

"THESE SCRAPS OF OTHER SCRAPS  
OF AN ANTIQUE RIGMAROLE":  
REMEMBERING *HOW IT IS*

By

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not negative as it does for many, with his drama.

by *The Last Tape* and read *Waiting for Godot*.

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My appreciation for Beckett did not begin, as it does for many, with his drama. As an undergraduate I was assigned *Krapp's Last Tape* and read *Waiting for Godot* out of curiosity. At that time neither appealed to me a great deal. I respected the bleakness of the terrain, but left the plays with a crucial misunderstanding. I did not realize that Beckett is funny, that it was acceptable to laugh at his characters. I did so, but felt as if laughter directed at misery was somehow unacceptable. In *Endgame* Nell turns to Nagg, and "(without lowering her voice)" informs him that: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (18). She is right, I have decided, though it took reading Beckett's first "trilogy" to convince me.

I devoured the trilogy. The compulsion with which its narrators are obsessed had obsessed me. I emerged from my apartment and told anyone who would listen that *Molloy* might not be the greatest novel of the twentieth century, but I had not read a more satisfying one. Professor Robert R. Hill informed me that Beckett had gone *beyond* the trilogy with a novel entitled *How It Is*. For good or ill (or both) this thesis is partly his fault.

*How It Is* is narrated by a voice that purports to be crawling naked, in the dark, across a terrain of mud, excrement, and vomit. The novel, if that is what it really is, is divided into three parts: before, with, and after Pim, Pim being a fellow mud-dweller whom the narrator encounters in the second section of the novel and tortures for company. The novel's first section plays upon the narrator's anticipation to get to Pim while the last details his isolation when this creature abandons him, ending with a

disavowal of the entire 147 page narrative. It is the last of Beckett's long prose comedies and perhaps, the funniest.

However, I am among the few who think so. Ursula K. Heise, who has written one of the most useful and accurate articles on the novel, exclaims: "certainly the procession of crawling torturers and victims can hardly be understood as . . . promising" (257). This assertion causes me to wonder if she hasn't missed one of the novel's primary points: promise is illusion. Heise also argues against reading *How It Is* as a realist novel. The majority of critics dealing with the work follow suit, some venturing so far into the realm of allegory that they lose sight of their own readings. They refuse to heed the advice given them by the "editor" of *Watt*: "no symbols where none intended" (257).

I do not intend to begin my investigation by critiquing the interpretive strategies of the critics who have paved the way for those, like myself, who wish to write on this difficult novel. I have, at times, pointed to observations that seem to me inaccurate. Because a number of critics have posed allegorical or pseudo-allegorical interpretations of *How It Is*, I have emphasized what I see as flaws in such interpretations in an effort to situate my own reading.

My critical procedure in writing this thesis has been simple. Generally, when dealing with any novel, I read and am either extraordinarily moved or extremely bored. When the former happens I reread until I memorize the parts of a book that have "moved" me. If I am still curious about a work I go to the library and find what other people have written about it. I chiefly look for close readings that explain or attempt to

explain aspects of the work that I could not understand when I read it with the aid of a dictionary. It was in her eye as if it was the semiotic paper, but its faults were many and

Sometimes this process occurs while I am taking a graduate seminar. In fact, after my initial encounter with *How It Is*, I was fortunate enough to be enrolled in Professor Elizabeth Grubgeld's seminar in Irish Literature and Post-colonial theory. My seminar paper argued that Beckett's novel was a "text" (I still used that term then) which mimicked what I called the colonial predicament. I now feel that it was wrongheaded of me. I was approaching Beckett's work with what Harold Bloom calls an "arbitrary and ideologically imposed contextualization," something he views as "the staple of our bad time" (9). He outlines this "procedure" as follows:

[B]egin with a political stance all your own, far out and away from [the author's work], and then . . . locate some marginal bit of . . . social history that seems to sustain your stance. Social fragment in hand, you move in from outside upon the poor [work], and find some connection, however established, between your supposed fact and [the author's] words. (9)

Bloom is, of course, speaking about current trends in Shakespearean criticism but his indictment seems wholly applicable to my first attempt at "criticism" on *How It Is*. The main problem that I encountered with a post-colonialist reading of Beckett stemmed from attempting to impose an ideology *on* the novel. I should have investigated something *in* the novel that I found interesting and critically useful. The idea occurred to me but I was unsure what to investigate. A deadline approached, and I had spent a number of hours that semester reading Declan Kiberd, Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, and David Lloyd. *How It Is* as Beckett's comment on post-colonialism made perfect sense at that point.

It did not, however, make perfect sense to Professor Grubgeld. She was kind, and gracious to boot, in her evaluation of my seminar paper, but its faults were many and extraordinarily evident. That was the end of my course-work, the spring semester of 1998. I was done, I thought, with that novel of mud, excrement, and vomit and was considering writing my Master's thesis on representation in *Titus Andronicus*. Mutilated lunatics seemed a respite from Beckett's "life below." But, try as I might—and I tried hard that summer—I could not keep from speculating about other ways to approach Beckett's strange novel. I had read a number of critical pieces on *How It Is* but realized that there was more work to be done, and eventually commissioned myself to do some of it.

But where start? How proceed? Professor Grubgeld encouraged me to write every day, to attempt to discover precisely what I wanted to say about Beckett through writing. My initial drafts discussed the way writing itself is depicted in the novel, with what the work has to say about its own process of composition. The topic was interesting enough to keep me writing and thinking about Beckett, which is probably all that one should expect from a topic. James Olney delivered a lecture early that semester, fall 1998. Olney is a scholar of both Beckett and memory. His lecture, entitled "The Micturition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and what it has to do with St. Augustine and Samuel Beckett," discussed Augustine and Rousseau's confessional writings, Beckett's *Company*, and how memory informs these works. The next morning when I sat down at the computer, my thesis took a different turn. I did not make the decision consciously, nor did I realize that what I then viewed as a digression would eventually become the focus of my inquiry. *How It Is* proved a work replete with allusions to memory and

discussions of the effect of memory on storytelling. I now believe that the novel is as much concerned with memory and with an imagination that speaks out of its reservoir as it is with anything else.

Despite my debt to Olney, I cannot apply his theories about Beckettian memory wholesale to *How It Is*. I am not placing myself in opposition to Olney. For one, we are dealing with works that differ to some degree. Secondly, I employ far too many of his ideas to consider myself his opponent. My reading of Beckett does, however, part from his in a number of instances. My true opponents are those who offer overly anti-realist or allegorical readings of *How It Is*. Throughout my thesis I will return to why I believe that such readings must be misreadings. I have yet to encounter an allegorical reading of Beckett's novel that did not contain a crucial and rather obvious misunderstanding of its particulars. I do not speak of ambiguities. I speak of misquoted passages and errors in detail. When working with a novel as complex as *How It Is* such errors are not difficult to make. I hope to avoid making blunders worse than those that I will, on occasion, cite.

I argue against the anti-realist interpretation in the body of my thesis and base my exegesis on a primarily literalist one (for lack of a better term) because I feel that it is imperative to see the narrator as an actual person, with actual memories. Otherwise, we must ask ourselves what is at stake. If our narrator is not human, then his plight and the plight through which he puts his companion, Pim, loses currency for the humans who read his story. In 1960 Beckett, when describing the as-yet-unpublished novel, began his synopsis: "A 'man' is lying in the mud and dark murmuring his 'life' as he hears it obscurely uttered by a voice inside him" (qtd. in Knowlson 413). Interestingly, Beckett places quotation marks around both "man" and "life." Is *he* suggesting that our narrator

is something other than a man recounting something other than a life? All of Beckett's or men lead lives that are debased and degraded. Their essential humanity is tenuous, as is their existence, and both are called into question. However, neither is negated. They remain men and they retain their lives, yet they are forced to question both. Like the narrator of *How It Is* they seem aware of the quotation marks that surround them.

For whatever reasons, a number of critics are reluctant to see *How It Is* as the story of a "man" lying, crawling, and murmuring in the mud and instead view it as some sort of fable inhabited by a race of mud-dwelling organisms. Critics such as H. Porter Abbott concede that "there is considerable critical support for the position that *How It Is* is indeed about how it is" (141). Such an assertion is compromised, however, when he quotes William York Tindall: "'Man's suffering, cruelty, and loneliness have never found a more desolating *metaphor*'" (141 italics mine). Why could Tindall not have ended the above quoted sentence with "expression"? Must we believe that Beckett is operating figuratively to explain something besides the reality of the narrator's existence, which is what I take to be the "It" of the novel's title? Not all of humanity crawls naked through mud, but there is no reason to believe that the narrator does not.

Finally, the mud might be the only aspect of the novel we can trust. If there is a certainty in *How It Is* besides the voice which narrates it, it is the predicament of the voice's body. Memory, that function our narrator denies having and then proceeds to either have or find surrogates for, must have a location, and that location must be inside the head of a human body. This is the ultimate site of Beckett's novel. The voice supplies us with a landscape more vivid and frightening than the one upon which it lies, a terrain which is "invented remembered a little of each no knowing" (72). Here, at least,

he speaks the truth, for he conflates the process of remembering with that of imagining or inventing. Thus memory, inextricably intertwined with the narrator's imagination, becomes the subject of *How It Is*. For all its deprivation, it emerges from the mud to frustrate our narrator and his listeners.

Memory emerges not because the narrator is dedicated to its excavation, but because his compulsive mutterings cannot prevent its emergence. Out of this inexpressive barrage of speech, memory and its surrogates arrive to provide and plague our narrator with company, with the only diversion he will receive from an unbearable present, from life in the mud. It is here that I must begin, in the present tense, in the mud. It is helpful, I believe, to see that from which you are trying to escape.

In the third and final section of *How It Is* the narrator proposes a mathematical formulation in which he could exist in “the same instant / always” (112).<sup>1</sup> This formula is the basic situation of the novel, a seemingly interminable present tense.<sup>2</sup> Despite the prevalence of popular clichés that would encourage us to work toward living in the present, such ideas when enacted in Beckett’s fiction pose a number of problems. Presumably, an eternal present would negate the very notion of memory and create bliss, in the sense that an erasure of memory would equal blissful ignorance. However, our narrator casts his predicament in a different light: “want of memory / the various times mixed up in my head / all the various times / before / during / after / vast tracts of time” (107). Thus, the narrator’s “want of memory” is not absence of memory. The problem is that the narrator does possess memories, sometimes in spades.<sup>3</sup> But he forgets his memory. Often he cannot remember that he can remember and will speak of himself as a being “with no memory” (40). Because of this forgetfulness, memory, when it comes, will carry the weight of vision in an almost metaphysical sense.

Throughout the narrative, readers encounter a narrator who at one moment tells them “I haven’t been given memories this time” (11) and at another speaks of “memories of scenes past” (98). *How It Is* confronts us with a memorial paradox which the narrator and Pim<sup>4</sup> articulate during the first mock-catechism of the novel: “so one can’t speak of memories / no / but at the same time one can speak of memories / yes” (97).

The ambiguous stance of the novel toward memory will, no doubt, complicate my discussion a great deal. However, at this point I merely want the reader to recognize the paradoxical attitude toward memory that the novel maintains. I assert that the narrator



remembers, but forgets that he possesses this faculty. Thus memory will be represented in the novel in a variety of ways: it will be spoken of as vision, as witness and scribe figures, as writing, as a set of eyes at the back of the head. I will later discuss these elements as internal and external *embodiments* of the narrator's memory.

The notion of a present tense is inextricably intertwined with structure. Thus a discussion of the present's relation to memory in *How It Is* will be incomplete if we fail to consider the way in which the novel is structured. The present is, after all, only one level in the novel's three-tiered structure, accompanying a poorly recounted past and an undisclosed future. *How It Is*, like much of Beckett's work, is divided into threes. Scholars such as James Olney suggest viewing and evaluating it in trilogistic terms.<sup>5</sup> If this is the case then the same interpretive strategies that have been applied to *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*, might be applicable here. The questions that arise when one begins to relate this structure to memory are legion. How does the trilogizing of narrative transform memory and vice-versa? Does memory carry a structure of its own or do we impose one on it? Simply stated, in what ways does structure, especially one split into three, affect memory?

