In-Between Words: Late Modernist Style in the Novels of Henry Green, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Samuel Beckett, and Elizabeth Bowen

by

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to identify, contextualize, and explain the achievement of late modernist novelists.

Late modernism represents a significant, under-examined chapter in the development of the twentieth-century novel. Unlike the majority of their peers in the decades after modernism’s height, novelists such as Henry Green, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Elizabeth Bowen—and the best-known, Samuel Beckett—continue to innovate in prose rather than returning to realism. Unlike their predecessors, late modernists move towards doubt, eschewing the sometimes ultimately redemptive ethos of high modernism. They do so without the insistence of later postmodernists, however, or their playful mood. The result is something new, strange, and “in between.”
The aims of this study are to specify the nature of late modernist style, place it in its aesthetic and historical context, and explain its significance. Each chapter is a close reading of key works by one writer: each novelist uses different techniques to add to the late modernist aesthetic, but they all move in the same direction. The first chapter explores Henry Green’s work, analyzing the textual omissions and narrative construction that make his novels so evasive. In Compton-Burnett’s case, the focus is on how dialogue creates a constantly shifting moral world in which nothing can be taken for granted. The chapter on Beckett explores repetition, both as a microscopic stylistic tool and an organizing device that prevents the text from reaching conclusion. In examining Bowen, the centre is how her syntax circles continually around various kinds of “nothingness” and self-reflexively suggests ways to explore it.

This study arranges late modernist novelists in a new continuum alongside Samuel Beckett, with the result that Beckett seems less a unique genius, and the other late modernist writers seem less eccentric and more profoundly challenging. They all seek ways to go on writing when doing so seems impossible.

Late modernists bring something new to the novel. Through the smallest stylistic gestures, their works make and unmake themselves, refusing to allow the reader finality. They avoid the aesthetic and philosophical associations of either consolation or utter uncertainty; late modernists matter by refusing to matter in a familiar way.
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This thesis is dedicated to my family, in thanks for their love, patience and support: my parents, Alex and Alma Tarnopolsky; my stepson, Will; my son, Benjamin, and my daughter, Clara. Most of all it is for my wife, Kate, without whom it would have been impossible.
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1. Starting with Late Modernism

A selection of late modernist beginnings shows some of what late modernist writers do and why it matters, helping us to begin.

The famous first sentence of Henry Green’s 1945 novel *Loving* is: “Once upon a day an old butler called Eldon lay dying in his room attended by the head housemaid, Miss Agatha Burch” (18). A few of the markers of Green’s style are already at work here, and though they may initially seem small matters, they prove to be significant. After “Once upon,” for example, one might expect “a time” to follow. Green’s “Once upon a day” is simultaneously an echo of a fairy tale opening and a turn away from it. “Day” is more particular than “time,” without being as specific as a calendar date or a day of the week. Green’s beginning is a way of both employing convention and refreshing it, as Sebastian Faulks notes in his introduction to the Vintage edition of the novel (vi).

Names are mentioned at the start, and they will be significant throughout the novel. The butler Eldon is dying in his room, and his passing will mean that the head footman, Raunce, will take over from him. As butler, Eldon is referred to by only his surname; as footman, Raunce is known as “Arthur,” even though his own first name is Charlie, because all his employer’s footmen are known as “Arthur.” When Raunce becomes butler he will be known by his
surname, which the *OED* defines as a rare and poetic word for bramble. The politics of John Scott (1751–1838), the Earl of Eldon, were “regarded as typical of ‘diehard’ toryism,” the *OED* entry for “Eldonian” says. It is the kind of name one can imagine Henry Yorke knowing—“Henry Green” was the pseudonym of an Eton-educated businessman. But there is perhaps also the suggestion of something verbal in Eldon, as there often is in *Loving*. One can imagine the ambitious Raunce, who has a habit of dropping aitches when he gets emotional, showing his irritation at the way that Eldon “held on” for so long. When we get to “Miss Agatha Burch,” we are given a marital status, first name, and surname. As Faulks notes, we may wonder why all this is provided, and why in a novel called *Loving* she is at the butler’s deathbed at all—and why soon after she is seen in tears (vi). But this is to jump ahead. Reading the first sentence, we may note that things are already a little askew; that though a butler usually waits on people, this one is being waited on.

We might also notice the odd rhythm of the sentence. Some things seem to be missing, such as commas after the introductory “Once upon a day” or after “in his room.” That is, one might expect the first sentence to be punctuated: “Once upon a day, an old butler called Eldon lay dying in his room, attended by the head housemaid, Miss Agatha Burch.” Commas would slow the sentence down and divide it up. Without any punctuation until after “housemaid,” the sentence has its own, peculiarly stretched-out music, in which many elements are bundled together before there is some respite. The absence of commas may also visually or aurally suggest the connection between Eldon and Miss Agatha Burch—or readers may silently provide the anticipated commas for themselves. Odd though they are, these absences are not as stark as the omission of articles in the first sentence of Green’s earlier novel *Party Going* (1939): “Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet” (384).
Even the two words “lay dying” may matter. Green admired William Faulkner (Treglown 47, 211), and one might try to find an echo of *As I Lay Dying* in the first sentence of *Loving*. It is the thinnest of possibilities, and yet even considering it points to some similarities and differences between high modernism and Green’s writing, the kind this study will explore. Faulkner’s title ends with a verb in action, even if the action is death (one thinks of Samuel Beckett’s title *Malone Dies*); but where Faulkner uses a Homeric allusion in his grand title, Green’s nod of the head to a contemporary, if there is one, is a much subtler matter. For late modernist writers, myths and allusions tend to come and go, rather than serving as real signposts or overarching frameworks the way they do for high modernists. Green’s images and symbols also work this way, Melchiori noted (193).

Starting a novel one is finding one’s feet, and there is much one does not know. It would be a mistake to try to read *Loving*’s first sentence in complete isolation from the novel as a whole. No one reads only the first sentence of a book by Henry Green. And yet, looking at it tells us what to look for. The gaps make it sound particular and give it an unusual beauty, but it is hard to say exactly what the gaps do and how they affect what remains. The sentence makes reference to fairy tale contexts, but then turns away to something that is at once quotidian and mysterious (we are never told exactly why Agatha Burch is at Eldon’s deathbed; the only time Eldon speaks, he calls out the name “Ellen” repeatedly). Faulks finds “lay dying” to have a Biblical cadence (vi), but if this is a kind of allusion through rhythm it is, again, too thin to make very much of. Part of what I wish to show in this study is that in late modernist writing, the gesturing at and dissolving of meanings, which comes from minuscule stylistic practice, spreads throughout the text. Though in some ways late modernist styles might appear to be a retrenchment after the explosive innovations of high modernism, I wish to show that in more

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1 As Kathy Justice Gentile points out with regard to Ivy Compton-Burnett’s work (27).
subtle ways the textual practices of late modernist writers are a way of continuing to innovate in prose while avoiding the move towards consolation, redemption, or “presencing” that one sometimes sees in high modernist works. In late modernism, we start with an appealing and strange combination of certainty and uncertainty, and we stay with it.

Other late modernist openings amplify these ideas, but also remind us that different late modernist writers use different stylistic techniques. What this study deals with is not so much a group or school as a continuum of writers working in different ways towards a similar end. In part, this study aims to identify a late modernist aesthetic, or mood, that has previously been noticed in passing or in studies of individual writers. The starkness of Ivy Compton-Burnett’s opening sentences, for example, is different from the oddness of Green’s. But she innovates in her own way towards a similar result (although, in fact, the lack of a final result is what matters). In this way, Compton-Burnett adds another quality to our sense of late modernist writing. The first line of *Mother and Son* (1955), to give one example, is utterly minimalist: “The person has arrived, ma’am” (5). As with Green, small details tell us a great deal. Indeed, here what is surprising is how much we can learn in five words: though there is no narrative comment to tell us who is speaking, we can surmise that it is a servant addressing a female employer. Someone has come to a house of a particular standing, then. Though the first line of the novel is reduced to almost nothing, it also includes an element that is essential to drama: someone is calling, which means that something will change. But as a first line it is partial and remains mysterious. We do not know exactly who is speaking, who is addressed, or who the visiting “person” might be.

So, we learn a great deal, and much is left out. One also has to note how unusual it is to start a novel with dialogue. Francine Prose has discussed the ways that, with such beginnings, Compton-Burnett drops the reader into her novels “as if from a great height” (“Afterword” 286).
The first line of a novel is a moment, as has been noted, when one might expect to be guided into a world. Even Green’s narrating voice does this much, albeit the world it leads us into is peculiar. In Mother and Son, there is no narrative commentary telling us who is speaking, or where, or how, or when. To continue with Prose’s image, we have to pick ourselves up off the floor and figure it out as best we can, by continuing to read. Put another way, at the start of a Compton-Burnett novel one has the sense of a microphone being turned on or a curtain rising on a play (her method, as is often said, at times seems like the most theatrical possible version of the novel). Compton-Burnett is not alone among late modernists in using dialogue heavily. Green’s later novels, such as Doting (1952) and Nothing (1950), proceed almost exclusively through dialogue, and Elizabeth Bowen’s celebrated use of it is perhaps best summarized by her comment that in her own novels “speech is what the characters do to each other” (“Notes” 41, emphasis in original). David Lodge has written that where the high modernist concern with subjective interiority is displayed in stream of consciousness, late modernists are more interested in inter-subjectivity—with groups rather than individuals—explored through a stream of talk (After 81).

The beginning of Mother and Son is more extreme than some of Compton-Burnett’s other openings, which cast light on other aspects of her style and its significance within late modernism. Manservant and Maidservant (1947) begins with a question, and this time we are told who is asking it: “Is that fire smoking?’ asked Horace Lamb” (3). And yet it would seem easy for Horace to tell if the fire is smoking or not simply by looking at it. The question has a purpose quite apart from factual investigation, as does the repeated question with which A House and its Head (1935) begins: “So the children are not down yet?’ said Ellen Edgeworth” (3). In both these cases the narratorial comment tells us who is speaking, and in both cases the questions are ways of establishing knowledge, which in Compton-Burnett is inextricably tied to
power. Who knows what, and when they know it, is at issue from the start. As the novels proceed, every line of dialogue seems to be undermined by the succeeding one. The style in which the dialogue is written is so restrained and correct that in a paradoxical way it comes to seem radically original, an innovative way to present spoken language without the slightest concern for mimetic accuracy. The ultimate effects of Compton-Burnett’s books are like that of her first lines: we are made alert, and then immediately left unsure.

The moral and epistemological world that Compton-Burnett establishes is comparable to the one Samuel Beckett explores in his novels. Compton-Burnett creates hers through undermining dialogue, while Beckett creates his more through narrative voices that are made and undermined by repetition. Again, style is both what forms and dismantles. The first line of *Molloy*, the first novel of Beckett’s trilogy, reads: “I am in my mother’s room” (7). This is a straightforward statement of fact, though we might wonder, reading it, where Molloy’s mother is if he is in her room. In Beckett it is not until the second sentence that things become unusual: “It’s I who live there now.” The pronouns here are unusual, something that we will also see in Green and other late modernist writers. The deliberate awkwardness of Beckett’s phrasing raises questions. Why not the possibly more natural, “I live here now”? Saying, “It’s I who live there now” focuses us again on what seemed straightforward in the first sentence, the “I” that will be Beckett’s concern throughout the trilogy. But when “I” is repeated it is made strange by “It’s I who.” The narrator refers to himself in terms that would refer more naturally to another person (e.g., “It’s she who lives there now”). The word “there” has the same effect: if Molloy lives in his mother’s room now, saying “I live here” would seem an easier way to put it. “Now” also raises a question, leaving us to wonder what has happened between Molloy’s mother living

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3 One of many to discuss them, Moorjani focuses on Beckett’s pronouns as part of a linguistic analysis of the beginning of *Molloy.*
in her room and “now,” the time in which Molloy lives in what is still called his mother’s room even though she no longer lives there. (The undertone suggests the various kinds of “living on” after death that will be one of the recurring themes in the trilogy.) In repeating and explaining the references of the first sentence, the word choices in the second sentence subtly question them.

The second novel in the trilogy, *Malone Dies*, begins—like Henry Green’s *Loving*—with an old man dying in a room. The first line of the book is: “I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all” (179). Unlike Green’s Eldon, Malone is alone: he makes company for himself by telling stories. The fact that both Green and Beckett begin with men on their deathbeds may suggest what many readers take to be the reduced horizons of late modernism, or its unusual and pronounced interest in debility, passivity, paralysis, and what one does “afterwards.” The third novel in the trilogy begins with a question that is even starker than the dialogue question that Compton-Burnett begins her novels with: “Where now?” (291). *Molloy* began with a self and a place; *The Unnamable* begins with questions about both. It takes the uncertain mode of beginning a novel that we have seen in Compton-Burnett and Green to an extreme.

There are differences, as we will see, between Beckett and other late modernist writers; differences of style and interest as well as biographical differences. And yet it is the many significant similarities that this study is concerned with. For now, the most significant to note is that Beckett creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, using microscopic gestures to uncouple what his words have put together. This is what Green does, too, as well as Compton-Burnett, and the other late modernist writer examined in this study, Elizabeth Bowen.

Bowen’s novels of the 1930s and 1940s often start with a brief description of setting or landscape. Though these seem fuller than those of the other writers mentioned here, and this might suggest that she is more fully engaged with novelistic conventions than they are, the way
her first sentences run suggests some of the countervailing innovative and fragmenting energies in her style. The first sentence of *The Heat of the Day* (1948) echoes the other late modernist openings discussed here in both telling us something and ensuring it remains enigmatic—in this example, through an unexpected, small gesture: “That Sunday, from six o’clock in the evening, it was a Viennese orchestra that played” (3). The initial “that” is unusual. It brings us into a kind of intimacy with the narrator (it was that Sunday, you remember) and yet more subtly it also keeps us at a distance, because we do not know which Sunday the narrator is referring to so closely. Reading this opening, one might feel one is being told something personally, only to realize that one is in fact eavesdropping. And, like “once upon a day,” Bowen’s “That Sunday” is both specific and vague. Knowing it is a particular Sunday means knowing it is a particular day of the week, and yet at the same time we do not yet know which Sunday it was.

Bowen employed the same word to begin her earlier novel *The Death of the Heart* (1938): “That morning’s ice, no more than a brittle film, had cracked and was now floating in fragments” (3). The effect of the word “that” is similar to the example above. It is interesting to note that where Green avoids commas, Bowen favours them (although there isn’t one after “cracked”). What matters here is that the ice both is broken and still remains. Critics have pointed out that it is significant that this novel begins with a description of something that used to be a fragile whole. The book is about the destructive effects of a new person’s intrusion into a family, and the opening sentence suggests the ways that the intruding sunlight of Portia’s innocence will break up the brittle surface of the Quaynes’ family life.

But the opening is interesting for other reasons. Late modernist novelists, as this study will show, are concerned with finding ways to write something that is broken without suggesting through their way of writing that it is actually whole. They do this, I will argue, through a variety of stylistic techniques that keep readers uncertain, that give and take away.
The openings gathered here are in many ways different, but there are fascinating parallels between them—in particular, the microscopic oddities of word choice and punctuation. Each beginning grows into a style, and each will be a way of innovating towards ambivalence rather than eventual consolation. Bowen’s opening image is the perfect description of what she, Green, Compton-Burnett, and Beckett attempt to write: ice that had once been whole is now cracked and floating, in fragments. Without giving up because things are too fractured, or writing it in such a way as to suggest that the cracks can be healed, this is the moment that late modernist novelists attempt to depict.

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2. Specify, Contextualize, Explain: The Aims of this Study

This dissertation argues that late modernism contributes something new to twentieth-century aesthetics. Where high modernist innovations may often lead to or seem tied to an ultimate redemptive or consolatory force, late modernist writers innovate towards a kind of uncertainty. Like their predecessors, and unlike the majority of their contemporaries, late modernists continue to bend literary language into doing new things. Unlike their predecessors, their innovations rarely seem intended to heal or redeem a fractured time. Though their work might be seen as a response to the tumultuous political and social world they live in, the way it resists interpretation means that any such interpretation remains hard to prove. If writers like Green, Compton-Burnett, Beckett, and Bowen attempt to express a perceived brokenness in their time, they do so in forms that neither ultimately cohere nor ultimately fall apart. They do
not “ultimately” do anything. Their methods work to stave off resolution and consistency.

Altogether, they provoke a new and strange sensation.

Samuel Beckett’s aesthetic terms may provide the best description of what he and other late modernist writers do. Their work can be seen as a way to go on when they can’t go on (to paraphrase the end of *The Unnamable*)—when factors that may be political, social, personal, and/or aesthetic (particularly the mixed inheritance of high modernism as both a startling revolution and inevitable failure) make it seem impossible to go on writing. In an interview, Beckett put it like this:

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is something else... To find the form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now. (Driver 219)

This is worth comparing to T.S. Eliot’s famous essay about *Ulysses*, in which he saw that novel’s mythic framework as a way of “controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history” (167). Beckett and other late modernists may experience the same futility and anarchy, or perhaps even harsher versions of it, but the verbs are importantly different. Beckett’s aesthetic program, he claims, is not to control, order, or give shape and significance. He does allot the artist a task, but the task is to “accommodate” and “admit.” There is still a high modernist-inflected striving towards making something new—“to find the form”—but it comes with a refusal to say that chaos is anything other than chaos. And yet there must still be form. Beckett and other late modernist writers attempt to tread a fine line: to write chaos without either rendering it whole or producing a formless work.
Late modernist writers move forward, I argue, by innovating with basic elements of literary style, including word choice, syntax, punctuation, and repetition. They venture into innovations on a larger scale through their use of dialogue, narrative construction, and self-reflexivity. They handle their themes, whether power relations or the nature of the self, in a way that refuses finality. They results are evasive, beautiful, difficult, rewarding, and enigmatic.

Beckett’s importance is universally recognized—Gabriel Josipovici called him “probably the most important writer of the second half of the twentieth century,” for example. But the other writers examined here have yet to be fully appreciated, or brought fully into the prevailing narrative of the development of fiction over the twentieth century. This is in spite of the strong admiration they have each attracted. Tim Parks describes Henry Green as “the most highly praised, certainly the most accomplished of twentieth century novelists not to have made it into the canon, not to be regularly taught in universities, not to be considered ‘required reading’” (v). On the back cover of the New York Review Books edition of A House and its Head, Hilary Mantel calls Ivy Compton-Burnett “one of the most original, artful, and elegant writers of our century.” Victoria Glendinning, in her biography of Elizabeth Bowen, describes her as “a major writer... to be spoken of in the same breath as Virginia Woolf... She is the link which connects Virginia Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark” (1).

The late modernist writers assembled here alongside Beckett are all considered brilliant by their admirers, but they are all also somewhat sui generis and repeatedly described as such. A page by any of these writers is instantly recognizable. But it is perhaps their very uniqueness and strangeness that has prevented them from being more fully appreciated, and made them seem curiously not of their time. That is, they do not fit easily within a simplified story of twentieth-century literary history, according to which high modernism is followed by a temporary return to realism in the 1930s to 1950s before the advent of a more playful, popular,
and self-aware postmodernism. Because late modernist writers innovate in their own individual ways, they are hard to compare with each other. Because of the way their sentences omit, undermine, repeat, and obsess, their works often seem to resist interpretation, including interpretation that seeks to understand them as explorations of their historical moment. This dissertation will argue that part of what matters about them is the way they resist mattering in any familiar way.

The praise quoted above comes from critics who are also writers of fiction. Tim Parks and Hilary Mantel are acclaimed novelists as well as practising critics; Victoria Glendinning, although principally a biographer, has also published three novels. Gabriel Josipovici is the most recognizable academic critic, but he is also an accomplished novelist and poet. The appeal that late modernist novelists hold for writers may suggest that there is something both practical and magical about their work that resists large theoretical, historical, or contextual explanations. And though Beckett’s work has been exhaustively explained and analyzed, there is a growing sense that much of this interpretation leaps too quickly into philosophical interpretation or generalization, without dealing closely enough with Beckett the writer. And yet, all that said, recent criticism has begun to take new note of Green and Bowen in particular, as will be discussed below. This dissertation joins a movement that attempts to see late modernist writers in a new way, and transform our understanding of fiction after modernism accordingly.

The first aim of this study is to specify, that is, to examine late modernist writing in close detail and explain what these writers contribute to literary style: how they innovate and how they change the novel on the most basic levels. The prose of Green, Compton-Burnett, and Bowen (and even Beckett, on occasion) has been called “mannered” or “eccentric” without

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4 Garry Leonard, personal communication. Simon Critchley suggests some reasons for what he calls this critical “overshooting” in Very Little... Almost Nothing. Recent critics have begun to attend to the surface of Beckett’s texts more carefully, perhaps following the idiosyncratic lead of Christopher Ricks in Beckett’s Dying Words.
enough explanation of what this means. This study seeks to show that what seems aesthetically ill-fitting or a failure to meet a certain model is in fact deliberate and determined, original and significant.

The second aim, building on the first, is to construct a new taxonomy for late modernist writing. The result is not a tight-knit late modernist “group”—there are too many aesthetic and biographical differences for that—but rather a continuum linked by family resemblances. Bowen narrates extensively, for example, as Beckett does, but also tells us a great deal through dialogue, as Green and Compton-Burnett do. Knowledge is often uncertain in Compton-Burnett’s novels in a way that echoes the uncertainty in both Beckett’s and Bowen’s books. Compton-Burnett’s novels are set in a late-Victorian past rather than the present favoured by Bowen and Green, but all three writers use houses in the country as key settings. Putting similarities and differences together, we can identify a mood, a tone, a recognizable late modernist aesthetic that comes about through various innovative stylistic techniques. Each writer adds something different, but their additions all move in a similar direction.

The inclusion of Beckett is the key taxonomical point. To make it is to follow up a suggestion made in passing by critics of the other authors examined here. By placing writers like Green and Compton-Burnett next to Beckett, whose work tends to be seen either as an endpoint of modernism or an inauguration of postmodernism, two things are gained: Beckett’s work is changed by the comparison, and so is that of other late modernist writers. Beckett no longer seems an incomparable genius, and he can be seen as more than a culmination or rejection of modernism. While he goes farther than the other writers studied here, he can be seen as doing so by putting their innovations together, rather than creating an entirely new program. He explores the same moral universe as Compton-Burnett; he minimizes and repeats to “come and go” like

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5 Compare, for example, the title of Anthony Cronin’s biography Samuelf Beckett: The Last Modernist with the discussion in The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett of the Beckettian world where “signifiers obliterate signified and language becomes less external than self-referential” (Ackerley and Gontarski xiv-xv).
Green; he obsesses over nothingness like Bowen. Like his contemporaries, he makes something new that is full of doubt.

Similarly, placing Green, Compton-Burnett, and Bowen next to Beckett changes them. What may have seemed mannered or eccentric in their writing gains new aesthetic importance and philosophical weight. Seen this way, the world that Compton-Burnett’s novels depict appears less isolated and personal, and more a stark and profound shearing away of expired metaphysical certainties. Bowen’s baroque sentences are not merely florid but rather a way of circling around something that is both essential and unsayable. Green’s “shimmering” style, which states and then withdraws what it has said, seems less inexplicable, more a response to and avoidance of certain aspects of high modernism. And, Beckett’s rare but important critical comments on his work are the perfect explanation of the late modernist practice of the other writers examined here. The result is that, rather than appendages of modernism or mere oddities at a time of aesthetic retrenchment and political engagement, late modernist writers can be seen as their own continuum, with their own interest.

The final aim of this study is the most difficult. As well as specifying what late modernist styles do, and placing the late modernist novel in context, this study seeks to explain late modernist writing. The style of late modernist writers is built around omission, repetition, undermining, and self-reflection. This study attempts to interpret what Bharat Tandon calls “making-do-without” in Green’s writing (396) as a way of doing without the largest and most familiar consolations offered by works of art. The chapters in this study move from analysis of small prose gestures to larger thematic and narrative issues, and then on to aesthetic and philosophical concerns. The problem is that it is hard to say much about late modernism that is certain, because absence and uncertainty are hard to interpret. What matters is the absence and how it is negotiated—as Beckett once said about Waiting for Godot, if he had meant Godot to
mean God, he would have said God (Knowlson 12). One must remain uncertain and uneasy. The aim of this study is not to prove that late modernist writing expresses this or that philosophical point or comes down on this or that side of a particular historical or social issue. Rather, the aim here is to understand the meaning of late modernist gestures by examining them and contextualizing them. One can stay truer to their spirit and learn more from them by refusing to close down their ambiguities. Naturally, this study makes the effort to interpret and to explain. But the effort remains half in parenthesis—and hence true to the writers studied.

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3. The Late Modernist Moment: Terms and Contexts

i) Terms

Any definition stretches and reduces the way things are, but for the purposes of this study, late modernist writers are the English and Irish novelists born close to the turn of the twentieth century, whose work of the period before, during, and after World War II engages with high modernist writing more fully than that of their contemporaries, and whose innovations in prose tend towards doubt as much as wholeness rather than towards one over the other.

There is some debate about who should be considered a late modernist. In his important book, *Late Modernism*, Tyrus Miller includes Samuel Beckett, Djuna Barnes, and Wyndham Lewis, making late modernism an international genre-crossing concern and not simply a chronological one. Michael Gorra examines Henry Green together with Anthony Powell, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh, thereby including some writers who are more typically
seen to exemplify a return to conventional realistic modes. Fredric Jameson’s “international” late modernists in *A Singular Modernity* include Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, and Vladimir Nabokov, while a recent collection on *British Fiction After Modernism* includes essays on Elizabeth Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett alongside others on still less well-known figures such as Storm Jameson and Olivia Manning (MacKay and Stonebridge). The four writers examined in this dissertation are present in varying current approaches to late modernism, then, but they are far from being the only possible candidates. They are included here because they seem most significant and most representative of a particular strand of late modernist writing in which literary style comes to the forefront. There is also the matter of personal preference—the writers examined here seem to me the most original, most interesting, strange, and best writers of their time.

“Late modernism” is itself a debated term with advantages and disadvantages. Other labels applied to the writers and the period include, variously: neo-modernism, residual modernism, ex-modernism, modernist inheritors, problematic vestigial modernity, and intermodernism, among others. The term “mid-century fiction” suggested by MacKay and Stonebridge is consciously chronological, against the prevailing desire to line up the writers studied here in one relation or another to high modernism (2-3). I have used the term “late modernism” not because it seems unproblematic, but because it is the most commonly employed. And, if considered in full, its various connotations suggest a more complex relationship to what came before. Many critics note that any definition using the term “late modernism” rests on a preceding definition of high modernism. This study emphasizes one of the energies of high modernism, something described as the transformation of fractured experience into formally dazzling works of art (T. Miller 31, discussing Jameson); the effort to

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6 The term “late modernism” is also sometimes used to categorize mid-twentieth century American poets such as Charles Olson. See Mellors.
totalize, redeem, and recuperate through artistic form (T. Miller 125, discussing Owens); and the artistic effort to create order out of chaos and construct a meaning for a world otherwise without one (Gorra 5). There are always dissolving energies within modernism, of course, and there is always the impulse towards fragmentation—Robert Kiely once wrote that Woolf could not see a structure without seeing shards, for example (5). What matters here is the extent to which this is followed by or folded into a larger organizing structure.

But if there are different energies in modernism, there are also different kinds of modernism, and this affects what one sees as “late modernism” too. Tyrus Miller identifies Walter Benjamin’s “epic modernism” as much more concerned with fragmentation, heterogeneity, and disruption, avoiding any Joycean mythological structure or Woolfean redemptive moment that would master chaotic modernity (17). Peter Nicholls’ book Modernisms sets out even more possibilities, as the plural of its title suggests.

Given the number of competing definitions of modernism and the complexity of argument surrounding the term, it may be that the more useful word to focus on in the context of this study is “late.” In this light, late modernism might on first encounter suggest a further or additional stage of modernism, one that simply comes afterwards. But lateness can mean different things. Late can suggest baroque and exaggerated, as in late Renaissance painting, or simplified and purified, as in Beethoven’s late quartets. A late work can resolve the tensions inherent in an approach to artistic production, or appear as their final, paralyzed self-contradiction. Late may suggest belated, which summons up the idea of late modernist writers coming to a party after the fun is over: in one of his novels Evelyn Waugh identifies such

7 Quoted in Gorra (6).
8 There are of course parallels between this discussion and the question of whether postmodernism suggests something that comes “after” modernism or is a continuation of it.
latecomers as elegant contrivers, carrying on after the originating, exuberant talent has passed.⁹ But late can also be used without any negative connotations, as Michael Wood points out: late evenings are punctual (Said xi), and indeed lovely.

Whichever term one uses, to examine late modernist writers in depth—to consider them worthy of close attention—is in itself to complicate a view of twentieth-century literature that held sway until fairly recently. Green, Compton-Burnett, and Bowen have all been considered eccentric or outside the main lines of literary development. Beckett is a different case: Malcolm Bradbury wrote with him in mind that after 1930 modernism was “alive, well, and living in exile” (Modern 299). Again, much depends on one’s definitions and one’s focus: Beckett’s emphasis on pushing style to its limits to find new configurations of the self makes him seem modernist; his often comic engagement with the self-reflexive problematics of writing seems more postmodern. For this study, the point is that he stands somewhere in between the poles.

The status of Beckett’s English contemporaries is all the more uncertain. A preponderant view, summarized by Terry Eagleton, is that modernism ended with the 1920s. “By the 1930s, with Auden and Orwell, realism was firmly back in the saddle” (Walter Benjamin 95). Realism is perceived to have held on until being displaced by a postmodernism that took hold in the 1960s or 1970s. On the other hand, a recent guide has somewhat different dates in its title, Modernism: 1910-1945 (Goldman). The general tone when discussing this period is summed up by the subtitle of James Gindin’s book on the fiction of the 1930s: The Dispiriting Decade. Rubin Rabinovitz’s significant study of the 1950s is called The Reaction Against Experiment. In the introduction to British Fiction After Modernism, Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge note that a typical answer to the question, “What happened to British fiction after Modernism?” is “Not much” (on page 1—and hence their corrective book). That is to say, the most influential

⁹ In The Ordeal of Gilbert Penfold, in a passage also quoted by Malcolm Bradbury as the epigraph to a chapter in No, Not Bloomsbury (87).
and best remembered writers of the period 1935-55 are stylistically more conventional novelists such as Graham Greene, Anthony Powell, and Evelyn Waugh, who are seen as returning to familiar forms and styles in order to engage fully with the political and social crises of their time. With the exception of Beckett, the writers studied here, who continue to experiment and innovate, are considered (if at all) by a large part of the critical literature as irrelevantly pushing on with an expired aesthetic.

This is a simplified view, of course, and it has long been made more complicated. Critics such as Keith Williams and Steven Matthews, in *Rewriting the Thirties*, acknowledge the fact that the years after the height of modernism were not made of a bland or homogeneous anti-modernism but something more complex (1), a judgment echoed by Valentine Cunningham ("Age" 5). More recent studies by Tyrus Miller, Michael Gorra, Marina MacKay, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Nick Bentley, Rod Mengham, and others have delved more deeply into the late modernist period and attempted to account for the writers who do not fit the typical narrative. These studies, along with examinations of individual writers, bring out the aspects of late modernist writing that build on some and reject other strains of high modernism in the effort to create something different.

In sum, there are ways in which late modernist writers continue with high modernism and ways in which they break with it. When terms, genres, and periods are so fluid and multivalent, perhaps it is more helpful to identify tendencies rather than attempting to come to final definitions. So, where high modernist writing privileges subjectivity, late modernist writing emphasizes the group or takes the subject apart; similarly, where high modernist writing sometimes proceeds through a stream of consciousness, late modernist writers favour dialogue;\(^1\) where high modernist writers may employ myth as a controlling framework for the

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\(^1\) See Lodge (*After 81*) for both these points.
expressively chaotic energies in their work, late modernist writers dispense with mythic
structures or show them to be misleading and insufficient (Gentile 27); where high modernist
symbols may move towards epiphany or unity, late modernist symbols enigmatically come and
go (Melchiori 193), or diverge further and further away from a single meaning on each
occurrence (Mengham, “Thirties” 369); where high modernist allusion gives anchoring cultural
depth to the text, late modernist intertextual references seem like “reflex action” or “mental
dribbling” (T. Miller 181); where high modernist energies towards chaos and futility are
redeemed or made whole through symbolic or narrative arrangement, mythic control, or a
moment of powerful subjective awareness, late modernist writers turn away from such
consolations.

Late modernism relates to postmodernism in similar ways to its relationship with high
modernism. This study explores the ways that late modernist writers exhibit certain
characteristic qualities of postmodernism, such as self-reflexive moments at which their texts
seem to point to ways they should be read. There are differences, too: late modernist writers lack
the mixing of “high” and “low” culture that is a frequent hallmark of postmodernist works. In
their interest in uncertainty, late modernist writers foreshadow a postmodernism fascinated by
doubt and the erosion of certain knowledge—although late modernist writers seem more
interested in placing doubt and certainty in suspension, together, rather than disappearing in the
direction of one or the other. To speak of moods, again, late modernism seems its own province,
without the playful unsentimentality that is characteristic of certain strands of postmodernism.\[11\]

ii) Contexts

\[11\] Best and Kellner provide a useful discussion of the various relevant dimensions of postmodern theory.
Critics of the period make a few key contextualizing points in the attempt to explain the differences between late modernist writing and high modernism. The first is the claim that late modernist writers “cannot summon the modernists’ sense of belief in their own powers” even if they evince a keen interest in stylistic innovation (Gorra 18). The source of their apparent weakness can be put in terms of knowledge or ignorance: either knowledge of modernism is crippling, or the late modernists have no experience of a solid past that they can call upon for support.

The argument about knowledge begins with Fredric Jameson’s point that where modernists saw themselves as seers, late modernists see themselves as modernists (Singular 198-200). That is, they are differentiated by their awareness of being part of a movement, even if the movement they see themselves as being part of has in fact passed. Moreover, they are either overwhelmed and paralyzed by the achievement of their modernist predecessors, with a sense of not being able to compete with or add anything to it; or, while still believing in its methods, they have a sense of it ultimately having failed, which leaves them uncertain about what to do next.\(^\text{12}\) In either case—be it because high modernism has succeeded in revolutionizing art or because it has failed to make a new world—late modernists have come after something, are the lesser by comparison with it, and are faced with the problem of how to go on.

Michael Gorra argues that what late modernist writers lack in particular is their predecessors’ confidence in the consolatory or redeeming powers of art: “The question, then, becomes one of method, of technique... How best to capture that impotence, without making the art itself incomplete?” (19). This seems right, but I would argue that it underplays the radicalism of late modernist writing. In choosing to work with failure and with fragments, late modernist

\(^{12}\) Wyndham Lewis makes a comment to the effect that the problem with the avant-garde is that it never actually comes about (T. Miller 3).
writers try to avoid both “incomplete art” and anything that smacks too much of completeness. They try to find a new, third option, something in between completeness and incompleteness, as explained below. Another way to put this, perhaps, is to distinguish between a high modernist cultivation of presence (seen in the use of such techniques as stream of consciousness and transformative epiphany), a postmodern interest in absence (seen in breakdowns in narrative and characterization, for example), and a late modernist position somewhere in between.\(^{13}\)

In a discussion of Virginia Woolf’s 1940 essay “The Leaning Tower,” Gorra sets out the argument that late modernist writers display weakness because they lack a particular experience of the past. Here the late modernist problem is seen not as consisting in their awareness of high modernism’s aesthetic success or failure, but rather in late modernist writers lacking something the high modernists had at first hand. Woolf calls it “the knowledge of a settled civilization” before World War I (170). In this view, if high modernists set out a kind of consolation or consolidation of the chaos of modern civilization, they do so in part out of nostalgia for a pre-existing period that is perceived as having been particularly stable, peaceful, and prosperous. As Randall Stevenson comments, extending this same point, late modernist writers are not able to find a refuge in the past that high modernist writers identify as existing before World War I (32). They were born too late to do so, and have only known historical uncertainty. While this is highly suggestive, and fits the mood of late modernist writing well, it is also hard to prove. There is no straight line between personal experience and artistic expression—lacking a life experience of settled certainty might lead a writer to construct reassuringly solid aesthetic structures rather than ambiguous ones (it is also hard to find a social or historic mechanism of influence that would explain both Henry Green and Graham Greene). The hypothesis also fits poorly with the case of Ivy Compton-Burnett, who was born early enough to experience late

\(^{13}\) To use terms first suggested to me by Joseph Rosenberg, personal communication.
Victorian England and reconstruct it in her work—but not as any kind of nostalgic refuge. To pursue the approach set out by Woolf here is to speculate more on historical and biographical aspects of literary creation and less on the stylistic aspects that are the interest of this study.

If the proposed absence of a settled past is interesting, it should also be noted that one of the key interests of recent criticism into the period has been to identify how late modernist writers relate to their present. MacKay and Stonebridge, for example, are curious to explore the ways that late modernist writers generate “a distinctive aesthetic in which realisms emerge that are written self-consciously ‘after’ modernism” (7). This, at a time when “the operations of history and modernist experimentation had combined to make the conventional fictional relation between them no longer valid or interesting” (Gorra xii), so that late modernist writers felt that another way of exploring the relationship between art and society must be found. These studies also make one examine the ways that late modernist authors blur the fixed lines one might seek to draw between aesthetic innovation and realistic retrenchment, making it harder to place them into simple categories. George Orwell, perhaps surprisingly, argues that an uncommitted, helpless, passive novel may be the only justifiable kind of novel to write in a time of crisis—simply as a way of staying human (“Inside” 47). And perhaps this, too, is a way of dealing with what people call reality. If the objection comes that such an approach is to fiddle while Rome burns, it is, as Orwell says about Henry Miller, to fiddle with one’s face to the flames (“Inside” 41).

It does seem likely that late modernist styles are related in some way to Britain’s imperial decline, to the political crises of the 1930s, to the Second World War: how could writers be immune to such defining moments? But the nature of the relationship is harder to bring to light, precisely because of the kinds of works late modernist writers produce. On the

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14 Critics such as Kristin Bluemel and Andrzej Gąsiorek follow suit.
one hand, late modernist writers may seem to be valedictory, minimalist, and anti-expansive, expressing two decades of economic, social, and political regression. In this vein, in their introductory essay MacKay and Stonebridge distinguish between London of the 1920s, a magnetic imperial capital, and the bombed-out, bankrupt city of two decades later. On the other hand, the writers examined here simultaneously seem to continue to innovate in prose, in the face of all the world’s urgings that they should attend to more political, realistic matters alongside their peers. Again, MacKay and Stonebridge are useful here, because they subtly take note of the ways that late modernist writing is neither a conventionally realistic or documentary response to a world in crisis, nor a continuation of a high modernist ethos that sees the work of art as entirely autotelic and unconcerned with its surroundings.

