

# **Beckett's and Murakami's 'Vaguened' Worlds**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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## Summary

On the first page of the first *Happy Days* typescript, Samuel Beckett wrote the self-instruction: ‘vague it.’ Haruki Murakami writes in a similarly ‘vague’ prose from a contemporary Japanese setting, stripping cultural markers of their surrounding context. Crucially, both authors’ writing is shaped by self-translation, the movement between languages informing their liminal ‘worlds.’ This thesis aims to highlight and problematise biases informing the idea of ‘vague’ literature, with a focus on the relationship between contextually denuded writing and constructs of ‘universality.’

I examine depictions of architectural interiors in selected extracts by both authors, discussing the link between these interior settings and the crafting of a prose that appears to turn from the ‘outside’ world. I discuss the presence of such ‘vague’ writing in both 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary contexts, with the aid of three main methodologies. The first is a ‘typology of vagueness’ according to which the thesis has been organised by chapter. The second is that of close reading: my first three chapters are each structured around a small number of chosen extracts. I examine these extracts in light of the typology of three different types of ‘vaguening’ I have identified in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work, discussing the ways in which interior space contributes to a sense of cultural indeterminacy in their texts. The final two chapters take the form of research findings, following these first exploratory exercises. Chapter 4 broadens to consider the three aforementioned ‘vaguening’ techniques with relation to a range of international author case studies – focusing on work by Jamaica Kincaid, Adonis, and Ana Castillo – partially to interrogate this typology and foreground its constructed nature. Chapter 5 applies my third methodology, namely an analysis of three existing theories of ‘world literature’, using each to examine the impact of ‘vague’ writing on an international scale.

In this final analysis I discuss a fourth and last type of ‘vaguening’, linked to an apparently culturally interchangeable atmosphere in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work. Both concluding chapters maintain a focus on the relevance of architectural interiors to the ‘vaguening’ discussed, taking into account the ways in which ‘domestic’ writing from underrepresented contexts has been viewed as trivial or overly ‘specific.’

This thesis presents key examples in which ‘vaguening’ is used to make a different statement in canonical literature versus in literature written from decolonial and feminist perspectives. These findings contribute to the idea that ‘vague’ writing appears neutral, yet contains a diversity of politically weighted content. An appreciable link between ‘vagueness’, constructs of ‘universality’, and Anglocentric and Eurocentric bias is demonstrated. The possibility that authors writing from underrepresented backgrounds experience a pressure to ‘universalise’ their experience through ‘vaguening’ is considered. The potential of reclaimed ‘vagueness’, with special attention to instances of the female-authored uncanny, is explored.

In this manner, I provide illuminating background to discussions of ‘vague’ literature in contemporary times of uncertainty, charting both the advantages and the pitfalls of such literary indeterminacy.



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## Introduction

### Clarifying ‘Vagueness’: The Case for a Beckett-Murakami Comparison

#### 1. *A Study of Obfuscations*

On the first page of the first *Happy Days* typescript, Beckett wrote the self-instruction: ‘vaguén it.’<sup>1</sup> This ‘vaguening’ – broadly speaking, the obscuring of contextual markers – ostensibly characterised much of his *œuvre* following his turn from the relative verbosity of his early works.<sup>2</sup> Seeking to decode Beckett’s vagueness, readers may search for ‘hidden’ Irish specificity in his work; similarly, they may observe in it signs of modernist multilingual ‘cosmopolitanism.’ However, proceeding in either of these directions may lead readers to admit, paradoxically, to the presence of abundant references to material culture and contextual detail in Beckett’s writing, a fact seemingly at odds with its reputed vagueness.

Beckett’s vagueness, then, is – appropriately – difficult to pinpoint. Indeed, what has been labelled ‘vagueness’ in Beckett’s case could perhaps more accurately be called an absence of consistently detailed cultural context. As this study will argue, an apposite way to view this purported vagueness is through Beckett’s abundant indoor settings.

While his interiors are in fact reasonably detailed, they often lack situating description. In

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<sup>1</sup> S. E. Gontarski, *Beckett’s ‘Happy Days’: A Manuscript Study* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> As James Little summarises, ‘John Pilling has remarked that Beckett’s early poetry is marked by ‘inwardness’, with Beckett regularly using a first-person voice that deliberately excludes the reader with its range of references. (7) As the speaker of the poem ‘Casket of Pralinen for a Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin’ (1931) would put it, somewhat understatedly, Beckett’s early writing ‘was perhaps inclined to be just a shade too self-conscious’ (CPSB, p. 33). In his fiction, alongside this hermeneutic enclosure, there is a strong focus on alienation from the outside world which is frequently described using images of confinement.’ Examples of culturally specific early prose arguably include *More Pricks Than Kicks* and *Murphy*. (James Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 14; Samuel Beckett, *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), pp. 77-226; Samuel Beckett, *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. I*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York, Grove Press, 2010), pp. 1-168.)

certain cases – as Chapter 1 of this study will discuss – such flashes of detail serve to emphasise the surrounding *absence* of description in Beckett’s settings.

The writing of contemporary Japanese author Haruki Murakami is, to put it simply, *vague in the same way*. Culturally specific references in his work are denuded of their surrounding context, rendering them absurd. In ‘A Poor-Aunt Story’, the characters look ‘across the water towards the bronze unicorns on the other shore.’<sup>3</sup> This detail is, ostensibly, the exact opposite of ‘vague’: it refers to actual unicorn sculptures outside the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery in Tokyo.<sup>4</sup> However, for non-Japanese readers this image may create a sense of jarring, dreamlike unreality; for Japanese readers, it may stand out as a sudden recognisable detail in an otherwise thinly sketched cityscape.

Will Slocombe notes that ‘the trope of translation is central to Murakami’s works’, emphasising that Murakami’s focus is often on translation as ‘not a linguistic process, but a thematic issue’ present even among ‘individuals who speak the same language.’<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Murakami’s writing combines this focus on the translation process with recurrent references to vague – or ‘vague’ – architectural settings.

Apparently featureless spaces abound in his novels: both *A Wild Sheep Chase*<sup>6</sup> and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* begin in elevators.<sup>7</sup> Like Beckett’s bowler hats and greatcoats,<sup>8</sup> specific objects reappear throughout Murakami’s *œuvre*. As Jay Rubin notes, his narrators frequently perform ‘mindless physical task[s]’ such as ‘ironing shirts, cooking pasta, [or] mowing lawns’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘A Poor-Aunt Story’, trans. by Jay Rubin, in *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, trans. by Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 159-182 (p. 160).

<sup>4</sup> Jay Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Will Slocombe, ‘Haruki Murakami and the Ethics of Translation’, *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 6.2 (2004), 1-11 (p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, trans. by Alfred Birnbaum (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, trans. by Alfred Birnbaum (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Julie Bates, *Beckett’s Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Rubin, p. 65.

In terms of their settings, both authors may initially appear to be worlds apart: this thesis will discuss Murakami's use of popular culture and brand names, for instance, at length. By contrast, as Peter Boxall notes, Beckett's writing appears to consistently jar with the contexts of its inception: he states, '[i]t is difficult, for example, to accustom oneself to the fact that Beckett's *Ghost Trio* was first televised in the year that *Star Wars* was released'.<sup>10</sup> However, despite such differences, this thesis will demonstrate the manner in which objects and cultural references act in a remarkably similar way in both authors' *œuvres*, taking on a translation-informed role occasionally akin to props or variables.

In terms of further similarities between the authors' work, ears are obsessed over in Murakami's writing<sup>11</sup> as a portal between self and other, similar to the 'tympanum'<sup>12</sup> of Beckett's *Unnamable*. Murakami's use of doubles, such as the translation partner<sup>13</sup> or the Rat<sup>14</sup> – who lives elsewhere writing novels and sends his finished manuscripts to the protagonist<sup>15</sup> – seems to imply that writing itself is a process of distancing or translation. Like Beckett's works, Murakami's writing initially appears vague but contains contextual detail present in, for want of a better word, 'concealed' form. Even such a cursory summary of both authors' *œuvres* reveals striking similarities. However, to borrow Malone's phrase, Murakami has never directly referenced such Beckettian influences, 'in spite of all.'<sup>16</sup>

Both authors maintain complex relationships to a form of colonially influenced privilege. Patrick Bixby uses Homi Bhabha's definition of the 'unhomely' to discuss the

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 27; Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 15; Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> 'I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either'. (Samuel Beckett, *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. II*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), p. 376.)

<sup>13</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Wind/Pinball: Two Novels*, trans. by Ted Goossen (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 26; *Pinball, 1973*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 148; *Hear the Wind Sing*.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, pp. 171-281 (p. 173).

manner in which Beckett's liminal relationship to Irishness imbues his writing with key historical insight.<sup>17</sup> Murakami's work can be read as a critique of Japanese imperialism, his bilingual 'vagueness' seen as an effort to question loyalty to a single language or culture.<sup>18</sup> Both authors wrote for audiences outside of their respective nations, and aspects of their public personae make them seem reluctant to appear as figurehead 'national' writers. Murakami is disinterested in the Bundan, or Japanese literary guild,<sup>19</sup> and, like Beckett, lived abroad in 'self-imposed exile.'<sup>20</sup> However, such reputations are rather easily disputed: nonfiction works such as *Underground*,<sup>21</sup> for instance, see Murakami embracing political engagement in a Japanese context; Declan Kiberd describes Beckett's writing as 'not so much a rejection of Gaelic tradition as of various smug representations of it.'<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, any 'transcendence' of cultural context both authors enact is arguably a product of their privileged perspectives.

Both authors have backgrounds in translation important to their respective cross-cultural images. Beckett both self-translated<sup>23</sup> and provided translations for a range of publications including *transition*.<sup>24</sup> Murakami is a 'celebrity translator' in Japan, his visibility allowing him to creatively rework existing texts.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, both authors used self-translation to the same creative end. Beckett wryly explained his turn to French as a means of writing 'without style',<sup>26</sup> in reality creating a performatively bilingual voice

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Bixby, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Slocombe, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Carl Stretcher, *Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2014), Loc 189 of 5837.

<sup>20</sup> Beckett himself, nominated to Aosdána in 1981, was consistently absent at their events. (Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (England, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 1.)

<sup>21</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Underground*, trans. by Alfred Birnbaum and Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London, Vintage: 1996), p. 537.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, of Patrick Bowles, he wrote that 'the revision of his text gave [him] so much trouble that I felt it would be simpler to do the following translations [himself]'. (Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Cyril Lucas, 4 January 1956', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-1956*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 591-592 (p. 591).)

<sup>24</sup> Sinéad Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> His translations of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Great Gatsby* have become bestsellers in their own right, the latter triggering Japan's recent translation boom. (James Hadley and Motoko Akashi, 'Translation and Celebrity: The Translation Strategies of Haruki Murakami and Their Implications for the Visibility Paradigm', *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 23, 3 (2015), 458-474 (p. 471).)

<sup>26</sup> 'Parce que qu'en français, c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style'. (Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Excuse My French: Samuel Beckett's Style of No Style', *The New Centennial Review*, 16, 3 (2016), 133-150 (p. 133).)

that further stylised his writing.<sup>27</sup> Murakami also drew on translation in order to craft his prose, writing in his ‘severely limited’<sup>28</sup> English and back-translating to Japanese to attain concision.<sup>29</sup> Previous, brief instances of the Beckett-Murakami comparison have been made on the basis of their similar self-translation processes. Rebecca Walkowitz notes this connection,<sup>30</sup> and Rubin makes a similar comparison, albeit contrasting Murakami’s ‘easily digestible, pastel-colored world’ with Beckett’s ‘hard-edged clowning’.<sup>31</sup> However, neither critic’s view takes into account their other, numerous similarities.

Before proceeding with this argument, it is indeed important to note certain differences in both authors’ approaches to bilingual writing, due in part to Murakami’s notably flexible attitude to translated work. While his style originated with the rigorous bilingual method of composition outlined above, the author is also known for his unorthodox approach to the translation of his writing by others. Lacking the time to read manuscript galleys of his novels in English, Murakami has outlined the manner in which his assistants read the texts in order to inform him of any major differences.<sup>32</sup> This system appears born of necessity, and indeed leaves Murakami open to criticism of what could be perceived as a cynically prolific writing approach. However, according to an opposing line of argument, Murakami’s accommodation of differences in translation is itself interesting, especially when considered alongside the other translational aspects of his writing.

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<sup>27</sup> When asked to explain his turn to French, Beckett first responded that he would be happy to do so. However, within a few months, he issued the statement that he did not, in fact, know why he wrote in French, nor why he wrote at all. However, when pressed, he confessed in ‘a strong or rather weak Dublin accent’ that it was ‘pour faire remarquer moi’ (to make myself noticed). However, as Juliet Taylor-Batty observes, the correct sentence should be ‘pour me faire remarquer’, and the ungrammaticality functions ‘to get the word *moi* noticed.’ Thus, Beckett ‘misuses language in order to make it function performatively’. (Georges Duthuit, qtd. in Juliet Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modern Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 2013), p. 150; Taylor-Batty, p. 151).

<sup>28</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘The Birth of My Kitchen-Table Fiction: An Introduction to Two Short Novels’, in *Wind/Pinball: Two Novels*, trans. by Ted Goossen (Knopf: New York, 2015), pp. vii-xvii (p. xiii).

