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THE POLITICAL CLIMATE: ECOCRITICISM AND THE APOCALYPTIC TONE

BY JONATHAN BASILE

Abstract: The tendency today to frame academic projects as political interventions risks limiting our political horizons if it treats our responsibilities as something that can be settled in theory. I read Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* together with John Guillory’s *Professing Criticism* because they offer two conflicting narrative contextualizations of the present turn to ecocriticism and “new materialism”—as a result of external, ecological or internal, academic forces. Both attempts at circumscription founder on the undecidable relations of politics and textuality. I turn to Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* to reconfigure the hinge of literature and politics.

It has become a guiding principle of our field that literature and literary criticism have an important role to play in averting the worst of climate catastrophe. Among the countless texts making such arguments, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* has been particularly influential, offering a compelling narrative about the complicity of literary form in the expansion of fossil fuel economies, and foretelling a transformation of literature in its wake.¹ I hope here to place in question certain orthodoxies of ecocritical and ethico-political readings of literature, not to pretend that an apolitical reading has or could ever exist, but to displace our thinking of the political, the ecological, and their literary relations. Too often, literature and the university are treated as a sort of free space for “imagining otherwise,” at the risk of circumscribing literature, politics, and the reader within a realm of free and conscious convictions that is only ever preconditioned by what most needs to be confronted. I would challenge this claim or aspiration without for a moment falling into its easy reversal, which depends on the same vision of isolated self-containment by pretending literature or the academy are politically neutral or irrelevant. At the heart of anything resembling politics, ethics, climate or ecology, we find what we call literary there already; anything but a distant shore or sandbox, everything we consider as belonging to the structure of literature and narrative is a precondition of ethico-political action.

I point to this necessity, not to make everything the subdiscipline of a literary study become a universal or encyclopedic science, but to open every discipline, including our own, to what it is not and cannot contain within a synchronic or unified structure. The type of precedence I am referring to is not or not only the subject matter of our discipline, but its substance or subject as well—“literature,” “literary theory,” “ecocriticism,” “us,” and so on are so many characters, stories, or allegories, a fictive figuration that preconditions our agency rather than being under our control or within our domain. They call for a folding back or redoubling of criticism or rather deconstruction, which opens every discipline to an unimaginable alterity. Facing an infinite responsibility, precisely where and precisely because there is no secure footing for the one who could respond—you *must go on*, *I can’t go on*.

I’ll go on. In what follows, I’ll examine three texts that offer radically different understandings of the possible relations of literature and politics. John Guillory’s *Professing Criticism* and Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* weave two chiasmatic narratives, each situating the contemporary interest of literature and literary criticism in the climate. For Guillory, ecocriticism is just one of several examples of literary critics declaring a political vocation for themselves despite their field becoming increasingly detached—in Guillory’s view—from the society they hope to change. The story he tells locates this contemporary moment as the outgrowth of a series of transmutations of the critical profession—a story which, by showing us how we have drifted from the proper aims of literary criticism, is meant to reorient us toward that true telos. Guillory’s tale derives the present from a series of displacements *internal* to the university; in this it clashes with Ghosh’s probably more familiar narrative, which places ecocriticism within the geological and climatological history leading from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. In Ghosh’s version of events, critics are taking account of what they previously ignored, overwhelmingly *external* forces that are finally being reflected in our thought and work. I place these stories side by side not to pick a winner, but to recognize the artificiality and fictiveness, in short a certain literariness, that is necessary to their formation. That is not to say that there are not crises of the climate or the profession at the moment, but that no “crisis” or moment of decision can be figured without these devices that represent the agency of self and other within a framework that admits of endless revisions or reinscriptions. This raises the stakes of our

responsibility, which can only respond from within such a narrative (“we” is always already a character) but must take responsibility even for its narration.

Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* is the “narrative” of these conditions of possibility and impossibility of narrative. It punctures both the literary history narrated by Ghosh (which elides the existence of modernism) and his formulation of the relationship of narrative in general to place and the environment. Moreover, while both Ghosh and Guillory argue that literature or literary criticism have lost touch with the real world in which political agency is possible, Beckett’s *Texts* rather demonstrate the inseparability of anything like a world from textuality. This does not diminish the unprecedented threats whose urgency is channeled, in quite different ways, through these narratives, but it affects our representation of political agency or efficacy and its relationship to literary form or simply to *reading*—to everything that resists the programmable or deterministic, that resists allowing us to settle our responsibilities *in theory*.

I. A VISIT FROM THE GO ON SQUAD

Criticism is often understood, today, to be undergoing its own moment of *crisis*, precisely around these questions of its proper relations to the “political.” Ecocriticism (which I will examine in the following section) is an example of a broader trend in literature departments and the humanities generally, the tendency to justify academic writing by orienting it toward contemporary political questions. Commentators from the reactionary to the progressive or revolutionary have indicted the politics of literature or the literature of politics for growing increasingly grandiose and increasingly out of touch, claiming a central role for itself in the most urgent decisions of our time, in spite or because of what some see as its waning influence and its diminishing institutional support. Rather than this critique of criticism, which would *separate and decide* upon “literature” and “politics,” assigning them to their proper roles and relations, I would propose to rethink them starting from the impossibility of discovering a rigorous center and limits belonging to either of these terms.

John Guillory’s *Professing Criticism* is a recent and influential example of an effort toward this criticism of criticism, which promises to reinstate the proper delimitations of literary criticism and

politics, against the current of what he sees as their thoughtless confusion today.² Guillory tells a story (there will be more to say about its narrativity), in which the various epochs we recognize as the history or pre-history of literary criticism represent a series of negotiations or misrecognitions of the dual task which is contained, semantico-philologically, in the term “criticism.” Guillory argues that at all times “criticism” has meant or intended—meant to mean—“criticism of the text” (*PC*, 48) and “criticism of society,” (*PC*, 49) but where these were once structurally unified aims, they have fallen asunder. In addition to the dis-integration of critic and society, because of the institutionalization, specialization, and professionalization of criticism, Guillory attributes the marginalization of literary criticism to the decreased popularity of literature (as he defines it) relative to “new media” (*PC*, xiii). This story of a fall from paradise, from an organic whole in which our means suited our ends, in which the critic spoke to the “public” directly, without need of a mediator and before the differences of tribes and tongues, is far from the only sign of soteriological history in Guillory’s text. Already from its title page, it announces an intention to purify *professing* of the echoes of a *profession of faith*, to return to a *justification by works*.³ The present, then, represents a kind of perversely narcissistic cathexis, a displacement of the energies of “criticism of society” from their proper object. The “new social movements” (*PC*, 60) that animated the era of “high theory” (*PC*, 61) placed certain academic norms in question in the interest of orienting academic practice once more toward its effects on “the world.”⁴ Yet, during the canon wars and continuing into what we call the present, these drives have turned inwards: “The critique of the discipline from within came to *constitute* its criticism of society, its political intervention” (*PC*, 66). Guillory sees the present crisis as a result of the growing disjunction between the political aspirations of literary criticism and its political effects—because it has taken itself as a sacrificial lamb or scapegoat in lieu of the actual domain of politics that, Guillory seems quite certain, can be found outside it.

The task Guillory sets himself is quite literally that of criticism: to *separate* [*krinein*] text and world from their contemporary confusion. His aspiration is at once palingenetic and radical-revolutionary—he hopes to return criticism-of-text to an earlier form in which the literature was engaged with on its own terms (not as a proxy for mundane intervention) *in order to* clarify the proper aims of the

task of criticism-of-world. This would require recognizing what Guillory calls a “gap” (PC, 58, 68) between discipline and society, or between “specialized scholarship” (PC, 69) and the “public sphere” (PC, 69). If we do not mind this gap, we find our political initiative squandered in what Guillory calls “proxy wars” (PC, 69)—the notion of substitution or surrogacy is of particular importance to his theory: “So the discipline became a surrogate for society in the ‘criticism of society.’ What is needed now is a critique of the *discipline as surrogate*” (PC, 69). I will not deny that the particular ferocity of certain disputes, within the academy though certainly not exclusively there, suggests the surrogational displacement of energies—in other words, because it is hard to imagine the sort of interventions that would topple the most tenacious and pernicious hierarchies, one directs one’s energies, sometimes with an excess of zeal, to those targets one can strike. Political parties, billionaires, militaries, and corporations may be beyond our reach, but we can relentlessly purify our syllabi, or invert power structures in our classroom, for example.