This is to say that late modernist writers refuse to let us easily make the connection between their works and their times. They make connections, but then they proceed to unmake them (and this method is one of the primary interests of this study). Along with narrative certainty and conventional, formal satisfactions, late modernist novels tend to exclude a straightforward presentation of their immediate setting and context. The Second World War in Loving is at once far off, because the novel’s action takes place in neutral Ireland, and close at hand, because the war affects the servants and family who are the novel’s protagonists. It has an influence, but it is experienced indirectly, through news, fears, letters, and gossip. Meanwhile, though efforts have been made to read Ivy Compton-Burnett’s work politically (see Sackville-West, for example), she more obviously seems to set history aside altogether (Bradbury, Modern 248). The Heat of the Day is in some ways a realistic and defining novel of the Second World War in London, in other ways a labyrinthine romantic thriller with profoundly interpersonal as well as historical concerns. The point is that late modernist works refuse to do or be one thing

15 These terms come from Victor Li, personal communication.
only, and refuse to relate to their period in a way that allows us to ignore their surfaces. They are not about nothing. They are about class, love, society, money, the self, war, social change, and much more besides. The point that this study makes is that they handle these subjects in a pitted, skewed manner that constantly throws one back into the question of the handling rather than allowing one to make confident comments about the thematic content.

Critics such as MacKay and Stonebridgevaluably differentiate between high and late modernism on the grounds that the latter is more engaged with real political concerns: late modernism uses modernist styles to engage with the political and social world in a new way, they argue. The present study attempts to make the distinction in more aesthetic terms: modernist styles are adapted to make a work of art that is uncertain, that makes and unmakes itself as it goes on. This study is less focused on late modernist writing as a response to the lack of a past experience or as an exploration in realism, and more concerned with the ways its stylistic innovations lead to a new kind of artistic product (which may, itself, be considered more “lifelike” than conventionally realistic works—see the conclusion of this study). Support for this approach is found in the criticism of Edward Said; discussing Theodor Adorno, he argues that “late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favour of reality” (9). That is, to attend to the formal qualities of late modernism is to attend to something that is integral to it. While there are differences between my approach and Tyrus Miller’s, here I follow Miller’s claim that late modernist writers, unwilling or unable to formulate an alternative to modernist aesthetics, “laboured to tunnel through it, undermining and leaving it behind” (32). Through this tunnelling, even while pursuing certain aspects of the modernist conception of the work of art, late modernist writers leave key aspects of modernist metaphysics behind. The image of tunnelling may fit Beckett (and perhaps Ivy Compton-Burnett) best.16 Green and

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16 It resembles Alain Badiou’s sense of the way Beckett’s works “scrape” at the surface of knowledge (see chapter 4 of this study, or the essays collected in Badiou’s On Beckett).
Bowen do something that seems more like what Bowen herself said of Katherine Mansfield: that rather than rebelling against modernism she somehow passes beyond it (“A Living Writer” 75). There are different ways to live with the past and leave it behind; there are different ways to be late.

The point, once again, is that because of the ways they are written, late modernist novels are not in straightforward relation to anything. As Susan Osborn says in an article on Bowen’s novel *The Last September*, Bowen’s style may make it impossible to produce a competent reading of her work: stylistic, formal, and narrative irregularities “undermine the certainty upon which these readings rely for their force, and bar us from forming conclusive statements... about its ultimate justification or meaning” (36). And so it is the meaning of the style of difficulty and irregularity that is the primary interest here. The approach of this study is not to seek to explain late modernist styles by reference to historical events, but rather to analyze them, contextualize them, and interpret them as works of literature. The interpretation has social, economic, and political elements and ramifications, but the focus of this study is on the more literary aspects. While this may be to downplay something important, it is to centre on something essential. Rather than saying that this aesthetic expresses the chaos of World War II, or some aspect of these writers’ childhoods, I look at the faltering and interesting ways that late modernist writers gesture.

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4. How It Is: What This Study Does

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17 Andrew Bennett first turned this comment back onto Bowen in his essay, “Bowen and Modernism” (28).
Examining the gesture in detail is this study’s principal aim. Accordingly, this dissertation is divided into four chapters, each one focusing on the work of a single author.

In my first chapter, I examine the fabric of Henry Green’s style, bringing to light the techniques that allow him to create texts that are oblique and evasive. I concentrate on those small elements that are occasionally noticed in passing or called eccentricities, in particular his omission of -ly endings from adverbs. In looking at what is missing in *Loving*, I consider its effect on what remains, tracing how the result is a text that, thematically concerned with kinds of presence and absence, is itself “there and not there” at once. The main focus of the chapter is Green’s 1945 novel *Loving*, but I also examine two of his earlier novels, *Living* (1929) and *Party Going*, by comparison. The former is even more noticeably marked by the absence of articles and punctuation; the surface of the latter is smoother, but it is at the same time profoundly enigmatic in construction. *Loving* is interesting, and exemplary, because it represents a midpoint in Green’s trajectory. It is not yet as minimalist or extreme as his later, almost exclusively dialogue-based novels, such as *Nothing* and *Doting*.

As well as examining word endings and punctuation, the first chapter discusses the ways that Green, like other late modernist novelists, innovates towards something more like doubt than consolation. For example, the narrative voice in *Loving* often takes up a curiously speculative position with regard to what happens inside the characters, neither commenting with certainty nor excising narrative commentary altogether, as Ivy Compton-Burnett does. Green’s comments are often prefaced by “perhaps,” in a way that seems to undermine them as they are made. However, Green’s techniques do not harden into a consistent method, and this inconsistency is another reason that late modernist writing is hard to explain: not even the innovations by which they weave and unweave are entirely reliable. After a discussion of certain self-reflexive moments in the text, which seem to point at ways of understanding its manner of
“coming and going,” the final issue examined in this chapter is the narrative construction of *Loving*. The novel almost has two endings: one is explicitly stated, but undercut by another one that is suggested by the tone and rhythm of the last sentences in the book. Neither ending gains the reader’s full confidence, however, and the novel leaves us without any sense of security or escape.

The second author examined is Ivy Compton-Burnett. In many ways, Compton-Burnett’s writing is comparable to Green’s but, unlike him, in her dialogue-rich novels she makes little effort to imitate spoken English. Her characters speak in crisp, grammatically correct sentences. Given this, Compton-Burnett’s innovations are perhaps not stylistic in exactly the same way as those of the other writers in this study—although the insistent correctness of her characters’ perfect expression comes to seem paradoxically innovative, and any given page of one of her novels is instantly recognizable. In this chapter I examine the ways that Compton-Burnett creates and captures the moral and philosophical world of late modernism, sentence after sentence. One character after another speaks, all too often undermining what has just been said, often whittling away the commonplaces and clichés that usually pass for common sense. The plots are melodramatic, the characters often monsters of narcissistic cruelty, and their actions are more often than not rendered in dialogue with only the most passing narrative commentary, and no explicit narrative judgment. The result is that Compton-Burnett’s novels depict a world in which no one can be trusted: the stream of talk, to use Lodge’s term, leads to no safe place. Compton-Burnett is typically late modernist in that she finds the perfect formal mode with which to undercut redemption or wholeness.

Compton-Burnett told Frank Baldanza that style is what a writer does not choose (Baldanza 15), but in my chapter I attempt to show how deliberate and methodical her writing is, at first by way of opposites. Examining the very few moments of poetic or lyrical description
in her novels allows us to show precisely what she leaves out in the majority of her prose. One of the themes I examine is the way that Compton-Burnett’s method lends itself to describing the competition for power that is very often her subject. As with the other writers examined here, I also look at moments in which Compton-Burnett’s writing self-reflexively suggests ways to read her work, in this case by examining a key letter from A House and its Head. Of particular interest is the way that Compton-Burnett’s writing does not suggest any great doubt about the power of language. If anything, language is all too understandable, all too full of painful meanings for the characters to deal with.

As with the other chapters in this study, my examination of Beckett’s writing moves from small to large elements. Here, the focus is on the way a key attribute of Beckett’s style allows the text to be something new. Reading Beckett’s trilogy of novels, Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable, I examine the ways that everything in the text repeats—from individual words within sentences, to phrases within paragraphs or separated by hundreds of pages, to plot events, characters, and themes. I look at sound repetitions and, as with other late modernist writers, point to moments at which the text itself seems to suggest ways to read it, in this case through Beckett’s figures of repetition. Using Beckett’s comments on aesthetics and the most recent critical commentary on his work, I illustrate the ways that it is through a determined use of a stylistic element that Beckett creates a text that “accommodates the mess” (Driver 219), that innovates towards a kind of uncertainty.

Repetition is what allows the text to be, to adopt Andrew Gibson’s term, the “obverse” of everything we expect literature to be (Beckett and Badiou 256). This is not to say that it is meaningless, but rather that it constantly creates and dissolves meanings, making it impossible for the critic to have the final word. Repetition in the Beckett trilogy is similar in effect to Green’s evasions and omissions and Compton-Burnett’s undermining dialogue: it is the stylistic
innovation that at once gives the work its shape and makes it impossible to interpret with finality. For all the differences between Beckett and the other late modernist writers examined in this study, the trilogy is still an exemplary late modernist text. Through innovations on the level of the sentence, it refuses to sit still. If Beckett goes further than the other writers examined in this study, his journey to extremes also allows us to see new things in their work as they fall into place behind the spearhead his writing represents.

As with the other writers in this study, Beckett’s trilogy represents a midpoint in his career. While it is a development from the more explicitly modernist experiments of a novel like *Murphy*, it has not yet reached the minimalist reduction of later works such as *Lessness*. As is the case with the other writers examined here, the trilogy is an in-between work; perhaps being in between is the representative late modernist moment.

In my fourth chapter, I examine three novels written by Elizabeth Bowen between 1935 and 1948: *The House in Paris*, *The Death of the Heart*, and *The Heat of the Day*. In analyzing the style of these novels, I show again that aspects appearing to be mannerisms or eccentricities are of a piece with the innovations of other late modernist writers. They are the way that Bowen creates a resistant, unsettled, moving text. In some ways, Bowen is the writer most engaged with conventional novelistic forms of all those examined here, but one should not allow this apparent retrenchment to obscure the equally radical innovation her work represents.

The chapter begins with Bowen’s use of the word “nothing,” expanding into an analysis of the double and triple negatives in her work, and her use of rare or obsolete words beginning with *un*-.. Bowen’s obsessively negative style creates a world in which certainties are overturned. As with the other writers discussed here, Bowen incorporates scenes that give us clues about how to approach her work. In particular, scenes of reading focused on very small elements suggest how we are to go on in the absence of aesthetic or religious certainties. The
larger elements of her novels echo her stylistic practice: narratively, like the other writers examined here, Bowen refuses certainty or plot resolution. Like Green, her themes revolve around the effects of absence. Although infinitely more generous in narrative commentary than Compton-Burnett, she is as unsentimental about human motivation. Like Beckett, at times she seems resolved on doing something impossible—what one might call writing something and nothing at once. As with the rest of this study, the novels by Bowen examined here stand at a midpoint in her career, before her unusually inventive final novels. Her work stands somewhere in between the modernist exploration she inherits and the conventional forms she manipulates in the search for something disconcerting, effective, and ultimately as novel as it is challenging.

All four chapters in this study begin with the analysis of microscopic stylistic elements, focusing on what is strange, or missing, or overdone. I discuss the broader thematic threads to which stylistic elements are tied, such as presence and absence in Green and language and power in Compton-Burnett, and connect them to the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of late modernism. Finally, as well as examining the ways that each novel includes self-reflexive suggestions about how it should be read, I attempt in each chapter to explain how each late modernist novelist’s works contribute to my sense of the late modernist aesthetic.

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5. Theoretical Approaches

Late modernism is a fascinating, complex, intermediary period. The ways it has been examined and overlooked reveal much about the preferences and blind spots of literary criticism, past and present. Sometimes late modernist writers are rejected in terms that echo the
criticism that high modernist writers first attracted. When Jed Esty criticizes the “self-
obsolescing” (12) techniques of late modernist writers, for example, he seems to repeat the
claims of F.R. Leavis, who found modernist writing to be an aesthetic distraction from the
novel’s ultimately social mission (see *The Great Tradition*, for example). In such responses,
literary works that foreground surface and style are seen as less serious, moral, or important than
conventionally realistic works—the real or the political becomes a kind of ultimate standard that
is always more significant than the “decorative,” as if realism were not itself a literary style, and
as if literary style existed in a vacuum. Such approaches also tend to assimilate late modernism
into high modernism more completely than is justified.

At the other extreme, a formal criticism that pays attention only to the most exuberant
textual extravagances seen in high modernism may overlook the sometimes subtler innovations
of late modernist writers. MacKay and Stonebridge make this point with reference to Malcolm
Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*, arguing that such criticism may elide “the late modernist novels of
Henry Green and Ivy Compton-Burnett – as rewardingly subtle as Lowry, but otherwise utterly
sui generis” (5). Pointing to another critical omission, David Lodge has noted the ways that the
critic who looks for a moment of explanatory lyrical expressiveness in literary language may
find it hard to come to grips with novels that foreground dialogue, as many late modernist
novels do (*After 83*). Similarly, there are lyrical moments in Beckett’s novels, but focusing on
them at the expense of the repetitive qualities of the majority of the text would be to miss
something important. In general, such moments are often considered authorial, Lodge notes, and
yet the styles of Green and Beckett often seem intended to engineer a kind of authorial
disappearance (though the results are paradoxically recognizable). These are some of the ways
late modernist writing challenges the reflexes of criticism and requires us to look anew, again.
To do so, this study places close reading first, for several reasons. Close reading is a way of starting with and staying close to the ethos of the writers examined. Novelists like Green and Bowen choose to do odd things with syntax and punctuation; Beckett’s novels repeat obsessively; Compton-Burnett cuts away almost everything one expects a novel to do. To attend to their practice in apparently small matters is to remember the degree to which writing itself is a question of small matters. It is to keep one eye on the text’s strangeness as it appears on the page, without trying too quickly to reduce or assimilate it to a theory. To take such an approach to late modernist writing is valuable, too, because it is novel: the textual practices of Bowen and Green, for example, have been much less fully examined than those of their predecessors. While it sometimes seems every aspect of Beckett’s work has been picked over to extremes, the basic strangeness of his prose is still too often passed over in favour of its apparent philosophical meanings, as has been mentioned already. This study tries to stay close to the text and to the oddities in late modernist writing that first capture our attention.

This is not to say, however, that the purpose of this dissertation is a merely empirical observation of style. The point is rather that late modernist writers create their profound and paradoxical effects through their manipulation of basic elements. By attending to such things as repetitions and omissions, one attends to the ways in which they create works that ultimately resist interpretation. One comes to deal with the largest aesthetic and philosophical implications of their works from the ground up, so to speak. Though the price of this approach is that it becomes harder, in an introduction, to make ambitious and universalizing statements about everything the study finally proves, the benefit is that one avoids shoe-horning fictional works too quickly into a pre-existing framework. One lingers close to the page a little longer. This matters because it is a way, again, to stay close to what late modernist novels do. Less explicitly ambitious than high modernist works, they do not provocatively try to remake the world. They
suggest, evade, propose, and disavow. This is why they matter, and this study aims to keep both their initial and their ultimate evasiveness in mind.

To take this approach is to stand in a critical tradition, though not one that has been applied to late modernist writers, apart from Beckett. It is what Theodor Adorno called “immanent criticism”: a criticism that begins from details, with the oddities and contradictions of the text, without connecting them too soon to an established mode of thinking (“Cultural Criticism” 19-33).18 Faced with a work that avoids conventional semantic patterns, the immanent critic attempts to reconstruct the ways that such aesthetic gestures aim towards what Adorno termed the “determinate negation of meaning” (“Commitment” 191). The critical purpose is not to recuperate or force the work’s contradictions into a new and complete whole, but rather to understand the meaning of the work’s meaninglessness. This critical task is, at once, as Simon Critchley writes, “necessary and impossible” (151).

Adorno sees the successful work of art as refusing spurious harmony in favour of an embodiment of contradiction in its innermost structure (“Cultural” 208).19 For Adorno, the contradictions embodied are ultimately political. As Varum Begley puts it, it is “the systematic accumulation of small resistances and singularities—episodes in which conventional circuits of meaning-making are disrupted—that add up to a dystopian counter-totality, an evocation of the world’s guilt, its debris, victims, and violence” (21). This study is less able to take the final, political step: what seems to me most interesting about late modernism is the way that it prevents us from being certain when we take any such steps, even as it invites them. But it remains the case that Adorno’s privileging of the small factor as the way into the larger ones is an essential avenue towards trying to understand late modernist styles.

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18 The discussion that follows is indebted to Begley and Critchley’s responses to Adorno.
19 Quoted in Begley (26).
The approach of this study also has connections to post-structuralist efforts to elucidate the ways that texts weave and tangle meanings and may ultimately self-contradict. While this study aims to work in parallel with post-structuralist approaches, especially to Beckett’s work, it also seeks to avoid what one might call the somewhat fundamentalist “negative didactics”\(^\text{20}\) that such readings can be prone to (especially with regard to Beckett). Late modernist writing is not only negative, does not only unpick. It is not meaningless, but a protracted effort to mean and step back from meaning at once. As my chapter on Beckett explores, recent critics have begun to explore the finitude and limitedness that is present in his work together with its unmaking, unweaving energies. What this study seeks to explore is the determinate textual practice that produces both meaning and its opposites, at once. Corcoran notes something similar about Bowen’s work when he argues that even though her writing “is drawn to fragmentation, this is... inflected with affirmation” (12-13). One could also mention the important inconsistency of late modernist writers’ methods, and the way that they resist any straightforward explanation of their meaning as much as of their meaninglessness. The late modernist mood is obviously close to what post-structuralism proposes, but also seems distinct. Again, the best path for in-between works seems to be in between: an approach that is aware, with post-structuralist critics, of the energies within the text that unmake it, but that does not see these as monolithic or an exemplification of a single philosophical position; attempting, like the immanent critic, to reconstruct the meaning of the work’s resistance to meaning, but without politicizing it. This study also seeks to put late modernist works within the context of an aesthetic response to modernism that extends and troubles it, rather than claiming each late modernist novel is an isolated artefact.

\(^{20}\) A term suggested to me by Victor Li, personal communication.
All this is a way to remain true to something inherent in late modernism, or as Edward Said claims, something inherent in lateness more generally. Said’s sense of late style builds on and twists away from Adorno’s to note the ways that late works (the example is Beethoven) “remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive” (12). Rather than coming to a final interpretation of late modernism, this study seeks to keep its constitutive paradoxes alive.

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6. Concluding

Late modernist writing matters for several reasons. Historically, the writers examined here represent the most innovative and interesting extension of and response to modernism. They wrote against what is often called the reaction to experiment that still tends to define their time—the reaction which produced, according to one critic, “the least interesting and effective fiction written anywhere in the world during this period” (Levitt 125). Green and his contemporaries show us some of modernism’s afterlives, the new and unusual shapes that modernism took on in a second generation. They also show us a reaction, not against experiment, but against much of what modernism stands for.

This makes late modernist writers relevant today. If we are in a postmodern period, we too are still inheritors of modernism, either because we labour in its shadow or because we are its successors. If not—if we have moved beyond postmodernism, too—there are echoes between our times and the late modernist period that make these writers significant. We may think that
anxiety about Western decline is something new; late modernists wrote at a time when the future was equally insecure. Making doubt and uncertainty the fabric of their works, they give us possibilities. They show us how to go on when even believing in the value of what we are doing has become difficult or impossible. In these ways they may seem to be our contemporaries.

At once, late modernist writers present a challenge to criticism in all the ways that have been suggested above. Critics seek to explain effects and point to what they mean, to contextualize and interpret. Late modernist works innovate in prose in dramatic, subtle ways, but whether one is describing Bowen’s circling around nothing or Green’s use of “perhaps,” the ultimate effect of their innovations is hard to place. Indeed, Beckett’s work has been called a negative to all the positives of criticism (Gibson, “Postface” 119).

One might argue that late modernist writing presents a truer expression of the world view that provoked the artistic innovations of high modernism than high modernism itself does—that it is the fullest evocation in art of a world shocked by war, economic crisis, and social unrest, not to mention the philosophical shocks prompted by such thinkers as Darwin, Freud, and Einstein. In a world of chaos and doubt, late modernist writers continue to write and continue to attempt to make art do new things, as their predecessors did. But they refuse to turn away from that chaos and doubt, refuse to make it mean something other than what it is, refuse to transcend what confronts them. They do not tie their works to earlier myths in order to step out of their own time, or seek shelter in a nostalgically remembered era of wholeness; nor do they turn away from innovation into more conventional forms in the name of engagement with political realities. They neither give up on art nor on art’s capacity to evolve.

Beckett writes in the era of the collapse of the grand narratives, Andrew Gibson claims (Beckett and Badiou 40). This study seeks to say the same of the other late modernist writers
collected here. They cannot summon up the modernist belief in their own powers, Gorra writes (19); they can find no solace in art, no escape from the collapse their predecessors set out. If there is a structural compatibility between previous redemptive modes and high modernism, late modernists seek out something else. Beckett’s terms provide the most memorable summary of the late modernist project:

The more Joyce knew the more he could. He’s tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance. I don’t think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is achievement—must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable—as something by definition incompatible with art. (Shenker 148)

This is the most ambitious way to interpret late modernist styles, by saying they contribute something new to aesthetics, something previously unknown. Beckett claims to be working with something that the entire history of previous artistic practice rejected: now he finds a way to let it in, when so many definitions of art and artistic practice would prevent him from doing so. In its ambition and universality, it sounds oddly like a high modernist manifesto, even as it sets itself up in opposition to Joycean omniscience.

Perhaps a more fitting version of the late modernist project is another one, provided by Beckett in *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, where he seems to set out the difficulty of proving what the previous quotation claims. Art expresses nothing, Beckett has argued; all one can do as an artist is fail to express (125). And then:

I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act,
obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists. (125-6)

To say that late modernist writing expresses the impossibility of expression would be to betray that impossibility, to fix it. Instead, one has to try not to shut down the relation. In different terms, what one has to remain aware of is what Adorno calls the refusal of late style even to coalesce into a single version of what is not reconciled.²¹

The gesture is what matters, but the way the gesture is made—its giving and taking, its repeating and omitting, saying and unsaying—prevents it from being wholly interpretable. And so what really matters about late modernist writing is the way it keeps us thinking about it, the ways it pulls us back into the text rather than its external determinants. In doing so, it paradoxically achieves something that recent criticism of Beckett calls resisting the world’s meanings (Critchley 179). The world is full of meanings—in a novel, determined way, late modernist writers find ways to slide past them.

At the other extreme from the maximalist, most ambitious interpretation of late modernism might be a much more empirical and restrained one: that late modernism matters because it presents us with a new aesthetic sensation. This writing is significant because it is unlike other kinds of writing; because it has odd and attractive qualities that are worth considering quite apart from their ultimate place in literary history; and because there is a value in pointing them out, exploring them, and displaying their complexity. Even in the midst of doubt and uncertainty, late modernist writers give us the rewards of an original and stirring mode of writing that, like any mode of writing, is an experience of a different mode of being.

Late modernists write in the absence of something, and to try to fill in that absence with an

²¹ From Michael Wood’s introduction to Said, discussing Adorno’s comment that describes the late Beethoven’s refusal to “reconcile into a single image of what is not reconciled” (xv).
explanation of what is missing is somehow to miss the point. They discover ways to point at absence, and work with it, and accordingly their novels, built around gaps, are oddly shaped, and the shape is what we have to talk about.

Like late modernist writing, this study seeks to be in between. It does wish to identify what is new and unique in late modernist writers, and specify the nature of the new and complex mood and sensation they offer. At the same time, it also seeks to show that late modernist novelists can be profitably related, and—while remaining aware of the aesthetic reasons that a highly ambitious interpretation remains parenthetical—it does point towards the historical and philosophical ramifications of late modernism.

To summarize, the aim of this study is to specify, contextualize, and explain the late modernist achievement. By analyzing late modernist stylistic practices in depth, I seek to show how special and unusual late modernist writing is. The claim is not that late modernist writers are identical; they have different thematic interests and use a variety of stylistically innovative techniques, but I argue that they use them to move towards a similar end. Creating a new continuum of late modernist writers, I seek to compare the often-neglected work of Henry Green, Elizabeth Bowen, and Ivy Compton-Burnett with that of Samuel Beckett, altering our understanding of both the former and the latter. Taking note of the ways that late modernist styles resist grand explanation, I attempt to reconstruct the meaning of their refusal to mean in any simple way. Rather than finally interpreting them, I seek to explain how and why they must remain mysterious.
“Screened but open”:

Henry Green’s Presence and Absence

Edith, an under-housemaid, and Raunce, the new head butler, are talking in the Red Library of Kinalty Castle in Eire. They can do this because their employer, Mrs. Tennant, is away in England with her son and daughter-in-law. Edith and Raunce have become more intimate as the book has gone on; in this scene, which comes about three-quarters of the way through the text, Edith is showing some concern for Raunce’s health, or at least this is part of her excuse to have him take his cup of tea with her in a room where “huge fires were kept stoked all day to condition the old masters” (130). But once they are settled in purple armchairs, she seems to give no thought to the draught coming in through the open windows, the narrator tells us; a light summer air toys with her curls. Then, in an unromantic way (“There’s none of this love nonsense” [131]), wondering first if she’s seen the little place close to the East Gate where the married butlers used to live, Raunce asks Edith to marry him. “That’ll want thinking over Charley,” she replies immediately (131).

She doesn’t quite say either yes or no, yet. There is Raunce’s mother to consider, as well as his sister Bell; Raunce wants to bring his mother over from England, safe out of the Blitz, and Edith agrees—but she is less keen on the idea of Bell joining them, too. Still, she has a ring to wear for the engagement: Mrs. Tennant’s mislaid sapphire cluster, which Edith found, and hid in the lining of her armchair cushion. Now that she looks for it, it is missing. Raunce seems untroubled (perhaps he feels that if it is gone then at least Edith is no longer responsible for it), but when they hear a car turning towards the castle, he snaps into action to get properly dressed
to answer the door. He assumes it is a neighbour, Mrs. Tancy, who is visiting. Then, lacking time, he has his pantry boy Albert answer after all, and the visitor turns out to be Mike Mathewson from the Irish Regina Assurance. Albert shows him into the Library where Edith is pretending to tidy up. “That’s to say they’re not here,” Albert says over his shoulder. “‘It’th O.K. thon,’ Mike lisped” (134).

Mathewson speaks in this funny way, making Edith giggle. While Albert stands by the door, Mathewson tries to make Edith guess what his business is, and then explains something:

“Mike Mathewthonth the name. Jutht had a tooth out that’th why I thpeak like thith,” he excused then laid a hand genteel across his mouth. He took it away at once to finger the spotted tie. He was now very near indeed. He smelled of acid of violets.

“I come down when they claim a loss,” he brought out sharp, not lisping.

(135)

What he says, and how it is described, gives us several clues about what matters in Henry Green’s writing, and what makes it so strange and important.

For example, one might expect a comma between “excused” and “then” in “he excused then laid a hand genteel across his mouth” (together with the phrasing “he excused himself,” perhaps). But Green’s narrators and characters often omit commas, and having read this far in *Loving*, the reader may be used to the rhythm such omissions create, or may provide the comma silently. When the narrator describes Mathewson fingering “the” spotted tie rather than “his” spotted tie, this is odd too. Though we have heard about his spats and his hat, this is actually the first mention of Mathewson’s tie, so saying “the” is unexpected. It may keep the reader alert, or on uncertain ground, or may shift the focus—but again, play of this kind with articles and pronouns is typical of Green. A comma is missing and there is a gap where one expects it; the expected demonstrative pronoun is replaced with something else. Omissions and replacements
make the prose unusual, not unlike the way Mathewson’s speech is unusual because he has a tooth missing.

There are other kinds of omission in this paragraph, and they are also hallmarks of Green’s style. They make us alert to what is missing and what is present in the text at every level, and how presence and absence intertwine. After Mathewson explains his odd way of speaking, the narrator tells us, “he laid a hand genteel across his mouth.” The word “genteel” seems unusual. The movement of a hand is being described, so one would expect an adverb. The adjective “genteel” suggests that what is being described is somehow the hand itself, if that is possible (as in, “Mike laid a genteel hand across his mouth”) or, more likely, the person (“Mike, who was genteel, laid a hand across his mouth”). The sentence creates the expectation of an adverb and then upsets it with an adjective, and yet one feels that the adverbiaal reading does not entirely disappear. One might think that Green is simply trying to avoid the odd word “genteelly” (the OED’s last instance is 1876) were it not that Green often cuts out -ly endings. James Wood argues that such omissions derive from spoken language and that Green’s narrator adopts his characters’ manner of speaking (Irresponsible 296), but the technique is more wide-ranging. Here, if it is not from Mathewson’s own vocabulary, perhaps the use of “genteel” is self-undermining: Mathewson is not genteel, the omission of -ly very subtly suggests, even if he is trying to be.

Another example may make this practice and its effects clearer. When Mathewson speaks without lisping later on in passage, we are told his words are “brought out sharp,” where one would expect “sharply.” Bringing the words out “sharp” makes it sound like the words themselves are sharp, or that Mathewson is sharp rather than his manner of speaking. And these more figurative readings are useful to keep in mind. Where the adverbial suffix is excluded, the reader may silently provide it at the same time as trying to make sense of the strange use of the
word “sharp” in the text, in which case two readings would be active, neither quite edging out the other. Something is missing, and its absence makes what is left behind somehow strange, and yet it is perhaps not entirely gone.

The most obviously strange thing about Mathewson is his lisp, of course, which is what makes his conversation with Raunce, Edith, and Albert such a useful introduction to *Loving* and to Green more generally. His missing tooth has an effect on how he speaks: he has to work around the gap in his mouth and doing so gives what comes out a strange shape. Absences shape his presence in other ways: he is at Kinalty to find out about Mrs. Tennant’s missing ring, and is only speaking with the servants because Mrs. Tennant is away in England. What is most odd and important about Mathewson’s lisp, however, is that it comes and goes, as was mentioned earlier. Perhaps it takes a special effort on his part, or perhaps the lisp and the missing tooth are a bit of an act. When he stops lisping for a moment, the effect is threatening (or sharp): “‘I come down when they claim a loss,’ he brought out sharp, not lisping.” Mathewson has an eccentric way of speaking, but it is not entirely consistent. Similarly, Green doesn’t always cut out -ly endings or commas or other elements. The technique of omission does not harden into a consistent method. It keeps the reader uncertain, but one of the ways it does this is by being inconsistent itself. As readers, we cannot be sure about what is making us unsure.

The inconsistency is the heart of the matter. This chapter argues that *Loving* is marked by an obsessive interest in the workings of presence and absence, ranging from the small omissions discussed here, to its plot (“centred” on a missing ring) and narrator’s positioning, to the construction of its imagery and the narrative structuring of its conclusion. Writing presence and absence at once in these ways allows Green to create a text that is inconsistent, that is itself there and not there at once, so to speak. But if Green’s different uses of presence and absence are a way into understanding his unique style, they are at the same time the key to connecting
him to a new continuum of late modernist writers. One can compare his approach to that of other innovative late modernist writers: Ivy Compton-Burnett replaces narrative comment with undermining dialogue; Samuel Beckett’s repetitions simultaneously make and unmake his sentences, characters and plots; Elizabeth Bowen’s writing circles obsessively around nothingness. “Presence and absence” is how Green continues to innovate in prose, rejecting both the return to realism that is typical of his period and the “presencing” ethos often seen in his modernist predecessors. It allows him to make something new without making something whole.

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Mathewson is not the only character whose voice changes in *Loving*; this is a novel in which everything connects to something else. The following instance comes within the same scene:

“And you never heard of a ring being gone?” Mike asked in menacing fashion.

“’Ow d’you mean?” Raunce enquired in a less educated voice. (137)

But if one can find a straightforward, psychological explanation for the change in Raunce’s voice—in the threat he is feeling from Mathewson and in the secrets he is hiding about Edith and the ring—Mathewson’s ability to change his voice is more enigmatic. It is reminiscent of a character in Green’s earlier novel, *Party Going* (1939), a hotel detective who is able to change his accent from educated to Brummagem and can mysteriously enter and leave a railway station hotel that the other characters find barricaded. Mathewson is another kind of investigator, and one of few interlopers to enter the closed world of Kinalty Castle. When Raunce finally sees Mathewson’s business card, the confusion and fear increase, because the letters that begin Irish
Regina Assurance form a more frightening acronym. Frank Kermode sees the detective in *Party Going* as reminiscent of Hermes (*Genesis* 8), but he and even Mathewson might also be seen as figures for the author: coming and going, changing their distance, trying to get to the bottom of things, doing things the other characters cannot and, most of all, sounding unusual in different ways at different times.

Whether or not Mathewson ultimately figures the author, his investigations lead to a more general point about the narrator’s position in *Loving*, which again connects to questions of presence and absence. Mathewson has come to enquire about a missing ring, and he conducts his investigation through talk. Green’s novels are built around absence\(^1\) and rely increasingly on dialogue as his career goes on: his last work, *Doting*, cuts out narrative commentary almost entirely (as do the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, examined in the following chapter). *Loving* is interesting because it stands in between. There is narrative commentary about the characters’ inner lives, but it is of a special kind that connects to the ideas of presence and absence mentioned earlier.

Some of the reasons for this are hinted at in a two-part BBC talk given by Green, entitled “A Novelist to His Readers” when published in *The Listener* in 1950 and 1951. Green says many interesting things about narration and dialogue in particular, including the claims that dialogue is the best way for a novelist to communicate with his readers and that to be effective “dialogue should not be capable of only one meaning, or mood” (138, emphasis in original). We see countless examples of ironic and ambiguous dialogue at work in *Loving* and in Green’s other novels; one might argue that Mathewson and the hotel detective give things a further twist in that their words are capable of more than one meaning, and furthermore that they are capable of speaking in more than one way. When so much of the action and psychological explanation is

\(^{1}\) For example: Green’s first book, *Blindness* (1926), is about a student coping with losing his sight; *Back* (1946) is about a soldier’s return to England from World War II, minus a limb.
carried along by the dialogue, there is something especially disconcerting about a character whose manner of speaking is not reliable.

While Green says that dialogue is the “best way for the novelist to communicate with his readers” (137), “best” is not to be confused with obvious or straightforward. Green’s comments here are a way to move into discussing presence and absence in his narrative method more particularly. In a novel, he argues, explanations of behaviour are too direct, to the point of clumsiness. In the example he gives, a character is described pausing: “He seemed to hesitate.” Green instructs, “Note the ‘seemed to hesitate.’ If you have ‘he hesitated,’ this seems like a stage direction, and is a too direct communication from the author” (142). In *Loving*, narrative comments like “seemed to” can be put beside missing suffixes and Mathewson’s missing tooth as ways of increasing uncertainty, this time through addition rather than omission, through the presence of something unexpected rather than the absence of something expected.

For the most part, as the essay quoted above makes explicit, Green stays away from telling us what his characters are thinking or feeling. He prefers to show us their actions and present their words. In “A Novelist to His Readers,” Green argues that excising such narratorial commentary increases verisimilitude by increasing uncertainty: “And do we know, in life, what other people are really like? I very much doubt it. We certainly do not know what other people are thinking and feeling. How then can the novelist be so sure?” (139).

And yet, Green does not (at this time) go as far as Ivy Compton-Burnett in excising the narrator’s comments. Typically, he takes up a curious middle ground: there is commentary, but not certainty. The narrator comments on what the characters are feeling or thinking, but only in the mode of speculation. This way, narratorial judgment is withheld even as it is delivered. The comment is made, but in the form of a guess. When Green asks how the writer can be sure what the characters are thinking and feeling, we might want to answer, “Because the novelist is
writing the book.” But in Green, the narrator seems more akin to another reader, or to a person in a crowd, watching and hearing his companions and making hypotheses accordingly. If dialogue cannot communicate absolutely everything, if a narrator must make occasional comments, then they must at least be shadowy so as not so suggest omniscience.

The intricate way in which this is done can be made clearer with examples. During the scene with Mathewson, Edith drops her guard: “Then Edith must have forgot herself. She interrupted” (137). “Must have” makes the sentence turn away from us a little. To say “Edith forgot herself” would be a simple statement of fact about what happens in her mind; the addition of “must have” is an excision of certainty. It suggests the narrator observing Edith, listening the way the reader does, and making a guess. It is a good guess, hence “must have” rather than “perhaps,” but still speculative (even as the verbal quality of “forgot herself” may suggest the way Edith might herself describe what happened—paradoxically, the narrator would be at once infected by her speech and removing himself to a distance from her). There are countless examples of this technique in Loving, several even within the Mathewson scene. Attempting to stay on top of the new task of leading Mathewson into the house, “Albert probably remembered twice for he sang out again” (134). When Raunce joins them, the narrator tells us “It might have been Raunce thought Edith looked upset” to explain the line he takes (136). Meanwhile, Edith is on her knees, “it might be to make believe she was only in the room to do the fire” (133).

Sometimes another reading is possible. In the outdoor scene that is intercut with the conversation with Mathewson, Mrs. Tennant’s grandchildren “seemed delighted” to have peacock’s eggs smeared over their lips as a way of ensuring they wouldn’t reveal the secret whereabouts of the missing ring (136). Here, it may be that the narrator is describing how good the children are at pretending to enjoy something they had previously resisted; or it may be another instance of the narrator appearing to not be entirely sure how they feel. On the other
hand, when Mathewson turns “as though to give [Edith] time” (134), it seems a clear description of someone pretending, rather than a narrator having to guess why the character is moving around in a particular way.