All narratives, I would argue, carry, in one form or another, a structure. In the narrative that comprises *How It Is*, Beckett has highlighted structure as few authors have. The narrator begins his tale by describing the form it will take, "how it was / I quote / before Pim / with Pim / after Pim / how it is / three parts" (7), comments on that form incessantly as the narrative progresses, and concludes with a rearticulation of the formal devices that readers have followed for 147 pages. Without subtlety, the novel makes the point that a structure will be found in any circumstance regardless of how structureless

that circumstance may seem. As the imagination crafts memory, or vice-versa, narrative and temporal succession become evident.

However, we are dealing with a narrator for whom time, the foundation on which sequence rests, has been destroyed. As I have stated above, the narrator has difficulty distinguishing between before, during, and after; they have become "mixed up" (107). Perhaps this confusion of temporal succession causes him to become obsessed with structure, with imposing sequence on a world for which sequence has become an impossibility since past and future are reduced to mere ideas. In *How It Is*, these ideas are never affirmed as is the present in which the narrator exists. The result of this existence is boredom.

According to Arthur Schopenhauer,<sup>6</sup> in a world where "existence has no foundation on which to rest except the transient present," there is "no stability of any kind, no enduring state is possible . . . in such a world, happiness is not so much as to be thought of" (52). This is because happiness, in Schopenhauer's view, is always an illusion, a hope for future satiety. In this regard "[l]ife presents itself first and foremost as a task" (53). However, if this "task is accomplished, what has been gained is a burden, and there appears a second task: that of doing something to ward off boredom" (53). It is not difficult to see Schopenhauer's relevance to the desires and frustrations of the narrator: "Thus the first task is to gain something and the second to become unconscious of what has been gained" (53). The voice that narrates *How It Is*, hopes to gain order, but when it seems as if he has reduced his existence to a formula, he expresses boredom or the desire to "become unconscious of what has been gained."<sup>7</sup> In turn, this desire for oblivion will be reconverted into an obsession for order, for structure.

The basic structure which the narrator imposes on his narrative is the very one which those teachers of writing who have little patience impose on their students, that of beginning, middle, and end, or, as the narrator repeatedly puts it: "before . . . with . . . after" (7). To the teller of this tale such a structure indicates the "natural order" of "the journey / the couple / the abandon" (20). To this statement he appends "all that in the present" (20). This somewhat ambiguous phrase reminds us to question the location in time from which our narrator speaks.<sup>8</sup> On the same page he has provided his readers with this information: "I am in part three after Pim / how it was / how it is" (20).

This third part, this present, is the site from which the narrator, the "I," speaks. While this might seem obvious, I believe it is necessary to keep in mind. The present, in its most temporal sense, is just as much a location as any other more clearly spatial referent. What I mean by this somewhat confusing concept is that saying "I am in part three" (20)—a seemingly temporal marker—should be seen, at least in this novel, as the equivalent of saying, as Molloy does, "I am in my mother's room" (*Molloy* 7)—a spatial marker. This tag provides readers with the location of the telling, or with the illusion of location. The narrator's continuous confusions and repudiations cause a collapse of time and space in his fictional world. In *How It Is*, we can only make a distinction between the present from which the narrator speaks, and the narrative itself which is rendered in the present tense.

Such a distinction is useful in that it provides a way of approximating the distance of the narrator from his story. Throughout the novel his voice carries the immediacy of the present, so much perhaps that we are tempted to forget that what we are reading is basically a memoir. *How It Is*, is, in a sense, how it *was*. If the narrator relates events

that have occurred in the past, then he must either be remembering or imagining. Although the narrator insists on disinheriting both his memory and imagination he proves deficient in neither area. Despite the fact that the voice seems intent on effacing itself<sup>9</sup> the narrator's memorial and imaginative abilities approach virtuosity. At the very least they suggest the capability to revise. Such an ability validates the view that the narrator is, in fact, the author of the work we read.<sup>10</sup>

This is not, however, what the narrator would have us believe, nor would the critics who see him as a figure tortured into speech in the same way that he tortures Pim.<sup>11</sup> We must keep in mind the fundamental difference between the tortured Pim, who will "never be . . . anything but a dumb / limp / lump / flat for ever in the mud" (52), and the narrator who is in control<sup>12</sup> of more than he would have his audience believe, a control evinced through his ability to revise. Revision is a means of trickery. It deforms the past, what actually was, and presents it as something else, something that wants to be mistaken for an original. As teachers of writing we insist that our students revise and that they erase the tracks left by revision in their final drafts, that they turn in pristine representations. Paul Davies reminds us that such a process has a clear analog in memory: "there is a difference between the original experience that has been remembered . . . and the reliving of it a long time afterward, the *presence* of it in the imagination when all that the senses are offered is opaque darkness and mud" (122). Our narrator comes to a similar realization: "my memory . . . this voice is truly changeable" (15). In *How It Is* we see, or think we see, the process of revision as it happens, the novel's changeability. Because the narrator is so self-admittedly unreliable, we look for the contradictions in his story. They are not difficult to find, often occurring on the same page or within the same

verset.<sup>13</sup> He revises his story as he tells it. In order to see this revision as trickery, one need only glance at criticism of the novel. Critics are utterly confused about a number of particulars.<sup>14</sup> The narrator's multiple revisions and his ambiguous stance on the reality of Pim, for example, have the ability to baffle the reader into thinking that the incongruities cancel each other out. They do not. Despite the incongruous nature of the narrative, the narrator still maintains enough control to revise his present into three parts.

What does the narrator gain from employing a three-part structure? Why not four or two or twenty-four? Without venturing into the epistemological bear-trap that is numerology I would like to suggest that the trilogy exists because it is the most obvious of forms, one we tend to think most applicable to narrative. Our narrator reasons that his story should have a beginning, middle, and end, or, in his terms a "before," "with," and "after" (7)—one might easily be lead to think past, present, and future. He desperately attempts to order his experiences to match such reasoning. However, his memories, and the narrative they contain, defy him. "Before Pim" or "how I got here" turns out to be an unknowable—"not known / not said"—time which the narrator collapses for the convenience of narrative (7). "With Pim" is an easier task, if we reject the narrator's assertion that there was "never any Pim" (146), because it is composed of an amount of time which the narrator can bracket with events: the descent of his hand on Pim's "arse" (48) and the eventual departure of the creature to whom it is attached. "After Pim" is the most problematic of all three parts. This is partly because it contains the end, an element of his story that the narrator has anticipated since the inception of his narrative.

When he finally reaches the conclusion of his story he begins to catechize himself—one cannot help but remember his catechizing of Pim in section two (96-98)—seemingly attempting to make his cessation secure:

so things may change / no answer / end / no answer / I may choke / no answer /  
sink / no answer / sully the mud no more / no answer / the dark / no answer /  
trouble the peace no more / no answer / the silence / no answer / die / no answer /  
DIE / screams / I MAY DIE / screams / I SHALL DIE / screams / good (147)

In addition to displaying his anxiety about the end in a physical sense, this passage shows the narrator's ambivalence toward the end of his story. His yearning for closure is a bit too strong, and the screaming may very well indicate a protest against the conclusion of both his life and the story he has engaged us with. Perhaps the screams merely show a horrified frustration with the ambiguity of the situation. Caught between life and death, between the possibility of continuation and conclusion the narrator wants his existence to take a determinate turn. This, however, is not going to be an option. The narrator deals with a medium, memory, which is always indeterminate, temporarily accepting structures before rejecting them.

The narrator, however, is tortured by his desire for narrative order, for a method by which he can structure his memory. As Schopenhauer reminds us, the "form" of our existence is "essentially unceasing *motion*, without any possibility of that repose which we continually strive after" (52). This is precisely what torments our narrator. It also accounts for the neat division of his narrative into three sections. Beckett suggests that any attempt to structure, order, or divide memory will always end in failure, and that all attempts of this nature prove arbitrary and ultimately meaningless. Memory, which is

forever changing, cannot be confined within a static form. It is, in essence, unformed, because it continually processes new material while reprocessing the old. Thus the narrator's entire project is revealed as a fool's errand, an impossibility. How can anyone hope to accurately reconstruct or in any way lend an adequate structure to memory? When a structure is placed upon it, whether composed of three parts or thirty, memory's ever-changing nature will be sure to decompose that structure entirely.

Critics who discuss the narrator's refutation of his narrative rarely provide any reason for his doing so. It is the narrative, composed of the narrator's protean memories, which undoes itself. The anguish that the narrator experiences at the end of *How It Is* seems symptomatic of a creator who watches as his creation self-destructs. We should also keep in mind that the narrator is encapsulated within his own tale and its destruction cannot but involve his own. He and his creation, one composed of his memory, are intertwined in such a way that the death of one necessarily involves the death of another.

*How It Is* affirms the present, and the present only, but its structure—before, with, and after—furnishes us with the illusion of a past and future. Ultimately, the suggestion is that any attempt to look or live beyond or behind what *is* happening will result in disappointment. In fact, the novel hints that life outside of the present is an impossibility, that the goals of memory and imagination are doomed to failure. *How It Is* demonstrates how the faculty of memory itself may be forgotten. It is through this realization that we discard any efforts to recover the past or dictate the shape of the future. As J. E. Dearlove reminds us, any statement made by the narrator which ignores “how it is / present formulation” will meet with the recurrent phrase “something wrong there” (167).<sup>15</sup>



What does it really mean to experience the "same instant / always / everywhere" (112)? I argue that this experience, this feeling of an eternal present tense, constitutes the narrator's "darkness" more so than the actual darkness through which he must travel. The lack of vision caused by the monotony of terrain provokes the narrator to repeatedly voice his concerns over the lack of contrast.<sup>16</sup> Where there is nothing but mud, dark, a sack full of sardine tins, and an opener, where such things count as constants, how can memory function? I have no doubt that it does function yet I understand why the narrator repudiates it. In a "life . . . without callers / present formulation / no callers this time / no stories but mine / no silence but the silence I must break when I can bear it no more" (13) how can we expect the narrator to affirm or certify anything, especially a faculty as nebulous as memory? He has only himself—"me / sole elect" (13)—for contrast: "it's with that I have to last" (13). This is one of the reasons memory, though the narrator will not always verify its existence, proves so vital. Remembering, a "voice [which] recounts," becomes the "sole means of living" (129). It might be the only respite from the agony of the present tense.



The issue of style is of the utmost importance to a writer who allegedly attempted to write without it.<sup>17</sup> Most all critics who have discussed *How It Is* comment in some way on the stylistic oddities of the novel or on Beckett's style in general. Such a concern is relevant to this discussion in that style gives a shape to memories as they assume a written form. In an attempt to avoid many of the pitfalls of discussing style I will adopt the broadest of definitions, taking the term to mean the way in which Beckett arranges the words that constitute his novel.

Once the novel has been absorbed, it is not difficult to describe the short, clipped fragments that comprise *How It Is*. The technique Beckett uses is chiefly mimetic. The truncated cadences of the novel are meant to represent the narrator's speech patterns, his murmurs to the mud.<sup>18</sup> To many this will be apparent from the first page as the narrator describes his speech in terms of "murmur[s]," "scraps," and "panting" (7). This is the style of exhaustion, of decomposition. While it has been argued that the narrative details the narrator's deterioration as the novel progresses,<sup>19</sup> we must remember that he provides us with the location of the telling very early on: "I am in part three / after Pim / how it was / how it is" (20). If we take this temporal locator at face value, then we cannot see the narrator as mimicking the narrative *as it happens*. His stylized mimicry is one that is manufactured and remembered.<sup>20</sup> As the narrator says toward the end of the novel: "this solitude / when the voice recounts it / sole means of living it" (129). If he truly exists in part three, after Pim, and more importantly, *without* Pim, then his only company, his "sole means of living," is his memory.

While there remains little in this novel that readers may know precisely, both Beckett and the narrator believe the narrative is being delivered from the third section. Though I disagree with much of what critics say concerning what is happening to the narrator as he delivers his narration, we are mostly in agreement about his location at the moment of his telling. As we have seen, both Beckett and the narrator claim that the novel is being told from its third part. However, locating the narrator in such a fashion raises a number of equally troublesome concerns. Throughout *How It Is* the narrator disparages both his memory and imagination yet constructs an incredibly elaborate tale, one dependent on memory and imagination as few are. Such contradictions reveal to us the way the narrator employs style to conceal and enlarge what he sees as crucial aspects of his story.

