

Making Flies Mean Something

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This talk will be an effort to respond to Beckett's suggestion, issued in 1982 in reply to an academic who had sent him an essay he had written on animals in his work, that flies, of which there had been not a whisper in the essay, but of which Beckett gave a couple of examples, 'might have been made to mean something'. So what is coming up is an effort to make flies mean something, or, failing that, at least to make out something of their bearing on meaning. For flies have traditionally been thought of as the opposite of thought, as unmeaning. The meaning of flies is their meaninglessness, their meanness, insignificance, their negligible not-mattering. Flies are a maddening, but trivial distraction – maddening, of course, just because they are trivial. To undertake such an enterprise may, of course, be to blunder flylike into a sticky little trap, since it could easily be that what Beckett meant was that making even flies mean something, in the sense of forcing them into meaning, was just the kind of miniaturist i-dotting explicitation that might be expected of academics with nothing better to do, or plenty better to do but with the indolent indisposition to do it.

Implicit in this little sally may be a reminder that flies have often been thought of as a kind of threshold creature, a test-case for the idea of animality itself. Flies mark and make, not so much a boundary between humans and animals, as a boundary between animals and non-animals. Flies are in this sense, not the animal other, but the other of the animal. Flies, like ticks, maggots and fleas, were believed for many centuries to be spontaneously generated from purulent matter, to arise, for example, from drops of sweat dropping into dust. The belief in spontaneous generation was often linked to the belief that it produced imperfect creatures, creatures that do not belong to the domain of created nature. Aristotle was oddly uncertain about flies: although he observed and reported accurately on the life-cycle of certain of the insects, he also thought that there were spontaneously-generated flies, which, though they could copulate and reproduce, could never reproduce themselves identically:

whenever creatures are spontaneously generated, either in other animals, in the soil, or on plants, or in the parts of these, and when such are generated male and female, then from the copulation of such spontaneously generated males and females there is generated a something - a something never identical in shape with the parents, but a something imperfect. For instance, the issue of copulation in lice is nits; in flies, grubs; in fleas, grubs egg-like in shape; and from these issues the parent-species is never reproduced, nor is any animal produced at all, but the like nondescripts only. (Aristotle 1910, V.1, 539a-539b)

Flies may have been of interest to Beckett not just because of the possibility they held out for anthropomorphic identification, but more particularly because humans and flies were analogously anomalous. Both humans and flies are nonce- or nonesuch creatures, creatures of exception and accident.

There is, in fact, a long tradition of identification between humans and flies. If flies are in one sense the opposite or negative of human beings, literally living in and off our deaths, they are also for that very reason our familiars and fellow-travellers, their wide dispersal across the world shadowing that of their human hosts and partners. Flies have for centuries been taken as emblematic of human weakness, vulnerability and susceptibility to frivolous pleasures. Some of Beckett's early representations of flies seem to come out of this emblematic tradition. For this tradition, flies were dedicated to light, life and libido, and usually, for that reason neglectful of more spiritual truths. As dawn breaks in the waiting room at the end of Watt, flies, whose presence in such large numbers perhaps has something to do with the strange unlocatable smell of decomposition that assails Watt on first entering it (Beckett 1972, 234), gather and cluster longingly at the window

The flies, of skeleton thinness, excited to new efforts by yet another dawn, left the walls, and the ceiling, and even the floor, and hastened in great numbers to the window. Here, pressed against the impenetrable panes, they would enjoy the light, and warmth, of the long summer's day. (Beckett 1972, 236)

Flies have a prominent position in two poems Beckett wrote in the 1930s, 'Serena I' and 'La Mouche'. Both of these poems flirt with the kind of sentimentality that is always in the offing when an individual fly - 'my brother the fly' in 'Serena I' - is singled out for poetic attention and identification. The poem begins in the Regent's Park Zoo, with views of lugubrious weaver-birds,

condors, elephants and adders, and proceeds in a mock-Dantean pilgrimage across various London locations. Its menagerie-itinerary comes to rest (as it may be in the garden of Kenwood), with an ominous, valedictory view of a less exotic creature:

my brother the fly
 the common housefly
 sidling out of darkness into light
 fastens on his place in the sun
 whets his six legs
 revels in his planes his poisers
 it is the autumn of his life (Beckett 1977, 22)

