



**University of
Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA



Volume 12: 2019-20

ISSN: 2041-6776

**Displacement, Refuge and Diasporic Identities in Samuel
Beckett's *Stories and Texts for Nothing***

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English Dissertation: Full Year

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Nothing**

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INTRODUCTION

The postwar period of 1946-1950 is widely considered to be a major turning point in the career of Samuel Beckett, in which he both gained further recognition in literary circles and was able to develop a more mature, refined writing style. During this time, Beckett was prolific, composing a huge catalogue of prose fiction, the first work of which was a short novella entitled 'Suite'. 'Suite', later renamed 'La Fin' ('The End'), would eventually be part of the collection *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, comprised of three novellas, 'The End', 'The Calmative', and 'The Expelled', and thirteen short texts, *Texts for Nothing*. Beckett himself referred to this period as a 'frenzy of writing', while his official biographer, James Knowlson, suggests a parallel between this burst of creativity and spiritual enlightenment, observing that 'he wrote like a man freed from demons'.¹ Through close examination of the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, this study will explore the context surrounding this postwar surge of productivity, investigating how Beckett's experiences of war influenced his writing to create the bleak, darkly humorous style that would define the rest of his career.

'A FRENZY OF WRITING'

The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles.

— Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees'.²

That's where I'd go, if I could go, that's who I'd be, if I could be.

— Samuel Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing 4'.³

Critics have mostly neglected the *Stories and Texts for Nothing* in favour of other more prominent works, notably *Waiting for Godot*, and yet, these strange, dark fictions provide an invaluable insight into Beckett's postwar creative process and influences. Often, Beckett's 'frenzy of writing' is attributed to his decision to write in his second language: two-thirds of the way through writing 'The End', he stopped, paused, and continued writing in French, the language that henceforth, he would always write in first.⁴ Beckett maintained that it is easier to write in French 'without style', and offered an escape from what he called 'Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatism'⁵. Certainly, writing in French allowed Beckett to play with the limitations of language, and demonstrate the value that lies in restricted, minimalistic, prose. At the same time, much of this decision was practical rather than poetic: Beckett lived in France, his everyday language was French, and he was publishing stories in French magazines.

It is, therefore, crucial to consider the uncertainty, crippling poverty, and isolation endured during the years he spent in occupied France and subsequently within the French resistance. After the Resistance cell that Beckett belonged to, Gloria SMH, was betrayed, he was forced to flee to Roussillon, crossing borders, hiding from the Gestapo, and eventually finding refuge in dirty, flea and mice-infested conditions, living in fear of arrest⁶. These experiences are interwoven into the narrative in the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, which, through their discussion of citizenship, displacement, poverty, and the search for shelter, comment with humour on the absurdity of the human condition. In this way, the *Stories and Texts for Nothing* can be understood as a product of Beckett's experience of war.

1 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame, The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996), p. 355.

2 Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 264-274 (p. 270).

3 Samuel Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing (1-13)', in *Samuel Beckett, The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), pp. 100-155 (p. 116).

4 Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People, Writing, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 122.

5 Knowlson, p. 357.

6 Knowlson, pp. 313-323. 75 Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 62.

It should be noted that Beckett's postwar texts, with their French influence and focus on the human condition, reflect a move away from modernist tropes. Previous to 1940, Beckett had published acclaimed essays and reviews, but he had also received a flurry of rejections and suffered from chronic writer's block. Worst of all, he was hidden in the immense shadow of his close friend and colleague, James Joyce. Famously self-deprecating, Beckett once wrote in a letter to his editor, Charles Prentice, that an early story of his 'stinks of Joyce in spite of most earnest endeavours to endow it with my own odours'⁷. It was true; Joycean influences plagued Beckett's writing. Soon after the war, Beckett mostly cut ties with modernism and worked diligently to define his own unique identity as a writer, bringing concepts of humanity, destruction, and isolation to the forefront of his work. The presence of 'humanistic' writing grounded in his personal experiences of war resulted in a darker, minimalist writing style that liberated Beckett's identity and aided his departure from the influence of high modernism.

