the entire universe, there is really no difference in terms of volume. I lie down amidst this measureless darkness, and there is nothing to breathe, nothing to caress, nothing to covet—there is nothing. Nothing but tomorrows without end. Feeling their lying in wait once again outside my window, I merely tremble.
> December 19, Before the Dawn, Tokyo (275)

This conclusion with the date and place of writing introduces a sudden fracture in the reader's understanding of the essay, which was written not from the village but a year and two months after Yi Sang's actual visit to Sŏngch'ŏn. And the place of writing is neither the remote village nor Kyŏngsŏng, but the Imperial capital—Tokyo. This fracture renders the conclusion ambiguous: does "out here" refer to the remote village? Or the Imperial capital? Perhaps this ambiguity suggests that for Yi Sang it does not matter: barred from modern civilization and cut off from the past, he is a perpetually and hopelessly homeless subject. His invocation of "nothing" as well as the "tiny room" in fact match his professed state of in fact match the state of extreme poverty in which he professed to be living in Tokyo in his letters. A distinction is drawn between the writer and those who live in "frantic pursuit" of an objective. No objective exists for him to pursue. Yet the pressure of modernity remains as inevitable as the endless tomorrows that leave him trembling in the darkness.

Frankl poses a stark dichotomy between, on the one hand, Yi's poetry and prose fiction, and on the other, his essays:

> Yi's poetry and prose fiction appear largely personal, which is, of course, why they so often require major biographical research and scores of footnotes. They were not meant to communicate with the outside world any more than is a diary. Conversely, his essays, despite the relative neglect they have received from the scholarly establishment, are in form and content deliberate attempts to articulate. It is in his essays that Yi, to the degree that he ever does, provides unequivocal information, both about his internal states and about the everyday life of the societies in which he operated. ("Marking Territory," 349)

The contrast that I have highlighted in how idleness is treated in "Wings" and "Ennui" likewise implies a difference in Yi's approach to writing across these modes. However, I understand the line between Yi's prose fiction and his essays to be more fluid. The ending of "Ennui" is a case in point, as the geotemporal fracture that I have noted introduces a sudden shift in the reader's relationship to the text. This formal aspect of "Ennui," I argue, undermines the notion that the essay is a "deliberate [attempt] to articulate." On the contrary, the essay concludes—both in terms of form and content—by modally shifting the text towards Yi's prose fiction.

Frankl also remarks that, based on the distinction that he sets up between Yi's essays and his fiction, he intends to read the earlier "Lingering Impressions of a Mountain Village" "to see what it might reveal to us about Yi Sang and his world" (349). In my reading, Yi Sang's fiction bears this same potential—as ambiguous and obfuscatory as it is, it has a great deal to say about the writer and his world. What is required, though, is a readerly approach that delinks from the urge to "decipher" the text—one that engages with and seeks to relate to and acknowledge the referential

plenitude of the text without needing to decode it or reduce it into a singular meaning. In a sense, this readerly approach might also be understood as one inflected by a kind of "idleness." Yi Sang's techniques of idle narration, I suggest, push the reader towards such a form of textual engagement, and, as such, stand as remarkable works that demonstrate the subversive potential of idleness in modern literature.

## 4. Labor, Idleness, and the Work of Art in the Novels of Samuel Beckett

Although they are not always acknowledged as such, labor and idleness are central themes in the novels of Samuel Beckett, from the early *Murphy* (1938) to his later trilogy of *Molloy* (French: 1951; English:1955), *Malone Dies* (French: 1951; English: 1956), and *The Unnamable* (French: 1953; English: 1958).[17] While it is true that their importance in *Murphy* has often been noted, criticism has cast them to the wayside when approaching the latter novels of the trilogy, usually opting to see these works as modernist or postmodernist explorations of what are presented as universal problems of language or aesthetic expression. In this chapter, I will argue that while these later novels undoubtedly do explore linguistic and aesthetic problems, they do so in a way that implicates both capitalist labor logics and even the particular colonial history of Ireland itself in the emergence of such problems for Beckett himself.

While idleness in *Murphy* has been addressed by critics such as Gregory Dobbins, Robert Kiely, and Lin Lidan, discussion has largely been limited to its economic sense, Murphy's idleness most commonly being read as a rejection of or sign of incompatibility with capitalism's work ethic. Under capitalist ideologies of work—by which I mean the Protestant work-ethic as well as its later secular manifestations that to Max Weber were

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[17] While idleness features prominently in Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in 1932, it was not published until 1992 (three years after Beckett's death) and so was not regarded by Beckett himself in similar terms to his published work beginning with *Murphy*.

Beckett wrote the novels of the trilogy in French and subsequently translated them into English. *Molloy* was translated together with Patrick Bowles, while *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* were translated by Beckett alone.

epitomized in the writings of Benjamin Franklin—an individual's dedication to labor registers their compatibility with modernity itself. This modern obligation to work is, as Weeks points out, "fundamental to the basic social contract; indeed, working is part of what is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary, and for that reason, is treated as a basic obligation of citizenship. … Work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects" (Weeks, 8). In Beckett's novels, this individual as political subject of the liberal imaginary undoubtedly comes under attack, often through the presentation of the refusal to work.

Still, these novels' critique of work exceeds this autonomous Marxist framework by engaging with labor and idleness from a metaphysical perspective and, I will suggest, by evoking shades of Irish history that suggest the stubborn persistence of an alternative understanding of these concepts in cultural memory. Furthermore, I want to draw attention to the ways that this geopolitics of labor and idleness in Beckett's novels bears on the supposedly universal aesthetic problems of the placeless modern subject that the novels of the trilogy are widely acknowledged to demonstrate. The importance of idleness and labor in these novels has been underacknowledged in part because insufficient critical attention has been paid to the ways that these concepts exert increasing pressure on the texts at the level of narrative form and are ultimately inextricable from the well-known aesthetic problems of expression that increasingly emerge in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. By continuously pointing to their own production processes in ways that tie the literary "work" to the *alienating* labor of its

creation, I suggest, Beckett's novels implicate (the work of?) aesthetics in the same type of capitalist subject formation that has been ascribed to wage labor. Rather than prioritizing an understanding of idleness that is defined in relation to capitalism, then, I suggest that we approach idleness more broadly to see how toil and rest persist as recurrent themes with which Beckett engages on multiple referential levels: economic, metaphysical, and aesthetic.

Not only is the modernist problem of expression that is widely acknowledged to be central to Beckett's work starting with *Molloy* inseparable from its engagement with labor and idleness, but *Murphy*—which offers a much more explicit critique of the conceptualization of these states within a capitalist economy—exhibits the later novels' investigations into these topics in nascent form. This chapter intervenes in Beckett criticism by suggesting a degree of continuity between *Murphy* and the later novels of the trilogy—a continuity suggested by Beckett himself in many of his letters through his references to his work from *Murphy* to *The Unnamable* as a "series." Beginning with *Murphy*, I suggest that the wry metacommentary and remarkable diction that give the novel its distinctive narrative texture and tone emerge from a diegetic indifference that figures the act of narration itself as a tedious but necessary task. In drawing attention to the labor of narrative production, *Murphy* anticipates the more experimental forms that Beckett will develop in his later trilogy, where narration's figuration as a "task" is maintained and becomes an increasingly dominant concern. Here, literary production and wage labor are formally aligned through the articulation of the alienation inherent to both in terms of a "forced relation."

Meanwhile, direct and indirect references to Ireland throughout the supposedly placeless novels of the trilogy bring the nation's particular colonial history to bear on their figuration of labor and idleness. By raising the importance of Irish references in relation to idleness and labor in these novels, this chapter intervenes in Beckett criticism in a second way: by addressing what Emilie Morin has called "the conceptual split between understandings of Beckett as an Irish writer burdened by his Protestant heritage and as a placeless modernist/postmodernist whose work transcends national boundaries" (Morin, 5). The latter was the dominant (and only) paradigm starting in the 1960s, when, as John P. Harrington notes, criticism "almost invariably adumbrated a Beckett… whose salience is the construction of elevating artistic images out of elemental and so universal materials" (Harrington, 3). Ronan McDonald has written of this critical tendency that "the importance of history and politics, the contextual concerns of Beckett's cultural moment, are underplayed in the emphasis on absolute, transcendent articulations of the human plight or, more recently, in the emphasis on postmodern self-referentiality. History is seen simply as a pretext for these concerns" (McDonald, 141). The "Irish inflection in Beckett's work," meanwhile, is viewed as "simply a residue of a provincial world that he has happily transcended; at best, it is a quaint background colouring to set off a vision of the human condition that is trans-historical, too big to be contained within the boundaries of one nation, of one historical period" (McDonald, 141). Ignoring the presence of Ireland in Beckett's work is to ignore a particularly rich field of reference and leads to a false image in which Beckett and his texts expunge the particular in their elevation of the universal, a supposition that his texts defy over and over again.

Of course, on the other hand, asserting an “Irish Beckett” runs the risk of brushing under the rug his work’s prolific engagement with material such as continental philosophy that exceeds Ireland as an exclusive frame of reference and drastically oversimplifying Beckett’s complex relationship to Ireland and Irish identity. My own readings of Beckett’s novels, which have emerged out of a careful attention to the complexity of his highly complex and often contradictory subject position, align with a more recently emerging scholarly perspective shared by critics such as Emilie Morin, David Lloyd, and Ronan McDonald, who instead of attempting to locate the significance of Beckett’s work on one side of this binary or the other—either in its Irish reference at the expense of its cosmopolitanism or in its universal humanism at the expense of its Irish particularity—have in various ways shown how both the universal and the particular are essential to his aesthetic project, which emerges most fundamentally out of the irreducibility of the one to the other and the irresolvable tension between them, oftentimes taking the form of a constant movement between the two.