The possibility of fly-human identification is rather oddly suggested by Beckett's remark to Tom MacGreevy, following a lecture he had heard by Carl Jung, 'I can't imagine him curing a fly of neurosis' (Beckett 2009, 282). If one of the ways in which flies have been made to mean is by means of their meanness, then another is in the way in which they can be made to measure, or used to focus ideas of relative scale, and to make perspectives collide. During the nineteenth century, the fly, that had been thought to mark the limit of viability for life, began to be seen as the creature that inhabits the precise middle point of the scale of creation, holding the line between microcosm, with just as many creatures above it, all the way up to the blue whale, as there are microscopic creatures below it. The real drama of 'La Mouche' is not that of an identification, but rather that of a sudden convulsion of scales, with the fly on its transparent screen, caught between death and life, as the connector and converter of the two immensities on either side of it, the crushing thumb and the vast void of sea and sky. Crushed against the pane, the fly seems magnified, precisely through being the only item in view. By the end of the poem, it has suddenly expanded to cosmic proportion, capsizing the relations between near and far, small and large, local and universal.

entre la scène et moi
 la vitre
 vide sauf elle

ventre à terre
 sanglée dans ses boyaux noirs
 antennes affolées ailes liées
 pattes crochues bouche suçant à vide
 sabrant l'azur s'écrasant contre l'invisible

sous mon pouce impuissant elle fait chavirer
la mer et le ciel serein (Beckett 1977, 43)

between the vista and me
the pane
void save it

belly down
strapped in its black guts
crazed antennae, bound wings
legs crooked mouthparts sucking on void
slashing the blue crushing itself against the invisible
under my helpless thumb it convulses
sea and quiet sky (my translation)

The fly also marks out a convergence or mingling of time-scales. And the speaker in *Texts for Nothing* remarks '[t]hat's the way with those wild creatures and so short-lived, compared with me' (Beckett 1984, 72); but Moran feels himself 'ageing as swiftly as a day-fly'. Beckett 1966, 149). In later work, the fly becomes a much more ambiguous presence, much less definitive and more dubious kind of possibility. Beckett will often imagine a fly as the last possible accompaniment to his solitary creatures. In 'Imagination Dead Imagine', a fly represents the minimal, meremost flicker of life and the flickering of vision and imagination that may bring it into being:

And always there among them somewhere the glaring eyes now clearer still in that flashes of vision few and far now rive their unseeingness. So for example as chance may have it on the ceiling a flyspeck or the insect itself or a strand of Emma's motte. Then lost and all the remaining field for hours of time on earth. Imagination dead imagine to lodge a second in that glare a dying common house or dying window fly, then fall the five feet to the dust and die or die and fall. No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt. (Beckett 1984, 120)

A similar flickering of existence, between assumption and extinction, attaches to the putative or hypothecated fly in *Company*. The narrator imagines his story enlivened by the creation of a fly:

Some movement of the hands? A hand. A clenching and unclenching. Difficult to justify. Or raised to brush away a fly. But

there are no flies. Then why not let there be? The temptation is great. Let there be a fly. For him to brush away. A live fly mistaking him for dead. Made aware of its error and renewing it incontinent. What an addition to company that would be! A live fly mistaking him for dead. But no. He would not brush away a fly. (Beckett 1989, 22-3)

A sentimental reading might be that the fly indeed provides company in the darkness and silence, another living creature. But that 'let there be a fly' flickers between the permissive and the directive, since in Beckett's cosmos there may be as much cruelty in the fiat musca as charity. The word 'company' hints at a more sombre reading too, for it literally means eating or taking bread together. If the life of the fly seems in many ways incommensurable with that of man, not measurable on the same scale (and we will see later that questions of measure and scale will always be provoked by the thought of the fly), then it is certainly intimately commensal, taking its meals at the same table (we are a table spread for it).