But in the majority of examples in Loving, certainty about internal life is missing. Words and phrases such as “probably,” “seemed to,” “might have,” and “must have” affect what would otherwise be straightforward descriptions of motive. This may seem the opposite of removing a suffix that the reader has to supply, but the overall effect is not dissimilar. The narrator’s comment shimmers a little (to borrow a word often applied to Green’s writing): it moves away from us even as it is spoken. It is delivered, but only in the mode of a guess.²

And yet, once again, a technique that introduces uncertainty is itself inconsistent. Green’s narrator is far from uncertain about everything, unlike, say, later postmodern narrators.³ When Raunce responds defensively to Mathewson, the narrator seems clear about his state of mind: “‘I wouldn’t know what you’re referrin’ to’ Raunce said a bit daunted” (137). When Mrs. Tennant’s granddaughter Moira praises the cook’s nephew (also named Albert, like Raunce’s pantry boy), the narrator tells us clearly that a full intention underlies her statement: “‘Well you are clever,’ Miss Moira told him and meant it” (135). Though we never get a full description of, say, Raunce’s early life, some facts about the characters and the world they live in are expressed with similar categorical certainty, such as the information that the little Albert just mentioned “had picked up countrified expressions when he was evacuated” (136). At times this kind of commentary seems to move into a different register altogether, a kind of caricatured omniscience reminiscent of the fairy tale or fable tone of the “Once upon a day” (3) with which the novel begins: “For this house ... had yet to be burned down” (64-5). Loving is not completely

² The “perhaps’ narrator is not unique to Green, and has modernist antecedents in both Forster (indicated to me in personal communication by Melba Cuddy-Keane) and Woolf, as Greig Henderson has pointed out with reference to the discussion in Auerbach’s Mimesis of Woolf’s doubting narrator towards the close of To the Lighthouse—though there the effect is more transcendent than in Green (463-88).
³ Compare, for example, those of Michel Butor or Maurice Blanchot.
self-undermining or doubt-ridden. It explores a much more interesting interplay of doubt and certainty, presence and absence.

The themes of Loving add to the sense provoked by its stylistic and narrative techniques that exploring presence and absence is the way the novel proceeds. The problem in the Mathewson scene, as Edith and Raunce say repeatedly, is that Mrs. Tennant is away. Were she home, she would never allow them to be interrogated. Her absence changes the house in other ways: without her controlling presence, the servants’ intrigues boil over. Edith and Raunce’s romance blossoms and they scheme against the cook, Mrs. Welch. Mrs. Jack (Mrs. Tennant’s daughter-in-law) invites her lover Captain Davenport to the Castle, and when he sleeps in late and Edith discovers him in Mrs. Jack’s bed, the latter promptly departs for England herself. Raunce and Edith speak a great deal about whether to stay in service in Ireland or risk returning to England themselves—the war, as John Russell has noted, is at once far off and an important presence (Henry Green 114). It does not come to the Castle directly, though it profoundly affects the characters’ lives.

More focused examples of the workings of presence and absence in the text show us their effects on the novel as a whole. When we first see Edith, she is carrying a borrowed glove full of stolen peacock’s eggs that she plans to use to beautify her skin, together with some water glass taken from the cook’s pantry. Edith importantly links many of the missing objects in the book, and the book keeps returning to them: the cook wants to know who has stolen her poison; Albert wants his glove back; and the birds’ keeper, Paddy, is upset by the theft of the eggs. But pursuing these missing things leads to other missing things that come and go: Mrs. Welch may be out to trap Edith and Raunce, but her nephew little Albert (or is he her illegitimate son, as gossip suggests?) killed a peacock when he arrived at the Castle. Though Mrs. Welch buries the
peacock, it won’t stay hidden; Badger the dog digs it up and Raunce hangs it up in her larder as a warning. Paddy then locks up the birds so that no more harm should come to them.

Mrs. Tennant’s ring is the most important missing object to come to Edith. Mathewson’s search for it moves between misunderstanding and threatening insinuations (“‘In – what?’ Charley asked” [137]). His search for the ring becomes a comic and cagey game of questions that gets repeatedly stuck. At times each statement undercuts the last, in ways that suggest Ivy Compton-Burnett’s stichomythia:

“Then you won’t anthwer?”

“I never said that. What are you tryin’? To trap someone?”

“Who mentioned a trap? I’m here to trathe a ring.”

“What’s that got to do with me?” Raunce enquired.

“I don’t know yet,” Mike replied gentle.

“Well get this then. I don’t know nothin’ an’ I’m not sayin’ nothin’ without Mrs Tennant gives permission. So now have you got that straight?” (138)

As Mathewson says early on in the scene, “Noboby theemth to know nothing” (137). And though his lisp gives the conversation an undercurrent of comedy, the tension rises until Albert eventually cracks: “‘I got it,’ he confessed” (139). Mathewson tries to pounce, but Edith immediately sees that “I got it” is capable of more than one meaning, and says that Albert meant he had an idea about where the ring might be. She aggressively moves to make Mathewson leave, and Raunce is finally able to force him out, but Mathewson has the last word: “We’re not paying” (139).

The missing ring is missing in more than one way, as was noted above; Mrs. Tennant lost it, then Edith found it, then Edith finds that she has lost it. In the scene that interrupts the conversation with Mathewson, little Albert, Miss Moira, and Miss Evelyn are shown hiding the
ring in a peacock’s egg by the dovecote. Raunce’s Albert’s confession is false, but it tells us something about him, as will be discussed below. Meanwhile, as the ring moves between the characters, its absences and appearances prod the plot along. Raunce tells Edith that Mathewson’s threat not to pay could have serious repercussions for Mrs. Tennant. With some wiles and her loving understanding of the children, Edith is able to retrieve the ring. But when Mrs. Tennant does return, and the ring is eventually returned to her, very little is resolved. Mrs. Tennant is able to get no satisfactory explanation of where it was, and her investigation soon drops away. Instead of an important symbolic structuring device, it returns to being a bauble misplaced by an absent-minded, wealthy woman (Raunce comments more than once on the way that she is “always puttin’ things down where she can’t find ’em” 143). The pattern provided by the ring lasts a little while, and then something else must come along.

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* Loving* is especially interesting because of the ways it stands at the crossroads of various kinds of presence and absence in Green’s writing, and because in it the interplay of presence and absence comes most to the surface of the text as a subject. But Green’s other work takes up the issue in ways that allow us to place him in the late modernist context. Green’s second novel, *Living* (1929), is replete with half-there sentences such as, “Thousands came back from dinner along streets” (207), or “Mrs. Eames put cold new potato in her mouth” (231). Articles and pronouns are omitted; A. Kingsley Weatherhead claims that the effect is to solidify objects but weaken the relationships between them (88), while John Updike sees the omissions as a way of making each sentence new in high modernist fashion (11). Putting these approaches together
seems most explanatory. The omissions are a way of swerving away from convention, but the effect is to dissolve and disarm, rather than eventually console or redeem.

*Living* also features structural omissions. Chapters are arranged like mosaics, switching back and forth between characters with little preparation for the reader. The following example switches suddenly between disconnected places:

[Mr. Craigan] put hands up over his face and laid weight of his head on them, resting elbows on his knees.

Continuing conversation Mrs. Dupret said to her son well she was sorry it could not be then... (229)

*Loving* does something similar, but its juxtapositions are usually prefaced by a segue such as, “At this precise moment” (135). The plot of *Living* is marked by presence and absence, too: with his father ailing, but not dead, young Mr. Dupret meddles in the operations of the family’s factory. However, he rather falls out of the book in its second half, which pays more attention to the romance between Lily Jones and Bert. Their relationship is incomplete in its own way. When Lily and Bert elope, he abandons her and she has to return home alone.

The famous first sentence of *Party Going* suggests that there will be as many holes in the surface of the text as in *Living*: “Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet” (384). But although absences suffuse the book, they do so in a more thematic and symbolic, and less stylistic way: the sentences are mostly complete, but they are also largely about present and absent things. Julia feels she has “lost her name” in the fog (388); another character is described as “thinking of something he had forgotten” (391); Max’s reputation, we learn, was enhanced by an affair with an older woman, though in actual fact they had nothing to do with each other (431); Miss Fellowes’ lips move, “only she had no voice to speak with” (452); “Alex did not find that Julia was giving him her
attention” (429—because he is not aware of her doing so, or because she is not giving it to him?).

With London wrapped in fog, the young socialites never get beyond the first stage of their journey to Max Adey’s party. Trapped in a railway hotel, they have nothing to do but talk, like rich and spoiled versions of Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon. They gossip and scheme for social position even as Miss Fellowes, who finds the dead pigeon at the start of the book and tries to care for it, lies very sick in an adjoining room. As their servants connect with each other in somewhat more human fashion, the crowds in the station grow and become more and more restless (in spite of which, like Living, the novel has only oblique political charge). The novel suggests several possible interpretations, as Frank Kermode notes, without providing enough interpretation to fully support any of them (Genesis 14). Keith Odom states that “the thematic threads remain apart... they are never completely interwoven” (59), but this is not a bad thing, as a more detailed discussion of the book’s symbolism suggests.

When Robert pushes his way through the crowd in the station bar, he remembers “patches of bamboo in his parents’ garden” (407) that he had played in, forcing his way through as if there were a temple at the end of them (something like the reader thinking there is a meaning at the end of Party Going, perhaps). The people around Robert seem to him to be warm, but somehow not fully human: they remind him of “tailors’ dummies, water heated” (407). He mentions this to Julia soon after: “Claire was practically brought up with us, wasn’t she, when she was small and when she was sent over to play with us you know we never told her about those bamboos. Curious wasn’t it?” (415). In turn, Julia mentions this to Max some thirty pages later, when he asks her about her charms (which she needs to have with her to travel, and fears she has forgotten), telling him another secret: “what Robert had never known was that one of her charms, the wooden pistol, had been buried plumb in the middle of the
bamboo patch,” so that the bamboo, “or probably they had been overgrown artichokes,” took on great consequence in her mind (442). This almost seems like a joke at the reader’s, or critic’s, expense: a buried (toy) pistol seems to parody detective fiction, while the overgrown and indeterminate vegetation—which Robert as a child pushed through as his “romance,” and Julia remembers as significant because of the secret buried in it—is like erotically over-determined dream imagery. If one tries to use it to say anything significant about the characters or the book, one is led further into a web of connections.

For example, the hotel detective pushes through the crowd, and for him it is “like trying to get through bamboo or artichokes grown thick together with thousands of tailors’ dummies stores warm on a warehouse floor” (483). Like Robert, he thinks of bamboo and dummies, but though Robert sent him on his mission out of the hotel to find Julia’s luggage, they never discussed Robert’s childhood. When the detective thinks of artichokes, is the purpose to connect Robert and Julia through the detective, or is this just the way the narrator likes to describe crowds? Is he figuring the author in the ways mentioned earlier, or is this perhaps an instance of the literary telepathy described by Nicholas Royle? These are far from the only instances of this imagery. As will be discussed in the chapter on Beckett’s writing, noticing repetition is one of the most basic ways by which we construe literary meanings—but in Green, and in other late modernist writers, repetitions seem to dissolve the text, or clutter and choke it, as much as they give it shape.

In the long final paragraph of the novel, artichokes and other symbols return to Julia’s thoughts:

And as she hoped this party would be, if she could get a hold of Max, it would be as though she could take him back into her life from where it had started and show it to him.
for them to share in a much more exciting thing of their own, artichokes, pigeons and all,

she thought and laughed aloud. (528)

The artichokes, and the pigeon with which the book started, come back as comedy: sharing a

childhood secret with Max is at once a romantic hope and absurdly funny, an item in a list.

Giorgio Melchiori and Rod Mengham, some thirty years apart, have noted the ways that

symbols in Green’s novels work: they recur “insistently, apparently carrying some sort of

message, never fully revealed,” the former notes, adding that they have the force of symbols

without their precision of reference or consistency (193). Mengham comments that each time

the pigeon of the first sentence recurs in the book, “the text provides yet another divergence

from the path to knowledge and understanding, rather than further evidence of a gradual

progression to meaning” (“Thirties” 369). We expect the book’s artichokes and bamboo, toy

guns and tailors’ dummies to help bind it together into something meaningful, but they are

neither clearly connected enough to do so nor disparate enough to dismiss.

The ending of Party Going makes one think of the treatment of Mrs. Tennant’s mislaid

ring in Loving. A friend known as Embassy Richard has been the subject of much talk in the

novel, relating to a “scandal” about whether or not he wrote a letter to The Times about being

invited to a diplomatic party, and whether or not he will come to Max’s party. When he finally

does arrive, however, his appearance changes almost nothing. Asked if he shouldn’t be at

another function, he replies, “I can go where I was going afterwards,” with a smile (528).

In place of an ending that ties or wraps things up, the last line of Green’s last novel, Doting

(1952), has a similar quality of continuation, of going on, that is typical of late modernist

endings: “The next day they all went on very much the same” (337).

Anecdotal and biographical fragments lead one to think more about the combination of

presence and absence in Green’s works, and its effects in the context of late modernism. Jeremy
Treglown notes that Green preferred not to be photographed for publicity purposes, except from behind (4); a photograph of the back of Green’s head appears on the cover of *Surviving*, a collection of his early, occasional, and critical writing. Having produced nine novels and a memoir by the age of 47, Green withdrew; he did not publish a book in last two decades of his life. In a biographical note in *Surviving*, Green’s son Matthew Yorke recalls him leaving the house less and less in his last years, increasingly deaf, increasingly isolated, and increasingly eccentric. Something similar happens in the prose, one could argue. Green seeks to excise more and more from his texts, in order to achieve a kind of authorial neutrality that communicates without explaining or instructing, to use the terms of the BBC broadcast quoted earlier. And yet, as with other late modernist novelists who omit and disguised in their own ways, the result is a prose style that is instantly recognizable.

There is much that does not fit under the rubric of presence and absence in Green’s work, of course. And, it should be repeated, presence and absence are handled in different ways at different times. The way Green writes is more a resistance to method, a way of changing shape, than a rigorous method. While *Living* marks the high point of textual gaps on the level of word and sentence, *Party Going* seems to be the text whose narrative and symbolic structure are most shaped by presence and absence. *Loving*, as was mentioned earlier, is of special interest here because it stands at a midpoint in Green’s trajectory, and because it brings presence and absence to the surface of the text most insistently, in the scene that will now be discussed.

Why does Albert confess, if he doesn’t have the ring? Because he loves Edith. This story of unrequited love adds much, subtly, to the psychological complexity of the novel. The way it
is handled tells us a lot about Green’s writing. Albert is a minor character, easy to neglect on a first reading, who only comes to the forefront on occasion. He is the pantry boy, being trained through informal apprenticeship to Raunce in professional matters such as polishing silver, and learning other things from him too (“You should clean your teeth before ever you have anything to do with a woman” [18]). Albert is frequently referred to as “yellow,” but as Faulks notes it may be some time before we realize that this is a reference to his blond hair rather than his character, for he is variously described as simpering, trembling, sobbing, paralyzed, and sitting back apart. The fact that he is soon joined in the novel by another character named Albert, the cook’s nephew, might reduce his individuality for the reader even more. Raunce’s Albert and Edith seem to inhabit such different emotional worlds (“by the tone of voice she might have been his mother’s sister” [20]) that we might forget the fact that “she was no more than three months older” (20). Perhaps the closeness of their ages makes things harder for Albert: he is not distant from Edith in age or station, but she is making plans for an adult, married life with Raunce, while Albert can barely find the emotional means to talk to her. Albert does finally establish his individuality when he does something Raunce is afraid to do, departing suddenly to join the army in England—but in doing so, of course, he removes himself from Edith, too. Typically, we are not told directly about his feelings for Edith or whether he is moved to leave by courage or despair or both. As in other examples, we deduce his emotional state from descriptions of his words and actions as well as the narrative’s hesitant, proffered-and-removed speculations. These are of particular interest here because the strength of emotion described seems to require concomitant layers of defence around it—which once again insist on various kinds of presence and absence.

Mrs. Jack has gone to England, and Nanny Swift is sick, so Edith and Kate (the other under-housemaid, and Edith’s intimate friend) take Miss Moira and Miss Evelyn out to the
beach for a picnic together with the two Alberts. “Those” children (once again, Green uses the unexpected demonstrative) run screaming down to the water, while Raunce’s Albert lies down under a hedge. Edith and Kate mock him for not being more helpful and for appearing to be sick (“Like Charley,” when Edith took him out for a rare walk, she comments [122]), and suggest he might light the Primus stove. But when he gets up with a packet of cigarettes the mood starts to change:

“Lawks we’ve took a man along,” Kate mocked. He offered them round. As he cupped his hands to shield the flame and Edith bent her lovely head he lowered his yellow one over hers. She giggled which blew the match out. “One thing at a time thank you,” she remarked looking him in the eye from close. He blushed painfully. Then the wind sent her hair over her vast double-surfaced eyes with their two depths. As she watched him thus, he might have felt this was how she could wear herself in bed for him, screened but open, open terribly. (122)

Edith’s head is “lovely,” in a repetition of the first description of her in the book (19). Mrs. Tennant also calls her lovely, and one wonders (alongside many previous commentators) if Edith is at the heart of the novel’s “loving” as much as at the centre of the ring’s back and forth. She is loved by Raunce and Albert, intimate with Kate, and admired by Mrs. Tennant and Mrs. Jack (who wishes she had Edith’s skin, 36). Jack Tennant once made a pass at her in a corridor, Raunce discovers to his dismay (81); and Mike Mathewson “goggled” at her beauty (134).

Unaffectedly, Edith returns affection where appropriate. She teases Albert, scares Raunce with the force of her passion (see below), and is more caring and maternal with Moira and Evelyn than their mother is. Narratorial judgments are mostly missing or speculative in Loving, as has been discussed, but there is no absence of them with regards to Edith, and they are of a certain kind. Calling her “lovely” seems more full of subjective affect, an appreciation of character as
well as appearance, than calling her “beautiful” would. One wonders if the present, absent, and guessing narrator is most present in the attention paid to Edith.

Edith is watching Albert from close (not “close up” or “close by”) as he lights her cigarette and blushes at her teasing response to him lowering his head over hers. The wind sends her hair over her eyes, which are at once covered and visible. They are twice doubled: “double-surfaced” with “two depths,” in one of many descriptions of her eyes in the novel. When Raunce proposes, a few pages on from this scene, her eyes will undergo what seems “a quadrupling in depth” (131—perhaps doubling the depth of the moment with Albert is a way to underscore where her true feelings lie). Looking into the fire in the Red Library, “her great eyes became invested with rose incandescence that was soft and soft and soft” (131). Kate, on the other hand, has “gimlet eyes” (82), while Raunce has a squint, which is “shocking with his two different-coloured eyes” (43). It is only Edith whose eyes provoke lyricism, prompting a kind of oblique revelation of the narrator in its poetic excess.

Albert’s eyes are weak, but they shine at Edith. While the narrative voice is sent into rapture in the examples above, Albert’s powerful emotional response to looking into Edith’s eyes is treated in cautious fashion, in terms that explicitly bring out the movements of presence and absence in Green’s writing that this chapter identifies. The way he looks at her sends him into a powerful fantasy—unless that is saying too much already. Because we learn, as she watches him, that “he might have felt” what follows. We are told what Albert is feeling, but only in the mode of possibility (as if, again, the narrator observes the moment from outside and speculates on what he sees). What is unusual about the description of Albert is the way it develops, going farther into Albert while padding each step with an additional layer of rhetorical care. “He might have felt this was how she could wear herself in bed for him” is a series of tiny, protected moves. “Could” is a second possibility, after “might,” and what Albert is (possibly)
imagining is Edith in bed—but even that description is of how she could “wear” herself in bed for him. The most intimate moment is figured as a moment of presentation. Physical or emotional nudity is clothed; she is not just herself, but herself “for him.” Even to say “in bed” is to circle around what they would be doing there.

After the comma, there is some summary of what this means. Albert imagines Edith, like her eyes through her hair, “screened but open, open terribly.” As with many of Green’s descriptions, there seems to be more motivating this one than is stated—and yet speculating on what is behind it feels like overshooting. Edith screened but “open terribly” might suggest a sexual power that is the source of both her appeal to Albert and his fear of her, something that makes him a child even as he longs for her. Elsewhere, in a comparable moment, Edith kisses Raunce passionately and he flops back, “flabbergasted, having caught a glimpse of what was in her waiting for him” (152).

But what is being described is itself “screened but open.” Something is covered up but still visible, there but not entirely there, which is why this brief description fits Loving and Green so well. The hedging and caution cover something up, even as something beautiful and enigmatic and full of life and strangeness remains visible underneath. Green almost seems to be describing his own practice in Albert’s potential fantasy. What is being described is both there and not, is at once present and absent, screened but open—and the description is itself, in its cautious development and careful hypothesizing and figuring, an example of presence and absence at once, a way of bringing presence and absence together in a phrase.

In the rest of this long picnic scene, Albert talks to Edith at length about himself for the first time, unable to make out “the expression in her enormous eyes behind the black yew branch of windblown hair” (125). Edith lies over Albert with a straw, surely torturing him more; afterwards, Edith and Kate talk about the missing ring and Kate warns Edith about Albert’s
feelings for her. They fall asleep, and Albert creeps back from a walk with Peter, the donkey, who follows him around. Albert sits next to Edith as she sleeps: “He never took his eyes off her body” (130).

Even in a scene that seems to provide so telling a figure for Green’s writing, there are caveats. Eyes obscured by hair are not unique to this moment. When Paddy, the Irish lampman, is seen with Kate, “His light eyes shone through the grey hair over them” (87). Kate and Paddy have this time together because Edith and Raunce were taking a walk—the walk mentioned in passing by Edith in the picnic scene. When Edith tickles Kate with the straw, Kate says the name “Paddy” in her sleep (126). The line following “screened but open” is a rapid deflation: “‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Snap out of it’” (122). Whenever we find something that seems critical or categorical in Green, it seems to be accompanied by a countervailing deflationary force, as Joseph Rosenberg has explored. The hedging in the description of Albert is one version of this; Edith’s rejoinder is another.

*

The end of Loving picks up the strands of presence and absence already identified in the novel and takes them further, showing how necessary they are to its narrative workings, and thus how they connect Green’s work to late modernism more generally. To examine it one needs to look first at the beginning of the novel, which runs something like a fairy tale:

Once upon a day an old butler called Eldon lay dying in his room attended by the head housemaid, Miss Agatha Burch. From time to time the other servants separately or in chorus gave expression to proper sentiments and then went on with what they had been doing.

One name he uttered over and over, “Ellen.” (18)
As has been discussed in the introduction, the twist away from “Once upon a time” suggests that what is to come will be both fairy tale and something more quotidian. Although a death is foretold, most of the servants go about their business; we do not know why Miss Agatha Burch attends to Eldon (or why, soon after, she seems so much more affected by his death than her colleagues). Eldon is referred to by only his surname, unlike Miss Agatha Burch. When Charley Raunce takes over from Eldon he will be known by his surname too, rather than being called “Arthur,” which is what Mrs. Tennant calls every footman, whatever his own name is. To be known as Raunce is to gain some individuality, then, but also in a way to lose some, because it is to enter a series of head butlers known by their surnames. It takes time for the other servants to adapt to calling him Raunce.

The ending of the novel is similar to the beginning and yet strangely different. Raunce is sitting on a bench by the dovecote with Edith, his eyes closed and his face flushed (“The colour spread until his face had become an alarming ugly purple” [202]). During a long conversation, Raunce and Edith have just agreed to elope, at last, to escape together to England without giving notice. Raunce rests, and Edith takes out a bag of scraps and feeds the peacocks, which quickly surround her, joined by a company of doves:

And their fluttering disturbed Raunce who reopened his eyes. What he saw then he watched so that it could be guessed that he was in pain with his great delight. For what with the peacocks bowing at her purple skirts, the white doves nodding on her shoulders round her brilliant cheeks and her great eyes that blinked tears of happiness, it made a picture.

“Edie,” he appealed soft, probably not daring to move or speak too sharp for fear he might disturb it all. Yet he used exactly that tone Mr Eldon had employed at the last when calling his Ellen. “Edie,” he moaned.
The next day Raunce and Edith left without a word of warning. Over in England they were married and lived happily ever after. (203-4)

As ever with Green, there is a lot going on in a few lines. “It could be guessed” is another instance of the narratorial speculation discussed earlier. Here, it is a way of suggesting what Raunce is feeling, expressed in the mode of what a watching narrator might conclude from the way Raunce watches Edith. “In pain with his great delight” may remind us of Albert’s paradoxes of sensitivity around Edith (and Green’s use of contradictions: “‘Aren’t you just awful,’ she said apparently delighted,” [25]). The image of Edith surrounded by birds may seem idyllic and painterly, but the terms used to summarize it come from Raunce’s more prosaic, but still enchanted register: “It made a picture.”

The fact that Raunce calls out “Edie” using “exactly that tone” that Eldon employed to call “his Ellen” on his deathbed suggests ominously that the scene of Raunce and Edith on their bench repeats that of Eldon on his deathbed attended by Agatha Burch. Raunce is calling to Edith, who is next to him, while Eldon calls out past Miss Burch to someone else. The repeated allusions to Raunce’s ill health preceding this scene underline the grim mood: “for the past fortnight he had been looking very ill” (190); he tells her at the beginning of this scene that he “vomited this morning another time” (192); to get him to the dovecote, “she had conducted him as though he was an old man” (192-3). One reason to leave Ireland is that Raunce thinks the sea air may be damaging his health and making what he takes to be dyspepsia worse. At 39 he is far from aged, but he is twenty years older than Edith and the distance between them is suggested when he regrets Albert’s departure for the war in paternal terms. Adding to the tone, death is mentioned several times in the surrounding pages, in phrases such as, “You’re dead right it has,” and “He was dead serious” (194); and, when Badger the greyhound appears, Raunce assumes he wants to “knock off” one of the pigeons (203). Just before the “picture” quoted above, Raunce
closes his eyes and Edith says, “Well this is a fine elopement... I didn’t gamble on you going to sleep on me I must say” (203).

Of course, the ending’s strongest suggestion of the beginning of the book is the return to fairy tale register in the last words. It is an accelerated swerve back into the tone with which events began. Its speed seems important, akin to Edith’s deflationary comments at moments of high emotion: after twelve pages of measured dialogue in which Edith and Raunce debate the merits of returning to England or not, doing so immediately or giving notice, the action happens in two quick sentences: “The next day Raunce and Edith left without a word of warning. Over in England they were married and lived happily ever after” (203-4). We are not given the kind of realistic detail that Green lingers over to describe action elsewhere in the novel. The acceleration and the fairy tale words “happily ever after” undermine what is said even as it is said. The reader has to wonder if this can be how Raunce and Edith’s story ends—or if this is an ironic ending, in which speed and register are a way of indicating that the happy ending is not to be taken seriously, that perhaps there is another, unsaid ending suggested in a different way by the ending’s echoes of the beginning. That is, if once again a butler is dying, accompanied by a woman who loves him.

Critical views on the ending differ. Keith C. Odom counsels the reader against deciding that the author “could not have meant what he said,” adding that “Green was the master of his words... Raunce and Edith in Loving did live happily ever after” (10). The fact that he has to say as much suggests there is more to discuss, however. Oddvar Holmesland’s view, although eventually as alive to the ending’s equivocations as John Russell is in his study (Henry Green), is initially starker and quotes Green himself to similar effect:

There is no sign that Raunce’s moaning is a symbolic symptom of any malignant affair with Edith. Neither the separate images nor their coalescence seem to carry any
clear message so as to provide a premonition of the hero’s fate. Green indicates that Raunce’s fits of dyspepsia after falling in love with Edith, have no sinister thematic implications: “In this particular case, not unusually, the husband had been made ill—his stomach had been upset—by being in love.” In fact, Green himself was unaware of any deliberately ironic ending at the time he wrote Loving: “I have often been asked how soon after they got to England the husband died... my answer invariably is ‘Whenever you think,’ though in writing the book I had no idea but that they were to have anything but a long and happy life thereafter.” (112)

There are of course signs that Raunce’s moaning is a real symptom of malignance affecting the affair with Edith. The images do not carry a “clear message” to provide a premonition of Green’s fate, but by now it should be clear that Green is rarely so definitive.

Green’s comment on the ending is similarly unsatisfying. Raunc might think he has an upset stomach, but the weight of references to just how sick he is suggest something more, as do the mentions of death and the echoes of Eldon’s demise. Even before Raunce falls in love, he hardly radiates health: the first description of him in the book reads, “He was a pale individual, paler now” (18). And Green’s comment elides one of the real issues, of course. Leaving it up to the reader how long Raunce and Edith live in England before his death takes for granted that Raunce and Edith leave at the end of the book, when this departure is put in question by the way Green composed the book’s last sentences. Holmesland makes the insightful suggestion that what Raunce is repeating is not Eldon’s death, but Eldon’s “loving” (114). It may be that the first sentence is trustworthy (that they depart) but that the last words are not (that they live “happily ever after”). One still has to wonder if Raunce’s departure from the castle and from the book will be with Edith, as the ending explicitly states, or like Eldon’s, as the echoes suggest.
The point of all this is not to claim that Raunce “actually” dies on the bench. Rather, it is to note that *Loving* has, almost, two endings. Neither is entirely satisfactory or definitive; neither is entirely present or absent. The echoes and diction suggest that Raunce and Edith are replaying a death scene that happened at the start of the book, stronger than the possibility mentioned in Green’s letter and repeated by critics (see MacKay 102) that Raunce will die after returning to England. But the literal meaning of the final words of the book tells us the opposite. Should we ignore the text’s explicit statement, or its poetic suggestions?

One must read for both, of course, and hold them in contradiction. The end of the book is another iteration of the explorations of presence and absence in the rest of the novel. It echoes the description of Edith’s eyes as “screened but open,” the narrative judgments that are only guesses, the symbolic patterns that come and go, the missing commas and word endings that the reader may supply. It is enigmatic, and yet full of emotion. By giving and taking away, by leaving the reader shifting between possibilities, it refuses narrative closure—but does so by giving several possible options, rather than none. The ending according to which Raunce dies is there, but undermined, as is the ending according to which he and Edith go to England, as is the even more shadowy ending by which they depart and he dies shortly thereafter.

My own sense, when reading the book for the first time, linked to the descriptions of Edith as “lovely” and the narrator’s affection for her. Raunce is dying, but Green loves Edith too much to have her story end with that crisis—and yet respects her too much to fob her off with a fairy tale ending and nothing more.

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This chapter has explored the workings of presence and absence in *Loving*. Moving from Green’s use of punctuation and omission of *-ly* endings through to narrative positioning, the details of Green’s imagery, and the nature of the novel’s ending, the aim has been to show how Green uses presence and absence on every level, the effect being to create a text that is there and not there, that resists interpretation even as it encourages it.

Commentators on Green’s work have long noticed its oblique qualities. He is called “elusive” as often as he is called important. Since it was published, Green’s work has been considered deeply significant without being fully assimilated into any of the movements of twentieth-century literature one would expect him to be associated with. His conspicuous interest in stylistic innovation means he is often assimilated with slightly older, high modernist writers: James Wood calls Green, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence “the last serious European modernists” (*Broken* 186). But this necessarily elides some of the important differences between his work and theirs. Green’s explorations of class and social mores even in such idiosyncratic novels as *Living* and *Party Going* have led to readings that focus on the more political aspects of his work (see Gąsiorek). Michael North and Michael Gorra consider Green in the context of his period, as exemplifying an uncertainty typical of the 1930s or a rhetorical and metaphysical weakness succeeding high modernism; meanwhile, Randall Stevenson examines the ways Green refuses to fit in with the writing of his generation at all, and rather stands out from it. While it has come in and out of academic view, Green’s work has attracted both nuanced readings, such as Rod Mengham’s influential psychoanalytical analysis of the novels (*Idiom*), and more idiosyncratic ones, such as A. Kingsley Weatherhead’s early interpretation of the novels as being about self-fashioning, for instance.

Perhaps the most significant critical appreciation of Green’s writing has come from other novelists, such as John Updike and Eudora Welty, and more recently Tim Parks and Francine
Prose. The most recent criticism has begun to examine the different kinds of realisms incorporated into Green’s writing, trying to find ways to keep an eye on both his stylistic innovation and his interest in everyday life (as in McDermott, and the introduction to MacKay and Stonebridge). Meanwhile, close readings such as those of Bharat Tandon and James Wood, closest in spirit to this study, emphasize what is absent and unusual in Green’s writing and attempt to account, in part, for its moving strangeness. The approach of this study is similar: to look deeply at the working of Green’s style and connect him with a continuum of late modernist novelists who continue to innovate in prose, but with the aim and result of creating ultimately evasive rather than completely satisfying works.

Green is often compared in passing to contemporaries such as Ivy Compton-Burnett, Samuel Beckett, and Elizabeth Bowen, and building on this comparison allows one to look again at Green’s play with presence and absence and put it in a new context. Henry Green is a unique writer, but he can be compared with some equally unique contemporaries. Some of their stylistic techniques are similar and some are different, but their overall effect builds into a late modernist aesthetic.

This study seeks to put Henry Green into a continuum with other late modernist novelists. Compton-Burnett focuses on dialogue even more than Green does, and reduces the role of her narrator to extremes that Green will not pursue until his later novels, *Doting* and *Nothing*. And yet, as the following chapter will examine, the effect of Compton-Burnett’s spare, undermining dialogue is to create an uncertain text, that gives and takes in similar ways to Green’s. In some ways, Compton-Burnett seems icily secure and at a remove from Green’s more lyrical uncertainties; in other ways, however, the effect of her giving power to her characters is to create texts in which the reader is left with a surfeit of incomplete options, as happens at the end of *Loving*. Samuel Beckett’s novels, this study will argue, are as attuned to
their surfaces as Green’s are. Where Green experiments with omission and narrative speculation, Beckett’s style is full of repetitions that undermine the text even as they construct it, making it something “in between” in the same way as Green’s novels, and occupying the same kind of philosophical or epistemological space as Compton-Burnett. Elizabeth Bowen’s fiction may seem more conventional at first reading, but this study will explore the way her innovative, pitted syntax curls and obsesses around nothingness in ways that echo Beckett’s concerns as much as Compton-Burnett’s and Green’s; this is to say, she is working with uncertainty as much as the other authors examined here.

This, perhaps, is the meaning of presence and absence in Green’s novels. Green continues to innovate in prose through the kinds of omission and doubling examined in this chapter. That is, he stands apart from the “return to realism” that is one of the important qualities of his period. And yet, the effect of his innovations is late modernist, more comparable to those of Beckett and his peers than the more totalizing effects of his high modernist predecessors. Green presents and then removes, guesses and gives options; he creates patterns, but then they dissolve. Even the techniques by which he makes an inconsistent text are themselves inconsistent, and this adds to their effect.

Each of the novelists examined here adds something different to late modernism: the presence and absence, omission and speculation described in this chapter are Green’s addition. Whatever his books are seen as being ultimately about—whether they are interpreted more as social commentary, romantic comedy, or isolated, self-reflexive “gems”—this is how they proceed. What this chapter aims to show is that, while many readings are possible, the kind of innovations Green pursues in style move towards suspension, towards giving and taking away, towards intransigent parts in suspension rather than one or another interpretation of the whole.

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4 Anthony Burgess’ word for Green’s novels, reprinted on the back cover of the Penguin edition of Loving, Living, Party Going.
And yet, like other late modernist works, Green’s novels are not autotelic in any simple way: by writing presence and absence at once, they fall apart rather than allowing one to interpret them as isolated or self-sufficient artefacts. Through a series of determinate stylistic and narrative gestures, they invite philosophical and epistemological interpretation, but equally keep such readings in parenthesis, not quite final. If Green’s works are described as “lifelike” because of the way they resist conclusion, even this conclusion has to be resisted. Through its mechanics of presence and absence, the text is rendered present and absent to interpretation. Like the other late modernist writers examined here, Green finds ways to go on writing through stylistic innovation of a kind that allows his works to come and go.

As was suggested in the introduction, the best approach to Green’s novels may come from Beckett’s aesthetics: “To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now” (Driver 219). Green’s presences and absences are a way of creating a text that rejects the presencing, consoling, or redemptive aspects of high modernist stylistic innovation. They work against the kind of writing which, Beckett argues, tries “to say that the chaos is something else” (Driver 219). Green resists the return to realistic convention of his peers, such as Greene or Powell. Green’s work is also distinct from the more insistent negativizing of his postmodernist successors including, one should say, the later Beckett. Without being sufficient to itself, the text constantly invites one back into itself. It does all this through very deliberate, dedicated, sentence-level effects that “accommodate the mess.” This is not everything that matters about Green, but it is part of what makes him matter, both as an individual and innovative novelist of genius and as a contributor to a late modernist aesthetic.
This chapter examines the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett in detail in order to explore its contribution to the continuum of late modernist, innovative, and uncertain novels set out in this thesis. Compton-Burnett’s narrative mode, heavily reliant on dialogue, is an aesthetic expression of her work’s unconsolated and unconsoling moral outlook. While any given page of a Compton-Burnett novel is instantly recognizable, and a rejection of the return to conventional realism seen among many of her contemporaries, her novels also reject key aspects of high modernism. Compton-Burnett continues to disrupt the novel, as her high modernist predecessors did, but the philosophical and moral outlook her works convey is more comparable to Samuel Beckett’s than theirs. Her characters are doomed to speak without respite or satisfaction, with no ultimately redemptive aesthetic underpinning their mutually undermining comments. Compton-Burnett’s minimalist narration echoes that of Henry Green, while the way her plots refuse narrative transformation suggests Elizabeth Bowen. But the style in which she works is innovative in a paradoxical and subtle way. Because it is scrupulously correct, it is somewhat different from that of the other writers examined in his study. Each of the late modernist novelists examined here offers something slightly different, but the overall effect of their works is similar. Compton-Burnett presents a stark world that makes and unmakes itself before the reader’s eyes, and she leaves the reader to face it without illusion.
After setting out the more unusual elements of her work, this chapter will begin to explain the significance of Compton-Burnett’s unruffled prose style through opposites, so to speak, by exploring moments at which it is temporarily dropped, such as in the speech of Toby Clare in *The Present and the Past* (1953). It will then show, using a typical scene from *Mother and Son* (1955), how in the absence of a controlling narrator her characters use words as tools for power and control, fighting for dominance and even survival in a world without a narrator or judge. Words in Compton-Burnett, I will argue using a letter from *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), are all too revealing of the “natural” savagery that makes up civilized domestic life. Her endings are a final element in an aesthetic technique that sets out a moral and intellectual world in which everything that is given is liable to be taken away.