Such a critical perspective parallels to a certain degree what Marjorie Howes and Derek Attridge have referred to as the “semicolonial” understanding of Joyce, signaling their sense of a “partial fit” between the disciplinary field of postcolonial studies and Joyce’s writing: “Rather than claiming that the issues raised and models offered by postcolonial studies can illuminate every element of Joyce’s works or supersede other interpretive or theoretical frameworks, we believe that it is precisely from the limited compatibility between them that the most interesting lessons can be drawn—for both readers of Joyce and theorists of colonialism” (Howes and Attridge, 3). They note that

Ireland is "a country whose status *vis-á-vis* the imperial power, although it can be illuminated by the colonial model, cannot be understood straightforwardly in its terms" (Howes and Attridge, 4) They note too "the way in which Joyce's encyclopedic appropriations of the material and textual worlds around him exceeded the boundaries of Ireland" and "the importance of historical factors other than imperialism in shaping his literary production" (Howes and Attridge, 4). Much the same can be said of Beckett and his writing. My own perspective differs somewhat, though, in that I examine the partial fit not between Beckett's writing and postcolonial studies, but between Beckett's writing and decolonial thinking. Insofar as this fit remains only partial—in spite of the decolonial energy of much of his writing, his very subject position (as I think his writing shows) forecloses the possibility of delinking entirely from the modern/colonial imaginary—my readings of his novels illuminate what might be called a "semi-decolonial" Beckett, in which idleness and labor emerge as a thematic crossroads or point of overlap between the particularity of Ireland and Irish history as a field of reference—evoking modernity, imperial state power and the Protestant work ethic—and the abstract referential fields of metaphysics and aesthetics. This shifting between different levels of referentiality—economic, aesthetic, geopolitical—can be disorienting if one is attempting to logically decode the text in order to ascribe to it a specific meaning. But as Beckett himself wrote, "My writing is pre-logical writing. I don't ask people to understand it logically, only to accept it." He constellates his material in such a way that the possibilities of reference and association are abundant, yet rarely fixable or definitive. In this way, the "Irish" Beckett and the placeless, universal Beckett can be neither amalgamated nor disentangled.

### **Idleness, Labor, and Capitalism in *Murphy***

Set mostly in London, *Murphy* is in some sense a novel of postcolonial migration. Murphy, who had been in a relationship with Miss Counihan in Dublin, has ostensibly "torn himself away to set up for his princess, in some less desolate quarter of the globe, a habitation meet for her" (*Murphy*, 32). Neary, an associate of Murphy's who has fled Cork (and Miss Dwyer) for Dublin, attempts to gain the affection of Miss Counihan, who, he rightly believes, has in fact been abandoned by Murphy. He shares with her the news that Murphy has been seen in London. London is for Miss Counihan "The Mecca of every young aspirant to fiscal distinction," where she imagines Murphy to be "steadily amassing a large fortune so that she might not be without any of the little luxuries to which she was accustomed" (*Murphy*, 33). Murphy, meanwhile, who has otherwise been living a socially isolated and solipsistic life in London, has managed to fall in love with Celia, a prostitute who immigrated from Ireland at the age of four. The plot of the novel then follows on the one hand the attempts of Neary and Miss Counihan (joined also by Wylie and Cooper) to track down Murphy in London, and on the other Murphy's absurd attempts to reconcile his solipsistic social isolation with his love for Celia. With no money and no job, Murphy had been sustaining the former thanks to an understanding with his landlady whereby she would send an inflated rent bill to his uncle and hand over the difference ("less a reasonable commission"). While this arrangement had enabled Murphy "to consume away at pretty well his own gait," it "was inadequate for a domestic establishment, no matter how frugal" (*Murphy*, 12).

Gregory Dobbins has situated idleness in *Murphy* within the context of Irish modernism, where its representation, he suggests, "engages with matters having to do with nationality and decolonization" (Dobbins, 25). Noting how idleness takes on a particular historical significance in an Irish context as one of the many colonial stereotypes of the Irish that was used in British Imperial discourse to justify opposition to Home Rule (self-government within the United Kingdom), Dobbins argues that the representation of idleness in Irish modernism functions differently than it does in the work of other modernist writers. In Matthew Arnold's "On the Study of Celtic Literature," for instance, "the indolence of the Celt required the countering discipline of the Anglo-Saxon" (Dobbins, 18). Travel writing from throughout Ireland's colonial history abounds with descriptions of what seemed to be an Irish proclivity for the unproductive use of time, beholding with melancholy "such numbers of boys and girls, as are seen in most parts of Ireland, idling away their time in barren amusements, ignorant of any business by which they might support themselves," or lamenting that Irish peasants were "extremely obliging and civil, placing, alas! far too little value on their time. But it is common to all Ireland; except, perhaps in the North, where the folk have some of the notions of their neighbors the Scotch… that *time is wealth*" (qtd. in Williams, 118; 116).

With mainstream nationalism as well as the greater part of the Celtic Revival echoing its demonization in colonial discourse, the representation of idleness in Irish modernism functioned as "a form of dissent from the values of the Revival—and later, the post-colonial state" (Dobbins, 25). While I agree with much of what Dobbins has to

say about *Murphy* and its position in relation to the Revival (a movement of which it, like Beckett's other writings of the time, is explicitly critical), my foregrounding of the reimagining of idleness and labor in Beckett's fiction actually suggests not the Revival as the Irish literary movement to which his works are most fundamentally opposed, but rather the earlier tradition of improvement literature. As Helen O'Connell writes of Mary Leadbeater's *Cottage Dialogues* (1811):

> An emphasis on hard work is echoed throughout… in fact, there is no room for idleness (or idle reflection) and leisure time is only usefully spent in the reading of instructional literature or engaging in some "light" work, such as "straw-plait." The necessity of combining pleasure and utility is always stressed: one character glances out the window at her garden as she sews, thus keeping her hands busy while enjoying the flowers outside. It would appear, then, that all (aesthetic) pleasure has to be fully grounded in material, physical experience, united with the raw world of work rather than separated from it. (O'Connell, 32)

Improvement literature was itself a response to traditional forms of Irish storytelling, which were not well suited to the temporality of modernization. As O'Connell explains, "the traditional oral story recounted at the cottage fireside was prolonged, drawn out, and constructed to fill the ample time of the pre-modern. The supposedly undisciplined, digressive quality of these stories could not be facilitated within the context of a modernizing economy" (O'Connell, 34). Improvement literature:

> … educated readers in the economics of time and cautioned that the leisureliness of a pre-modern economy had to be replaced with the relentless activity of improvement. … Rural impoverishment was largely attributed to the idleness of the poor (and landowners) rather than to the economic mismanagement of the government. Hence, improvement created busy, industrious peasants who plan their days in meticulous detail and are receptive to change and progress. These improved peasants are liberated from the hungry, struggling past of wakes and oral storytelling into economic prosperity, information, and technology. (O'Connell, 36)

While improvement literature may not have been as effectual in transforming the rural poor as its writers had hoped, its rhetoric and ideology, which, for instance in Martin Doyle's *Hints for the Small Farmers of Ireland* (1830), asserts upon observing the peasantry's "idle hands" that they deserved "to be poor and miserable," would find new use not as suggestion for improvement but as justification for the sweeping agricultural reforms and concomitant social transformations imposed by the British government in the wake of the catastrophic famine that struck Ireland from 1845 to 1849.

While British settler colonialism had driven the Irish poor from the more fertile lands to the bogs and mountainsides, they were able to develop a "sophisticated and ecologically inventive means of survival" based on cultivation of the potato, which was well-suited to growth on poor and marginal land (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000*, 19). As David Lloyd has written, this system enabled a "moral economy" that is reflected in the Irish proverbs and laments for the passing of the potato: "If we had potatoes and turf, we could take life easy"; "The potato was good and generous, leaving plenty to share among God's poor; and every stranger who passed the way had a week's lodging and shelter from the elements..." (qtd. in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 228). According to Lloyd, "Both the existence of the population and its subsistence, miserable as it was, outside the laws of capitalist economy posed a theoretical problem for political economy" ("The Political Economy of the Potato," 31). "The problem that the Irish pose to political economy is that they represent a human society that defies the forms of subjectification it assumes to be universal; its response is to produce a discourse

of the non-human predicated on the incapacity to labor and the requirement of what is to be an ultimately humanizing discipline" (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 324).

For instance, Charles Trevelyan, the British Treasury Secretary in charge of Famine relief, describes in "The Irish Crisis" (1848) the supposedly detrimental effects that the "potato system" has upon society due to its obviation of wage labor and the leisure that it provides:

> The relations of employer and employed, which knit together the framework of society, and establish a mutual dependence and good-will, have no existence in the potato system. … A fortnight for planting, a week or ten days for digging, and another fortnight for turf-cutting, suffice for his subsistence; and during the rest of the year he is at leisure to follow his own inclinations, without even the safeguard of those intellectual tastes and legitimate objects of ambition which only imperfectly obviate the evils of leisure in the higher ranks of society. (qtd. in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000*, 38)

After posing the question of how the Irish population, which had been subsisting on potatoes until the Famine struck, could now support themselves, Trevelyan writes, "The obvious answer is, by growing something else" (qtd. in "The Political Economy of the Potato, 314). This, however, is not possible, since "the small patches of land which maintained a family when laid down to potatoes, are insufficient for the purpose when laid down to corn or any other kind of produce; and corn cultivation requires capital and skill, and combined labour, which the cottier and conacre tenants do not possess (qtd. in "The Political Economy of the Potato, 314). He then comes to the conclusion that, "The position occupied by these classes is no longer tenable, and it is necessary for them to live by the wages of their labour" (qtd. in "The Political Economy of the Potato, 314).

Beckett was writing long after these events, and he was notoriously critical of the antiquarianism of the Celtic Revival, writing in his early essay "Recent Irish Poetry," for instance, that there were no "vehicles of communication" with the past. And yet *Murphy* stages a conflict between that same ideology of capitalist political economy and a subject inassimilable to its supposedly universal laws, approaching head-on the supposed necessity asserted by Trevelyan that one live "by the wages of their labour."

Critical attention to Murphy's idleness and the novel's critical representation of capitalism has mostly presented these aspects of the novel as a response to and a rejection of the Protestant work-ethic, which, as Declan Kiberd has noted, "was a defining feature of the Anglo-Irish upper middle class" out of which Beckett emerged (Kiberd, 456). Robert Kiely, for instance, suggests that the novel "… is first and foremost a critique of the work ethic and the postwar economic recovery in London" (Kiely, 62). Lin Lidan similarly suggests that Murphy is portrayed as "a subversive idealist resolved to forswear the conventional Protestant ethic" (Lidan, 250). I agree with much of this criticism, as *Murphy* undoubtedly stages a conflict between Murphy and the capitalist economy of London in which the majority of the novel takes place.

The inescapable dominance of capitalist political economy as ideology is foregrounded in the novel, which shows it to structure virtually every aspect of life in London. The degree to which human relations are perceived through the lens of financial transaction is perhaps most evident in Miss Carriage's reaction to her bleeding and dying tenant. When she enters his room to find the gruesome scene of his body in "meanders of blood," his throat cut, and a razor in hand, she is sure to call the police rather than a

doctor so as to avoid being sent a bill. She calls the police, who then send for a doctor, who then sends for an ambulance, and the tenant dies on the way to the hospital. The narrator's subsequent remarks praise in lively tone Miss Carriage's financial foresight. She was "not a penny out of pocket, not one penny. The police, not she, had called the doctor, therefore his fee was on them. The bloody dilapidation of her lovely lino was amply covered by the month's advance rent paid by the old boy the day before. She had carried off the whole affair in splendid style" (*Murphy*, 83).