The passage in *Company* also recalls the climax of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, though almost certainly unintentionally, so strong are the parallels. The penultimate chapter of Hawthorne's novel is all addressed to the solitary figure of Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, as he sits dead in his chair, clutching his ticking watch. Just as the figure in *Company* entertains a series of ghostly companions, so Hawthorne imagines a host of Pyncheon's ancestors processing through the death-chamber. In the end, the appearance of a fly, and the Judge's failure to brush it away, marks the abandonment of the narrative's pretence that its addressee will ever respond to its jeerings and remonstrations:

What! Thou art not stirred by this last appeal? No, not a jot! And there we see a fly – one of your common house-flies, such as are always buzzing on the window-pane – which has smelt out Governor Pyncheon, and alights, now on his forehead, now on his chin, and now, Heaven help us, is creeping over the bridge of his nose, towards the would-be chief-magistrate's wide-open eyes! Canst thou not brush the fly away? Art thou too sluggish? Thou man, that hadst so many busy projects yesterday! Art thou too weak, that wast so powerful? Not brush away a fly? Nay, then, we give thee up! (Hawthorne 1991, 283)

I have just finished editing *The Unnamable* for Faber. This has produced plenty of difficulties as well as delights, and among the less absorbing parts of the

process was checking the Calder editions against the Olympia and Grove editions, particularly the punctuation, the problem being to distinguish commas from full-stops, especially with the Calder edition, in which the otherwise admirably yeoman-like font does not always easily allow one to distinguish the tadpole tails of the commas from the emmet's eggs of the full-stops. After an hour of close reading, some of the later pages of *The Unnamable* start to wriggle and shimmer under the pulsing eye like the lake-water under Leeuwenhoek's microscope. I thought it might help to automate the process, by scanning the texts and using the excellent JUXTA open source software to collate them. The problem here is the usual one that scanning from less than immaculate copies of the text gives the OCR operation a lot to contend with, since the accidental maculae are so apt to be construed as punctuation marks.

There is a long tradition that associates the bodies of flies with just this kind of scriptive markmaking. Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* proposes that punctuation derives from fly-specks, the small traces of dipterous excrement:

FLY-:SPECK:, n. The prototype of punctuation. It is observed by Garvinus that the systems of punctuation in use by the various literary nations depended originally upon the social habits and general diet of the flies infesting the several countries. These creatures, which have always been distinguished for a neighborly and companionable familiarity with authors, liberally or niggardly embellish the manuscripts in process of growth under the pen, according to their bodily habit, bringing out the sense of the work by a species of interpretation superior to, and independent of, the writer's powers. The "old masters" of literature – that is to say, the early writers whose work is so esteemed by later scribes and critics in the same language – never punctuated at all, but worked right along free-handed, without that abruptness of the thought which comes from the use of points... In the work of these primitive scribes all the punctuation is found, by the modern investigator with his optical instruments and chemical tests, to have been inserted by the writers' ingenious and serviceable collaborator, the common house-fly – *Musca maledicta*. (Bierce 2000, 83)

For Beckett too, we might surmise, flies are what bibliographers call accidentals, as opposed to substantives, a kind of noise, or automatic writing, neither figure nor ground, part of the fabric of the work, without quite partaking of its substance.

The visual noise of the fly is matched by its aural noise – that humming which indeed gives it its name in Romance languages, Greek *muia* modulating into Latin *musca*, Italian *mosca*, French *mouche* and English *midge*. Hebrew and Arabic hear a different kind of noise in the fly, more buzz than whine – the *zvuv* which gives *Beelzebub*. Beckett borrowed William James's phrase to refer to the perception of 'the face or the system of faces against the big blooming buzzing confusion'. In *Not I*, buzzing is used to conjure something like the ground bass of existence, that which prevents the relapse into full and perfect insentience. But the buzzing can never be discerned as ground, for it keeps breaking in on the speaker – crossing the line between ground and figure, insisting on being recognised and acknowledged – though presumably it is not the buzzing itself, but some voice making reference to, raising the matter of the buzzing, that keeps breaking in:

till another thought ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... very foolish really but– ... what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ... though of course actually ... not in the ears at all ... in the skull ... dull roar in the skull [...] no part– ... what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all silent but for the buzzing ... so-called ... (Beckett 1986)

And yet the buzzing becomes a correlative of the voice itself, which indeed begins and ends as indeterminable noise at the opening and close of the play.