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Compton-Burnett’s work presents the reader with unusual challenges. If one includes the posthumous *The Last and the First* (1971) and *Dolores* (1911), which she later disclaimed as juvenilia (see V. Powell 1), she published twenty novels of a remarkably comparable kind. Her works typically take place in a house in rural England around the start of the twentieth century. Proceeding almost exclusively in dialogue, they depict the life of a single family, often not as well off as they used to be, led by a domineering mother or father. A new character gets entwined with the family, or a journey or a bequest changes the state of affairs, and melodramatic events ensue: secrets are revealed, there are deaths and marriages and affairs, and sometimes even incest, murder, or suicide. However, after all this, the situation at the end of the novel is not entirely different from what it was at the start. Read closely, her works do reveal an
artistic progression and changes of interest,¹ but the fact that one can generalize about them at all shows how different she is from Beckett or Green in spite of all the similarities one also sees, since their works show much greater variety. In terms of narrative structure, theme, form, and style, Compton-Burnett’s works are much more uniform. As such, her oeuvre stands as something of a rebuke to conventional, contemporary expectations of a writer’s career, for example the unspoken (“natural”?) valorization of growth over time, or the need for each novel to be different enough from the last. Compton-Burnett seems almost to joke about this when she includes, in some of her books, references to the titles of others: “Now, mother and son, don’t quarrel,” says Dulcia in A House and its Head (72); “Well, a house must have a head,” says Miranda in Mother and Son (12). The titles, like much of her dialogue, have a proverbial ring to them. In the dialogue, proverbs and common sense and cliché are immediately dissected. But if her intertextual use of her own titles suggests that the world she creates is self-enclosed, her insistent use of surnames such as Donne, Bunyan, and Calderon suggests that perhaps books are all that exists, whether by Compton-Burnett or others.

Compton-Burnett’s style presents challenges. It displays the same paradoxical quality as Henry Green’s, as discussed in the previous chapter, but raised to a new degree of intensity. As in Green, a style that reduces the personal “telling” voice to almost nothing, perhaps in favour of a fuller communication between author and reader (―A Novelist‖ 139), itself becomes an instantly recognizable, personal style.² The further twist in Compton-Burnett is that the extreme grammatical and stylistic correctness of her characters’ speech is part of what makes her style unusual. They speak a precise and perfect Victorian English, and almost never hesitate, stumble,
or interrupt one another. There are few extended dependent clauses, inner punctuation, or twists and turns, as seen in these three moments taken at random from her novels:

“People are always ashamed of their best qualities and describe them in the wrong way,” said Dudley. (*A Family and a Fortune* 115)

“Don’t talk in that witless way,” said Duncan. “What difference does his being helpless make?” (*A House and its Head* 216)

“He is repaying you for what you give him,” said Emma. (*Mother and Son* 109)

Unlike Green, whose ear for spoken language is often praised,\(^3\) Compton-Burnett rarely uses syntax to identify individual characters or tries to concoct an individual rhythm or dialect for them. One can detect differences between them, but sometimes on a first reading it is hard to do so; one may find oneself wondering who has uttered a certain line of dialogue and who has replied. The differences between the characters’ tones are within a subtle range. There are exceptions: Edgar’s concerns for telling the truth in *A Family and a Fortune* gives him a verbal tic. “It is possible—it seems to be possible” (13), is one of his typical beginnings.\(^4\) Compton-Burnett’s dialogue does not aim to represent the detours and blind alleys of spoken English. Instead, at breakfast, at dinner, or over tea, her characters precisely and subtly insult one another. Aphorisms and clichés are spouted and then shown to be logically incoherent. The characters correct what others have said, reading each others’ words and revealing each others’ errors and weaknesses in what becomes a startling X-ray of the hostility that underlies family life. Speaking perfectly correctly, they gradually seem to tell us everything about each other; and yet, the lack of narrative commentary sometimes makes it seem that they have no deep internal lives at all. The characters have no privacy: they speak publicly, all the time, although

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\(^3\) Though James Wood notes the ways that Green’s dialogue is savoury and creative, and plausible rather than accurate to life (“Plausible” 53).

\(^4\) Another challenge is that, though Compton-Burnett’s work at first seems so uniform, the closer one looks, the more exceptions one finds to any general comment one would like to make about it.
they speak with such frankness that some critics have wondered if what Compton-Burnett’s dialogue represents is unconscious thought, or things that “people feel but could never say” (Hewitt 204), or sotto voce comments aimed at one character rather than all (Burkhart, I. Compton-Burnett 60).

The insults and pedantry are not everything. There are also moments of unity and solidarity, especially among the children who populate several of the books. As with Green, Compton-Burnett’s interest is often with the group rather than the individual.\(^5\) And so, as in the work of a slightly later dramatist like Harold Pinter, her characters often seem to be surfaces, or types, angling for power and position and using their awareness of shifts in language to get their way.\(^6\) The setting is often enclosed—when a character leaves the main house or another principal setting, she essentially disappears (another of the many ways Compton-Burnett’s novels are theatrical, as has often been noted). While her works seem to disavow any obvious political reading, critics have attempted to find a political statement in the manoeuvring, exploitation, and cruelty in her works. For instance, “Apart from physical violence and starvation, there is no feature of the totalitarian regime which has not its counterpart in the atrocious families depicted in her books” (Sackville-West 108; Gąsiorek’s reading is more confined to the English political scene [25-34]).

When one comes across a sentence about the weather in Manservant and Maidservant, it is triply strange: because it is the narrator’s, because it is about landscape, and because of its poetic weighting: “The cold held, bound the earth, could not break” (286). It is strange, too, because it comes at a moment of tension in the novel, and unusually here the tension seems to infect the otherwise unflappable rhythm. The description in A House and its Head of Sibyl going up the stairs with her stepmother Alison is haunting because of all the things it does that

\(^5\) See Lodge (After 81) for the claim that this interest, pursued through dialogue, is typical of late modernist writing.

\(^6\) Sos Eltis makes the comparison to Pinter in these terms (228); Hansford Johnson discusses types (19-24).
Compton-Burnett usually avoids: “The latter rose, and taking her arm, walked with her towards the stairs, and Sibyl, mounting them at her side, glanced down into the moonlit room” (142). Closing the chapter, this is an extended sentence in the narrator’s voice, describing two characters moving together in silence. Sibyl’s glance into the poetically moonlit room foreshadows much that happens later in the novel, and is a quietly suggestive moment of beauty in itself. One reason that one notices this moment is that they are so rare—perhaps comparable, rhythmically and in their rarity, to the small moments of poetic landscape description in Beckett’s prose trilogy.

Compton-Burnett deliberately reduces the novelist’s armoury in ways that may remind one of the minimalist aspects of Green or Beckett. In some ways she goes beyond them: Evelyn Waugh commented that there is no architecture in her work, and no flavour of food or wine (Burkhart, I. Compton-Burnett 38). One could add that there are no daydreams, or humming, or toothbrushes: for the most part, except for brief, initial physical descriptions, the sources of characterization in her work are the characters’ words, not the narrator’s words about them. In the late modernist context, Compton-Burnett’s minimalism presents more of a challenge to interpretation because she refuses for the most part to draw her effects from stylistic innovations within the sentence. Her innovativeness is different and harder to place: this chapter will argue that it comes from her method of presenting her moral outlook. Compton-Burnett’s use of dialogue and reduction of narrative commentary is the perfect technique by which to deliver a harsh medicine. She fits in with the late modernist writers discussed in this dissertation because of the sense in her works that works of art can provide no ultimate or external redemption; like them, she uses extremely small, stylistic elements to move towards a work of art that refuses utter finality or complete fragmentation, but instead offers us something else. Although Compton-Burnett’s unyielding and personal technique and view of the world might seem to
prevent her from being read within the aesthetic currents of her time, this chapter seeks to show that she can be seen as part of a continuum of innovative, doubting late modernist writers. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it, “in her hands the novel is quietly being changed from one kind of thing into something else” (No, Not Bloomsbury 121).

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As has already been suggested, a compelling way into specifying more deeply what is unusual about Ivy Compton-Burnett’s novels is to proceed by opposites, first of all by looking at the warm and human figure of three-year-old Toby Clare in The Present and the Past. In a fictional world where even young children speak in complete, correct sentences, Toby is an anomaly. He refers to himself in the third person, makes grammatical errors, leaves out words, and focuses on unexpected aspects of what is said to him. When William the gardener moves a sick hen to another coop, for example, he tells Toby, “That is better, sir.” Toby’s reply, said smiling to himself, is: “Call Toby ‘sir’” (6).

The eccentricity of Toby’s speech depicts his personality and his youth in a way that is unusual in Compton-Burnett. Toby’s eight-year-old brother Henry, for example, is capable of sentences such as, “He has a sense of humour like a savage” (about Toby—21). Although Toby’s way of revealing it is unusual for Compton-Burnett’s characters, his temperament is in some ways typical of them: like the patriarchs and matriarchs who have become known as her “tyrants” (a term apparently first applied by Liddell, in The Novels of I. Compton-Burnett), Toby’s self-obsession knows no bounds. He will not accept that Henry is also their mother’s “little boy” (34); when he hears of his father’s death, he insists that only he loved his father—no one else did (156). Compton-Burnett’s adults are much the same: after the death of Duncan
Edgeworth’s wife in *A House and its Head*, one of his daughters comments about Duncan that: “Mother is not here to console him for her death... It will be his last grievance against her” (82).

Some children are as eloquent as the wisest adults; some adults are emotional children.

Typically, Compton-Burnett’s characters have already noticed something like this. “Why should I talk like a child, when my life prevents me from being one?” asks Fabian in *The Present and the Past* (13); after Cassius Clare’s death, his father comments that he knew Cassius as a child, “and saw the child in him,” which was his help (149). After the traumas of *Manservant and Maidservant*, the nurse comments that the children will be better off in the nursery: “What they need is to become children again” (258). Another challenge that Compton-Burnett’s work presents to the interpreter is that her characters are always reading each other and coming up with what seem to be definitive judgments.

Toby is an odd case, as has been stated, but he helps us to specify what is unusual about Compton-Burnett’s writing. For example, he is extremely active. While Compton-Burnett’s characters marry, have children, betray, and sometimes kill each other, they typically do so offstage.7 The reader is presented with discussion of those events (or discussion that avoids them) which is at times sarcastic, aggressive, or querulous, and for the most part the reader imagines the action and provides the emotion. But, fittingly for a three-year-old, Toby is at home in his body and always in motion. He tumbles through moods, breaks plates, and leaps in and out of adults’ laps with honest and selfish declarations of love and favour. We see him helping William with the gardening alongside his siblings, Megan and Henry, and their governess, Miss Ridley:

When they reached the garden, Henry and Megan were standing about it, unoccupied. Toby, who was never in this state, was once more devoted to the service of

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7 One of many frequently observed connections between Compton-Burnett’s works and Greek tragedy.
William, who was shovelling litter into a barrow. Toby was plucking single leaves and adding them to its contents.

“Soon be full,” he said to Miss Ridley.

“You are a busy little boy.”

“Big boy. So very busy.”

“Will you be a gardener when you grow up, sir?” said William.

“No, Toby have one.”

“Will you have me, sir?”

“Yes, have William.”

“Father has him,” said Megan.

“No, not Father; Toby.”

“Perhaps Father will be dead by then,” said Henry.

“Yes, poor Father.”

“What will you be yourself, sir, when you are a man?”

“Have a church,” said Toby. “Speak in a loud voice.”

“Well, I shall come to your church, sir.”

“Oh, no,” said Toby instantly. “Not people like William.”

“What kind of people?” said Megan.

“People like Father.”

“Do you like Father better than William?”

“No, like William.”

“You would want everyone to come to your church,” said Miss Ridley.

“Oh, no,” said Toby, solemnly. “Not church.” (37-8)
Toby helps by adding one leaf at a time to the barrow—the moment is perfectly observed and perfectly credible, presented to the reader by a commenting narrative voice. Compton-Burnett is completely capable of what one might call conventionally realistic literary effects, even of presenting the charm of life. Her presentation of Toby’s verbal missteps and strange logic (“Not church”) shows how effectively she can convey idiosyncrasy in a personal, eccentric idiom. For the most part, however, she chooses not to.

Interestingly, the themes explored in the scene just discussed are similar to Compton-Burnett’s concerns elsewhere. The series of corrections in the dialogue are the way the characters establish position. The talk of Cassius’ death foreshadows some of the central action of the novel. Henry’s pessimism shows us Compton-Burnett establishing character through what the characters say rather than how they say it. Toby’s sense of what it means to be a pastor (“Speak in a loud voice”) is at once what a child might think and of a piece with Compton-Burnett’s harsh satires of religion and religiosity, her concern with showing that for all its otherworldly claims religion is as tied up with class, money, and property as any other part of life.8

The scene is a reminder that, although Compton-Burnett herself claimed that her style was not a matter of explicable choice but something more unavoidable (Baldanza 15), her works are capable of more than they seem to be. Their apparently reduced breadth is a specific and determinate exploration of a certain part of the writer’s toolkit. Compton-Burnett’s focused attention to microscopic elements creates effects with large ramifications akin to those of other late modernist writers. This chapter argues that Compton-Burnett uses parts that allow her to create a work that constantly “comes and goes,” that depicts doubt and uncertainty without

8 See Gentile (8), for this point.
solidifying it. Her methods and moral interest are her additions to the late modernist continuum. One can now turn to her more usual strategies in detail.

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In *Mother and Son*, a guest named Hester Wolsey pours Rosebery Hume a cup of tea. This is a complex process, and one that has to be read closely. It happens in the Hume house: Rosebery apologizes because his parents are not there to meet Hester. The chair Hester would like to sit in, because of its perfect distance from the fire, is Miranda Hume’s favoured seat, so Rosebery asks Hester if she could move. Then, having rung for the tea, he asks Hester to pour it: “I think a man never looks so misplaced as when he attempts to preside at the tea table” (68). She asks him how he takes it and he replies, “Miss Wolsey, I am going to make a confession. I take sugar as a rule, because I have not had the heart to break it to my mother that I have lost the taste for it” (69). It might seem trivial, but much is happening, inch by inch: if pouring tea is usually women’s work, as Rosebery suggests, it is also a way of establishing power over other characters. Miss Wolsey’s unknowing attempt to take Miranda’s seat is a foreshadowing of the disruptive effect that she and other women will threaten to have on the men of *Mother and Son*. Rosebery’s confession is an unusual rupture of his intimacy with his mother in favour of Hester that at the same time reveals how much under Miranda’s thumb he really is. And yet, all this is preparatory. The real battle begins when Miranda and Julius Hume return, which leads to a series of tiny, spoken movements in which the characters advance and retreat.

Shortly after entering, Miranda says, “Now shall we have the tea table in its proper place? It seems to have taken a leap” (70). Order and custom must be re-established; Miranda wishes to be in control of the tea ritual in her own home. The figurative “leap” the tea table has
taken perhaps suggests how outlandish it is for things to be any different. Rosebery confesses that, “We moved it... or rather I did so” (71), so that Hester could pour the tea but not be in Miranda’s seat. Miranda suggests that Rosebery should have sat there and then moved when Miranda returned. When Julius agrees with Rosebery that it is better for a woman to serve the tea than a man, Miranda contradicts herself, stating that Hester could have poured it for them all, after all. Rosebery catches her out, and when Julius tries to make peace by suggesting the tea table now be put to its proper use, Miranda makes a move that is typical of Compton-Burnett’s tyrants, a slight change of subject: “‘Well, shall we pursue the sugar basin?’ said his wife. ‘I do not know how it got on to that table by itself. The things seem to have taken on a life of their own. And you must have had your tea without sugar, Rosebery’” (71). In a way the subject has not changed: Miranda does not want Rosebery to have a life of his own.

Miranda says there is not enough tea for everyone, and asks Bates the butler for how many people it was made, seemingly catching Rosebery in another lie. Investigating every detail of what has happened in her absence is Miranda’s way of re-establishing her authority, one feels when reading the scene; no transgression or change will be hidden from her. She bats away Rosebery’s small protests and instructs Hester and Rosebery into their proper places, next to her. “You shall soon have a cup of tea to your taste,” she tells Rosebery (72). In command of the game, she can change its rules at will: when Rosebery says he has already exceeded his normal allowance of tea, Miranda tells him, “It does not matter whether one or both of you has done so,” making Hester a suspect, too, even as she says it does not matter. “It is too small a point to pursue,” she concludes, having pursued it (72). The conversation only changes when Hester spies a cat.

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9 Rosebery says this in an “open tone,” which somehow makes one think he is not being open: one of the strange things about the reversal of the normal proportion of dialogue to commentary in Compton-Burnett is that one finds oneself doubting the reliability of the commentary when it does come.

10 One thinks of Green’s comment that, to be interesting, dialogue should not be capable of only one meaning (“Novelist” 138).
It is a small scene and not the cruelest exchange or most bracing interrogation in Compton-Burnett’s work: Anna Donne’s interview with Jessica Calderon in *Elders and Betters* has more destructive effects, while Horace’s discussion with his son Avery about a Christmas cracker in *Manservant and Maidservant* is infinitely more heartbreaking. But the tea table conversation does feature several of the more salient aspects of Compton-Burnett’s methods, here built out of the most daily and basic elements. In particular, it shows us what changes in the almost complete absence of the commenting narrator. No point of view is endorsed, and certain characters will say almost anything to hold control. There is no arbiter restraining them within the text and no narrator, both somewhat within and at a distance from events, to tell the reader who is right or wrong or otherwise smooth down the characters. In its absence, because no one knows anything more certainly than the others, the verbal fight for position is unremitting. The dialogue is proper and polite, but it reveals violent seas beneath. Knowledge, as we often see in Compton-Burnett, is at a premium: Miranda’s effort is to pursue the truth about what has happened in her absence. A small attempt at rebellion is discovered, exposed, and quelled, and status quo re-established. But while a secret is revealed (Rosebery had tea without sugar), another remains hidden (Rosebery’s preference for tea without sugar). It is all somehow more meaningful than it ought to be.

This is because, like other late modernist writers, Compton-Burnett’s small innovations produce large effects. Taking tea without sugar is a way of showing that one is grown up. Miranda is reasserting that Rosebery is her child and her subordinate, a status he simultaneously rebels against and enjoys. The forensic examination of facts, moments of subtle sarcasm, pedantic checking over of particular words, and convenient changes of subject, all proceeding without commentary or respite, give the reader a strong sense of Miranda’s domineering and hectoring qualities together with Rosebery’s sidling ones, as well as Julius’ downtrodden state.
and Hester’s bemused awe at the world she has walked into—even as psychological exploration of the individual seems less Compton-Burnett’s interest than the politics of status and position, depicted in a manner that is itself a constant shifting and breaking.

It is typical of Compton-Burnett that the book does not forget this episode. Some fifty pages later, Miranda and her family are visiting Hester’s previous home (she has been living with the Humes as Miranda’s paid companion). After knowing smiles about who should pour the tea, there is finally a volunteer:

“I will pour it out,” said Hester. “I know the tastes of everyone here.”

She showed this knowledge too openly.

“My son takes sugar, Miss Wolsey. I know you would want me to say so.” (119)

Not everything happens in dialogue in Compton-Burnett. There are occasional inconsistencies in her method (though fewer than in Green). Here, the narratorial comment is especially important, but it is also indirect. We infer from Miranda’s words that Hester has served tea for Rosebery without sugar. Hester shows her knowledge of his tastes “too openly,” but the narrator’s comment telling us this is itself not too open. We still deduce the precise action from the spoken words. And though not everything happens in dialogue, almost everything does. The narrator’s words are important, but apart from one “said Emma” and one “said Hester,” they are the only ones on this page of *Mother and Son* not uttered by a character.

What Rosebery says next tells us more about him, and once again tells us more about power dynamics within the group and Compton-Burnett’s methods. Rosebery almost tells the truth when he says that, “I am getting beyond the stage of wanting everything sweetened,” but belies this claim at maturity with the lies that he wants to make a change in his habits on this particular day, and that he had an unsweetened cup of tea on the prior occasion when Hester

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11 A previous applicant for the post of Miranda’s companion, Miss Burke, is now housekeeper to Emma Greatheart at Hester’s former home.
served it to him that way, “judging by my age and appearance.” Then Miranda asks, “But how did Miss Wolsey know” that this time, too, Rosebery would want his tea without sugar? (119). “I can only think she remembered the occasion I spoke of. She has the memory of the good hostess,” Rosebery says. One might think this is match point, but Miranda pedantically or precisely points out: “She was not a hostess then” (120). The conversation goes on, and once again it is only interrupted by the arrival of a cat.

In these pages of *Mother and Son*, “I know you would want me to say so” is as telling as the exchange it precedes. Miranda speculates, in her domineering fashion, about the mind and motives of another character, claiming to know perfectly what Hester must feel. This is one way that Compton-Burnett’s characters take over what is more conventionally the narrator’s role (see Sarraute, among others, for more discussion of this point). The narrator does not tell us, except rarely, what is in the characters’ minds or what motive lies behind this or that statement. But the novel provides something of this sort, through characters sifting through what others have said. The moments of explicit speculation like the one above are rare: the focus comes about through the characters’ scrupulous parsing of each others’ comments. Other late modernist writers have a similar distrust of explicit, confident narration, with similar results. What internal commentary Henry Green’s narrators provide is often undermined by words like “perhaps” that render the comments speculative rather than certain; through repetition and cancellation, Beckett’s narrators become more unreliable as the trilogy goes on; and, as will be seen later, for all Elizabeth Bowen’s generous narration about her characters’ inner lives, its end result is often the conclusion that they remain private and unknowable.

The point here is that if the characters in Compton-Burnett’s novels take on a role more usually associated with a narrator, this means the reader comes to depend on a series of sometimes contradictory, always motivated speculations. The text provides little information
about the characters except for what they say about each other, and they are a disunified chorus
whose individual members snipe at one another. As Megan says in The Present and the Past,
“All points of view are selfish” (16). Rather than a reliable or unreliable narrator, it is almost as
if the unreliable group narrates. Sos Eltis, among others,\(^\text{12}\) has pointed out that the reader of
Compton-Burnett’s novels is therefore placed on the same level as the characters. In the absence
of narratorial authority, Eltis says, readers are “unprivileged witnesses, left to negotiate
meanings, motives, and deceptions with as little certainty or security as the protagonists” (229).

In this vein, it is typical of Compton-Burnett’s work that the characters are talking about
tea as they take it. One might expect a narrator to set the scene or explore hidden motivations,
but here almost everything is done by the characters. And in their conversation, there is an
almost unrelenting focus on the present moment. They very rarely reminisce or plan, and this
temporal focus mirrors the geographic isolation of the setting described earlier, as well as the
plot’s relentless, slow, chronological march without flashbacks or foreshadowing. The
characters create their world by speaking about it, which in large part means criticizing each
other’s sense of it. There are significant similarities, again, to other late modernist writers. The
enclosed environment created by speech suggests the train station of Henry Green’s Party
Going, as well as (to a lesser extent) Kinalty Castle in Loving; the sense of paralysis, that all the
characters can do is talk without respite or conclusion, suggests the world of Samuel Beckett. As
with the other writers examined in this study, Compton-Burnett’s effects are created by
manipulation of the smallest elements.

Though the subject of tea may seem to be of minimal significance, the tea room is shown
to be a crucible of withering passions. One sees the same techniques at work in what would
seem to be far more emotionally significant moments. When Miranda is on her deathbed, for

\(^{12}\) Hutchinson, for example.
example, Julius admits to a typical Compton-Burnett crime: the children she thinks are his niece and nephews are in fact his daughter and sons by another woman. She attacks him for essentially killing her with this news, but even on her deathbed she manipulates the situation to her advantage. After she dies, a document hidden in her desk reveals that Rosebery is not Julius’ son, but Miranda’s son by another man. “I wonder if she ever spoke me a true word,” Julius says (159). Rosebery responds: “Father, her words were true. That is why she left this in silence.” It is a bizarre, quibbling defence. When Miranda spoke, Rosebery claims, she spoke the truth. She did not lie; she just left the truth unsaid. One could say Rosebery inherited his pedantic streak from his mother, were it not a quality that so many of Compton-Burnett’s characters display. At times like this, when moral problems are converted into quibbles over words, one has again the sense that only words matter in Compton-Burnett’s work. Even if this is not the case, her characters’ examination of each others’ words is both a key to interpreting her work (because it shows us what matters about it) and a challenge (because so much of the hermeneutic work has already been done, on the page, by them).

At times the checking and correcting is more philosophical, as in the discussion of fairness and rightness in Manservant and Maidservant (101). In a repeated line about step-parents in The Present and the Past, one character comments that he will make no difference between the biological mother and the stepmother, provoking the instant reply, “That is done for us” (157). Clichés, conventional wisdom, and stale phrases are subjected to especially destructive analysis. In The Present and the Past, again, Elton does this to his own speech: “I hardly think wild horses do as much to drag things from people as is thought” (59). Elsewhere, the mode of proceeding by “exploiting in each remark unobvious logical and syntactical implications in the previous one” (Kermode, “Fiction” 471) is a vehicle for startling psychological insights, principally about human weakness. When Julius confesses his affair to
Miranda in the scene in *Mother and Son* described earlier, he says that he will not forgive himself for it. She rebuts him: “You forgave yourself the thing you did. What you cannot forgive is the telling of it” (127). There is no space for sanctimony or cant in Compton-Burnett’s world, no space for linguistic or emotional laziness. But there is a lot of room for deceit and malice: Miranda may impress us with this moment of acuity, but she dies concealing her own, parallel secret from her husband.

In a way, one could choose almost any short section of Compton-Burnett’s work to make these points, and this is another challenge she presents to the reader. On the one hand, her characters’ words have to be read with scrupulous attention in order to see each shift in power as it occurs. Like other late modernist writers, she builds great effects from the smallest elements. But at the same time, the moments and characters in her work sometimes seem interchangeable. Individual characterization is secondary to what Malcolm Bradbury calls the total intercourse of the particular scene in which the speakers act (*No, Not Bloomsbury* 121-2). The plots of her novels are garish and baroque, in a way that makes them seem almost a joke on the idea of plot—and they are strangely reminiscent of each other. Her characters seem to have already perceived and said everything about each other that a critic would like to. With Compton-Burnett one is dealing at once with both the slightest, most detailed semantic shifts and an oeuvre that resists critical expectations. If she is in some ways a typical late modernist writer, she presents unique challenges—though, of course, it is a hallmark of late modernist writing to appear *sui generis*.

The effect of her innovative style, the focus of the present study, is aptly summed up by Sara Crangle as a “disembowelling of the immediate” (103). This description calls to mind the moments in Beckett’s trilogy where what seems a straightforward comment is immediately contradicted and then picked apart. Sometimes in Beckett the attempt to specify leads to time
appearing to stop as words take over, as in the description of Molloy’s stone-sucking technique (69-74). But the mood of Compton-Burnett’s work seems different. We are uncertain, weak creatures, she seems to say, but our words are stronger than us. Words have to be checked and re-checked not because they are doubtful and misleading but because they are crystalline, sharp weapons—and there is no protective narrator to mop up the pain they cause. There is only language, and power, and people confident of themselves, constantly being proved wrong.

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It is of special interest, then, to analyze a moment at which one of her characters theorizes about words, language, and feelings, the better to place and explain Compton-Burnett’s contribution to the late modernist continuum set out in this study. There are many such moments in her work—as was mentioned, her characters are in a way already their own best analysts—but a line from a letter in *Manservant and Maidservant* is especially significant.

The background to this letter is complex, and worthy of an opera, or a soap opera. Horace Lamb was a tyrannical father; his wife, Charlotte, and his cousin, Mortimer, planned to escape together with Horace and Charlotte’s children. Away on a journey, Charlotte wrote Mortimer a loving letter about their plans; it was discovered by Horace when Magdalen Doubleday, a neighbour who also loves Mortimer, allowed Horace to see it (thanks to a subplot involving an illiterate post office keeper). Horace changed his ways to become a model father, making it impossible for Charlotte to separate him from the children. Then, he announced his knowledge of the affair and banished Mortimer from the house. Shortly thereafter, he receives a letter from Mortimer.
Before it is opened, Mortimer’s letter provokes the children’s curiosity and the ironic comment that “letters are private things” (211). Horace reads it, and it is provided in the text in full, followed by a subtle internal description of his reaction to it. This moment is followed by one of the key episodes in the book: Horace goes for a walk, and though his children know the footbridge he will take is broken and trying to cross it could kill him, they do not warn him.

The letter is one of several important documents in Compton-Burnett’s work. In Elders and Betters, two competing wills spur the action; the plot of Pastors and Masters is motivated by a long-hidden manuscript. They point both to the melodramatic, somewhat parodic aspects of Compton-Burnett’s plotting, as well as the importance of reading and writing in her work. The way the moment of reading the letter is staged may remind one of Henry Green’s minimalism. There is no introductory phrase such as, “He opened the envelope,” or, “He broke the seal.” Rather, Horace walks to the fire with the letter and its text follows. It begins:

My Dear Horace,

You told me not to write to you, but I am never so malicious as to take people at their word. It is almost like telling them they have made their bed and must lie on it. Thank you very much for your letter. It has broken my heart, but that is the natural result of the use of words. When human speech developed, it was a foregone thing. It allowed people to communicate their thoughts, and what else could come of that? And putting them on paper renders it a certainty. People can keep on returning to them. (214)

Through Mortimer’s words, Compton-Burnett shows that he is answering a letter of Horace’s. As well as the response in the first line, each paragraph seems to begin by answering a question, in lines such as, “You are wondering how I spend my time,” and, “I am in homely and comfortable rooms” (214-5).
But what seems the most interesting statement in the letter is left hanging. “It has broken my heart, but that is the natural result of the use of words.” Not having Horace’s letter, we do not know what it is that broke Mortimer’s heart, or if it was just the fact of receiving the letter at all. There is a homosocial element to Compton-Burnett’s work: here the husband finds that he misses his wife’s banished lover more than he would miss his wife if they were separated. “Edgar’s life,” in *A Family and a Fortune,* “was largely in his brother” (17). In the absence of the particular, we have to rely on Mortimer’s somewhat abstract, passive comments about the general. As is also seen with the gently metafictional moments in other late modernist novels this study explores, Compton-Burnett’s words about speech and writing cast an interesting light on her practice.

The natural result of the use of words is to break hearts. Mortimer reasons about effects but leaves his reader to infer causes. This is more to do with language than with writing: when human speech developed, Mortimer says, broken hearts were a foregone thing. Writing merely renders this effect certain, through repetition. The only reason Mortimer gives is negatively phrased. Words allow people to communicate their thoughts, “and what else could come of that?” Lots of things, one might say: love notes as well as lies, sympathy as well as egotism. Mortimer is one of Compton-Burnett’s more contemplative, gentle, and generous characters. His affair with Charlotte is a mode of resistance to Horace’s oppression. When he says he is “not so malicious” as to take Horace at his word, he is being funny but also honest.

The sentiments Mortimer expresses in his letter about people’s expression of their sentiments echo what we see in Compton-Burnett’s work more generally. The reason words break hearts is that thoughts, expressed in words, are painful to other people. Mortimer seems to be imagining words as the unruffled surface seen almost everywhere in Compton-Burnett’s work, with the exception of a character like Toby. Words do not misrepresent or confuse
meaning. They present it transparently, all too clearly, with no misunderstanding or difficulty or “thickness” of their own. Rather, words simply allow us to communicate our thoughts. And thoughts, in Compton-Burnett’s work, are vicious. (Most people, unlike Mortimer, are malicious in that they do take each other at their word. In Compton-Burnett it requires a special kind of generosity not to.) In a way, Mortimer’s letter seems to describe one of Compton-Burnett’s conversations perfectly. People communicate their thoughts and break each other’s hearts in crystal-clear sentences. The reason they check and correct each other in comment after comment is not because they have misunderstood the insult or comment because it was poorly phrased, but because they have understood it all too well, and want to get their own back.

Seeing Mortimer’s letter as a potential description of a theory of language and emotion at work in other parts of Compton-Burnett’s books, one can place it productively alongside some other comments her characters make. In A Family and a Fortune, for example, Dudley remarks, in the midst of some stinging insults, that “I almost think that the gift of speech is too dangerous to use” (206). Some thirty pages later Aubrey wonders if “we might all be better if our feelings were destroyed” (235).

Something is still missing, however. To explore why Compton-Burnett has Mortimer suggest that thoughts are heartbreaking, one needs to look at one of the words he uses more closely. This allows us to examine both the innovative conception of character in Compton-Burnett’s work and its innovative formal presentation. When he says having his heart broken by Horace’s letter was the “natural” result of the use of words, Mortimer is using a Compton-Burnett key word. Mortimer may mean something like “consistent with nature” (“natural,” OED), but the word “natural” occurs repeatedly in Compton-Burnett’s novels and brings with it its own associations. Sometimes it is used to describe the inevitable in human behaviour: “We are all showing the natural reaction. Yes, we are true to type” (Manservant and Maidservant
Elsewhere it is contrasted to the use of words in ways that seem to contradict Mortimer’s letter: “Nature will have her way with us... Words do not make much difference” (*A House and its Head* 56). There are countless other examples, but a major meaning of “natural” in Compton-Burnett’s work is in opposition to what is civilized or educated. One of the main questions Compton-Burnett’s work explores is how far down the patina of civilization reaches, and the answer is: not far. Although, once again, there are too many interconnected examples to list, returning to Toby may be the most straightforward way to explore this. Midway through *The Present and the Past*, Toby is questioned by his father, Cassius, in the presence of his mother and his sister, Megan:

“What does Toby eat?”

“Very nice bun. Henry and Megan and Toby.”

“Does Toby have the biggest?”

“Oh, no, dear little bun.”

“Does William have a bun too?”

“No, very nice beer.”

“What do you like best to eat?”

“Only bacon,” said Toby.

“Surely he does not have that?” said Cassius.

“He likes the smell of it,” said Megan. “And he may have tasted it.”

“Always eat bacon,” said Toby.

“You should say what is true,” said his father. “You know you do not have it to eat.”

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13 The web of connections among such terms in Compton-Burnett is reminiscent of the tangles of bamboo and other imagery in Green’s *Party Going*, as discussed in the previous chapter: repetition of key words or images makes the reader think the theme is important, but the way they are interconnected seems to lead to overwhelming obscurity rather than informative clarity.
“No, not good for him, poor little boy!”

“A child is a strange thing,” said Cassius, as they were left alone.

“It is a natural thing,” said his wife. “That is why it strikes a civilized person as strange.”

“Yes, well, I suppose one is a civilized person,” said her husband, on a faintly gratified note, “though one does not think of oneself in that way. I suppose one’s training and background have done their work.” (97-8)

What is strange to Cassius is that Toby does not tell the truth. Flavia says this is the “natural” thing. By contrast with a civilized adult, a “natural” child seems strange. Flavia is suggesting that there is something civilized in adults that contrasts them with children. However, one of the major movements in Compton-Burnett’s work is to show that there is less difference between the natural and the civilized than might at first appear to be the case. Cassius says that Toby should not lie, but any ten-page section of Compton-Burnett’s work will show an adult lying when it suits them, as Rosebery does. They also cheat, steal, betray, and murder. Later in The Present and the Past it is “natural” Toby who will accidentally reveal “civilized” Cassius’ subterfuge: the fact that when he apparently attempted suicide through an overdose he actually took far less than a lethal amount. In the conversation quoted above, it is interesting that when a surprised Cassius congratulates himself on his civilized qualities, he lapses into referring himself as “one” rather than “I.” Perhaps he is trying to be modest, but the reader is reminded of Toby referring to himself as “Toby” or “him” or “poor little boy.” Very few characters are as civilized as they seem to be in Compton-Burnett’s work, effectively collapsing the distinction between civilized and natural that Flavia tries to make.

In a similar way, as was mentioned earlier, adults in Compton-Burnett are like children. This is one reason adults and children speak in the same way, communicating their thoughts in
perfectly clear and controlled sentences of the kind that, as Mortimer says, break hearts. Toby is
the oddity, and so interesting, because his language is as halting, incorrect, and expressive as it
is fragmentary. For the most part, the corrections and juxtapositions, the way each character’s
aggressive statements correct the previous ones, is the expression of Compton-Burnett’s
characters and their moral world.

Once again, this is a point that Compton-Burnett’s characters make for themselves. In
*Mother and Son*, Emma says, “We all prey on each other. The jungle is never dead” (63). In *A
Family and a Fortune*, the narrator briefly comments that, “The present seemed a surface scene,
acted over a seething life, which had been calmed but never dead” (215). The characters also
speak about their efforts to suppress the “natural.” When Duncan Edgeworth’s wife dies in *A
House and its Head*, a death for which he is in part to blame, he says, “We will not wear our
hearts on our sleeves,” although his subsequent behaviour undercuts this effort at displaying a
stiff upper lip (65). In a similar way, Compton-Burnett’s plots bring secrets to the surface, no
matter what the characters do to hide them. At times, they will even play along, knowingly
getting as close as they can to revealing a secret without actually doing so—as in the
conversation Bullivant has with Miss Buchanan in which he offers her a newspaper and a list of
wines, and chats about what would be the greatest disability that could face a woman in her line
of work, all in the effort to make her admit what he has found out: that she cannot read
(*Manservant and Maidservant* 183-205).

One could get lost in all the meanings and associations of words like natural and
civilized in Compton-Burnett’s work, or the changing relations of depth and surface. The
principal point here is that words break hearts because they reveal what we are. This is a way of
explaining Compton-Burnett’s work in the context of other late modernist writers whose

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14 Greenfield, Prose (“Afterword”), and others point out the extent to which Compton-Burnett’s novels explore the
essentially Darwinian nature of family life.
innovations are more obviously syntactical, such as Green’s omissions, Beckett’s repetitions, or Bowen’s “unwords.” Compton-Burnett’s characters’ words are not as obviously distorted, but their form and arrangement are the innovative way by which Compton-Burnett creates a typically late modernist effect. Her style, in a more general sense, tells us what the world is like: what it gives it takes away, what is certain is immediately rendered uncertain.

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The endings of Compton-Burnett’s novels give us a way to develop this point about her overall significance. In *Elders and Betters*, for example, Anna Donne burns the version of Aunt Suky’s will that Suky asked her to keep, preserving instead the version that makes her the recipient of Suky’s fortune. Anna’s interview with Jessica, the rightful heiress, is so devastating a rhetorical performance that it helps drive Jessica to suicide.\(^{15}\) Anna is then free to marry Terence, Jessica’s son. Her crimes are neither brought to light nor punished. As Liddell comments, “The book ends with the wicked flourishing like a green bay-tree” (*Novels* 44). In *A House and its Head*, Sibyl arranges the murder of the child who stands to disinherit her husband, Grant. Her crime is discovered, but she is still welcomed back into her family when (or perhaps because) she receives an unexpected legacy. The publisher’s cover copy comments that the transgressions the book depicts “are made all the more scary by the ease with which, in the end, the survivors accept the results.” Sibyl’s family do not punish her for what she has done, and as Gentile points out, in Compton-Burnett’s novels there is no police or state power outside the family to bring the characters to justice (6). Francine Prose notes that in this novel, Compton-Burnett is “unwilling to offer us the faintest redemptive consolation or even hope” (“Afterword”

\(^{15}\) Mrs. Fisher’s conversation with Max, in Bowen’s novel *The House in Paris*, provides an unexpected parallel.
— a sentiment that, interestingly, is often applied to the works of Samuel Beckett. In an article comparing the novelist with Pinter,\(^{16}\) Eltis says of Compton-Burnett’s characters that “no poetic justice shapes their ends, no tragic closure is offered, nor is there even measured discussion or recognition of what has passed” (228).