From the first page of *Murphy*, rationalized temporality is intertwined with market exchange: "Somewhere a cuckoo-clock, having struck between twenty and thirty, became the echo of a street-cry, which now entering the mew gave *Quid pro quo! Quid pro quo!* directly" (*Murphy*, 1). Murphy's aversion to these figures is immediately established, along with his feeling of complete alienation in relation to the world that they represent: "These were the sights and sounds that he did not like. They detained him in the world to which they belonged, but not he, as he fondly hoped" (*Murphy*, 1-2). As such, he fiercely rejects the material world and the materialism of the world of capitalism, and he displays a keen awareness of and disgust at the exploitation and alienation inherent to wage labor in a capitalist economy. Channeling Murphy's own thoughts, the narrator remarks, "For what was all working for a living but a procuring and a pimping for the money-bags, one's lecherous tyrants the money-bags, so that they might breed" (*Murphy*, 46).

Murphy's intimate understanding of the profit motive is evinced in this daily lunch ritual, an elaborate swindle and a "triumph of tactics" against "a colossal league of plutomanic caterers, highly endowed with the ruthless cunning of the sane" (*Murphy*, 49-

50). By drinking down the tea in a single gulp and complaining that it had been Indian and not Chinese, he obtains a refill. The waitress, Vera, does not hesitate to oblige, because, as the narrator explains, "She was a willing little bit of sweated labour, incapable of betraying the slogan of her slavers, that since the customer or sucker was paying for his gutrot ten times what it cost to produce and five times what it cost to fling in his face, it was only reasonable to defer to his complaints up to but not exceeding fifty percent of his exploitation" (*Murphy*, 50). He then drinks "not more than a third" and asks for more hot water under the ruse that there had been too much "cowjuice." By this method, we are told, "Murphy defrauded a vested interest every day for his lunch, to the honourable extent of paying for one cup of tea and consuming 1.83 cups approximately" (*Murphy*, 51). While Murphy's defrauding may be regarded in some sense as an act of cunning resistance, it is a "triumph of tactics" taking place entirely within capitalism as a field of battle.

Yet the novel linguistically shows Murphy's world to be inextricable from that of capitalist exchange and rationalization from page one, when the rocking chair in which Murphy sits is described using language—"guaranteed not to crack, warp, shrink, corrode, or creak at night"—inflected by advertising (*Murphy*, 1). Similarly, when he orders his cup of tea and packet of assorted biscuits, the nutritional value typically connoted by the phrase "perfectly balanced meal" is supplanted by the monetary: "Twopence the tea, twopence the biscuits, a perfectly balanced meal" (*Murphy*, 49). The language of *Murphy*, in other words, suggests that tactical resistance can never extricate one completely from capitalist ideology.

While I think much of the criticism that highlights Murphy's idleness in relation to capitalism is correct and that such attention is certainly warranted, as Murphy is indeed incompatible with a capitalist society, and the text does make explicit the inherently alienating and exploitative nature of labor under capitalism, the novel's complex engagement with idleness is not limited to its economic critique.[18] As Murphy himself says to Celia with regard to his state of unemployment, "it was not altogether a question of economy. There were metaphysical considerations, in whose gloom it appeared that the night had come in which no Murphy could work" (*Murphy*, 13). No clear explanation of these "metaphysical considerations" is offered, either to Celia or to the reader, beyond Murphy's obscure rhetorical questions: "Was Ixion under any contract to keep his wheel in nice running order? Had any provision been made for Tantalus to eat salt? Not that Murphy had ever heard of" (*Murphy*, 13). These questions suggest an analogous relationship between Murphy and these mythological figures subjected to eternal punishment and imply that life itself is for Murphy a state of unending suffering, with the further implication being that work serves either to exacerbate or maintain this state of suffering. From Murphy's metaphysical perspective, then, the problem of work is

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[18] The focus on Murphy's idleness as a form of resistance to a capitalist work-ethic can also lead to misguided readings in which Murphy is seen as "heroic" and Celia is cast in far too harsh a light. Consider for instance in contrast to Murphy's idleness Celia's response of swift assistance and care to seeing Murphy in a state of distress, having somehow turned upside down while tied to his chair: "Losing no time in idle speculation Celia undid the scarves and prised the chair off him with all possible speed. … she dragged him out of the corner, shovelled the rocking-chair under him, emptied him on to the bed, laid him our decently, covered him with a sheet and sat down beside him" (18-19).

actually secondary to the problem of life itself. Beckett's preoccupation with idleness and exertion, like Murphy's aversion to work, is as much metaphysical as it is economic, though he weaves these distinct realms together in his writing.

It is important to stress that while Beckett draws on philosophical thought in this way, it does not displace or occupy a position of dominance in relation to other fields of meaning. Beckett constantly interweaves and jumps between the specific and the abstract, the physical and the metaphysical, and his interest in philosophy should by no means be taken as an endorsement of its epistemological underpinnings. In fact, his interest in the writings of philosophers was often more attuned to the writing than to the philosophy. The language of Heidegger and Sartre was, he said, "too philosophical" for him (Cronin, 231). As Cronin has written, "In general too much has been made of Beckett's interest in philosophy and too little of his impatience with it" (Cronin, 231). With regard to those philosophers whose writing he was attracted to, it was again their use of language that appealed to Beckett, not their philosophy.

To view Beckett's writing as itself philosophical, then, misunderstands his relation to knowledge. He once said that if he could have expressed the subject of his novels in philosophic terms then he "wouldn't have had any reason to write them" (*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 217). "I am not a philosopher," he once said. 'One can only speak of what is in front of one and that is simply a mess" (Cronin, 231-232).

In writing *Murphy*, Beckett drew heavily on his philosophical reading, in particular of Arnold Geulinx and Arthur Schopenhauer, whose thoughts on "action and

movement" illuminate his explorations of idleness and labor in *Murphy* and his subsequent novels (Schopenhauer, 359). Schopenhauer writes that, as with "persistence," action and movement are not "freely chosen" (Schopenhauer, 359). Schopenhauer argues that, while "everyone would really like to rest," our desire continuously pushes us into action, while its fulfilment can only lead to its emergence in new forms, as its absence leaves us in a state of "boredom" that can only be tolerated for so long. "Want" and "boredom" are, in other words, "the whips that keep the top spinning" (Schopenhauer, 359). One conclusion that Schopenhauer draws from this bears particular relevance for Beckett's aesthetic theories, both as expressed in writings such as "Three Dialogues" and as explored in his later fiction, most conspicuously in the trilogy. Schopenhauer writes, "Therefore the whole and each individual bear the stamp of a forced condition. Since everyone is inwardly indolent and longs for rest, but must nevertheless go forward, he is like his planet, that does not fall into the sun only because a force driving it forward does not allow this to happen" (Schopenhauer, 359). While Beckett undoubtedly draws on Schopenhauer's writing, though, it would be a mistake to assume that Beckett himself assumes a philosophical perspective. In a 1930 letter to McGreevy, he writes that he has been reading Schopenhauer: "But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician. An intellectual justification of unhappiness—the greatest that has ever been attempted—is worth the examination of one who is interested in Leopardi & Proust rather than in Carducci & Barrès" (*Letters I*, 33). Upon returning to Schopenhauer years later, he writes again to McGreevy (September 21, 1937): "… it is a pleasure also to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet, with an

entire indifference to the apriori forms of verification. Although it is a fact that judged by them his generalisation shows fewer cracks than most generalisations" (*Letters I*, 550). Not only is Beckett drawn to Schopenhauer by the non-philosophical quality of his writing, he also suggests an aversion to the generalizations of philosophical thought, whose inherent "cracks" undercut its claim to universality. In a particularly relevant comment with regard to the relevance of philosophy to his work, he was quoted as insisting to Alan Schneider after noting "a wonderful sentence in St. Augustine," that he was "interested in the *shape* of ideas" (Cronin, 232; emphasis mine). Attention to Beckett's interest in the "shape" or form of ideas helps to illuminate the connections that his work weaves between idleness as an economic, philosophical, and aesthetic concept. Schopenhauer's "forced condition" in which desire, or the will, drives us to action but can never be fully satisfied insofar as its achievement only leads to its re-emergence in a new object, is formally analogous to Beckett's vision of the artist's simultaneous "obligation" and "inability" to express, and it is phrased in nearly identical terms in *Molloy*, in Moran's remark about "this relation that is forced upon me" (*Three Novels*, 131). Beckett's texts from *Murphy* through *The Unnamable* exhibit narration itself as the result of a "forced condition" in which the act or labor of narration is driven by some form of obligation, against which is a desire for what in the later texts, such as *The Unnamable*, is figured as "silence," the voice finally at rest. In this way, Beckett's novels increasingly adopt as a formal principle a narrative voice that, in the words of Schopenhauer, "longs for rest, but must nevertheless go forward."

A 1937 letter from Beckett to writer, critic, and childhood friend Mary Manning Howe is worth quoting at length, as in it he expresses his own penchant for idleness and aversion to work in terms quite similar to those of Murphy:

> I do nothing, with as little shame as satisfaction. It is the state that suits me best. I write the odd poem when it is there, that is the only thing worth doing. There is an ecstasy of accidia—willless in a grey tumult of idées obscures. There is an end to the temptation of light, its polite scorchings & consolations. It is good for children & insects. There is an end of making up one[']s mind, like a pound of tea, an end of patting the butter of consciousness into opinions. The real consciousness is the chaos, a grey commotion of mind, with no premises or conclusions or problems or solutions or cases or judgments. I lie for days on the floor, or in the woods, accompanied & unaccompanied, in a coenaesthesia of mind, a fulness of mental self-aesthesia that is entirely useless. The monad without the conflict, lightless & darkless. I used to pretend to work, I do so no longer. I used to dig about in the mental sand for the lugworms of likes & dislikes, I do so no longer. The lugworms of understanding. (*Letters, I*, 546; August 30, 1937)

Beckett's letter makes quite clear that idleness, or "accidia," bears a complex and mysterious attraction for Beckett, and he begins to reflect upon it and conceptualize it not negatively through the lens of capitalist economy as an absence of productive labor, but in positive terms as a state unto itself. Bearing this in mind, we should regard Murphy's idleness in terms of its resistance to capitalism, but not exclusively in these terms. While Murphy's retreat to the mind is ultimately lampooned in the text as a utopian failure, the pleasures described therein should be taken seriously as a reimagining of idleness that anticipates Beckett's preoccupation with this theme in his later work.