In aural as well as visual terms, the fly is a phenomenon of the in-between, a fact to which Beckett draws our attention in alluding to Proust's treatment of flies:

his faculties are more violently activated by intermediate than by terminal – capital – stimuli. We find countless examples of these secondary reflexes. Withdrawn in his dark cool room at Combray he extracts the total essence of a scorching midday from the scarlet stellar blows of a hammer in the street and the chamber-music of flies in the gloom. (Beckett 1965, 83)

Another respect in which the fly can be regarded as a hinge or liminal creature is in relation to its uncertain singularity. Like all insects, flies appear to us as species-creatures, in that they do not have distinguishable individual appearances. The fly is always just a fly. And yet flies do not quite subsume their individual existences into that of the mass. It is common for human beings to refer to swarms of flies, but in reality flies do not form swarms, if by that is

meant a collective form or form of behaviour that is more than a mere aggregation of individuals. Flies cluster, when they do, near a food source, or source of warmth or coolness, not because their massing gives them any concerted mutual benefit. Fly swarms are contingent rather than constitutive, aggregative rather than associative. And yet the fly seems nevertheless to partake of plurality, most notably in their proverbial deaths (we die like flies, not like a fly) in a way that, for example, spiders and beetles do not.

In this respect, the fly is cosubstantial with the many insects that scurry through Beckett's work. It is in *The Unnamable* that we find the insect, in the form of the ant, embodying the threshold or interstitial condition of the narrator, who is neither in nor out of language or being:

In at one ear and incontinent out through the mouth, or the other ear, that's possible too. No sense in multiplying the occasions of error. Two holes and me in the middle, slightly choked. Or a single one, entrance and exit, where the words swarm and jostle like ants, hasty, indifferent, bringing nothing, taking nothing away, too light to leave a mark. (Beckett 1966, 357-8)

There seems to me to be a strong affinity between the swarming and jostling of words, often thought of in *The Unnamable* as a kind of semi-animated dust, ash or other particulate matter, and the swarming insects that the text evokes at moments like these. 'I'm like dust, they want to make a man out of dust', the voice says (Beckett 1966, 351).

For the voice to be voice nothing but his voice, *vox et praeterea nihil*, is for it to be a swarm-entity, since a voice is the postulated synthesis of all the swirling bits and divisions of language, words, vocables, punctuation marks

I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I'm the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet (Beckett 1966, 390)

There is in fact a link between atoms and insects, which in earlier times have often been thought of as marking a kind of limit in terms of possible size, as though animalcules represented the irreducible motes or corpuscles of life. Fleas and flies were thought to be able to generate spontaneously, from dust or dirt. This link is etymological as well as atomic: for an atom is that which is a-tomos, without a break, while an insect, from in + sectare, to cut, is a precise translation of the Greek en-tomos, that which has a cut or division within it. Beckett's work often seems to be driven by the urge to atomise, to slice, split and divide, in pursuit of the ideal of maximal disarticulation, or what Bion calls the attack on linking; as Beckett told Lawrence Harvey 'you break up words to diminish shame' (Harvey 1970, 249). The shame that Beckett seems to have in mind here is the shame attaching to the pride or presumption that he sought to guard against precisely with disarticulation, telling Harvey in 1961 or 1962 'I can't let my left hand know what my right hand is doing. There is a danger of rising up into rhetoric. Peak it even and pride comes. Words are a form of complacency' (Harvey 1970, 249-50).