Exile, and the motif of the exile, is perhaps the most immediate example of 'humanistic writing' in *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. In the *Stories*, a pattern starts to emerge: each tale becomes a ludicrously odd narrative that begins with an expulsion and goes on to detail the miserable existence that results, using cryptic prose that is occasionally shocking in its brutality. The narrator of the *Stories*, an unknown, perhaps unhuman, creature, loosely guides the plot through a winding internal monologue. While Beckett's prose quickly becomes fantastical, the beginnings of each of the *Stories* are, to a point, realistic. In the opening lines of 'The Expelled', the first story in the trilogy, the narrator is preoccupied with the minutiae of his new life as an exile, focusing on specific details of steps, numbers, and figures around him. He begins with the following sentence:

There were not many steps, I had counted them a thousand times, both going up and coming down, but the figure has gone from my mind.⁸

However, as the text progresses, the narrator's preoccupations and, subsequently, his sense of self, become more abstract. Beckett plays with the subconscious mind and progression of time, intertwining blurry memories as he hops between past and present: shortly after the protagonist's initial expulsion, he 'forget[s] how old I can have been', yet explains that it 'just happened'⁹. The narrative then jerkily transitions to the present tense, as the narrator declares, 'I'm lost'¹⁰. This disorienting style represents a deteriorating mind and confused sense of self. It is not clear if the narrative voice belongs to the protagonist, or is an external being who oversees the misfortune of the ejected.

Conflicted identity is a dominant theme in the *Stories*. In 'The Expelled', the narrator is cripplingly self-conscious. Shortly after the expulsion, Beckett's hero worries that 'all trace of me was lost'¹¹. Later, he wanders the streets, pondering his 'impressionable years, those which govern the fabrication of character', then, eventually, 'decided therefore to be myself'¹². Here, Beckett pays attention to the mental repercussions and faltering sense of self that placelessness can invoke, in a way that reflects the experience of refugees during and after the Second World War. In 1943, Hannah Arendt published an essay in the American Jewish literary magazine *The Menorah Journal* entitled 'We Refugees'¹³. In it, she describes the identity struggle that results from forced migration and statelessness, writing that: 'we were reminded that the new country would become a new home.'¹⁴ She then adds: 'the more optimistic among us would even add that their whole former life had been passed in a kind of

7 Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (New York: Springer, 2006), p. 73.

8 Samuel Beckett, 'The Expelled', in Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski, pp. 46-60 (p. 46).

9 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

13 Giorgio Agamben, 'We Refugees', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 49.2 (1995), 114-119 (p. 114).

14 Arendt, p. 264.

unconscious exile and only their new country now taught them what a home really looks like.¹⁵ The exile's faltering identity is rooted in their placelessness, as they reject their previous self to assimilate in the new country. Beckett's characters, evicted, nameless, out of place, face the same dilemma.

DIRT AND DESOLATION

Mary Douglas defines dirt as 'matter out of place', explaining that 'dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements'¹⁶. In the *Stories*, Beckett's protagonists are characterised as misfits, or 'matter out of place'. The unnamed narrator in 'The Expelled' struggles to define his identity: he has no home address, is unconcerned with world events, refuses to read the newspaper, and has little social interaction, observing that, in two years he had only spoken to three or four people, 'on the subject of food'¹⁷. This isolation plays a role in the creation of the typical Beckettian protagonist: off-beat, eccentric, even inhuman. However, it is not merely isolation that Beckett utilises to place his characters in an 'out of place' existence. Instead, the real dirt featured in the *Stories*—unclean spaces, habits, thought, and language—is essential to the creation of the outlandish protagonists in 'The End', 'The Expelled', and 'The Calmative' and cements their status as inappropriate elements. In 'The Expelled', the narrator finds himself on the streets, and details his daily routine:

I had then the deplorable habit, having pissed in my trousers, or shat there, which I did fairly regularly early in the morning, about ten or half past ten, of persisting in going on and finishing my day as if nothing had happened...and till bedtime I dragged on with burning and stinking between my little thighs.¹⁸

Here, the mature narrator offers a self-conscious analysis of his childhood self, where memories of youth evoke a sense of disgust. His 'deplorable' habit—defecation—is a shameful emotional (and physical) burden that causes him to 'drag on' for the rest of the day, while the 'burning' sensation informs the reader of physical pain endured by the narrator as a result of his transgression. The use of the expletives 'pissed' and 'shat' are jarring, not just in what they describe, but through the vulgarity of the language employed; Beckett uses foul language to convey a 'dirty' existence.

In *Beckett and Ethics*, Jackie Blackman argues that postwar narratives are linked to survival, and that 'narrative in its traditional form could be seen to emphasize the shame of the survivor'¹⁹. Indeed, this self-critical passage clearly carries a sense of shame. However, the *Stories* also suggest an interest, or even fascination, with dirt and vulgarity. In 'The End', the third and final text in the collection, pleasure is intertwined with the disgust and shame of uncleanness. The displaced narrator, forced on to the streets, expresses the joy that he finds from scratching himself:

It passed the time, time flew when I scratched myself...I itched all over, on the privates, in the bush up to the navel, under the arms, in the arse, and then patches of eczema and psoriasis that I could set raging merely by thinking of them.²⁰

Here, there is overt pleasure in pain. Any shame tied to images of dirt and poor hygiene dissipates as the narrator gleefully details his routine scratching of the body, a routine so all-encompassing that its relief is powerful, causing time to fly and psoriasis to be 'set raging'. For

15 Ibid.

16 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 35.