Idleness in Beckett's novels is subjected to a similar conceptual inversion whereby its economic sense of a lack of productivity is supplanted by a seemingly contradictory notion of absence as abundance. Beckett introduces one such inversion to

explain the unexpected pleasure of Murphy's senses "at peace": "Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real" (*Murphy*, 147-148). It is through this conceptual inversion that Beckett comes to reimagine idleness, not from an economic perspective as the absence of labor, but as a positive state unto itself. Similarly, wage labor is also subjected to a parallel conceptual inversion, as when the narrator remarks that Celia "could not go where livings were being made without feeling that they were being made away" (*Murphy*, 41). By playing with the phrases "make a living" and "make away," with the latter's meaning "to destroy," *Murphy* figures the notion of laboring for a wage as the destruction of life.[19]

## Idleness and Narrative

Beckett's letters to poet and friend Thomas McGreevy in the years 1935 and 1936 record the difficult process of composing *Murphy*. He writes in September, 1935, "I have been forcing myself to keep at the book, & it crawls forward. … It is poor stuff & I have

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[19] Adorno writes in *Aesthetic* Theory: "In Beckett the negative metaphysical content affects the content along with the form. The work does not, however, thereby become something simply incomprehensible; the well-founded refusal of its author to offer explanations for so-called symbols is faithful to an aesthetic tradition that has elsewhere been dismissed. A relation, not identity, operates between the negativity of the metaphysical content and the eclipsing of the aesthetic content. The metaphysical negation no longer permits an aesthetic form that would itself produce metaphysical affirmation; and yet this negation is nevertheless able to become aesthetic content and determine the form" (347-348).

no interest in it" (*Letters I*, 277; September 22, 1935). The following month, he writes, "I have been working hard at the book & it goes very slowly… only the labour of writing the remainder is left. There is little excitement attached to it, each chapter loses its colour & interest as soon as the next is begun" (*Letters I*, 283; October 8, 1935). In June, 1936, he writes upon finishing the novel, "I could do more work on it but do not intend to. All the more grievous losses have been cut. It has been hard work the past month & I am very tired, of it & words generally" (*Letters I*, 345; June 27, 1936).[20] Beckett's constant attention to his own writing process as labor, in particular labor that is tedious and alienating, seeps into the text itself, where it manifests in the narrator's own diegetic indifference. In this way, labor and idleness are explored at the level of form, where they are registered in a narrative process caught between the obligation of the former—where the production of narrative has its end in the achievement of expression—and the attraction of the latter in the form of a linguistic playfulness that is useless.

In this sense, I believe that John Bolin is correct to emphasize that the story of *Murphy* is "told" by the narrator, whom he describes as "the key figure in this book's ironic meta-fictional strategy" (Bolin, 45). However, his reading of the narrator as "a figure for the *novelist*" as "the final system-builder" who exerts absolute control over the novel's characters and events cannot account for the sense of begrudging obligation that often accompanies its narration or the linguistic techniques that I suggest emerge in

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[20] Though these letters reveal an antipathy towards the novel, *Murphy* would in fact become the first work that Beckett would not later disavow, and he would continue to reflect and remark upon it years later.

response to that forced relation between the narrator and text (Bolin 45, 48, 56). The nature of this relation is subtle, but attending to it helps to better elucidate the connections between *Murphy* and Beckett's subsequent novels, in which this relation of obligation exerts increasing pressure.

Murphy's narrator presents the events of the novel as deterministic and unavoidable—the story's predetermined end "degrades the way into a means" and renders the plot "a sceneless tedium" through which "all things hobble together" or "limp together" "for the only possible" (*Murphy*, 113, 135, 140). Narration takes on an image of a laborious task that must be performed, and the use of "tedium" is particularly notable here, as it will become a recurring descriptor for the narrative process in Beckett's later novels—particularly in *Malone Dies*, where the interjection "What tedium" becomes almost a refrain in its repeated interruption of the "stories." The narrator's task-like approach to the story emerges perhaps most strongly in its framing of section six: "It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression 'Murphy's mind' has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was—that would be an extravagance and an impertinence—but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be. Murphy's mind is after all the gravamen of these informations. A short section to itself at this stage will relieve us from the necessity of apologizing for it further" (*Murphy*, 65).[21] The section

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[21] In a legal context, "gravamen" refers to an essence or most serious part, or the grievance of a criminal charge, while "information" refers to a formal criminal charge

ends: “This painful duty having now been discharged, no further bulletins will be issued” (*Murphy*, 68).

I suggest that we read the narrator’s various linguistic quirks in light of and as responses to this relation. On the one hand, the narrator acts in accordance with its obligation to express, employing language in the process of narrative production as a means to a literal end, the story’s conclusion, the expression’s achievement. Echoing “the sense of time as money” that Murphy notes as being “highly prized in business circles,” this form of narration prioritizes expediency and efficiency in order to keep the narrative moving ahead as efficiently (and “rationally”) as possible (*Murphy*, 43). On the other hand, the tedium of narration pushes the narrator in the opposite direction. Echoing Murphy’s biblical invocation of the “hireling” who “fleeth because he is an hireling,” the narrator indulges in “idle” language in the form of jokes and puns that are diegetically “useless.”

The novel’s second section in particular plays out the narrator’s expedient and efficient narration, opposing it to Celia’s telling of how she came to be involved with Murphy to Mr. Kelly. The chapter begins, in fact, by introducing Celia not narratively but through a list of her physical features and measurements:

> Age. Unimportant.
> Head. Small and round.
> Eyes. Green.

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lodged by a prosecutor. In this sense the novel is a presentation of criminal charges of sorts, and Murphy’s mind is in violation of the law.

Complexion. White.
… (*Murphy*, 7)

The actual events of Celia's and Murphy's meeting and their early interaction are filtered through multiple levels of narration. Celia relays the story to Mr. Kelly, while also providing what seems to be Murphy's perspective on the events. (Celia is able to recount all this detail because, apparently, Murphy "tells [her] everything" (*Murphy*, 9).) Celia's telling, however, is refashioned by the narrator, who precedes it with the remark that, "Celia's account, expurgated, accelerated, improved and reduced, … gives the following" (*Murphy*, 8). This act of narrative compression and rationalization—the phrase "expurgated, accelerated, improved, and reduced" is repeated verbatim—is redeployed with Neary's account of why he left Cork for Dublin and with Cooper's account of locating and subsequently losing Murphy in London (*Murphy*, 30, 72). Echoing the apparent necessity of such compression and rationalization, Mr. Kelly interrupts Celia, objecting to the profusion of detail in her story and admonishing her to "be less beastly circumstantial. The junction for example of Edith Grove, Cremorne Road and Stadium Street, is indifferent to me. Get up to your man" (*Murphy*, 9). Again objecting to "All these demented particulars," he tells her to "Lay off them" and "Get up to your man" (*Murphy*, 9). I suggest that we read Mr. Kelly's objection to all of the "demented particulars" of Celia's narrative not only as an association of the profusion of circumstantial detail with madness or insanity. The etymological roots of the word "demented" suggest something as being separated from the mind, and in this way, these particulars are themselves "de-mented" in the sense that a certain form of mental labor

has not been applied to them—they have not been rationalized or organized into a coherent and digestible narrative. In this way, the "demented particulars" of Celia's narration anticipate the forms of Beckett's later writing. As Beckett himself once said, "My writing is pre-logical writing. I don't ask people to understand it logically, only to accept it" (qtd. in Knowlson and Knowlson, 109).

Against this expedient narration, the narrator's metacommentary often mocks the characters and what they say, as when the fundamentally redundant nature of Murphy's question "Yes or no?" is highlighted by the appendation of the phrase "The eternal tautology" (*Murphy*, 26). Or his (perhaps condescending) remark following the explanation of Murphy's lunchtime swindle: "Try it sometime, gentle skimmer" (*Murphy*, 51). Most interesting are the puns or linguistic jokes that result from what I call Beckett's technique of "insidious diction," the use of a common word not in its common sense, but in a sense suggested by a more literal translation of its etymological components. This technique serves no real purpose in terms of narrative production, and it can easily be a source of confusion for readers, as it leads to the use of common words in ways that make little or no sense syntactically or semantically. I derive the name of this technique from a particular instance of its use: When the narrator describes Murphy's adoration for riding the bus, it remarks, in what seems contextually to be the reason for this, that, "The deep oversprung seats were most insidious, especially forward" (*Murphy*, 57). Only when the Latin roots of "insidious" are taken literally does the word make any sense as a descriptor for the "deep oversprung seats" of the bus, which are neither treacherous nor cunning and cannot be said to be scheming against Murphy in any way. Etymologically, though, the

Latinate "*in*" (meaning "on") combines with *sedere*, "sit," to give a meaning something akin to, "The deep oversprung seats were well suited for sitting on." Used in this way, words themselves are insidious, "proceeding or operating secretly or subtly so as not to excite suspicion," while "lying in wait or seeking to entrap or ensnare" the reader (OED). Yet what appears to be nonsense turns out in fact to be not only mundane but even tautological. Similarly, in relaying Celia's and Murphy's disagreement over his unemployment, the narrator remarks, "He begged her to believe him when he said he could not earn. … He begged her to believe that he was a chronic emeritus" (*Murphy*, 13). While Murphy's state of unemployment is to a degree consonant with the idea of "one who has retired or been discharged from active service or occupation," it does not sit well with the word's honorific connotations (OED). According to *Merriam-Webster*, "Emeritus, which is the Latin past participle of the verb *emereri*, meaning 'to serve out one's term,' was originally used to describe soldiers who had completed their duty." This sense of completion, though, sits awkwardly with the qualifier "chronic." But if we delve deeper into the word's etymology, we find that *emereri* "is from the prefix e-, meaning 'out,' and merēre, meaning 'to earn, deserve, or serve.' The OED gives as further senses of the prefix e- (short for ex-) "to remove, expel, or relieve from" as well as "to deprive of." In other words, by referring to himself as a "chronic emeritus," Murphy (or the narrator) is restating precisely what has just been said—that Murphy "could not earn" (*Murphy*, 13).