Insects seem to be closely associated with all the many heaps or piles of loosely sifting stuff, dust, millet, sand, lentils, that appear so frequently throughout Beckett's work as an image of the loose and provisional aggregation of selfhood, neither wholly dispersed, nor fully holding together. Two of the most beautiful associations between flies and dust are to be found in Moran's narrative. The first is Moran's memory of seeing the minimal breath of a fly's passage: 'And I note here the little beat my heart once missed, in my home, when a fly, flying low above my ash-tray, raised a little ash, with the breath of its wings' (Beckett 1966, 163). The second is the little cluster of decomposed bees that he finds in his hive at the end of his disastrous journey (though bees evolved from wasps, and were thought of for centuries as a kind of fly, as the French miel-mouche confirms, they are in fact hymenoptera and not diptera), an experience analogous, perhaps to the discovery of the neglected hedgehog in *Company*:

I put my hand in the hive, moved it among the empty trays, felt along the bottom. It encountered, in a corner, a dry light ball. It crumbled under my fingers. They had clustered together for a little warmth, to try and sleep. I took out a handful. It was too dark to see. I put it in my pocket. It weighed nothing... The next day I looked at my handful of bees. A little dust of annulets and wings (Beckett 1966, 175)

This recalls an earlier passage in which the thought of dying like a fly has prompted in Moran himself the thought of crumbling into dust:

And on myself too I pored, on me so changed from what I was.
And I seemed to see myself ageing as swiftly as a day-fly. But the
idea of ageing was not exactly the one which offered itself to me.
And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing
of all that had always protected me from all I was condemned to
be. (Beckett 1959, 149)

The speaker in *Texts for Nothing* makes a similar copula between dust and the life and death of flies: 'Well look at me, a little dust in a little nook, stirred faintly this way and that by breath straying from the lost without. Yes, I'm here for ever, with the spinners and the dead flies, dancing to the tremor of their meshed wings, and it's well pleased I am, well pleased, that it's over and done with' (Beckett 1984, 98). Insects are of a piece with Beckett's highly-developed feeling for the pulverous or particulate, which is drawn to and organises itself around the diffuse movements and massings of comminuted matter, its siftings, shiftings, slippages, stirrings, swellings, erosions, undulations, dissolutions, agglomerations and agitations. A particulate mass is a mixed body, a median form between a body and the space it occupies – it is a body suffused by space, and a space saturated by bodies, which has its outside on its inside and whose inside is all outerness. The fizzy, sizzling sensation appropriate to these shifting masses is Willie's 'formication'.

There may be another, more particular reason for the association of flies with dust. At the end of their lives, usually after about three months or so, house flies will often become infested by a fungus, which will slowly consume them from the inside out. They can often be seen, motionless on window panes or ledges, the desiccated effigies of themselves; sometimes the spores of the fungus will surround them in a faint white smudge of dust; touching the fly is itself often enough to crumble it into dust. The action of the fungus, known as *Empusa muscae*, was first described by Goethe in 1828. Those short-lived autumn flies, which Moran thinks of as having hatched out, may in fact be at the end of their lives. They certainly end in the dust-pan:

You see them crawling and fluttering in the warm corners, puny,
sluggish, torpid, mute. That is you see an odd one now and then.
They must die very young, without having been able to lay. You
sweep them away, you push them into the dust-pan with the

brush, without knowing. That is a strange race of flies. (Beckett 1966, 166)

Appropriately, given its dipterous contour, the agent of verbal granulation in the trilogy and especially in *The Unnamable* is the comma, the word deriving from Greek *kopma*, from *koptein*, to strike or cut, the mark of elementary division, dividing off the smallest unit of grammatical sense, that is nevertheless itself not quite entire, that, like the insect has duality or division within it, between body and tail, and therefore lacks the punctual absoluteness of the period or full-stop.

The comma fulfils a dizzying multiplicity of functions in *The Unnamable*: interrupting, retarding, accelerating, clarifying, confirming, questioning, iterating, intensifying, interpolating, taking and making exception. Perhaps its principal function, though, like that of the fly, is to distract, to draw apart or internally divide an utterance that both does and does not wish to round on, to come round to itself. The comma performs in Beckett the labour of what Roland Barthes proposed in his *Elements of Semiology* to call 'arthrology', which he glossed as 'the science of apportionment', though the word really signifies the knowledge of joints and articulations – arthrology was used in the seventeenth century by John Wilkins and John Bulwer to mean a manual sign-language. We may perhaps recall the speaker in *Texts for Nothing* looking at his own writing hand: 'it comes creeping out of shadow, the shadow of my head, then scurries back, no connexion with me. Like a little creepy crawly it ventures out an instant, then goes back in again' (Beckett 1984, 86). The comma articulates, in both senses, opening and occupying the intervals between units of sense. The comma has no sound in itself, but it exerts its influence on the sound and the sense of everything around it.