Early in part one the narrator states, "I haven't been given memories this time" (11), while section three begins with the frank admission: "imagination spent" (103). If we pursue this issue logically, then we must conclude that one of these statements is false. How does one narrate without an imagination or a memory? As the narrative progresses, as the process of what the narrator calls "invention" (72) continues, disavowals will become more frequent. Not only would the narrator have us believe that his story is "ill-said / ill-heard / ill-recaptured / ill-murmured" (7), but he attempts to persuade us that he has no means with which to say, hear, capture, or murmur. Thus with "no memory" (40) and an imagination which has "attained the bottom" (104) the narrator proves himself capable of weaving a highly complex narrative, meticulously structured and shot through with reminiscence.

imagi This conflict between what the narrator says about his memory and imagination and what he is able to accomplish as a storyteller must give us pause. The simple answer would be to conclude that the teller of the tale is lying. This says little since all tellers of all tales prove themselves incapable of being anything other than liars. When we begin to review the list of the first person narrators of Western literature (*Huck Finn*, *The Good Soldier*, *Lolita*, etc.) a pattern of unreliability emerges. One might conclude that the first-person voice is unfit for truthful recounting, and even a so-called objective third person voice is not without its biases.<sup>21</sup> The “I” adds a layer of subjectivity to any story. The first-person persona infects prose with a fictional quality. Writers like Twain, Ford, and Nabokov clearly wanted to stress the ability of the fictive voice to reveal truths while lying. However, I argue that Beckett’s fiction works under an entirely different set of rules. In all of Beckett’s post-1945 fiction there is an open admission that no truths will be disclosed.<sup>22</sup>

We must remember, however, that Beckett’s narrators are not so much liars as they are ignorant. Beckett was able to produce such voices as Molloy, Moran, Malone, etc. only when he acknowledged the deficiency out of which his art must come: “‘*Molloy* and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly’” (qtd. in Knowlson 319). The great works of Beckett begin with a sense of absence. Indeed, that might be described as his *modus operandi*. Beckett himself would go on to say: “I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding” (qtd. in Knowlson 319). Such an approach to art might be seen as standing in diametrical opposition to the stance of the self-confident Twain, the erudite Nabokov, and the encyclopedic Joyce. The contradictions between memory,

imagination, and narrative agency which are embedded in *How It Is* serve not so much to highlight the flawed conventions of storytelling as they question, even interrogate, the epistemological posture of any voice or teller. Beckett, by exposing the subjective and ultimately ignorant persona behind the devices of memory and imagination, reveals and exploits the emptiness of narrative.<sup>23</sup>

With his many contradictions our narrator displays himself not as disingenuous, but as merely forgetful. This impoverishment allows the narrator room to espouse and disavow his memory and imagination. While at times he seems dishonest, even manipulative, the truth of the matter seems to be that our narrator, confined to a perpetual present tense, utters whatever his faculties allow him. If at times his faculties allow him to ruminate, to recall specific images from his "life above" (as they do as early as page nine), and at others fail him completely causing him to repudiate his narrative, then we may assume that his story is not contrived, but dictated by the demands of the present.

Critics such as H. Porter Abbott wish to remind us that the novel is being quoted ("Original" 96). *How It Is* presents this idea in its very first line: "how it was / I quote / before Pim / with Pim / after Pim / how it is / three parts / I say it as I hear it" (7), and concludes with a chiasitic restatement: "that's how it was / end of quotation / after Pim / how it is" (147). The most accurate way to explain the issue of quotation that runs throughout the novel is to see it as the narrator describing the dictations of his faculties. Critics who choose to argue that the novel is simply bracketed in quotations fail to mention that the phrase "I quote" recurs throughout the work.<sup>24</sup> Such a move suggests that the narrator's voice is derivative, or, more precisely, dependent on something else. But rather than believing that what the voice depends on is the voice of another, Bom for

instance, an idea that shatters the solipsistic world Beckett has created, perhaps we should question our narrator's memory.

I would argue that the narrator describes his ability to remember as quotation. So alien and impossible does the notion of memory appear to him—"I haven't been given memories this time" (11)—that it seems more like a vision. When the narrator remembers, he thinks he is watching scenes from someone else's life: "that life . . . said to have been his [Pim's] / invented / remembered / a little of each / no knowing" (72). Sometimes his faculties permit him to reminisce or to imagine a future; at other times they fail him utterly. This unreliability of the self, this lack of control makes him feel as if he is passively receiving information from a source outside himself. Thus, what he chooses to relate always appears as borrowed speech, as quotation. Perhaps what is so intriguing about *How It Is* remains the narrator's awareness and admission of his unreliability, and his ignorance.

All narrators, I would argue, write out of limitations and are reliant on faculties that will inevitably fail them, faculties they will forget they possess. Beckett's narrators differ in that they choose to exploit, rather than hide such facts. The narrator of *How It Is* "writes" out of a "want of memory" (107) which renders remembering foreign. Thus, when he speaks of the process of memory, he undertakes what I will call in the next chapter the procedure of embodiment.

Early on the narrator would have his listener believe that he relates “no stories but mine” (13). From where then does he get the material for the narrative that comprises Beckett’s novel? One might argue imagination as a viable answer if we were dealing with another narrator. The fact that here we deal with one who speaks of his life as “invented / remembered / a little of each / no knowing” (72) frustrates our attempts to make such a distinction. What, in this novel, is the difference between memory and imagination? Are the two terms synonymous? If there is memory at work, and I believe ample evidence exists to prove that there is, how, precisely, does it function?

Viewing memory and the act of remembering as an excavation would seem to make sense in the context of a novel in which the narrator views images, scenes from his life above, in the mud. It is in the muck that the narrator has buried memories, images, scenes, voices, and it is out of this muck that our narrator will retrieve them, willy-nilly. However, a metaphor of excavation is not without its problems.

According to James Olney, Augustine offers two models for memory: an archaeological one in which memories are buried and kept unchanged in their storage, and one that is processual (873). The latter model takes weaving as its metaphor and suggests that memories are combined with other material, thus producing “new and different patterns, designs, forms . . . it will bring forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self” (874). In fact, the entire novel might be seen as such an enactment of memory. The narrator must travel through the mud, the dark, to get to pieces of information that tell him who he is or isn’t, often both simultaneously. Not only is the act of retrieval a process fraught with peril, but

processing retrieved material threatens to unhinge, and does unhinge, the narrator's epistemological centers. Thus, he is forced to say of his world: "it's the place without knowledge" (123).

The very methods by which he knows, perceives, and analyzes are compromised and subject to destruction with the acquisition of each "new" piece of information.<sup>25</sup> It is not necessarily true that the images the narrator sees or the voices he hears are new, but they always seem to baffle him with their newness. He processes each memory as if what he is remembering is happening to him afresh. And, in a way, it is. Augustine's processual model suggests that the storage of a memory, its burial in the muck, does not prevent mutability. In fact, it seems that the further removed from a memory the narrator is, the deeper it is buried, the more it appears to have changed when he reprocesses it in the novel. He speaks of memory as something which is "all-important" yet a "voice . . . truly changeable" (15). It seems that it is changeable both in storage and retrieval.

Despite his assertion of the importance of remembering, the narrator exhibits a certain ambivalence toward "memory / we're talking of my memory / not much / that it's getting better / that it's getting worse / that things are coming back to me / nothing is coming back to me" (15). Thus, very early in the *How It Is*, the narrator has set up a dual attitude toward memory that the entirety of the novel will treat, questioning without remorse, answering with the utmost reticence. The end of part two illustrates this ambivalence as the narrator begins to catechize his victim, Pim, a process to which he will later subject himself:

they are not memories / no / he has no memories / no / nothing to prove he was  
ever above / no / in the places he sees / no / but he might have been / yes /



skulking somewhere / yes / hugging the walls / yes / by night / yes / he can't  
affirm anything / no / so one can't speak of memories / no / but at the same time  
one can speak of them / yes (97)

One can speak of memories because, in this work, memory is entangled with  
imagination.<sup>26</sup>

But this imaginative memory is plagued by a sense of inferiority. When the narrator recalls a "little scene," he feels forced to qualify and disparage it: "I couldn't have imagined it / I couldn't" (89). If he does not imagine the information that he is relating, then he must be remembering it. The problem lies in the fact that he can not decide. Despite his indecision, he manages to offer the only acceptable answer to this question, a phrase that I have quoted before: "life . . . invented / remembered / a little of each" (72). If *How It Is* may be read as an exploration of memory, we must also recognize that it seeks to redefine the notion of memory to some extent. Redefinition proves processual. The entirety of the novel is a vacillation between the comforting thought of objective memory and the rigors and responsibilities of a subjective imagination.

Careful readers of *How It Is* will have little difficulty discarding ideas of objectivity and subjectivity as they explore this work and its treatment of imaginative memory or remembered imagination. The notion that we recall events unchanged from an unchanging memory loses its currency, if not its entire epistemological foundation, when a processual model is espoused. Memory, like the imagination which gives it shape, is in a constant state of invention in Beckett's fiction. The first lines of *How It Is*—"voice once without . . . then in me" (7)—are resonated in *Company*, published almost twenty



years later: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine" (7). The tension and relationship between memory and imagination fascinated Beckett throughout his career.

The narrator tethers memory and imagination to an exterior voice that exhibits the defining characteristics of an interior one: "in me that were without / when the panting stops / scraps of an ancient voice in me / not mine" (7). This voice in *How It Is*, which I take to be a manifestation of memory, is complicated by the invisible quotation marks<sup>27</sup> which surround and saturate the novel. I must again raise the quotation issue that I began discussing in the previous chapter. The narrator's constant, and somewhat baffling, use of the phrase "I quote" frustrates our attempts to locate a stable voice. It is, perhaps, helpful to look at the novel in terms of possession or even "ventriloquism" as Singer suggests (135); many voices (selves) speak from the narrative consciousness presented by *How It Is*.

But how can we discuss the illusory yet somehow palpable forces of memory and imagination and the treatment they receive in this novel? While I feel that it is potentially hazardous to attempt overly metaphorical readings<sup>28</sup> of Beckett's work, *How It Is* presents us with the characters of scribe and witness whom one is tempted to read as figurative. Krim and Kram,<sup>29</sup> whom I view as the narrator's approximation of the process of remembering, its *embodiment*, are worth investigating in this context.

The first allusion to Krim and Kram, to scribe and witness, comes on the novel's first page. Here the narrator speaks of "someone listening / another noting" (7). Such a veiled reference can only be confusing to the first-time reader. In fact, there is no critical consensus as to who precisely these figures are, though most are in agreement as to the

nature of their "reality."<sup>30</sup> I have found no criticism that disputes their basic functions, those of listening and notation.

These acts make sense in the context of the page on which they are first mentioned when we consider the narrator's repetition of words like "voice," "quote," as well as variations of "say" and "hear." The novel has already been marked as one highly concerned with utterance, transcription, and preservation. As these are the devices of memory,<sup>31</sup> one is tempted to read external forces (i.e. the "voice without," the scribe and witness principles) as projections or poorly located versions of the self which narrates. I am reluctant to suggest that Krim and Kram act as allegorical figures.<sup>32</sup> Rather I feel, and I realize that the distinction here might seem rather fine, that they are embodiments of memory, that the narrator who never can decide whether he has memories or not chooses to render the process of remembering via the one who listens and the one who notes.

When these figures surface again in part two their functions seem clear, and they are presented as two distinct entities:

all alone / and the witness bending over me / name Kram / bending over us /  
father to son to grandson / yes or no / and the scribe / name Krim / generations  
of scribes keeping the record / a little aloof / sitting / standing / it's not said /  
yes or no / samples / extracts (80)

The narrator, at this point, would have his audience believe that the witness and scribe exist to catalog and to record the particularities of his "life below."<sup>33</sup> He mentions "generations" of scribes, a chain of Krims.<sup>34</sup> Does this suggest that memory is a matrix composed of many recorders? The narrator will reverse his opinion on Krim and Kram and eventually will conclude that they are the same figure (133). However, since most of

the narrator's postulations are temporary at best, we may take the dual recorder idea as one that is just as stable as any other epistemological stance offered in the novel. The narrator revises all of the methods by which he attempts to know his surroundings and himself.