The point of this insidious diction is precisely that it is pointless. Unlike with the jargon and neologisms that serve to expedite the task of narration, these jokes and puns

are not *practical* in any narrative way; they do not drive forward the plot, nor are they revelatory in any way about its characters. Their uselessness is moreover heightened by the banality and tautological nature of what their investigation reveals, while their relative opacity for most readers (readers whose presence the narrator explicitly acknowledges several times) suggests that they occupy a place in the text much like that of Murphy's joke about "the stout porter bitter": "This was a joke that did not amuse Celia, at the best of times and places it could not have amused her. That did not matter. So far from being adapted to her, it was not addressed to her. It amused Murphy, that was all that mattered" (*Murphy*, 85). In other words, these jokes and puns introduce a different relationship between the narrator and the text, one that runs contrary to the overarching diegetic task which it is obliged to carry out.

## Labor and Idleness in the Trilogy

If idleness and labor bear on narrative form in *Murphy* in a way that suggests a forced relation between narrator and text, this relation becomes an overt and central concern of Beckett's later trilogy of novels, *Molloy* (1955), *Malone Dies* (1956), and *The Unnamable* (1958). These novels are perhaps most recognized for their exploration of Beckett's aphasic theme, stated variously throughout his work but in "Three Dialogues" as: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" ("Three Dialogues," 103). And while it is certainly true that this aesthetic predicament was a primary driving force of Beckett's writing from the

trilogy onwards, the consistent entanglement of this predicament with idleness and labor as thematic concepts deserves notice. Attention to this entanglement reveals idleness and labor to be concepts of much greater importance to Beckett's work than criticism has generally acknowledged. It also reveals a line of continuity between *Murphy* and these later novels, which, despite the interconnection suggested by Beckett's own conceptualization of his work from *Murphy* to *The Unnamable* as a "series," are generally regarded disparately.[22]

In the trilogy, the "forced relation" of *Murphy* exerts increasingly greater pressure on narrative form. The resulting "de-composition" of form, typically interpreted as a

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[22] Beckett's conception of these novels as a series was retroactive—as Cronin notes, he had "no notion of this form of continuance" when writing *Murphy* (Cronin, 384). But he would often think back to this early novel, regarding it more as an open exploration of ideas than a finished product with a concrete and definitive meaning. (In a letter to Mary Manning Howe dated January 18, 1937, he wrote that he had found "new planes of justification," for a certain aspect of the novel and that, "If I am not careful I shall become clear as to what I have written" (I, 422).)

The first reference to the novels as a series in his letters appears in 1948, when, after having begun work on *Malone muert* (and not yet having conceived of *The Unnamable*) he writes to McGreevy, "Molloy is a long book, the second last of the series begun with Murphy, if it can be said to be a series" (4 January, 1948; II, 71). In a letter to George Reavey dated July 8, 1948, he is more explicit about what constitutes the series when he refers to *Malone muert* as "the last I hope of the series Murphy, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, not to mention the 4 Nouvelles ["Premier amour," "L'expulsé," "Le Calmant," and "La Fin"] & Eleuthéria" (II, 80). He would later remark of the trilogy in a letter to Peter Suhrkamp, its German publisher, that "one might locate the point of departure in *Murphy*" (January 12, 1954; II, 442). Beckett's characteristic tentativeness should be noted and taken to indicate the idea of the series not as being in any way definitive but rather as a way of looking at the texts. However, while, as Cronin notes, "Criticism has on the whole rightly decided to ignore these attempts to bring *Murphy* into the scheme," Beckett's repeated reference to these works as a series suggests that he had come to see *Murphy* in this way, as a "point of departure," and certainly not, as many critics have suggested, as a "sole exercise, and an anomalous one" (Cronin, 384; Kenner, *Samuel Beckett*, 75-76; qtd. in Bolin, 45).

response purely to problems of language and signification—and indicative of the problem of the modern artist—responds to the increasingly unavoidable entanglement of literary creation with the alienated labor of production under capitalism. But while the act of literary creation itself is infected by capitalism and the Protestant work ethic, the trilogy also attempts to de-link from these concepts by re-imagining idleness through a conceptual inversion whereby it is defined not in terms of negation or opposition but as a positive state in and of itself. While *Murphy* does offer glimpses of such inversion, it is much more prominent in the trilogy, where it is encapsulated in Moran's description of his own state of being as "powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more" (*Three Novels*, 161). Finally, these novels' abundant references, both direct and indirect, to Ireland and its history make available a geopolitical reading of its engagement with idleness at the levels of both content and form.

The forced relation between narrator and text that is suggested by the narrator's "painful duty" in *Murphy* becomes an overt and central concern in the novels of the trilogy. An early exploration of this relation can be found in Molloy's shifting comments regarding his own speech. He posits that, "Saying is inventing," only to immediately reject the notion: "Wrong, very rightly wrong" (*Three Novels*, 32). He then describes his speech, in what will be a recurring thematic concept throughout the trilogy, as a "pensum": "You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten" (*Three Novels*, 32). As a form of writing punishment given at school, "pensum" suggests an absence of originality in the writer or speaker—both in the sense

of a lack of creativity and in that the language has its point of origin outside the writer or speaker—and gives imaginative form to the "obligation" that Beckett identifies with aesthetic expression. The term is also notable in that, as C.J. Ackerley points out, it was used by Flaubert to describe "the chore of writing *Madame Bovary*" and by Schopenhauer in his description of life itself as "a Pensum of work" (qtd. in Ackerley, 114).

The choice of "inventing" as the oppositional term in the above quotation from *Molloy* is also of particular note due to its highly specific though now obsolete use in referring to literary or artistic composition. The OED gives this definition as, "To compose as a work of imagination or literary art; to treat in the way of literary or artistic composition." Though now listed as obsolete, this particular use would not have been obscure to Beckett, used as it was by Shakespeare and in John Dryden's translation of *The Aeneid*, where it explicitly casts literary creation as productive labor: "A Poet is a Maker, as the word signifies: And who cannot make, that is, invent, hath his Name for nothing" (qtd. in OED). Such a connection between aesthetics and economics is noted by Theodor Adorno, who writes in *Aesthetic Theory* that, "In bourgeois society artists, like all who are intellectually productive, are compelled to keep at it once they have taken on the trade name of artist. Superannuated expressionists not unwillingly chose marketably promising themes. The lack of any immanent necessity for production, coupled with the

concurrent economic compulsion to continue, is apparent in the product as its objective insignificance" (Adorno, 229).[23]

Moran explicitly refers to his writing in terms of "this relation that is forced upon me," and the text brings the aesthetic problem of the production of narrative within such a relation into constellation with the alienation of labor in economic relations through Moran's identification of the source of this forced relation as his "employer" (*Three Novels*, 131). This relation is quickly complicated, though, by the introduction of a "voice," another one of the trilogy's recurring thematic concepts: "the voice I listen to… is within me and exhorts me to continue to the end the faithful servant I have always been, of a cause that is not mine, and patiently fulfil in all its bitterness my calamitous part, as it was my will, when I had a will, that others should. And this with hatred in my heart, and scorn, of my master and his designs" (*Three Novels*, 131-132). The shifts from "employer" to "voice" to "master" are characteristic of the way that the trilogy moves between related thematic concepts. As with the economic and metaphysical in *Murphy*, none of these provides a master key for interpreting the texts. Instead, their correlation suggests undefined affinities between their fields of reference. What remains consistent in these shifts is the form of relation: from "this relation that is forced upon me" to "faithful

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[23] Elsewhere in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes, "the conclusion of Beckett's *The Unnamable*, condenses this antinomy to its essence: that externally art appears impossible while immanently it must be pursued. What is new is that art must incorporate its own decline; as the critique of the spirit of domination it is the spirit that is able to turn against itself. The self-reflection of art penetrates to its own foundation and concretizes itself in it" (320).

servant" of "a cause that is not mine," Moran's writing is an alienated product of obligation.

The narrators of the trilogy respond to this alienation of forced relation with various modes of "de-composition." Unlike with the narrator of *Murphy*, narration in the trilogy is very much tied to the body that produces it (however grotesque or ambiguous that body may be). In what will become a recurring motif of blurring the line between and defamiliarizing the concepts of life and death, Molloy, remarks that he has "ceased to live" (*Three Novels*, 25). He reflects upon the "long confused emotion" that he understands to have been his life in what he calls the "tranquillity of decomposition" (*Three Novels*, 25). I suggest that we understand this phrase on both a bodily and a narrative level. Narratively, "de-composition" might be understood as an undoing or reversing of "composition," considered here with all of the etymological weight of "putting together" as well as its suggestion of the labor of construction. De-composition as a narrative process pushes back against the assimilative and cohering labor of composition, sundering linear narrative into a disjointed textual artifact. Or as Malone says of his "notes," they have "a curious tendency… to annihilate all they purport to record" (*Three Novels*, 259).

One way in which the text engages in de-composition can be understood as a return of the "demented particulars" of Celia's narrative in section two of *Murphy*. When it comes to the choice between "the things not worth mentioning and those even less so," Molloy expresses a preference for the latter: "That my knees are enormous, that I still get up from time to time, there are things that do not seem at first sight to signify anything in

particular. I record them all the more willingly" (*Three Novels*, 62). This recording of seemingly insignificant detail resonates with the "demented particulars" of Celia's narrative in section two of *Murphy*, suggesting a connection between the form of narration that was silenced in *Murphy* by its narrator and that which is given voice in *Molloy*. Molloy's subsequent aside places such details in opposition to narrative movement, the notion of speed suggesting progress toward an end: "I apologize for these details, in a moment we'll go faster, much faster. And then perhaps relapse again into a wealth of filthy circumstance. But which in its turn again will give way to vast frescoes, dashed off with loathing" (*Three Novels*, 63). Malone likewise positions circumstantial detail in opposition to narrative speed: "I told myself too that I must make better speed. True lives do not tolerate this excess of circumstance" (*Three Novels*, 197).

The de-composition of narrative also takes the form of what I will refer to as "narrative abrogation," an evasion or deferral of the obligation to express in which the narrator or speaker raises a topic or theme only to refrain from pursuing it. Molloy exhibits this recurring tendency, for instance, after mentioning Lousse's house—"Must I describe it? I don't think so. I won't, that's all I know, for the moment"—and in the comments, "Now as to telling you why I stayed a good while with Lousse, no, I cannot. That is to say I could I suppose, if I took the trouble. But why should I?" (*Three Novels*, 35, 50).

Such moments of narrative abrogation can be viewed as functioning analogously to the insidious diction of *Murphy* in that it is "idle" in relation to the labor of narrative production and does not lead toward "achievement." Likewise, they respond to the

“weariness” or “tedium” inherent in the production of narrative of forced relation, as Molloy makes clear: “And as to saying what became of me, and where I went, in the months and perhaps the years that followed, no. For I weary of these inventions and others beckon to me. But in order to blacken a few more pages may I say I spent some time at the seaside, without incident” (*Three Novels*, 68). Out of the conflicting forces of Molloy’s weariness and his obligation to express, an image of narration as alienated labor emerges in the “blacken[ing]” of “a few more pages.” Molloy de-composes narrative through his idle indifference to the task of expression to which he is obligated, or “bound”: “I might doubtless have expressed otherwise and better, if I had gone to the trouble. And so I shall perhaps some day when I have less horror of trouble than today. But I think not” (*Three Novels*, 88).