Along these lines, Compton-Burnett’s endings seem to circle the work back to its beginnings, rather than towards transformation. The dramatic events that the characters go through seem to make no major difference to their lives (perhaps the change, if there is one, is in the reader). After a death, a move, and several proposals of marriage in *Mother and Son*, for instance, the novel’s two households are “reconstituted exactly as at the beginning, with the difference that the Humes have lost Miranda and the spinsters have gained Miss Burke” (Baldanza 91). Hester is able to torpedo Julius and Rosebery’s plans for marriage for her own selfish reasons, without suffering any major consequences. The novel ends with Rosebery giving up on his plan to find his biological father, and instead asking to join the children in their game of cards. Compton-Burnett’s books, with their repetitive patterning and competing players, often seem to resemble games. The significance of games is noted in the exchange with which the novel ends:

> “Will nothing else absorb Rosebery’s energy?” murmured Francis. “If only Aunt Miranda were alive!”

> “Francis, that will be the epitome of my life.”

> “Would she have liked us to play cards?” said Adrian.

> “Was it that doubt, that prevented your playing?” said Rosebery with a smile. “I can relieve you of it. She taught me to play herself, when I was a boy.”

> “And now has left him partnerless,” murmured Francis.

\(^{16}\) Pinter was deeply influenced by Beckett: see his note, “Beckett,” in *Beckett at Sixty* for one instance. Kristin Morrison provides a comparative analysis, and Roof offers a more original approach.
“And now has left me as you say, Francis,” said Rosebery. (255-6)

The fact that it was the “tyrant” Miranda who taught Rosebery how to play is a surprise, and perhaps a suggestion that her sadistic machinations were also a kind of game. On the other hand, knowing how to play, thanks to Miranda, may give Rosebery a way out of the solitude he and Francis describe. Miranda taught him how to play and then left him partnerless, a word that Rosebery himself cannot repeat.

To end a novel with dialogue is a strange move. It is something Henry Green does, too, at the end of *Party Going*, for example—though Richard’s cryptic comment and smile at the end of that novel create a different tone from Compton-Burnett’s. Raunce moans “Edie” on the last page of *Loving*, but the statement is followed by two lines of enigmatic narrative commentary. Compton-Burnett sometimes rounds off her dialogue with a final narrative comment, but just as often does not. The last line of *Elders and Betters*, for example, is Julius saying “Our temple is not his temple, nor our God his God” (236); *Daughters and Sons* ends with the words “‘Muriel has not got out of the habit of laughing at nothing,’ said Miss Bunyan” (239). It is worth noting that one of Compton-Burnett’s more accessible novels, *A Family and a Fortune*, does end with the narrator’s voice describing Justine watching two other characters through a window.

As with their endings, the majority of Compton-Burnett’s novels begin with dialogue. At moments when one would most expect a narrator’s scene-setting or explanation, then, one instead has to take one’s guidance from the characters who spend their time bickering and undermining each other. Gentile elaborates on the significance of Compton-Burnett’s mode of narration:

By withdrawing almost all commentary the narrative voice throws off the mantle of the 19th century version of God, or the omniscient and omnipotent author. The reader can no
longer rely on the guidance of an omniscient implied author and must engage the text
without the sustained mediation of a comforting narrative voice. (39)

Engaging the text means engaging with characters arguing with each other, analyzing and
examining each other’s words in microscopic, forensic detail. Gentile reads Compton-Burnett’s
narrative technique as a way of exploring the death of God, or of other patriarchal myths or
grand narratives. Colletta similarly draws parallels between Compton-Burnett’s patriarchs and
gods (109)—and it is interesting to note once again that this is something one of Compton-
Burnett’s characters does for herself. “He behaved like a god, and we simply treated him as one”
(A House and its Head 178).

Well before Gentile’s enterprising, theoretical reading of Compton-Burnett’s works, the
initial efforts to understand Compton-Burnett were more heavily taxonomical, setting out the
repetitive themes and types of characters encountered in her novels. Charles Burkhart put them
in the context of the twentieth-century “eccentric” novel (I. Compton-Burnett 13-24), while
Robert Liddell, adding to Sackville-West’s study of violence and power in Compton-Burnett,
also claimed that she was “the greatest and most original artist” of all English living writers
(“Novels” 102). Pamela Hansford Johnson inaugurated the tradition of Compton-Burnett’s
novels being more admired by other novelists than by academic critics. Her brief, personal, and
enthusiastic commentary was joined by notes and reviews by contemporaries such as Elizabeth
Bowen, Angus Wilson, and Anthony Powell. More recent admirers of this kind, who contribute
afterwords and introductions to Compton-Burnett’s works, include Philip Hensher and Francine
Prose. As is the case with Green, they find something unique in her works, and something oddly
“writerly” in its insistence on its own methods and resistance to interpretation. Perhaps, as well,
the way the characters correct and edit one another’s sentences suggests a writer going over her
own work and endlessly trying to improve it.
Compton-Burnett’s works come and go in studies of twentieth-century literature and collections of essays about the novel. Criticism of her novels tends to repeat a general sense of admiration and puzzlement while adumbrating certain aspects of her work (Bradbury, *No, Not Bloomsbury*); dissenting critics find her work banal, pretentious or gossipy;\(^{17}\) while Baldanza’s study focuses on her sophistication and miniaturist perfection. In the 1960s, one of the more unusual sources of critical interest came from French practitioners of the “new novel,” such as Nathalie Sarraute, who found that the use of dialogue in Compton-Burnett (and Henry Green) presents an objective method that gives the exhausted tropes of the form a future—this study echoes some of Sarraute’s comments about the way dialogue takes over the usual functions of the narrator. Hilary Spurling’s biography led to a brief spike in interest, and more recently, Compton-Burnett’s books have been reissued by Penguin, New York Review Books, and Hesperus Press. Contemporary studies focus on unusual aspects of her work (such as risibility or deceit, in Crangle and Hardy respectively) or its social ramifications (Gąsiorek).

Compton-Burnett remains admired and remains problematic. Barbara Hardy has written that “Compton-Burnett is such an original novelist that her language and storytelling make an implicit critique of previous and contemporary novels: her writing throws into bold relief the formal, moral, and metaphysical simplifications of others” (136). In spite of the efforts made, Compton-Burnett’s originality has not been fully assimilated within the critical tradition, perhaps precisely because it is original in ways that are hard to build upon. David Lodge has written about the challenges that dialogue-rich novels present to critics accustomed to looking for an explanatory moment of lyrical expressiveness (*After 83*). As was mentioned earlier, another difficulty is the similarity of tone and event from novel to novel, and the fact that

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\(^{17}\) Again, it is often writers who take this line (see Amis; West).
Compton-Burnett’s characters seem to have done all the analytical work before the critic comes on the scene.

This chapter seeks to make new headway on Compton-Burnett’s work by specifying, contextualizing, and explaining. The aim is to see her in a new light through a close examination of her style that allows one to view her work in a new continuum of late modernist writers whose methods, while different, are comparable in their detail and originality—and whose effects, while ultimately difficult to explain, are for this reason similar.

First, it has sought to examine her work in detail, giving her microscopic shifts in power, for example, the attention they call for. Part of this involves examining her use of key terms that collapse, such as “natural” and “savage,” and the composition of her unredemptive, unconsoling endings—in short, to specify what is unique about her style. But, in addition, the aim is to add something to the very frequent but brief comparisons to Green, Beckett, and Bowen that critics make in response to Compton-Burnett’s work. Compton-Burnett is often called _sui generis_ or unique, but this study seeks to argue that while her methods may be highly original (although simultaneously, at times very similar to those of other late modernist writers), her effects and significance are as part of a late modernist continuum of writers who similarly seek to create works that come and go, that make and unmake themselves as they go on. Like her, they reject both the return to conventional realist forms that was seen in the decades after high modernism, but also the totalizing ethos that the stylistic innovations of high modernism may carry with them.

In Green, the work proceeds through omission, narratorial speculation, and narrative doubling; in Bowen, the exploration is a stylistic and narrative investigation of the nothingness

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18 In a personal communication, Victor Li points out the similarity between Compton-Burnett’s opposed terms and her insistent use of “binary” titles: _Manservant and Maidservant, Elders and Betters, Mother and Son_. As with her binaries, the books seem similarly to undermine the distinctions set out in their titles.

19 To begin with, one could mention Sackville-West for the comparison to Bowen; Hardy and Tristram’s mentions of Beckett; Gąsiorek’s comparison to Green.
within things. The next chapter will explore the ways that Beckett’s use of repetition is a way of undermining as he creates. As has been noted, and as later chapters will show, Compton-Burnett creates a moral world reminiscent of Beckett’s, through characters doomed to speak to one another and pick apart one another’s comments without respite. Beckett’s narrators do the same to their own words, but in Compton-Burnett it happens in a dialogue-heavy mode that suggests Green, with narrative conclusions that echo Bowen. What Compton-Burnett adds to the palette, her equivalents to Green’s omission of -ly endings or Bowen’s circling syntax, is the method of juxtaposed, undermining dialogue and narratorial disappearance. This means that, as this chapter has aimed to show—and this is another aspect of her links to other late modernist writers—the philosophical or aesthetic point is made formally, through determinate making and unmaking on a sentence-by-sentence level.

Explaining, as ever, is most difficult. As has been set out, various philosophical or political readings of Compton-Burnett’s work are possible. They are engaging but at the same time, as with Beckett, Green, and Bowen, hard to be entirely confident in. Her novels encourage such readings while at the same time discouraging them. We are repeatedly drawn back into the text as we try to leave it or conclude about it. At the same time as her novels refuse endings that console the reader with a sense of justice having been done, one still has a sense of who is evil, who has escaped punishment, who has been the victim; not everything is doubt and uncertainty. As with other late modernist writers’ methods, Compton-Burnett uses extremely small elements in a determinate way to move away from both conventional realism and high modernist wholeness. She uses them in order to create a late modernist work of art that, to adapt the terms from Beckett first used in the introduction, accommodates the chaos without pretending the chaos is something else. It is important to note that the result is accommodation, rather than either control of the chaos or complete fragmentation in the face of it.
Like the other writers examined here, Compton-Burnett is unique: but one of the paradoxes this study explores is the unexpected similarities between unique writers. As with the other writers examined here, she epitomizes the late modernist refusal to be reconciled—in her case, to be reconciled to conventional modes of writing or moral thought. To continue to adapt Beckett, Compton-Burnett works with uncertainty, but specifically seeks a form that will preserve that uncertainty without binding it; as with the other writers examined here, her work refuses to make an occasion out of not being an occasion. That is, her characters will not even allow themselves to be swallowed up by a single sense of what it means to be unreconciled.20

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20 See Michael Wood’s introduction to Said, on Adorno’s comment describing Beethoven’s refusal to “reconcile into a single image of what is not reconciled” (xv).
“Nothing else, yes, something else”:
Repetition in Samuel Beckett’s Trilogy

A story that begins suddenly, late in *The Unnamable*, gives a sense of the nature and importance of repetition in Samuel Beckett’s trilogy of novels:

...I speak of evening, someone speaks of evening, perhaps it’s still morning, perhaps it’s still night, personally I have no opinion. They love each other, marry, in order to love each other better, more conveniently, he goes to the wars, he dies at the wars, she weeps, with emotion, at having loved him, at having lost him, yep, marries again, in order to love again, more conveniently again, they love each other, you love as many times as necessary, as necessary in order to be happy, he comes back, the other comes back, from the wars, he didn’t die at the wars after all, she goes to the station, to meet him, he dies in the train, of emotion, at the thought of seeing her again, having her again, she weeps, weeps again, with emotion again, at having lost him again, yep, goes back to the house, he’s dead, the other is dead, the mother-in-law takes him down, he hanged himself, with emotion, at the thought of losing her, she weeps, weeps louder, at having loved him, at having lost him, there’s a story for you. (406)

Though it touches absurdity, this passage is only slightly more dense in its repetitions than the trilogy more generally. As in the text as a whole, there are repetitions of many kinds at once, from words to events; as in the text as a whole, repetition becomes a theme. In this passage, as in the trilogy, repetition is both the way the text goes on and what threatens to derail it.
First of all, one notices repetition of individual words and parts of phrases: “they love each other,” “she weeps,” “with emotion.” Single words are repeated immediately (“she weeps, weeps louder”) and in consecutive phrases (“he goes to the wars, he dies at the wars”). Repetition is complicit with variation, as when “at having loved him” shifts into “at having lost him.” In another example, “In order to love” grows into “in order to love again.” Small structures are repeated for a few phrases, altered, and then abandoned, and then taken up again. This is one way repetition works to both give the reader some footing and then alter that ground.

Along with the repetition of textual elements in the passage, this story from *The Unnamable* makes repetition a theme: it is a comedy of repetition, a tragedy made comic through repetition. Reminiscent of Ivy Compton-Burnett’s domestic Grand Guignol, it features a marriage, an apparent death, another marriage, a real death, and another death through suicide. The things that matter in the story happen more than once (which is often how, in stories, we know what matters). But the repetition also drains the story of affect and makes it ridiculous. The undermining, repeated commentary and textual tics (“with emotion”) accomplish the same thing. Interestingly, repetition is present as a subject for the characters too: the thought of “having her again” is too much for the first husband, who dies in the train; the thought of “losing her” (as she apparently lost her first husband) drives the second husband to suicide. This may all yet happen again: “you love as many times as necessary.”

The passage also connects to and repeats important elements in the trilogy. The wife’s weeping suggests the recurrent images of crying in *The Unnamable*, for example, “I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly” (304). The narrating voice’s repeated interjection “yep” suggests Malone’s inability to stay out of the stories he tells.
in *Malone Dies*.¹ The story itself may have an intertextual element, in that it reads like a highly compressed adaptation of Balzac’s novel *Colonel Chabert*—in which a soldier thought to have died in the Napoleonic wars returns home to find his wife married to another man and is then excluded from what was his life. *The Unnamable*’s version is both minimalist and exaggerated: we do not find out which wars the husband goes to, and the interlacing of the deaths—the second husband dying without knowing the first is already dead—suggests the ending of an O. Henry story. Though it is full of deaths, the story’s initial subject, “living on” after an apparent death, is a recurrent trope in the trilogy. Malone fears that death might bring no end to repetition, and makes the hypothesis “that I am dead already and that all continues more or less as when I was not” (219). Similarly, the story itself “lives on” after its action is complete, in that it is succeeded by a series of undermining interpretations that necessarily repeat certain elements of it: “that’s love, and trains, and the nature of trains, and the meaning of your back to the engine” (406). The discussion suggests that the kind of attention to realistic detail one finds in Balzac (and many of Beckett’s contemporaries) is not entirely absent from *The Unnamable*, perhaps surprisingly. The narrating voice attempts to determine whose mother-in-law he has mentioned, and whether the story concerns “the son-in-law and the daughter” or “the daughter-in-law and the son” (407). The story connects to the themes of the trilogy in other ways. The voice says “it’s the door interests me,” and while this seems like another way to trivialize the story he has told, it also connects to a key passage about what *The Unnamable* might be: “I’m in the middle, I’m the partition... I’m the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world” (383). The passage has the aural quality that is essential to the effect created by *The Unnamable* throughout, repeating the same short words and phrases again and again, with both hypnotic and bewildering results.

¹ And, perhaps, another late modernist response to the problem presented by narrators, to compare with Henry Green and Ivy Compton-Burnett’s. Green’s guesses, Compton-Burnett’s disappears; Beckett’s are always in the process of parodically falling apart.
This study argues that Beckett’s use of repetition can be understood as an instance of the late modernist effort to innovate with style, with the aim of creating a text that can, to use Beckett’s terms, “accommodate the mess” (Driver 219). Where Green omits and his narrators speculate, where Compton-Burnett tells her stories through mutually undermining speakers, and where Bowen circles syntactically around “nothing,” Beckett repeats to create a text that insistently comes and goes. Following the mode of the rest of the study, this chapter will attempt to specify, contextualize, and explain Beckett’s use of repetition, examining its various forms in close detail in order to explore the intricacy of his writing, and placing it in the new context of the other works examined in this study in order to see it differently. Finally, this study cautiously attempts to explain Beckett’s use of repetition with reference to recent studies of the “obverse” in his work (Gibson, Beckett and Badiou 256)—although even more than the other authors examined here, the effect of Beckett’s writing of repetition in the trilogy seems to be precisely to resist final meanings.

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The story quoted at the start of this chapter suggests both the attraction and the challenge of repetition in the trilogy. Everything in the trilogy repeats, and so one has to attend to repetition, but repetition is notoriously paradoxical and hard to interpret. By itself, it is both meaningful and meaningless: it is often the first thing the reader looks for (perhaps even without realizing it) to understand what matters in the text and how it is arranged. At the same time, it is so universal, such a basic building block of literary, musical, logical, and countless other forms that it can almost be taken for granted. The same thing happening again can be observed in almost any aspect of human creation or behaviour. And yet, as is well known, repetition is
impossible: when something happens a second time, it is not quite the same, because there has been a first time.

Beckett’s writing is always repetitive. *Play* ends (or fails to end) with the stage direction to “Repeat”: “the repeat may be an exact replica of the first statement or it may present an element of variation” (368). The second half of *Lessness* repeats the words of the first half in a different order. There are countless repetitions between Beckett’s works, also: “One of the thieves was saved,” Vladimir says, deep in thought in *Waiting for Godot*. “It’s a reasonable percentage” (5). Malone has the same thought in *Malone Dies*, although he calls it a “generous percentage” (255). They are referring to events in the Bible, of course, but there is a salient intertextual repetition here, too. In an interview Beckett refers to what he calls one of his favourite sentences in St. Augustine, and his comments on it may also bear on this study’s approach to the detail of his style, as well as that of the other late modernists:

I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe them. There is a wonderful sentence in Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.” That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters. (Hobson 153)

As with the other late modernist examples collected in this study, in Beckett the shape matters, and one profits from examining it in detail. And as in the other late modernist works collected here, the trilogy is also interesting because it is a middle work in Beckett’s trajectory, rather like *Loving* in Green’s or, in its own ways, *The Heat of the Day* in Bowen’s. The trilogy features a lot of repetition but also a lot of variety. Some instances, such as Molloy’s stone sucking, recall the recursive games of Beckett’s earlier novel *Watt*. When sound starts to take over from sense

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2 Even if, as in this study, one does not assume that an author’s comments about his or her work are final.
in *The Unnamable*, on the other hand, we are offered a preview of the aesthetics of his later prose. There is a sense that being in between may be the characteristic late modernist moment.

Previous approaches to Beckett’s use of repetition in the trilogy have tended to fall into one of two camps. Some classify the various kinds of repetition Beckett employs, creating a taxonomy; others more ambitiously attempt to show that Beckett’s use of repetition exemplifies a certain psychological or philosophical theory. Interpretations of the first kind tend to be pedestrian, barely even interpretations; those of the second kind risk “overshooting the text,” in Simon Critchley’s phrase, failing to attend to the particulars of Beckett’s prose in the rush to place him within a particular school or ideology that some aspect of his work suggests (141).³ Once again, between is the place to be, as *The Unnamable* says (341). This chapter attempts to examine the textual functioning of repetition in Beckett’s work in detail, while also explaining it with reference to recent interpretations of the ways his writing functions as the “obverse” of everything one expects literature to be (Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou* 256). One way to avoid “overshooting” in the manner just described is by following some ways the text itself suggests repetition may be understood—just as, in other late modernist writers, metafictional moments offer clues to profitable interpretations of their resistance to interpretation.

This chapter will proceed by first setting out the variety and detail of Beckett’s uses of repetition in the trilogy. It then discusses previous approaches to repetition in Beckett’s work; compares Beckett’s repetitions to other late modernist stylistic techniques; then attempts to explain the significance of Beckett’s repetitions. It will focus on particularly salient and previously overlooked uses of repetition in Beckett’s work: sound repetitions and figures of repetition.

³ In the case of a phenomenon as universal as repetition, Beckett’s writing can be too quickly assimilated to theories from the worlds of philosophy, music, psychology, physiology, or many other intellectual areas. Rather than choosing any one of these, this chapter seeks to explore the ways Beckett’s repetition both invites and rejects such interpretations.
One of the peculiarities of Beckett’s use of repetition in the trilogy is the degree to which it highlights sound. Sound repetitions call out for interpretation, and yet are curiously resistant to explanation, because even more so than usual the semantic content is not central. One sees the invitation and the difficulty in a moment from *Malone Dies*, in which the ear picks up on soft and hard *i* sounds as well as *e*, and a more minor insistence on *h* and *ear*: “I do not see any fields or hills. And yet they are near. I do not see the sea either, but I hear it when it is high” (184). One’s ear is drawn to the repetitions, but it is hard to know what exactly they contribute, or what one can usefully say about them. Attempting to answer suggests ways to respond to Beckett’s use of repetitions in the trilogy as a whole. While some sound repetitions can be interpreted as building towards particular meanings, or creating a meaningless “rush” of noise in the text, certain self-reflexive moments in the use of sound suggest a third mode of interpreting sounds as moving in both these directions at once, and towards something else.\(^4\) This is one way repetition keeps the text in an in-between state.

Another body of evidence that is particular to Beckett’s use of repetition—and that can be profitably examined for its functioning in the text and what it points to, in order to avoid the dangers of either “overshooting” or merely classifying—is the presence in the text of several figures of repetition. Beyond the countless repeated phrases, objects, and situations in the trilogy, there are a number of moments that seem to speak to the effects and functioning of repetition, from essential to apparently trivial moments. *The Unnamable* repeatedly describes the need to repeat and not to repeat; in *Molloy*, Moran mentions repeating himself in conversation with his son when he had not intended to (“I repeated. I who had said I would not repeat” [143]). Such moments are so common within the text that repetition becomes a theme;\(^4\) These approaches to sound shadow larger attitudes to repetition in the trilogy, as will be seen below. “Emphatic” interpretations tend to view repetition as building towards particular results; “dispersive” ones see repetition as undermining any final meanings. This chapter, following the cue of recent studies of Beckett’s finitude, attempts to see repetition both as belonging to these categories and as something else as well.
the ways that it is figured point to ways of understanding its effects in the trilogy without overshooting or classifying. Repetition is sometimes figured as building meanings, sometimes seen as dismantling them; at times, most problematically and interestingly, it is seen as doing both at once. Such figures of repetition, which show us the text continually repeating, staging, and undermining itself, help us come to see the trilogy as a different kind of object from those we are more familiar with.

Beckett’s use of repetition has much to tell us, both about his work and the attention to microscopic textual matters in other late modernist writers who, as has already been shown, use their own methods to create works that unmake themselves as they go on and innovate in the direction of doubt. In his concentration and focus, Beckett is the spearhead, so to speak, of the continuum of late modernist writers set out in this study. The comparison to him deepens our understanding of the others’ textual innovations; but the comparison to them changes our understanding of Beckett also, allowing us to put a writer who often seems utterly unique in a new context and new company.

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There are too many repetitions of too many kinds in the trilogy to hope to account for them all, but this section will attempt to communicate the texture of repetition in the novels by exploring its pervasiveness and variety. Sometimes precisely the same words recur, and this recurrence may be within a unit such as a sentence or a paragraph, or two instances may be separated by hundreds of pages. Sometimes the repetition is inexact or partial, so that some of the same words recur but not all of them. The trilogy also features disguised repetitions; for

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In this way, this chapter stands alongside recent critical studies of Beckett that seek to move beyond the search for either existentialist truths or destructive uncertainty in his work (see the introduction to Caselli for a helpful summary).
example, occasions when plot elements recur without any of the same words being repeated.

One can see many of these elements at work together in a passage from *Molloy*:

> And suddenly I remembered my name, Molloy. My name is Molloy, I cried, all of a sudden, now I remember. Nothing compelled me to give this information, but I gave it, hoping to please I suppose. They let me keep my hat on, I don’t know why. Is it your mother’s name? said the sergeant, it must have been a sergeant. Molloy, I cried, my name is Molloy. Is that your mother’s name, said the sergeant. What? I said. Your name is Molloy, said the sergeant. Yes, I said, now I remember. And your mother? said the sergeant. I didn’t follow. Is your mother’s name Molloy too? said the sergeant. I thought it over. Your mother, said the sergeant, is your mother’s—Let me think! I cried. (22-3)

The name “Molloy” is repeated to comic effect in the confusion, without doing much to anchor the scene. “Suddenly” and “remembered” in the first sentence return as “all of a sudden” and “remember” in the second, so that action and description almost touch. In a move that will become typical in the trilogy, repetition is part of an undermining process: Molloy first says it is a sergeant, and then in amplifying his statement with “it must have been a sergeant” casts doubt on it. Repetition can be realistic: the sergeant keeps asking the same question, in slightly different words, hoping to find a formula that breaks through to Molloy. And yet, repetition does not seem to build into anything: Molloy keeps saying “Molloy,” perhaps delighted, but he does not seem to be able to step beyond the repetition into answering the sergeant’s question about his mother. At the same time, there are links to other parts of the trilogy: when Molloy cries “let me think!” he foreshadows Lemuel, having similar difficulties answering a simple question, crying, “Let me think, you shite!” (266). And confusion about names is a constant in the trilogy. Molloy is uncertain about his own name before this scene, and about other people’s throughout.

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6 The wording, and the paradoxical undermining, is reminiscent of Green’s uncertain narrator’s comment about Edith in *Loving*, when she “must have forgot herself” (137).
(“She went by the peaceful name of Ruth I think, but I can’t say for certain. Perhaps the name was Edith” [56]). Other characters are uncertain about other names (“But it is Moll, can’t you see, her name is Moll?” [256]). Neither Worm nor Mahood has any great confidence in their changing names in *The Unnamable*.

In the phrase that interrupts the scene above—“They let me keep my hat on, I don’t know why”—one finds a tag that is repeated countless times in the text. “I don’t know” may be the narrators’ most common response to self-addressed questions in the three novels, which often start with a “But”: “But you seldom think of them, with what would you think of them? I don’t know” (8); “But what if her purpose, in sorting the lentils, were not to rid them of all that was not lentil, but only of the greater part, what then? I don’t know” (214); “…but what is it that presses against my rump, against the soles of my feet? I don’t know” (304).\(^7\) If the repetition of “I don’t know” suggests the pervasiveness of doubt and ignorance in the trilogy, other kinds of repetition seem to have similar effects. Phrases are repeated exactly so as to undermine, such as, “To tell the truth (to tell the truth!)” (32), or sometimes without apparent purpose: “But I was tired, but I was tired” (71-2). The repetition of single words within a sentence can be equally enigmatic: “The room smelt of ammonia, oh not merely of ammonia, but ammonia, ammonia” (18).

Exact sound repetitions are an integral element in the trilogy, as when at night Moran observes a glow of lights in the distance: “It lay like a faint splash on the sharp dark sweep of the horizon” (159). No particular words are repeated, but repetition is operating in the vowels and consonants, as we go from the *l* of “lay like” and “splash,” the *sh* that moves between “splash” and “sharp,” the *ar* in “sharp” and “dark,” and so forth.

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\(^7\) Beckett’s narrators’ self-questioning, while typical of the trilogy, also connects to the more general late modernist concern with knowledge and language, as seen in Ivy Compton-Burnett’s and Elizabeth Bowen’s examinations of how much people’s spoken words really tell us about them.
Meanwhile, at the other extreme from exact sound repetitions are disguised narrative repetitions. Again, though the same words are not necessarily reused, these disguised examples show us to what extent the trilogy is made up of repetition, from the smallest to the largest elements. Again and again, Beckett’s characters in the trilogy write from a single room, alone. They wear hats, are looked after by women, and tell stories they cannot seem to stay out of, stories which noticeably feature bicycles, dogs, and parrots. The trilogy is full of unsettling, small repetitions, such as the fact that neither Gaber nor Molloy can understand his own handwriting. To give just one example in more detail, one notices a connection between modes of locomotion in Molloy and The Unnamable. Molloy describes his method as follows: “Flat on my belly, using my crutches like grapnels, I plunged them ahead of me into the undergrowth, and when I felt they had a hold, I pulled myself forward” (89-90). In The Unnamable there is a chance that “Perhaps Mahood will emerge from his urn and make his way towards Montmartre, on his belly, singing, I come, I come, my heart’s delight” (371). The exact repetition is minimal (“belly”) but Beckett’s characters are often described moving in this same way.

The trilogy is also repetitive in the ways it uses certain literary modes and techniques again and again. The exactitude of Molloy’s description of his stone sucking is a well-known example, but its fastidious attention to permutation is echoed in Moran’s description of the four ways he has of wearing his disintegrating shirt (171). Repetitive self-correction is another essential mode in the trilogy; what Maximilian de Gaynesford calls a narrative voice which “gives with one hand and then denies that there could be something to give or a hand to give it with” (293). Perhaps this is seen most clearly when, in the last words of Molloy, Moran describes himself writing down the first words of his account, and then negates them. From sentence to sentence, the repetitive “disembowelling of the immediate” (to use Sara Crangle’s description of Compton-Burnett’s method [103]) is the mode by which The Unnamable
continues. It is the style through which Beckett accommodates the mess, so to speak, without the text either becoming a complete mess or pretending that ultimately the mess is ordered:

That’s his strength, his only strength, that he understands nothing, can’t take thought, doesn’t know what they want, doesn’t know they are there, feels nothing, ah but just a moment, he feels, he suffers, the noise makes him suffer, and he knows, he knows it’s a voice, and he understands, a few expressions here and there, a few intonations, ah it looks bad, bad, no, perhaps not, for it’s they describe him thus, without knowing, thus because they need him thus, perhaps he hears nothing, suffers nothing, and this eye, more mere imagination. (363)

Repetition of this kind calls attention to itself, but at times the repetitions in the trilogy seem both essential and harder to characterize. When Macmann, one of Malone’s inventions, looks at the crucifix earrings of his (sort of) beloved Moll, he asks:

Why two Christs?, implying that in his opinion one was more than sufficient. To which she made the absurd reply, Why two ears? But obtained his forgiveness a moment later, saying, with a smile (she smiled at the least thing), Besides, they are the thieves, Christ is in my mouth. (263-4)

The idea of one Christ as “more than sufficient” hides a mordant (so to speak) theological commentary in an everyday phrase. Moll’s absurd reply suggests another cliché: we were given two ears and one mouth to talk half as much as we listen.8 A carved tooth in her mouth is Christ. Echoing the phrase from St. Augustine cited earlier in this chapter, just a few pages before this scene Malone had been considering the two thieves who were crucified with Christ. Two thieves, in a repeated phrase; two Christs, for a moment. “Christ is in my mouth,” Moll says, but is there another one in the name Macmann, taken as “Son of Man”? Macmann here is the one

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8 Elizabeth Barry has written on Beckett’s undermining use of cliché and proverb. One is reminded, of course, of Compton-Burnett’s frequent unpicking of the “common sense” of such tags, and her undermining of religiosity in particular.
who provides forgiveness, after all. In a few pages, the image recurs, but Moll “does not speak or smile anymore” (266). There is repetition, but it is far from easy to say what it contributes. As was seen in Henry Green’s imagery, as discussed in chapter 2, in such instances Beckett uses a standard tool of literary meaning and turns it towards his own, more uncertain ends.

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Critical responses to Beckett’s work often mention repetition and then move away from it, noting that it must be important, but not being able to say much more. Specialized investigations of Beckett’s use of repetition in the trilogy are mostly of two kinds, as was said above. Each of them involves a broader approach to repetition more generally. The first group focuses on emphasis and unity, allied explicitly or implicitly towards what one might call a commonsensical or traditional view of repetition according to which repetition is additive. That is, each time something happens again, there is a strengthening of and greater emphasis on it. Rubin Rabinovitz, for example, argues that the repetitions linking the stories of Molloy and Moran unite them within a Jungian framework as stages within an endless quest. Despite the differences between them, through repetition “Beckett’s heroes can be seen as representing aspects of a single personality” (“Repetition” 40). Thomas J. Cousineau sees such moments in the text as presenting us with the voice of Beckett himself (103-4). Elizabeth Segrè’s study of the ways repetition alters the operations of language in Beckett’s work similarly suggests that repetition moves towards a single point: The Unnamable’s repetitive rhythm is held to express “the narrator’s inextricable confusion” (130). In such studies, repetition creates shape and order, bringing otherwise hidden unity to the surface and revealing the text’s hidden message. As an approach to repetition, the idea of repetition as adding and emphasizing can be traced back to
Plato.⁹ Seen this way, the similarity within repetition is essential to understanding: “meaning itself is grounded in repetition; the never-before-experienced, the wholly other, is meaningless, not available to perception” (Attridge 81). In relation to Beckett, the problem with this approach is what it assumes. Both Rabinovitz and Segrè, for example, try to show the ways that repetition portrays the single narrator of *The Unnamable*; but more recent critics, such as Thomas Tresise in *Into the Breach*, point out the ways that *The Unnamable* resists such simplification. Indeed, one of its essential subjects is the impossibility of its narrating voice settling into any one identity. While Rabinovitz brilliantly reveals the similarities between Beckett’s narrators, he elides the equally important differences between them.

Beckett’s sound repetitions can also be interpreted as emphatic in the way just described. In *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* especially, sounds are often repeated in lyrical passages. In the following example, mentioned briefly above, the reader notices the repetition of two *i* sounds as well as *l, s,* and *t*:

> I distinguished at last, at the limit of the plain, a dim glow, the sum of countless points of light blurred by the distance. I thought of Juno’s milk. It lay like a faint splash on the sharp dark sweep of the horizon. I gave thanks for the evening that brings out the lights, the stars in the sky and on earth the brave little lights of men. (159)

Examining this passage, Romana Huk argues that its sound effects—its “elegiac rhythm” and “lilting repetition”—give it “a prayerful sound as Moran... gains sober, yet bracing insight into the bravery and brevity of the lives of men” (70). The sound is taken as indicating a narrator’s state of mind.¹⁰ Adam Piette takes a similar approach in reading *w* sounds in a section of *The Unnamable* as traces of a verbal narrator “panicked into a fleeting acknowledgment of his

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⁹ J. Hillis Miller, in his introduction to *Fiction and Repetition*, suggests one route.

¹⁰ As with Compton-Burnett’s rare lyrical moments of description, the break from Moran’s initially more highly controlled syntax is sudden, stark, and puzzling.
powerlessness to suppress his own traces” (*Remembering* 220). Ludovic Janvier’s analysis of Moran’s “oral aggression” as opposed to the “stumbling softness” (82) of Molloy’s hesitations similarly places sounds in terms of a speaking personality—although interestingly, both Molloy and Moran’s narratives position themselves as written.

Figures of repetition may also suggest emphasis. Moran, for example, describes giving his son instructions in such a way as to be properly understood: “I let a few minutes go by and then, without being asked, repeated slowly, word for word, this rather long and difficult sentence” (118). In *The Unnamable*, a long-hoped-for day is mentioned when “the little effort of the early stages, infinitely weak, will have become, by dint of repetition, a great effort” (358). These moments suggest the sense that, as the same things happen again and again in the trilogy, repetition accumulates into greater understanding or greater effort. They can be connected to a network of passages about the importance of similarity in the text. Molloy comments that, for all his journeying, things do not change: “however far I went, and in no matter what direction, it was always the same sky, always the same earth, precisely, day after day and night after night” (65). *The Unnamable* says, “I have my faults, but changing my tune is not one of them” (335).

While the emphatic approach to repetition tells us much that is essential about Beckett’s use of repetition in the trilogy, it inevitably leaves out a great deal. For all its echoing of itself, the trilogy is a profoundly self-undermining text, and repetition plays a key part in this. The differences and difference inherent in repetition are the focus of several influential studies of repetition in Beckett’s work. Steven Connor’s *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* and Sarah Gendron’s *Repetition, Difference and Knowledge in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze* apply post-structuralist approaches to repetition in their examinations of Beckett’s work. Building on Derrida’s insights into the paradoxical nature of repetition, Connor argues that the repetitions between the two parts of *Molloy*, for example—
which Rabinovitz sees as gathering the text around a single purpose (in “Repetition”)—prevent
the reader from establishing firm points of reference for either Molloy or Moran (44-63). *The
Unnamable*, Connor argues, follows Derrida’s logic of the supplement in relation to the rest of
the trilogy: it is a third element that adds to what came before it in such a way that what came
before is undermined (72-78).