Shortly after the passage quoted above, the narrator recounts a bizarre conversation between Krim and Kram.<sup>35</sup> This particular moment might be the novel's strangest. It might also prove the most telling when we consider that the narrator listens as his memory carries on a discussion with itself, one primarily concerned, as much of the novel is, with cessation. Thus, Kram begins: "no more motion than a slab and forbidden to take our eyes off him / what's the use of that Krim says / his number's up / so is mine / we daren't leave him / quick / all numbers up / it's the only solution" (81). The topic of this "conversation" is either the narrator's or Krim's "last day" and the speaker, here, whoever that might be,<sup>36</sup> realizes that he must "invent / keep busy / otherwise death" (81). Krim is an intimidating figure, "straight as a die / at his stand / ballpoint at the ready / on the alert for the least / never long idle" (81). If Krim and Kram are indicative in some way of the process by which our narrator remembers, the idea that one might be intimidated by this process may strike us as strange. We must remember, however, precisely what is at stake in this passage, what memory really means in the context of a life below. It constitutes the only means of knowing, the only hope of escaping, or, as the narrator puts it: "the sole means of living" (129). Yet memory is the very thing that frustrates hope, escape, and life. To be in dialogue with it is, at least in this work, both to commune with the self and come in contact with something entirely alien, threatening, and perhaps even fatal.

The narrator, or whoever speaks in the passage quoted above, reports on the contents of three notebooks that, we assume, are the property of Krim/Kram. That he has access to them suggests that the witness and scribe figures are parts of the self rendered as external beings, characters that embody the devices of memory. They exist in order to keep records, to tabulate, and to cosmologize, tasks the narrator considers himself incapable of. These notebooks contain three distinctly different types of information. The first is "for the body," cataloging "inodorous farts / stools idem / mud suckings / shudders / little spasms of the left hand / in the sack quiverings of the lower / without sound / movements of the head . . ." (81-82). These are what the narrator has defined as his certainties, his "great categories of being" (14). The second notebook exists solely "for the mutterings / verbatim / no tampering / very little" (82). Here Beckett has installed what many would deem a metafictional apparatus. Certainly, it is a self-reflexive one since the notebook of mutterings refers to the novel of which it is a part. There are a number of passages throughout the work where the narrator's utterances or engravings remind the reader of the book itself, due to similarities of representation.<sup>37</sup>

The third notebook is "for my comments / whereas up till now all pell-mell" (82). There is a notable difference between a manuscript which records "mutterings / verbatim" (82), the function of the second notebook, and one which provides commentary on those mutterings. The problem arises when we remember that these notebooks are associated with the supposedly exterior figures of the witness and the scribe. When the narrator began his discussion of them we were given the image of Krim "at his stand with his ballpoint at the ready" (81); thus the notebooks are authored, or, more precisely, penned, by Krim. By the time the narrator concludes his discussion of

the notebooks the notion of authorship has become even more tenuous; he appears to place himself in the role of commentator. The utterances represented in this part of the novel become "my comments" (82). The issue of authorship and commentator is temporarily concluded when the narrator states: "little private book / these secret things / little book all my own / the heart's outpourings / day by day / it's forbidden / one big book and everything there" (84). By juxtaposing two completely different ideas—writing and owning in contrast to being written and owned—Beckett addresses an important problem, yet refuses to provide an easy or over-simplified answer. He does not, as far as I can tell, offer any answers, but rather complicates issues further. Is all writing mere recording? If so, who or what is being recorded? Who is the author in such circumstances? If we cite memory, have we confessed to (auto)plagiarism?

It is helpful in this context to keep in mind the chief rhetorical device of the Beckettian utterance: presentation and retraction. Beckett's narrators, particularly the one who narrates *How It Is*, present information and almost immediately retract it. While this constant undercutting might seem like continual regress and a refusal to take a position, it is, in a sense, a progressive narrative technique. We progress through a series of utterances that, like memory, engage in double-talk, in assertion and refutation. The result is not complete stasis but revision, reduction. When readers reach the end of a Beckett novel, they encounter truth in the only form in which it can exist in his fiction: a short declarative statement, factual only because various fictive elements have been stripped away. Beckett suggests that discovery lies not in acquisition, but in abdication. Yet this giving over of stories, of fictional devices, the process of lessening, does not purify or reveal the master narrative or narrator. We are given, after painstaking efforts, a

reduced version that acts much in the same way that metonymy does. This part for a whole, the codification of a complex narrative into a heavily freighted declaration like the line which ends *The Unnameable*, mirrors the process of remembering in which entire memorial narratives may be condensed into a single phrase or image.

The device of presentation and retraction in conjunction with Krim and Kram is further complicated when we consider the framing technique which Beckett's narrator employs in the passage quoted above. Krim/Kram enter section two when the narrator decides to provide his audience with "samples / extracts" (80). After the idea of the "little book all my own" is contrasted with "one big book and everything there" the narrator decides, "that's enough / end of extracts / yes or no / yes or no / no / no / no witness / no scribe / all alone / and yet I hear it / murmur it all alone / in the dark / the mud" (84). What are we to make of this refutation of the figures which have been so crucial, appearing on the very first page of the novel? Has the narrator once again proved himself wholly unreliable? This move also further collapses the distinction between memory and imagination.<sup>38</sup> If Krim/Kram are inventions, then out of what are they invented? The narrator provides some valuable hints.

Before refuting their existence, a move he will again make as he will again assert their presence, the narrator remarks on the idea of a "private book" and states, "Krim imagines I am drawing / what then / places / faces / loved / forgotten" (84). In that cluster ideas of memory and imagination are closely linked. It is logical perhaps, as much as one may use logic when interpreting this novel, to read Krim as an embodiment of the imagination, of imaginative memory, the recorder who embellishes because, as scribe, he has been given the power of notation, the agency of writing. Kram, therefore,

would function in the capacity of a memory that records, or listens, one which must, because of its restricted nature, be more strict, objective. Perhaps this accounts for the continual passing of Krams—the narrator mentions “Kram the Seventh” and that he has “dreamt of Kram the Ninth” (82). Memory is too subjective a faculty for an objective component to maintain prolonged survival within it.

But how long does such a reading hold when we consider the narrator’s refutation of the existence of these figures? Perhaps worse is the suggestion that their roles are interchangeable: “Krim to Kram / roles reversed” (93). If the roles (a term interesting for its connotations of performance) of Kram and Krim, of memory and imagination are truly reversible, then they are identical. Whether something is imagined or remembered makes no real difference. Beckett’s novel questions whether or not one ever possesses the knowledge to distinguish between memories and the imagination. Thus the paradox which I have before quoted begins to acquire a certain significance that looks very much like truth: “so one can’t speak of memories / no / but at the same time one can speak of them / yes” (97).

Just as the second section ends with a benediction for the “memories of scenes past” (98) the third section begins with an invocation of an “imagination spent” (103). The narrator goes on to explain in his halting way: “imagination on the decline having attained the bottom / what one calls sinking” (104). The third section will be a contradiction of that very assertion since it proves a series of imagined formulae that attempt to account for the existence of the narrator and his possible companions in the life below.



Krim and Kram again surface after the bulk of these speculations to be temporarily reduced by the narrator to one figure: "Kram who listens / Krim who notes / or Kram alone / one is enough / Kram alone / witness and scribe" (133). If the witness and scribe figures are in any way indicative of memory and imagination, then it is important that we observe, at this point, their collapse into a single entity. This is a move that Beckett has suggested since their introduction on the first page of the novel: "someone listening / another noting / or the same" (7). The merging of memory with imagination, their qualities brought together in a single signifier, Kram, might be the catalyst for the unraveling of the entire narrative. When memory is disauthenticated by a subjective imagination, the sole means of knowledge becomes storytelling, an activity our narrator is quite accustomed to. However, this storyteller repeatedly reminds us of the illness of his craft: "all that / among other things / so many others / ill-spoken / ill-heard / ill-remembered" (135). *How It Is* does not so much wind down as it unravels. Beckett chose to take denouement a step further than most authors are willing. The last mention of Krim and Kram, which might also be the last mention of memory and imagination, comes during the narrator's final disavowal of his narrative: "all that / yes / Krim and Kram / yes / all balls / yes" (145). While Beckett demonstrates the manner in which memory and imagination blend, he also shows the dangers involved when they are merged. When witness and scribe become one, storytelling becomes both empowered and threatened.<sup>39</sup> If J. E. Dearlove is right and the "imaginative murmur . . . is the source and substance of the universe" (154) of *How It Is*, then that universe rests on shaky ground.<sup>40</sup>



After the narrator has discounted the existence of Krim and Kram, figures I have read as being embodiments of imagination and memory, chiefly of the latter, he posits the idea of “an ear above / somewhere above” listening to the “murmurs innumerable” (134). The concept of a listener appears crucial to the narrator. He desperately wants “an ear / a mind to understand / a means of noting / a care for us / the wish to note / the curiosity to understand / an ear to hear / even ill” (134). This organ is spoken of in metaphysical terms. Reception of the message from below is elevated to a spiritual status.

Perhaps even more interesting than our narrator’s desire for metaphysical intervention is the confession that his narrative consists of “scraps of other scraps of an antique rigmarole” (134). Such a statement indicates a number of things. The phrase “scraps of other scraps” describes the narrative itself as one pieced together from other pieces. There is no assertion of cohesion, of a coherent narrative. In fact, if we begin to accept the reading that *How It Is* is nothing more than an extended quotation, we must concede that it is a quotation of a quotation. Such a thought combined with the notion that all we are reading has happened before, that the narrative is a mere extension of an “antique rigmarole” offers the Beckettian idea of history, a story composed of memory and imagination, delivered by a series of internal scribes and witnesses. Thus Beckett takes a seemingly absurd, even implausible, existence and causes it to speak to those things which most all of us are concerned with. The concerns of the life below are not radically different from those of our life above. On closer consideration, the similarities are more striking than the differences.

Earlier I mentioned the hazards involved when attempting to interpret Beckett's work in allegorical terms. A twenty-two year old Beckett, speaking of *Finnegans Wake* in "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce," claimed that Joyce's novel is "not *about something*; it is *that something itself*" (117). This much-quoted passage can be seen as a reference to Beckett's own art, an art that steered further and further away from the symbolic<sup>41</sup> as it progressed. There is the temptation to use realist<sup>42</sup> terms in an attempt to describe Beckett's project, yet such terms leave much to be desired, for they are hardly concrete ("real") enough. I suggest the term "literalist,"<sup>43</sup> as an option; however, it remains merely an approximation. "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce" opens with a warning: "The danger is in the neatness of identifications" (107). It is one we should keep in mind.

Having said that, I contend that Beckett, at times, employs certain figurative devices in his novel. In the previous chapter I spoke of such figuration as embodiment. Krim and Kram embody the functions of memory, but they do so externally. The narrator chooses to displace his faculties, representing them in scribe and witness figures that he positions outside himself. There is also an internal embodiment of memory in *How It Is*, the narrator's second set of eyes which are mentioned quite early in the novel, and rather obliquely. In the midst of his exposition the narrator states: "I see me on my face / close my eyes / not the blue / the others at the back / and see me on my face" (8). We should be attentive to the shape of this sentence, for, as Beckett reminds us, "it is the shape that matters" (qtd. in Cronin 232). The narrator is attempting to explain how he is able to "see" himself on his face, something that is clearly a physical impossibility if he lies face down in mud. As he "recapitulate[s]" (8) he manages to justify this vision by calling its

literality into question. The narrator does not “see” himself for there are no eyes “at the back”; yet, he does and there are.

The failure to account for his ability to perform certain functions<sup>44</sup> forces the narrator to embody them in either an internal or external fashion. Memory, in a figurative sense, is the present looking back to the past. Like memory, the eyes in the back of the narrator’s head enable him to “look” backwards.<sup>45</sup> These “eyes” allow him to view the “little scenes in the mud / or memories of scenes past” (98) that he speaks of with urgency during his catechizing of Pim at the end of the second part. Beckett’s grotesque portrayal of the memorial act, his depiction of the remembering man as a four-eyed creature, suggests that memory is something monstrous, a deformed vision. For what does it mean to be able to view one’s self through *closed* eyes in the back of the head? Beckett’s figure is doubly impossible: “I . . . close my eyes . . . see me on my face” (8). Not only are we dealing with fictitious apertures, but ones through which sight is possible only when closed.