17 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 54.

18 Ibid., p. 50. 69 Lorna Fox O'Mahony and James A. Sweeney, 'The Exclusion of (Failed) Asylum Seekers from Housing and Home: Towards an Oppositional Discourse', *Journal of Law and Society*, 37.2 (2010), 285-314 (p. 285).

19 Jackie Blackman, 'Post-war Beckett: Resistance, Commitment or Communist Krap?', in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. by Russell Smith (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), pp. 68-85 (p. 81).

20 Samuel Beckett, 'The End', in *Samuel Beckett, The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski, pp. 78-99 (p. 93).

the narrator, scratching is portrayed as an otherworldly, passionate practise, and he dreams of being able to reach every crevice: 'To scratch myself properly I would have needed a dozen hands'²¹. Beckett plays with themes of dirt, the abject, and dark comedy in the *Stories* as his characters demonstrate a perverse fascination with dirt and disorder through numerous references to scatology, use of expletives, and enamoured description of unhygienic practises, all of which contribute to the narrators' status as marginalised outsiders pushed to the edge of society.

Using Mary Douglas' definition of dirt as a lens through which to view Beckettian characters, the recurrent exile of the *Stories* is not merely dirty, but is the 'displaced matter' than Douglas describes and is hence 'dirt' itself. The home evictions in Beckett's *Stories* exemplify the 'systematic ordering and classification of matter' that Douglas describes, rendering the protagonist 'dirt'—the lowest of the low. Then, he rejects personal hygiene, becoming physically unclean. In this way, dirt and dirtiness hold two intersecting definitions which trap Beckett's hero into a vicious cycle of classification and rejection. The literal filth that features throughout the *Stories* is a vehicle to expose the way other characters respond to the protagonist: they treat him 'like dirt'.

This metaphor is grounded in examples of mistreatment towards the unfortunate exile. Note the policeman in 'The Expelled', who 'pointed out to me that the sidewalk was for everyone, as if it was quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category.'²² Then, he says to the narrator: 'If you can't bloody well get about like everyone else, you'd do better to stay at home.'²³ Of course, the latter statement is particularly cutting as, for the narrator, there is no 'home'. The policeman's attitude is highly telling of the refugee experience more generally. In *Blaming Immigrants*, Neeraj Kaushal explains the system that simultaneously excludes and traps those who flee terror: 'Refugees neither can go back to their home country nor are integrated into the host country.'²⁴ Thus the policeman's request for the narrator to 'stay at home' is futile and his statement that he is not 'everyone' echoes the cruel sentiments of an unwelcoming society.

Throughout the *Stories*, Beckett demonstrates careful control of sympathy, to the extent that the reader is simultaneously sympathetic to and repulsed by the narrator. In 'The End', the narrator passes a night in foul conditions, in a cabin where 'the vilest acts had been committed'²⁵. The floor is 'strewn with excrements, with condoms and vomit', and the narrator drinks from a cow's udder 'covered with dung'²⁶. Here, the grotesque insinuation is that he is nourished by the dung-covered udder. It should also be noted that physical cleanliness has long been associated with moral purity: consider the classic example of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which Lady Macbeth attempts to scrub away her shame, muttering that 'A little water clears us of this deed'²⁷. In partaking in the 'vilest' acts, then, the protagonist demonstrates immorality, making him an unlikely candidate for sympathy.

Yet at the same time, Beckett's bleak, matter-of-fact linguistic style generates sympathy through the very interaction with the abject. The text provides little information about the narrator, and the reader does not learn his name, age, or even if he is entirely human, but Beckett's stripped-back language demonstrates the protagonist's quiet acceptance of his fate. Of his derelict lodgings, the narrator says: 'Nevertheless it was a roof over my head.'²⁸ In these few words, Beckett elicits the hopelessness of his situation. The narrator is not content, but numb, and it is this deep despondency that evokes sympathy in the reader.

21 Ibid.

22 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 52.

23 Ibid.

24 Neeraj Kaushal, *Blaming Immigrants: Nationalism and the Economics of Global Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 143.

25 Beckett, 'The End', p. 89.

26 Ibid., p. 90.

27 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Kindle Edition (Green World Classics, 2020), Location 430 of 1466.

28 Beckett, 'The End', p. 90.

Beckett's curious, wandering characters are vehicles for his own experiences, which is where much of their charm lies. It is not difficult to draw parallels between the filthy cabin in 'The End' and the tiny, decrepit, farmhouse in Roussillon that Beckett took refuge in during the war. In creating sympathetic characters that mirror his lived experience of hopelessness and poverty, Beckett lays the groundwork to discuss large and small-scale humanitarianism, institutionalism, and societal attitudes towards those who find themselves in the 'dirt'.

BUREAUCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

In his introduction to *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, S.E. Gontarski writes that Beckett's *Stories* are in 'direct opposition to the post-medieval tradition of humanism', focusing not on 'local, civil, or social' injustice but on 'the injustice of being born'²⁹. This statement makes a case for categorising Beckett as a modernist writer, as anti-humanism and modernism often go hand in hand. However, just as Beckett's modernist identity has been disputed,³⁰ it is possible to read the *Stories and Texts for Nothing* as a discussion of society and the 'local, civil, social' injustice that Gontarski ignores, through their representation of the boredom elicited by bureaucratic culture. Beckett's fascination with heavy bureaucracy and the difficulties of quotidian life is unveiled through a series of complicated tasks and convoluted paperwork that must be completed in the *Stories*.

In 'The End', the speaker faces a confusing web of bureaucracy as the story opens with an expulsion from an unnamed institution. It is not clear where or what exactly this institution is, but the reader can infer that this is a charitable organisation, as the opening sentence reads: 'They clothed me and gave me money'³¹. Who 'they' are is also not made explicit, but it can be understood that this refers to the all-knowing officials at the institution. Meanwhile, the narrator is kept in the dark, ignorant and uninformed. Later in the text, the narrator is swindled out of his savings by a conniving landlady who presents him with a counterfeit receipt. He is advised to get a refund, but exclaims: 'I don't even know her name, let alone her address.'³² Here, a lack of documentation allows the woman to be unidentifiable and untraceable, resulting in the narrator's second eviction.

Beckett's interest in the acquisition of official documents, and, more specifically, the problems that arise from having no official identity, is similarly present in 'The Expelled', where the complicated and time-consuming nature of dealing with officials is made clear. During a brief encounter with a lawyer, the narrator observes: 'He verified my identity. That took some time'³³. There is a sense of irony here; the narrator has had his identity 'verified', and yet, to the reader, is still unnamed and unknown. It is clear that interactions with administrative agents are both sluggish and anxiety-inducing for the protagonist. Once the narrator has undergone the verification process, he finds himself accepting money, not from the state, but a mysterious private source. He explains: 'I went back to ask him where this money came from.'³⁴ This request is refused, and the narrator must argue that he 'had a right to know'³⁵. This secretive monetary exchange is demonstrative of a controlling society, in which Beckett's hero has little autonomy or control over his personal finances. Furthermore, the insistence of his 'right' to financial clarity opens up further questions about officialdom and the rights available for the citizens in Beckett's fictional societies.

The subject of rights, permission, and entitlement is threaded through much of Beckett's oeuvre but appears most frequently in the thirteen *Texts for Nothing* that follow the *Stories*. While in 'The End', the speaker must beg for his 'right to know', in the more abstract *Texts*, the

29 *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski, p. 23.

30 See Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince, *Samuel Beckett (Longman Critical Readers)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), p. 27.

31 Beckett, 'The End', p. 78.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

33 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 54.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

35 *Ibid.*

narrator is more authoritative and is even able to make judgement on the deservedness of others. In 'Texts for Nothing 6', the narrator presides over his 'keepers'. He muses: 'are they entitled to a little recreation? I would say no.'³⁶ In 'Texts for Nothing 8', a similar power structure is in place, as the narrator demands: 'What right have you then...None, none.'³⁷ In 'Texts for Nothing 5', there is more uncertainty. The narrator asks: 'Is he entitled to the wig. I don't know, formerly perhaps'³⁸. Still, even the opportunity to question and doubt the rights of others is something that is never afforded to the narrators of the *Stories*. Elliot Krieger argues that the 'I' that speaks throughout the *Texts* 'is not a person, but the text itself, the black words printed on the white page.'³⁹ Using Krieger's interpretation of the *Texts*, a line can be drawn between the *Stories* and the *Texts for Nothing*. Beckett's physical characters in the *Stories* are rightless, but the 'text itself, the black words printed on the white page' in the *Texts* holds power and can decide on the rights afforded to the creatures in the narrative.