Gendron’s study, as its title suggests, places Beckett more as a post-structuralist thinker
than a writer of fiction. Gendron is particularly interested in pursuing the epistemological
ramifications of Deleuze’s work on repetition; the ways that repetition—in which change
emerges though no change is visible—undermines the uniqueness and authority of any original.
This can be called the “dispersive” theory of repetition, and though it has been most thoroughly
elaborated with regard to literature in the decades since 1960, it has ancient antecedents just as
the more “emphatic” theory does. Before Plato, Heraclitus wrote that “We step and do not step
into the same rivers, we are and we are not” (J. Barnes 117). This is an expression of a view of
repetition that is also commonplace, although it is the opposite of emphasis: any repetition must
be different from the first occasion, if only because one has changed and the world has changed
since the first occasion. Perhaps the most sensitive exponent of the post-structuralist approach to
repetition as it colours Beckett’s writing is Leslie Hill:

In Beckett’s work, virtually without exception, repetition dissociates or separates more
insistently than it assembles or unifies. Its usual function is to split units of meaning,
whether narrative structures or objects, or language, into two asymmetrical parts... which
ghost each other like reflections in a mirror but with the result that the asymmetry ruins
the appearance of identity. (67)

According to post-structuralist readings, sound repetitions in the trilogy exert a similar
dispersive force. Rather than shepherding the trilogy towards spoken unity, sound repetitions are
seen as contributing to a kind of static, a buzzing roar or whisper within the text that could never be spoken by a person. The focus is on *The Unnamable*, where the effort to “speak and yet say nothing, really nothing” (303) is taken not as an individual’s utterance but as emanating from what Maurice Blanchot calls “that neutral region where the self surrenders in order to speak” (116). Simon Critchley elaborates as follows:

There is no name for the voice that speaks in *The Unnamable*. Whoever speaks in Beckett’s work, it is not “I,” it is rather “he” (although this is still a pronoun, and that’s the trouble), the third person or impersonal neutrality of language... The narrative voice approaches a void that speaks as one vast, continuous buzzing, a dull roar in the skull like falls, an unqualifiable murmur, an impersonal whining, the vibration of the tympanum. (174-5)

The sense that repetition is aligned with difference and uncertainty, and that repetitions do not build into anything, but rather dismantle, is also figured in the text. In one often-noted moment early on in the trilogy, Molloy describes trying to communicate with his deaf mother by knocking on her head. One knock means yes, two knocks mean no, and so on. But: “By the time she came to the fourth knock she imagined she was only at the second, the first two having been erased from her memory as completely as if they had never been felt” (18). Doing the same thing again has no agglomerative value. Moran, meanwhile, presents a classical analogy for repeating the same action without it catching or growing:

But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places. And it may even be they are not too particular about the route he takes provided it gets him to his destination safely and on time. And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive,
would it not, hellish hope. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction. (133)

The figure of dispersive repetition here is in the idea that Sisyphus, usually a mythical embodiment of emphatic repetition, might think each journey is the first. This seems counter-intuitive: one would expect that part of the punishment would consist in knowing that one has already tried to push the boulder up the mountain many times and that it has never stayed there. Each failure would make the punishment worse. (Moran, identifying the mythological character with his own situation, calls Sisyphus’ punishment “a journey.”) Moran delicately reverses the conventional logic. If each time he does it, Sisyphus thinks he is pushing the boulder up the mountain for the first time, that keeps the hope of success alive. One might think that such hope is a form of release, but to Moran it is a more refined kind of torment. To have hope in what is in fact a hopeless situation, to not know what one’s true situation is, is what is really “hellish.” By contrast, emphatic repetition—to do the same thing again and again, and know it—“fills you with satisfaction,” even if what happens over and over again is failure. Repetition often takes this form in the trilogy. Repetition that does not grow and does not build is in some ways the condition of *The Unnamable*, where a “they” (recalling Sisyphus’ tormentors as seen by Moran) condemn the voice to repeat itself with neither awareness nor satisfaction: “If I could remember what I have said I could repeat it, if I could learn something by heart I’d be saved, I have to keep on saying the same thing and each time it’s an effort” (399).

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The dispersive approach to repetition is of immense use in understanding Beckett’s writing, especially the intense, perpetually self-undermining contradictions and negations of *The
*Unnamable.* But, like the emphatic approach, it also leaves out a great deal. It is not much help in assessing the variety of repetition in the trilogy, such as those disguised narrative repetitions in which something similar is enclosed in something different. When Tresize comments that in Beckett’s work “the only sameness is the repetition of difference” (57) he goes too far, neglecting whole swathes of simple similarity in the trilogy that are, of course, the basis of any repetition, even if their ultimate results are taken as dispersive. For Rabinovitz (“Repetition”), the repetitions between Molloy and Moran build into unity; for Connor, the same repetitions suggest incompleteness. But emphasis needs difference if there is to be addition and not just identity, and difference needs similarity if there is to be paradox and not just simple estrangement. Something essential to the text is lost if it is seen as “only” making or unmaking, meaningful or meaningless.

What might be lost has been suggested by many contemporary readers of Beckett’s work, such as Alain Badiou, Andrew Gibson, Russell Smith, and, perhaps most interestingly, Steven Connor—some twenty-five years after his deeply influential, post-structuralist account of Beckett’s use of repetition. These recent critical interventions, though not specifically focused on repetition, suggest another way to approach repetition in Beckett’s work and align it with the late modernist styles discussed in this study. Connor tries to see something different from difference (or différance) in a paper on “Beckett’s Radical Finitude”:

I spent the first half of my sentient life pointing to everything in Beckett that seemed to qualify, complicate, defer or infinitise—all the near-misses, failures of correspondence, “vaguenings,” temporisings, that seem to tend towards infinity—and trying to loosen the adherence to finitude that haunts that work everywhere. My first book on Beckett attempted to negate the closure of repetition, prising open its fist to show the various forms of inexhaustibility that characterise his work. That work, though
necessary, at one time, if only for me, now seems to me in the light of an evasion, an attempt to turn unwisely tail from the exacting penury of the finite in Beckett’s work.

(47)

In looking for a way to describe something more affirmatory in Beckett’s writing, Connor touches on the work of Alain Badiou. Badiou’s approach to Beckett suggests a way to speak about “the exacting penury of the finite” (47) without abandoning the advances of post-structuralist theory in a return to a naive aesthetics of emphasis and unity. Badiou argues that Beckett’s reductive, unmaking mode of writing is a way of picking at the surface of contemporary knowledge to reveal what is underneath. Beckett’s minimalism is his way of reducing the human to its fundamental determinants, Badiou argues. In its persistence and exactitude, he goes on, Beckett’s writing attempts to subtract itself from the spirit of the world. This is not Deleuzian exhaustion of the kind explored by Gendron, one might note. Rather it is what Badiou sees as the limit of persistence: through its patience, measure, and courage, Beckett’s writing suggests a resource: a human resource based on nothing more than humanity itself.11 Like Gendron’s, Badiou’s Beckett is more of a thinker than a writer; Badiou is not terribly concerned with the mechanics of Beckett’s writing, and Andrew Gibson sets out the ways that, for all its suggestive power, Badiou’s world differs from Beckett’s at several key points.12

In spite of this, Badiou’s work does suggest ways to approach repetition without making the error of either taxonomizing or overshooting, and without looking only for unity in Beckett’s work, or only for difference. It is repetition, this chapter argues, that gives Beckett’s writing the unique quality that Badiou finds in it. Repetition is persistence, and burrowing, and measure,

11 This summary is based on the editors’ introduction and Andrew Gibson’s “Postface” to Badiou’s collection On Beckett.
12 Particularly in Badiou’s sense of the trilogy as an impasse in Beckett’s trajectory; his failure to avoid the teleological traps that Beckett’s work presents to the reader; and his outdated understanding of current issues in Beckett scholarship.
and courage as they exist in the text. But it is also paralysis, boredom, and relentless self-undermining. Through a determined and determinate use of repetition, by basing itself in repetition and staying with it, Beckett’s work unmakes itself as it makes itself, so that in the end (or rather, precisely not “in the end”) it can be seen as a text that is always on the move, somewhere between doubt and wholeness, moving back and forth between them and never quite fully either one. In attending to the particulars of repetition, one sees the ways that through a stylistic choice Beckett’s work achieves its shadowy status (although, again, “achieves” is the wrong word). In the broader, late modernist terms of this study, repetition is the way that Beckett makes his prose innovative and strange, but his microscopic innovations do not coalesce towards any grand pattern, transcendent whole, or ultimate consolation. Rather the opposite happens, as some hitherto-overlooked aspects of repetition suggest. By listening closely to the text’s sound repetitions and looking closely at figures of repetition where the text seems to offer the most clues to the meaning of its own repetitive practices, one sees more evidence coming to suggest that what Beckett is doing in the trilogy is making and unmaking at once.

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As was explored above, sound repetitions can be interpreted as moving the text towards lyrical unity or dispersive static. And yet, certain chaotic passages in *The Unnamable* seem to build something even as they collapse:

Let others hope for him, outside, in the cool, in the light, if they have a wish to, or if they are obliged to, or if they are paid to, yes, they must be paid to hope, they hope nothing, they hope things will continue as they are, it’s a soft job, their thoughts wander as they call on Jude, it’s praying they are, praying for Worm, praying to Worm, to have pity,
pity on them, pity on Worm, they call that pity, merciful God, the things one has to put up with, fortunately it all means nothing to him. (362)

There are strings of $p$ as well as repeated $h$ and $w$ sounds that seem to provide small sonic footholds for the reader, even as the overall sound of the passage could be characterized as that of a vacuum cleaner or a radio in between stations. One does not have to interpret such repetitions as a narrator’s verbal cues, the way Janvier and Piette and other scholars do; they perform a double function. Even as one is bewildered by the rush of words in the paragraph just quoted, one’s ear catches on certain key words and key sounds, and they help provide a way to go on through the text. As well as leading the text towards Blanchot’s undifferentiated roar, then, sound repetitions seem to be a sonic version of Badiou’s persistence.

This point is supported by the fact that, while post-structuralist critics focus on the sound of *The Unnamable*, one finds a persistent, self-defeating, and yet somehow indestructible phrasing at other points in the trilogy, a more acoustic version of what Christopher Ricks, quoting Beckett, calls a “syntax of weakness” (82). For Ricks, this is a mode of phrasing that is always “pressing on, unable to relinquish its perseverance and arrive at severance” (83). One can hear it, or something like it, in moments that are neither blatantly paradoxical nor full of the greatest significance, first in *Malone Dies*, then in *Molloy*:

All is pretext, Sapo and the birds, Moll, the peasants, those who in the towns seek one another out and fly from one another, my doubts which do not interest me, my situation, my possessions, pretext for not coming to the point, the abandoning, the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash, even though it may annoy the bathers.

(276)

And if I do not go there gladly, I go perhaps more gladly than anywhere else, astonished and at peace, I nearly said as in a dream, but no, no. But it is not the kind of place where
you go, but where you find yourself, sometimes, not knowing how, and which you cannot leave at will, and where you find yourself without any pleasure, but with more perhaps than in those places you can escape from, by making an effort, places full of mystery, full of the familiar mysteries. (40)

Certain sounds are focused on for a few lines, and then abandoned. In the first passage, for instance, the attention to p, s, and t (pretext, Sapo, peasants, possessions, pretext, point, splash) is soon interwoven with m through “my” (“my situation, my possessions”) and develops into the combination of a and m (escape, from, making, places). In the second quotation, the initial repetition of g and o (go, gladly, go, gladly, no, no go) is taken over by w (knowing, will, where, will, where) and then p and f (pleasure, perhaps, places, from effort, places, full, full, familiar).

These passages sound similar, in a way, to those identified in *The Unnamable* as a roar or static, as insistently repetitive, focusing on chains of sounds and then dropping them in favour of other chains, refusing to come to a full stop.

But paradoxically, the fact that one can recognize an unmaking, acoustic quality in earlier parts of the trilogy adds to the sense that sound repetitions in *The Unnamable* do not only move the text towards static and nothingness. They do so, but at the same time they echo something we are already familiar with. By continually repeating different sounds within the paragraph, by repeating an earlier sound from within the trilogy, they emphasize and disperse at once, moving neither only towards a simple, lyrical voice nor towards a simple, voiceless buzzing.

Certain self-reflexive moments in the trilogy work similarly, presenting the ways that the text approaches but never quite reaches the conditions it describes. They also show that the idea that repetitions may move the trilogy towards both voice and static is something contained within the text itself:
...and this voice the voice of those who mourn them, envy them, call on them and forget them, that would account for its incoherence, all is possible. Yes, so much the worse, he knows it is a voice, how is not known, nothing is known, he understands nothing it says, just a little, almost nothing, it’s inexplicable, but it’s necessary, it’s preferable, that he should understand just a little, almost nothing, like a dog that always gets the same filth flung to it, the same orders, the same threats, the same cajoleries. (359)

Through repetition the text approaches a dispersive buzzing it can never quite reach, but repetitions also prevent it from being utter chaos, allowing us to follow “just a little.” As The Unnamable regurgitates sounds from sentence to sentence, one comes to know it, without being able to say quite what it is that one knows.

Such self-reflexive moments remind us again that both voice and buzzing have been at issue throughout the text. Molloy hears “a sound which begins to rustle in your head, without your knowing how, or why. It’s with your head you hear it, not with your ears” (40); Moran says, “I have spoken of a voice telling me things” (175-6); Malone describes Macmann hearing “the kind of distant roar of the earth” (239). One could list more instances, such as Moran’s bees, whose buzzing he does not understand, or Malone’s inability to tell apart the noises of the world. The Unnamable, in particular, is mostly about the problems of voice and voicelessness that critics find operating in the text. To give one instance:

Hearing this voice no more, that’s what I call going silent. That is to say I’ll hear it still, if I listen hard. I’ll listen hard. Listening hard, that’s what I call going silent. I’ll hear it still, broken, faint, unintelligible, if I listen hard. Hearing it still, without hearing what it says, that’s what I call going silent. (393)

Repeated words mean repeated sounds. In six sentences both “hearing” and “that’s what I call going silent” are repeated three times. “Hear it still” and “listen hard” develop into “hearing it
still” and “listening hard.” More subtle sound repetitions are also present: a thread of soft and hard i sounds, for example, in “I’ll hear it still, if I listen hard,” with the stress on l carried over into “I’ll listen hard. Listening hard...” Important words from the beginning of The Unnamable are recalled in “that’s what I call,” and once again the notion of wanting a repetitive voice to cease is often a concern in the text. The ambiguity of the phrase “hearing it still” is underlined by its recurrence: continuing to hear the voice (I still hear it), or hearing that it ceases (I hear it still), or hearing that it is somehow figuratively motionless (I hear that it is still).

Here, the repetition of certain phrases undermines how well one can connect them to ideas. As the sounds circulate and recirculate between words, sense seems to drop away into the gaps, even as one is led along by sound. Which is, paradoxically, what the passage is about: listening, silence, and the possibility marked out by the repeated phrase of “hearing it still, without hearing what it says.” The wish to listen without hearing suggests the repeated desire in The Unnamable to speak and yet say nothing. Sound repetitions let the passage approach this state, but they also keep it from this state. As they anaesthetize sense, they also suggest through the differing amount of repetition that “hearing it no more” is less important than “hearing it still.”

Figures of repetition in the trilogy similarly suggest that repetition is neither simply emphatic nor dispersive, but both—and hence something else entirely. Emphasis focuses on the similarity within repetition, dispersion concentrates on the difference within repetition, and certain figures within the text support each approach, as has been indicated. But at times the trilogy seems to introduce something different that is, at the same time, similar. Molloy, for example, imagines himself repeating:

No doubt I’ll come back some day, here or to a similar slough, I can trust my feet for that, as no doubt some day I’ll meet again the sergeant and his merry men. And if, too
changed to know it is they, I do not say it is they, make no mistake, it will be they, though changed. (27-8)

The repetition is not exact. Molloy imagines himself returning to his ditch, “or to a similar slough.” The references slip and are ambiguous: when Molloy imagines himself returning, “too changed to know it is they,” it seems that “too changed” may refer to the policemen as well as to him (given that they are changed at the end of the next sentence). Whether he has changed or they have changed, it will still be “they.” In spite of the difference, there will be a repetition: “It will be they, though changed.” Something is being suggested in Molloy’s imagination that is not quite emphatic repetition, because of all the change and inexactitude, but it is not quite dispersive either, because of the continuing insistence on similarity.

Other passages point towards the sense that either the emphatic or dispersive approach to repetition, by itself, is insufficient for dealing with the enigmas of Beckett’s use of repetition in the trilogy. The vague usage “some day” returns when Molloy remembers being lost in the forest: “And I was all the more convinced that I would get out of the forest some day as I had already got out of it, more than once, and I knew how difficult it was not to do again what you have done before. But things had been rather different then” (85). Repetition is figured here as extremely difficult to avoid, but in the next sentence a line is drawn: “things had been rather different then.” Repetition has an emphatic hold, and so Molloy knows (or knew) that he will get out of the forest, but that hold can be broken and locked in the past. First, repetition is emphatic, then dispersive, with (in this example) the moment of telling in between.

In *The Unnamable*, figures of repetition come together with the greatest profusion; repetition is most explicitly a theme, and comes close to explaining what is happening in the text. The voice (if one can call it that) in the novel speaks repeatedly of having to repeat what it

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13 Molloy’s use of “they” rather than “them” adds to the confusion about the reference, and is reminiscent of the unexpected use of pronouns at the start of this novel (see the introduction) as well as in Henry Green’s writing.
hears, and says that what it hears is at once “monotonous beyond words and yet not altogether devoid of a certain variety” (352). Sometimes the repetition is exact:

It is they who dictate this torrent of balls, they who stuffed me full of these groans that choke me. And out it all pours unchanged, I have only to belch to be sure of hearing them, the same old sour teachings I can’t change a tittle of. A parrot, that’s what they’re up against, a parrot. (338)

One thinks of Lousse’s foul-mouthed parrot in Molloy, or the parrot that Jackson tried to teach in Malone Dies. But if at times the voice in The Unnamable claims to be repeating what it hears exactly, at other times it admits to trying to repeat and falling short, which introduces a dispersive note: “I shall transmit the words as received, by the ear, or roared through a trumpet into the arsehole, in all their purity, and in the same order, as far as possible” (349). The last four words of the quotation suggest that all the voice can provide is an attempt at exact repetition, and any idea of precision and purity is undermined by the information that what he is hearing might be coming to him “roared through a trumpet into the arsehole,” not the best guarantee of exact repetition.14

There is a sense in The Unnamable, then, that repetition is essential to understanding what is happening in the text, or at least to understanding why one cannot understand it. Repetition is both devoutly to be wished for, because a perfect repetition would be an end to speech, and that which gets in the way of achieving the longed-for silence. Everything the voice says in The Unnamable is figured as a repetition of a highly repetitive dictation, but since it is so often self-reflexive, this dictation is at once about itself and simultaneously prevented from being itself perfectly. This is experienced in one sentence in The Unnamable as follows:

14 The image may also be an odd reversal of a moment in Dante (an important source and influence for Beckett), one of whose demons “makes a trumpet of his ass” at Inferno XXI.139.
But how can you think and speak at the same time, how can you think about what you have said, may say, are saying, and at the same time go on with the last-mentioned, you think about any old thing, you say any old thing, more or less, more or less, in a daze of baseless unanswerable self-reproach, that’s why they always repeat the same thing, the same old litany, the one they know by heart, to try and think of something different, of how to say something different from the same old thing, always the same wrong thing said always wrong, they can find nothing, nothing else to say but the thing that prevents them from finding, they’d do better to think of what they’re saying, in order at least to vary its presentation, that’s what matters, but how can you think and speak at the same time, without a special gift, your thought’s [sic] wander, your words too, far apart, no, that’s an exaggeration, apart, between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought, and feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing, that would be a blessed place to be, where you are.

(374)

To think and speak at the same time is another version of the longed-for words, which allow silence because they say everything. Repeating what it hears exactly would be a way for the voice in *The Unnamable* to finish speaking, at last, by reaching a kind of zero point of thought and language in which the word expresses the thought perfectly. But at the same time every effort to speak and say the last words gets in the way of the effort to stop speaking, and takes the voice farther away from silence. And yet, repetition is also connected to saying something different, which might also be the solution: the voices repeat endlessly in the search for something new to say. The goal, whether repetition or difference, is to be reached by repeating. “That’s why they say the same thing and again and again.” But repetition is also what gets in the
way of success: “they can find nothing, nothing else to say, but the thing that prevents them from finding.”

Pointing to the self-reflexive difficulty, Gendron notes that what The Unnamable does is stage the undecidability at the heart of language and identity: any effort to say “I” is false from the start because “I” is both one’s own word and somebody else’s (Repetition 67). Tresize emphasizes the paradox, noting that “repetition is both compulsion and impossibility” (54). The notion is echoed in Lawrence Miller’s comment about Molloy: “The terms of the desired relation are threatened by any effort to bring it about” (69). Focusing in more detail on the self-reflexive, self-undermining aspects of the project of The Unnamable, Eric Migernier builds on Deleuze to note that Beckett’s writing repeats the collapse of representation in language. As language tries to grasp the ungraspability of the moment of its own destabilization, it finds an ungraspable otherness lodged in the heart of its own proliferation (18). And yet, of course, The Unnamable cannot stop trying, is obliged to go on, in the knowledge that it can never arrive or be stilled.

But interestingly, the text itself discusses its own operation in figures of repetition. These give us another set of terms for speaking about the ways it is beyond either emphatic or dispersive models of repetition. Perhaps the most useful of these is the notion of the pensum, through which the text discusses its own repetitive work even as it performs it. “Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I’ve forgotten what it is” (312). It is “the keyword to the whole business” (368), which, if it were said, would allow the voice to finally fall silent and end the torment that is speech and thought. As well as the goal, the pensum is the whole task of speaking, the whole of the repetitive mantra the voice must utter, with the suggestion that it can finally be exhausted: “My

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15 Greig Henderson, in personal communication, notes the similarities between Gendron’s point and those made by Emile Benveniste and Roland Barthes in their own discussions of subjectivity, deixis, and “shifters.”
speech-parched voice at rest would fill with spittle, I’d let it flow over and over, happy at last, dribbling with life, my pensum ended, in the silence” (310).

The word “pensum” itself suggests these meanings. The *OED* defines the word as “A piece of work; a duty or allotted task; a school task or lesson to be prepared; (U.S.) a piece of schoolwork imposed as a punishment.” The pensum is both “a punishment for having been born” (312) and a task to be performed before one can rest. At times the pensum is distinguished from a lesson: “if I have a pensum to perform it is because I could not say my lesson, and that when I have finished my pensum I shall still have my lesson to say” (310-11). The novelty seems to be the pensum as password, “the right pensum” (311). One can only imagine the pensum as repetitive, like a pupil copying out lines, which in turn suggests another aspect of repetition. Though the word “pensum” may aurally suggest thought (through “pensive”), the *OED* sets out its derivation as ultimately from the Latin *pendere*, to weigh out (typically used of a quantity of wool to be spun). This suggests emphasis, again, and perhaps also the materiality of words when they are repeated, the sonic quality examined earlier that repetition carries with it. And yet the pensum is also wrapped up with dispersion. At one point, *The Unnamable* wonders whether it has already said its saving words, but without effect: “it’s all been done already, said and said again” (412).

We have seen the pensum already in the trilogy, in *Molloy*: “You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept” (32).16 That Molloy describes himself “stammering out remnants” suggests the way that *The Unnamable* tries to repeat what it hears, as best it can, but the phrasing in *Molloy* is

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16 Here, lesson and pensum are differently distinguished: the lesson is the remnant of the pensum, whereas for *The Unnamable*, when the pensum is said, the lesson will remain. But in a similar way to the effect of Henry Green’s bamboo imagery, the attempts to distinguish pensum and lesson in the repeated mentions of them lead to inextricable confusion.
interesting. Any effort to imagine, to escape, to speak, is a repetition—but a repetition of a special kind, a repetition of something forgotten. Again, this seems to encompass both similarity and difference at once, and seems both to build and to take apart. For Molloy, one repeats even when one does not know one is repeating. Rather than repeating what one knows in order to build on it, or repeating in order to undermine the first occasion with a slight difference, Molloy seems to describe something even more paradoxical. One does not know one repeats but one still does it, because it is all one can do. The first instance is neither built upon nor displaced. In a way, this seems not to be repetition at all—and yet it is.

The pensum brings up many contradictory senses of repetition, but its very ambiguity makes it an excellent figure for speaking about repetition in the trilogy. Repetition is everywhere in the novels and acts in many different ways. It is also “between words,” happening within them and to them. The pensum comes close to giving us a way to speak about how repetition works in the text, in its “in-between” way: as pensum, repetition is at once the goal, the task, and what prevents the goal from being reached and the task from being completed. Figures of repetition like this give us a way to discuss repetition’s functioning in the text without simply gesturing at it, but also without assimilating it too early to an overarching, external theory. Sound repetitions have similar uses. In their complexity they also remind us that it is impossible to reach any simple conclusion:

I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else... (390)

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Repetition is present on every page of the trilogy and on every page it presents a challenge. Its ubiquity, set out early in this chapter, makes it necessary to interpret; its paradoxical nature makes both it and the trilogy hard to interpret. The approach thus far has been to examine the particularities of repetition’s functioning in the trilogy without absorbing it too quickly into a larger theory, or merely listing off instances of it. By examining the ways the text itself suggests interpretations of repetition, I have tried to show the movement and ambiguity of the trilogy. Its texture is repetition, from phrases and sentences to characters and actions; sound repetitions at once suggest a droning non-voice and lyrical, personal meanings. Figures of repetition suggest ways that it is both a building and a dismantling tool in the trilogy, rather than one thing or the other.

All this places Beckett’s work in new company. Though critics often gesture at connections and resemblances, Beckett’s works have been compared with those of the other late modernist writers examined in this study only in passing. He is more often considered *sui generis*, the profound ramifications of his work explored in isolation from other writers, or else he is examined in response to his high modernist predecessors, particularly Joyce. This study aims to show the ways that his uniqueness and his relationship to his predecessors are not themselves unique.

Any given page of Beckett’s work is unmistakeable, but the other late modernist authors examined here are also unique. Certainty is done away with in the unravelling of Beckett’s narrators, with parallel effects to Green’s “speculative” narrators. Beckett’s repetitions destabilize the surface of the text and render it unfamiliar, as do Green’s omissions, not to mention Compton-Burnett’s and Bowen’s own stylistic innovations. Over the course of the trilogy, Beckett gradually pares down the familiar realistic apparatus of the novel in ways that
are reminiscent of Compton-Burnett’s minimalism, or the later work of Green. In all these
works, fewer and fewer technical tools are used, with greater and greater effect. Beckett’s
wandering plots suggest the endings of Bowen’s novels, where the action is conspicuously not
wrapped up for the reader; similarly, the endings of Compton-Burnett’s novels take us back to
their beginnings. Neither Beckett nor Compton-Burnett offer the reader any of the moral
consolations familiar to the novel; in a way that resembles Green’s doubling or uncertain
endings, as well as Bowen’s, *The Unnamable* closes with the promise to go on.

There are differences, of course: the reduced settings of Beckett’s novels are much less
recognizable than Bowen or Green’s; Beckett’s besieged rooms go beyond even the hermetic
isolation of Compton-Burnett’s houses, or Green’s castles, factories, or train stations, all places
where human motivations are more recognizably aimed at money, love, and other worldly
concerns. Both Beckett and Compton-Burnett are ceaselessly aware of the passing moment, but
where in Compton-Burnett social dialogue is used to relentlessly unpick the present, in Beckett
the torment is more psychological or even ontological. A key difference seems to be the
importance of a metafictional level in the trilogy that is absent for other late modernist writers:
Molloy writes for a man who “takes away the pages” (7); what we read in *Malone Dies* is
Malone’s notebook, written about its own production. And yet, though they do not stage the
moment of writing as he does, other late modernist works similarly offer valuable, self-
referential clues to their functioning, from Green’s imagery to Compton-Burnett’s discussion of
language and meaning, to Bowen’s comparisons between the broken texts available to her
characters and those from a classical, fuller past.

These are the reasons why the works examined here are described as a continuum.
Beckett’s works exhibit the attention to stylistic detail already discussed in Green and Compton-
Burnett, and which will be seen in Bowen. Like them, he produces large effects by manipulating
the smallest elements of the text. The technique focused on is not identical, but the effect is. Beckett’s repetitions have the same effect as Green’s omissions, Compton-Burnett’s dialogue, and Bowen’s “unwords.” They make the text something new, but it is something that makes and unmakes itself at once. The effect of the stylistic innovations tends more towards doubt than consolation, towards something in between presence and absence, towards a work of art that neither collapses in fragmentation nor offers a spurious wholeness. Beckett is not unique, then, but he goes farther than the other writers examined here, and trying to explain his achievement gives us new tools for speaking about theirs.

But in concluding, having specified and contextualized, one also must try to explain, even if what one is trying to explain seems importantly evasive. Repetition as a gesture is used precisely because it resists final answers. But Andrew Gibson, in a comment within his study of Beckett and Badiou, suggests a productive way to put a name to what has been related here—which also pertains to the third element, neither emphatic nor dispersive, sought by Steven Connor in his reframing of his own post-structural explanations of repetition. It applies both to Beckett’s repetitions and his place as the most advanced point of a late modernist continuum of doubting, innovating writers. In describing the critical fascination with Beckett’s writing, the unending profusion of responses to his work, Gibson says: “One explanation, I think, as to why there is such continuing interest in Beckett and his work today is not that he is exactly paradigmatic of anything in our world but rather the obverse” (Beckett and Badiou 256).

The sentence is a little difficult to parse: is Beckett’s work exactly paradigmatic of “the obverse” of our world, or is he the obverse of “exactly paradigmatic of anything in our world”? (Inexactly paradigmatic of something in our world? Exactly paradigmatic of nothing in our world?) Obverse is an interesting word, also. The OED’s principal definition is “Turned towards or against; located on the other or further side, opposite; contrary.” In numismatics, however,
the obverse is the front of a coin bearing the main design, as opposed to the reverse. The context of Gibson’s discussion postulates Beckett as a spectre, a presence haunting what he calls our contemporary culture of *jouissance*—that is, obsessed with satisfaction, gratification, and presence. We live, Gibson writes, “obsessed (but also obscurely tormented) by a dream of plenitude, the illusion of being able to square the circle and have it all” (*Beckett and Badiou* 255-6). Beckett’s writing offers the greatest possible intransigent resistance to *jouissance*, Gibson claims, and offers us instead what might be called “intermittency.” Drawing on Badiou, Gibson argues that what Beckett’s work reveals is a world not of completion but of a permanent wait for what in Badiou is called the event—an unforeseen, intervening, transformative moment.

Russell Smith makes a similar point in a recent article on time in Beckett’s writing. Rather than a salvific moment, Smith argues, what Beckett’s work unveils is a relentless sequence in which each moment exists equally, one untransformed second after the next (418). In Beckett, in a way that is unfamiliar in the novel, real time is not obliterated but revealed. But when the text is never quite finished, and never quite lets go, it becomes extremely difficult for the critic, with only a teleological language of endings, to point to anything final within it (405).

That is to say, the critic’s task is to say yes or no and why, but the obverse suggests that the best response to Beckett’s work is something else. Applied to repetition, Gibson’s sense of the obverse is a long way from the humanist or aesthetic claim that repetition builds into unity or wholeness; but it is also distinct from the more stringent claims of post-structuralist theory as applied to Beckett’s work. It insists on Beckett as haunting fullness rather than claiming that Beckett leaves no fullness standing. To claim that Beckett breaks apart all meanings is to pursue a “negative *jouissance,*” to capitalize “Uncertainty,” whereas calling repetition the obverse carries with it an etymological suggestion that, in Beckett’s work, repetition may be both the front of the coin and the back. This is more a name than an explanation, perhaps, but it suggests
the need for a new kind of thinking in response to the challenges of Beckett’s writing, one that respects its stylistic strangeness. This is because the effects described here come about through Beckett’s insistent use of repetition. It is a stylistic choice, the decision to base the text in an element that both builds and dismantles, and to pursue all its ramifications. Repetition is the obverse because in many ways it comes about for no identifiable, stable reason; but this is not to say it is meaningless. Rather it occurs, invites us to explain it, and stops us from interpreting quite why it has occurred. It expands this effect to the trilogy as a whole.

To say the “obverse” is to take up a suggestion made in one of Beckett’s critical works, although he does it in different terms. In *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, Beckett discusses art and expression and the relationships between the artist, the work, and the world. The character named Beckett in this shaped and staged conversation admires an art which makes painting “independent of its occasion”—that is, which does not try to express anything by means of paint (121). The first artist to have accomplished this, Beckett claims, is the Dutch painter van Velde. He is “the first whose painting is bereft, rid if you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form” (121). Many have felt that painting is impossible; van Velde is “the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act” (121). He continues to paint, that is, even when it seems impossible to paint. This chapter argues something similar about Beckett’s writing. Repetition is the means, the key stylistic decision, that allows the trilogy to go on without becoming “an occasion.” Through repetition, the trilogy moves backwards every time it moves forwards, makes and dismantles itself with each step, without either the making or the dismantling being able to reign.

But what is essential is that this not be the last point. In necessarily ironic tones, perhaps because he is saying something that was called absurd earlier in the dialogue, Beckett continues:
No, no, allow me to expire. I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists. (125-6)

The speech ends with the stage direction, “Prepares to go.”

The trilogy provides the obverse—and does not, of course, because saying the “obverse” too easily is to make a new “occasion.” This is the logic that the trilogy inhabits. “A voice like this, who can check it,” The Unnamable asks (410), suggesting that to either stop or assess the voice is equally impossible. One wants to describe and conclude, but repetition prevents one from doing so, leaving us in “an unenviable situation.” The text that repeats and never sits still is Beckett’s paradoxical accomplishment, what Hugh Kenner calls a magnificent achievement of failure, as “more and more deeply he penetrates the heart of utter incompetence” (Flaubert 77), even as it is also exemplary of Badiou’s human persistence. It is what Beckett himself calls working with impotence and ignorance (Shenker 148), and elsewhere describes as trying to find a new form that “accommodates the mess” and “admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is something else” (Driver 219). None of this is easy. Lawrence Miller notes that, for Moran, “Paradoxically, it takes more strength, more will, to refuse to act than it does to lead a life of goals and achievements” (90). Life rushes in, urging the text to mean something: “Unable, unable,” says Moran. “It’s easy to talk about being unable, whereas in reality nothing is more difficult” (139).
Beckett’s achievement is to save us from being redeemed again, Critchley argues along these lines:

The world is overfull with meaning and we suffocate under the combined weight of the various narratives of redemption – whether they are religious, socio-economic, political, aesthetic, or philosophical. ... What Beckett’s work offers us, then, is a radical de-creation of these salvific narratives, a paring down or stripping away of the resorts of fable, the determinate negation of social meaning through the elevation of form, a syntax of weakness, an approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption, an acknowledgement of the finiteness of the finite and the limitedness of the human condition. (179)

The de-creation via the work of art is accomplished, this chapter argues, through attention to writing, through the innovative use of a stylistic element that affects the shape of almost every sentence in the trilogy. Like the other late modernist writers examined here, Beckett makes his sentences new in such a way as to achieve the right kind of failure. What Beckett does through repetition, the other writers do through their own methods, each in a singular way. By failing to be good modernists, or good realists, late modernist writers manage to be something else altogether.
Unmeaning:

Something and Nothing in the Novels of Elizabeth Bowen

This chapter argues that Elizabeth Bowen’s novels of the late 1930s and 1940s, like the work of her contemporaries analyzed in this study, are an effort to extend the stylistic innovations of modernism in a new direction. Analyzed in detail, Bowen’s style is revealed to dispense with the redemptive, “presencing” ethos that high modernist novels may carry with them, in the effort to write something and nothing at once. Her work circles repeatedly around the word “nothing,” around negatives, cancellations, and doubts. At the same time, she is the most realistic and narratively generous (in every sense) novelist in this study; to say she writes something and nothing at once is not to claim that her work is meaningless. Rather, I argue that Bowen’s style expresses and explores a devastating sense of emptiness that may be as much personal, aesthetic, or historical, while at the same time putting the possibility of any full or satisfactory expression or exploration into parentheses. Like the other late modernist writers studied here, the purpose of Bowen’s negative style seems to be to short circuit any simple explanation of it—one that would claim it is directly symptomatic of the Second World War, say, or her childhood experiences. Indeed, precisely what it is meant to explore is of less weight than the fact that something is missing, and that the work has to be built around this absence rather than ignoring it or pretending it is meaningful. Bowen’s achievement is to create a style that revolves around absence and emptiness, that is complicit with nothingness, but is at the
same time fully engaged with real human, social, and psychological problems. Her importance is that she finds a way to say something and nothing at once.

Though she seems in some ways a more conventional novelist than the other writers examined in this study, Bowen fits well alongside them. She wrote admiringly about Ivy Compton-Burnett in a review of *Parents and Children* (“This is a time for hard writers—and here is one” [163]);¹ V.S. Pritchett allied her with Green as an oblique writer, a “dispossessed poet” trying to write the history of a civilization in crisis (77).² Sinéad Mooney, like many other critics, compares her work to Beckett’s, noting in particular the comparable treatment of zero and nothingness in Beckett’s early novels, *Watt* and *Murphy*, and Bowen’s late one, *Eva Trout*. Bowen came from the world of the Anglo-Irish “Big House” that is the setting of Green’s novel *Loving* (and her early novel *The Last September* is set in one). Like Compton-Burnett, her work relies extensively on dialogue to reveal facts and character, though with a much more present narrating voice. Bowen’s oddity is that she is in some ways highly conventional and in some ways utterly revolutionary, and this makes her hard to place: “Too conservative for modernism, too idiosyncratic for traditionalism,” Maud Ellmann claims (16).³ Her settings and plots seem on the surface to be infinitely more recognizably grounded than Beckett’s situations, for example, but her syntax and style are highly mannered, growing more so as her work develops over her career. The closer one looks at her plots, the less they seem to grow towards satisfying conclusions. *The Heat of the Day* has been described as “a spy story without any ‘action’” (Lee 175); Andrew Bennett argues that Bowen’s earlier novels “take on the overweening narrative line of conventional fiction and rewrite it, dispute it, deconstruct it... [and] resist the temptation of what... Aristotle calls *peripeteia* (reversal) and *anagnorisis* (recognition)” (27). To Bennett,

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¹ Emphasis in original.
² Quoted in Lee (237).
³ Ellmann notes that Bowen’s political conservatism comes from different personal sources than that of modernists such as Pound and Eliot; I would add that in some ways Bowen’s writing is as revolutionary as theirs.
paraphrasing Bowen’s own comments on Katherine Mansfield, this is part of the way Bowen’s kind of modernism is a “passing beyond” literary convention rather than a break with it (28).

The critical treatment of her works reflects the difficulties of her status, as Susan Osborn and others point out. There was a time when Bowen was considered too mannered a stylist to be placed alongside more realist novelists of her period, such as Graham Greene and Anthony Powell; there were too many omissions and oddities and curls in her syntax, and these things marked it out as defective (Osborn 1). And yet, her surface interest in apparently conventional stories and psychological problems made her seem a pallid reduction of a more revolutionary novelist like Virginia Woolf. Even as acute a critic as Hermione Lee, who did much to remind readers of Bowen’s importance, often questions Bowen’s style. Lee calls the prose of *The Heat of the Day* “highly strained” (164) and wonders if the “syntactical mannerisms... [make] not merely for an evasive surface but an almost impenetrable one” (165).