As soon as these “eyes” close, various “images,” which various critics<sup>46</sup> read as memories, begin to flood the novel: the narrator watches an old man through a spy glass; he views himself in his crib amidst urine and excrement; he sees the “slender wings of butterflies” that he “scissored into slender strips” (9). The arrival of such images, memories of his “life in the light” (9), upon the shutting of the “eyes at the back” indicates their function as memorial devices.

The idea of a four-eyed narrator appears incongruous with the many realistic details that comprise the novel. When it seems that the narrator has accounted for such an incongruity by establishing the “eyes at the back” as a function of memory, as

“organs” which allow him to view the past, his other set, “the blue,” which I take to mean his “actual” eyes, only complicates such a hypothesis. This complication occurs the next time that the eyes are mentioned: “the eyes / the blue / closed no doubt / no / since suddenly another image / the last” (28).<sup>47</sup> The images viewed by the narrator in the first part of *How It Is* constitute scenes from his life above; the reader assumes that they are memories from a brighter and more vertical existence. However, what are we to make of such images if they are visible to the narrator’s actual eyes as they are in the passage quoted above? If Beckett wanted to employ a figurative set of eyes to deal with memory, then these should be the receptors for such visions. Perhaps the answer lies in the status of this “image” as a product of the imagination rather than memory. At least twice within this image the narrator qualifies certain specifics with the phrase “I imagine” (29). Does this mean that the blue eyes deal with imagined scenes while the “eyes at the back” process remembered ones? While this is a possibility, I think that here Beckett alters the conventions he has set up in the novel. Though he has shown that the process of remembering will be embodied by a set of fictive eyes, Beckett prevents us from accepting this embodiment as fact by installing an element of confusion which compounds the narrator’s faculties. Later the narrator will confess to the difficulty he experiences in using his eyes; they cause him to “mix up all” (107).

The next time eyes are mentioned they prove to be “the same old two” and, as one might expect, they are closed (42-43). What proves particularly interesting is their conflation with the external embodiments of memory, Krim and Kram: “he would need good eyes / the witness / if there were a witness / good eyes / a good lamp / he would have them / the witness / the good eyes / the good lamp” (44). The conflation of the

disparate proves to be one of Beckett's chief means of association. United in the passage quoted above are both of the "figures" of memory that we have seen so far in *How It Is*. I would argue that like Krim and Kram, who embody the functions of imagination and memory, the narrator's eyes serve a dual purpose: they remember and imagine. The imaginative capabilities of the narrator's eyes are underlined in a passage in which he has one of his few "religious" visions: "raise the eyes / look for faces in the sky / animals in the sky / fall asleep / and there a beautiful youth / meet a beautiful youth with golden goatee clad in an alb / wake up in a sweat / and have met Jesus in a dream" (45). If we take the "eyes at the back" to be figurative and the "blue ones" to be actual, then what we have encountered in this dream is their conflation. The narrator raises actual eyes in a figurative context. Thus we are given an "image / not for the eyes / made of words / not for the ears" (45). While such an observation makes sense, we are still left to question which faculty the image is made for. Are the "eyes at the back" responsible for witnessing images like these? If so, they take on themselves the burden of imagination in addition to that of memory. As with Krim and Kram these processes are intertwined.

While there are numerous mentions of eyes in section two, there is no reference to "the eyes at the back" and no exploration of the eyes as an embodiment of memory. One may speculate about the reasons for such an omission. Perhaps Pim distracts our narrator from employing such figurations, though we must remember that it is here that Krim and Kram make their most notable appearances. When the eyes at the back resurface in the third section, they reward those who have assiduously tracked them.

It is here that we get a clearer sense that the figurative eyes afford the narrator the opportunity to look into things he would not normally be capable of seeing. Thus he

relates: "clench the eyes / I quote on / not the blue / the others at the back / see something / somewhere / after Pim that's all is left / breath in a head / nothing left but a head / nothing in it" (104). The unpunctuated phrases of the novel poses a difficulty here. Are we to read this passage "see something . . . after Pim" or "see something [PAUSE] after Pim that's all is left" (104)? The difference is crucial, especially when we are attempting to tease out the relationship of the "eyes at the back" to memory and imagination. While I recognize the possibility that the first might be the more correct reading (or that Beckett would allow a both/and paradigm instead of an either/or) I choose to follow the second. I do this for a simple reason. The eyes the narrator describes seem to be objects which look back in time, not ones which see into the present of "after Pim," a present in which our narrator exists.

Yet, what is it that the narrator sees with these clenched eyes? I surmise that this strained action is meant to activate a memory and an imagination that resist activation. Beckett's narrators are often at war with their faculties, especially their internal ones. What he conjures, however, and is pleased with once it is conjured, is "a sack / bravo / colour of mud / in the mud / quick say a sack / colour of its surroundings" (105). The sack has been a constant throughout. The existence of most of the novel's postulations (i.e. Pim, Krim and Kram, Bom, etc.) are called into question, yet the sack and the mud remain unquestionably real; they are certainties.<sup>48</sup> Thus, they act as devices which focus the narrator's attention on the present, consequently taking his mind off a past which he has spent the course of the novel attempting to install himself in. It is curious that the figurative eyes are responsible for yielding such eminently attainable objects. The narrator's concerted effort to employ eyes which have before been capable of retrieving

various images from above, here yield only a commonplace item, one of the novel's less interesting constants. Readers tend to forget that the narrator's sack burst and was abandoned in the first section.<sup>49</sup> What we may be observing here is a reconciliation of the memory/imagination with reality. The sack, which the narrator fetishizes throughout the novel, is more certifiably "real" than the various images/memories that he recalls. Thus, in the final section, the narrator, using an ever-weakening memory, is able to recall something which readers can verify from the first section of the novel. This clenching of the "eyes at the back" in order to produce the image of the sack constitutes the novel's only valid memory—valid in the sense that the reader is able to certify this memory. As readers we remember that the narrator had a sack in which he kept sardine tins and that he placed no small amount of importance on this piece of luggage.<sup>50</sup> When, in the third section, he is able to recall it, we are, if sympathetic to his concerns, pleased with this recovery. However, we must keep in mind that not even the sack escapes the repudiation of the narrator's final catechism: "no sack either / no / not even a sack with me / no" (146).

Satisfied with the success of this clenching of the "eyes at the back," the narrator attempts it again with a different objective in mind. He wants to recover something more interactive than his sack: "things said to me / said of me / to whom / else of whom / else clench the eyes / try and see another to whom / of whom / to whom of me / of whom to me / or even a third / clench the eyes / try and see a third / mix up all that" (107). This gesture ultimately ends in failure. And it is not surprising. The narrator simply wishes to solve the riddle which plagues so many of Beckett's protagonists: is there company? Is



there anything certifiable outside the self? Can one even rely on the self for company?

These are questions, however, which memory cannot answer.

Company, as Beckett's novel bearing the same name suggests, is unknowable:

"[i]f the voice is not speaking to him it must be speaking to another. . . To another of that other. Or of him. Or of another still. To another of that other or of him or of another still . . . So with what reason remains he reasons and reasons ill" (6-7). In the final analysis, at least in our narrator's, the voices one hears and the images one sees might only be a product of oneself. The final clenching of the eyes, this last attempt to envision a world outside of present-tense solipsism in which the narrator is encased, provokes a series of cosmological formulations. The narrator has already informed us that he "always loved arithmetic / it has paid me back in full" (37). Pages 107-143 verify the first part of that statement but contradict the second. This part of section three is devoted to mathematical formulas whereby the narrator seeks to discern the nature and number of his kin; if he has any, that is. It is as if, his "eyes at the back" having failed him, he chooses to resort to arithmetic. However, science proves incapable of solving the epistemological nightmare that is the life below. Math is purely a frustration that leads him to the conclusion that he is alone, that "all these calculations . . . explanations . . . the whole story from beginning to end . . . completely false" (144). The repudiation is almost total:

this business of a procession / yes / never any procession / no / nor any  
journey / no / never any Pim / no / nor any Bom / no / never anyone / no /  
only me / no answer / only me / yes / so that was true / yes / it was true



about me / yes / and what's my name / no answer / WHAT'S MY NAME /  
screams / good (146)

The narrator will not disavow himself. For all the negations and erasures of *How It Is*, the novel, finally, refuses to efface the self, the site of memory and imagination. If memory is slighted at the novel's end with the narrator's repudiation of his "autobiography" composed of memories and images of a life above and below, then his imagination is exalted. When we tell stories we recite from our memory and/or embellish with our imagination. To say part of one's story "never" was, never existed in reality, is to affirm one's imaginative capabilities. The denial of memory's contribution to narrative as a shaping and a driving force means the exaltation of the imagination, or vice-versa.

Yet, how much attention should we devote to the end of the novel, to this assertion of never was? Ultimately it is problematic to place an enormous amount of weight on the novel's end. The information conveyed there is no more (or less) true than any other part of the novel. To read the closing words of *How It Is* as more accurate than the novel's other sections is to stumble into the same trap in which we continually find the narrator. It is merely desire for the end, for closure that will never come, which cannot come. This desire is synonymous with intolerance. Those who find it difficult to accept the present tense on its own terms will always find "something wrong there." In a novel that is so concerned with how memory functions in an atemporal context, it is ludicrous to demand truth and resolution at the end.

Yet, at the same time, Beckett delivers it: "good / good end at last / of part three and last / that's how it was / end of quotation / after Pim / how it is" (147). The novel ends

with the title because it must "end" with the title. It forces us to accept the present tense as the only certifiable reality and then fractures that reality by allowing a nebulous past to intrude. The final paragraph that I have quoted above presents the work in miniature. It forces us to reconcile the concrete and undeniable present, the "is," with a past which may or may not have existed, the "was." The "is" will inevitably become the "was;" what is now certifiable, concrete must become an unstable narrative which we will be forced to construct and reconstruct.

The action of *How It Is* is chiefly comprised of torture.<sup>51</sup> The second section of the novel is almost wholly concerned with the narrator's torment of Pim, his attempts to provoke speech from a "dumb / limp / lump" (52). This is accomplished with the aid of a "table of basic stimuli" a series of painful communicative devices (i.e. "nails in armpit," "blade in arse," "thump on skull," "index in anus," "clap athwart arse") which the narrator delivers with the intention of producing various effects.<sup>52</sup> Critics have commented on the sadism<sup>53</sup> of these actions, interpreting them as the extortion of speech<sup>54</sup> and linking them in various ways with the written and spoken utterance.

I find it interesting and rather odd that in a novel so obsessed with the recovery of memories we encounter long passages which detail the torture of one of the novel's few characters by the other. Though others are mentioned, *How It Is* foregrounds two characters, Pim and the narrator, and stresses their importance to the narrative.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Beckett keeps this work in line with his other pieces which deal primarily with two characters (*Molloy*, *Mercier and Camier*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, etc.) whose dealings with each other seem predicated on a cruelty both desired and despised.<sup>56</sup> Such an assertion leads us to ask a number of questions that are worth considering in relation to this discussion. What does a novel so concerned with memory gain by introducing the theme of torture? What do two such seemingly different devices have to do with each other? And, most importantly, what might Beckett be suggesting about their relationship? I believe that the answer to these questions might be found if we investigate the way that torture serves as the surrogate for an agency which the narrator does not possess and as a distraction from the predicament in which he is stuck.

The narrator will go on to speak of his "table of basic stimuli" as a "script" (69). Such a term, apart from its obvious dramatic connotations, carries a certain amount of weight as a mnemonic device. Pim becomes the narrator's surrogate for memory. One is released somewhat, distracted, from the agonies of probing the self when allowed to inscribe another. This is precisely what happens as the narrator begins to "carve . . . on Pim's back . . . from left to right / and top to bottom . . . Roman capitals" (70). This distraction from the agony of the present tense that I spoke of in the second chapter also enacts the most basic function of memory, that of recording.

But what is it that the narrator carves? If this act of inscription proves a surrogate for memory then we expect the narrator to write a memoir. What he writes looks like anything but that: "YOU PIM / pause / YOU PIM / in the furrows / here a difficulty / has he grasped / no knowing" (71). This appears to be naming, plain and simple.<sup>57</sup> Our narrator crawls to his creature, invents a name, carves it on his back, voila.