Moran, who regards his life as an “inenarrable contraption,” continues this pattern of narrative abrogation in Part II of the novel: “I have no intention,” he says, “of relating the various adventures which befell us, me and my son, together and singly, before we came to the Molloy country” (*Three Novels*, 114; 131). And immediately after voicing his intention to divulge “the source of Ballyba’s prosperity,” he decides instead to withhold this information: “I’ll tell you. No, I’ll tell you nothing. Nothing” (*Three Novels*, 133). He even explicitly invokes “literature” in opposition to his own writing, marked as it is by his inveterate aversion to the production of narrative: “I am sorry I cannot indicate more clearly how this result was obtained, it would have been something worth reading. But it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature” (*Three Novels*, 151). And later in reference to his “intestinal affections,” “I would have described

them once, not now, I am sorry, it would have been worth reading" (*Three Novels*, 166). Mirroring Molloy's reference to his "weariness," Moran notes that "All is tedious, in this relation that is forced upon me" (*Three Novels*, 131). Malone interrupts his own "stories"—so often that it becomes a sort of refrain within the text—with "What tedium." Reflecting upon his own metacommentary, he remarks, "I wonder why I speak of all this. Ah yes, to relieve the tedium" (*Three Novels*, 195).

In *The Unnamable*, the language of narration as pensum reemerges and is further explored in opposition to "silence" as freedom from its inherent obligation: "My speech-parched voice at rest would fill with spittle, I'd let it flow over and over, happy at last, dribbling with life, my pensum ended, in the silence. … Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation" (*Three Novels*, 310). And while the subsequent demand to "Squeeze, squeeze, not too hard, but squeeze a little longer" may seem enigmatic, it can be read as an oblique demand to "express," given that the more literal meaning of "express" is "to press, squeeze, or wring out" (OED). Read in this way, the text's suggestion that this demand "is perhaps about you, and your goal at hand" posits "expression" itself, as Beckett does in "Three Dialogues," as the impossible task to which the voice is bound (*Three Novels*, 310).

In a somewhat more direct way, *The Unnamable* approaches this forced relation in its articulation of "a task to be performed, before one can be at rest": "Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself. Strange hope, turned towards silence and peace" (*Three Novels*, 311). The figuration of this relation in *The Unnamable*, as it is throughout

the trilogy, is ever-shifting, and while the voice of the text will declare "All this business of a labour to accomplish… of an imposed task" to be "All lies," the removal of the subject who imposes the task does not eliminate the obligation along with it: "I have to speak… No one compels me to, there is no one, it's an accident, a fact. Nothing can ever exempt me from it…" (*Three Novels*, 314). And it is not long before the voice reiterates the relation as one imposed, even drawing upon a language of debt and exploitation that constellates the production of language once again with alienated labor: beyond the voice's "masters" is "that other who will not give me quittance[24] until they have abandoned me as inutilizable and restored me to myself" (*Three Novels*, 331).

Finally, while the formal de-composition of the novels of the trilogy registers the "forced relation" between the producer of narrative and the text, it also challenges the aesthetic expectations of literature, specifically the association of expression with "achievement." In an interview with Israel Shenker, Beckett remarked, "There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is achievement—must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable—as something by definition incompatible with art" (qtd. in Knowlson, 686, n. 57). In the trilogy, Molloy claims that any failure to mention a certain detail "in its proper place" is due to the fact that, "you cannot mention everything in its proper place, you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so" (*Three Novels*, 50). The achievement of narrative conclusion reemerges here as

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[24] A release or discharge from a debt or obligation.

both essential and impossible: "For if you set out to mention everything you would never be done, and that's what counts, to be done, to have done. Oh I know, even when you mention only a few of the things there are, you do not get done either, I know, I know" (*Three Novels*, 41). Completion, or "to be done," is both "what counts" and unachievable. The phantom of narration's end is invoked by the "voice" that speaks to Moran, telling him "that the memory of this work brought scrupulously to a close will help me to endure the long anguish of vagrancy and freedom" (*Three Novels*, 132). Malone characterizes all of his stories as functioning towards the continuation of speech, through which the achievement of expression is endlessly deferred: "All is pretext, Sapo and the birds, Moll, the peasants, those who in the towns seek one another out and fly from one another, my doubts which do not interest me, my situation, my possessions, pretext for not coming to the point" (*Three Novels*, 195, 276). In *The Unnamable*, the drive towards achievement of expression is figured as the desire "to go silent": "I am doing my best, and failing again, yet again. I don't mind failing, it's a pleasure, but I want to go silent. Not as just now, the better to listen, but peacefully, victorious, without ulterior object. Then it would be a life worth having, a life at last" (*Three Novels*, 310). Still, any sense of achievement is negated by the "obligation" when speech has ended "to begin again, to start again from nowhere…" (*Three Novels*, 302). Moreover, the Unnamable remarks in contradiction to its stated desire for silence (and echoing Malone's notion of narration as "pretext for not coming to the point") that, "The essential is never to arrive anywhere, never to be anywhere… The essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line…" and

suggests, "Set aside once and for all… all idea of beginning and end. Overcome, that goes without saying, the fatal leaning towards expressiveness" (*Three Novels*, 338, 390).

Out of this conflict between the desire "to be done" and the resistance to "expressiveness," the formless text of *The Unnamable* emerges, seeming to echo the very formal conflict between the Irish oral tale and the "improvement literature" that had sought its elimination. While Beckett's novels may not move consciously towards specifically Irish storytelling forms, they do evince a shift away from a literature amenable to the consumption patterns of capitalism towards a formlessness more amenable to an alternative temporality shared by the historically occluded cultural practice of the oral tale. The suggestion that we read in the trilogy a geo-political critique of labor and aesthetics may seem counterintuitive when we consider Beckett's earlier writings on aesthetics and their sweeping universal claims about the nature of language and art. In his 1930 essay *Proust*, for instance, he writes on the inadequacy of language and the failure of communication, that, "There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication. Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happen to be valid expressions of personality, they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them" (*Proust*, 64). His thoughts on the "mess" of reality are presented in the language of philosophical scepticism: "Reality, whether approached imaginatively or empirically, remains a surface, hermetic. Imagination, applied—a priori—to what is absent, is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real. Nor is any direct and purely experimental contact possible between subject and object, because they are automatically separated by the subject's

consciousness of perception, and the object loses its purity and becomes a mere intellectual pretext or motive" (*Proust*, 74). A potential seed of later well-known formulation of the modern artist's necessary "fidelity to failure" in the act of expression—"unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation"—can be detected in his suggestion of that Proust's explanations of his characters are "experimental and not demonstrative": "He explains them in order that they may appear as they are—inexplicable" (*Three Dialogues*, 125; *Proust*, 87). Yet the very certainty with which Beckett makes declarations such as, "We cannot know and we cannot be known" defangs the epistemological scepticism expressed in the statement itself (*Proust*, 66). Moreover, his later comments on and disavowal of these writings make clear that he was uncomfortable with the authoritative manner in which they were presented, and his move away from this tone is consistent with the critique of epistemological certainty in his later writings. While the Beckett of *Proust* and *Three Dialogues* is useful in constructing the image of Beckett as a placeless modernist, his later disavowal of these writings is clear, yet rarely mentioned.

In 1956, Beckett wrote to Barney Rosset, who had expressed interest wanting to publish an American edition of *Proust*, and, while he did not dismiss the idea altogether, he wrote, "I'm not sure that you are well advised. It's a very juvenile affair. We'll need the date of composition plain and large" (*Letters II*, 643; August 1, 1956). In his letters from 1957-1959 to art critic and publisher Jacques Putman, who wished to publish a French translation of "Three Dialogues," Beckett refers to "Three Dialogues" as "convoluted nonsense," "very bad," and "idiotic" (*Letters III*, 17; February 5, 1957.

*Letters III*, 29; March 15, 1957. *Letters III*, 228; April 28, 1959). When Martin Esslin wrote to Beckett that "Three Dialogues" "seem to me to be excellent radio and an important statement about modern art" (3 November, 1965; III, 678), Beckett replied that, "Rightly or wrongly I regret the Duthuit Dialogues and prefer not to have them broadcast" (*Letters III*, 678; November 9, 1965). And to John Calder, who had inquired about further translations of both "Three Dialogues" and "Proust," he wrote: "I don't want the Dialogues to go any further, i.e. no translations, and definitely don't want Proust to appear in French. Please forgive me" (*Letters III*, 678; November 23, 1965). Rather than take these early writings as indicative of a Beckett dedicated to the impossible articulation of a placeless and universal modern subject, I suggest that we see in them a sincere engagement with European philosophical and aesthetic thought that he will consciously turn away from, while acknowledging that it no doubt will continue to inform his own writing and thought to a certain degree.

**Idleness as Theme in the Trilogy**

Along with the decomposition of narrative, the trilogy is notable for the shift that it registers from Beckett's intellectual writing to what we might call his writing of feeling. Beckett began work on *Molloy* after a sort of revelation. As he describes in an interview with Gabriel D'Aubaréde, "*Molloy* and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel" (qtd. in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 217). The recognition of his "folly" and turn to the writing of feeling aligns with his deep-rooted aversion to Western epistemological assumptions. So

while the Beckett who wrote *Murphy* still approached writing as an intellectual practice, he would later remark, "I am no intellectual. All I am is feeling" (McDonald, 134). So while the trilogy begins, in *Molloy*, with a scene that centers around the wage labor relationship, this relationship is not subjected to intellectual critique as it is in *Murphy*, but is rather destabilized from a position of ignorance, and the labor in question is, unsurprisingly, writing. Each week, Molloy is visited by a man who gives him money and "takes away the pages"—"So many pages, so much money" (*Three Novels*, 7). He then makes an odd and contradictory remark, "Yes, I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work any more" (*Three Novels*, 7). Soon after, he claims, "Yet I don't work for money. For what then? I don't know" (*Three Novels*, 7). Gone is the detailing of "how Murphy defrauded a vested interest every day for his lunch, to the honourable extent of paying for one cup of tea and consuming 1.83 cups approximately," in place of which *Molloy* presents a cloud of ambiguity and contradiction that brings into question the very concept of "work" (*Murphy*, 51).