Without denying the reality of this pattern, I would place in question both sides of the theory or critique Guillory has built around it. First, *there are only “surrogational politics”* (PC, 69). Guillory’s desire to be done with substitutability, prosthesis, supplement, or surrogacy, to arrive at the center of politics *itself*, is a fundamental misrecognition both of political action and, in a word, of the *itself* itself. We will never be done with the space of substitutability in which and as which politics plays out, with the need to grasp partial objects, to take on provisional and marginal objectives, to say one thing and do another (without even any straightforward hypocrisy, simply doing what is possible in the name of what is as of yet impossible), to act without ever knowing what we can or will have accomplished, or even what success would be. It might seem that this follows simply from the scope of the injustices that can be named in the present, such as what we call settler colonialism, racial capitalism, or the Anthropocene, which are greater than any individual action or even collective campaign, which can only be approached through surrogacy—yet, beyond this seemingly historical or empirical limit lies the structure of unconditional responsibility itself, a demand in the face of which every response is substitutive. That does not mean that some objects or objectives are not better than others, but it is precisely in proximity to the greatest risk and chance of transformation that their undecidability is most apparent; it is only

in the face of responsibilities that cannot be satisfied in the present that we intervene, and thus the directness of our intervention remains open for the future, as a legacy. Those who come after will decide what was the true or real political act, and what failed or failed by succeeding, was too easily cooptable or appropriable. Failure is not a simple notion—it is possible to ostensibly fail in the present while bequeathing the inspiration or even the means for a future accomplishment. The structure of *referral* that Guillory hopes to exorcise from politics, the sense that we are mired in fake, surrogational politics while the *real* political deed lies further along, is *constitutive* of any politics worthy of the name. In order to set the limit, to say what will count as real politics, how it will be recognized, how we will act on it, the positing of such limits is already a political decision. The “gap” Guillory hoped to place between politics and nonpolitics unfolds *within* the political, which requires that we work toward the impossible in a realm that offers only substitutive aims. If we ignore the dis-junction that opens in and as politics, we risk a certain overconfidence in our own political faith, and a too easy dismissal of others.

Then, second, turning to literature, criticism, text, the academy and the profession, we find no simpler a structure. Both because each of these institutions is of the never-real-enough world in which political intervention plays out, and because there has never been a “world” without some remanence of textuality. Once again, I concede the impetus of Guillory’s intervention; it is not false to say that certain texts that will never be read beyond a handful of specialists (and sometimes not even by them) take on airs when describing their own stakes, but it would not be possible to extrapolate from the most egregious cases to a stable theoretical system in which text and world occupied separate spheres. (Where within this schema would Guillory’s own text fall? Is it a cloistered object reserved for specialists or does it reach out and touch “the” public? If it speaks to “both” parties, how, by its own account, is that possible?) Countless political fronts traverse the inside of academic labor and thought today, which not only receives continual shocks from the political world “outside,” but offers at every point of its “interior” the risk and chance of oppression and resistance. Even what we call literature or art in general makes an intervention, and though many of the means of judging its ethico-political stakes are naïve, it is just as naïve to dismiss entirely the relation of ethics and aesthetics.

Guillory circumscribes any such consideration of the politics of academic life by invoking rather brutal and untenable delimitations that are typical of a certain strain of contemporary Marxism. He claims the university has shifted its focus from “economic” to “cultural” politics, and that anyone it touches magically enters the “professional-managerial class” and learns merely the correct professional *attitude* adjustments, which “have encouraged universally [!] among the college-educated a desire to move beyond the injustices visited upon minority populations” while obscuring the “structural bases of social injustice” (*PC*, 74). A more nuanced accounting of how the university, the critical profession, and its students are constituted today by these very “structural bases of social injustice” would make this attempted distinction between true and false political consciousness far more obscure.⁵

There is a further sense in which the textual, the literary and literary-critical, punctures the inside of the political enclosure. Akin to the dis-junctive structure of “politics,” literature has no essence—its essence is to be nothing and everything, to have no given form or limit that guarantees its presence or its absence, but to haunt everywhere.⁶ It follows from the structure of referral or surrogacy within politics that a certain literariness, a narrative and fictive structure, is essential to any formulation it could take on. This is legible within Guillory’s text, which, in order to dismiss certain projects as insufficiently political and to define the telos of unsubstitutable politics, depends on the very literary gestures that it hopes to circumscribe. I’ll point somewhat telegraphically to instances of this that would merit more patient reading: 1) Guillory is an erudite historian of the profession and, moreover, a skilled raconteur. Yet, he narrates the past of “criticism” as if it governed what we call criticism, both as it is and shall be (*PC*, 72). He does not acknowledge that, far from revealing the nature of criticism, this history or pre-history is impossible unless we know already what “criticism” is. Merely noting that the *word* criticism appears in the past and the present is certainly not enough to establish filial or filiative relations, for like any term “criticism” is capable of brooking irreconcilable tendencies, and it is left to us (who, “we?”) to draw its limits. Thus, rather than recuperating a past or essence that governs the future, one is inevitably re-inventing or re-appropriating a past in the image of some desired future. 2) The artificiality or artifactuality of the resulting narrative is not a *contingent* feature. It may strike us as particularly false at moments,

given Guillory's tendency to a universalizing narrative mode, to speaking of "*the profession*" or "*the discipline*" (PC, 75) as if that were some one entity that could collectively be said to feel just one way in the present about its practices—"fatigued" (PC, 75) or "becalmed," (PC, 75) for example. Though it is easy to recognize the artificiality of this narrative, *it can only be displaced or deconstructed into another similarly artificial structure*. It depends on some framing or framability to make sense of its political position and aspirations, and can only declare its politicality by means of such provisional and destabilizable fictiveness or literariness. 3) Ultimately, it would be impossible to say whether what Guillory has written is "criticism of text" or "criticism of society"—*and there is nothing contingent in that*. He argues that, to arrive at last at the real world of politics, texts must be placed within their proper limits, they must be *well criticized*, and thus it is possible to read him at once as an aesthete and militant. (In this respect, Guillory's work instantiates a pattern that its namesake, Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature*, recognizes as recurring throughout the history of literary criticism. That is, the many versions of the call to return to literature for literature's sake are almost universally framed as critiques of a technicizing and instrumentalizing culture.)⁷

What can be gained from a political reading, such as perhaps this one here, is not accusation, a revelation of a text or author's true identity as conservative, lib, or leftist, but details that alert us to the role something like context plays in making a difference. Here, the most salient detail is undoubtedly Guillory's argument (which is, ultimately, one among many) that the "internal" "crisis" of legitimation for literary study can be separated from its "external" political and labor crises, and addressed merely by better articulating the discipline's self-conception.⁸ It could be read, and indeed has been in the pages of *The New York Times*, as saying that it is literary critics' own faults their profession is being attacked and defunded.⁹ Such self-critique is the *internalization* of demands that knock on the door of the academy today, from politicians, the media—and university administrators who are often overly credulous or complicit—and thus could not possibly be countered merely by self-reflection. Especially because, as Guillory unintentionally demonstrates, the *inside* is shaped by these externalities—text by world, and world by textuality.¹⁰ In other words, though Guillory declares that his explicit motive is to distinguish text and world, his writing nonetheless demonstrates that the "world" does not

precede its textual inscription, and that “text” and its readers or professors are traversed by the urgencies he posited as externalities. Far from an oversight or accident, this unintentionality is constitutive of anything like a sphere of action or intervening agent, which come to a stand only on the basis of what compromises their self-identity, a textuality or contextuality that can never ultimately be re-incorporated or mastered.

Guillory’s text offers an example of the impossibility of fixing a rigorous limit between the literary and the political. On the one hand, this impossibility opens everything we might take as hermetic, esoteric, or otherworldly to *context*—we should not be surprised when we discover political, cultural, economic, or ecological concerns, concern for the context in which writing and reading take place, shaping the inside of literary practices or institutions. On the other hand, it follows from the non-self-identity of literature and politics that the relations of text and context are never simply given, and any determination of their borders is already a political act and a literary fabulation.

Guillory’s narrative, together with Ghosh’s, to which I will turn in a moment, represent two distinct and perhaps irreconcilable contextualizations of literary criticism “today.” One situates it within a history that follows from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, while the other makes it derive from epochs of philology and literary history, New Criticism, and High Theory. These are two quite different ways of understanding a certain shift in the context and framing of our work: how it has become so common to justify a reading as a response to political or ecological necessities that it seems to call for justification or excuses if one refuses the practice. (It is worth noting that one contributory to the near-ubiquity of this practice has been the demand placed on academics by grants and often university administrators to justify their work in terms of its social utility, which often translated into a proclaimed concern for social or ecological justice. Without claiming that all such writing was in bad faith, it will be interesting to observe, in coming years, if the hostility toward such criteria enforced by the Trump administration restricts the recourse to this framing device, and in the process displaces or fractures the legibility of this episteme.) Far from our simply being able to decide on the truth or motivational efficacy of these framings, who “we” are and our political agency can only be understood within some such narrative. The most urgent decisions facing us in the present are not *opposed* to this fictiveness; they depend on it.