An earlier passage clarifies this somewhat, and shows what we have witnessed is indeed naming, and that it is anything but simple: "when this [the name "Pim"] has sunk in I let him know that I too Pim / my name Pim / there he has more difficulty / a moment of confusion / irritation / it's understandable / it's a noble name" (60). This passage indicates the reason our narrator settled on "Pim" as a name for his creature; it was his own name. It is that "own," and the idea of name ownership, that remains troubling. Where did the narrator receive his name? Apparently he received it from one like "the one I'm waiting for":

oh / not that I believe in him / I say it as I hear it / he can give me another /  
it will be my first / Bom he can call me / Bom / for more commodity / that

would appeal to me / m / at the end and one syllable / the rest indifferent //  
BOM scored by finger-nail athwart the arse / the vowel in the hole / I  
would say a scene from my life he would oblige me to have had (60)

In a sense, the naming process is remembering as it is a reenactment, learned, and therefore remembered, behavior. The narrator simply repeats, re-members, what was done to him by a figure named Bom<sup>58</sup>: “the day comes / I come to the day / Bom comes / YOU BOM / me Bom / ME BOM / you Bom / we Bom” (76).

Pim becomes the narrator’s page, the tablet upon which he will write, reenacting behaviors from the past. This creature’s engraved body begins to mirror the typographical layout of *How It Is*<sup>59</sup>: “unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection with the nail of the index until it falls and the worn back bleeding passim” (70). As written-torture and memory become conflated, the novel’s meanings acquire a resonance that allows these seemingly disparate elements to cohere.

If Beckett’s novel suggests that remembering is a torturous process then we should seek to understand precisely how imagination plays into this matrix of cognition and torture. In previous chapters I have counterpoised memory and imagination, attempting to discern if *How It Is* draws a line between the two or if it merely collapses them. In the context of the present discussion I believe that we can see that as memory becomes conflated with torture, imagination is drawn in as well.

Perhaps the word that best typifies the function memory and imagination serve is the one that the narrator uses as he carves his messages on Pim’s back: invention. In such a context this word implies creation, production. Remembering and imagining are tools used to create, and both become blurred as the creative act takes place: “invented /

remembered / a little of each / no knowing" (72). The narrator is here referring to "that life . . . said to have been his" one which he will appropriate to some degree (72). As he extorts speech from Pim, he takes his stories, stealing idyllic moments from his creature in order to manufacture a life for himself.<sup>60</sup> We watch as the narrator adopts another life, or a memory from another's life:

that thing above / he gave it to me / I made it mine / what I fancied / skies  
especially / and the paths he crept along / how they changed with the sky /  
and where you were going on the Atlantic / in the evening / on the ocean /  
going to the isles and coming back / the mood of the moment less  
important / the creatures encountered / hardly any / always the same / I  
picked my fancy / good moments / nothing left (72)

Such a passage bears quotation, I believe, as it constitutes the longest and most exotic image in the novel. This evocation of a paradisiacal island scene could not be more out of place in a novel of the mud. It testifies, perhaps, to what the narrator calls "the proportion of invention" which he believes to be "vast assuredly" (72).

But invention to our narrator is usurpation. Pim proves much more than a "dump / limp / lump" (52). He becomes a surrogate for our narrator's memory and imagination, providing the narrator with material for his "invention." It is no wonder our narrator relishes his sojourn with Pim, or laments his departure. Pim spares the narrator work, something all of Beckett's protagonists seek to avoid. In light of this it is surprising that so little is done to prevent Pim's leaving. Perhaps the sustained physical effort the narrator would be forced to exert in order to keep Pim outweighs the benefits of his possession. The conservation of energy remains a principle concern throughout the

novel, and critics such as Howard Harper are right to talk about it in terms of entropy and heat death (270). However, the narrator releases Pim for a reason more pertinent to the present discussion. The arrival of Bom has been anticipated since the novel's beginning, and the figure will only come if Pim leaves. This constitutes equanimity in Beckett's work, the chief "justice" in the life below.

Despite the narrator's gestures at autonomy, he continually reminds us of the possibility that he is incapable of remembering, imagining, or inventing anything, that he only has a voice because one has been lent him, presumably by Bom. As the narrator puts it: "I talk like him / Bom will talk like me / only one kind of talk here / one after another" (76). In the scheme of *How It Is* the tormenters are always mute (119). Thus, the narrator's obsession with Pim's voice is partly a result of not having one of his own. In a sense he relishes the thought of Bom's arrival: "he's coming / I'll have a voice / no voice in the world but mine" (76). It appears that the thing chiefly valued in the world of *How It Is* is expression. The problem is that the narrator feels too acutely, the words of the Beckett character to Georges Duthuit in *Three Dialogues*, 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" (103). If Pim has acted as the narrator's mouthpiece, serving as a distraction from the present and a surrogate for his memory, then Bom, if he arrives, will offer the opposite. Yet, the arrival of Bom is not dreaded; it is the journey to Pim, part one, or the waiting for Bom, part three, that proves most painful. Waiting, as many of Beckett's heroes illustrate, forces one to accept the responsibilities of the present, to ruminate upon them.

Torture in the context of this novel distracts the self<sup>61</sup> from rumination. The narrator, by inflicting pain, allows his consciousness and attention to be scattered. In part two of *How It Is* we do not observe the type of introspection that we encounter in parts one and three, where torture, in a literal sense, is not an issue. This is partly what the narrator means when he demands, "I can efface myself behind my creature when the fit takes me" (52). Accepting the role of torturer means accepting responsibility for another's pain. It can also mean denying responsibility for one's own. Thus, it is an effacement of feeling, but not its extinction. Torture is a means of filtering sensation through one's victim. The narrator effaces himself *behind* Pim. To be able to "gorge on his [Pim's] fables" the narrator must "give him a name / train him up / bloody him all over with Roman capitals" (62).<sup>62</sup> Perhaps such a process goes beyond surrogacy and ventures into parasitism. The narrator is starved for expression: the imagination that it takes to express and ability to remember what has been expressed. As he tortures Pim he is provided with a means to "express" and a memory to appropriate.

But why bother? What does memory and imagination offer the narrator? And how can we understand him as we gorge on the fables of a popular culture (i.e. the "be here now" cult) that tells us life lived proves simpler and less painful than life remembered or life anticipated. If we think of memory as backwards looking, and imagination as forwards looking, then we see that either of these devices prevents an individual from concentrating on "how it is / present formulation" (129). However, I argued in the second chapter that the present is precisely what our narrator seeks a respite from.



Thus torture is revealed both as a means of escaping the present and a way of gaining access to memory and imagination, faculties our narrator believes are “impossible” (80). Yet, what will it be like for our narrator when he is the recipient of the same type of torture he inflicts in part two? Bom,<sup>63</sup> like the narrator, is the mirror image of Pim, the tormentor approaching his victim. He is also a being who, if we can apply our narrator’s consciousness to him, seeks a past and future, a creature frustrated by an eternal present. The narrator justifies his failure to present a fourth section, one that would detail his torture at the hands of Bom, for the simple reason that he feels such a move would be repetitious:

the two couples / that in which I figure in the north as tormentor / and that  
in which I figure in the south as victim / compose the same spectacle  
exactly // having already appeared with Pim in my quality of tormentor /  
part two / I have not the cognizance of a part four in which I would appear  
with Bom / in my quality of victim (131)

For the narrator it is “sufficient for this episode to be announced” (131). Perhaps this is true. If his interaction with Bom really does “compose the same spectacle exactly,” then there is no need to include it. However, we must remember that we are dealing with a narrator whose chief rhetorical device is repetition. Critics have gone to some pain to point out the various phrases that are recycled throughout the novel.<sup>64</sup> Why would a voice given to duplication be concerned with the repetition of such a significant scene? The elision of the Bom episode appears more suspect the more one thinks about it. Can we assume from this that the narrator is hiding the enactment of his being tortured for a

reason? And if so, what precisely is he hiding? What does this particular absence tell us about the story and the story's treatment of memory and imagination?

For whatever reason, the narrator refuses to reveal this scene. However, if we want to speculate about its possible contents, we must trust the narrator and attempt to reconstruct the episode from what we are told about its counterpart, part two, the torture of Pim. We might also look at the first mention of Bom and see how the absence of this character frustrates our attempts to construct a past or predict a future; he is a creature both remembered and imagined but never presented. This is a curiosity that cannot but make this figure all the more suspect.

Bom is alluded to throughout the first section, but he is not named until early in section two. As the narrator does so, he immediately calls attention to the arbitrariness and the negotiability of names in the life below: "the one I'm waiting for . . . Bom . . . m at the end / and one syllable / the rest indifferent" (60). In this scheme of things the torturer imposes his name on his victim and thus is revealed the naming process of *How It Is*. Yet, as we notice from the above quoted material, there is the suggestion that the name is given not only out of cruelty, but out of convenience as well, an idea that our narrator reinforces: "BOM / scored by finger-nail athwart the arse / the vowel in the hole" (60). One of my points in highlighting these details is that our narrator's torturer, or his name at least, is associated with utility. Torture, which I have argued above as a device that provides relief from the constraints of the present tense, in such a context is made convenient. One desires it because it furnishes a respite, a distraction from the present. Pleasure and pain are reversed in the sadistic economy of *How It Is*. Torment is pleasurable because of what it negates, the present painful because of what it includes.

Bom teaches our narrator this diversion, teaches him a way to escape an eternal present. If a diversion is all that is needed to efface oneself, it little matters whether the narrator is the proponent or recipient of this torture. As the narrator puts it: "what the fuck / I quote / does it matter who suffers" (131).<sup>65</sup>

At the end of Beckett's novella "The Expelled," the narrator says: "I don't know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I'll be able to tell another" (25). I feel similarly in concluding this thesis: that my selections were arbitrary, that another topic would have served me as well, and that perhaps, some other time, I will again write on Beckett.

However, unlike the voices that narrate his fictions, I cannot repudiate this "narrative." I have drafted, researched, revised, reordered, and edited the entirety of this manuscript. I am willing to admit that familiarity breeds contempt and to assert that over-familiarity engenders nausea, desperation, and hatred. And though there have been times in writing this thesis when I have felt desperate, times during editing when I have hated it, I submit my manuscript and believe that what I have said here bears saying.

*How It Is* proves a novel obsessed with memory, yet its treatment of memory is so ambivalent that readers can easily miss what I have described as an obsession. The continual rejection of the memorial and the reliance, even insistence, upon it is just as disconcerting as it is compelling. One wonders why, in the third paragraph of the novel, the narrator invokes his "memories" (7). Can memory even exist within a narrator for whom sequence has lost its meaning? Absolutely not. And yet, despite the denial of sequence and the frustration of temporality, the narrator of this strange book has his memories and forgets them.

By portraying memory in this fashion is Beckett attempting to make a larger statement about the way we remember? Can there even be talk of a "we" in relation to

the “I” which narrates *How It Is*? Those are questions that I feel are of the utmost importance and it is here that they should be answered.

But I cannot. I would like to believe that *How It Is* reaches outside itself, that it can inform how it is for us, how it is with our memory. But I cannot even speculate. I know nothing about cognitive psychology, its advances or frustrations in researching the way we remember. It seems to me possible that Beckett’s novel could be “accurate” in its depiction of memory, that its depiction has currency beyond the confines of the page.

There is much work to be done with cognitive psychology in relation to memory in Beckett’s fiction. A scientific comparison of the way memory is thought to operate and the manner in which Beckett depicts it would prove useful in a number of ways. The project will, no doubt, prove long and arduous; I wish whoever starts it the best of luck.

The narrator of “The Expelled” makes an interesting declaration at the beginning of his narrative: “Memories are killing” (9). I did not understand what such a statement meant until I began to tease out the relationship of memory to *How It Is*. Memory frustrates us as few things can. What narrative is more disjointed, protean, confusing, and, finally, compelling? It is in memory and memory only that we hear ourselves speak of ourselves. And the speech is poor, inaccurate, and difficult to certify. Why even bother? Why not say with the narrator of *How It Is*: “I haven’t been given memories this time” (11) and have done with it? We cannot do so, however. We cannot even choose to do so. It might be accurate to say we are compelled to remember. Even more accurate to say that we are, like Beckett’s protagonists, condemned to memory. Such condemnation is not death, but it is certainly killing.