Unlike the period, however, the comma exerts only a short-range influence. The full stop draws together an entire span of words into a single, elastically-sprung, intentional arc, turning it precisely into a period, literally, *peri + odos*, a turning way, a time that turns back on itself. The comma, by contrast, effects something like what Beckett, referring to Winnie's loose hold on time, calls the 'incomprehensible transport' from one moment to another (Knowlson 1985, 150). The sentences in *The Unnamable* have nothing like an organic closedness; rather they are like Clov's 'moment upon moment, pattering down like the millet grains of ... that old Greek' (Beckett 1986, 126). Commas effect that weak syntax or 'syntax of weakness' that Beckett told Lawrence Harvey that he sought (Harvey 1970, 249). Beckett's commas are appositional rather than compositional, they bring about coordinated rather than subordinated syntax,

in which items are added to each other with the exhilarated, improvised forgetfulness of the fly in flight, rather than layered or levelled. There is no subordination in this syntax, there are no real enclosures; it is made up of what might be called leaking parenthesis, closed on one side, and open on the other, as though the comma were an abbreviated form of an opening bracket which never finds its corresponding closing form, just as Beckett, following Joyce, uses commas rather than inverted commas to introduce speech, the mark therefore inhabiting the same plane as what it introduces, rather than being lifted above it. At one point, Beckett seems to suggest an affinity between the nonfinite unfolding of his sentences and the similarly unfinished business of biological evolution: 'my good-will at certain moments is such, and my longing to have floundered however briefly, however feebly, in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans, that I, no, parenthesis unfinished' (Beckett 1966, 325). When the voice congratulates himself on keeping hold of an intention through the turbid spate of his discourse, it is in terms that suggest to us the entomological nature of its form – 'what a memory, real fly-paper' (Beckett 1966, 385). But, for much of the time, the paper itself seems to lack this adhesiveness, and to be characterised by the scribbling, riddling flight of what, in a poem that weaves together flies and words, Ciaran Carson calls 'His dizzy Nibs' (Carson 1996, 45). The fly means this prolonged meanwhile, incessantly coming unstuck, in a movement that turns on itself without ever quite intersecting with its own flight.

The fly is a figure of distraction, of a dehiscent or internally-divided interiority, as in the cries of the patients in the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat heard (and ignored) by Murphy: 'The frequent expressions apparently of pain, rage, despair and in fact all the usual, to which some patients gave vent, suggesting a fly somewhere in the ointment of Microcosmos' (Beckett 1970, 124). Thoughts, so apt to be torn from their moorings by the interference of the fly, are often themselves figured as fly-like. Moran, for all his tender curiosity about insects does not tolerate them for long: 'That there may have been two different persons involved, one my own Mollose, the other the Molloy of the enquiry, was a thought which did not so much as cross my mind, and if it had I should have driven it away, as one drives away a fly, or a hornet' (Beckett 1959, 113). When hornets reappear in *The Unnamable*, they are not so easily to be evicted from thought, since they are now thought's own spasmodic, impassioned substance: 'For others the time-abolishing joys of impersonal and disinterested speculation. I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest, once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded' (Beckett 1966, 353).

The fly performs its work as a figure of distraction, of unintact, disfigured or discomposed thought, mostly through the idea of its infant form, the maggot, in which every fly begins its days. For centuries human beings have lived with a dread of their skulls and brains being invaded by worms or maggots. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word 'maggot' was commonly used to mean a whim or fantastical obsession, which, once having taken up nibbling residence in the mind, could not easily be expelled. In this sense, the most developed dipterous doppelgänger in all of Beckett is the crepuscular non-figure of Worm, whose role seems to be to bore out a pure space of hypothetical existence, that is meant never to be real enough to be falsified: 'Worm, I nearly said Watt, Worm, what can I say of Worm, who hasn't the wit to make himself plain, what to still this gnawing of termites in my Punch and Judy box' (Beckett 1966, 342).