<sup>29</sup> While Murakami eventually abandoned this technique, he still uses translation as a means of acquiring distance from his writing. Having a work ‘converted into another language by someone else’s hand’ allows him to ‘enjoy it coolly as a quasi-outsider’. He still writes by mentally ‘converting Japanese [...] into a mock foreign language’. (Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Kieran Robert Maynard, ‘Lost Chapters in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*: A Translation and Commentary’, *Pacific Asian Inquiry*, 4, 1 (2013), 169-179 (p. 176).)

<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> David Karashima, *Who We’re Reading When We’re Reading Murakami* (New York: Soft Skull, 2020), p. 120.

Walkowitz notes that Murakami's native Japanese itself appears uneasily translated.<sup>33</sup> He uses the first-person pronoun *boku* to denote an informal 'I', instead of the pronouns *watakushi* or *watashi* traditionally used in Japanese fiction.<sup>34</sup> This appears unusual, as if Murakami is making overly literal translations from an English text. A preoccupation with the untranslatable is visible in Murakami's work: he employs *katakana*, a script usually used for loan-words, to depict a wider variety of unusual speech.<sup>35</sup> This technique poses a problem for translators, as there is no equivalent to such a choice in European single-script writing systems.<sup>36</sup> Kenzaburō Ōe stated that 'Murakami Haruki writes in Japanese, but his writing is not really Japanese.'<sup>37</sup> To anyone acquainted with research on Beckett's multilingualism, this will sound familiar: Sinéad Mooney compares *Watt*, Beckett's last novel in English, to 'a work of faulty machine-generated translation.'<sup>38</sup>

Certain main similarities emerge in both authors' careers: a background in translation, an international readership, and an apparent vagueness of setting notably reflected in their treatment of indoor space. This latter focus allows their works to convey an ostensible veneer of placeless depoliticisation, while containing veiled or covert allusions to both authors' respective eras. With relation to these points, my study will focus on linguistic translation in part, but is more concerned with what I will refer to as conceptual translation. This thesis will discuss the content conveyed or misinterpreted across cultural boundaries, and the extent to which such losses in translation matter if a work is contentiously deemed to have 'universal' appeal.

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<sup>33</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>34</sup> Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Kenzaburō Ōe, in Kazuo Ishiguro and Kenzaburō Ōe, 'The Novelist in Today's World', in *Japan in the World*, ed. by Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 163-176 (p. 173).

<sup>38</sup> Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, p. 2.

Megan Quigley's *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* asks whether vagueness was 'a vital feature in the self-definition of the modernist novel', linking 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in analytic philosophy to the linguistic experimentation of authors such as James Joyce, Henry James and Virginia Woolf during this cosmopolitan time.<sup>39</sup> Works such as Mooney's *A Tongue Not Mine* have discussed the manner in which 'the double inscription of each [Beckett] work in French and English denies the reader access to any unified or originary surface of interpretation'.<sup>40</sup> As Graham Fraser notes, the word 'vague' comes from the Latin *vagus*, meaning 'wandering', 'inconstant', or 'uncertain': he uses this term with reference to what he calls an 'epistemological restlessness' in Beckett's writing.<sup>41</sup> It is possible – obvious, even – to posit a connection between vagueness and translation. This study aims to build on such criticism in order to further this connection.

'Vagueness' in literature has been used, Quigley notes, as a 'term of censure';<sup>42</sup> it may be similarly considered a negative outcome when translating. Unless exact equivalents are found, idiomatic phrases and cultural references risk loss when a work is translated for international consumption. This study will take as one of its central premises the fact that as self-translators, both authors consciously make use of this translated 'vagueness', exploring the (im)possibility of cultural transposition and the risk of miscommunication in *all* language. However, more interesting still is the idea that 'vagueness' is perhaps a misapplied term with relation to both authors. As a reference that can seem 'vague' to one audience may have a precise cultural significance to another, even the very proposition that these authors are vague *at all* will be problematised.

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<sup>39</sup> Megan Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. x.

<sup>40</sup> Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, p. 199.

<sup>41</sup> Graham Fraser, "'Haze Sole Certitude": Beckett's Late Vaguenings', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 38, 2 (2015), 117-133 (p. 118).

<sup>42</sup> Quigley, p. ix.



For this reason, where possible I refer to vagueness and ‘vagueness’ as distinct ideas throughout this study. Most commonly, I place the term ‘vagueness’ in inverted commas in order to illustrate the subjectivity implied by this concept. When referring to a given image or reference – in other words, a unit of meaning that provides vagueness, or acts as vague, in a particular context – I omit such quotation marks. As a result, I may refer to the ‘vagueness’ of Jamaica Kincaid’s work as a whole, but I may discuss the interplay between vagueness and specificity within a given sentence in Beckett’s *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

‘Vaguening’ appears to be a process characterised by complexity at a text’s every stage of development, from inception to reception. It is important to remember that while the term was originally applied in a compositional context, this first officially acknowledged ‘vaguening’ was itself not linear or neat. Gontarski discusses the effortful nature of Beckett’s descriptions when setting the scene for *Happy Days*, noting Beckett’s ‘three separate attempts to render the set description with mathematical precision’, and the setting’s eventual (slight) simplification after two typescripts and five versions.<sup>43</sup> By this second typescript and fifth version, some changes have been made: the grassy expanse, originally ‘rising gently’, has become ‘scorched’; and a description of the respective heights of the two ledges has been simplified.<sup>44</sup> What unites both versions, however, is the aim to achieve symmetry, albeit first intended as ‘severe symmetry’ and then amended to ‘strict symmetry.’<sup>45</sup> This original instance of ‘vaguening’ appears closely tied to an attempted precision.

‘Vaguening’ thus effects a peculiarly doubled, contradictory movement: the term arose in the context of a series of stage directions that would successively attempt to pare

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<sup>43</sup> Gontarski, *Beckett’s ‘Happy Days’*, p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

back and, absurdly, to *clarify* a given scene. It is interesting to note James Little's observation that while Rosemary Pountney sees the *Happy Days* note-to-self as 'explicit testimony'<sup>46</sup> to Beckett's poetics of 'vaguening' later drafts, 'Winnie's situation was vague from very early on in the compositional process.'<sup>47</sup> S. E. Gontarski's manuscript study reveals that many cultural markers that occur subsequently in the text were removed, Willie originally wearing striped pyjamas recalling the uniforms worn in concentration camps, and the characters conversing about recent nuclear strikes.<sup>48</sup> However, Little appears to argue that the term 'vaguening', in its original context, it did not apply particularly to questions of place and political content. He observes that 'the principal 'vaguening' to the stage space of *Happy Days* concerned not the place of action as such but rather the stage measurements.'<sup>49</sup>

It is clear that this first instance of 'vaguening' applied to a situation in which a lot is described but not much is given away; it could easily be extrapolated that spatial layout played an important role in Beckett's conceptualisation of a 'vaguened' world. While my study is concerned primarily with 'vaguening' at the later stage of audience reception – namely, how cultural contexts may be *read into* texts on an international scale – it is also vital to acknowledge that 'vaguening' is a contested concept from the very first draft.

In Murakami's case, for instance, Michiko Kakutani uses an analogy based on the composition process in order to criticise *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* for its inconclusive plot. She writes, "'Wind-Up Bird' often seems so messy that its refusal of closure feels less like an artistic choice than simple laziness, a reluctance on the part of the author to run his manuscript through the typewriter (or computer) one last time.'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, for a writer whose settings could be considered minimal or sparse, the inconclusive nature of

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<sup>46</sup> Rosemary Pountney, qtd. in Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> Gontarski, *Beckett's 'Happy Days'*, p. 49; p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Michiko Kakutani, qtd. in Karashima, p. 147.

Murakami's work also means it may be viewed according to a kind of conceptual 'messiness.' Coupled with his perceived lack of rigour regarding the translation process, it is interesting to note the manner in which 'vagueness' leaves an author such as Murakami open to charges not only of being terse but also, perhaps, circuitous and even unrefined in his writing approach. As this study will show, while technically 'vague', Murakami's novels make use of repetition and even, at times, a kind of cyclical 'excess.' In short, 'vagueness', as a concept applied to writing, is broad in scope. It is possible that more variations on the term are needed in order to achieve a granular understanding of perceived indeterminacy in literature.

Such issues of apparent 'vagueness' and 'specificity' are vital to the analysis of contemporary translated literature. David Damrosch asks whether 'expanding communication and interconnection [will] open up a world of rich diversity' or rather lead to 'a spreading *loss* of minority cultures and their languages, a "harrowing down" that will leave only 'a commercialized global monoculture'.<sup>51</sup> This study will contribute to such debate by interrogating Beckett's and Murakami's ostensible 'placelessness' in terms of its relation to canonical literary forms.

Comparing as it does the writing of an Irish and a Japanese author, such a thesis statement may appear, at a glance, to disregard the very different histories of both authors' cultural contexts, practically enacting a version of the kind of homogenising gaze Damrosch critiques. However, the links between Beckett and Murakami are clearer on examination. Murakami's frequent and often possibly ironic citation of a form of modernist 'high culture', including explicit references to W. B. Yeats<sup>52</sup> and Ernest Hemingway,<sup>53</sup> can be read as a comment on a Eurocentrically- or Anglocentrically-

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<sup>51</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> See Jonathan Ellis, Mitoko Hirabayashi and Haruki Murakami, "'In Dreams Begins Responsibility": An Interview with Haruki Murakami', *The Georgia Review*, 59, 3 (2005), 548-567 (p. 550).

<sup>53</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Men Without Women*, trans. by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen (London: Harvill Secker, 2017); Ernest Hemingway, *Men Without Women* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927).

influenced Japan. A link to Japan, on the other hand, can be observed in modernism's focus on East Asian art forms, the interest in *nō* theatre as advanced by Padraic Colum,<sup>54</sup> Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats<sup>55</sup> providing a notable example of this, at times, fetishistic borrowing. Beckett's Japanese affinities have been similarly documented.<sup>56</sup> If Beckett can be situated in a modernist tradition that already reworked East Asian media, and Murakami's writing makes deliberate reference to Eurocentric canonical norms, it follows that each author can be read as referring to the other in an interestingly circular manner.

Considering the similarity of their self-translation techniques, Murakami's lack of reference to Beckett remains puzzling. The idea that to cite Beckett would be to expose too foundational an influence seems a flawed explanation in Murakami's case. As this study will show, Murakami's work appears to make repeated and self-reflexive reference to its own influences: if anything, it follows that the author may consider such transparency a virtue. As an absent cultural reference, the unacknowledged Beckettian influence provokes interesting questions. Are Murakami's intertextual citations less straightforward than they seem? Both the Beckett and Murakami *œuvres* appear to contain a limited set of repeated cultural markers, creating the impression of simplicity. Murakami's lack of allusion to Beckett introduces the possibility that the author's repeated citations create something like a decoy, easily understood frame of reference, hiding the work's more complex foundations. As the following chapters will demonstrate, this technique may be read as an attempt, observable in both authors' writing, to discourage contextually based interpretation.

The idea of defining such often slippery 'cultural markers' or 'intertextual references' themselves – often in their capacity as the sites of a 'vaguened' cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Christopher Murray, 'Padraic Colum's *The Land* and Cultural Nationalism', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 2, 2 (1996), 5-15 (p. 5).

<sup>55</sup> Earl Miner, 'Pound and Fenollosa Papers Relating to *Nō*', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 53, 1 (1991), 12-16 (p. 12).

<sup>56</sup> Masaki Kondo, '*Ill Seen Ill Said* and the Japanese Spatial Concept *Ma*', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 19 (2008), 67-74 (p. 67); Kumiko Kiuchi, 'Finding a Form for the Speechless,' *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 29, 2 (2017), 325-336.

exchange – recurs throughout this thesis. I aim to examine the manner in which both authors use limited or repeated cultural references to create insular, microcosmic ‘worlds.’ However, before elaborating further on this idea, it is important to flag some of the more troubling implications of this interior focus.

2. *‘I think any pattern is probably coincidental’<sup>57</sup>: ‘Vaguened’ Literature as Microcosm*

This study grew out of initial, fascinated comparisons between Beckett’s prose and certain early Murakami works, such as *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *The Elephant Vanishes*. At its core was an intended exploration of the manner in which such contextually denuded fiction nonetheless appears to capture a given cultural reality. More extensive reading of the Murakami *œuvre*, however, quickly led to a critique of the work’s problematic elements.

Murakami’s two-dimensional and often misogynistic depictions of female characters have been commented on with something approaching unanimity by contemporary critics. However, an even more unsettling aspect of this misogyny – namely, what appears as the repeated sexualisation of teenage female characters in his novels – is less often acknowledged in criticism and reviews of the work. Mieko Kawakami touches on this latter topic in her interview with the author, although Murakami appears to react obliviously to such readings.<sup>58</sup> In addition to this, Kawakami’s interview focuses for the

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<sup>57</sup> Interviewing Murakami about his gender politics, Mieko Kawakami notes ‘[a] common reading is that your male characters are fighting their battles unconsciously, on the inside, leaving the women to do the fighting in the real world.’ In this manner, Kawakami argues, these female characters appear only to exist in order to aid the male protagonist’s self-realisation. However, in response to this point, Murakami answers, ‘I think any pattern is probably coincidental.’ (Mieko Kawakami and Haruki Murakami, ‘A Feminist Critique of Murakami Novels, With Murakami Himself’, trans. by Sam Bett and David Boyd (2020) <https://lithub.com/a-feminist-critique-of-murakami-novels-with-murakami-himself/> [Accessed 5 February 2021].)