The lack of transparency and complicated bureaucracy that surrounds the subject of rights and rightlessness in the *Stories* is a by-product of a generally turbulent setting, which is echoed in the language of Beckett's characters. Uncertainty is woven into all three of the *Stories*, seen in the final lines of 'The Expelled' which read: 'I don't know why I told this story'⁴⁰. This precedes the equally diffident opening statement of 'The Calmative': 'I don't know when I died.'⁴¹ This air of doubt does not merely affect the wandering narrator. All of Beckett's characters demonstrate gaps in their knowledge; note the kindly taxi driver in 'The Expelled', who despite his best efforts, cannot understand the narrator's situation—it 'escapes him'⁴². Even the divine, angelic figure at the gates of purgatory in 'The Calmative' is, comically, confused by Beckett's hero, asking him 'Where did you spring from?' and 'What's that you said?'.⁴³

This ever-present uncertainty in the *Stories* puts its characters in a state of anxiety as they try to fulfil both prosaic and abstract demands; accommodation, official documents, financial stability, and a broader understanding of their identity and position in the space they occupy. It is clear, then, that the hero's frustration with oppressive bureaucracy and his demand for rights and knowledge is really a function of the anxious placelessness afforded to him by the space he inhabits and the other citizens who occupy that space. Without any real help from bureaucratic institutions or the receipt of documents and financial aid, Beckett's characters tumble into an anxious non-existence, searching for stability. It is evident that Beckett's discussion of rights, placelessness, and belonging is rooted in reality, a distorted reflection of the state of the recovering postwar world as he saw it.

In *Placeless People*, Lyndsey Stonebridge argues that Beckett's references to administrative and legal absurdism run alongside his own experience of dealing with⁴⁴ obstinate officials in France in 1942.⁴⁴ She references the *sauf-conduit*—a safe-conduct pass that allowed security and freedom of movement to non-nationals (and was eventually awarded to Beckett). James Knowlson's biography of Beckett goes into great detail about this time: having been made to flee Paris, he made the dangerous journey to Roussillon, encountering 'extremely unsympathetic'⁴⁵ Irish representatives and risked admitting his illegal crossing of the border into Vichy. The image of the '*sauf-conduit*' is equally important to the characters in the *Stories*, who, due to a lack of documentation, struggle to remain in their homes and must rely on charity in order to survive.

36 Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing', p. 122.

37 Ibid., p. 131.

38 Ibid., p. 119.

39 Elliot Krieger, 'Samuel Beckett's Texts for Nothing: Explication and Exposition', *MLN*, 92.5 (1977), 987-1000 (p. 987).

40 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 60.

41 Samuel Beckett, 'The Calmative', in Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski, pp. 61-78 (p. 61).

42 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 56.

43 Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 72.

44 Stonebridge, p. 129.

45 Knowlson, p. 321.

THE CAPITAL OF THE RUINS

Charity is a recurring theme in Beckettian literature, no doubt a result of Beckett's own experience with charitable organisations. After the war, Beckett found that returning to France would be extremely difficult, and as an Irish citizen, he might not be allowed to keep his residence in Paris.⁴⁶ As a means of legally getting back into France, he chose to join the Irish Red Cross in the Normandy town of Saint-Lô, where they were setting up a hospital and rebuilding the town, which had been utterly devastated in the Allied D-Day invasions.⁴⁷ Here, he experienced first-hand the grisly aftermath of war. In 'The Capital of the Ruins', a short report written by Beckett for radio broadcast, he captures the desolation:

Saint-Lô was bombed out of existence in one night. German prisoners of war, and casual labourers attracted by the relative food-plenty, but soon discouraged by housing conditions, continue, two years after the liberation, to clear away the debris, literally by hand.⁴⁸

Even in 'The Capital of the Ruins', a nonfiction report, Beckett is drawn to the abject, remarking that 'children play with detonators' and 'a large number [of patients] are suffering from scabies and other diseases of the skin'⁴⁹. His comment on scabies later translates into the description of 'raging' psoriasis and eczema in 'The End', as discussed in Chapter 2. Knowlson writes that this period in Saint-Lô specifically was 'vital' in terms of the content of his postwar writing.⁵⁰ Indeed, the misery, destruction, disease, and poverty that Beckett witnessed in Saint-Lô is omnipresent in the *Stories and Texts*. Early critics of the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, reluctant to comment on the painful, shameful, memories of war and Vichy collaboration, tended to avoid historical readings of Beckett's works.⁵¹ More recently, however, attention has been paid to the many allusions to war within the texts.⁵² In 'The Calmative', the narrator, finding himself in what appears to be a dreamlike purgatory, sets the scene: 'Perhaps it's just ruins, a ruined folly, on the skirts of the town'.⁵³ Beckett's prose describes an imagined, otherworldly, afterlife, and yet, the 'ruined folly' would not be at all out of place in the nonfiction Saint-Lô report. 'The Expelled', too, is grounded in recent history, and interspersed with references to war. Soon after his eviction, the protagonist wanders towards the 'Lüneburg Heath', the site of Nazi surrender in Germany in 1945. He ponders the mysterious voice, that 'kept saying to me, it's the Lüneburg Heath you need'⁵⁴. Then, in 'Texts for Nothing 3', the narrator takes on the role of a war veteran, declaring that 'we'll relive our campaigns and compare our scratches.'⁵⁵