I would like finally to revert to the postcard, or fly-leaf, of 1982 with which I began. Beckett recommended two examples of flies in his work that 'might be made to mean something' – 'the unswottable fly in *La Mouche* and the flies in the waiting room in *Watt*'. Of course, it is possible for swotting to be spelled with an 'o', but it is surely much more usual to spell it 'swat'. In tipping this wink to the earnest young swot who had written to him, Beckett may have wanted simultaneously to offer up his flies to the loutishness of learning and protectively to hold them back. The first sentence of the postcard, alluding to the title of the article he had been sent, 'Beckett's Animals', read 'Thank you for "my" animals, read with interest'. The fly at the end of 'Serena I' may allude to this question of ownership, for we hear that the fly 'fastens on his place in the sun' (Beckett 1977, 22). As Lawrence Harvey reminds us, the phrase 'place in the sun' is an allusion to one of Pascal's *Pensées* (no. 265) that deals with the theme of human ownership and appropriation (Harvey 1970, 90, fn 29):

Mien. Tien. – Ce chien est a moi, disaient ces pauvres enfants,
c'est la ma place au soleil. Voila le commencement et l'image de
l'usurpation de tout la terre

Mine, yours. – 'The dog is mine', said those poor children; 'that is
my place in the sun.' Here is the beginning and the image of the
usurpation of all the earth. (my translation)

It seems as though the role of the fly, especially as bodied forth by the maggot, that incipient, almost-creature, in which the fly has its beginning, and we are like to find our end, is to be an image of the unconstruable, of that which cannot be made to mean, or might hold out against the eclipse of its being by

meaning. Beckett prefers the inscrutable Worm to the creature occupying its place in the sun, in the burning light of scrutiny. Why, I wonder, does Beckett call the fly of 'La Mouche' unswottable? Harvey, coached perhaps by Beckett, tells us that

He has been unable to act the part of fate. At the critical moment his thumb becomes paralyzed, incapable of visiting destruction on the helpless fly. While the poet wisely leaves it at that, we can easily imagine the experience preceding the poem, the sudden intuition of the unity of all living creatures in a common earthly destiny. (Harvey 1970, 198)

Hugh Kenner, by contrast, sees a very different ending to the poem: 'Having delineated the beast with precise repulsion, he squashes it, and the heavens, for no clear reason, are reversed in their courses. He is playing God, perhaps, and the fly (sucking the void, sabring the azure) is being made to play man' (Kenner 1961, 54). Both of these readings are perhaps right. For why is the fly, first so frenzied and yet so trapped, and yet also immobile enough to be crushed by a thumb? I think it is plausible that it has already been swatted once, and is here in its death throes, the only circumstances in which a fly may be crushed by a thumb, which makes the prolonging of its life scarcely as merciful as it seems to Harvey. Knowing, owning and owning up are perhaps here not easily to be distinguished.

Let me recall some of the claims I have been trying to get up on their feet. First, that, as a kind of anomaly-animal, flies are fitted to embody the anomaly of the animal itself. Second, that flies are a kind of mean, a mediator and converter of scales and gradations. Third, that Beckett moves from an identificatory focus on the fly as singular entity to the indistinctness of the multiplicity - from the form to the swarm. Finally, the fly focuses a reproach to the usurpation of animality into the sphere of meaning.

The figuring of flies in Beckett's work allows us to imagine a different configuration of the relation between human and animal, that is neither the simple usurpation of the animal for human purposes - through what Derrida calls the 'animot', the singular-general name-word that names that which cannot name itself - nor the sentimental fantasy of ceding to the animal its existence *an sich*, its place in the sun, which is itself another mode of custody, making over to the animal as it does a being that it can never own. During Beckett's life, as the lives of humans and flies became indissolubly compounded, through the knowledge of our own composition furnished by

Drosophila melanogaster, the fruit fly, the fly comes to allow an understanding of humans and animals, not as others or brothers, but as chimerical assemblages, constituted in their mutual interferences with each other, living out each other's lives and deaths.

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