<sup>58</sup> ‘MK: But what about the gap between her and the narrator?...When Mariye starts asking him about her breasts, did you struggle at all over how he should respond?’

most part on the issue of Murakami's thinly-sketched female characters more generally. Furthermore, in both this interview and her article 'Acts of Recognition: On the Women Characters of Haruki Murakami', Kawakami praises Murakami's particular portrayal of one female character in the short story 'Sleep.'<sup>59</sup> While this analysis advances an original focus on what is arguably an underrated short story, the issue remains that one sensitive portrayal does not make up for the other, quite numerous, problems with the Murakami *œuvre*.

Kawakami's promotion of a feminist re-interrogation of Murakami's novels nonetheless appears as a step in the right direction, when compared with other analyses of the author's more indefensible content. In an article titled 'Murakami is Terrible Now', Jeva Lange flags that the contemporary work includes such disappointing content as *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, a novel she calls 'a vague probing of the fallout of a false rape allegation, more interested in the impact on the male victim than the motivations of his female friend'.<sup>60</sup> The same article notes the manner in which the author's 2018 novel *Killing Commendatore* is narrated by a protagonist who repeatedly comments on a thirteen-year-old character's breasts.<sup>61</sup> However, Lange also praises *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* as an example of the author's more profound early

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**HM:** I know what you're saying. But the fact that she asks him for his opinion on her breasts suggests that she doesn't really see him as a man. She doesn't recognize him as a sexual object. This strengthens the introspectiveness, or philosophical nature, of their dialogue.' (Ibid.)

<sup>59</sup> Kawakami states, '[b]ut of all the women that you've written, the one that stays with me most persistently is the protagonist in the short story "Sleep" (*The Elephant Vanishes*, 1993). I've read lots of female characters written by women and lots of female characters written by men, but to this day, I've never encountered another woman like the character in "Sleep." It's an extraordinary achievement.' She praises the same story in 'Acts of Recognition: On the Women Characters of Haruki Murakami', writing, '[w]hat it depicts is not a stock female loneliness or hopelessness, the kind women are used to identifying with, through sympathy and familiarity, because they can see themselves. This human loneliness, relayed to us through a strange tension that won't let up for a second, moots the fact that the narrator is a woman. Yes, because women are people.' (Kawakami, in Kawakami and Murakami, <https://lithub.com/a-feminist-critique-of-murakami-novels-with-murakami-himself/>; Mieko Kawakami, 'Acts of Recognition: On the Women Characters of Haruki Murakami', trans. by Sam Bett and David Boyd (2019) <https://lithub.com/acts-of-recognition-on-the-women-characters-of-haruki-murakami/> [Accessed 5 February 2021].)

<sup>60</sup> Jeva Lange, 'Murakami is Terrible Now' (2018) <https://theweek.com/articles/800717/murakami-terrible-now> [Accessed 5 February 2021].

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

work, neglecting to analyse the latter novel's similar voyeuristic portrayal of a teenage character.<sup>62</sup>

Herein lies one of the most noteworthy aspects of the Murakami *œuvre* – such troubling portrayals recur in many of his novels, and if anything the above examples appear to indicate that these tropes become more exaggerated in the later work. While Stephen Snyder claims that Murakami's *œuvre* is becoming increasingly progressive, he nonetheless acknowledges that, 'a Murakami book will always be about some schlubby 30 year old guy.'<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this quotation in itself presents a particularly relevant example of how the Murakami *œuvre* is understood: the novels are formulaic, and perhaps their content is taken less seriously on these grounds.<sup>64</sup>

Citing the above summation by Snyder, Eric Margolis states that, 'sex in Murakami clearly represents an outdated norm to move beyond by reading contemporary women writers,' but adds that '[w]hile the individual scenes are not problematic, when taken together, they represent a troublesome pattern to explicitly reject.'<sup>65</sup> It is interesting to explore such opposing critical attitudes to what can be termed the 'accumulative' effect of Murakami's problematic content. On one hand, the formulaic quality of the novels could provoke a form of desensitisation in the reader. This latter idea is exemplified, for instance, by Snyder's argument. The statement that Murakami's narrators will 'always' be a certain way may even imply that, in Snyder's view, the narrator's dubious cluelessness is an essential element of the Murakami formula. Margolis's statement presents a counterargument that nonetheless appears imperfect. His quotation above

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.; Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Snyder, qtd. in Eric Margolis, 'What's Up With Bad Sex in Murakami?' (2019) <https://metropolisjapan.com/sex-haruki-murakami/> [Accessed 8 February 2021].

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, this quote itself seems to present issues of 'vaguening' in translation: as an Americanisation of the Yiddish *zhlob*, the term 'schlub' is a culturally specific term now broadly employed. Thus, Murakami's status as an author who appears simultaneously 'placed' and 'placeless' problematises neat descriptions of his worlds. (Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960), p. 447; Merriam-Webster, 'Schlub' (2022) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/schlub> [Accessed June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021].)

<sup>65</sup> Margolis, <https://metropolisjapan.com/sex-haruki-murakami/>

suggests that Murakami's female characters are insufficiently developed, but in a manner that only appears troublesome when the *œuvre* is considered as a whole.

Neither view seems a satisfying analysis when applied to Murakami's more unsettling tropes, such as the recurrence of narrators who normalise the sexualisation of underage individuals. One example of such content is surely sufficient to provoke criticism of the author's work: arguably, these instances should not need to be numerous. As in the case of Grant Snider's 'Murakami Bingo' cartoon, which euphemistically cites 'Weird Sex'<sup>66</sup> as a constant in the author's *œuvre*, this content risks being judged yet another puzzling and anomalous aspect of the author's work.

In a study that seeks to explore how architectural representations of confinement and compartmentalisation serve to fragment a novel's historical context, it seems all the more necessary to begin by addressing Murakami's problematic content. Acknowledging this more troubling side to his work appears key to discussion of how certain literature has been viewed as allegorical, nonmimetic, or otherwise unconnected to a 'real life' context.

As my introduction mentioned at its outset, much contextually-based critical analysis of Beckett's and Murakami's writing seeks to situate both authors' purgatorial worlds in a 'concrete' historical reality. In such readings, Beckett's blank rooms are located among Ireland's psychiatric institutions;<sup>67</sup> Murakami's aimless narrators are placed in the aftermath of Japan's student protests.<sup>68</sup> I advance a similar reading, but one that begins with the question of literary misogyny as its point of departure.

Murakami's novels posit metaphysical realms in which everyday morality does not apply. As Chapter 3 in particular will explore with reference to architectural space, his narrators' more abhorrent actions are often couched in microcosmic and occasionally

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<sup>66</sup> Grant Snider, 'Murakami Bingo' (2014) <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/06/01/books/review/03snider.html> [Accessed 30 August 2019].

<sup>67</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> Chikako Nihei, *Haruki Murakami: Storytelling and Productive Distance* (New York, London: Routledge, 2019), p. 26.



heterotopic circumstances:<sup>69</sup> in *Kafka on the Shore*, the protagonist commits rape in a metaphysical realm; in *IQ84*, the seventeen-year-old Fuka-Eri is presented as a spiritual and sexual ‘conduit’ connecting Tengo to Aomame. In *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, a more realist novel, such disturbing tropes appear intended to signal divided worlds in a similar way: the false allegation is arguably a device by which the central group of friends experience an unspoken rift, signalling the gulf between their adult lives and the idealised microcosm of their school years.<sup>70</sup> The protagonists of *Dance Dance Dance*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Killing Commendatore* all conduct conversations with teenagers that appear sexual in nature. The first protagonist, Boku, notices the teenage Yuki in the supernatural setting of the Dolphin Hotel.<sup>71</sup> *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*’s Toru Okada first meets May Kasahara in a disused space near his house, signalling liminality.<sup>72</sup> *Killing Commendatore*’s protagonist is a painter who has moved into a long-unoccupied house after his marriage breaks down,<sup>73</sup> signalling rumination or regression. In many of these cases, the troubling content appears blurred by the possibility that the women and girls concerned are figments: memories, ghosts or apparitions.

A forgiving analysis could undoubtedly be made that such indefensible behaviour is intended to pose a moral problem to the reader. The acts stand in as a metonym for irreconcilable actions or views; they may be intended to represent crucial information that will change the reader’s estimation of the protagonist. The difficult content has been read as metaphorical: for instance, Rebecca Suter connects the novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage* to the traumatic aftermath of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.<sup>74</sup> As Suter argues, Japan’s emphasis on *kizuna*

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<sup>69</sup> Michel Foucault, qtd. in Fuminobu Murakami, *Postmodern, Feminist and Postcolonial Currents in Contemporary Japanese Culture: A Reading of Murakami Haruki, Yoshimoto Banana, Yoshimoto Takaaki and Karatani Kōjin* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 45.

<sup>70</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Dance Dance Dance*, trans. by Alfred Birnbaum (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Killing Commendatore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goosen (London: Harvill Secker, 2018), pp. 33-34.

<sup>74</sup> Rebecca Suter, qtd. in Nihei, p. 161.

during this period, or the idea of friendship in the face of hardship, erased the experiences of those who had lost loved ones in the disaster.<sup>75</sup> According to Suter's reading, Tsukuru Tazaki's wrongful exclusion from his former friendship group illustrates this sense of misunderstanding and loss. However, the reader may wonder why misogyny is so frequently necessary to illustrate Murakami's seemingly well-meaning messages. His early *Rat Trilogy*, by contrast, captures the gulf between the protagonist's idealised early twenties and his considerably vaguer present, in a manner that is often read as a metaphor for the aftermath of Japan's student movement.<sup>76</sup> These first novels present a similar instance of a dwindling friendship as symbolic of a complex historical reality. However, in comparison to such subtler early work, the author's subsequent adoption and reuse of misogynist tropes appears gratuitous. Furthermore, the manner in which Murakami eschews meaningful engagement with this trend in his work, even when interviewed on the topic, arguably serves to negate any 'optimistic' reading that might be made.

Why the author himself chooses such tropes repeatedly is not, however, one of the questions that this thesis will attempt to answer. My introduction has referenced Murakami's more unsettling content as a starting point in order to discuss broader instances of canonical bias. If one message emerges clearly from analysis of Murakami's critical reception, it appears to be that literature and 'real life' are abidingly viewed as discrete realms. This is, of course, a message that Murakami's novels deliberately contribute to: as discussed earlier, a character's abhorrent actions often take place in an alternate reality, as though these events are legitimised by a momentary, magic-realist inversion of societal codes. This thesis begins from the premise that this misogyny, observable to a particularly extreme degree in Murakami's novels, is already present and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> In a statement particularly relevant to the study of 'vaguening', Nihei notes that, '[t]he term *zenkyōtō* [meaning "collective battle", a term given to the late 1960s counterculture movement among Japan's baby boomer generation] never appears in his writing, yet the shadow of the movement is implied throughout the stories, particularly in his early works.' (Nihei, pp. 7-9, summary in brackets mine.)

normalised in many other works considered ‘canonical.’ His protagonists can undoubtedly be viewed as variations on the Nabokovian unreliable narrator;<sup>77</sup> Kawakami posits that some of Murakami’s gendered tropes appear to ‘draw from a reserve’ of the ‘hardboiled’ crime fiction he so often reworks.<sup>78</sup> His *œuvre* presents a particularly obvious case of what appears to be an often uncritical reuse of misogynist characterisations.

Consequently, this reading does not seek to normalise Murakami’s troubling content itself, acknowledging that the latter presents, at times, particularly difficult material for study; more pertinent to this introduction is the analysis of how such material is often received in a bemused or desensitised manner, perhaps by readerships accustomed to a long history of literary misogyny. Furthermore, the way in which this aspect of his writing is overlooked may be tellingly indicative of a critical tendency to view literature as akin to one of Murakami’s surreal microcosms itself: a universe separated from political and social realities.

It is difficult to know how to analyse an author whose work appears to condone sexualising portrayals that many people would not wish to read about, and many more may understandably think should not be studied or taught. Despite the focus of this introduction, my thesis does not aim to discuss the problematic content itself in much detail. In taking this approach, my argument risks emulating critical viewpoints that appear to regard the content in question as an anomalous or inexplicable element of the *œuvre*. However, my thesis’ approach is necessary on several grounds.

There are many questions on which this study may have focused at length. Why, for instance, does the continuing praise of Murakami as an international household name<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Anthony R. Moore, ‘How Unreliable is Humbert in ‘Lolita’?’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 25, 1 (2001), 71-80 (p. 71).

<sup>78</sup> Kawakami, in Kawakami and Murakami, <https://lithub.com/a-feminist-critique-of-murakami-novels-with-murakami-himself/>

<sup>79</sup> Rubin, pp. 6-7; Oliver Burkeman, in Oliver Burkeman and Haruki Murakami, ‘Haruki Murakami: You have to go through the darkness before you get to the light’ (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/11/haruki-murakami-interview-killing-commendatore> [Accessed 15 February 2021].

often lack meaningful discussion of the troubling views articulated at times in his novels? Why has the author consistently resisted updating his representations of female characters in accordance with more contemporary perspectives? There is arguably a point at which frustration over these questions risks imitating the fascination with irreconcilable moral problems to which Murakami's work often returns. Any analysis that asks, 'but how can Murakami be so popular, when he is so problematic?' seems to signal that the author has succeeded in presenting readers with a dilemma. His works have acquired a reputation for appearing readable on the surface, yet containing strange and difficult ideas;<sup>80</sup> this thesis seeks to demystify this divide between form and content.