Further to Beckett's use of historical realism and references to the devastated site of Saint-Lô, the *Stories* demonstrate a subtle sympathy towards victims of war. The charitable work that Beckett undertook in Normandy; the camaraderie, social consciousness, and occasional hypocrisy and frustration, inspired in Beckett a new understanding of humanity. In 'The Capital of the Ruins', Beckett is uncharacteristically sentimental in his prose:

What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none, but the occasional glimpse obtained of that smile at the human condition—the smile deriding,

46 Ibid., p. 345.

47 Ibid.

48 Samuel Beckett, 'The Capital of the Ruins', in Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski, pp. 275-278 (p. 276).

49 Ibid.50 Knowlson, p. 350.

51 Marjorie Perloff, 'In Love with Hiding': Samuel Beckett's War', *The Iowa Review*, 35.1 (2005), 76-103 (p. 77).

52 See Séan Kennedy, 'Humanity in Ruins', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Dirk Van Hulle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 185-200 (p. 187).

53 Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 61.

54 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 50.

55 Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing', p. 111.

among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health.⁵⁶

This sympathy towards and understanding of 'that smile at the human condition' is carried into the *Stories*. In 'The Expelled', Beckett examines the psychological damage that war can bring: 'Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you.'⁵⁷ The use of 'certain things' is ambiguous; upon the initial reading, this appears to be another vague, cryptic reference, but a historical interpretation of the text implies a more sensitive meaning. Just as the human mind subconsciously blocks out traumatic memories, the 'certain things' that Beckett refers to cannot be named. The 'killing' memories of war must be avoided at all costs.

Lyndsey Stonebridge writes that the *Stories* 'tell us what it is like to live in a world with few rights and limited compassion.'⁵⁸ And yet, Beckett does demonstrate compassion towards his bizarre, frequently unpleasant, characters, through these interspersed reflections on war. This compassion towards the protagonist then extends to a criticism of authority and satirisation of altruistic organisations. During his time in Saint-Lô, Beckett professed that he was irritated by the 'apathy' and 'neo-colonial hauteur' of his colleagues.⁵⁹ This irritation at superficial altruistic acts is present in the *Stories*, where Beckett satirises the so-called 'charitable institutions'. In 'The End', the lodging house masquerades as philanthropic through its provision of clothing and money: 'This is a charitable institution, he said, and the money is a gift you receive when you leave.'⁶⁰ However, this generosity is short-lived as, in the following sentence, Beckett's hero is told to 'never come back'⁶¹. Beckett denounces the self-described 'charitable institution' for its conditional offerings that exist solely to eradicate the minor inconvenience of the vulnerable exile.

Beckett goes on to criticise not just large organisations, but the charitable gesture more generally. Later in 'The End', the narrator, sitting on the pavement and begging, thinks about those that donate. He concludes: 'What they like above all is to sight the wretch from afar, get ready their penny, drop it in their stride and hear the God bless you dying away in the distance.'⁶² Beckett demonstrates a cynicism towards the performative act of giving, concluding that the do-gooder wants no real interaction with the beggar—they drop the penny 'in their stride', observe him 'from afar', and hear his calls 'in the distance'. The helplessness of the vagrant, who must express his thanks for a mere penny, is made explicit. The cynicism Beckett holds towards self-serving charity in the *Stories* recurs in Beckett's works until the end of his career and, resultantly, the *Stories* can be understood as the drafts for later, more technically developed, writings. In *Molloy*, published some years after the *Stories and Texts for Nothing* in 1951, the text reads: 'Against the charitable gesture there is no defense. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth.'⁶³ In other words, beggars cannot be choosers.

Despite the criticism of false altruism demonstrated in the *Stories*, the overriding influence of Beckett's time spent in Saint-Lô on his writing is expressions of sympathy and genuine care for humanity. In 'The Calmative', the narrator is no longer living, wandering through a strange post-mortem world. References to death take the shape of vague metaphors, and mid-way through the text, the narrator explains that he has 'reached this point'.⁶⁴ Here, the reader can

56 Beckett, 'The Capital of the Ruins', p. 277.

57 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 46.