As a result, the most urgent decisions, calling for “political” interventions in the present, remain haunted by the undecidability of their contextuality. Simply to take the most immediate example, the implicit debate between ecocriticism and Guillory is overdetermined by contestations of the academic space it tries to define and yet takes place “within.” On the one hand, the most reactionary political energies in American life gather around the site of the university, whether they are invoked in the name of neo-Nazism or conservatism—which would view ecocritical projects as a front for “cultural Marxism” (“watermelon environmentalism”), complicit with “critical race theory” and “gender ideology”—or by the liberalism that too often makes excuses for the right, in the name of academic freedom or free speech.¹¹ And yet, as we just observed, when Guillory attempts to draw on a certain Marxism to describe this scene, he ends up writing a text which is easily reappropriable within this consensus. Guillory’s text is at once reactionary and revolutionary, each for the sake of the other. It deploys a Marxist framework (separating superstructural “cultural” politics from a base of economic issues), and yet by doing so adds fuel to a fire whose winds blow restlessly to the right today (depicting academics as out-of-touch, replacing artistic merit with identity politics). I am not arguing that Guillory or anyone else is to blame for the appropriability or cooptability of his discourse (as if the objective were to find an inappropriable framing)—rather, I am trying to demonstrate that there are *only* ex-appropriable political framings, and our political responsibilities start from there, from the impossibility of being satisfied *in theory*. It cannot be a matter of staking out a political *position*, such as could be conceptually or theoretically defined, if positionality can be overdetermined by context, such that an apparently self-same commitment works toward the best and the worst at once. Rather, one must negotiate each time anew with the inscription of one’s positions, which brings with it everything we might hope to circumscribe as surrogational or textual.

The dependence of anything we would call practical agency on undecidable and ex-appropriable contextuality is what I am calling *the political climate*. The readings I offer here are examples, so to speak, of how this climate, which is no more strictly practical or theoretical, textual or worldly, overdetermines our efficacy as “political” agents and the interventions it makes available to us.

Both Guillory’s narrative and the ecocritical narratives I will examine below respond to a sense of crisis that is no more internal

than external; it takes place in a political climate that does not obey such borders. The precarity within our profession and the ecological degradation we are witnessing are effects of the same political priorities. Whether we address the “internal” or “external” conditions of our labor, we are speaking to both at once. The framing of ecocritical and “new materialist” discourse is at once an “external” orientation toward a neglected precondition (the environment) of academic and all labor, and an intergenerational struggle among academics who require this sense of novelty and progress, proclaiming their own writing unprecedented, in order to justify their work under increasingly competitive and hostile working conditions. Moreover, the renewed deference of the humanities to the natural sciences can also be understood as internally motivated, an attempt to secure relevance and funding for humanities disciplines by borrowing the relatively acknowledged authority of the sciences.¹²

In what follows, I will introduce a prevalent form of ecocritical narrative, and propose a reading of Beckett that unsettles its presuppositions. To whatever extent possible, I hope to avoid falling into the tendency of ecocritical one-upmanship, where we reflexively claim that our favorite texts or “methods” of reading happen to be those best suited to combatting climate change. I am not saying that reading Beckett will put a stop to what, compulsively, goes on. I introduce it here because it happens to respond to a field certain (not all) of whose dominant narratives suppress such modernist projects, and thus it may allow us to recognize something this field is resisting. That is to say, this text responds to a context, a climate, though it certainly could be grafted or appropriated into others where it would undoubtedly work toward the worst. This is all I am trying to demonstrate, and all that has gone under the heading of deconstruction: we will never settle *in theory* our commitments or responsibilities, but must necessarily engage in an interminable negotiation with contexts that are never purely delineable or anticipatable in the light of the present. It is neither, then, to shirk responsibility nor to overconfidently claim to have satisfied it, but to hold open its impossibility precisely where the urgency of its call is most pressing.

It is in this political climate, which is no one context, that Ghosh's ecocritical work has found its place. We could say it is a context which is not *one*, meaning at once that it entails multiple conflicting contextual framings, and thus that it is not a "context" at all, that it does not and cannot set a rigorous limit specifying the identity and meaning of its apparent contents. Ghosh's influence is not merely owed to his work's ability to make literature and criticism the site of a struggle over the climate crisis; the story he tells also represents a self-understanding and justification that unites wide swathes of the theoretical humanities, environmentalist activism, and climate science today. The force of such a narrative can be felt even where it is not mentioned explicitly; though it has no one signature, focusing on a text where it is made explicit allows us to examine its inner workings.

Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is itself a model of the narrativity it champions, a story about literature that spans multitudes and ages while giving voice to the ecological. In rough outline, Ghosh frames a story in which the nineteenth-century realist novel deduces a certain notion of realism from the worst ecological abuses of colonialism, and ultimately reinforces that worldview by making the narrow limits of its realism almost inescapable:

I have come to recognize that the challenges that climate change poses for the contemporary writer, although specific in some respects, are also products of something broader and older; that they derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth.¹³

According to Ghosh, the concept of realism that shapes what he calls "serious fiction" makes the extreme weather events that are becoming our new normal unrepresentable within the space of the novel. A certain expectation on the part of readers and writers prevents it; whenever something serendipitous occurs in "realist" fiction, if for example a crucial plot development hinges on a storm of unprecedented magnitude befalling our protagonist, there is a risk of offending a reader's sense of *probability*. Ironically, it is precisely what is *naturalistic* about the realist novel that makes what is increasingly the norm of what we call nature unrepresentable novelistically—such events, depending on how they are woven into

the fabric of a story, risk creating a sense of artifice, that a plot *device* or *mēkhanē*, something like a *deus ex machina*, has interrupted what ought to unfold according to something like an internal necessity (a compulsion we will have to interrogate).

According to Ghosh, the narrative tendencies of realism descend from something like the original sin of Western culture. Settler colonialism and empire violently extirpated cultures with a connection to place, to the natural and “material” world they were part of, imposing on them grids of scientific and mechanistic thought that treated the environment as mere resources to be extracted. Ghosh ties this displacement to what he calls, following Bruno Latour and many others, “Cartesian dualism” (*GD*, 31) or “partitioning” (*GD*, 68), which is treated as the origin point of colonial violence. The regularity this imperial culture imposed on its surroundings was only tenable so long as a relatively predictable climate participated in making it possible—thus, the violence of colonialism and of environmental degradation have the same origin as the orderliness of bourgeois life depicted within the nineteenth-century “realist” novel:

[T]he Anthropocene has already disrupted many assumptions that were founded on the relative climatic stability of the Holocene. From the reversed perspective of our time, the complacency and confidence of the emergent bourgeois order appears as yet another of those uncanny instances in which the planet seems to have been toying with humanity by allowing it to assume that it was free to shape its own destiny. (*GD*, 21-22)

The task of the novelist in the Anthropocene, as Ghosh describes it, is to place these colonialist and extractivist inheritances in question by allowing the climate to speak through the novel in a way that jeopardizes the form and form of life it has thus far represented.

Ghosh’s is a compelling story—though I fear the source of our conviction may be precisely what his narration owes to the very “realist” norms he critiques. His story rests on the linearity and teleology that it hopes to place in question, both in its depiction of the totality of Western civilization’s evils as following from Cartesian philosophy, and in its depiction of literary history. Ghosh restricts literary history so that *the* “novel” can be depicted as a single character, with a single tendency or trait: suppression of its ecological background. Blame can then be attributed to it for the trajectory of European history, and a soteriological future can be prophesied

in which it will redeem itself by overcoming its character flaw. As I will examine in what follows, this explanation of the novelist's task brings together prominent narratives or theories of decolonial and new materialist thought with an ecocritical understanding of literary form. I hope to place in question, through Ghosh's text, certain orthodoxies in each of these fields that depend on precisely the traditions they hope to exceed or overcome.¹⁴ In the process, I hope to demonstrate that apparently "external" justifications of literary and critical or academic writing, which appear to ground its present task in political and ecological necessities, are no less dependent than the "internalizing" narrative examined above on a textual inscription that destabilizes their conclusions and practical efficacy.

Ghosh's story is, in a sense, a biography—it starts with the birth of its hero and villain, a birth that is strangely out of joint. The notion of the *probable* that Ghosh believes has restricted literary fiction and Western culture has an origin, he claims, in the modern period. Already, when he displays its birth certificate, we find one of those coincidences that beggars the belief of novel-readers: "Probability and the novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience" (*GD*, 16). Several decisions that are crucial for Ghosh's theory and his story are gathered in this twinning, but before they can be elaborated let us simply note what is artificial or possibly counterfactual about this narrative. The sense of "probability" that Ghosh claims originates at "about the same time" as the novel is markedly similar to one that can be found already in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle discusses at length, especially in Book 9 of the *Poetics*, what he calls *to eikos*, which has almost always been translated into English as "the probable." Undoubtedly, we would find differences in Aristotle's and Ghosh's presentation of this concept, but also basic commonalities that raise certain suspicions about the relatively modern birthdate in Ghosh's narrative. For Aristotle, the *eikos* or "probable" is similarly what gives internal unity to plot or character:

With character, precisely as in the structure of events, one should always seek necessity or probability [*to eikos*]*—so that for such a person to say or do such things is necessary or probable, and the sequence of events [touto meta touto ginesthai] is also necessary or probable. (Clearly the denouements of plots should issue from*

the plot as such, and not from a *deus ex machina* [*apo mēkhanēs*] as in *Medea*[.]¹⁵

If “probability” as a concern of narrative or poetics has ancient roots, why might Ghosh locate its origin in the modern period?