And while Murphy's idleness is a conscious withdrawal from the material world, Molloy's is a positive and natural state of being, so that, far from adopting idleness as an act of defiance, Molloy is not even aware of his transgression. He is approached by a policeman while resting with his bicycle, and the result of their interaction is, as Molloy puts it, "my understanding that my way of resting, my attitude when at rest, astride my bicycle, my arms on the handlebars, my head on my arms, was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency" (*Three Novels*, 20). The scene is once again ambiguous, as it is Molloy's "way of resting" or his "attitude when at rest" that

constitutes an act of transgression in the eyes of the law. Although he points out his crutches and attempts to express his infirmity, which, as he says, "obliged me to rest as I could, rather than as I should," the policeman replies that, "there are not two laws… one for the healthy, another for the sick, but one only to which all must bow, rich and poor, young and old, happy and sad" (*Three Novels*, 20).[25]

In spite of this, Molloy (again, unlike Murphy) is eager to fit in, and he asserts that, "I never rested in that way again, my feet obscenely resting on the earth, my arms on the handlebars and on my arms my head, rocking and abandoned. It is indeed a deplorable sight, a deplorable example, for the people, who so need to be encouraged, in their bitter toil, and to have before their eyes manifestations of strength only, of courage and of joy, without which they might collapse, at the end of the day, and roll on the ground" (*Three Novels*, 24). As Ronan McDonald suggests, Molloy's idle state of being is here revealed to be a threatening transgression insofar as it poses "the possibility of an alternative way of viewing the world. Molloy's innocuous activity—leaning on his bicycle in a restful posture—is enough to pose a bad example" (McDonald, 163). While Murphy's idleness can no doubt be read in terms of its resistance to capitalist exploitation and the Protestant work ethic, it offers no such possible alternative, and the novel can ultimately proceed (to its conclusion) only through Murphy's death.

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[25] Considered alongside the possibility of Irish history as a field of reference, this assertion of a universal system of law evokes the imposition of English common law in place of Irish Brehon laws.

In other words, if Murphy's idleness is fundamentally a rebellion against state power and the Protestant ethic, then it is also dependent upon it. His death in the novel is the only possible outcome when the work-ethic that he rejects is presented as inescapable and there is no viable alternative that can be imagined on its own terms. In this sense, an intellectual critique can only go so far. But by shifting to a writing of feeling and ignorance in *Molloy*, Beckett effectively de-naturalizes the supposedly universal relationship between human life and labor that capitalism requires. And the formal circularity of the trilogy gives aesthetic space for characters such as Molloy to exist.[26]

Molloy's estrangement from work is further illustrated through his inactivity while at Lousse's house:

> For I helped neither in the house nor in the garden and knew nothing of what work was going forward… Men were always busy [in the garden], working at I know not what. For the garden seemed hardly to change, from day to day, apart from the tiny changes due to the customary cycle of birth, life and death. And in the midst of those men I drifted like a dead leaf on springs, or else I lay down on the ground, and then they stepped gingerly over me as though I had been a bed of rare flowers. (*Three Novels*, 51-52)

Again, Molloy's ignorance has the effect of rendering the physical labor of working in the garden absurd: "Yes, it was doubtless in order to preserve the garden from apparent change that they laboured at it thus" (*Three Novels*, 52). Through his analogical correlation with a dead leaf and a bed of rare flowers, the recumbent Molloy is associated with the natural world, against whose "customary cycle of birth, life and death" the workers toil, only to produce what was already there.

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[26] If and when they are killed off, their place is quickly taken by another.

Perhaps the most intriguing character-entered critique of labor and idleness in the entire trilogy is that of Macmann in *Malone Dies*. Macmann is "happier sitting than standing and lying down than sitting, so that he sat and lay down at the least pretext and only rose again when the élan vital or struggle for life began to prod him in the arse again" (*Three Novels*, 243). Macmann's bodily disposition hearkens back to that of Murphy, as "a good half of his existence must have been spent in a motionlessness akin to that of stone" (*Three Novels*, 243). Moreover, Macmann is unable "to earn, in the sweat of his brow or by making use of his intelligence" (*Three Novels*, 243). When he is "given the job of weeding a plot of young carrots… at the rate of threepence or even sixpence an hour, it often happened that he tore them all up, through absent-mindedness, or carried away by I know not what irresistible urge that came over him at the sight of vegetables, and even of flowers, and literally blinded him to his true interests" (*Three Novels*, 243). He fares no better as a street-sweeper:

> … the place swept by him looked dirtier at his departure than on his arrival, as if a demon had driven him to collect, with the broom, shovel and barrow placed gratis at his disposal by the corporation, all the dirt and filth which chance had withdrawn from the sight of the tax-payer and add them thus recovered to those already visible and which he was employed to move. … And yet he had done his honest best to give satisfaction, taking as his model his more experienced colleagues, and doing as they did. (*Three Novels*, 244)

What is most remarkable about the depiction of Macmann, though, is that his incompetence seems limited to the realm of employment and wage labor, as "when it came to doing some little thing for himself, … then he really exhibited a certain dexterity, without the help of any other apparatus than his bare hands" (*Three Novels*, 244-245).

Out of necessity, he devotes "to these little tasks a great part of his existence": "For he had to, he had to, if he wished to go on coming and going on the earth…" (*Three Novels*, 245). What is crucial to note is that Macmann's aptitude for survival is presented on equal terms as his incompetence in (alienated) wage labor. These are presented as equally legitimate frames for viewing Macmann's mode of being in the world:

> Such then seemed to be Macmann, seen from a certain angle, incapable of weeding a bed of pansies or marigolds and leaving one standing and at the same time well able to consolidate his boots with willow bark and thongs of wicker, so that he might come and go on the earth from time to time and not wound himself too sorely on the stones, thorns and broken glass provided by the carelessness or wickedness of man, with hardly a complaint, for he had to. (*Three Novels*, 245)

As with Molloy's restful posture, Macmann's mode of engagement with work serves as a "bad example" in that it suggests "the possibility of an alternative way of viewing the world"—an alternative to the Protestant work-ethic and capitalism's naturalization of "bitter toil" in the midst of artificial scarcity and accumulation. Macmann's aptitude for the un-alienated labor of "doing some little thing for himself" together with his ability to survive, to "go on coming and going on the earth" point in the direction of such an alternative view, whereby activity is directed not by the profit motive, but towards the sustenance of human life. The possibility of a world that would accommodate Macmann is furthermore suggested by Malone, who pauses at this point in his narration of Macmann's story to remark "… it is perhaps not inappropriate to wish Macmann, since wishing costs nothing, sooner or later a general paralysis sparing at a pinch in the arms if that is conceivable, in a place impermeable as far as possible to wind, rain, sound, cold, great heat (as in the seventh century) and daylight, with one or two eiderdowns just in

case and a charitable soul say once a week bearing eating-apples and sardines in oil for the purpose of postponing as long as possible the fatal hour, it would be wonderful" (*Three Novels*, 245). Among the things listed by Macmann when he wonders "what was lacking to his happiness" are (admittedly along with the less tasteful "Moll dead"), "The right to be abroad in all weathers morning, noon and night, trees and bushes with outstretched branches to wrap him round and hide him, food and lodging such as they were free of all charge, … a minimum of persecution and corporal punishment, the song of the birds, … what more could he wish?" (*Three Novels*, 277-278). While many of the character vignettes throughout the trilogy offer a vision of life and of human activity free from the Protestant work ethic and notions of labor and idleness as conceptualized from within the ideology of capitalism, Macmann's stands out because of the degree to which it articulates this alternative vision, but also because of the way that Malone seems to bring this alternative vision into indirect association with Irish history through his remark that, "It is true the Macmanns are legion in the island" (*Three Novels*, 259). The novels of the trilogy in fact relentlessly suggest through references both direct and indirect that their supposedly placeless setting—referred to as "the island"—is in fact Irish.

As Emilie Morin suggests, the Unnamable's reference to "the subject of my behaviour above in the island, among my compatriots, contemporaries, coreligionists and companions in distress" is "culturally and historically weighted and suggest Irish origins" (Morin, 62). The voice goes on: "The island, I'm on the island, I've never left the island, God help me. … it's on the island I wind my endless ways" and references its geography of "boglands" that define the greater part of the Irish landscape (*Three Novels*, 326-

327).[27] Malone's remark that, "It is true the Macmanns are legion in the island" seems to suggest a connection between Macmann's seemingly absurd subjectivity and Ireland itself, and the sudden remark that, "… on the island, there are Druid remains" is also heavily weighted in that, while the druids were not exclusively "Irish," belonging to the pre-Christian Celtic cultures, they figured heavily in Irish-language literature and sagas of the island's pre-Christian past (*Three Novels*, 259, 286). And among all of the numerous vague and indirect references to Ireland, Malone makes one that is absolutely explicit. Pondering "how long can one fast with impunity?" he remarks: "The Lord Mayor of Cork lasted for ages, but he was young, and then he had political convictions, human ones too probably, just plain human convictions" (*Three Novels*, 273). The "Lord Mayor of Cork" is no doubt Terence MacSwiney, who was elected in 1920 during the Irish War of Independence, arrested and imprisoned by the British government on charges of sedition, and died in Brixton Prison after 74 days on hunger strike.

While Beckett may not make direct reference to the pre-Famine Irish poor in his writing, throughout his work (and perhaps most notably in *Endgame*) appear what *seem* to be at least oblique references to the Famine, as when Molloy mentions eating grass or

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[27] Morin points out that the referential potential of "the island" is intensified by the bilingual nature of the text: "since there are no triphthongs in French, a French speaker learning English may have a tendency to turn the triphthong into a diphthong and to pronounce 'Ireland' as 'island'" (Morin, 64). While Morin suggests that this slippage between "Ireland" and "island" becomes apparent in English "only with the support of the French text," Elizabeth Bowen's remark in *Seven Winters and Afterthoughts* that, "my failing to have a nice ear for vowel sounds, and the Anglo-Irish slurred, hurried way of speaking made me take the words 'Ireland' and 'island' to be synonymous" indicates its broader resonance (Morin, 64).

the purpose of his sucking stones: "A little pebble in your mouth, round and smooth, appeases, soothes, makes you forget your hunger, forget your thirst" (*Three Novels*, 26). In this way the catastrophic devastation of the famine and its seizure by colonial power as an opportunity for the erasure of recalcitrant traditional ways of life is registered in Beckett's writing through its haunting absence.