58 Stonebridge, p. 122.

59 Ibid., p. 125.

60 Beckett, 'The End', p. 80.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 92.

63 Samuel Beckett, 'Molloy', in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), pp. 9-196 (p. 24).

64 Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 74.

infer that 'this point' is both the point in the story and the final point in his life. This metaphorical discussion of death progresses, as Beckett compares dying to a flight of stairs: 'It must cease gently, as gently cease on the stairs the steps of the loved one, who could not love and will not come back'⁶⁵. The acknowledgement that the deceased 'will not come back' speaks to a universal human sadness and hopelessness, but the consolation that 'it must cease gently' is soft and reassuring in a way that utterly contrasts with Beckett's portrayal of his cynical characters and institutionalism. This sensitive linguistic style mirrors Beckett's creative works composed in the war, such as his poem, 'Saint-Lô':

Vire will wind in other shadows unborn through the bright ways tremble and the old mind ghost-forsaken sink into its havoc⁶⁶

With words that wind like the 'Vire', the river at Saint-Lô, the poem begins with the 'unborn' and reaches a 'ghost-forsaken' mind, showing the passing of time from birth to death. Though, in some ways, the imagery of Saint-Lô elicits hopelessness, making 'bright ways tremble', Beckett's conclusion that the destroyed city will 'sink into its havoc' demonstrates the bittersweet release of death and destruction. The *Stories*, with their sympathetic portrayal of death, and acknowledgement that life on earth is bizarre and painful, reach the same verdict.

SHELTER AND HIERARCHY

Beckett's 'humanistic' writing extends to discuss, not just the war and destruction he knew in Saint-Lô, but the tangible after-effects and politics of displacement and homelessness. In the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, Beckett criticises the hypocrisy of a society that creates displaced people and then refuses to help them. In 'The End', the protagonist is told he is only valued so much as he is able to work for society, as a nameless official at the 'charitable institution' rejects the narrator for being unskilled, saying: 'If they believed you were really willing to make yourself useful they would keep you'⁶⁷. It is useful here to consider the original French text. In English, the institution is referred to using the pronoun 'they'. However, in French, 'they' can be translated as both '*ils*' and '*on*'. In the French text, Beckett chooses to use the pronoun '*ils*' instead of the more neutral '*on*'⁶⁸. '*ils*' elicits more familiarity than '*on*', but simultaneously distances the object it describes, putting the institution in a separate sphere to the narrator and drawing attention to their false altruism and hierarchical structures in the narrative.

This notion of belonging and being of 'use' to society parallels long-standing attitudes towards migrants, particularly in France where Beckett composed these texts. The *Stories* were written in 1946 postwar France, at a time when the country was welcoming vast numbers of immigrants from North Africa in order to repair the devastation caused by the war. Just as the narrator in 'The End' is told he could remain if he were 'willing to make [himself] useful', so too were North-African, in particular Algerian, immigrants valued for their work in rebuilding war-torn France but not really welcomed: images of the derelict shanty-towns, or *bidonvilles*, then populated largely by immigrant workers are testament to this.

Dilapidated housing such as in the *bidonvilles*, or even no lodging at all, is a common feature of the refugee and migrant experience. In 'The Exclusion of (Failed) Asylum Seekers from Housing and Home', Lorna Fox O'Mahony comments on this issue:

'Housing'—the practical provision of a roof over one's head—is experienced by users as 'home'. Conversely, being without housing is experienced not only as an absence of

65 Ibid.

66 Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 46.

67 Beckett, 'The End', p. 80.

68 Samuel Beckett, *Nouvelles et Textes pour Rien*, Kindle Edition (Minuit, 2014), Location 565 of 1592.

69 Lorna Fox O'Mahony and James A. Sweeney, 'The Exclusion of (Failed) Asylum Seekers from Housing and Home: Towards an Oppositional Discourse', *Journal of Law and Society*, 37.2 (2010), 285-314 (p. 285).

shelter but in the philosophical sense of 'ontological homelessness' and alienation from the conditions for well-being.⁶⁹

It can be understood, then, that for the newly displaced, the acquisition of shelter is essential to achieving proper assimilation in the new environment and to overcoming 'alienation from the conditions of well-being'. Beckett had personal experience of the desperate search for and decline of shelter in both Roussillon and Saint-Lô during the war, and reflects this context in his writing.

Much of the narrative in the *Stories* is built upon the search for proper shelter, where Beckett's heroes valiantly attempt to seek out refuge, moving from one dilapidated shelter to another. In 'The Expelled', the evicted narrator moves from the literal gutter, to a taxi cab, to 'a corner on the straw' in a barn.⁷⁰ Rubin Rabinovitz argues that Beckett's shelters are 'womb-like refuges'.⁷¹ The metaphor of the womb, maternal, warm, and comforting, could perhaps apply to the taxi-cab that the narrator finds in 'The Expelled', where it is explained that the drivers 'spent their day snug and warm inside their cabs'⁷². However, this 'snug and warm' shelter is exclusively available to the driver, who, through employment and proper housing, is accepted by and integrated into society. The beaten-down narrator has quite a different experience, and, for him, the cab is 'a big black box, the windows are small, you curl up in a corner, it smells musty'⁷³. While both descriptions elicit the claustrophobic nature of the shelter, it is clear that, for the narrator, his lodgings are hopeless, devoid of all life, in a way that defies any 'womb-like' connotation. The grim nature of the shelter afforded to the narrator continues with the barn he later enters, with the 'gallop of the rats' and the makeshift 'horse blanket' bed⁷⁴. The degrading shelters afforded to the narrator are representative of his low status in society. Furthermore, Beckett demonstrates the difficulty of escaping this existence. In 'The Calmative', the narrator has faced hardship for so long that he settles into desolation, and 'can't tell between den and ruins'.⁷⁵