Thus, rather than advancing a sustained analysis of his *œuvre's* uncomfortable aspects, this thesis begins from the premise that they are indeed frustratingly recurrent in Murakami's writing. While I reference Murakami's more troubling representations at this early point in my argument, this thesis remains largely a study of a broader range of topographical and sociopolitical 'vaguening's' in both his and Beckett's work. The main sites of this analysis will be the representations of 'vaguened' interiors and obfuscated cultural markers in both authors' writing. Thus, the same centring of dominant narratives that leads to the alternate exclusion and idealisation of female characters in Murakami is also present, in a subtler form, in his other 'universalising' obfuscations. Murakami's 'vaguened' settings posit the existence of surreal and otherworldly universes. In their curious blankness, these worlds appear both accessible to many readerships and strangely difficult to map on to any one lived experience. Paradoxically, I argue that it is this nonspecific quality that may lead readerships to view literature as distinct from life in

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<sup>80</sup> 'It makes sense that Murakami's work might prove popular in times of political anxiety: it exerts an entrancing, sometimes almost sedative effect on the reader, the strangeness of the plot developments dampened by an emotional flatness that can feel like a comforting refuge from the real world and its extremes [...] "People say my books are weird, but beyond the weirdness, there should be a better world. It's just that we have to experience the weirdness before we get to the better world. That's the fundamental structure of my stories: you have to go through the darkness, through the underground, before you get to the light."' (Burkeman and Murakami, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/11/haruki-murakami-interview-killing-commandatore>)

Murakami's case; yet this thesis aims to show that such erasures are not unique to his work alone.

Instances of misogyny in Beckett's works are arguably less shocking than those seen in Murakami; for the most part, his representations of the gendered body lack the unsettling focus on youth so often present in Murakami's writing. The pessimistic humour of Beckett's early work, notable for its representations of pained human physicality, gives way to arguably more sympathetic portrayals of female characters in texts such as *Not I* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*.<sup>81</sup> Incidentally, Beckett's focus on bodily decrepitude – apparently presenting aging as an equalising experience – can itself be read as a facet of this subtler brand of misogyny. It is arguable that Beckett's women are only afforded subjectivity once apparently desexualised by age, an idea notably illustrated in a very literal way by Winnie's disappearing body in *Happy Days*.<sup>82</sup>

Gendered bias in the Beckett *œuvre* is arguably present in a subtler form, and in this area the Beckett-Murakami comparison not a neat one. Rather, an astounding similarity observable with reference to both authors' careers is the manner in which problematic content in their work has been *received*. Such bias in traditional Beckett criticism may be – perhaps appositely – characterised by issues of absence. Beckett's white, male

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<sup>81</sup> Marie-Claude Hubert and Claire Hubert Whitehill offer an astute, related analysis of how this progression was reflected in Beckett's drama: 'Up to about 1960, the world that Beckett created was populated by mutilated bodies. His characters, nearsighted or blind, lame or paralyzed, some of them even amputees, have come to the end of their lives. The dramatic action is reduced to their meager bodily movements. The pitiful falls of Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, the stiff and unsteady gait of Clov in *Endgame*, the sounds of Mr. and Mrs. Rooney falling in the radio play *All That Fall* provoke bitter laughter. The ludicrous games of Hamm with his blind-man's glasses, of Clov with his telescope, of Winnie with her magnifying glass and her eyeglasses, punctuate each play [...] After the sixties, however, a change occurs: instead of emphasizing its infirmity, Beckett's plays focus on the question of how to situate the body or, in other terms, of how to find the place where the fragmented body can be integrated. This quest for the unified image becomes more central than the physical suffering of the body. From this point of view, *Happy Days* (1961) marks a turning point. Winnie, buried in her mound, is at first only a torso, then only a head. Beckett notes in Act II: "Her head, which she can no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise, faces front motionless" (37). [...] In 1970, with *Breath*, and in 1972 with *Not I*, Beckett pushes the experiment of the disintegration of the body to its extreme limit. He hides the body, leaving as a visual sign of its presence only a mouth, which emerges from the dark in *Not I*, and, as an auditory sign, only the sound of breathing and the baby's cry in *Breath*.' (Marie-Claude Hubert and Claire Hubert Whitehill, 'The Evolution of the Body in Beckett's Theatre', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 4, 1 (1994), 55-66 (p. 56; p. 59).)

<sup>82</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. III*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), p. 271; p. 295; Kumiko Kiuchi describes the manner in which 'Beckett's dramatic works are often seen as an attempt to neutralize femininity,' also observing that such works 'present an artistic form stripped of concrete historical details in order to attain universal abstraction.' (Kiuchi, p. 327.)

characters are considered ‘universal’;<sup>83</sup> there was originally little critique of the manner in which alternative perspectives in his work are frequently ‘ill seen.’<sup>84</sup> The Beckett *œuvre* presents fascinating questions of bias, among them the idea that Beckett’s bodies are the product of an ‘equal-opportunity’ disdain for human physicality. This thesis will attempt to challenge some such overlooked areas, for instance interrogating the view that the depiction of singular and/or confined subjectivity can convey a collective historical experience.

Perhaps most importantly in this connection, the third chapter of this study will introduce the idea that such perceptions of Beckett’s ‘subtle’ misogyny are themselves erroneous. In an *œuvre* that contains explicit references to violence against women, together with a frequently contemptuous framing of female characters, it is possible that misogyny in Beckett has itself been subject to ‘vaguening.’ Study – such as my investigation in Chapter 1 – of how ‘surrounding’ vagueness in a text can appear to have a subsuming or obfuscating effect on what are otherwise rather clear cultural markers becomes particularly apposite in this case.

When Murakami’s *Killing Commendatore* was censored in Hong Kong in 2018 on the grounds of its containing indecent materials, Jason Y Ng of PEN Hong Kong asked, ‘who is to say Mr Murakami’s depiction of sex in *Killing Commendatore* is any more indecent than that in a James Joyce or Henry Miller novel?’<sup>85</sup> Comparisons such as this

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<sup>83</sup> ‘*Waiting for Godot* alone has been interpreted as an allegory for British colonialism in Ireland, for the author’s experiences in the French resistance, for the Cold War and fear of nuclear holocaust, for the death of God, for the Second Coming, for Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, for Freud’s structural model of the psyche, for Jung’s theory of the self, and for Camus’ ideas about the absurdity of existence.’ (André Bernold, *Beckett’s Friendship (1979-1989)*, trans. by Max McGuinness, photographs by John Minihan (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2015), p.vi.)

<sup>84</sup> Georgina Nugent-Folan notes the lack of scholarship regarding Gertrude Stein’s influence on Beckett, a female stylistic forerunner whose significance has been arguably under-researched in Beckett studies. Nugent-Folan’s research demonstrates how this female perspective has been overlooked in critical reception of Beckett’s work; this sense of ‘ill-seen’ alternative perspectives is also present *within* Beckett’s texts, as his characters often appear solipsistic and disconnected from their surroundings. Little notes how texts such as *Murphy* themselves stage encounters that appear to emphasise the difficulty of understanding another’s perspective without resorting to voyeurism or fetishisation, an example he illustrates with reference to Murphy’s staring at Mr. Endon. (Georgina Nugent-Folan, ‘Ill buttoned’: Comparing the Representation of Objects in Samuel Beckett’s *Ill Seen Ill Said* and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 22 (2013), 54-82 (p. 55); Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 47.)

<sup>85</sup> Alison Flood, ‘Haruki Murakami’s new novel declared ‘indecent’ by Hong Kong censors’ (2018)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/25/haruki-murakami-novel-indecent-hong-kong-censors-killing-commendatore> [Accessed 15 February 2021].

one appear particularly relevant to the Beckett-Murakami connection. Temporal distance may be another key factor in terms of how readerships analyse problematic content. As Ng states, Joyce and Miller are ‘taught in school as classics.’<sup>86</sup> The passage of time may affect an audience’s readiness to acknowledge an issue such as misogyny in Beckett’s work; this softened perspective is perhaps the inevitable product of changing attitudes to representation in literature. However, Murakami is a notable example of an author whose output spans from the late 1970s – a period in which Beckett was still composing some of his more empathic later texts – up to the present. The date parameters of Murakami’s career present an interesting case of an author who is both contemporaneous with Beckett *and* still writing today. His largely unchanged representations of female characters seem to provoke questions regarding how we view ‘old’ versus ‘new’ instances of misogyny. In this manner, the Beckett-Murakami comparison can be viewed as a helpful point of departure for discussing the interrogation of canonical bias from the modernist up to the contemporary era, as such a connection bridges these two periods.

### 3. *Aims: Towards a Typology of Vagueness*

In a manner that perhaps reflects, with hindsight, its inception amid both the ‘alternative facts’<sup>87</sup> of the early Trump presidency and the grim truths of the #MeToo movement,<sup>88</sup> this study began with the aim to chart a history of literary obfuscation. Although the literary canon may seem a world apart from these events, the continuing effects of such cultural moments have led to growing acknowledgment of the fact that

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, ‘George Orwell’s ‘1984’ is Suddenly a Best-Seller’ (2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/books/1984-george-orwell-donald-trump.html> [Accessed 15 February 2021].

<sup>88</sup> Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 1-2.

certain stories are privileged over others, and that artistic media have long reflected such biases. Studies such as Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* responded, as early as 2007, to issues such as the 'marketability of postcolonial self-consciousness' – namely, the idea that authors from 'peripheral' literary traditions are 'compelled to resist, justify, or celebrate' incorporation into a predominantly Anglo-American literary market.<sup>89</sup> My study will consider the manner in which issues of the obfuscation or clarification of lived experience remain central to debates surrounding international literature.

However, despite the context of this thesis's inception, the relationship between 'vagueness' and canonicity that I aim to delineate throughout this study is not always a negative one. Indeed, this thesis devotes substantial analytical space to the potential of 'vaguening' as literary 'common ground', and to the idea of the technique as subversive in marginalised contexts. Little informatively charts the manner in which Beckett's representations of carceral and institutional settings evolve throughout his career, proving that the author's closed spaces 'draw attention to the world without.'<sup>90</sup> I aim to build on such studies by investigating the idea of 'vaguening' as, in certain contexts, a form of attempted empathic narration as often as I link this technique to the uncritical centring of a privileged experience.

In a manner relevant to the idea of looking beyond established narratives, it is apposite at this juncture to briefly discuss this thesis's contribution to studies of 'vaguened' domestic space. My argument will not focus, for instance, on the fascinating influence of Franz Kafka's institutional settings on Beckett's and Murakami's work, due to prior documentation of this comparison extending to the observations and writing of both authors themselves. Beckett explicitly defined his own writing in relation to that of

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<sup>89</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 156.



Kafka, albeit noting their similar focus on ‘consternation’: ‘In my work there is consternation *behind* the form, not in the form.’<sup>91</sup> Murakami makes clear reference to the author in texts such as *Kafka on the Shore* and ‘Samsa in Love.’ The latter, a story in which the protagonist wakes as a human with, perhaps, the memories of an insect,<sup>92</sup> seems to raise translational questions of ‘original’ and ‘copy’, the troubling of this binary evident both in the text’s sequel status and in the protagonist’s (re)metamorphosis, as if he has undergone something approaching the physical equivalent of a back-translation.

A similarly important influence on both authors’ work comes in the form of psychoanalytic theory, a thread I will expand on later in my study. I intend to acknowledge such influences while moving forward from the psychoanalytic vein of criticism, according to a line of argument summarised well in Little’s following paraphrasing of Phil Baker: ‘[s]ubscribing to the ‘underlying assertion of womb as paradigm’ in Beckett’s novellas misses out on the multiple interpretations they suggest’.<sup>93</sup> While the texts in this study are undeniably relevant to both Kafka studies and many forms of psychoanalytic interpretation, I aim to engage with the tropes of inwardness and the microcosm as they relate to self-translation, privilege, and theories of a ‘global’ literature.

The structure of my argument is loosely informed by a typology of ‘vaguenesses’ observable in Beckett’s and Murakami’s writing. Each chapter will examine a different type of ‘vaguening’, judged in my reading to be common to both authors’ work. By studying these various techniques by which contextual information is obfuscated or denuded, I will analyse the stylistic features that combine to form Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘universal’ style.

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<sup>91</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Fraser, p. 126.

<sup>92</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘Samsa in Love’, trans. by Ted Goossen, in *Men Without Women* (London: Vintage, 2014), pp. 186-211 (p. 187; p. 196).

<sup>93</sup> Phil Baker, qtd. in Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 74.

The methodology of Chapters 1-3 will be each based on close readings of five to six extracts from the core authors' work. These extracts have been analysed in relation to their French and Japanese originals, with a view to determining changes in cultural markers in translation. I have also given attention to the possible cutting or addition of material during the translation process, conducting my study in a manner mindful of the role translation has played for both authors in the genesis of their texts. Given both authors' repetitive *œuvres*, it is simultaneously easy and difficult to choose texts that could be called 'representative' of their writing. The extracts – from *Mercier and Camier*, *Malone Dies*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and 'Scheherazade' – have been chosen in order to illustrate both the scope and the curious uniformity observable within their respective *œuvres*. Considering only prose facilitates discussion of both authors' work with reference to a discipline they share, but it also demonstrates the extent to which neither author's fiction writing is free from interdisciplinary echoes. Arguably, Beckett's prose texts are written with a playwright's concern for meticulously delineated spaces; objects recur in the manner of props. Murakami has written nonfiction and book-length interviews;<sup>94</sup> novels such as *After Dark*,<sup>95</sup> which occasionally uses a dialogue format similar to that of a film script, possibly also demonstrate an earlier interest in multivocal fictional narratives. Interestingly, blank, stage-set spaces recur in both authors' *œuvres* despite the fact that Murakami does not write drama, a pattern that could be taken as further evidence of the latter's Beckettian influence.