Ghosh’s decision to introduce this improbable coincidence into his narrative, the birth of “probability” from the same womb as the novel, can be read symptomatically. Even if any such decision is irreducibly arbitrary, for that very reason it is never purely arbitrary—it is because a pure reason could never possibly ground such an origin story that we are free to ask after the reasons or motives, the compulsions, that give it this particular form in this particular instance. Why, then, tell a story like this? We can recognize Ghosh’s logic, his reasons, by observing the values with which “probability” is articulated. Though he speaks about narrative unity, just as Aristotle did, Ghosh describes “probability” as a “mathematical idea” (*GD*, 16). He refers not to a literary critic but to historian and philosopher of science Ian Hacking as the authority countersigning its birth certificate. We should not assume that the “probability” in question is thus a separate concept with a demonstrably separate birthdate from Aristotle’s. For at least two reasons: first, it would be necessary to confirm, for every author and every reader of what we call the novel, that the implicit and even unconscious sense of probability justifying their writing or reading—what makes the difference between a gripping, even breathtaking narrative and one that makes us wrinkle our noses—this underlying sense of propriety would have to be demonstrably mathematical. Even within our quite recent framework where it is not uncommon to refer to a hunch as a “Bayesian prior,” I am not in the least convinced that what is at stake in our intuitions of the probable could be said to be saturated by the mathematical in the modern sense—I would rather argue that quantification or mathematization is a nonlinear limit passing *within* everything and anything we would attempt to identify with opposing categories of quantity or quality, logic or aesthetics. These are not simply questions of history or philology—nothing can be given a diachronic, historical, or narrative form until decisions are made as to these undecidable demarcations which therefore precondition the work of historiography.

Ghosh’s narrative has gone out of its way to make narratological “probability” a mathematical concept, and to locate it in the modern

period. This corresponds to a series of decisions shaping Ghosh's narrative that are, to borrow another term from his narratology, part of its *background*. They can be taken for granted because they cohere with the dominant mode of storytelling legible in the contemporary disciplines that form the backdrop of his study. First, there is everything in his theory that draws from the new or vital materialism of thinkers such as Jane Bennett.¹⁶ Already in *The Great Derangement*, but more centrally in his 2021 *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh makes modern thought and Western culture equivalent with mechanistic thinking:

As the ideologies of modernity were rising to dominance, the war against vitalism would go hand in hand with the expansion of European projects of colonialism and conquest. An essential element of these projects was the idea that only “savages” and “primitives” believe that the Earth—or earthly entities like forests and volcanoes—have qualities that elude human perception. To be “civilized” was to accept that the Earth is inert and machine-like, and that no aspect of it, in principle, can elude human knowledge.¹⁷

Thus, the regularity European colonizers imposed on nature, which allowed for the bourgeois domesticity of the novel, is seen as an effect of treating matter as “inert,” as a calculable and programmable resource rather than a “protagonist in history” and a storyteller in its own right.¹⁸ Ghosh follows Latour in attributing mechanism—the *old* materialism, so to speak—to “Cartesian dualism” which is said to have birthed the idea of an inert and calculable matter separate from the freedom of human thinking (*GD*, 31). One of the secondary gains of this origin story is that, at what Ghosh called “about the same time,” this mathematical mechanization of nature synchronizes with both the birth of the novel and the European project of colonialism. Though he does not cite them, one could find several sources in decolonial discourse that tie the original sin of settler colonialism to the imposition of “Cartesian dualism” or the “Cartesian subject,” perhaps most notably Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.¹⁹

One sees the appeal of simple origin stories: if all these evils have the same source, then they can be exceeded in a single step. By transforming the novel and its probabilities we will have punctured the closure imposed by European colonialism, and the rest, hopefully, could follow. Without pretending to exhaust the immense vistas conjured by this grand narrative, I will simply note certain

wrinkles that complicate this project and its narratology. First, we would have to question the extent to which “mechanism” can be attributed to the West or Western as a whole, while “vitalism” can be taken as its non-Western resistance. (The tendency toward vitalism among “new materialist” thinkers is particularly ironic given that one strain of climate denialism by fossil fuel companies and right-wing politicians relies on what Anne Pasek has called “carbon vitalism.”)²⁰ If these names, “materialism” and “vitalism,” share their origin in Western thought and languages, and even represent inseparable or undecidable tendencies, this will disrupt any theory or narrative that hopes, for example, a “politics of vitality” would always be on the right side of history.²¹

This pattern, whereby resistance incorporates what it claims to oppose, repeats in Ghosh’s theory of narrative. The uniform description he gives of “the” novel explicitly subordinates a significant amount of novelistic production in order to maintain its theoretical closure. To defend his claim of the novel’s inability to represent climate change, he must invoke curious distinctions of genre, including a category he calls “serious fiction”:

To introduce such happenings [unheard-of weather phenomena] into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house—those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as ‘the Gothic’, ‘the romance’, or ‘the melodrama’, and have now come to be called ‘fantasy’, ‘horror’, and ‘science fiction’. (*GD*, 24)

Here and elsewhere, Ghosh risks the logical fallacy sometimes called “no true Scotsman”—the novel cannot represent improbable natural forces because when it does it is not a novel. Or, not “serious fiction,” this generic designation that Ghosh has ultimately created himself and requires for his theory, even if he pretends to lament its construction. No one could in good faith claim that over at least two centuries the novel has remained exclusively “realist”; introducing the stock characters of “serious fiction” and “science fiction” is necessary to maintain a history or story in which the dominant mode of fiction has always been guilty of the same exclusions. The narrative devices Ghosh relies on to maintain the teleological and soteriological orientation of his theory or story are difficult to distinguish from the very narrative techniques he critiques (the suppression of background conditions to simulate

individual agency). The force of narrative depends on the unity feigned by these genre designations that function as proper names; one can speak as if a single something has existed continuously and thus is *characterized* by a constant tendency, precisely a *probability* of character, and therefore that something unprecedented and redemptive could occur if its character flaw could be overcome.

Ghosh sometimes narrates the history of “serious fiction” as if it has never included anything but nineteenth-century realism. When he does acknowledge the existence of twentieth-century formal experimentation, Ghosh treats it as merely exacerbating the humanistic tendencies of realism:

[T]he trajectory of the arts had been determined long before the Cold War: through the twentieth century they followed a course that led them to become increasingly self-reflexive. . . . It was thus that human consciousness, agency and identity came to be placed at the centre of every kind of aesthetic enterprise. (*GD*, 120)

This “self-reflexivity,” which is not on its surface an inadmissible predicate for certain modernist experiments, is made the ally of the continuing tendency to separate humanity from the “constraints of material life” and turn toward a pure interiority at the expense of the “nonhuman” world. It is even said to limit fiction to the search for authenticity and the expression of human freedom. Perhaps this representation of “the twentieth-century novel” corresponds to a certain tendency exemplified by J. D. Salinger or John Updike and the fiction section of *The New Yorker*—stories about upper-middle-class white people with relationship problems. I would ask why this admittedly limited genre is treated as representative of the monolithic category of “serious fiction” in the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, every presupposition of Ghosh’s narrative, not just its literary history but its conception of human and nonhuman, mechanism and vitalism, politics and aesthetics, agency, consciousness, language, narrative, authenticity, and freedom, would be placed in question if it grappled with the unfamiliarity of certain modernist texts (where “self-reflexivity” precisely operates against humanism and freedom). My suspicion is that these texts are elided, not because they exacerbate Anthropocenic or anthropocentric tendencies, but precisely because they challenge what remains traditional and complicit in our habitual narratives of the present and its climate politics.

A certain bad conscience is legible in Ghosh's duplicitous treatment of the distinction between "serious" and science fiction. He denounces those who have, apparently unjustly, marginalized science fiction, while nonetheless marginalizing it himself, which he must do in order to argue that he is calling for something unprecedented, a novel novel.²² When "serious" and "science" fiction are cast asunder, Ghosh often blames others, especially literary gatekeepers: "Indeed, it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction" (*GD*, 7). And yet he himself insists that "serious fiction" must purify itself of certain science fictional dislocations in order to think the unthinkable: "[T]he Anthropocene resists science fiction: it is precisely not an imagined 'other' world apart from ours; nor is it located in another 'time' or another 'dimension'" (*GD*, 72-73).²³ Unsurprisingly, this has led to two diametrically opposed readings of Ghosh's work. Timothy Clark, who makes several apt criticisms of Ghosh's work, sees him as a *proponent* of science fiction, as arguing that the genre should be taken more "seriously."²⁴ At the same time, several authors have read Ghosh (with good reason) as further marginalizing sci-fi and cli-fi, by arguing that only "mainstream literary fiction" can depict climate change in the here and now (*GD*, 72).²⁵

Without this fiction, the apparent unity of genre designations, there is no diachronic direction to Ghosh's intervention whatsoever. He would merely have told us that a taxonomic redistribution was in order, what had been called "science fiction" ought to be called "serious fiction," and perhaps reshelfed in our bookstores and libraries. This synchronic intervention might undermine the apocalyptic aspirations of Ghosh's narrative (his project of salvation through an unprecedented textual revelation, re-orienting the course of history); if it has long been possible for the novel to represent the "improbable," then his call for dramatic literary transformations to respond to dramatic ecological transformations dissipates.