<sup>1</sup> Beckett's novel is completely unpunctuated. I follow the example of Susan Brienza in using slashes to "isolate significant phrases" (91) when quoting sections of *How It Is*. A paragraph break is signaled by two slashes (//). While I realize that this practice might be bothersome to certain readers, I feel that it helps to clarify my discussion and facilitates easier reading. Admittedly, such demarcations are somewhat arbitrary as the phrases constituting *How It Is* may be arranged in a variety of combinations.

<sup>2</sup> Brienza states that: "[o]nly the absence of memory makes the eternity of repetition bearable. Having no past or future, the narrator lives in an eternal now . . ." (110). My reading obviously differs from Brienza's here in that I argue that memory is crucial to an understanding of the narrator and the work he narrates.

<sup>3</sup> See the "images" which began on page 9 of the novel. Paul Davies counts twenty-two memories in the work (101).

<sup>4</sup> Early in the novel the narrator says of this character: "Pim / he does not exist" (27). Throughout the work the reality of this being is called into question. Critics such as James Knowlson and John Pilling view Pim as the creation of the narrator (71).

<sup>5</sup> Olney states that "there was among [Beckett's] works a real and intended trilogy—a kind of trilogistic model—in *How It Is*" (106). He goes on to suggest that *How It Is* "provides us . . . with a kind of narrative model of the Trilogy Principle . . ." (*Memory* 106).

<sup>6</sup> Beckett studied and greatly admired Schopenhauer. In a letter to Tom MacGreevy dated 21 Sept. 1937, Beckett, sick with influenza, wrote: "the only thing I could read was

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Schopenhauer. Everything else I tried only confirmed the feeling of sickness. . . it is a pleasure also to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet" (qtd. in Knowlson 248).

<sup>7</sup> Even when "given a fancy" he is "yawning / yawning / always sleepy / little sleep" (19-20).

<sup>8</sup> This appears to be a highly problematic concept among critics. To cite one, Brienza is of the opinion that the "novel is told from the vantage point of the missing part 4" (111). Beckett himself provides the answer to the question if we trust his letter to Donald McWhinnie: "'the 'I' is from the outset in the third part and the first and second, though stated as heard in the present, already over'" (qtd. in Knowlson 413).

<sup>9</sup> Early in the second section the narrator says "you wait and see . . . how I can efface myself behind my creature when the fit takes me" (52). In a sense, the "creature" referred to is Pim. But if Pim is a fabrication, one of the narrator's selves, we must entertain the possibility that the narrator's effacement is one in which he hides behind his own creation. This is a case of the narrator concealing himself behind himself, an interesting concept and one that is, I believe, at work throughout Beckett's oeuvre as his narrators don different masks to effect concealment. It never works since they insist on ripping off the mask. This convention allows Beckett to make a rather startling point about identity.

<sup>10</sup> This view is not without its adherents. Ruby Cohn ("Lyrics" 234) and Frederik Smith, who believes that the novel "documents the process of writing a novel as it is occurring within the artist" (108), are among them. Ursula K. Heise makes an astute point when she asserts that *HUI* "does everything to discourage the reader from thinking of it as a

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written narrative" (254). She tends to favor the argument that the novel is oral/aural rather than written.

<sup>11</sup> See Brienza (116).

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Webb contends that in *How It Is*, the artist is both completely honest and firmly in control to the very end" (168). This control manifests itself through the "ab[ility] to find forms to convey a vision of chaos" (168).

<sup>13</sup> I follow the example of James Knowlson and John Pilling in speaking of the unpunctuated paragraphs of *How It Is* as "versets" (63).

<sup>14</sup> Brienza contends that "Pim is the narrator" (103); Davies asserts that the narrator *only* refutes his narrative at the end (125); Kenner attempts to read the narrator as the older and more devolved M. figure of *Murphy*, *Molloy*, etc. ("Voices" 201-02). While I could provide a lengthy note concerning various critical misconceptions, the contentions of Brienza, Davies, and Kenner illustrate the two issues that the majority of critics have difficulty with: the identity of the narrator, and the (il)legitimacy of his narration.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase, "something wrong there," occurs twenty-two times in the novel. Paul Davies counts twenty-two memories (101). May we deduce from this that something is very wrong with the memories which we are given?

<sup>16</sup> In "Lyrics of Fiction" Ruby Cohn points out that the images in *How It Is*, which I take to be the narrator's memories, are chiefly concentrated in part one, though several surface in part two (235-36). By the third section the "images thin out in a muddy present" (236). Thus, the closer to the present tense the reader gets, the less contrast s/he is given. The past of parts one and two prove much richer imagistically than the present of the final section.



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<sup>17</sup> According to Knowlson, “when Beckett began to write in French rather than in English, he offered by way of explanation the fact that French allowed him to write ‘without style’” (239).

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Trelhoff believes that the rhetorical devices used to create the language of *How It Is* (enantiomorphism, anacoluthon, etc.) work to “give primacy to the oral/aural text over the written” (91). Thus what we encounter in the novel is an attempt to accurately represent the ramblings of a spoken voice. Such a reading provides support for literalist interpretations of *How It Is*.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Harper notes that Beckett’s protagonists “seem to move according to a literary second law of thermodynamics: trapped in a closed system, they degenerate continually toward lower levels of energy” (270).

<sup>20</sup> Brienza, who chooses to see the novel as an utterance tortured out of the narrator in an undisclosed fourth section, a reading that I disagree with, makes some helpful observations about how memory is represented in the novel: “generally descriptions of how it was can be ordered into neat, syntactic units, while the present how it is cannot be described grammatically” (116). Francis Doherty would remind us that “the voice is not remembering simply; it is recreating, questioning and trying to see” (121).

<sup>21</sup> Alan Singer, whose criticism of *How It Is* proves more difficult and much less rewarding than the novel itself, does provide a helpful, if rather aphoristic, comment on the narrator. Singer states that he is “his own ventriloquist’s doll” (154). Such an interesting remark on the narrator’s subjectivity is enriched when we consider Olney’s assertion that, “[m]emory, like narrative, is obsessive in Beckett, but it is ultimately unsuccessful in evoking ‘the first person singular’” (871). Taken together, Singer and

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Olney's comments suggest that Beckett places the "I's of his fiction in quotation marks. He has called the very nature of the subject into question. Can one speak as an "I," or do the various voices that memory replays compromise such an individualistic position?

<sup>22</sup> Davies wants to see "language [in *How It Is*] as an epistemological act," one with truth value (92). Where I have privileged memory, Davies has privileged imagination and asserts "that its powers must be respected as knowledge rather than as personal taste or whim . . ." (126).

<sup>23</sup> Erudition does not, necessarily, give impetus to narrative or the ordering of memory into narrative. Olney argues that "[w]ith Beckett, the impulse to narrate . . . has become irrational and illogical, compulsive, obsessional, repetitive, unwilled and often unwanted but not to be denied" (858). One becomes a narrator not because one has been trained, but because one feels that it is imperative to speak . . .

<sup>24</sup> Brienza makes much of the issue of quotation, finding in it grounds for the disputation of the narrator's authority and voice. She claims that "Pim's extorted voice is actually the voice of the narrator . . ." (116); thus, "Pim is the narrator . . ." in her reading (103). Even Kenner falls into this trap of quotation, and suggests that Pim quotes the narrator who is quoting Bom who is quoting Beckett ("*How It Is*" 140). Ursula K. Heise puts the issue of quotation to rest, I believe, by showing its absurdity. She emphasizes the narrator's phrase "I say it as I hear it / every word / always" (42), asking if this is also part of a quotation (260). Heise goes on to say: "[t]his would open up the rather vertiginous possibility of this other voice being itself only a repetition and quotation of yet another voice it hears, which could be read as yet another quotation, and so forth. One may reject this possibility as absurd, but in that case the words, 'I say it as I hear it

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*every word always*" (emphasis mine) are not literally true, and we must assume that the narrator is sometimes quoting and sometimes commenting on the act of quotation in his own voice. Where, however, does this voice begin and end?" (260). Where indeed? As Heise puts it, "Brienza's hypothesis has its own problems" (258) and attacks her idea that the narrator is speaking from a fourth part where he is being tortured into speech by Bom. See note 16 in Heise's article on 266 for a further attack on Brienza's position.

<sup>25</sup> Through the course of the novel the narrator views twenty-two images, which critics such as Hugh Kenner ("How It Is" 137-38) and Ursula K. Heise (251) view as memories of his life above, or a past, and more pleasant version of his life. Howard Harper argues against such a reading: "One is tempted to call these 'images' memories, especially since some of them are very clearly images of Beckett's own memories, but the narrator resists that temptation—and so should we" (264). Harper errs here, for the narrator does not resist this temptation: "the light goes on / little scenes in the mud / or memories of scenes past" (98). These memories, however, along with the whole of the novel, are repudiated at its end. I will refer to this passage throughout this thesis but quote it at length here to help establish context for the present discussion: "and all this business of above / yes / light / yes / skies / yes / a little blue / yes / a little white / yes / the earth turning / yes / bright and less bright / yes / little scenes / yes / all balls / yes / the women / yes / the dog / yes / the prayers / yes / the homes / yes / all balls / yes" (145).

<sup>26</sup> Doherty paves the way for such a reading with her assertion that "the voice is not remembering simply; it is recreating, questioning and trying to see" (121). In her view the narrator's "memory . . . is artistic invention . . . its 'reality' is not of the same order as 'memory'" (122). Cohn follows suit by conflating the processes of memory and

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imagination as they are represented in the novel ("Lyrics" 232). Perhaps most interesting in this context is H. Porter Abbott's assertion that: "Beckett is showing us how it is with our imagination" ("Other" 145).

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Klaver sees such quotation marks as a device which allows Beckett to add yet another structuring principle to his "never-ending" work, "thus emphasizing its linguistic nature" (377).

<sup>28</sup> While "hazardous," such readings are not without their appeal. William Hutchings offers an amusing interpretation of the novel, viewing it as an extended "scatological metaphor" (87). The narrator, in this reading, is a metaphorical turd moving through a cosmic digestive system toward a celestial porcelain container (73-75). While entertaining, Hutchings must either dismiss or refashion the narrator's memories (82-83) as well as many other details in order to make this clever interpretation work.

<sup>29</sup> Ruby Cohn believes that Beckett puns off the German word for "junk," *krinkram* ("Lyrics" 237).

<sup>30</sup> My reading is they are the narrator's invention. Such an interpretation is borne out by Ruby Cohn ("Lyrics" 237), G. C. Bernard (see Davies 119), Francis Doherty (128), Ursula K. Heise (255), Frederik N. Smith (133), and J. E. Dearlove (161).

<sup>31</sup> Howard Harper who believes that storytelling "turns out to be a major theme, perhaps the theme," acknowledges that Krim and Kram "seem fairly important in the narrative consciousness" (260). If K and K embody memory, it is easy to see why such a statement is true. With these characters, one who listens, another who notes, we have the most basic activity of memory, that of recording. The narrator, who claims to have "no memory" (40), accounts for the function of recording by fictionalizing it. If one insists

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on denying memory and yet is confronted with its reality, then one will create a “fiction,” and I use that term broadly, to account for a record that exists and continues to play despite denial.

<sup>32</sup> Allegory does, in a sense, embody abstract concepts in concrete figures. However, these figures represent concepts that exist outside of the work. In *How It Is*, memory, Krim, and Kram all share the same textual space.

<sup>33</sup> In speaking of Krim and Kram, Dearlove asserts that: “Their transcript is the book we hold” (161). This shifts the authorship of *How It Is* from the narrator to the figures he creates. While this reading justifies my interpretation that memory, to some extent, narrates Beckett’s novel, I do not agree that Krim and Kram are the “authors” of *How It Is*.

<sup>34</sup> Later in the novel when Krim and Kram collapse into one entity, the narrator will refer to Kram as the “me bending over me” (133).

<sup>35</sup> I am not alone in my interpretation of this passage. Susan Brienza notes that “an imaginary dialogue between Krim and Kram, complete with stage directions, does take place” (97). She refers, however, to a passage that comes somewhat later: “Krim / I cannot credit it / let us take their temperature / Kram / no need / the skin is rosy / Krim / rosy / are you mad / Kram / they are warm and rosy / there it is / we are nothing and we are rosy / good moments / not a doubt” (93).