This study thus focuses on prose texts due to its overarching research question, investigating as it does the boundaries between 'text' and 'world.' Prose texts are a

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<sup>94</sup> Haruki Murakami and Hayao Kawai, *Haruki Murakami Goes to Meet Hayao Kawai*, trans. by Christopher Stephens (Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 2016); Haruki Murakami and Seiji Ozawa, *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Harvill Secker, 2011).

<sup>95</sup> Haruki Murakami, *After Dark*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 70-76.

particularly appropriate resource with which to explore the tendency to view literature as an apparently distinct realm. Fiction does not need to demonstrate the contextual accuracy expected of journalistic writing; it arguably lacks theatre's immediacy and visceral bodily focus. Beckett's and Murakami's prose is perhaps easier to view as discrete from their respective 'real-world' contexts, even as both authors' fiction is informed by, and thematically similar to, their work in other more 'concrete' disciplines. I have thus focused on prose in order to draw attention to such questions of framing and mediation.

The study considers a mix of short and long fiction, a comparison intended to elucidate the relationship between 'vagueness' and form. Stripped-back writing may go comparatively unnoticed in short-form work: indeed, short stories may be generally associated with a lack of expository detail due to the constraints of the medium. By analysing a mix of short and long texts, I aim to convey the manner in which both authors' 'vague' style is remarkably consistent regardless of form. In this way, I aim to rule out any argument that both authors' contextual denudation is exclusively a feature of their short form writing.

Each chapter will analyse this collage of extracts from a different angle; each corresponds to a different term in my typology of 'vaguening.' Chapters 4 and 5 of the study will broaden in focus to consider the power dynamics that inform 'vaguening' on a global scale. These final chapters will depart from the former extract-based structure in order to adopt a more sustained, analytical focus. The thesis can thus be read in terms of two steps: the first three chapters investigate the primary materials, and the final two adopt a theoretical focus that analyses these research findings.

This thesis is, in many respects, a study of 'vaguenesses' previously considered 'peripheral.' Interwoven with my analysis are considerations of writing from less frequently represented perspectives. Each chapter diverts to consider 'vaguened' worlds

created by authors writing contemporaneously to Beckett and Murakami. The authors I will discuss are predominantly female, and can be said to write ‘vaguely’ in a similar style to the core texts discussed. This study aims to demonstrate the manner in which such apparent indeterminacy is never wholly apolitical. As discussed above, I will use such examples to discuss the subversive uses of a form of ‘vaguening’-as-resistance in marginalised settings. I will also attempt to determine whether there is a preference in the literary market for authors who erase contextual specificity in a manner that facilitates international – yet often white and Anglocentric – reach.

The authors I analyse in this connection cannot always be considered ‘unproblematic’ literary alternatives. My first chapter, indeed, takes as its foundation an analysis of Elizabeth Bowen’s insular ‘big house’ narratives. This comparison offers an introductory example of the relationship between privilege and microcosmic domestic space. My second chapter detours into a discussion of nostalgia in Banana Yoshimoto’s novels, considering her fiction in relation to *iyashi* or ‘healing’ literature. The latter, as a form that deliberately adopts an apolitical focus often based in interior settings, has been criticised for its promotion of a brand of self-care that may be considered materialistic. Elsewhere in my study, the bleak yet strangely cheerful misanthropy of Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman* seems by turns both Beckettian and Murakamian, and cannot be said to advance a wholly kind or socially just opinion of the human condition. Authors such as Jamaica Kincaid and Adonis, both discussed in my fourth chapter, often make use of a cosmopolitan, translational ‘vagueness’ that may be disputed for seeming – at a glance – to neglect direct articulation of the speaker’s lived experience.

I do not wish to dispute the views of such authors themselves: rather, such a range of examples seem to indicate a bias towards ‘vague’ writing in a globalised literary market. I will advance such comparisons to inquire, as a theoretical by-product of this study,

whether underrepresented experiences are only considered valid when ‘universalised.’ Must authors render their writing palatable by imitating a ‘canonical’ style? Considered as a separate phenomenon throughout this study is the idea of ‘vaguening’-as-resistance, or the manner in which a flat or blank style has been used in decolonial contexts to convey cultural trauma and erasure. Similarly, in the case of writing that contains un glossed or untranslated terms, such ‘vagueness’ can be read as implicitly centring the marginalised experience. This use of ‘vaguening’ is subversive in that it eschews explanation of the speaker’s position to an audience more familiar with the literature of cultural ‘centres.’

My first chapter, by way of a broad introduction, considers three forms of what I term ‘paradoxical vagueness’ employed by both Beckett and Murakami. The first section of this chapter proposes that their repeated references create microcosmic, stylised worlds. This stylisation can be viewed in both authors’ cases as an extension of their self-translating perspective, a form of willfully created liminal space. The second section of Chapter 1 interrogates this concept further to specify that these limited cultural markers also involve a crucial element of inconsistency, by which a sudden, recognisable reference serves to reinforce what appears as a ‘surrounding’ sense of indeterminacy in the text. There is itself a translational quality to this inconsistency, in that it recalls the patchy or intermittent transmission of meaning. The argument’s final section furthers these ideas of incongruity and paradox in order to focus on the use of humorous or ironic cultural references in both authors’ work. Such references are often accompanied by an absurd defamiliarisation, serving to heighten the sense of an incomplete or fraught translational encounter. All three of these techniques can be seen as serving to mitigate the effect of what are otherwise quite direct references to a text’s cultural and political

situation; they are all discussed under the umbrella term of ‘paradoxical vagueness’, often but not always linked to ‘inconsistent vagueness.’

In my second chapter I expand on this connection by considering a form of ‘overarching vagueness’ in both authors’ texts, by which interior spaces themselves are represented as disparate and porous. Continuing my focus on writing techniques that work to obscure direct mimetic interpretation, I consider both authors’ writing as an escape from interior-as-genre, discussing their tenuous and customised use of forms such as *iyashi* writing, *noir* fiction, and testimonial literature. This movement between genres is, of course, itself translational and at times even appropriative, as both authors’ styles appear to oscillate between inhabitation of the ‘native’ and the ‘borrowed’ literary genre. The escape from genre as an escape from interior space also carries inevitably gendered connotations. Both authors’ apparent evasion of their ‘home’ or ‘national’ genres may be linked to a turn from ‘maternal’ or familial spaces, a trope perhaps most notably seen at both the opening and the close of Beckett’s ‘First Love.’<sup>96</sup>

My third chapter considers flaws in this preceding argument, discussing the ways in which the attempted transcendence of cultural particularity through ‘vaguened’ interiors is essentially unsuccessful in both authors’ cases. Their minimal worlds remain subjective, vulnerable to bias and perspectival limitation – in short, such purportedly ‘universal’ authors cannot possibly speak for ‘the world’ at large. By discussing architectural instances of the uncanny, my third chapter outlines cases in which both authors’ ‘vaguened’ interiors perpetuate narrowly gendered perspectives. Throughout this chapter I contrast representations of the uncanny in my core texts with similarly themed novels written by female authors from both Ireland and Japan. I include analysis of writing by Anna Burns, Yūko Tsushima, Nicole Flattery and Sayaka Murata. Via such

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<sup>96</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘First Love’, in *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010, pp. 229-246 (pp. 229-231; p. 246.)

comparisons, I discuss how gendered representations of liminal space as seen in Beckett's and Murakami's texts have been critiqued and, to an extent, reclaimed. My central drive throughout this chapter is a focus on examples of what I term 'multivalent vagueness', a form of conceptual translation by which the study's core authors employ a given reference in order to refer to multiple cultural situations at once. Rather than arguing that this technique makes both authors' texts more applicable or contextually fluid, I demonstrate the gendered quality of this apparent 'multivalence' in order to discuss its limitations.

I further broaden this focus in my fourth chapter, the beginning of the more analytical 'findings' section of the thesis. While these first three chapters have focused on close readings of my core extracts from three different angles, Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the implications of such readings. My fourth chapter employs the three forms of 'vagueness' hitherto discussed – 'paradoxical', 'overarching', and 'multivalent' – as an imagined metric by which to form alternate and subversive 'vague canons.' My argument is that this same typology of 'vagueness' can be read into much decolonial literature. To begin with, translational characteristics such as code-switching and loan-words occur naturally in writing from areas where multiple tongues are spoken. Thus, deliberately 'translationese' writing may only appear unusual to, for instance, monolingual Anglophone or Eurocentric audiences: readerships which, in a global context, are not sizeable. Indeed, as Kate Briggs notes in *This Little Art*, Anglocentric dominance in literature is an 'everyday peculiar thing' the reader is asked to 'willingly accept';<sup>97</sup> it is possible a similar statement could be made about monolingual bias. Considering politicised uses of opacity and the uncanny in decolonial writing, I argue that the 'vagueness' for which Beckett and Murakami are often specifically praised in fact

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<sup>97</sup> Kate Briggs, *This Little Art* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), Loc 75 of 3171.

occurred contemporaneously in many different contexts around the world. I consider three authors – Jamaica Kincaid, Adonis, and Ana Castillo – whose writing may fall under the rubric of such decolonial ‘vaguening.’

My fifth chapter further continues this focus on internationally disseminated writing and the often limiting definitions of ‘world literature.’ I first discuss Beckett’s and Murakami’s translation-informed style in conjunction with Rebecca Walkowitz’s idea of ‘born translated literature.’ I then go on to consider both authors in light of Emily Apter’s theory of ‘translating untranslatably.’ I make this comparison between my core authors a final time with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s idea of ‘planetarity.’ I employ these three theories of writing in translation in order to discuss issues of canonicity and literary pedagogy with relation to uncanny or defamiliarised writing. My common thread throughout these comparisons is the last term in my typology, namely a form of ‘methodical vagueness’ by which given actions in the text are described in painstaking and repetitious detail. I discuss this persistent focus on what are often household tasks in terms of the oddly literalised universe it creates in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work. Problems of limited perspective are present as urgently here as in my study’s earlier chapters: again, both authors appear to employ a focus on interior worlds in order to create a culturally fluid atmosphere. The unexpectedly domestic prose this focus creates raises its own issues of privilege and glamourised labour.

Ultimately, this study will question whether it is truly possible to create a literary space discrete from the ‘outside world.’ My conclusion will consider Murakami’s 2009 Jerusalem Prize speech as a case study of the interaction between ‘vague’ literature and contemporary political reality; it will also end on a brief analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story ‘The Boundary’ alongside Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s *A Ghost in the Throat*, two contemporary examples of translation-informed ‘vaguening.’ This study thus progresses



to chart the stubbornness of such ‘pseudovagueness’ as a literary technique, demonstrating the continued presence of the obfuscated, the nebulous and the indeterminate even in politically conscious contemporary writing. In this manner, I will open a conversation on future ‘vaguening.’ A further discussion of contemporary ‘vagueness’ may investigate the possibility that such literary indirection becomes obsolete, enacting as it does an arguably inevitable sacrifice of detail, and an element of narrative compromise or dilution. Equally, it may be interesting to explore whether such ‘vaguening’ techniques are in the process of being updated to narrate current experiences of uncertainty. As a thesis developed amid the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, my argument will ultimately pave the way for future study on literary ‘vaguening’ as a means of processing lived experience of identities and circumstances considered liminal.

## Chapter 1

### **‘You flew all the way to Finland, and you ate a margherita pizza?’:<sup>1</sup> Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘Paradoxical Vagueness’**

*We didn’t leave anything in the pockets by any chance? said Mercier.  
Punched tickets of all sorts, said Camier, spent matches, scraps of newspaper bearing in their margins the obliterated traces of irrevocable rendezvous, the classic last tenth of pointless pencil, crumples of soiled bumf, a few porous condoms, dust. Life in short. Nothing we’ll be needing? said Mercier.  
Did you not hear what I said? said Camier. Life.<sup>2</sup>*

This fragment of dialogue between Mercier and Camier is notable for the opposition it outlines with relation to what may be – albeit somewhat loosely – termed ‘concrete’ or ‘material’ references in Beckett’s work. Described respectively as ‘spent’, ‘obliterated’, ‘pointless’ (in the case of the pencil, both lacking a purpose and a sharpened point), ‘soiled’, and ‘porous’,<sup>3</sup> each object here is unable to carry out its intended function. Furthermore, they are located in a garment that is itself absent, so these objects are being signified in a process of substitution through language. Yet, as Camier twice asserts, this assortment of objects amounts to ‘life’ itself.<sup>4</sup>

Such a statement appears tongue-in-cheek in this context. However, just as Beckett’s summary of Tal Coat’s art in the ‘Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit’ has been taken as a semi-ironic justification of his own writing,<sup>5</sup> this dialogue – pseudo-profound as it may be – arguably reveals interesting paradoxes regarding Beckett’s

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<sup>1</sup> Murakami, *Colorless*, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works Vol. 1*, p. 431; *Mercier and Camier*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> ‘The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.’ (Samuel Beckett, ‘Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit’, in *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), pp. 555-563 (p. 556).)

treatment of cultural references and material detail. Indeed, Julie Bates argues that ‘Beckett’s identification of miscellaneous rubbish with the world, minds and bodies of his characters indicates its importance in his writing.’<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the above quotation, the disused or ‘rubbish’ quality of the objects mentioned serves to disconnect them from their usual functions. The quotation thus heralds the importance of ‘vaguened’ or defamiliarised items to Beckett’s representational style. As this list shows, ‘concrete’ references in Beckett are rarely exactly that. Eroded or defunct, these contextual links in texts so often considered ‘abstract’ prove, in their own right, difficult to pin down. In the above extract, the objects mentioned both allude to a ‘real world’ context yet are modified, devalued, or made unrecognisable in some way, as if to prevent the reader from making straightforward inferences regarding the work’s situation. It is consequently easy to see Beckett’s references as ‘false leads’: as not conveying that which they purport to represent.