Even ecocritical authors who find many points of agreement with Ghosh place in question his argument that literature must be set in "the present," not in "other worlds," in order to properly address the climate crisis. Elizabeth DeLoughrey's *Allegories of the Anthropocene* gives a clear example of this contrast, because of her

focus on allegorical reading as a method that reveals the ecological legacies of colonialism in literary texts.²⁶ In particular, she turns to literary writing with island settings, arguing that these islands can be read allegorically as representing the global, and in particular, as depicting the global as a finite and vulnerable space that can be invaded and destroyed, culturally and ecologically. Rather than *opposing* place in its particularity to abstract or Cartesian space (as Ghosh does), DeLoughrey sees place and space in a “dialectic,” where local and global develop their provisional identities only in relation to each other.²⁷ Moreover, the allegorical readings that DeLoughrey brings to postcolonial island texts are informed by Benjamin’s understanding of allegory, where language, place, and history are experienced as *ruins*. The possibility of allegorical reading (and, one could say, of literature) starts from this *displacement* from which emplacement is first recognizable, precisely as what has been immemorially lost.

Thus, DeLoughrey is suspicious of all narrative “linearity,” whether it takes the form of “progress” or “decline.”²⁸ In this sense too, we might see DeLoughrey as displacing the premises of Ghosh’s project, which offers a unified history of the modern world, and thus suppresses the allegoricity making that narrative possible and impossible. This narrative or history of decline, holding out the promise of redemption, is fundamentally transformed by DeLoughrey, who sees all narratives of the “novelty” of “crisis” as misrecognitions of a postcolonial condition that is one of *continuous* dispossession.²⁹ (Perhaps one could place this idea of a continuity of dispossession in dialogue with the figure Paul de Man borrows from Schlegel, “permanent parabasis.”)³⁰ In this sense, her project builds on the work of Kyle Whyte and others who have argued that Indigenous people are already living in postapocalyptic conditions.³¹ Even if Ghosh’s narrative and DeLoughrey’s allegorical reading practice share certain commonalities, most notably in depicting the violence of colonization as a historical rupture, DeLoughrey nonetheless complicates how Ghosh’s narrative readies the present as a novel moment for heroic intervention.

At the same time, DeLoughrey describes an “ambivalence” in the face of allegory. It is not put forward as simply good or evil, there is no critical or ecocritical gesture that allows us to isolate a particular literary form or reading method that will always be on the side of the best. She recognizes that allegory may have negative effects (for instance by naturalizing the colonial construction

of non-European cultures as located outside of time). It is only in the face of this undecidability of here and elsewhere, possession and ruin, good and evil, that one can and must *read*, that we are called to respond in a non-programmable fashion to what cannot be decided *in theory*.

The displacements or resistances legible within Ghosh's story can be read symptomatically. Every aspect of such a narrative—in which we receive a continuous and stable historical legacy, one offering adequate resources to interpret and narrate itself, where good and bad intellectual and political positions are purely external to each other and internal to themselves, allowing for pure and theoretical ethical commitments without cross-contamination—everything in such a narrative or theory grows from the desire for simple origins. The mode of “realist” narration that Ghosh pretends to decry is the backdrop or background of this entire project; the intervention of the “improbable” can only be defined on the basis of the probabilities established by such a narrative, and the author, as always, finds himself as a character within it.

Guillory's “internal” narrative of literary criticism derived contemporary political projects including the ecocritical from the history of the academy, in order the better to circumscribe a self-contained literary realm. Nonetheless, he revealed that internal space to be shaped by everything he hoped to locate outside the academy, in the supposed site of true political action. The political exigencies that he argued could be confronted immediately if academic labor recognized its own limits, only existed in a state of cross-contamination of text and world. Ghosh demonstrates the mirror-inversion of this pattern; he tells a story that makes literary history depend on momentous political events, on settler colonialism and ecological degradation as a whole, revealing in the process that political and ecological history depend on their textual inscription. This does not in the least diminish the urgency of the decisions they call for, but it displaces our notion of who is called to respond, and how.

III. BECKETT, FOR WHAT BECKONS

I turn to a reading of Beckett to listen for what in his texts complicates these political and ecocritical narratives. If the existence of modernist experimentation's challenges to literary realism is entirely elided in Ghosh's history, this is perhaps not only because

it disturbs certain of his conclusions about the past and future possibilities of narrative, but because his own project—and many of the stories we tell to find our place in the present—depends on a form of narration that a text such as Beckett's destabilizes.

Nonetheless, this elision of modernism does not govern the entirety of ecocritical discourse. Ecocriticism may have initially privileged nature writing and literary periods where a certain environmentalism was more easily recognizable, but it only requires a single step to see modernist experiments, often interpreted as responses to the technological innovations that produced the "Anthropocene," as having something to say about the ecological.³² Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* offers one framework within which both nostalgic or sentimental nature writing and urbane or ironic avant-gardism can be read as equally ecological. What I will say in a moment about Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* is not simply to reverse Ghosh's position and arrive at Morton's. First, despite everything Morton says about the turn or return to nature, "ecomimesis," remaining within textual production, ("The more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have"), his project maintains a telos of ideological demystification oriented by something like naturalism.³³ Despite claiming to be "without" nature, Morton consistently inscribes his project within a Marxist-inspired "materialism" that declares "nature" to be ideological *in order to return to something more foundational*. This longing for return is all that has ever been meant by the name "nature," it is the nature of nature, and pretending otherwise would require us to believe that the value of "matter" or even the "ecological" has no relationship to the concept of "nature." Second, despite his explicit allegiances to "deconstruction," and his claim to launch a "relentless questioning of all essence," it is plain that he is content to "drop the concept of nature," or rather the term, without questioning the essentiality of the guiding terms that remain his project's orientation.³⁴ Finally, while his "ambient poetics" allow us to expand what can be read as ecological literature, to include anything that draws attention to context, whether that of the "page" or the "physical and social environment," it maintains a tendency to stabilize oppositions such as content/form in order to designate certain texts and techniques as "properly ecological."³⁵ Morton resists the undecidability of the political inscriptions of literature, the political climate.

Beckett's writing unsettles both ecocritical projects, whether they express themselves in a relatively narrative or theoretical mode,

and whether they suppress or celebrate the genre designations in which we try to contain Beckett. Both Ghosh and Morton seek a secure origin from which to program or calculate the political and practical tendency of writing, while Beckett gives voice to the inconsistency of anything like an origin. If we would like “place” to be the origin and anchor of stories in which “material” things have an agency and identity of their own, in Beckett such origins do not precede their inscription or the longing for return. At the same time, nothing is less secure there than the project of a demystification of “ideology,” as if the recognition of this secondarity was our second birth into the really real. Nature as the compulsion of origin is at once necessary and impossible in Beckett; its belatedness does nothing to efface its lure or allure, which is perhaps expressed most economically in the final words of *The Unnamable*, “You must go on, I can’t go on. I’ll go on.”³⁶

Reflecting the delayed uptake of ecocriticism in modernist studies, many Beckett scholars have recently argued for his relevance not only to ecocritical projects such as those of Ghosh and Morton, but to new materialism and the “nonhuman” turn.³⁷ I see a greater potential for the reading of Beckett to place in question many of the basic assumptions of the contemporary theoretical humanities—certainly not to dismiss their ethico-political impetus, but to resist the tendency to win our “seriousness” as a discipline by suppressing the inscription of these objectives in scenes of reading.

Beckett is also a remarkable omission from Ghosh’s narrative because his settings are often read as post-apocalyptic landscapes, and thus must have something to tell us about the encounter of climate catastrophe and literature (I refuse to call Beckett, who never loses touch with a certain gallows humor, or rather with the omnipotent force of irony, “*serious fiction*”). *Endgame* is the most obvious example, where the atmosphere of destitution captured by Clov’s line, “There’s no more nature,” has given rise to several ecocritical readings.³⁸ Here, I hope to explore the more general sense of “aftermath” or afterwardsness enabling and constraining Beckett’s prose works, in particular his *Texts for Nothing*.³⁹

Both Ghosh and Morton long for a certain return, to the here and now of place or the bedrock of materialism. What becomes of this longing in *Texts for Nothing*? Where and when are we upon opening these *Texts*?

Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on. Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on. I'll describe the place, that's unimportant. The top, very flat, of a mountain, no, a hill, but so wild, so wild, enough. Quag, heath up to the knees, faint sheep-tracks, troughs scooped deep by the rains. It was far down in one of these I was lying, out of the wind. Glorious prospect, but for the mist that blotted out everything.⁴⁰

Several contradictions are immediately mobilized to destabilize—I won't say the narrator or even the narrative, for now let's simply say the *Texts*—to destabilize the *Texts*'s occupation of anything like a place. And, in turn, our access to it as readers. “Suddenly”—“at last,” “couldn't stay”—“couldn't go,” “I'll describe the place”—“that's unimportant,” “the top”—“far down,” “so wild”—“enough,” “glorious prospect”—“blotted out.” The foundations of narrative are not so much refused as ironized here, everything from character and setting to grammatical person is posited or haunted in order to be emptied of content, de-positated only as a predicament. As Beckett puts it in another text: “talking to himself in the last person.”⁴¹ The *Texts* do not set us elsewhere, nor do they *describe* or allegorize textuality as a setting. We are not wrong to read this landscape of “faint sheep-tracks, troughs scooped deep,” as the very lines of text traversing the page of the *Texts* we are reading, or any text into which they are grafted, such as this one here.⁴² On the following page, the view is described as “the distant sea in hammered lead,” in which we hear the heavy fall of a typewriter's keys. (“In” here can describe a kind of coloration, but also a form—we receive the sea in the shape or guise of hammered lead, the inked depressions the typewriter deposits.) But it is text, not as a space of immanence excluding all else, but as what excludes itself, as what is interminably open to a beyond that does not arrive. The impasse of the *Texts*, in which we readers are always already entwined, does not trap us in an other world (such as is sometimes attributed to language or literature) but refuses the comforts of a fiction that places alterity somewhere else. By opening and stymying that compulsion to go on, one is exposed to the aporia of textuality that *must* go on, as what we crash back against.