Recent critical work has taken a different approach. As Osborn comments in her introduction to *New Critical Perspectives* on Bowen, what once seemed egregious is now most interesting, in a way that applies equally to the other late modernist writers examined in this study:

Within the last decade, Bowen’s readers have sought to recuperate her fiction by focusing their analyses precisely on those aspects of her work that produce the sense of interpretative strain early identified by [Jocelyn] Brooke and others, those problematic exchanges caused by the ungainly irregularities, the improprieties and ‘thickened’ stylistic effects that produce her works’ uncustomary recalcitrance and that continue to challenge readers’ interpretative abilities. (5)

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4 These two compass points are found more positively in the *Atlantic Monthly* review quotation on the front cover of the Anchor edition of Bowen’s *Heat of the Day*: “Imagine a Graham Greene thriller projected through the sensibility of Virginia Woolf.”
The blind alleys in Bowen’s writing, the negatives and doubts, now seem part of a new way of writing that is neither simply modernist nor simply realist, and indeed puts such categories into question—as well as being what puts the categories she examines in her writing under pressure, from gender to Anglo-Irish relations to the individual in history, depending on the critical perspective. The most significant recent studies to examine Bowen as an innovator in this light are by Maud Ellmann, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, and Neil Corcoran. Ellmann’s is particularly important to the present study because of the ways she proposes to explore the different kinds of nothingness in Bowen’s work. Ellmann claims that, like Beckett, Bowen “also seems to feel obliged to express the resistance of nothing to expression” (12). Interestingly, for the introduction to her study, Ellmann uses subheadings taken from titles of works by Green and Beckett: Nothing, Back, Loving, and Company, for example. But in her wide-ranging, theoretically diverse study, Ellmann perhaps loses sight of this interest among her many other claims. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have done a great deal to illuminate the dissolving effects of Bowen’s writing, and their co-authored study is another major influence on this chapter—in particular their sense that Bowen’s novels “diverge from anything in or after modernism that might be identified with a ‘culture of redemption’” (xviii). However, their interpretations of Bowen’s work are more idiosyncratic than my own when they draw on such concepts as psychoanalytic encryptment and literary telepathy. They may also go too far, as Corcoran suggests in cautioning against critics who, as he puts it:

...while valuably emphasizing and illuminating her sheer strangeness, do seem to me to present us with a Bowen endlessly death-inflected, dissolved, haunted, cryptic, modulated towards silence and negativity, in ways which I find too monotonous to

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5 Several commentators compare Green and Bowen, but to my knowledge none has noticed that Henry Yorke’s pen name before he settled on Henry Green was Henry Michaelis (as Green notes in Pack My Bag [163], although Treglown records the name as Michaels [5]), and that Karen Michaelis is the protagonist of Bowen’s novel The House in Paris. A real Karen Michaelis was a well-known novelist of the 1910s, and hence perhaps the source for both Green and Bowen here; the name Michaelis also appears in Conrad’s The Secret Agent.
account for a writer in my view very tonally varied indeed.... Though she is drawn to fracture and disintegration, this is more inflected with affirmation—since she often is primarily a comic writer—than some recent criticism has made it seem. (12-13)

Although I do not deal with Bowen’s comedy or satire in this chapter, I take up Corcoran’s suggestion that what matters about her work is not that she simply dissolves or breaks up, but the way that rupture and dissolution interact with the positive aspects in her writing. In this, once again, she is deeply comparable to Green, Compton-Burnett, and perhaps most especially Beckett: Terry Eagleton has recently noted the value of trying to see “a creative sort of nothingness” in Beckett, rather than a “dogmatism of undecidability” (“Foreword” xxv).

I seek to use the best of these studies, but my sense of Bowen goes in a different direction. Bowen seems, to me, significant because of what she adds to the late modernist continuum: the unique method she contributes to the approach towards a goal she shares with other late modernist writers. And so, rather than taking on all of Bowen’s work, this chapter focuses on three of Bowen’s novels written during the 1930s and 1940s, the ones most contemporary with novels such as Loving and the writing of Beckett’s trilogy. The House in Paris, from 1935, is a complex study of a broken family. The narrative structure moves between “The Present,” in which a boy named Leopold waits to meet the mother he has no memory of; to “The Past,” in which the story of his origins and their connection to the house in Paris are explained; and back to “The Present,” in which much changes, even if little is resolved. The Death of the Heart, published in 1938, is the story of the arrival of a teenaged girl named Portia into the family life of Anna and Thomas Quayne (Portia’s half-brother), and the destructive effects of her relentless innocence on their self-satisfied and empty lives. During the war, Bowen wrote two volumes of non-fiction and many significant short stories, and her next novel, The Heat of the Day, was published in 1948. Set in wartime London, it is in part a suspenseful
spy thriller, but, as was noted above, it is also a book in which almost nothing happens. The story of Stella Rodney, a heroine trapped between two men, is told in Bowen’s most mannered, nothing-obsessed style.

As with the other chapters in this study, I analyze Bowen’s writing in great detail in order to show how microscopic her methods are—and, as such, how well they compare with those of Green, Compton-Burnett, and Beckett. I will examine the ways that Bowen is involved in a similar project to theirs, deploying her innovative techniques with the same aim in mind. Although there are differences between Bowen and the other writers in the late modernist continuum, she uses small, textual jolts that keep her writing fresh and strange like theirs. She is as close to high modernism as to the more conventional realism that was prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s, but like other late modernists, her stylistic techniques focus on cancelling while saying, moving forwards while moving back. This is not to say at all that her writing is meaningless or only concerned with dismantling prior certainties; rather, it is an attempt to grapple with nothingness, whether that nothingness has personal, historical, or aesthetic sources. It aims to explore and express such things without mis-stating them as whole. It attempts to do what Beckett was looking for in the interview quoted in the last chapter: “What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a new form, and that this new form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is something else... To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now” (Driver 219).

The argument of this chapter is in three steps. Having now placed Bowen in the context of the late modernist writers examined in this study, I present in detail some examples of Bowen’s stylistic obsession with nothing, including her use of double and triple negatives; her coinages and use of rare or obsolete “unwords”; and her phrasings that appear to deliberately...
pursue a negative route when a positive one would seem more immediate and straightforward. These are some of the ways that “something and nothing” exist in her writing on a sentence-by-sentence level. Any particular example might not seem significant by itself, but taken together they start to form a pattern that calls for explanation. The second part of this chapter puts Bowen in the context of her historical period—cautiously—to examine what situations her style is applied to, and to explain how “something and nothing” in style is a way to describe “something and nothing” in the world. The third section of this chapter returns to more detailed analysis of certain scenes of reading in Bowen’s work. The aim is to show the ways that Bowen’s novels, like those of the other late modernist writers examined in this study, guide us in our reading—and, in her case, suggest ways we can explain the significance of nothingness in her work.

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One finds Bowen writing something and nothing at once in the smallest gestures in her syntax. Her sentences frequently focus on the negative, highlight absence, and repeat words like “not,” “never,” and “nothing.” Once one begins to notice this in her writing, the examples pile up. A room is described as having “the look of no hour” in The Heat of the Day (312); in The House in Paris a character “did not even ask herself why she had said nothing” (130, emphasis in original). At one point in The Death of the Heart, Anna “went on saying nothing” (130). The negatives are often repeated within single sentences, as is already becoming clear; Anna’s friend St. Quentin is described earlier as “not noticing being not noticed” (33). The odd, deliberate phrasing somehow suggests that “being not noticed” is something, and specifically something that the character ignores, rather than the absence of something. Sometimes nothing comes into physical descriptions, as when in The Heat of the Day “the unsubstantial darkness was
quickened by a not quite wind” (138). The darkness lacks substance. It is brought to life by a wind, but that wind is itself not all there. Any one of these instances might be dismissed as inconsequential, but together they start to form the pattern of writing something and nothing at once.

Looking at her prose in detail, one finds that Bowen’s sentences are full of double negatives where an equivalent positive formulation is available. “There used not to be nothing to say,” Karen says in *The House in Paris* (137), rather than “There used to be something to say.” Some forty pages later she says “I haven’t not thought of her” (177), rather than “I have thought of her.” Towards the end of *The Heat of the Day* comes the comment “Not that this is not a very nice room” (349). One wonders why Bowen so often chooses the more negative option; one also starts to wonder if the positive and negative formulations are synonymous, in fact, or what it might be that the version that dwells on nothing paradoxically adds. On occasion one finds triple negatives, as when Stella Rodney considers whether Harrison intends to take her out to dinner or not: “His not having said so gave her no chance of saying she would on no account dine with him” (*Heat* 21). Here, Stella regrets not having the chance to reject a dinner invitation that has not even been made.

Another way Bowen tries to write something and nothing at once is through her frequent use of words beginning with the prefix *un-*-, as in “unsubstantial darkness” in the quotation above. “Unconscious” is a key word in Bowen. Words like “unadmitted” or “unreal,” or a moment at which the countryside seems to be “undoing the reality of the city” for a returning traveller (*Heat* 138), are not especially strange by themselves. But, once again, when taken together they start to add up to a negative pattern, and as it becomes more extreme it calls for attention. In *The Heat of the Day*, Robert tells his niece “what an un-clever, un-funny little girl” she is (293), rather than calling her silly or dull. He himself displays “a sort of provocative
unindifference‖ (205), a phrase that it takes some effort to understand. Sometimes the instances of “unwords” occur in clumps one cannot miss. On one page of The House in Paris, for example, Leopold’s elbow “undoubled” itself and his arm goes around Henrietta with “unfeeling” tightness; he looks drowned, and it is as if the sea has washed over his “unstruggling” face with eyes “unchangingly open,” though he and Henrietta remain “unalarmed” (200). The use of un- is noticeable in itself, but one should also add that Bowen seeks out obsolete and rare “unwords.” The OED’s only instance of “undoubled” comes from 1598, for example, while “unalarmed” and “unstruggling” are nineteenth-century words. Meanwhile, beyond the instances already mentioned, words like “unexploring” (House 118), “unconcentratedly” (Heat 110), and “unestablishable” (Heat 154) are not in the OED at all. The only quotation the OED provides for “unsalt” after 1598 is from The House in Paris.

“Unmeaning” (Heat 154, 305) seems a good word to describe Bowen’s practice with “unwords,” the effort to use or invent words that mean something while at the same time taking something away or rendering them strange. Her use of these odd, obsolete, or invented words is significant; they show that as well as curving her syntax in the ways described above in order to try to bring nothing into her writing (not to mention her interest in plot holes and other absences), Bowen will also innovate on the level of the individual word itself. Something is said, but even before it is said it is being cancelled. It is not that we think “salt” when we read “unsalt”: rather, we are being guided along a negative road, being told to look out for the absence of something rather than its presence. Or, perhaps, something absent becomes present in the form of a negative “unword,” so what we are led to is the presence of something that is at once absent. The meaning that Bowen wants is there, but the opposite meaning is also there, and the result is not nothing, nor quite something, either. It is unmeaningful, perhaps.
As a microscopic technique with large effects, Bowen’s use of *un-* is comparable to the techniques of the other late modernist writers examined in this study. It is highly reminiscent of the way that Henry Green’s narrator prefaces his rare psychological comments with a doubtful “perhaps,” but then says them anyway. In their effects, Bowen’s “unwords” are also similar to Green’s habit of chopping the -ly endings off of adverbs. Green’s erasure changes the word, introduces a new reading without completely effacing the expected adverbial one; Bowen’s use of *un-* is an addition that takes the reader along a negative route, forcing one to think in negative terms. On a slightly larger scale, the use of *un-* is reminiscent of the results of Compton-Burnett’s undermining dialogue. Where Bowen’s words are erased as they are uttered, Compton-Burnett’s characters reject and undermine each others’ comments in turn, so that it seems that nothing that is said can be fully trusted. Perhaps the fullest connection is to Beckett’s writing in *The Unnamable*, however, where at times every phrase seems first to repeat the previous one and then undo it. In each case, the noticeable stylistic practice moves away from satisfying wholeness.

Bowen’s interest in nothingness moves beyond her choice of words and shaping of sentences, into the kinds of situations she writes about, into her plots and modes of characterization, for example. In *The House in Paris*, the narrator asks about Ray, “For how long has he not stopped gripping the sofa?” (228), where it would seem more straightforward to ask how long he has held on to it. Perhaps the negative phrasing here emphasizes the unconscious tension Ray might be feeling throughout this scene with Leopold; other instances of the negative are more thorough and enigmatic. For instance, shortly before the example just mentioned in *The House in Paris* are two pages of “unspoken dialogue” between Ray and his wife Karen. The conversation is reproduced in the book to look like staged dialogue (although “reproduced” is not quite the right word for a conversation that does not take place). This non-
conversation is principally about Karen’s absent son Leopold, the child she has no contact with. And yet, Ray says,6 “We never are alone, while you’re dreading him” (221). The fact that he is not with them makes him loom large; he is the missing guest at every meal: “If he were here with us, he’d be simply a child” (221). In this non-conversation about presence and absence, as so often, Bowen seems to be describing the interplay of something and nothing in a form and style that evokes and mimics that interplay.

One starts to feel like Louie Lewis, a minor character in The Heat of the Day, as she tries to fall asleep: “Louie, back on her back again, clasped her hands under her head and stared up at nothing—it was oppressive though, how much of nothing there was” (277). Here, explicitly, the prose characterizes nothing as a thing with its own weight and bulk, and Louie is kept awake by the enormity of the black space above her. One wonders if the presence of that absence helps make the words used to describe Louie curl around themselves (“back on her back”), as if they have nowhere else to go.

In many cases the examples link into more complex, connected instances, some of them with great thematic significance. When Portia and Eddie awkwardly run into Major Brutt and Thomas Quayne in The Death of the Heart, for instance: “They stood a foot apart but virtually hand in hand. Portia looked past Eddie liquidly, into nowhere, as though she did not exist because she might not look at him” (121). There are no “unwords” here, or any very special negative convolutions in the syntax, and yet versions of nothing are being described. Eddie and Portia are not physically touching and yet they “virtually” are holding hands, announcing their attachment in front of Thomas (“in a way that showed complete indifference to the company... one more domestic fatigue” [121]). Portia looks “into nowhere,” another phrasing that somehow suggests that nothing is a thing one can see. Not being able to look at Eddie, not seeing him,

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6 Or “says.”
somehow takes away Portia’s being: if she cannot see him, it is “as though” she is not there. But there is a different kind of foreshadowing at work here, because when Eddie reveals himself to finally be indifferent to Portia, her world and that of the Quaynes will come crashing down.

One sees something similar at the beginning of The Heat of the Day, where a string of negative instances sets up the book’s thematic interest in something and nothing. Near a concert in Regent’s Park, hints of the music make people feel they are missing something (3). The music comes from “a hollow” and is itself “a source of dusk” (3). The theatre holds “an emptiness the music had not had time to fill” (4). Harrison’s first words in the book, when he is offered a program by Louie Lewis, include a lacuna: “N’t thanks” (6). Shortly thereafter he realizes he had “forgotten to smoke” (7). There are kinds of nothing here—Sunday’s beauty “drove its lack of meaning into the heart” (5)—but also, one should note, kinds of something. For all the negative-sounding phrases just mentioned, this is a moment that “crowned the day with meaning” (5). There is nothing, something, and the effort in the descriptions above to write both at once.

The effects of Bowen’s effort to bring nothingness into her work have been recently explored by critics such as Corcoran, Ellmann, and Bennett and Royle, as was mentioned earlier. Mooney, for example, attempts to compare Bowen’s “suspended characters” in the late novel Eva Trout to Beckett’s early novels Watt and Murphy. Bowen’s characters often state that nothing can be known about human motivation (“why does one do anything?” [Heat 341]), suggesting one important avenue of exploration that links to both late modernist modes of characterization and scepticism about knowledge. Bowen’s plots seem to dissolve rather than come to conclusion. As in Green, Compton-Burnett, and Beckett, sometimes not very much seems to be happening (or, at least, not very much of what one usually expects in a novel). The action in the first part of The House of Paris consists of two children talking as one of them waits for his mother. She does not come (one thinks of Waiting for Godot). At the close of The
Death of the Heart, the servant, Matchett, is sent to pick up Portia from Major Brutt’s hotel. We do not know what will happen to Portia or where she will end up, even if the fingers playing the piano that Matchett can hear do finally find their way to a chord (417—a reminder that, again, one has to stress the interplay of the positive and the negative in Bowen’s work). When Harold Pinter adapted The Heat of the Day for the screen he was able to end it with a Beckettian stage direction that fits the novel’s climax. Stella and Harrison wait at a window for a raid to end. They finally hear the All Clear that marks the end of the bombardment, but in an echo of the last stage direction of each act of Waiting for Godot, “They do not move” (Pinter 242). As well as setting up novelistic structures around absence, Bowen often gives life to a scene by building it around something missing, such as characters exploring a house in the absence of its owner (Death 255-262).

“Something and nothing” is also in the text at the midpoint in between individual words and larger narrative structures. It is elaborated in detail in a paragraph describing the living and the dead in London during the Blitz—in ways that prefigure the broader historical and political associations of something and nothing to be described below. Here, rather than microscopic destabilization, one sees the interplay of something and nothing become a theme within a paragraph:

Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence—not as today’s dead but as yesterday’s living—felt through London. Uncounted, they continued to move in shoals through the city day, pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses, drawing on this tomorrow they had expected—for death cannot be so sudden as all that. Absent from the routine which had been life, they stamped upon that routine their absence—not knowing

7 Corcoran (200) and Randall (181) also note this connection.
who the dead were, you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the newsvendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger. *(Heat 99)*

The passage is interesting for the ways it explores something and nothing, but also as an instance of the more extended effects of Bowen’s style and themes. There are significant details: the dead who make their presence felt are anonymous, but are felt as yesterday’s absent living, not the present dead of today. It is typical of Bowen to interrupt the commonplace phrase of making “presence felt” with a comment in dashes, which both twists the writing away from cliché and also seems to serve as an instance of something getting in the way of any such presence being felt. One notes in passing the appearance of another *un-* prefix in “uncounted.”

There are ambiguities here, too: it is not clear how even the dead can pervade “everything with their torn-off senses,” if senses are what one would usually use to register something pervading. They pervade everything, and they have torn-off senses, perhaps?

If this looks clear at first, but on closer examination starts to blur, the rest of the paragraph amplifies the effect. As was mentioned earlier, something and nothing in Bowen often connect to knowledge, in particular the kind of knowledge people can have about each other and about each others’ motives. It often seems that in writing about something and nothing Bowen is writing about the combination of presence and absence that other people offer, their familiarity and unknowability. Here, the dead stamp their presence on the continuing routine of life, but after another dash the sense is made more contradictory and a second-person voice introduced: “Not knowing who the dead were, you could not know...” The absent dead stamp the routine with their absence, changing it, but “you” do not know who the dead are, so you do not know which part of the routine might have been changed. The newsvendor might know, and
the narrating voice knows enough to make the observation. But it is an observation about two absences: the absence of something has an effect, but the particular effect is itself absent (the particular death cannot be known). Something that starts as a description of an absence is doubled, and to some degree dissolved in Bowen’s expression of it. In this way it seems to go even further than the protagonist’s sense in Beckett’s novel *Malone Dies* that “I am dead already and that all continues more or less as when I was not” (219). Death or absence in Bowen means change, but she cannot tell us quite what the change means.

Of course there are connections between this paragraph and the particular historical moment Bowen is describing—Clarence Terrace, where she lived, was “blown hollow inside by a V1” in 1944 (Lee 166)—and in the following pages I do wish to explore what it is about the world and her times that Bowen explores in her use of something and nothing. Before doing so, however, it is important to note that Bowen was interested in this interplay before wartime. The description of the Quaynes in *The Death of the Heart*, from 1938, includes the comment that “something edited life in the Quaynes’ house... At the same time, no one seemed clear quite what was being discarded, or whether anything vital was being let slip away” (221, emphasis in original). Something and nothing might seem a way to write the realities of wartime, but it is also part of Bowen’s world well before the war.

* Bowen’s style seems obsessed with finding ways to write something and nothing at once, and this infects the syntax, choice of words, themes, and narrative structure. Of course, as with all the writers examined in this study, one wants to provide reasons for this interest, taking it as evidence of Bowen’s sense of human relations, or part of her formal dissolution of the
novel (as in Bennett and Royle), or her peculiar standing in between Ireland and Britain (Corcoran), or her relations to gender issues. One can do all this, but as with Beckett and the other writers examined here, one can only ever do so provisionally. “Something and nothing” erodes certainty about interpretation. The point is that something is missing, and late modernists write accordingly. What is missing matters less than the effort to go on without it.

And yet, while it would be going too far to say that Bowen’s style is a direct transmission of her response to the historical moment she lived through, the interest in something and nothing does have certain repeated qualities and Bowen does say certain important things about her times within her novels. This is a transitional point, a way of getting to say something about her writing and its relation to late modernism, rather than an attempt to fix her style as a response to history. To change the terms of the relation, perhaps a better framing is this: something and nothing are everywhere in Bowen, including in her telling of history.

The treachery of Robert Kelway in The Heat of the Day is of special relevance. After he finally admits to Stella that Harrison is telling the truth, that he spied on his country and kept his spying from her, Robert tells Stella some of the reasons why. He barely mentions Germany or his treachery directly, seeming more interested in what “the next thing” (301) will be than in Nazism itself. The problem is with the past and present. To Robert, words have become meaningless. If the hangover of the word “betrayal” repulses Stella, she is living in the past: “Don’t you understand that all language is dead currency?” (301). Although at other times Stella feels disconnected from the past—compared to her son, for example—here it is Robert who assumes that rootless role. When Robert says that Stella has been his country, she objects, and thinks of the things and places that surrounded and supported their relationship in London.

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8 The terms he uses are not unlike George Orwell’s contemporary repudiation of dying metaphors in “Politics and the English Language,” extended to moral language.
(rather than viewing them as things they were isolated from, which is how Robert sees it). These include leaves, the grass and asphalt at Roderick’s camp, and interestingly, since it echoes the passage quoted earlier about the living and the dead, “the flopping rippling headlines of Late Night Final at the newsvendor’s corner” (309-10). Robert is past all such matters, he claims. In Nietzschean tones he argues that most people are not capable of freedom, which is a “slaves’ yammer”—free people are “mice let loose in the Sahara” (302). If he is not entirely sure of his own self or his own strength, he finds a paradoxical consolation in his weakness: “We must have law—if necessary let it break us: to have been broken is to have been something” (302).

What is interesting is that the impact of Robert’s betrayal on their relationship is framed in terms of something and nothing. Knowledge and ignorance again twist around each other. Robert says he thought Stella must have known he was a spy after Harrison told her as much, “but I did not know you did not know till you asked me” (305). This replicates the way the main action of the book often seems to be in suspension. If the truth or falsehood of Robert’s treachery is left hanging, the relationship can go on. Were Harrison to force the issue and turn Robert in, he would have no leverage over Stella. But once Stella does know that Robert is a spy, he has to leave. When the crisis comes, the result does not leave things any more definite; instead, it is another way to write something and nothing.

“Dared we ever have come to the point of breaking silence if we had not known this was goodbye? Better to say goodbye at the beginning of the hour we never have had, then it will have no end—best of all, Stella, if you can come to remember what never happened, to live most in the one hour we never had.—Because now I must go.” (324)

They can be fully in love with each other only if Robert is leaving. He suggests that the “best” hour is a non-hour, in which the couple lives honestly and fully with each other. But like Bowen’s other paradises, discussed below, this fully satisfying love—this something—is also, at
the same time, nothing. Bowen once again seeks to formulate a paradox we have seen before in her prose, here in terms of love and time: it will be best if she lives most in the hour they never had, Robert says, because he must leave. Suspecting that Harrison is waiting for him at the door, Robert goes up to the roof and meets his death. Though we know Robert is a spy and is dead, much else is left undecided. What happened on the roof? As Corcoran asks, is Harrison—who puts his country at risk to blackmail Stella—morally superior to the traitor he is supposed to be catching (182)? When the revelation comes, Stella experiences it as a reversal: “It suddenly seemed to her it was Robert who had been the Harrison” (310), making who might be right or wrong all the less clear. To underline their duality, Kelway and Harrison both have the first name “Robert,” we learn (362). In an echo of the imaginary dialogue in The House in Paris, the inquest into Robert’s death is partial and curiously formatted: the book gives us Stella’s answers but not the questions she is answering, as she steps back into certain old myths about herself and her reputation that make what happened to Robert still vaguer (340-3).

Robert’s betrayal does tell us about the connections between Bowen’s stylistic interest in nothingness and the period she lived through. As Ellmann has pointed out, there is always a “shadowy third” in Bowen’s writing (e.g., 22-6), a destabilizing element or non-element. For Karen and Ray in The House in Paris, Leopold’s absence means he is always present (221); and Bowen explicitly describes “their time” as the third party when Stella and Robert have dinner together (Heat 217). Robert’s treachery is presented as coming out of a broader, generational sense of fracturedness or weakness, a time in which “nothing” is the third element that has seeped into human relations, perhaps. Physically wounded at the evacuation of Dunkirk, Robert says that he was in fact born wounded.\(^9\)

\(^9\) Charley, the protagonist of Henry Green’s 1946 novel Back, has also returned from the war wounded.
“Dunkirk was waiting there in us—what a race! A class without a middle, a race without a country. Unwhole. Never earthed in—and there are thousands of thousands of us, and we’re still breeding—breeding what? You may ask: I ask. Not only nothing to hold, nothing to touch. No source of anything in anything.” (307)

His whole generation, his race and class, is seen as defective, with a wound inside waiting. Here, Robert uses another of Bowen’s “unwords” to explain what he means. The race is whole but cancelled by “un,” incomplete. The use of the word “breeding” suggests Robert’s disgust with himself and his people, as well as suggesting that perhaps he is one of the “mice” in the Sahara that he derides. Later in his confession he tells Stella that her brothers, who died in the previous world war, were fortunate; “They were lucky to die before the illusion had broken down” (310). The final sentences of the paragraph are oddly resonant. They suggest the repetitive rhythms of Beckett’s minimalist later prose, but also echo T.S. Eliot (“On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing” [“Waste Land” 72]) and perhaps even include a foreshadowing of Phillip Larkin’s description of death in “Aubade”: “Nothing to think with, / Nothing to love or link with” (190).

Bowen does much more than the other writers in this study to bring history and the real into her work. Yet what she is bringing in is at once not full or certain, but something always weak and fractured. Through Robert Kelway she may see the world and her generation as broken and incomplete and somehow riddled through with nothingness, but her style does not banish that nothingness. Rather it tries to find ways to express it and explore it, without making it into a new whole. One way to do this is to keep talking about it.

Interestingly, Stella herself experiences some of the same doubts as Robert. Her response is not to betray her country, however. If Robert chooses a vain or vague Nazi future, and her son

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10 The *OED* lists “unwhole,” but as obsolete: a word that is itself something and nothing, then.
Roderick tries to cling to the past ("It was a matter of continuing—but what, what?" [352]), Stella seems to be always in between. Earlier in the novel, she visits a house that her son Roderick has inherited from her dead husband’s cousin, Francis. Here Stella, who is described as being roughly the same age as the century (*Heat* 24),

feels her generation’s distance from what came before: “She had grown up just after the first world war with the generation which, as a generation, was to come to be made to feel it had muffed the catch” (24). Stella imagines her son marrying and bringing his bride to the house, but somehow too late, because the link between past and present is gone. Again, the description summons and tries to write the negative, once again in imagining a scene that might not happen:

Of how much, of what, or by whom, the entering smiling newcomer had been disembarrassed she would never know—the fatal connection between the past and future having been broken before her time. It had been Stella, her generation, who had broken the link—what else could this be but its broken edges that she felt grating inside her soul? (195)

“She” (the imaginary bride) will never know how much she has not been privy too, how much has been lost, because the connection between past and present has been broken. The link between past and future is surely the present—Stella’s generation—and yet even though Stella is there, the link is broken: Stella is herself broken, perhaps.

It is interesting to note in this connection that Victoria Glendinning famously described Bowen as “a major writer... she is what happened after Bloomsbury; she is the link which connects Virginia Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark” (1). Bowen is seen as an unproblematic link in an unending chain; this smoothes down the difficulty and resistance of her

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11 Like Bowen, who was born in 1899.
work and replaces it with simplifying “metaphors of continuity and complementarity,” as Bennett and Royle ably point out in their introduction (xv).

Looking around, imagining what would have to change in the room she is in for Roderick’s imagined wife, Stella sees a depiction of a wreck:

For instance, here, hung in a corner so far out of day or lamplight’s reach that Stella, to see, had to strike a match, was one picture to banish. Evidently, it had been torn from a magazine of years ago; it had been stuck crooked into an alien frame—a liner going down in a blaze of all lights on, decks and port-holes shining, one half already plunged in the black ocean, the other reared up against the sky. “Nearer my God to Thee: The Titanic, 1912.” The significance of this drawingroom picture of Cousin Nettie’s would never be known. (195-6)

It is something, but almost nothing. Though almost hidden, this is a picture to get rid of. It is not the Titanic above the waves, or a picture of the calm seas above the presumed wreck. Rather, it is something and nothing at once: half of the boat above the waves, still in full, blazing light, half of it already gone in the “black” ocean. The photograph seems strangely akin to Bowen’s work, or that of other late modernists: an attempt to display the moment of disappearance, and perhaps also to express the mood of a time infected with failure, fracturedness, and nothingness.

The caption is the title of the famous hymn reportedly played by the orchestra as the Titanic sank, and yet even this effort at some kind of meaning is somewhat undermined. There is a change of address or aspect when we are told that the significance of the picture “would never be known.” The passive voice seems to include the reader as much as Stella. We have the photograph, the moment of disappearance, but we do not know what it means. This is all to say that something and nothing, while complicit with Bowen’s description of life during wartime, is about much more than wartime.
Oddly, the Titanic returns just after the narrator describes “their time” as the third presence at Robert and Stella’s table. Stella wants to tell him about the picture, but Robert does not really listen:

“Talking of that, why should we not marry?”

Up went her eyebrows. “Talking of the Titanic?”

“No, no—talking of Roderick. If anyone is to marry, why not us?” (Heat 218)

Stella’s lucid awareness of the moment in which this is being said makes the dialogue comic, but once again it is significant that even a proposal of marriage is framed in terms of negatives. As if to guarantee that the relationship cannot succeed, marriage is discussed at the same time as the ship that was the link between past and present and went down. It is framed in a negative way, word by word: “No, no... why not?”

Bowen’s novels of the 1930s underscore the suggestion that she is writing about something beyond an immediate crisis, something more akin to what Woolf called the lack of “knowledge of a settled civilization” (170)—although, again, to be too definite about it would seem to misread the thrust of the text. In The House in Paris, Max has a grim sense of the impossibility of a tomorrow in a world which “is no longer ‘history in the making,’ or keeps rules or falls in with nice ideas. Things will soon be much more than embarrassing” (120). In The Death of the Heart, Thomas Quayne derides his generation as bland and aimless, epigones compared even to the destructive generation of World War I: “We none of us seem to feel very well, and I don’t think we want each other to know it... But it took guts to be even the fools our fathers were. We’re just a lousy pack of little Christopher Robins. Oh, we’ve got to live, but I doubt if we see the necessity” (118).

One could take this gap, this weakness and doubt, in many directions. Furniture, for example, is one counter to the vacuity of the Quaynes’ life in The Death of the Heart. Alive to
the care and to the voices of objects, which are always important in Bowen, the servant Matchett is also aware of the “lack in the Quaynes’ life of family custom” (49-50). Matchett is the person sent to fetch Portia at the end of the novel, suggesting some kind of link between her as past and Portia as future, but an aside suggests that what matters to Matchett is itself no longer present: “Matchett, upstairs and down with her solid impassive tread, did not recognise that some tracts no longer exist” (49). As well as furniture, the gap or lack or nothingness here could be related to children. Anna has had two miscarriages, and Portia may initially seem a proxy child for her; Thomas feels that “he could think of nothing with which he could have wished to endow a child” (46).

In both The Death of the Heart and The Heat of the Day, however, the question of how to make sense of the past and how to make sense of the nothing-inflected present is presented in surprisingly literary terms. These help us to put it in a more relevant aesthetic context, rather than getting lost in Bowen’s labyrinth of textual and worldly connections.

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Late modernist writers often implicitly suggest ways to read their puzzling works. As was discussed earlier in this study, Beckett makes a theme out of repetition in the trilogy; Henry Green’s imagery echoes his unusual narrative perspective; and Compton-Burnett brings her philosophy of language to the surface of the text in her characters’ letters to one another. Bowen highlights the importance of the smallest elements of her writing by having her characters read closely and discover textual details that invoke both something and nothing. This suggests the uses of close reading and its limits. In particular, the presence and absence of commas is highlighted in The Heat of the Day and The Death of the Heart. In the former, commas missing
from a legal document seem to make it impossible for Roderick to understand what kind of relationship he should have with the past, which may suggest the situation of late modernist writers more broadly. In the latter, Portia’s use of a comma in her diary indicates to another character both how unique she is, and how dangerous. A comma is almost nothing, but it changes everything. Taking these instances together, one can try to use the lessons of her characters’ reading as an analogue for how to read Elizabeth Bowen after high modernism: she uses the smallest elements, these near-nothings, to make a difference. They change everything, even if they may leave everything unclear.

At the start of The Death of the Heart, Anna Quayne is walking in Regent’s Park with her friend, the novelist St. Quentin Miller. She confesses that she has been reading her niece Portia’s diary, and St. Quentin responds with a writer’s question:

“Tell me, do you remember the first sentence of all?”

“Indeed I do,” Anna said. “‘So I am with them, in London.’”

“With a comma after the ‘them’?... The comma is good; that’s style.... I should have liked to have seen it, I must say.” (9, emphasis in original)

St. Quentin comments on Anna’s quotation from the diary as if he were reading it himself. He is speaking about a comma he has heard in Anna’s pause as she quotes the first line from memory, as if it were a poem, and he has to ask to make sure. It is odd, then, that his own statement is marked by so many kinds of punctuation, with ellipses, semi-colons, his own comma (or Bowen’s), a question mark. Even as he admires Portia’s style, we may be being asked to consider his own as a speaker, or Bowen’s as a writer.

To St. Quentin, Portia’s comma is style. This is odd because a comma would seem to be so little, merely a pause, a splitting device, without any particular meaning of its own. Style can

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12 More than one critic comments on the fact that when Portia’s diary is quoted at length in the novel, we the readers become like Anna reading it.
come from many places, it seems; and in a way, from the moment he asks to hear the first line, St. Quentin is already treating the diary as a text with a style. To try to explain what Portia’s comma adds, Ellmann reads the passage by way of deletion, imagining the “nothing” is not there: “To take the comma out would weaken the contrast between ‘I’ and ‘them,’ diluting the effect of alienation... [With the comma left in Portia is] a lonely ‘I’ amidst an unknown ‘them’” (129). The comma is a visual partition, in Portia’s writing, between Portia and the Quaynes. For Corcoran, the comma is rhythmical, melodious, and ambiguous: “the flatness of the cadence, which the punctuation not only points but manages, hesitates between the mournfulness of resignation and the defiance of animosity” (123). Corcoran’s sense of Portia’s alienation echoes Ellmann, and he interestingly points out many other moments of “deadly” punctuation in Portia’s diary, often satirical ones (123). These critics seem to see Portia’s comma as a kind of undertow, pulling the sentence back from unity. The comma remains just a comma, however, so the possibility of unity is there even as it is undermined. One could go further: Portia’s comma splits the sentence just as the “family” will be split. What splits the family is an individual voice, a cadence, a style. In a way, Portia is her comma: an addition to the family who seems to change very little, who does almost nothing and yet changes everything. If this is true, the smallest parts of the sentence, highlighted at the start of the novel, suggest the largest workings of the plot.

But in a way what the comma does matters less than St. Quentin’s comment about it. What matters is that it is marked out. We do not know quite what it does, but have to argue about it; we are not told why St. Quentin thinks it is style, but have to speculate. In this way, Portia’s comma seems to be something and nothing at once. It is not a word, just a pause, a marker, but it makes a great difference. It marks Portia as a stylist and as such it introduces a tension that will grow in the novel: does Portia write with style, or is she just an observer?
There is an apparent contradiction here. St. Quentin admires Portia’s style, but her diary and her presence are described elsewhere as neutral and objective. To Anna, Portia seems dangerous: “Her diary’s very good—you see, she has got us taped,” says Anna, using another key word (399). (She continues: “Could I not go on with a book all about ourselves?... it’s given me a rather more disagreeable feeling about being alive—or, at least, about being me” [399].) And this ties to other important elements in the novel: Eddie, Portia’s unreliable and damaging love interest, seems to prefer something like “taping” to art, even though he too is a novelist. “I hate writing; I hate art—there’s always something else there” (136). In Portia’s case, the “other thing” that is there may only be a comma—nothing, or almost nothing—but it is enough.

St. Quentin’s role here is hard to pin down. Later in the novel he argues that writing should always and only invent. The events in his books “never happened” (327); one should never write down what has happened because it comes “much too near the mark” (327). Fortunately, we tend to lie in spite of ourselves. Shortly after registering a fact, “one’s begun to gloze the fact over with a deposit of some sort” (327). St. Quentin says elsewhere that “to write is always to rave a little” (8) and that “style is the thing that’s always a bit phony, and at the same time you cannot write without style” (8). You have to use commas. Yet, for all his talk of invention, St. Quentin plays the critical role in the plot of telling Portia that Anna has been reading her diary.

As is often the case with Bowen—or Green, or Beckett, one might add—there are many connections that go in many different directions. It is perhaps enough to say that Portia seems to inhabit two spaces in the novel. To Anna, and to the reader, she may be the bare, neutral observer who reveals the vacuity and cruelty of the Quaynes’ way of life. To St. Quentin, and once again to the reader, she is also a stylist with a personal presence. There is no such thing as

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13 She does this by “taping” the goings-on in the household into her scrapbook, Joseph Rosenberg has suggested in personal communication.
“taping” without changing what is observed, one wants to argue, against the suggestions in the novel that there is. As Ellmann says, even though Portia seems not to invent, there is more to her: “The diarist presents herself as an impersonal reporter of the facts. Yet there is style, even guile, lurking in this faux-naivety” (129).

To summarize, the point is that style seems to be defined here in a minimalist way. To change everything, all Portia has to add is a comma. As St. Quentin suggests, style need not be baroque or excessive. Small things matter and can have great destructive effects. To add a comma seems to be so little—and yet… The comma is a step towards a personal style, but also a step towards splitting Portia off from the Quaynes. The difficulty of interpreting it makes it a step towards uncertainty. Its meaning cannot be finalized, and it leads to a hodgepodge of associations. Through her characters’ attention to the smallest elements of prose, Bowen has us think about something and nothing in the smallest elements of her writing.

One finds a parallel scene in The Heat of the Day, when Roderick is reading from the will in which a cousin of his father’s has left him the house in Ireland:

“Look, this is where I want to know what you think. When he’s said about he bequeathes Mount Morris, the lands, the etcetera, etcetera, and so on, to his cousin Roderick Vernon Rodney, me, he goes on, ‘In the hope that he may care in his own way to carry on the old tradition.’—Why must lawyers always take out commas?”