As its point of departure, the first chapter of this study will consider in greater detail the puzzling fact that while both Beckett and Murakami have produced texts replete with cultural references, both authors’ work is still largely viewed as ‘placeless.’<sup>7</sup> It will investigate whether their references are presented in a manner that somehow obfuscates their contextual significance. This chapter will explore the idea of ‘vaguening’ as a way

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<sup>6</sup> Bates, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> While the cultural ‘placing’ of Beckett’s and Murakami’s work has long been customary in their respective fields of criticism, it is clear that both authors are enduringly associated with something like a combination of inscrutability and broad applicability. While situating Beckett’s work with relation to the philosophy of Fritz Mauthner, quite a specific influence, Linda Ben-Zvi nonetheless notes that ‘Beckett assigns all his characters the same direction, from east to west, indicating their common journey from birth to death.’ While acknowledging Beckett’s place in a host of literary lineages, Peter Boxall notes the manner in which these links rarely appear clear, his work standing ‘at a very peculiar, oblique angle to the cultures that have produced it.’ Jennifer Birkett describes the manner in which *Not I’s* Mouth was inspired by old women seen in the Irish countryside yet symbolises ‘destitute humanity everywhere.’

Chikako Nihei describes the manner in which, for instance, German and Russian readerships identify with Murakami’s articulation of ‘the demise of the dominant narrative in [a] society.’ David Karashima describes the cosmopolitan fluidity of Murakami’s work as seeming both ‘Japanese (if you’re not)’ and ‘contentedly-doomed to outsider status.’ Finally, Jay Rubin cites Murakami himself as describing ‘the world of literature [as] probably 85 per cent feeling and desire, things that transcend differences of race or language or gender, and these are basically things that admit of mutual exchange.’ As this thesis will demonstrate, it is arguable that Murakami’s own work explores this transcendent capacity of literature to varying degrees of success. (Linda Ben-Zvi, ‘Fritz Mauthner for Company’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 9 (1984), 65-88 (p. 78); Boxall, p. 3; Jennifer Birkett, *Undoing Time: The Life and Work of Samuel Beckett* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2015), p. 146; Nihei, p. 14; Karashima, p. 149; Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 234.)

of couching a given cultural context in a stylised, non-mimetic form. I will thus argue that Beckett's and Murakami's acts of linguistic distancing through translation are mirrored on a thematic level by the 'vagueness' of concrete references in their work. According to this 'conceptual translation', certain references are presented as humorous or defamiliarised, in a manner that parallels linguistic (mis)translation and discourages context-based readings of their prose.

I will support my argument with reference to three distancing techniques by which these authors render contextual markers uncertain in their work. I will use the term 'paradoxical vagueness' to denote the manner in which a sense of placelessness can still exist in texts replete with cultural references. While I intend to use 'paradoxical vagueness' as an umbrella term by which I discuss this general effect, I will also refer in this chapter to a form of 'inconsistent vagueness' arguably shared by both authors. As previously discussed, Fraser notes that 'inconstant' is one of the meanings included in the Latin root of the word 'vague';<sup>8</sup> the three distancing techniques I will refer to relate, in various ways, to this idea of inconstancy or inconsistency.

I will first explore the proposition that certain material markers recurring throughout both authors' *œuvres* appear as a well-worn, reused set, creating a sense that both authors are working with limited materials. The recurrence of fourteen key objects throughout Beckett's *œuvre*,<sup>9</sup> similar to the 'dozen objects' in Malone's room,<sup>10</sup> has been astutely investigated in Bates' study. My argument for this chapter will extend this focus from one centring on physical objects to a broader examination of the treatment of references such as place names and brand names in Beckett's and Murakami's work. I argue that Beckett's and Murakami's references are stylised through a variety of

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<sup>8</sup> Fraser, p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> Bates, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 3.

defamiliarising techniques, making them part of a recognisable Beckett or Murakami ‘brand.’ I suggest that this makes such references difficult to temporally place due to their repetition throughout an *œuvre*. Additionally, I explore the manner in which these resonances throughout an *œuvre* are often deceptive, as both authors’ bodies of work are thematically inconsistent while conveying an *impression* of repetition.

For instance, a reader who has read *Murphy* may read *Malone Dies* as a work set in a psychiatric institution: the evidence of this connection has been astutely summarised elsewhere by Little citing Eoin O’Brien.<sup>11</sup> However, as Chapter 2 of this study will further explore with reference to Emilie Morin’s analysis of *Malone Dies* as testimonial literature, such spaces can often signify multiple cultural situations at once in a manner that renders any unifying narrative regarding Beckett’s *œuvre* reductive. The manner in which Beckett’s institutions occasionally appear to signify two or more places at once illustrates the nuanced combination of repetition and deviation at play throughout the course of his writing career.

Similarly, a key point on which my argument differs from and builds on Bates’ *Beckett’s Art of Salvage* is that I question the idea of a linear temporality or canonicity traceable throughout both authors’ *œuvres* in terms of the evolution of their ‘prop’ objects. Bates notes that throughout Beckett’s work, ‘the objects under study seep agency along with their other defining characteristics from their first appearance to their last.’<sup>12</sup> Therefore, such items, ‘already worn-out,’ are seen ‘in their final appearances’ with ‘their colours faded and bleached [...] as though they had been submerged in water.’<sup>13</sup> While Bates notes that such objects ‘carry with them echoes of former appearances, thereby establishing a resonance that is not bound to their function in a single text’,<sup>14</sup> the sense of

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<sup>11</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Bates, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

canonicity she proposes appears to follow a linear pattern of degeneration from Beckett's early texts through to his later works. However, I propose an argument that sets Bates' observations against those of Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's study *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*. Notably, Bennett and Royle propose that a pattern of self-reflexive references point both forwards *and* backwards through Bowen's body of work,<sup>15</sup> making such references difficult to temporally place. I would like to argue, given such information, that a similar recurrence of references in Beckett's and Murakami's cases creates the sense of a stylised or mediated textual 'world.'

Problematically, this technique lends itself to the construction of subjective cultural microcosms. This sense of the references themselves as a kind of subjective, structuring 'world' is further complicated by the fact that both authors' *œuvres* often convey an *impression* of repetition and consistency that masks key thematic deviations.

I will illustrate this first set of ideas with close reference to Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* and Murakami's 2014 short story 'Scheherazade', two texts in which a certain ambiguity of indoor space parallels this sense of a mediated and non-mimetic world. Secondly, I will explore the dialectic between 'vagueness' and 'detail' in both authors' work. I will link Beckett's *Malone Dies* and Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* to the previous texts discussed by virtue of the fact that both works contain a crucially 'inconsistent vagueness', according to which certain references in a text are specific while others generically refer, in the manner of a contextual shorthand, to the greater *œuvre* in which they are located. In both texts, ambiguity of indoor space creates a sense of absent or deferred referencing whereby the author's other texts are simultaneously recalled and dismissed. Working in tandem with this technique is the manner in which both authors'

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 108.

references are not *in themselves* vague, but rather are contrasted with contextually sparse passages in a manner that serves to emphasise the ‘vagueness’ of the latter.

The third section of this chapter will address ideas such as that of the humorously employed reference, exploring the manner in which the references both authors present are crucially modified by ironic distance. This idea, of course, resonates with themes of repetition in both authors’ work, as readers may view their references as rendered depthless or divested of meaning through their ironic reuse. Baker has previously examined such use of ironic distance, in the case of references to psychoanalysis in Beckett that are modified by a form of knowing humour.<sup>16</sup> I will support my argument with close readings of Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and Beckett’s *Mercier and Camier*. As I will illustrate, ironic distance – as so often presented through the tongue-in-cheek employment of cultural references or the mixing of linguistic registers – is mirrored in both authors’ work by physical imagery of transitions between abodes and worlds. Far from simply being postmodern symbols grown meaningless through repetition, both authors’ well-worn references enable us to think about points of cultural connection and (mis)interpretation across linguistic divides. This threefold argument will set the stage for the second chapter of my study, which will interrogate the manner in which architectural interiors *themselves* are often used to create a sense of microcosmic ‘overarching vagueness’ in both authors’ work.

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<sup>16</sup>‘These psychoanalytic allusions can sometimes be superficial or arch, but the knowing inflection of Beckett’s more overtly psychoanalytic material constitutes a form of ironised quotation which functions along the lines of Freudian ‘negation’ [*Verneinung*], allowing disturbing or painful material to be raised and distanced at the same time.’ (Phil Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 172.)

## 1.1 Michelangelo, Memnon, Mazda: ‘Inconsistent Vagueness’ in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and ‘Scheherazade’

### 1.1.1

*The cabin. Its situation. Careful. On. At the inexistent centre of a formless place. Rather more circular than otherwise finally. Flat to be sure. To cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes. Depending on her speed and radius taken. Here she who loves to – here she who now can only stray never strays. Stones increasingly abound. Ever scatter even the rankest weed. Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. With none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread. How come a cabin in such a place? How came? Careful.<sup>17</sup>*

Throughout Beckett’s *Ill Seen Ill Said*, interior and exterior landscapes frequently appear to blur together. The cabin is depicted as shadowy and unaccommodating: such a space lacks many of the qualities one might normally associate with an interior, such as warmth, light, or comfort. Indeed, it is worth recalling Scott Eric Hamilton’s comparison of the unlikely ‘[h]ome!’ (p. 457) of the text to a passage grave.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, outdoor space in this text appears confining. Fragmented descriptive sentences ensure that it is debatable how much of this passage is set indoors (p. 451), and often the reader is unsure as to whether the space delineated in this description is the cabin itself or its greater environ. Reference to ‘the feeling at times of being below sea level’ (p. 452) brings to mind a lowland area such as a plain at the bottom of a valley. While possibly outdoors, the atmosphere of this space appears from such painstaking descriptions as nonetheless oppressively circumscribed.

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<sup>17</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 464; *Ill Seen Ill Said*. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Eric Hamilton, “In the Dim Light’: Archaean Astronomy in Beckett’s *Ill Seen Ill Said*”, *Irish University Review*, 47, 2 (2017), 315-330 (p. 324).



The next lines of the quoted passage seemingly abandon the absent centre from which the woman can ‘never [stray]’ (p. 451), expanding outwards. The following descriptions appear to refer exclusively to the surrounding landscape, in which ‘stones increasingly abound’, the weeds are becoming ‘scanter’, and the pastures are growing more ‘meagre’ as something – referred to vaguely as ‘it’ – ‘slowly gains’ (pp. 451-452).

The final sentences of the extract – ‘With none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread. How come a cabin in such a place?’ (p. 452) are confusing. Yet they appear, however indistinctly, to denote a kind of outward movement: as though the cabin itself, or the area of stones around it, is expanding into its surrounding environment. The lines between indoor and outdoor space appear to merge. This slippage stylises the landscape, further removing the location from ‘concrete’ contextual reality.

Even descriptions of the pastures that ‘hem’ the cabin appear claustrophobic, as does the imagery of stagnation suggested by ‘the rankest weed’ (ibid.). Just as the house itself appears somewhat porous or indistinguishable from an outdoor space – the woman is figured in the immediately preceding paragraph as sitting indoors ‘face to the night’ (p. 451), as though there is no border between her and the darkness – likewise, the surrounding landscape appears claustrophobic and confining.

The ambiguity over thresholds and boundaries in this text, according to which, as Laura Salisbury notes, objects even appear to waver and shake<sup>19</sup> – recalls a sense of flawed linguistic transition. Crucially, the limited or repeated quality of its contextual detail adds to this sense of the universe of *Ill Seen Ill Said* as somehow non-mimetic or stylised, in a manner that parallels Beckett’s translated-seeming prose.

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Such as they are, the narrative events in *Ill Seen Ill Said* describe a trembling or an oscillation – a “Slow systole diastole [...] Rhythm of a labouring heart” (75). Between “coming and going” (62), the old woman with trembling face and hands, traces a path between extremes, “[a]s smooth and even fro as to” (78), just as the objects that appear momentarily, only of course to fade from view in the ill-saying of this ill-seeing – the buttonhook, the house key – faintly quiver, vibrating in sympathy with her, that other object of sight.’ (Laura Salisbury, “So the Unreasoning Goes”: The Comic Timing of Trembling in *Ill Seen Ill Said*’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 11 (2001), 372-381 (p. 372).)