Up or down here, where *I was lying*, is no less a place and resting place: “I am down in the hole the centuries have dug, centuries of filthy weather. . . . They are up above, all around me, as in a graveyard” (*TN*, 101). This hole carved out by habit, by the

weather, which it would be overhasty to determine as the position of narrator or protagonist, but in which or from which “I” lies, is a grave, wombtomb. It is pictured, impossibly (“I can’t raise my eyes to them”), as a burial from the perspective of the corpse, a still-open pit from which the legs of mourners would be visible (TN, 101). The place of the *Texts* gathers intimate proximity with the greatest distance, as near and far as life from death. I’ll borrow a word from the *plus d’une langue* of these *Text(e)s* to express their relationship to place: *inhabitable*.

There is never a here, a place, a home or homeland, without this textuality. What has its origin in textuality has no simple origin. Every “materialist” theory that attributes agency, freedom, invention, or other powers to matter effaces its own responsibility for granting and nominating these powers. These *decisions* are ineluctable precisely because anything like agency, whether our own or the other’s, is *undecidable*; one only ever receives an effect or inscription that must, impossibly (you must—I can’t), remain as the innate artificiality or substitutability of the narrative or rational-causal form it takes. It is no more our own than it belongs to this or that other, and the risk of saying otherwise is always that of resting too comfortably with our own authority to say so, granting ourselves the power to grant power to the other. Beckett’s *Texts*, therefore, by describing the haunting loss of origin, describe a state of coloniality that is a condition of historicity, and cannot simply be attributed to a historical occurrence:

Well I’m going to tell myself something (if I’m able), pregnant I hope with promise for the future, namely that I begin to have no very clear recollection of how things were before (I was!), and by before I mean elsewhere, time has turned into space and there will be no more time, till I get out of here. Yes, my past has thrown me out, its gates have slammed behind me, or I burrowed my way out alone, to linger a moment free in a dream of days and nights, dreaming of me moving, season after season, towards the last, like the living, till suddenly I was here, all memory gone. Ever since nothing but fantasies and hope of a story for me somehow, of having come from somewhere and of being able to go back, or on, somehow, some day, or without hope. (TN, 132)

“I” is not cast out of a home it tells stories to recall, but only has a “home” on condition of the stories it must tell because of its constitutive homelessness. Far from dismissing claims to Indigeneity

or place, such an understanding of storytelling allows for it while also making room for experiences of exile, sur-vival through hybridity and translation, and possibilities of resistance opening within dominant cultures or languages, which are excluded when “place” is treated as a simple origin.

The “before” to which origin or home seems to belong is no more and no less an “elsewhere,” “time has turned into space,” the present of textuality is no more secure than its place. Textuality is not a specific loss that befell the once-present or once-emplaced, but rather the hope without hope, opening as the horizon of a future without deliverance, a “future” that is the haunting dis-juncture of every “present,” the structure of the phantasy of “a story for me somehow, of having come from somewhere and of being able to go back, or on.”⁴³ “I” has only one place, it is not my own. Recognizing this ex-appropriating structure of textuality does not diminish the violence of colonialism, but would see that violence as a displacement of this structure rather than the loss of a pure origin (a previous generation of postcolonial scholarship cautioned against the “nostalgia for lost origins”).⁴⁴ It is from this same impossibility that, even for those who have lost everything, resistance receives its chance. Beckett, too, wrote from such a place of displacement, composing himself in a language not his own, “all memory gone”—“What’s the matter with my head, I must have left it in Ireland” (TN, 133).

It requires certain precautions to tie the “here” of the *Texts* to textuality. It is necessary to resist any reading that would attribute this state of nonorigin to language or literature as if that named a realm apart, which achieved this destitution by shutting out something else, the world or nature. There is no lack or fault, no debt or guilt here. Thus, I am not calling for a return to the customary interpretations of “structuralism” or “poststructuralism” that speak of the “agency of language.” We can better recognize the textuality of the *Texts* by introducing (in order to displace them) certain distinctions from Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*. Genette distinguishes three meanings of *récit* that he feels have become confused: the *story* (*histoire*) or events narrated are different from (and not necessarily in the same order as) the *narrative* (*récit*) that recounts them, both of which are distinguished from what he calls *narrating* (*narration*):

A third meaning, apparently the oldest, has *narrative* [récit] refer once more to an event: not, however, the event that is re-counted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself. . . [T]he narrative discourse is *produced* by the action of telling in the same way that any statement [énoncé] is the product of an act of enunciating.⁴⁵

Without being unfair to Genette, who introduces this structure precisely to demonstrate how literary discourse plays in its interstices, we can see that Beckett's *Texts* expose the artificiality of this trinitarian structuralism.⁴⁶ "There's a pretty three-in-one, and what a one, what a no one" (*TN*, 150). Nothing is less *evident* than the conclusion Genette draws: "It is fairly evident, I think, that of the three levels we have just sorted out, the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis, which is itself the only instrument of examination at our disposal in the field of literary narrative, and particularly fictional narrative."⁴⁷ Such a description risks stabilizing what remains undecidable—and remains so everywhere (despite Genette's claim that this structure allows us to distinguish fictional narrative from its others), not just in a text or *Texts* such as Beckett's that exploits these possibilities or impossibilities to their unlimited limits. We do not have, here or ever, a narrative set adrift from its narrating, in view of its story, but what is none of these three because it takes place as all of them at once. The obsessive struggle of the *Texts* to declare and deny who speaks or writes and who is ventriloquized, to declare and deny the time and place of a story, tarries with the nonorigin of these "three" structures in a textuality that is all and none. Narrative too is no more present than absent, it has no stability until the others have been gleaned from it, made to precede it by what can only follow, go on.

I dwell on the undecidability of textuality to place in question the linkages in Ghosh's and much ecocritical or "materialist" writing, between language and the human. The *textuality* of Beckett's *Texts* is precisely the alterity *within* everything we could call language, consciousness, or thought. We are caught in the goings on of an ex-appropriation, no more our own than the other's, no more "human" than "nonhuman." The risk of privileging the "nonhuman" at the expense of the "human" is to rely on the most traditional exclusions or resistances in order merely to flip their sign. For example, in the first sentences of Richard Grusin's introduction to the *The Nonhuman Turn*, he glosses the

nonhuman as “animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies”—such a definition is forced to pretend the “human” is not an animal, a body, organic, material, geophysical or technological, and without affect.⁴⁸ It is precisely the “dualism” or “partition,” perhaps even an exacerbation of it, that so many today hope or pretend to denounce in Descartes. It does not help in the least that he employs this distinction to argue that “the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman,” or even for their “indistinction”—the ontologizing drive legible within such gestures aims to fix the boundaries of self and other in order to feel more confident in crossing them.⁴⁹ It shares with discourses of hybridity, symbiosis, network, process, becoming, rhizomatics, plasticity, and entanglement in effacing the necessity of reading, the undecidable inscription, that preconditions all such dichotomies (and their border crossings).⁵⁰ One cannot turn to the “other” or “non” while also absolving oneself of the (impossible) responsibility for these undecidable de-limitations. For this reason, everything that most resembles thought, language, or consciousness about the *Texts* is most haunted by inhumanity:

Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me? Answer simply, someone answer simply. It's the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist, in the pit of my inexistence, of his, of ours, there's a simple answer. (*TN*, 114)

It is not another place, the other as another human or nonhuman, or an author such as Beckett (whatever that is) to which or to whom we are called or recalled by the question “who says this, saying it's me?” We could no more posit a “real” distinction between the narrating and the narrative than we could a “fictional” one, to ground the origin and telos of this questioning. (The “real” world is only a displacement of this fundamental structure, which institutes every here and now on the basis of the gone.)⁵¹ On the same page, the *Texts* again reverse themselves without prior direction, speaking of “me who am everything, like him who is nothing.” For where does this referral beyond lead but to another text? Something with just as differential a structure or de-structuration—after all, who pretends to be the source of their own thoughts? It is thus that these *Texts*, which have so displaced any sense of presence, can ask, “what elsewhere can there be to this infinite here?” (*TN*, 123).