<sup>36</sup> This passage is particularly confusing, and it is difficult to distinguish between the “words” of Krim/Kram and those of the narrator. In a sense, they are all the narrator’s words as his is the voice that recounts them. Beckett has, I believe, installed an ambiguity in this passage for which there is no explanation. We should keep in mind that

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the issue of who speaks (the identity of the speaker) in Beckett's fiction is an important question, and at times, an unanswerable one.

<sup>37</sup> When the narrator writes on Pim's back in part two he describes his inscription as "unbroken / no paragraphs / no commas / not a second for reflection" (70). Such a passage would have served as a rather accurate blurb for *How It Is*.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Brienza asserts the importance of the imagination and privileges it, I believe, over memory in her discussion of the novel. She states: "what is brought out of the mud, the raw material of the imagination, may be the novel itself" (99).

<sup>39</sup> It might be helpful in this context to restate Paul Davies' contention that the "view of the imagination in *How It Is* . . . suggests that its powers must be respected as knowledge rather than as personal taste or whim . . ." (126).

<sup>40</sup> In *Three Dialogues*, the Beckett character suggests that the universe of the imagination is always shaky and subject to what he calls "failure." However, Beckett assigns this term a different meaning than the one it normally carries: "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world . . . all that is required now . . . is to make of . . . this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (125).

<sup>41</sup> Ruby Cohn, in "Comment c'est par le bout," believes that the objects of *How It Is* "demand symbolic interpretation" (192). Those interested should see pp. 192-95 of her book. Conversely, Leslie Hill contends that the novel "invites" symbolic and allegorical readings only to recant such an invitation: "the fiction as a whole remains radically and disturbingly empty of apparent symbolic purpose" (138).

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<sup>42</sup> Dearlove asserts that “[r]eality is not an issue” when we consider how to interpret Beckett’s novel (155). She views it as a system closed to an external reality: “It remains loyal to the self-imposed limitations of the way the story is told” (155).

<sup>43</sup> Alan Singer, speaking of such concerns in relation to *How It Is* states: “despite its avoidance of the devices of literary realism, the novel is conspicuously free of strategies of figuration associated with the complementary antirealist mode” (124). Raymond Federman takes a firm anti-realist stance in the introduction to his study, calling *Comment c’est* the “rejection of reality” (7). However, as he argues against the idea that the novel is a realist work, he voices the chief reason that I feel it to be, in some way, “realist”: “[The] remnants of realistic memories, presented as concrete images dispersed throughout the narration, are so incompatible with the narrator’s main stream of incoherent thoughts that they emphasize the fraudulence of his present condition” (10). The fact that our narrator has memories, and ones of a “realistic” nature, suggests that we are dealing with a “real” person in a “real” situation. Federman hedges his bet by offering the term “subreality” (7), which seems wholly applicable to the reality of a “life below.”

<sup>44</sup> In the last chapter I argued that Krim and Kram are invented because the narrator cannot account for the function they perform, that of recording. Because the narrator believes that he has “not been given memories this time” (11), when they arrive he renders them as a scribe and witness figure; he embodies the act of remembering.

<sup>45</sup> I have found at least one critic, J. E. Dearlove, who offers support for my reading that the narrator’s “eyes at the back” serve a memorial function, though her gloss on this aspect of the novel is brief. She states: “The important vision is mental rather than



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material. Hence the voice's need for two kinds of eyes: the blue to deal with the physical and 'the others' at the back (page 8) for the psychical" (163). I must stress, however, that Dearlove does not view this "psychical" vision as remembering. She does not believe that the narrator can have memories in a "world without a definable past" (163). She stresses the use of the narrator's word "images": "[u]nlike memories, the images are impersonal and independent of an external reality" (163). Obviously, my interpretation differs greatly from Dearlove in this regard.

<sup>46</sup> H. Porter Abbott states: "Throughout, the scraps of memory from how it is 'above in the light' . . . repeatedly pierc[e] the fabric of [the narrator's] construction in random incisions" ("Original" 100). Susan Brienza quotes Kenner to support her reading that "only the imagistic '[m]emories go into sentences that can be punctuated'" (115).

<sup>47</sup> This "last" image/memory is the novel's longest. It depicts the narrator and a "sweet girl" "exchanging endearments" (30) and constitutes the only "romantic" moment in *How It Is*. In 1956 Beckett published this piece as *L'Image* "on the way to *Comment c'est*" in the French magazine *X: A Quarterly Review* (Gontarski 283).

<sup>48</sup> B. C. Barnard suggests that the mud is proof of "some external reality" (78), evidence that the entirety of the novel cannot be fabrication. His chapter on *How It Is* entitled "'The Thing Itself'" works on the premise that the novel is not divorced from reality as many critics suggest.

<sup>49</sup> Teasing out the riddle of the sack is arduous work. At times it appears that the narrator possesses it, at others it is difficult to say. Toward the end of the first section the sack bursts (46) and early in the second section the narrator states: "it's like my sack / when I



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had it still . . . but I have it still / it's in my mouth / no / it's not there any more / I don't  
have it any more / I am right / I was right" (55).

<sup>50</sup> "the sack attends me / I turn on my right side and take it so light in my arms / the knees  
draw up / the back bends / the head comes to rest on the sack / we must have had these  
moments before" (44).

<sup>51</sup> Elaine Scarry's chapter on torture in *The Body In Pain* provides valuable insight into  
the torture-discourse of *How It Is*. According to Scarry, torture "den[ies], falsif[ies], the  
reality of the very thing it has itself objectified by a perceptual shift which converts the  
vision of the suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they  
represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power. The physical pain is so incontestably  
real that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has  
been brought into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so  
highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used" (27). Scarry's  
assertions, when applied to Beckett's novel, remind us that the narrator tortures Pim  
because his own reality is "contestable" and he himself "unstable." The narrator employs  
torture in an attempt to extend himself, an equation Scarry renders as "the larger the  
prisoner's pain, the larger the torturer's world" (37).

<sup>52</sup> The "table of basic stimuli" runs as follows: "one / sing / nails in armpit / two / speak /  
blade in arse / three / stop / thump on skull / four / louder / pestle on kidney // five softer /  
index in anus / six / bravo / clap athwart arse / seven / lousy / same as three / eight /  
encore / same as one or two" (69).

<sup>53</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit provide intriguing commentary on this aspect of  
Beckett's novel: "To be tortured is the precondition for being humanized, but this has

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nothing to do with any sadism on the part on the torturer or any masochism on the part of the victim. Rather, the torture consists in the fact that as soon as we begin to listen to voices we can't help hearing an injunction to speak" (7).

<sup>54</sup> Brienza suggests that an examination of torture scenes in the novel can help unravel the issue of the narrator's identity; she feels that we are hearing the "extorted voice" of Pim, the "true" narrator of *How It Is* (116). Alan Singer argues against such a stance. He asserts that the "subtle ventriloquism of the narrator" prevents us from discerning his identity: "we can't tell you who is speaking" (135).

<sup>55</sup> Pim is, in some ways, more than a character. He seems to act as a temporal indicator. Thus, the narrator begins his story by telling us "how it was . . . before Pim / with Pim / after Pim" (7). Pim is the only marker in the novel that allows the narrator to make distinctions like before, with, and after. He constructs his narrative around this creature. Such a move is frustrating for a number of reasons. Among them is the narrator's assertion: "Pim / he does not exist" (27). This will be repeated at the end of the novel: "never any Pim / no" (146).

<sup>56</sup> Declan Kiberd reads such a dynamic into *Endgame*, quoting the following lines to support his argument: "HAMM: I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your seivces. CLOV: Ah, pardon, it's I am obliged to you. HAMM: It's we are obliged to each other" (81). According to Kiberd: "[t]his closing declaration is made against all the odds, and it is one of the most beautiful moments in Beckett's writings" (549). I am not sure that I agree with the last clause of his statement, but appreciate the suggestion that Beckett introduces some tenderness into the relationship between Hamm and Clov.

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<sup>57</sup> Interrogation will also prove to be a large part of the torture-discourse inflicted on Pim. Scarry notes that “most historic episodes of torture . . . have inevitably included the element of interrogation: the pain is traditionally accompanied by ‘the Question’” (28). In *How It Is* the narrator’s only fully articulated “Question” turns out to be one which seems irrelevant to his situation: “DO YOU LOVE ME CUNT” (90; 96). See also the variation on 75. Lingis argues that the torturer wants the one he tortures to verbally efface himself: “The torturer demands that he confess that he is incapable of making sense, that his body is incapable of lucidity and discernment, that it is nothing but corruption and putrefaction” (147). If Lingis is correct, then the narrator’s slur becomes more important than his question. In fact, the question becomes irrelevant.

<sup>58</sup> Brienza provides some particularly interesting commentary on this matter, linking it to the quotation issue: “The narrator believes he is not relating a story but receiving one, is not remembering or creating words but mouthing and mimicking them. Perhaps the actual scenario is that the writer is being prompted by the tortured Bom, that is, by an alter ego, a compulsive inner creator” (113). My thesis argues that such a reading is untenable; however, the idea of mimicry and appropriation offered by Brienza, is, I believe, useful.

<sup>59</sup> Further support may be found for the idea of Pim as a textual entity in Brienza’s assertion that “[t]he writing on Pim’s back corresponds to the writing of the monologue: an *E* and an *N* are scored on his [Pim’s] back but never a *D*” (108). This is an astute observation as it explains the “E” and “N” inscription while allowing us to see another example of the narrator’s anxiety over cessation. Phyllis Carey also offers some relevant ideas about the textuality of Beckett’s characters in the context of torture: “‘Pim’

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becomes transparent as the generic name for the object being tormented, while 'Bom' indicates the exploiting, tormenting subject, both serving as objective correlatives of the artistic inner struggle to create, to transform a living imagination into text" (437).

<sup>60</sup> Though she ultimately poses an anti-memorial reading, Dearlove is among those who suggest that Pim "recalls" (163). In "Voices in the Dark" Kenner states: "the subtle argument of *Proust*, that only involuntary memory can briefly restore it [Paradise], is exactly borne out when Pim helps us recall what without him we cannot reach, the vanished days" (199). Kenner's seems to cast the narrator's appropriation of Pim's memories in a positive light. At best, "the vanished days" merely seems to distract the narrator.

<sup>61</sup> David Lloyd asserts that "in the space of 'not being onself' which is opened by desire, a writing takes place which is at once in and of the non-identical 'remains' of identity" (50). Lloyd gives us a key characteristic of resistance literature. Aside from how it informs the present discussion, I find such a connection interesting in that it politicizes Beckett to some extent, a writer widely considered apolitical.

<sup>62</sup> Alphonso Lingis speaks of torture in terms of institutional truth. The latter craves confirmation: "Truth requires institutions that select researchers, teach them the paradigms of successful research, and train them to repeat and apply that research" (136). *How It Is* introduces torture as its "research," one which is not instinctual as it might appear, but institutional as Lingis asserts in his investigation: "To emerge and be maintained, torture presupposes not certain instincts but certain institutions" (141). However solipsistic the narrator of *How It Is* may seem, it is helpful to remember that his actions suggest a tradition and an institution which stands behind it.

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<sup>63</sup> Like most of the “particularities” of the novel, Bom remains ambiguous. Dearlove states: “Pim is victim: Bem is tormentor already endured: Bom is the tormentor to come” (162). Earlier in the thesis I spoke of the “tormentor already endured” as “Bom.” I do so because I cannot find adequate support in the novel for the position that Bem is an entity separate from Bom. The narrator tells us that “Bem and Bom could only be one and the same” (113).

<sup>64</sup> Kenner links such recycling to the concern over memory: “we watch him [the narrator] assembling and reassembling, by the dint of repetition, the data in his memory . . .” (“Voices” 200).

<sup>65</sup> Lingis reminds us that though the torturer is abject, he is separate from and alien to the institution whose work he performs: “The one who tortures is not an agent that maintains the institution and contributes to its truth; he is one outside of public view, one who works in the dungeons and the night, who knows himself to be scum and refuse” (147). While this serves as an accurate description of the narrator, it also shows him to be more akin to the one he tortures than whatever “institution” compels him to commit his (its?) atrocities.

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VITA

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REMEMBERING *HOW IT IS*

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