In such a nebulous setting, references to material culture play something of an architectural ‘structuring’ role themselves. *Ill Seen Ill Said* could easily be characterised as a novella of echoes: in its opening pages, for instance, a curious effect can be observed whereby once a given reference occurs, it is immediately repeated in the manner of an emendation in the lines that follow. This repetition can be observed in lines such as ‘[f]rom where she lies she sees Venus rise. On. From where she lies when the skies are clear she sees Venus rise followed by the sun’ (p. 451). Such an effect is similarly visible in the lines, ‘[r]igid upright on her old chair she watches for the radiant one. Her old deal spindlebacked kitchen chair’ (ibid.). While slightly thematically different due to their depiction of a natural setting, the references to a moor follow a similar pattern: ‘A moor would have better met the case. Were there a case better to meet. There had to be lambs. Rightly or wrongly. A moor would have allowed of them’ (pp. 452-453).

It is perhaps significant that these quoted lines occur in the establishing paragraphs of the novella, when the setting is uncertainly sketched through apparently specifying repetitions that only appear to intensify the location’s ephemerality. Thus, repeated references in this text themselves enact a form of subjective ‘world’ in keeping with Beckett’s linguistic ‘neither’<sup>20</sup> spaces.

Elements of the location are anxiously repeated in the manner of an inventory. This sense of such details as enacting their own structuring role has been observed by Bates, who states that ‘[w]ithout homes, jobs, families or other social connections, the imaginative turning out of their pockets and inventorying of their shabby possessions therefore establishes the world of [Beckett’s] characters.’<sup>21</sup> While this statement describes literal actions carried out by many Beckett characters, it is also possible to observe from

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<sup>20</sup> As in Beckett’s ‘Neither’, the text is located between ‘two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once away turned from gently part again’. (Samuel Beckett, ‘Neither’, in *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Volume IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), p. 425.)

<sup>21</sup> Bates, p. 9.

such repetition of contextual detail in *Ill Seen Ill Said* that this inventorying is even present on a more pervasive level in Beckett's locations.

It is perhaps apposite to supplement a discussion of 'vagueness' and 'detail' in Beckett's locations with an examination of what constitutes a 'reference' in such a text. While Bates has observed the gradual attrition of Beckett's objects throughout his *œuvre*, a similar decline can be arguably charted in Beckett's *literary* references, as though they too are 'concrete' objects subject to wear. If a line from Dante is quoted in full – albeit unrecognised by Mercier – in *Mercier et Camier*, then a reference to that same first canto becomes a textual trace in *Stirrings Still*, a description of Virgil as '*fioco*' (faint) written, as Dirk Van Hulle astutely notes, in the manuscript copybook but omitted from the final draft.<sup>22</sup> This description – from which Beckett considered incorporating the English translation 'hoarse from long silence'<sup>23</sup> – appears as a particularly satisfying and iconic instance of 'vagueness.' The word *fioco* evokes a kind of sensory ambiguity, as it is variously used here to mean both 'faint' and audibly 'hoarse.' Virgil's vagueness is itself difficult to localise, as it is unclear whether his indistinct voice or his gradually approaching figure is being described as 'faint.' As a quotation on the subject of vagueness that has *itself* been 'vaguened', this reference seems to present a particularly good example of a worn-down or degraded cultural marker. The reference discussed here has been completely undone; its evocation of Virgil was imprecise to begin with. Yet when this trace is considered, it appears as an echo of Dante *just present enough* to be categorised as an intertext, or a particular kind of unusually compact translation.

While it is thus arguable that references to the same influential texts become leached and 'faint' throughout Beckett's *œuvre*, it is perhaps just as easy to apply Bennett

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<sup>22</sup> Dante Alighieri, qtd. in Dirk Van Hulle, *Manuscript Genetics, Joyce's Know-How, Beckett's Nohow* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Van Hulle, p. 45.

and Royle's argument here, a line of questioning I will shortly expand on in more detail. In short, *Stirrings Still* refers backwards, in a cyclical manner, to early texts such as *Mercier et Camier*, reawakening the same influences that inspired Beckett at the beginning of his writing career. The *œuvre* thus appears oddly fixed in time, rehashing the same intertextual links. Matters of linear versus cyclical referential patterns aside, the fact that Bates' and Van Hulle's arguments discuss objects and references in a similar manner appears telling in the context of the Beckett canon. Both objects and references are windows to a kind of 'outside world' in Beckett's works; both appear startlingly in otherwise 'vague' texts. Such comparisons appear to render the idea of a 'reference' itself interestingly subjective. For the purpose of analysing other novels in this chapter, in my definition of a cultural 'reference' I have decided to focus mainly on the presence of place names and brand names in the texts, along with the names of works of literature, music and film when referenced overtly; unsurprisingly, *Ill Seen Ill Said* appears to contain very few such markers.

Conversely, it is not a work devoid of 'references' either. How should the reader categorise the multiple references to Venus (p. 451; p. 452; p. 458; p. 466), which, as a planet, is technically a place? The reference to Memnon (p. 462) appeals to the reader's recognition of this figure in order to describe the woman's appearance. There is a reference to Michelangelo (p. 464); the phrase 'calme bloc'<sup>24</sup> on page 55 of the French text resonates with Mallarmé's 'Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe.'<sup>25</sup> In the English version, the woman's face is described as a 'calm slab worn and polished' (p. 458), as opposed to the perhaps less elegant image of a 'calm block.' This reference still likens facial features to stone, but perhaps loses the morbid specificity of Mallarmé's reference to a gravestone.

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Mal vu mal dit* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981), p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe', in *Selected Poems*, trans. by C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 88.

Similarly, the mention of ‘vile jelly’ (p. 468), a direct quote from *Macbeth*, may not quote Shakespeare by name yet is a ‘concrete’ and definable intertextual reference. Still harder to classify are the ‘greatcoat’ and ‘[a]ntiquated block hat’ of the distant male figure (p. 457), as they feed into a larger framework of Beckettian references to such garments. In addition to recurring throughout the Beckett *œuvre*, greatcoats also themselves signify seriality – Bates draws attention to their hand-me-down quality, quoting George Sala: ‘Your father wore it before you, and you hoped to leave it to your eldest son.’<sup>26</sup> It is on such items that the remainder of this section will focus, as they form a chain of self-referencing intertextuality that occurs throughout Beckett’s *œuvre*.

The notion of the Beckett *œuvre* as containing certain recurring references contributes to its non-mimetic quality. Little has already observed the link between repetition and confinement in Beckett’s work, astutely charting the manner in which such a link was crucial to the development of the author’s unique, recognisable poetics. He connects Beckett’s adoption of the ‘bottled climates’ of short story writing from *More Pricks Than Kicks* onwards to his espousal of a similarly restricted ‘continuous process’, namely ‘a process which included the recycling of characters, phrases and even entire episodes from one work to the next.’<sup>27</sup> In an interesting paradox, repeated images appear modified in order to dilute rather than intensify a sense of place in Beckett’s work. There is an *apparently* self-cancelling quality to these references, by which items such as the greatcoat – itself a garment passed down through generations – appear to become less rather than more imbued with meaning. These symbols seem divested of some former significance to begin with, a quality that only intensifies as the symbol is repeatedly reused.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> George Sala, qtd. in Bates, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> James Little, ‘Closed Spaces: Beckett and Confinement’ (PhD Thesis, Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin, 2017), pp. 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> ‘These items of costumes, accessories and furniture were already worn-out when Beckett first introduced them and become ever more so in their subsequent use by a series of characters.’ (Bates, p. 9.)

As Bates observes citing Ackerley and Gontarski, there is often an obsolete or incongruous quality to the material culture Beckett references. In Beckett's world, 'theatres are lit by floodlights', 'clothes are fastened by buttonhooks', and 'parents still pass on family greatcoats and bowler hats to their offspring'.<sup>29</sup> An implicit temporal distance separates these signifiers from the text's current context. A reader may be aware these objects retain historical significance, but their bearing on the denuded present of a Beckett text appears tenuous.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, Ackerley and Gontarski observe Beckett's literary background to be 'firmly' 'amid the Anglo-Irish bourgeoisie', citing works such as *Watt* and *Footfalls* in which 'the Ascendancy Big House [has] become Gothic'.<sup>31</sup> It is thus interesting to view this summary in conjunction with ideas expressed in Bennett and Royle's *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*. The comparison between Bowen and Beckett is obvious, resting not only on parallels regarding Anglo-Irishness and 'big house' literature – as in Beckett's *Watt* – yet also, interestingly, on the subject of 'vagueness.' The word 'vague' recurs with disconcerting frequency in Bowen's work: 'vaguely' appears at times as the default adverb by which her characters speak and act.<sup>32</sup> This 'vagueness' even finds its way into Bowen's landscapes: at one point in *Eva Trout* both 'earth and sky' are described in terms of 'the same unluminous greyness.'<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as Mooney

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> 'In a detail which does not appear in the English translation, the policeman in the French version of 'The Expelled', who kicks the narrator off the street and onto the sidewalk, wears a 'képi,' a piece of headgear which has a particular sociopolitical resonance given that it was part of the uniform of the French police in the post-war period and headgear of choice for General Charles de Gaulle, the paradigmatic authority figure of post-war France (Gibson 2010). The narrator of 'First Love' is convinced of the importance of this article of clothing but avoids wearing one himself: 'Kepis [...] exist beyond a doubt, indeed there is little hope of their ever disappearing, but personally I never wore a kepi' (*CSP*: 35). In the version of 'The End' published in *Merlin* in 1954, the narrator wears a 'British Kepi,' the nationality of which disappeared when Beckett came to revise the story (1954: 148).<sup>(9)</sup> In a story in which so little is made explicit, a strange object like the kepi has connotations of political authority even as its meaning remains open. Seán Kennedy sees such objects as 'resisting interpretation, even as they provide condensed expression of repressed historical materials.' 'History has not disappeared,' he argues, 'it just cannot readily be accounted for' (2015: 198, 188).' (Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 74.)

<sup>31</sup> C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, qtd. in Bates, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Instances of this repetition of the adverb 'vaguely' to describe characters' behaviour include: Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 53; p. 79; p. 95; p. 153; p. 192. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (New York, Canada: Random House, 2000), p. 41; p. 120; p. 258; p. 388. Elizabeth Bowen, *A World of Love* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 20; p. 23; p. 133. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), p. 49; p. 74; p. 90; p. 138; p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Eva Trout* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 47.

trenchantly outlines in ‘Unstable Compounds: Bowen’s Beckettian Affinities’,<sup>34</sup> these Beckettian resonances are present even on a linguistic level in Bowen, while such grammatical play from a female author has often been dismissed as a ‘feminine preoccupation with technique.’<sup>35</sup>

Bennett and Royle discuss Bowen’s use of referencing in a manner apposite to this study. Discussing the fact that Bowen’s *A World of Love* includes the phrase ‘the heat of the day’ – a reference to her previous novel – in its first line, the authors suggest that this reference makes ‘the writing [stage] the force of a certain self-remarking or self-referentiality, incorporation, encryption or enflasking, melting and dissolution.’<sup>36</sup> Such referencing is aporetic and ambivalent, a simultaneous process of making and unmaking: ‘the phrase,’ they state, ‘does not lead back to the book-title [...] as to some simple origin: any reading of ‘the heat of the day’ is caught up in a work of citation and intertextuality which moves both forward and back, which is retrolexic and irreducibly generative.’<sup>37</sup> Thus, in their view, ‘*The Heat of the Day* cites *A World of Love*, as well as vice versa, but this forward-and-back cannot be contained by a rectilinear temporality’.<sup>38</sup>

Little has observed the manner in which a mistaken insertion of Murphy’s name into the manuscript of Watt reveals how ‘this series is fruitfully read backwards as well as forwards’,<sup>39</sup> an observation that I argue further cements this comparison between Beckett’s and Bowen’s styles. Elsewhere, Little also explicitly connects such cultural markers to a form of confinement or world-creation themselves. In relation to Beckett’s *What Where*, Little cites J.M. Coetzee’s ‘construction of an *œuvre* that turns in upon itself and acts as an echo chamber for autotextual references’.<sup>40</sup> While this self-reflexivity may

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<sup>34</sup> Sinéad Mooney, ‘Unstable Compounds: Bowen’s Beckettian Affinities’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 53, 2 (2007), 238-254 (p. 239).

<sup>35</sup> John McCormick, qtd. in Mooney, ‘Unstable Compounds’, p. 239.

<sup>36</sup> Bennett and Royle, p. 108.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Little, ‘Closed Spaces’, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

be expected from a more contemporary author, it is interesting to consider that such autotextual echo-chambers were also present in the earlier writing of Beckett's contemporaries. I would like to argue that considering Beckett's work alongside that of Bowen further connects 'vaguened' references to the depiction of a form of privileged insularity.

It is significant that Bennett and Royle's study of Bowen itself links vague architecture to the interpretation of obfuscated or lacunary texts. Referring to a dialogue over an obelisk of uncertain origin in *A World of Love* ("I wish I could remember its origin – surely it must have had one, didn't it, Fred?"<sup>41</sup>), they draw attention to the fact that the word 'obelisk' can mean both a columnar monument and a stroke used in manuscript writing that means a 'spurious, corrupt, doubtful, or superfluous word or passage'.<sup>42</sup> The name of the obelisk's creator has been forgotten: 'What was his name?' 'Couldn't tell you.'<sup>43</sup> In a strange process of deferral or substitution, it is also revealed that the obelisk was built while its namesake was still alive: 'Chap put it up in memory of himself.'<sup>44</sup> Such ideas of substitution or facsimile pervade the novel, in which a set of letters from a dead man feature predominantly in the characters' minds and relationship dynamics: as Bennett and Royle observe, the letters that form the novel's 'narrative core' are themselves 'almost completely absent' and 'hardly quoted at all.'<sup>45</sup> In this manner, both the obelisk and the missing letters are linked in the text, creating a sense of absent or forgotten centres.