The resistance to reading—to reading the textuality in which any scene of self and other or human and nonhuman is inscribed—is a resistance to deconstruction. This can be seen not only where the “material turn” is accomplished or feigned by rejecting a “linguistic turn” (which, if it is anything, is something Derrida provided us with the resources to critique or rather deconstruct). Even where materialist projects ally with Derrida today, as if to correct a general oversight, such alliances are often formed precisely by resisting everything in Derrida that would require questioning the foundational status or pure exteriority (nonhuman, and so on) of “matter.” I’ll stay with the example Ghosh provides of this all too common tendency among “materialists” today. Ghosh attributes “language” to humans alone, in order to argue that to communicate with nonhumans we must “move beyond language” (*GD*, 82).⁵² Curiously, he couples this claim with an unacknowledged borrowing from Derrida:

Would it follow, then, on the analogy of Kohn’s suggestion in relation to forests, that to think about this era of climate change will be to think in images, that it will require a departure from our accustomed logocentrism? Could that be the reason why television, film and the visual arts have found it much easier to address climate change than has literary fiction? And if that is so, then what does it imply for the future of the novel? (*GD*, 83)

Derrida introduced the term “logocentrism” in a vastly different sense than the one implied here by what Ghosh calls “logocentricism.” Ghosh’s unfaithfulness is not just in the suffix, but in restricting the term’s borders to those of language in the traditional sense, in order to make its beyond accessible. Ghosh’s gesture is precisely of the sort Derrida described as logocentric—it treats language as having a definite center and limits, in order to secure a simple presence (reality or ideality) outside it. First, by making language a uniquely human attribute, Ghosh has incorporated the very gesture he claims to be exceeding, the tradition stretching well beyond Descartes, from Aristotle to Heidegger, that deprived all but the human of language. Second, it is notable that this traditional gesture is described precisely by borrowing or misappropriating terms from Derrida—and Ghosh is not at all alone in doing this.⁵³ It is symptomatic of the theoretical scene in which we find ourselves, which hopes to grant itself the power and authority of speaking from and to the realest real, and pretending to do

so by advancing beyond, rather than resisting, everything from a previous generation that would have complicated this hubris. We should note, given Ghosh's concern for the "future of the novel," that there is just as much resistance to reading today among academics as among our students.

There is as much "internal" as "external" necessity motivating this resistance, as many fears for the future of the planet as for the profession, which urge the taking of certain shortcuts while trying to speak to our responsibilities. I recall the aporetic of responsibility not to dismiss these ethico-political motives—the desire for social and ecological justice that grapples with the legacies of colonialism and environmental degradation—but to confront certain risks that return in the scenes of inscription of our responsibility. Wherever the political motivations of humanities research are invoked today, the understanding of the political subject is frequently constrained in order to argue more securely for the efficacy of our disciplines. If I question this self-understanding, it is certainly not to pretend that the direct line to action exists somewhere else, for example in the sciences that appear enviously real only from the outside (from the vantage point that takes them as models to be imitated). When we frame the political efficacy of literature as a space for the "imagining of possibilities," we risk flattering our vanities by bringing political decision-making within the domain of individual conscience (*GD*, 135). The role of the individual is always equivocal because only collective organizing can transform our given possibilities—individual pieties may be irrelevant or obstructive to such work, which at times must go on even without conviction.

We will not find any resolutions in Beckett. If his texts hold open certain aporias in which we can decipher what is most and least our own, what presses upon us with the urgency of an overpowering other, it is not because he simply depicted our political scene, our political climate. But those who come after, who go on, can read something of themselves in these texts, and that is nothing new: *Waiting for Godot* has been staged by German prisoners in Lüttringhausen, by the Free Southern Theater during the civil rights movement, in San Quentin, Sarajevo, the Jenin refugee camp, post-Katrina New Orleans, and Zuccotti Park during Occupy.⁵⁴ Refuting Ghosh's understanding of the necessary link between the here and now and social or ecological justice (Paul Chan's post-Katrina production is particularly relevant here), the play creates the sense and continuity of place and time precisely

by leaving and breaking it, by iterability, just as every call for justice asks for the recognition of a tradition or legacy by transforming it. If Beckett's texts speak to those who call for justice in different times and places, it is because we are called forward precisely by what never arrives. Godot would not arrive, nature would not return to *Endgame*, the *Texts* would not find their voice or their silence if any or all of the struggles we name in the present were to issue in something we could recognize as justice. Any more than we could save Kafka's K., for example, by a Paperwork Reduction Act. For this reason, I cautioned against justifications of literary studies that would assume its direct and almost deterministic efficacy toward the ends of social justice. What opens an inexhaustible demand at the heart of these texts is precisely what prevents their serving a definite end. The very risk of converting Beckett's texts into motivational posters (as has happened many times with his "I'll go on" and "fail better") is of dampening the resonance of uncontainable, impossible demands.⁵⁵ What most holds open the dis-juncture of justice and injustice is what makes anything like closure impossible in these texts.

One cannot read literature or anything else except within a scene that is political and even opens on no less urgent demands that exceed anything presently recognizable as politics. For just that reason, no reading will ever exhaust an ethico-political call to responsibility, not because responsibility lies in a definite elsewhere, outside the text, but because it can only be enacted in scenes haunted by the alterity of an inscription that calls in turn for the intervention of another reader. This haunting alterity, which makes possible our roles as political actors and the context in which they take place only by means of a fundamental displacement, is what I am here calling the political climate.

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NOTES

I am grateful to the many readers of earlier drafts of this article—their insights and careful readings have helped shape its present form. In particular, I thank Adam Frank and the participants of our 2023 ACLA panel, Thomas Clément Mercier, Deborah Elise White, Casey A. Williams, Claire Ravenscroft, and an anonymous peer reviewer.

¹ I will note in what follows many aspects of Ghosh's project that are idiosyncratic, and some which have been widely criticized by other ecocritics. Still, this framing which suggests a role of consciousness raising and political efficacy for literature and criticism reflecting on nature is widespread and foundational for the field. See

Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 121.2 (2006): 503–16. Heise also offers an example of the foundational opposition between ecocriticism and poststructuralism (as well as early examples of critiques of this dichotomy). More recent ecocritical writing has moved toward understanding its relationship with poststructuralism as non-oppositional; see Steven Swarbrick, *The Environmental Unconscious: Ecological Poetics from Spenser to Milton* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2023). Matthias Fritsch, Phillip Lynes, and David Wood, eds., *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2018); and Timothy Clark and Philippe Lynes, "Introduction: What Might Eco-Deconstruction Be?," *Oxford Literary Review* 45.1 (1 July 2023): 1–20.

² See John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2022). Hereafter abbreviated *PC* and cited parenthetically by page number. Guillory's book is not focused on ecocriticism, but lists it as an example of the broader tendency to which he is responding. For his more detailed comments on ecocriticism, see Matt Seybold, "Hungover from the Bad Old Days of High Theory," 14 August 2023 in *American Vandal*, podcast, 87:35, <https://marktwainstudies.com/HighTheory/>. In many ways, Guillory's 2022 book is a re-iteration of arguments from his 1993 *Cultural Capital*; thus, Peggy Kamuf's deconstructive reading of that earlier text is pertinent to the present debate. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993); and Peggy Kamuf, *The Division of Literature, Or the University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), 20–29.

³ See *PC*, 71–78.

⁴ Guillory frequently uses the term "world," interchangeably with "society," to refer in a unitary fashion to whatever is outside the profession or the university. See, for example, *PC*, xiii, 44.

⁵ See Jeffrey J. Williams, *How to Be an Intellectual: Essays on Criticism, Culture, & the University* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2014), 119–78; and Andy Hines, "Working Critics," *Modern Language Quarterly* 85.2 (2024): 205–229.

⁶ See Jacques Derrida, "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony," in *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 28–29.

⁷ See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁸ See Sarah Brouillette, "Reading after the University," *Public Books* (23 November 2022), <https://www.publicbooks.org/reading-after-the-university-english-departments/>.

⁹ See Jennifer Schuessler, "What Is Literary Criticism For?," *The New York Times* (3 February 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/03/arts/john-guillory-literary-criticism.html>.

¹⁰ These terms I have borrowed from Guillory's writing, "world," "text," and "criticism," may be reminiscent to some readers of major concerns of Edward Said's work. Said's project of restoring to texts the meaning they derive from their place in the world is explicitly contrasted to a project he associates with deconstruction-in-America that would decontextualize texts and read them as self-contained. If this critique is limited to certain followers of Paul de Man, I am in agreement with it, and would argue that this sort of textual immanentism or linguisticism was never part of Derrida's writing. On the other hand, deconstruction would require not only thinking of the "worldliness" of the text, but of the textuality of

the world, in a chiasmatic and aporetic (not a grounding) fashion. See Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 3.

¹¹ The present essay was written prior to October 7th and to the second Trump administration. The university has remained central to the rhetoric and tactics of this administration, both as a target of budget cuts that ultimately aim to eliminate public funding for everything but the police, the border patrol, and the military, and to achieve ideological control that will exclude people of color, international scholars, and trans people from the university and will silence research on race, gender, and the environment (among other things). Just as I wrote when composing the above text in 2022, a liberal-fascist alliance has paved the road for this takeover of the university; in every case, the Trump administration has premised intervention on the specious idea that campus protests of the genocide against Palestinians were “anti-Semitic”; this falsehood was the party line for the Democrats when they held power and was popularized throughout the liberal media.