In suggesting that the decomposition of narrative and the alternative labor logics presented in the trilogy be read in tentative relation to Irish history, my reading of these novels agrees with Ronan McDonald's argument that Beckett both "registers the recalcitrance and opacity of historical memory" in a way that resists both nostalgia on the one hand and complete amnesia on the other (McDonald, 154). "Plagued with fragments of the past which they cannot amalgamate into a consoling coherence," writes McDonald, "Beckett's people are never granted the solace of an easy oblivion. … They can only treat the past like obstinate and unwieldy extensions of themselves, which can neither be successfully repressed nor properly incorporated" (McDonald, 154). This is precisely, though, the position in which Beckett seemed to find himself. If the label of "Irish" is one that is highly problematized for Beckett today, it was earlier one that he could not help but avoid. The order form for *Murphy* in its first printing, for instance, describes the novel by saying that, "The style is leavened with a Celtic waywardness which is as attractive as it is elusive and leaves the reader questioning the source of his enjoyment" (qtd. in Ackerley, 14). The jacket copy likewise suggested: "The reader is carried along on the wave of an abundant creative imagination expressing itself in scene after scene of superlative comedy, ironic situations that only the Irish genius could conceive" (*Letters I*,

611). In a 1938 letter to his literary agent, George Reavey, Beckett writes wryly of *Murphy* following its publication, "The appearance is very satisfactory and the effort to make an Irishman of me touching" (*Letters I*, 609). He similarly comments upon the novel's appearance to McGreevy: "I got some advance copies of Murphy. All green white & yellow. In honour of Celia? They do their best, and not merely with the blurbs, to turn me into an Irishman" (*Letters I*, 611). But if Beckett felt estranged from Irish identity in the 1930s, his attachment to Ireland persisted until the end of his life and is reflected in the final letters he wrote before his death in 1987, which he ends with the Irish-language lament "ochone": "Ochone ochone / dead and not gone." And if the content of these novels can ultimately register Ireland and its history only through their haunting absence, their decomposition of narrative paradoxically aligns Beckett's modernist trilogy at a formal level with the Irish oral tale whose temporality rendered it incompatible with capitalist development and modern subject formation.

To stress the complex nature of Beckett's work as I have in this chapter is, I think, simply a way of acknowledging the complexity of his own subject position in relation to Ireland, England, and Europe. On the one hand, readers of Beckett should take seriously the enormous influence of European literature, art, and philosophy on Beckett's thought and writing. As long-time personal friend and authorized biographer James Knowlson has remarked, "Beckett always saw himself—his post-war, as well as his pre-war self—as part of a continuum with the European literary and artistic past" (*Images of Beckett*, qtd. in Bolin). Yet this view that Beckett no doubt had of himself and his work should be tempered with an attention to the lifelong and ever-strained attachment to Ireland that

permeates his writing. In the first interview he conducted for the authorized biography *Damned to Fame*, Knowlson challenged Beckett on the degree to which he claimed a separation between his life and work:

> I then adduced some of the images of his childhood in Ireland that appear often in his work, even in his late prose texts: a man and a boy walking hand in hand over the mountains; a larch tree turning green every year a week before the others; the sounds of stonecutters chipping away in the hills above his home. Dozens of such images could be cited, I maintained, which bridge his life and his work. At this point, Beckett nodded in agreement: "They're obsessional," he said, and went on to add several others. (Knowlson, 20)

That Beckett's reimagining of our relationship to labor suggests an identity of relation with a non-modern Irish past certainly does not mean that he was either consciously or unconsciously drawing upon that history. He quite vehemently rejected the Revivalist assumption that one could access this past with which there were no "vehicles of communication." The error is not, however, in suggesting that Irish history resonates with Beckett's texts. It is rather in the suggestion that this historical resonance is *exclusively* Irish. In other words, Beckett's engagement with labor and his imagining of ways of living and being that do not take capitalist economy as their basis (defining themselves either in alignment or opposition) suggests connections to Ireland and the past from which he was cut off and beyond Ireland, where other writers attuned to coloniality sought to explore analogous issues.

Similarly, David Lloyd writes that "it is so hard to speak of and secure an 'Irish Beckett'—not because Beckett transcends or denies those elements in his work that are of Irish provenance, but, rather, because Beckett works and constellates that material

formally in conjunction with diverse and disparate materials that cannot be reduced or referred back to an Irish location" ("Frames of *referrance*: Samuel Beckett as an Irish Question," 51). He notes, for instance, that while the slumped or bent postures of characters throughout Beckett's work are strongly evocative of the iconic imagery of Irish male despair as depicted in the graphics of famine evictions in the *Illustrated London News*, such images "are not of specifically Irish provenance, but belong in a European iconographic tradition that dates back at least as far as Dürer's famous engraving *Melancholia*," with similar iconography appearing within the literary tradition providing the outlines of figures such as Despair in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* and Belacqua in Dante's *Purgatorio* ("Frames of *referrance*: Samuel Beckett as an Irish Question," 48). In this way, this iconic pose "resonates both with the history of Irish catastrophe and with traumas that have taken place elsewhere. It neither refers to Ireland nor fails to: it constellates Irish matter with the matter of modernity more generally" ("Frames of *referrance*: Samuel Beckett as an Irish Question," 48-50). This quality of Beckett's writing, suggests Lloyd, makes it so that reading his work in relation to Ireland "demands of us a mode of cultural studies constantly capable of a shifting of frames, an Irish studies that would allow (for) its own perpetual displacement into other destabilizing contexts" ("Frames of *referrance*: Samuel Beckett as an Irish Question," 51).

Furthermore, the oral form of Irish storytelling against which the improvement literature of the 18th and 19th centuries sought to eliminate again becomes relevant when we re-read Beckett's novels alongside Glissant's work. As Glissant suggests from his own perspective, "The book is the tool of forced poetics; orality is the instrument of

natural poetics. Is the writer forever a prisoner of a forced poetics? Literature, insofar as it produces books and is the product of books, bears no relationship to outgrowths that are natural, anonymous, suddenly emerging from the composts. But that is precisely what we want: a literature that does not have to be forced" (*Poetics of Relation*, 244-245). Beckett's work is simultaneously an acknowledgment of its own impossible relationship to a "natural" poetics—its own "forced" condition—and an expression of desire for an alternative.

## 5. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have addressed the writings of three very different authors with the intention of revealing some significant affinities in their work, specifically the importance of labor and idleness as concepts to be investigated and tested artistically through experimental forms of narration. I think that a reader familiar with the work of any one of these individual writers will come away from this dissertation with a somewhat different view of their work, either with a fresh perspective that incorporates the aforementioned conceptual concerns or with an understanding of their potential place in the theoretical transnational constellation that I have constructed. Of course with any project such as this, there is a great deal of room for future development and expansion. One of the ambitions driving this dissertation was to produce a work of rigorous intellectual engagement that brings together Claude McKay's, Yi Sang's, and Samuel Beckett's writing in a productive and enlightening way without sacrificing the particularity of their individual work, and this proved to be a persistent challenge. Several chapters could undoubtedly be written on the topic of idleness in the work of any one of these authors, but if the dissertation inspires the reader to think in any of these directions incompletely or insufficiently pursued here, then I think it can be considered a success.

There is one particular absence in the dissertation that I would like to briefly address here, and that is the lack of engagement with gender and the representation of women in McKay's, Yi Sang's, and Beckett's work. In her commentary on Marx, Morag Shiach makes an important point regarding his lack of engagement with women's labor in his analysis of capitalism, and this critique points to the most glaring blind spot of the

dissertation, as it does not include any extensive analysis of the modernist creative output of women on the topics of labor and idleness. Shiach's critique could also be raised in relation to each of the writers that the dissertation does engage with, as Beckett, McKay, and Yi Sang all struggle with the representation of women in their writing. Shiach writes in her response to Marx's analysis:

> Despite the fact that women have been centrally involved in the mediation of nature through labour and in the production of a wide range of domestic and agricultural artefacts, the language and the images in Marx's text struggle to encompass that activity of women's labour, particularly as it would be imagined in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not that Marx excludes women's labour from his argument about species being, freedom and universality, but rather that he doesn't pay it any attention. (36)

She goes on to describe this as "a dilemma about the limits of the imagination and how it informs our sense of freedom or even of any kind of alternative practice" (36). I want to acknowledge the insufficient attention paid to women's labor in this dissertation and highlight this as one of the areas in which it could be more fully developed. "If we do not see women when we try to imagine species being," Shiach writes, "we have given ourselves a very significant problem of the imagination. If we do not articulate this absence we compound the problem by naturalizing it" (36). By acknowledging this absence in the dissertation, I hope at least not to naturalize it as Shiach warns.

Shiach's comments also extend in an important way to the authors that the dissertation does engage with, as, in spite of the fascinating ways in which they creatively reimagine labor and idleness in their work, their own struggle or inability to address women's labor in their literary narratives displays a significant problem of the

imagination. As such, it is essential both to acknowledge the absence of women's voices in this dissertation and to question the roles and representations of women in the works of the authors discussed. In each of their imaginative explorations of idleness and labor, women appear as both an oppositional force or partner-antagonist, yet at the same time a half-acknowledged source of the very possibility of the idleness explored in the text. Latnah (*Banjo*), Yŏnsim ("Wings"), and Celia (*Murphy*) each serve as an element that the text's imaginative vision of an alternative practice of idle life seeks to dispel, and at the same time an element that makes that very vision possible. A more thorough examination of the vector of modernist imaginings of labor and idleness that this dissertation seeks to describe would also include and engage with women's own creative work. And the analogously problematic figurations of Latnah, Yŏnsim, and Celia would also be an important topic to address in future studies of these authors.

I hope that the reader comes away from this dissertation with a clearer sense of idleness as a concept to which the literary narratives of Claude McKay, Yi Sang, and Samuel Beckett devote significant thought and attention. Despite the different geopolitical contexts in which these authors lived and worked, they each turned to modernist forms of writing as a way of creatively questioning the valuation of labor and the work-ethic of the modern/colonial world. While work may have emerged as a question for many other twentieth-century modernist writers, McKay, Yi Sang, and Beckett did not seek to redeem work, but to posit forms of idleness as real, legitimate states of being with positive value and meaning to human life. As such, their novels and shorter works of fiction challenge readers in a powerful way. They invite readers, through

their own engagement with the text, to dwell in these spaces of imaginative uncertainty and contradiction, and they estrange our own relationship to the world of work in which we live now.

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Keeran Murphy attended Fordham University and received a Bachelor's Degree in English in 2009. He then attended New York University and received a Master's Degree in Irish and Irish-American Studies in 2013. He edited the chapter "Modernism in Korea" in *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology*, published by Bloomsbury in 2019, and he has worked extensively in the English education publishing industry in South Korea.