“Because what they write is meant to be clear without them.”

“Well, in this case it isn’t. Which did Cousin Francis mean?”

“Which what, darling?”

“Did he mean, care in my own way, or, carry on the old tradition in my own way?”
Uncomprehending, Stella returned her eyes to the cropped top of Roderick’s downbent head. “In the end, I suppose,” she hazarded, “it would come to the same thing?”

“I’m not asking what it would come to; I want to know what he meant.”

“I know. But the first thing is that you’ll really have to decide—”

“What should I decide? He’s decided. It’s become mine.”

“We must think what you’re going to do.”

“But I want to know which he meant. Does he mean, that I’m free to care in any way I like, so long as it’s the tradition I carry on; or that so long as I care in the same way he did, I’m free to mean by ‘tradition’ anything I like?”

“There was another cousin of yours, Roderick, a Colonel Pole, at the funeral, who said—” (95, emphasis in original)

Perhaps surprisingly, given his portrayal elsewhere in the novel, Roderick shows himself to be an assiduous close reader. What matters to him, like St. Quentin, are commas. Roderick wants certainty, from a text, about an intention. Stella repeatedly attempts to be pragmatic, arguing that wherever the commas should be the result would be the same, and that now that the house is in his possession they must decide what action Roderick should take. But Roderick wants to know “which he meant.” In Portia’s diary, a comma made her writing personal, but in some ways uncertain; here, the absence of commas makes the legal document uncertain, and cuts Roderick off from the past he wants to know.

As the discussion continues, Stella tells Roderick not to be too influenced by the dead. One tries not to disappoint them, but they are fixed in place; if they had lived, she says, they might have disappointed themselves (96). Whether at her urging or not, Roderick soon returns to
form. He simply folds the will up and puts it back in its envelope: “Let’s leave that at that. I’ve really made up my mind” (96). The chapter ends with him described as “tranquil” (96).

Here, mother and son keep swapping places. For much of the conversation, Stella is pragmatic, and Roderick oddly bedevilled by the gaps in the letter. Then, he finds it easy to put away the letter and the situation while Stella, as the novel goes on, is more and more affected by mysteries and absences. When she describes them to Roderick towards the end of the novel, he longs for some kind of simple solution. He seems to think that such a thing is possible; her situation, however, remains much more drastically uncertain.

In the context of this study, Roderick’s situation may remind us of Bowen’s. He comes after something and has to decide how to go on: is the right course to pursue exactly the same avenues as his predecessors, or will he do as well to go his own route as long as he respects his predecessors’ spirit? It would be going too far to claim that the scene described is a portrait of the late modernist writer’s position, but it does echo the other questions asked by The Heat of the Day about the nature of the past and its significance to the present. Moreover, it suggests that what matters in such a situation is detail.

Where Portia’s comma marked her as a stylist, the absence of commas makes it hard for Roderick to understand what the past commands him to do. A small “nothing” is introduced into The Death of the Heart and it makes things personal and destructive. In The Heat of the Day, nothing is a textual presence in the will; the absence of the commas introduces doubt and uncertainty. One might call Portia’s comma “something that is nothing” and Roderick’s “nothing that is something.” In both cases, a microscopic textual detail in a scene of reading connects us to large questions about character, time, and knowledge. In both cases, the reader is left puzzled. Roderick may be able to put the letter away, but we do not know what the final meaning of the will is (just as much of the action in The Heat of the Day will remain opaque). In
The Death of the Heart, St. Quentin is satisfied that Portia’s comma means she writes with style, even as the reader may struggle to equate this with the presentation of her elsewhere as an objective observer. A textual detail is noticed, highlighted, and interpreted, but does not bring us to conclusion. These are further instances in Bowen’s writing of the importance of something and nothing. They are instances of Bowen’s characters being confronted with something and nothing at once that show us its effects.

The presence and absence of commas connects to larger aesthetic questions. When the main action of The Heat of the Day has moved into the past and can start to be spoken about by its characters, Stella’s son Roderick wishes for a kind of resolution that the novel makes impossible:

“I wish I were God,” he said. “Instead of which I am so awfully young—that’s my disadvantage... all I can do now is try and work this out, which could easily take my lifetime; and by that time you’d be dead. I couldn’t bear to think of you waiting on and on for something, something that in a flash would give what Robert did and what happened enormous meaning like there is in a play of Shakespeare’s—but, must you? If there’s something that is to be said, won’t it say itself?” (337, emphasis in original)

Roderick wishes he were God so that he could see the puzzle of Robert Kelway’s demise and his relationship with Stella all at once. He adds, “if I could even only see the thing as a whole, like God!”14 (337). All he can do, Roderick feels, is try to puzzle it out, but by the time he could reach an end point Stella might already be dead. He does not allow her the possibility of figuring out her story for herself. Roderick does not directly long for a Shakespearean explanation that would come like a lightning bolt to make everything meaningful—rather, he hopes his mother will not sit and wait for such a thing. But he does subsequently display a passive hope that

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14 Roderick echoes St. Augustine, beloved by Beckett, speaking of God’s ability to see all of time at once, unlike humans, in Book XI of the Confessions.
whatever has to be said will come by itself. Bennett and Royle note that *The Heat of the Day* is full of references to *Hamlet*, but add that the idea that in Shakespeare a fully explanatory moment comes along is itself naive (85—another instance of Roderick’s repeated hopeful positivism, one might add). Roderick believes in cultural and religious icons, in the sources of answers. God could see the story of Stella and Robert all at once, and explain it; Shakespeare might find a way to tell it so that it ended in a thunderclap of meaningful explanation. Stella seems to inhabit a different world. Roderick admits that he is too young to help, but still points to possible sources of meaning. He concludes, “As it is, I expect really you know what is best yourself” (337). Stella tries to agree, but the “syntax of weakness” of her answer, the way it extends and insists, means it becomes less convincing as it goes on: “I expect I do; I know I ought to; I must” (338).

Putting all this even more in aesthetic terms, Roderick has said, cryptically: “Robert’s dying of what he did will not always be there, won’t last like a book or picture: by the time one is able to understand it it will be gone, it just won’t be there to be judged. Because I suppose art is the only thing that can go on mattering once it has stopped hurting?” (337). Again, as was the case with Robert’s confession, the moment and the meaning cannot inhabit the same space. Understanding of Robert’s death and betrayal can only come too late, just as learning the truth about Robert, for Stella, meant the end of her relationship with him. Discussions of art and literature in Bowen, which are frequent, are often ways of claiming that what we are reading now is real, not art. In *The Heat of the Day* Stella feels she is “going to a rendezvous inside the pages of a book” (106); speaking of a coincidence in *The Death of the Heart*, Major Brutt says, “In a book, that would sound quite improbable” (344). The suggestion in Roderick’s comments seems to be that what we have read about in the novel was not redeemed art but intransigent life. Art, mysteriously, seems to be an exception to Roderick’s rule of exclusive timing. Robert’s
death will not matter once it no longer hurts, Roderick seems to be saying, but art can go on mattering after the pain passes. Why is this? Is it because in art, something can happen in a flash to give everything “enormous meaning”? Roderick does not explain, and his question is left hanging. What he could call Shakespearean art might continue to matter because it has meaning, one can hazard; or perhaps art matters after emotion passes because it has a shape and form and importance of its own. No matter what the precise answer is, Roderick puts the question in aesthetic terms. Bowen’s version of Stella’s story, by comparison, would seem to matter not because there is a flash but because there isn’t one. Instead, what it has is style.

Roderick’s sense of art and satisfying meaning is not the only one in Bowen’s novels of the 1930s and 1940s, and examining others is a way to discuss other scenes of reading and see the effects of something and nothing in Bowen’s work. In *The House in Paris*, for example, the narrator describes the reunion Leopold hoped to have with his mother. It is another hypothetical encounter, described in aesthetic and religious terms, like Roderick’s, that suggest what Bowen has to find a way to write without:

> Actually, the meeting he had projected could take place only in heaven—call it heaven; on the plane of potential, not merely likely behaviour. Or call it art, with truth and imagination informing every word. Only there—in heaven or art, in that nowhere, on that plane—could Karen have told Leopold what had really been. (60)

“Art” may be from the realm of fullness, but it comes with an offhand introduction: “call it art.” The terms of satisfaction, again, are religious and cultural. The words used are “heaven,” rather than Roderick’s “God,” and “art” rather than his “Shakespeare,” but the effect and purpose are similar. The fullness of maternal satisfaction that Leopold desires is not available in his childhood, and the narrator places his longing in the context of a spiritual and aesthetic fullness he is also denied. In this passage, the possible satisfactions are no sooner provided than
undermined. Heaven is not the afterlife of the blessed but a “plane of potential... behaviour” (and reduced, again: “call it heaven”). Art is imagined as replete with “truth and imagination informing every word,” but it too is a plane of “nowhere.” Again, this is something and nothing at once, the effort to describe something by describing its absence. The paradoxes of the phrasing seem to echo Robert Kelway’s suggestion that Stella “live most in the one hour we never had” (Heat 324). Leopold is pictured as imagining something that is gone forever, if it ever existed. Modernist writers may often seem to suggest that art is a replacement for religious verities now lost.¹⁵ For Bowen, art is as much of a lost or impossible paradise as heaven is—but one has to go on writing, even in its absence.

By way of comparison, it is worth noting Kathy Gentile’s argument that in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, the reduced role of the commenting narrator is analogous to a perceived erosion in traditional sources of authority—either God, Patriarchy, or another power (39). Bowen’s writing is perhaps more like Beckett’s on a technical level, in that she approaches the same endpoints as Compton-Burnett through a heavily present narrative voice that tells us again and again that it cannot reach where it wants to be. One senses all these writers, each in their own way, trying to say something and nothing at once because a simple something is somehow wrong, and saying nothing is unacceptable. Their words, characters, themes, and plots are strained by the paradoxical and impossible task.

In the absence of fullness, we have style; we have difficult detail. Rather than a Shakespearean flash that gives enormous meaning, or an art in which truth and imagination informs every word, we have something murkier, darker, more dubious, and more cautious. Rather than heaven we have something more like real life—not fully satisfactory, not fully explained, with devils in the details. It is a less satisfying version of real life than realism tends

¹⁵ Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” provides just one example: “Poetry/ Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns” (165).
to offer, but still, Bowen’s project, like Beckett’s, is in a curious way a realist one—not in the way this is usually said, not because of her apt description of London in the Blitz, but rather because her work is true and stays true to a lived situation of uncertainty. Part of the puzzle of her work, as was noted earlier, is how Bowen manages to be both at once; how she manages both to convey so much about the texture of material things in life and to innovate stylistically, in order to write both this familiar presence and a gnawing absence at the same time. Writing something and nothing at once is what makes her a late modernist writer, part of the continuum identified in this study; it also makes her a great and important novelist in her own right.

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One of the strange things that happens when one is reading Bowen is that “nothing” seems to take on its own life, its own fullness. On the last page of The House in Paris, for example, we are told that when Ray and Leopold leave the train station, “no taxi came immediately” (245). Rather than indicating that they have to wait for something to happen, the phrasing seems almost to suggest that something is happening: a “no taxi” is what comes immediately. What Ray and Leopold have to do is face and deal with the absence of something, and in this they are like Bowen’s readers. Like Roderick looking at the will with its absent commas, we have to decipher ambiguous statements marked by absences. On the level of the sentence, this is Bowen writing something and nothing at once, the effect amplified in the reader’s mind by all the thematic and narrative interest in something and nothing discussed in this chapter.

“Something and nothing” at once makes it hard to conclude. As was indicated earlier, the purpose of this kind of writing—as is seen also with Beckett, especially, as well as in Green and
Compton-Burnett—is to resist and put off conclusion. However, even if one cannot come to a full and final account of “something and nothing” that will tell us why Bowen writes this way, and settle the matter, one can analyze in detail what her writing does, place it in its context, and venture some tentative explanations of the meaning of its refusal to mean in a familiar way.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show the degree to which “something and nothing” is the mode by which Bowen’s prose goes on. As we have seen, she is syntactically obsessed with what one might call “touching the void,” trying to give a shape to the negative. And yet, the resulting shape does not redeem or make a new whole out of that negative. She manages this through an innovative style that employs convoluted syntax and “unwords,” together with scenes and plots built around absence. These are connected to her descriptions of wartime, but wartime does not exhaust their significance. They are Bowen’s method of writing, whatever the subject.

The effects of her style are deeply akin to Green’s, Compton-Burnett’s, and Beckett’s. Bowen continues to do interesting and complex things to the novel, rejecting the more straightforwardly realistic route taken by contemporaries such as Graham Greene and Anthony Powell (though, like Henry Green, she does not reject realist methods as fully as Compton-Burnett and Beckett do). Like the other late modernist writers studied here, her innovative effects seem to ally her with her high modernist predecessors, but looked at in detail, they move her writing more towards dissolution and nothingness than towards any new and present whole. Or, as this chapter has explored, they move her towards something else, what in Beckett was called the obverse. It is something that cannot quite be said. It is what Bennett and Royle, in a moment when they recognize Bowen’s more positive qualities, want the literary text to be: a folly that “concerns the unpresentable. It is at once affirmation and dissolution” (79). Beckett comes near this place through repetition and cancellation; Green through narrative positioning,
plot construction, punctuation, and syntactical innovation; Compton-Burnett through erasure of the narrator and constantly undermining dialogue. Bowen comes near it through syntax that curls around and obsesses about nothing, through neologisms, descriptions of nothingness, and, as this chapter has explored, through scenes of reading in which her characters examine the smallest present or absent details of the text and cannot come to final statements about it. To paraphrase Beckett, Bowen’s style is a way of going on when it seems impossible to go on. In these ways, Bowen is part of the continuum of late modernist writers assembled in this study. For all the differences between them, they are engaged in the same project of continuing to innovate in prose after modernism, but in the direction of doubt and simultaneous making and unmaking, rather than any saving certainty.

It is also hard to conclude because Bowen is such a fine writer, in ways that an exclusive focus on “something and nothing” risks occluding. As well as incisive psychological acuity (“this sad little triumph of being ready in time” [Death 322]), the three novels examined here are full of memorable and inventive touches, from the way Bowen allows facts to reveal themselves dynamically through dialogue, to the beauty of her descriptions of action (“sometimes her elbow, sometimes her schoolgirlish overcoat, unbuttoned, brushed on the white wall” [House 28]). The change of voice, into Matchett’s perspective, that ends The Death of the Heart is unexpected and startling, as is the chronological leap forward towards the close of The Heat of the Day. Bowen always keeps the reader lucid and alert, as when a chapter in The Heat of the Day ends with a sudden shift that puts everything in a curiously different perspective: “a passer-by halted, watching across the wall in November dusk the young soldier bending bareheaded among the graves” (244).

Some of these techniques are also seen in other late modernist writers. Henry Green leaps suddenly from a dialogue between two women at a window to the conversation between
the people in the garden they are watching (*Loving* 47). Bowen’s novels are full of dialogue, and in this are reminiscent of Green’s, or Compton-Burnett’s—although one of the major technical differences between Bowen and Compton-Burnett is the extent to which Bowen narrates, telling us all the things about them, in addition to what the characters say about each other, that Green and Compton-Burnett exclude. There are other connections, such as the “big house” setting of Green’s *Loving* and many of Bowen’s works, recalling in turn Compton-Burnett’s settings. As part of the Protestant Ascendancy, Bowen has connections both to the aristocratic world of Green and to Beckett’s national heritage. Bowen’s work seems infinitely more embedded in recognizable social settings than Beckett’s, but this makes her use of nothingness all the more interesting and destabilizing. As current criticism recognizes, Bowen’s prose deserves to be compared with his as something not mannered but quietly revolutionary.

Finally, it is hard to conclude because Bowen’s work contains much that cannot be examined here. As has been mentioned briefly, “something and nothing” infects Bowen’s sense of character and personal relations. One also wants to talk about it in terms of epistemology, and its links to narration ( Bowen’s novels are often driven by questions of who knows what when); one wants to discuss the importance of photographs, children, vagueness, power, silence, the telephone... all of which connect Bowen even further to the thematic and stylistic concerns of late modernism. However, the effort in this chapter has been to look more at how Bowen’s style functions, rather than assessing its accord with a single, particular connection—this is in order to show what it points at, and be true to the fact of its not arriving, rather than claiming that it points at any one something.
A selection of endings helps show for a last time what late modernist writers do that is special, how they relate to their time and their peers, and why they matter, helping us to conclude.

The close of Henry Green’s novel *Loving*, for example, seems to be two endings at once. One is stated explicitly in the novel’s last words (“Over in England they were married and lived happily ever after” [204]), but it is undermined by another, more shadowy ending, suggested through the echoes of fairy tale language and the accelerated rhythm of the book’s last sentence. Rather than full resolution or simple ambiguity, the close of *Loving* offers both certainty and uncertainty. Neither ending is conclusive. Through small stylistic means, the conclusion seems to stand and to undermine itself at once.

Henry Green is not unique. Other late modernist writers have their own methods for giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Ivy Compton-Burnett, for example, uses dialogue to conclude her novels with a similar effect to Green’s. As with *Loving*, Compton-Burnett’s endings echo the beginnings of her works. In her case, this is because her novels snap closed just as they snapped open, in dialogue. For example, after the melodramatic action in *Mother and Son*, which encompasses death, marriage proposals, and uprooted households, the book ends with old and young children in conversation, speaking about card games and about loss:
“She taught me to play herself, when I was a boy.”

“And now has left him partnerless,” murmured Francis.

“And now has left me as you say, Francis,” said Rosebery. (256)

The families described in the novel have circled, changed, and then come back almost exactly to where they began. The style serves as an equivalent. There is no comment or explanation about what the ending might mean, let alone any explicit lesson for the reader; there is not even a powerful concluding image or a moment of any great recognition, satisfaction, or change. There is no summary, “breakaway,” or justification for what has taken place. Novels by Ivy Compton-Burnett even refuse to allow readers to congratulate themselves for having felt, learned, or seen so much. Rather, her books remain ruthlessly true to their own methods and leave us in the same condition as her characters, as we have been throughout. Rosebery considers his incompleteness, and his words are recorded, as his mother’s were at the start of the book. The reader must make of them whatever he or she can—bearing in mind, perhaps, that throughout the novel each character’s own conclusions have been immediately undermined by subsequent lines of dialogue.

It should be noted that Compton-Burnett, like other late modernist writers, is not utterly consistent.¹ One of her more accessible works, A Family and a Fortune, ends with the narrator extensively describing a character looking out of a window and providing her thoughts about the people she sees. After a long dialogue between Horace and Bullivant at the close of Manservant and Maidservant (about the same possibly smoking fire with which the book began), the narrator rounds off the book with the briefest of descriptions in place of speech: “Horace could only be silent” (309). More akin to the late modernist mood is the ironic ending of A House and

¹ As Adorno says, it is characteristic of late style to refuse to coalesce into one image of what it means to be unreconciled (Said xv).
its Head, where Duncan Edgeworth warns his family, “You are all at my hand to be taught” (282).

The technique of using dialogue to end a novel is not exclusive to Compton-Burnett. Henry Green’s novel Party Going ends with a similar touch, and a similar deferral of conclusion, in Green’s more humorous tone. A character nicknamed “Embassy Richard,” who has been a subject of much gossipy discussion throughout the work, finally arrives in the closing pages. The novel ends with him in conversation with the others:

“But weren’t you going anywhere?” Amabel said to Richard, only she looked at Max.

“I can go where I was going afterwards,” he said to all of them and smiled. (528)

“Embassy Richard” appears, but his arrival provides minimal resolution. The novel ends with a smile and the promise of more to come. As with Compton-Burnett, the effect of staying with the characters right up to the end of the novel seems to be an evasion of any sense of finality that a narrator’s conclusions might bring.

Beckett’s endings are paradigmatic of the way late modernist novels avoid either complete certainty or complete uncertainty in concluding, although his methods are different. Where Green changes register and alludes to his opening, and Ivy Compton-Burnett concludes with her speaking, undermining characters, Beckett’s first-person narrators offer endings that make and unmake, as they have all along. Molloy provides a key instance. Again, the end offers echoes—in this case, metafictional and self-undermining echoes of the beginning of the second part of the novel. The second part of Molloy begins, “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows” (92). At the end of the novel, Moran repeats and undermines these words: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (176). Through Moran’s attentive repetition and cancellation—the same techniques that make the trilogy into a work that refuses to be any one thing—the
reader comes to the end of the book and is left with no certain ground to stand on. In a similar way to Green, Beckett offers the reader two endings, but they destabilize each other, leaving the reader oscillating between them. As with Compton-Burnett, one has to make sense as best one can, with minimal encouraging help from the text.

The famous ending of *The Unnamable* does the same thing in an even more concentrated fashion. It concludes (or resists conclusion) with a relentlessly self-contradicting, self-undermining, five-page sentence that ends with the repetitive, self-contradicting seven words: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (414). This might serve as a motto for the late modernist project: through microscopically effective techniques, these novels exemplify ways to go on writing when it seems impossible to do so, for myriad aesthetic or historical reasons. The sentence offers uncertainty and certainty at once. Replacing “can’t” with an elliptical “will” changes everything, replacing paralysis with continuation. And yet “I’ll go on” is a self-contradictory way to end a book; “I can’t go on” would seem a more natural last line. “I’ll go on” is a refusal to come to a close at the point of conclusion, a contradiction of the full stop that follows.

The endings of Elizabeth Bowen’s novels provoke the same effect through their own methods. The last lines of *The House in Paris* are most telling here. Ray has taken Leopold away from the Fishers’ pension after Karen (Ray’s wife, Leopold’s mother) failed to meet Leopold there. The book began with an eleven-year-old girl named Henrietta “skidding away from the Gare du Nord in a taxi” (3); it ends with Ray and Leopold looking for a taxi to take them away from the Gare de Lyon, having left Henrietta there. The book ends: “The copper-dark night sky went glassy over the city crowned with signs and starting alight with windows, the wet square like a lake at the foot of the station ramp” (269).

The novel does not end with dialogue to create uncertainty; and though it echoes its opening, there is no self-cancellation. In some ways Bowen’s narratorial description of the
environment where she leaves her characters seems a more familiar mode to end a novel than those ways chosen by her late modernist contemporaries. And yet, something in her syntax refuses to be easily resolved. The last sentence may be about the sky, which goes glassy over the city and the square; in this case, the city is both something the sky goes glassy over and what starts to light up with windows. Or, it may be that the sentence moves from the sky to the city (“starting alight with windows”), then back to the sky going glassy over the wet square (a sense that could be clarified by repeating the word “over”). Or, the sentence may switch from describing something more like the sky’s actions to something more like the city’s, which it stays with: the city both crowned with signs and starting alight with windows. In this case, the description of the wet square as a lake stands more alone, independent from the rest of the description. The best reading is not obvious. Something is changing, something is starting alight, something is being described. Agency is shifting from place to place—just as “possession” of Leopold is shifting, perhaps. But the difficulty of fixing this sentence may be what matters. In some ways Bowen is the most surprisingly evasive of the late modernist writers examined here. Her endings, together with so much else about her writing, seem to be the most straightforward; on close examination they become much less easy to make sense of.

The sampling above shows that for all the different ways late modernist novelists write, they share a refusal to come to conclusion. Green finds a way to offer two endings through register, allusion, and rhythm; and Compton-Burnett’s dialogue endings refuse the reader the expected lesson or satisfactions, as do Beckett’s undermining or metafictional endings. Bowen’s grammatically challenging last sentence leaves the reader on similarly unsteady ground. Late modernist endings refuse to resolve. They do not typically give the reader a character’s personal epiphany, or a sense of a moment out of a present, fractured time, say, taken from mythological or cultural sources. Late modernist endings stay where they are, with the methods that have
brought them to that point. They tend not to leave the reader with a sense of affirmation, or peace, or recognition. Instead, through stylistic manipulation of small elements, late modernist novels suggest, take away, offer, and undermine. At the moment when one expects the work to spell out a lesson, the work “smiles,” or paradoxically offers more than one ending, or stops with a promise of continuing, or defers a single grammatical reading. In this way the ending of the novel is more like “just” another point in the novel, rather than a final culmination that would be critically useful, that would allow one to assess and fully position what has come before. Typically, this makes it hard to conclude.

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Looking at the strangeness and obliqueness of late modernist endings is a way of starting to conclude about late modernist styles more generally. The attempt to explain the significance of the late modernist novel in itself is made below. But as well as reminding us of the mood of late modernism, the endings above suggest some of the implications of the late modernist novel. In particular, late modernism raises questions about metafiction and minimalism in relation to postmodernism, as well as opening up issues connected to narration, knowledge, and realism.

Self-reflexive moments are common in late modernist novels. At several points, as this study has sought to examine, late modernist novels seem to suggest ways to read themselves. Compton-Burnett and Bowen include comparable moments of reading or writing, while Green’s imagery underscores the importance of presence and absence in his work. Although the metafictional moments at which Beckett stages scenes of his characters’ writing are important, his less frequently examined figures of repetition are essential to coming to a sense of the functioning of repetition in his work. Metafictional play is considered a hallmark of postmodern
literature, with Beckett often presented as an exemplary instance. The gentler, subtler self-reflexive moments in late modernist writers suggest the ways that their work moves towards this aspect of the postmodern aesthetic without quite reaching it. In this way, self-reflexive moments in their work allow us a further way to contextualize them, in between high modernist and postmodernist styles.

Late modernist work has similar implications for minimalism. In particular, late modernist novelists seem to be able to minimize productively—reducing their literary armoury but doing so, paradoxically, in such a way as to appear unique. Green, Compton-Burnett, and Beckett all reduce in their own ways—among other aspects, Green reduces even on the level of parts of words, and Compton-Burnett more formally by excising narrative commentary, while Beckett’s work at times seems to be a relentless paring down of the resources of the novel to its most basic constituents (Kenner, Flaubert 77). Only Bowen seems not to fit the minimalizing ethos of late modernist authors, and yet her work often proceeds through dialogue, like that of Green and Compton-Burnett, and is thematically focused on absence and nothing in ways that seem to relate to minimalism. Again, minimalism relates late modernist authors to the aesthetics of postmodernism, especially (once again) through the spareness of much of Beckett’s work in prose after the trilogy. And yet, again, late modernist authors seem to fit as partially with postmodern as with modernist aesthetics. In all these cases, an interesting contradiction comes about: for late modernist authors, the result of stripping away the expected components of the word or the novel is not a purely self-reflexive artefact. Rather—and even though they are all in a way writers of absence—for late modernists, minimalism produces something new, immediately recognizable, and paradoxically fecund.

This may relate to the point, made by several critics of the individual authors examined in this study, that there is a positive, productive power in late modernist works, whether one
calls it the “creative nothingness” (Eagleton, “Foreword” xxv) or the “obverse” produced in
Beckett’s work (Gibson, Beckett and Badiou 256), or the affirmative, even comic power of
Bowen’s (Corcoran 12-13). While focusing a great deal on doubt, this study has also sought to
give affirmation its place. The point is not that late modernist authors take everything apart, but
something subtler and stranger. They move between affirmation and negativity; their works
make and unmake. Again, this seems to place them at a remove from either the “presencing”
ethos of high modernism or postmodernism’s equally insistent focus on “absencing.”² Late
modernist novelists, writing “in-between” works, exist somewhere in between our more familiar
categories.

Although this study has focused on style, late modernist novels have profound
implications for twentieth-century fiction through their treatment of knowledge, their
innovations in narrative technique, and the terms of their relationship to realism. Bowen’s plots,
most obviously, focus on questions about which characters know the what, whom, and when—
changes in knowledge drive the novels on. But the other late modernist authors examined here
display similar concerns about knowing, from Compton-Burnett’s unpicking of common-sense
certainty through dialogue, to Beckett’s gradual, parodic dissolution of the thinking self. Late
modernist innovations in narrative technique relate to knowledge, as well as mattering in their
own right. Where Green’s narrator is oddly speculative, Compton-Burnett’s essentially
disappears: new modes of narration suggest new ways of charting knowledge and doubt. This
concern has important thematic variants. Late modernist novels could be examined as chapters
in a history of weakness, looking at the way their characters are repeatedly passive (Bowen),
paralyzed (Beckett), or examples of “complete helplessness in the world of fact” (Michael North
on Green [10]). What Beckett calls the novelty of “working with ignorance” is generalized in a

² Joseph Rosenberg, personal communication.
late modernist approach that takes the most unpromising materials and makes them new and strange.

As was mentioned in the introduction, such concerns—doubt, weakness, passivity—suggest ways of relating late modernist novelists to their period. This study has sought to set out the ways that late modernist styles, while encouraging such readings, also seem to resist them: the focus here has been more on the methods by which late modernist novelists gesture rather than on what in their period they might be pointing at. As we have seen, current criticism of late modernist novelists does seek to establish the ways in which they relate to the more realistic current seen in their contemporaries. In this connection, perhaps one could say that the late modernist novelists examined here seek to be more “lifelike” than realist (see Updike; Stevenson). That is, late modernist novels may not, for the most part, attempt grand explanations of large-scale social events or changes, but this does not mean that they are simply solipsistic artefacts, or “art for art’s sake” alone. Writers like Green and Beckett are concerned with what life is like, but in an unfamiliar way. As was mentioned in the introduction, an unexpected source of support for this approach comes from George Orwell in his essay “Inside the Whale,” where he argues that an uncommitted, helpless, passive novel may be the only justifiable kind of book to write in a time of crisis—simply as a way of staying human (47). Such a mode of writing is neither conventionally realistic, nor politically engaged in the manner of late modernists’ contemporaries, nor focused exclusively on interior life. For late modernism, to be lifelike is to escape patterning, to remain elusive, to come and go. If life ends all of a sudden, without us necessarily coming to any full understanding of it, then late modernist novels have to end this way too. If we experience things partially, if our truths are essentially ephemeral, the late modernist novel will mimic this by making and unmaking. Late modernist writers seek in their stylistic techniques to capture transience and uncertainty without fixing it. In this way, their
works stay true to the intransigent difficulty of living rather than offering a solution. Their determined lifelikeness is part of what makes their novels so attractive, and so hard to conclude about.

In this way, late modernist novels have further implications. They do not present the absence of meaning: rather, they seem to make us ask what happens if meanings come and go. Things matter and then cease to matter. We do not get transformative epiphanies with lasting effects in these works. Their structures do not aim to put the shards of experience into a new and compelling whole; rather, meaning comes, but then it passes again. If, as it sometimes seems, there is a structural compatibility between high modernist redemption and earlier structures of belief, late modernism seems to present something different, a microscopic, determined, constant resistance to belief and conclusion. But, as has been explained, late modernist works do not present a chaotic or dissolved formlessness. Though it has connections to what comes before and what comes after, late modernism is something in between.

Late modernist lifelikeness suggests the kind of faith in the human that Badiou observes in Beckett in his essays on the writer: late modernist works do not ask us to believe in anything outside themselves, do not ask us to subscribe to any mythology, political program, or philosophy. Instead they offer us something more lifelike, partial, and memorable. The human moments in their work tell us they matter, and resist mattering, and then pass by, and we remember them: Edith and Kate dancing in an empty ballroom; Toby Clare adding a single leaf to the gardener’s pile; Malone in bed, writing that he is looking for his pencil in order to find a way out of the words he is writing; Stella and Harrison, together and apart again, waiting for the All Clear. Soon we will forget.

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This study has attempted to set out the unusual and interesting stylistic techniques employed by late modernist authors, place these writers alongside one another and in the context of their predecessors in a new way, and explain their significance. Specifying lets one see what late modernist authors do that has not previously been fully appreciated; contextualizing helps one see the historical and aesthetic ramifications of their work. The implications of late modernism, set out above, are a way to begin to explain its significance.

In the case of Henry Green, one finds a novelist writing different kinds of presence and absence in individual sentences, through his themes and the speculative position his narrators take up. The results are novels that perpetually “come and go,” using stylistic innovation to refuse any full presence or consolatory ethos. In Compton-Burnett, the same effect is achieved through somewhat different means. Both Green and Compton-Burnett rely heavily on dialogue, but Compton-Burnett pursues this method even further. The results are works that depend almost entirely on their characters to move forward, but this means relying on characters who undermine one another constantly. Compton-Burnett’s novels explore major moral and philosophical problems about power, language, and civilization, without providing the reader with any firm or satisfying lessons about them. Instead the reader is left startled and questioning what previously seemed obvious. Beckett’s novels provoke a similar experience, but, once again, through a different set of techniques. In the trilogy almost everything, from the smallest to the largest elements, is repeated, and the text even figures its own repetitive action, resulting in a work that makes and unmakes itself at every step. The novel is reduced to its most basic elements, and the way it questions and destabilizes them through microscopic action results in something that seems like a new kind of art altogether. Bowen, meanwhile, initially seems more obviously concerned with recognizable historical and social worlds than other late modernist
authors. But her insistence on “something and nothing,” and use of “unwords” and scenes of reading, similarly refuse the reader the opportunity to be reassured or comforted by her work. Rather, like other late modernists, she makes as she unmakes.

These are things we see if we look closely. Late modernist works suggest and deny and defer through the manipulation of small elements. A paradox of late style, pointed out by Edward Said, is that it is both what puts together and dissolves (17). That is, through the same techniques the work both proceeds and threatens its own readability. In Green, it is deletion and omission that paradoxically become a personal signature; Compton-Burnett’s refusal to comment or assist the reader at all is utterly original, but carries with it the threat of losing the reader; in Beckett, similarly, repetition is both what makes the work instantly recognizable and threatens it with paralysis. Similarly, Bowen’s “unwords” and her circling around nothing make her sometimes baroque sentences strange and new, but also at times moves them beyond what can be deciphered. Late modernism is always in between.

As well as specifying—showing in detail what late modernist writers do that is unusual, both on the level of the sentence and in their handling of narrative structure and thematic material—this study seeks to put them in context. This has been done implicitly and explicitly, by comparing them at various points to their high modernist predecessors. Late modernist authors are distinguished from high modernist novelists by their use of small stylistic innovations towards ambiguous ends. Where high modernist stylistic innovation can be tempered or controlled by a mythological, psychological, or other structural framework, late modernist stylistic innovations, though in themselves sometimes less extreme, are performed without a net beneath, so to speak. They proceed without necessarily following an ordering pattern that comes to fruition; they are not even always fully consistent. By this means, late modernist writers do something that Beckett calls new to art (Shenker 148). They let chaos,
doubt, and nothingness in, and do not try to control it, transform it, or transcend it. Rather, they try to accommodate it, to use Beckett’s verb. One might even say that, in this way, late modernist authors are truer to what modernism means than high modernist authors are. One can see a structural compatibility between prior redemptive modes of belief and the consolations ultimately offered by some strains of high modernism; late modernism offers us something different.

To place late modernist writers in context is also to place them in conversation with each other. The aim is to set out a new continuum that notes the similarities and differences between them, setting out the ways they employ different techniques towards a single end. The major new comparison here is between Beckett and the three other novelists. Because he pursues his stylistic effects further than the other writers examined here, Beckett may seem unique; the purpose here has been to show the significance of the similarities between his aims and methods and theirs. Like Green’s, the surfaces of Beckett’s work are pitted and strange, full of repetitions and omissions; like Compton-Burnett, he depicts a world in which expected truths are ripped through; like Bowen, his prose circles around a nothingness at the heart of knowledge and experience. Beckett is the spearhead, the writer who goes further than the others. But his example and his aesthetics allow one to see late modernist writing differently. Behind him, the other late modernist writers are drawn into a new arrangement. One can see them pulling and pushing at the conventions of prose and fiction in order to accommodate doubt and chaos as part of its texture; one can see them perpetually giving and taking away meanings, as Beckett does; one can see them creating works which refuse any redemption, consolation, or concluding pat on the back. Seen alongside Beckett, Compton-Burnett’s philosophical significance comes through all the more clearly; placed alongside Beckett’s, the styles of Green and Bowen seem less superficially eccentric and more deeply strange, powerful, and important.
The value of contextualizing is that, as well as changing our view of late modernist authors, placing Beckett in conversation with these writers changes our view of him also. He is still the opposing inheritor of Joyce, but his project no longer seems as isolated or *sui generis*. The direction that Beckett explores no longer seems solitary. Through these other writers, Beckett is also more connected to the particular concerns of his time, even if it is hard to be absolutely specific about what these are. What matters is less the problem dealt with than the comparable effect of its treatment.

Oddly, after examining other late modernist writers in detail, Beckett’s work starts to seem like an assembly made from all of their techniques. Put Green’s tiny omissions, repetitions, and moments of rare lyricism together with Compton-Burnett’s undermining of character and conventional pieties in a minimally realistic world, and add Bowen’s obsession with nothing and absence, and you have a work that sounds a lot like a novel by Beckett.

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To specify what is particular about late modernist writing, and put late modernism in new aesthetic and historical contexts, is already to begin to explain why it is new and why it matters. The implications—just elaborated—of late modernist writing for subjects as diverse as epistemology and realism suggest some other reasons. In this light, to reduce late modernist endings to a single lesson would be to get it wrong. But, as Molloy puts it early on, “You have to say goodbye, it would be foolish not to say goodbye, when the time comes” (8).

One starts with commas and omissions, repetitions and retorts, neologisms and sentences that change shape. These details and problems grow into patterns. Different methods are employed by the different authors about different subjects: Green focuses on presence and
absence, Compton-Burnett on problems around power and language; Beckett’s figures of repetition call attention to the text’s concerns and functioning, as do Bowen’s scenes of close reading. Late modernist writers differ from each other in important ways, but they share an ethos. And while there are points of comparison, they all differ importantly from their high modernist predecessors and their more realist peers. They come together, behind Beckett, in the effort to write in such a way as to “accommodate the chaos” (Driver 219). The way they write makes it hard to say that the chaos is a historical or political fact outside the work; what matters is the way they find different ways, in their writing, to gesture. And so one attempts to chart the ways that late modernist styles add up to a faltering gesture. As Said’s book on the subject elaborates, we can learn from late style, which suggests ways of going on in times where everything seems to collapse. If they present something lifelike, as was suggested, late modernist authors also suggest that what is most lifelike is transience, is things passing, is making and unmaking. There is something wrong with concluding, with summarizing what cannot be summarized, with moving on from moving and intransigent parts into consoling statements about the whole. For this reason, late modernist novels end with unexpected gestures that refuse satisfaction. They leave you wanting to say more; they leave the critical act importantly incomplete.
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