¹² A certain deference to the sciences is one motive animating the emergence of “postcritique.” See Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225–48; Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371–91; and Guillory, *Professing*, 79–102. Here again, it is necessary to note how the political climate has shifted in the two or three years this essay waited to be published. While it is still said, in certain contexts, that the humanities (and their social justice bent) fall short of an ideal of objectivity embodied by the sciences—sometimes associated with computational methods of reading including “AI”—it is more obvious than ever that this critique was only one justification of a political project aiming to dismantle all public funding for research and education, including the sciences.

¹³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *GD*.

¹⁴ See Thomas Clément Mercier, “Uses of ‘the Pluriverse’: Cosmos, Interrupted — or the Others of Humanities,” *Ostium* 15.2 (2019), <https://ostium.sk/language/sk/uses-of-the-pluriverse-cosmos-interrupted-or-the-others-of-humanities/>.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Poetics / On the Sublime / On Style*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 15.1454a.32–38.

¹⁶ I have written elsewhere about various authors associated with new materialism, in particular on how the effort to grant agency to matter depends on the traditional schemas of causality that it claims to place in question, and suppresses the textuality of nature and the natural sciences. On Bennett, see Jonathan Basile, “Life/Force: Novelty and New Materialism in Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*,” *SubStance* 48.2 (2019): 3–22. On new materialism more broadly, see Jonathan Basile, “Misreading Generalised Writing: From Foucault to Speculative Realism and New Materialism,” *Oxford Literary Review* 40.1 (2018): 20–37; Jonathan Basile, “The New Novelty: Correlation as Quarantine in Speculative Realism and New Materialism,” *Derrida Today* 11.2 (2018): 211–29; Jonathan Basile, “Other Matters: Karen Barad’s Two Materialisms and the Science of Undecidability,” *Angelaki* 25.5 (2020): 3–18; and Jonathan Basile, “The Epic of Genesis: Catherine Malabou and the *gène* of Epigenetics,” *Derrida Today* 16.2 (2023): 99–113.

¹⁷ Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2021), 87.

¹⁸ Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 38, 39.

¹⁹ See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007).

²⁰ See Anne Pasek, "Carbon Vitalism: Life and the Body in Climate Denial," *Environmental Humanities* 13.1 (2021): 1–20; and Andreas Malm and The Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso, 2021), 20.

²¹ Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 222.

²² See Jesse Oak Taylor, "The Work of Fiction in an Age of Anthropogenic Climate Change" *Boundary 2* (31 January 2018), <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/01/jesse-oak-taylor-the-work-of-fiction-in-an-age-of-anthropogenic-climate-change-review-of-amitav-ghosh-the-great-derangement/>.

²³ See Sadia Abbas, "Of Things to Come" *Boundary 2* (4 April 2018), <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/04/sadia-abbas-of-things-to-come-review-of-amitav-ghosh-the-great-derangement/>.

²⁴ See Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 97–99.

²⁵ See Ursula K. Heise, "Climate Stories" *Boundary 2* (19 February 2018), <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/02/ursula-k-heise-climate-stories-review-of-amitav-ghosh-the-great-derangement/>; Abbas, "Things to Come"; Marco Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2021), 22–23.

²⁶ See Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2019).

²⁷ DeLoughrey, 2.

²⁸ DeLoughrey, 8, 9.

²⁹ DeLoughrey, 2.

³⁰ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 179.

³¹ See Kyle P. Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55.1 (2017): 153–62; and Kyle P. Whyte, "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1.1–2 (2018): 224–42.

³² See Anne Raine, "Ecocriticism and Modernism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 98–117.

³³ See Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 30.

³⁴ Morton, 21.

³⁵ Morton, 3; Morton, 1.

³⁶ Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable," in *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 407.

³⁷ For Morton, see Paul Saunders, "Samuel Beckett's Trilogy and the Ecology of Negation," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 20.1 (2011): 54–77; Greg Garrard, "'Endgame': Beckett's 'Ecological Thought,'" *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 23 (2011): 383–97; and Laura Salisbury, "Slow Violence and Slow Going: Encountering Beckett in the Time of Climate Catastrophe," in *Samuel Beckett and Catastrophe*, ed. Michiko Tsushima, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Mariko Hori Tanaka (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 155–74. For Ghosh, see Marc Farrant, "Earth, World, and the

Human: Samuel Beckett and the Ethics of Climate Crisis,” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 32.2 (2020): 207–21. See also Charlie Clements, Eleanor Green, and James Martell (eds.), *Beckett and Nature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025). My own contribution to this volume builds on the themes and the reading of Beckett here, especially making the dialogue with Morton more explicit; see Jonathan Basile, “Mother Remains: Beckett’s *autour* Function and the Ecological” in *Beckett and Nature*, ed. Charlie Clements, Eleanor Green, and James Martell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025), 15–34.

³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 18. See Garrard, “‘Endgame’: Beckett’s ‘Ecological Thought’”; Jeff Fort, “Imagination’s Dead: Beckett’s Catastrophic Realism,” in *Samuel Beckett and Catastrophe*, ed. Michiko Tsushima, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Mariko Hori Tanaka (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 117–33.

³⁹ See James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, in *Samuel Beckett, the Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 100. Hereafter abbreviated *TN* and cited parenthetically by page number.

⁴¹ Samuel Beckett, “All Strange Away,” in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Grove Press, 1995), 169.

⁴² See Elliot Krieger, “Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*: Explication and Exposition,” *MLN* 92.5 (1977): 989.

⁴³ One could draw numerous connections between the colonality expressed by Beckett’s *Texts*, and that in Jorge Luis Borges’s writing, which takes the form of composing oneself within the language and fantasies of the other. See Jonathan Basile, *Tar for Mortar: “The Library of Babel” and the Dream of Totality* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2018), 49–51.

⁴⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan Education, 1988), 291. For Spivak’s positioning of recent “decolonial” discourse in relation to “postcolonial” scholarship, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gianmaria Colpani, and Jamila M. H. Mascot, “Epistemic Daring: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” *Postcolonial Studies* 25.1 (2022): 136–41.

⁴⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 26.

⁴⁶ In “The Law of Genre,” Derrida deconstructs Genette’s tendency to *naturalize* precisely such “linguistic modes.” See Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” in *Parages*, ed. John P. Leavey, trans. Avital Ronell (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2011), 222–26.

⁴⁷ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 27.

⁴⁸ Richard Grusin, “Introduction,” in *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2015), vii.

⁴⁹ Grusin, ix.

⁵⁰ There is not space here to enter into a more detailed reading of the many authors who invoke these tropes today and the intellectual traditions from which they are inherited. I will return elsewhere to these themes, which could be clarified, for instance, by reading the Deleuzian tendencies of Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* in dialogue with Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other*, which places in question Glissant’s distinction between rhizomatic Relation to the Other and

the “totalitarian root.” See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997); and Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998).

⁵¹ On thinking the gone without loss or guilt, see Jonathan Basile, *Virality Vitality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2025), 59–62.

⁵² Compare Ghosh, *Nutmeg’s Curse*, 208–10, where an argument akin to Levi-Strauss’s “Writing Lesson” is used to equate Indigenous thought with the absence of writing.

⁵³ See Basile, “Misreading Generalised Writing.”

⁵⁴ See Rodney Sharkey, “Beckett on the Inside,” *The Beckett Circle*, Autumn 2017; Paige McGinley, “On (Not) Waiting for Godot: Absurdity and Action in Mississippi,” *American Literature* 95.1 (2023): 151–67; Russell M. Dembin, “Nothing But Time: When ‘Godot’ Came to San Quentin,” *American Theater* (January 22, 2019), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/01/22/nothing-but-time-when-godot-came-to-san-quentin/>; Susan Sontag, “Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo,” *Performing Arts Journal* 16.2 (1994): 87–106; “While Waiting,” *The Freedom Theatre* (2017), <https://web.archive.org/web/20170615094152/http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/while-waiting/>; Paul Chan, “Waiting for Godot in New Orleans,” *Cultural Politics* 5.3 (2009): 326–33; and Lance Duerfahrd, “Precarious Theatre: Staging Waiting for Godot at the Occupy Wall Street Protest,” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 29.2 (2017): 350–60. This is only a short list of the productions and adaptations of *Godot* that have taken on political significance. Compare Matthew McFrederick, “‘The Air Is Full of Our Cries’: Staging *Godot* During Apartheid South Africa in Davies,” in *Beckett and Politics*, ed. William Davies and Helen Bailey (Cham: Palgrave, 2021), 195–211; and Ilan Ronen, “*Waiting for Godot* as Political Theatre,” in *Directing Beckett*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Michigan: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997). See also Emile Morin, “Political Theatre and the Beckett Problem,” in *Beckett and Politics*, ed. William Davies and Helen Bailey (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), and references therein. A recent adaptation in Pakistan is noteworthy in this context for its emphasis on environmental themes; see Muhammad Saeed Nasir, “Breathing Human Within Breathless Nature: *Waiting for Godot* in Pakistan” in *Beckett and Nature*, ed. Charlie Clements, Eleanor Green, and James Martell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025), 105–20.

⁵⁵ See Thomas Clément Mercier, “Beyond Failure: Queer Theory’s Fallibilities,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Failure*, ed. Adriana Mica, Miłkołaj Pawlak, Anna Horolets, and Paweł Kubicki (Routledge, 2023), 446–67.