Status is inherent to Beckett's portrayal of housing, as the extended metaphor of declining shelter draws attention to a rigid hierarchy. Alongside the description of stark, unhygienic living conditions, there are vivid depictions of inaccessible beauty. For example, the charming house that the narrator is ejected from in 'The Expelled' is described in loving prose: 'How beautiful it was! I have always greatly admired the door of this house, up on top of its little flight of steps.'⁷⁶ There could not be a greater difference between this lodging and the rat-infested barn. It is clear that this beauty, the safety of real housing and 'home' as is understood by O'Mahony's definition, is out of reach for the narrator; it is 'up on top', there to be 'admired' but not experienced, as he lies in the gutter. Similarly, as the narrator later lies in the pitch-dark barn, he hears 'above me the muffled voice of the cabman and his wife as they criticized me.'⁷⁷ Again, there is a literal hierarchy in that they are 'above' him, which exposes the social hierarchy that leaves the narrator, homeless, unidentified, at the bottom.

It can be understood, then, that the shelter that Beckett's hero craves is not merely a physical shelter to escape 'homelessness', but the cultural assimilation that shelter provides in order to move away from 'ontological homelessness'. The allure of the 'beautiful' house is representative of this ambition: the narrator wishes to ascend the metaphorical flight of steps to be accepted by society.

70 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 59.

71 Rubin Rabinovitz, 'Samuel Beckett's Figurative Language', *Contemporary Literature*, 26.3 (1985), 317-330 (p. 322).

72 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 56.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

75 Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 62.

76 Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 49.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

78 Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 93.

Alas, attempts at social mobility by the protagonist are futile. In fact, as the narrative progresses, the state of shelter declines. Beckett demonstrates the desperation of the protagonist as he turns, not to disinterested state officials, but to God. In 'The Calmative', as the protagonist sits outside, pleading for money, he thinks: 'They must have thought I loved nature. Most of the time I looked up at the sky.'⁷⁸ Clearly, looking up to the sky provides escapism for the narrator. Again, though, it is essential to consider the original French, where the 'sky' is 'ciel'. The ambiguity of 'ciel', which translates to both 'sky' and 'heaven', evokes the sense that Beckett's protagonist is looking to a holy presence for guidance. In drawing attention to the speaker's reliance on God, Beckett again exposes the failures of state institutions to act.

The characters in the *Stories* are used to demonstrate the desperation, confused sense of self, and inability to assimilate that arise in the homeless person, with homelessness defined as both being without a house, and, by the failure to be officially recognised by their new home country. Richard Bernstein says of Hannah Arendt that, from 1933 until eighteen years later when she became a naturalised United States citizen, she 'lived the precarious existence of a stateless person—or, more accurately, a stateless *nonperson*.'⁷⁹ Here, Bernstein refers to Arendt's legal status, the fact she did not officially belong to a nation-state. But there is a dual meaning. In her essay, 'We Refugees', Arendt captures the anxious existence of the stateless refugee who struggles to either adopt the new culture or hold on to their old way of life. The dilemma is not just that the displaced person is stateless, but that they are homeless, in that they do not feel 'at home' in the new space. In this way, Beckett's homeless, nameless, isolated protagonists epitomise the 'nonperson'.

CONCLUSION

The chaos of war and placelessness is completely intertwined into the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. Beckett's interactions with obstinate officials, charitable work, and time spent hiding in derelict accommodation in occupied France inspired in him a new sentimentality towards the human condition. In turn, his postwar texts demonstrate a humorous juxtaposition between sympathy and cynicism, orchestrated through careful, minimalist prose. The weird and wonderful protagonists in the *Stories* are vehicles to explore subjects that remain relevant today: the role of the state and the individual in society, the lived existence and identity of the placeless person, the limitations that strict bureaucracy enables, and the value of art in times of crisis. To engage with the *Stories* through this lens is to gain both a deeper understanding of the utter transformation of Beckett's postwar writings and a new perspective on his fascination with the absurdity of life.

⁷⁹ Richard J. Bernstein, 'Hannah Arendt on the Stateless', *Parallax*, 11.1 (2005), 46-60 (p. 47).

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