Absent centres are crucial, of course, to analysis of the cabin of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, located as it is at the 'inexistent centre of a formless place.'<sup>46</sup> In a text where indoor and

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, qtd. in Bennett and Royle, p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett and Royle, p. 119.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Bennett and Royle, p. 105.

<sup>46</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 451.



outdoor space appear porous and difficult to define, references – especially those that refer to an overarching framework of Beckettian tropes – themselves enact a form of structuring architecture. Just as Beckett problematises the linear passage from one language to another, the text is replete with difficult and uncertain boundary-crossings.

Of course, to stylise a given environment according to a Beckettian aesthetic is not to depoliticise it, and the *fact* that Beckett's references are moderated and filtered thusly is itself worthy of examination. This is another reason why comparison to Bowen's work is apposite. Bowen's circular references are in keeping with the insular worlds she depicts, and any sense of the text as microcosm in Bowen is paralleled thematically in the obsolete 'big house' environments her characters inhabit. In this manner, repeated references enact a form of subjective world-creation uncomfortably linked to exclusionary discursive control. To 'vaguene' from a place of privilege – even if, in Beckett's and Bowen's cases, this is a form of dispossessed privilege – appears as a wilful erasure of the world 'without.' The insular environments they depict serve to reinforce a singular narrative of affluence, admitting of little plurality even as they seek to comment on such narrow perspectives. Perhaps most crucially in Beckett's case, certain mimetic references are stylised and modified in keeping with the author's distinct 'brand.' We will see this form of distancing or stylisation more clearly with additional reference to Murakami's 2014 short story, 'Scheherazade', in which the connection between indoor space and references as confining or limiting is particularly evident. As I will discuss, this sense of 'vaguening' as world-creation also resonates with the deliberately 'translationese' quality of Murakami's work.

'Scheherazade' has been rendered in English by Ted Goossen, the Canadian translator among those long associated with Murakami's international reception.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> Karashima, p. 65.

frame of reference in which the story occurs recalls something of the ‘obsessive use of brand names’ that Rubin, elsewhere, calls an ‘overfamiliar element’ of Murakami’s work.<sup>48</sup> This style of referencing contributes to the translational quality of Murakami’s prose, demonstrating as it does an overtly self-reflexive awareness of globally recognisable signifiers. However, the following analysis of ‘Scheherazade’ will also consider a way in which Murakami takes this self-reflexivity further. It will note the manner in which later texts such as this one appear to gesture to familiar tropes in Murakami’s *œuvre* at large, without explicitly mentioning some of the author’s more typical references.

### 1.1.2

*Scheherazade’s next visit to the House was three days later, after the weekend had passed. As always, she came bearing large paper bags stuffed with provisions. She went through the food in the fridge, replacing everything that was past its expiration date, examined the canned and bottled goods in the cupboard, checked the supply of condiments and spices to see what was running low, and wrote up a shopping list. She put some bottles of Perrier in the fridge to chill. Finally, she stacked the new books and DVDs she had brought with her on the table.*<sup>49</sup>

Habara, protagonist of ‘Scheherazade’, exists in a vacuum. His surroundings are depopulated: he has ‘no one to phone’, ‘no newspaper [...] delivered’, and ‘no way of accessing the Internet’ (pp. 117-118). Murakami’s novels take place, as Jonathan Boulter observes, in spaces ‘hidden from public view.’<sup>50</sup> For unexplained reasons, Habara cannot go outside. A vaguely bureaucratic context is alluded to: the woman he calls

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<sup>48</sup> Rubin, p. 254.

<sup>49</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘Scheherazade’, trans. by Ted Goossen, in *Men Without Women* (London: Vintage, 2014), pp. 114-145 (p. 133). For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), p. 59.

Scheherazade, whose real name we never learn, has been ‘assigned’ as his “support liaison” (p. 121). Much like *Ill Seen Ill Said*, ‘Scheherazade’ is a text in which the ambiguity of indoor space contributes to the creation of a stylised textual world. The vague ‘House’ in which Habara resides recalls other physical and metaphysical worlds<sup>51</sup> in Murakami’s *œuvre*, simultaneously suggesting and discouraging interpretation through comparison with his other works. Both the story’s setting in an isolated microcosm, along with the fact that it implicitly – through the strategic ‘vaguening’ of certain references – recalls the well-known tenets of the Murakami ‘brand’, encourages the reader to mentally situate the text in something akin to a heterotopia.<sup>52</sup>

The confined nature of this story’s setting is evident. It takes place in a series of rooms – either in the indoor setting of the unnamed House where Habara appears to be prisoner, or the site of Scheherazade’s burglaries as described in her flashbacks. Domestic spaces (even if, in the case of the unclassifiable House, this is a loose term) and the markers of personal hobbies and interests that adorn them are a key aspect of this story; nevertheless, specific references are oddly scant. While the flashback-driven subplot’s premise, in some ways, rests on a description of intrusions on private space, Scheherazade’s teenage break-ins yield little concrete information. Rather, these stories are striking for what her secret burglaries *fail* to reveal: ‘She’d hoped to come across something personal [...] but the desk held nothing of that sort’ (p. 127). Crucially, the reader never learns the final instalment of this episodic tale, and Scheherazade’s later encounter with the boy’s mother (p. 143) remains unexplained. Just as this text refers backwards and forwards to other Murakami texts, the diegetic action rests on a similar problem of absent centres. As she visits Habara in his present-day, vaguely institutional

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<sup>51</sup> See Strecher’s table of physical and metaphysical realms in Murakami’s novels. (Strecher, Loc 1488 of 5837.)

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, qtd. in Fuminobu Murakami, p. 45.

location, Scheherazade tells stories of a simultaneously mysterious past encounter with indoor space.

Descriptions of the House in which Habara resides, and his present-day meetings with the adult Scheherazade, are similarly unyielding. In the above extract, a large amount of material objects are mentioned, even in a methodical and detailed way. However, a great many of these references have a *generic* quality. Her grocery bags are ‘large paper bags’ bearing no insignia; the ‘food’ and ‘provisions’ are left unelaborated (p. 133). There are ‘canned’ and ‘bottled’ goods, as well as ‘spices’ and ‘condiments’, but none of these items are discussed in detail (*ibid.*). It would be arguably unnatural to mention a slew of brand names or specific products in this sort of passage, which after all appears intended to provide a rough sketch of the woman’s typical routine. However, it is interesting that such a large amount of narrative space is given over to describing this list of tasks. The housework and chores are themselves recounted with precision: she ‘examine[s]’ the canned and bottled goods, and ‘stack[s]’ the DVDs and books on the table with apparent care (*ibid.*). The description gives an impression of detail while in fact yielding little specificity: a tension is observable between the meticulous description of household tasks and the relatively scant mention of specific products.

Given the vagueness of the preceding passage, the reference to Perrier (*ibid.*) calls attention to the fact that the other items have not been referred to by brand name. Thus ‘vagueness’ and ‘detail’ contrast mutually, an observation which this chapter’s second section will develop further. Following this juxtaposition is the casual reference to ‘books and CD’s’ (*ibid.*), which are never described in further detail. The reader is told that Habara and Scheherazade may have incompatible tastes in viewing material: ‘In addition, she chose an assortment of DVDs – though he had a hard time accepting her criteria for

selection on this front' (p. 122). Murakami's 'vagueness' is inconsistent in a manner similar to Beckett's, a point that bears further examination.

'Scheherazade' featured in Murakami's 2014 collection *Onna no inai otokotachi*,<sup>53</sup> translated into English in 2017 as *Men Without Women*. This is Murakami's fourth short story collection; at its time of publication the author had also written thirteen internationally translated novels. When this story appeared in *The New Yorker* it would have reached its audience as the latest missive from an already well-known author, published late in his internationally established career. While specific references are limited here, what few there are *suggest* or *refer back to* a canon of references that resonate across the Murakami *œuvre* at large.

Snider's 2014 *New Yorker* cartoon 'Murakami Bingo' lists many of the author's most commonly used tropes: individual squares are titled, for instance, 'Urban Ennui', 'Unexpected Phone Call', or 'Ear Fetish.'<sup>54</sup> While most likely intended as a light-hearted comment on this author's predictable *œuvre*, this cartoon arguably exposes one of the most interesting aspects of Murakami's repetition. Firstly and most obviously, everyday pastimes – 'Running', 'Cooking' and 'Old Jazz Record' – are listed alongside more supernatural tropes, such as 'Parallel Worlds' or 'Something Vanishing.'<sup>55</sup> Yet what the cartoon also showcases is the fact that activities such as 'Running' and 'Cooking' appear jarringly specific when contrasted with tropes, such as 'Mysterious Woman', that make use of vagueness as their driving force. However, crucially, on further inspection the 'concrete' or banal tropes in Murakami are vague *in themselves* – 'Cooking' and 'Running' are not reducible to any one nationality or cultural context, yet repeat readers will nonetheless associate them with the typical Murakami universe. It is possible that at

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<sup>53</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Onna no inai otokotachi* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Snider, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/06/01/books/review/03snider.html>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

this point in his writing career the author need only hint at the cultural milieu in which his novels are typically set.

It is difficult to summarise the Murakami textual world in terms of the culture consumed there, yet this milieu indeed appears composed of distinct and repeated categories. Rubin's observation that Murakami's 'copious pop references' signify 'his generation's rejection of their parents' culture'<sup>56</sup> is apposite here. These references often have what may be awkwardly termed a specific vagueness in common: as Snyder notes, '[h]is touchstones are well known: jazz, spaghetti, classical Western music, the works of Fitzgerald and Carver, all of which underpin his work so seamlessly that many readers have wondered aloud what makes his fiction Japanese.'<sup>57</sup>

Jazz references abound, as do a form of tongue-in-cheek 'highbrow' nod to figures such as Proust,<sup>58</sup> Balzac<sup>59</sup> or Kant<sup>60</sup>. However, such summations are inevitably reductive as Murakami's novels are so allusively dense as to also contain abundant deviations from such categories. References in *South of the Border, West of the Sun* include those to Jeep,<sup>61</sup> Armani,<sup>62</sup> Seurat,<sup>63</sup> 'snobby French restaurants', American Express cards,<sup>64</sup> Perrier, an Italian restaurant (and, in the same paragraph, a Meiji-ya import store),<sup>65</sup> and Romeo and Juliet.<sup>66</sup> *Pinball, 1973* includes references to Rubens,<sup>67</sup> Kant,<sup>68</sup> Robinson Crusoe,<sup>69</sup> Ben Shahn, Mozart, Bach, Haydn, Pat Boone, Bobby Darin, The Platters,<sup>70</sup> and Disney.<sup>71</sup> References in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of*

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<sup>56</sup> Rubin, p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Snyder, 'The Murakami Effect' (2017) <https://lithub.com/the-murakami-effect/> [Accessed 19 February 2021].

<sup>58</sup> Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*, trans. by Jay Rubin and Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), p. 613.

<sup>59</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 86; *Pinball, 1973*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>61</sup> Haruki Murakami, *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>67</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

*Pilgrimage* include those to Yves Saint Laurent,<sup>72</sup> Google, Facebook,<sup>73</sup> Lexus,<sup>74</sup> and Starbucks.<sup>75</sup> *Kafka on the Shore* refers to Duke Ellington, The Beatles, Led Zeppelin,<sup>76</sup> McDonald's, 7-Eleven, a 'love hotel made up to look like a European castle', Denny's,<sup>77</sup> Tolstoy,<sup>78</sup> Chekhov,<sup>79</sup> Armani, Converse All-Stars, North Face,<sup>80</sup> and Mazda.<sup>81</sup> While the novel also contains references to *pachinko*,<sup>82</sup> Yoshinoya,<sup>83</sup> and Inoue Yosui,<sup>84</sup> markers of Japanese culture are considerably scantier. And perhaps most evidently, *Kafka on the Shore* features characters named after brands such as Johnnie Walker, who appear as sentient apparitions.<sup>85</sup> Needless to say, these absurd touches contribute to the cynical self-awareness such copious citation of brands arguably demonstrates. The trope-like status of Murakami's references is occasionally intensified by the fact that these references are abundant, often occurring in lists.<sup>86</sup> This makes them appear deliberately repetitive, as in the case of the protagonist of *A Wild Sheep Chase*'s repeated listening to 'White Christmas.'<sup>87</sup>

Japanese references in 'Scheherazade' are scant but present. Habara's house is in 'a provincial city north of Tokyo' (p. 121): despite this geographical detail, the city in question is left unnamed. In Scheherazade's story, her schoolmate's mother 'taught the Japanese language' (p. 125). However, the references to straight-A school reports and

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<sup>72</sup> Murakami, *Colorless*, p. 80.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>76</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>86</sup> As the following quotations demonstrate, brand names in Murakami are often listed in succession. 'Those were the days of the Doors, the Stones, the Byrds, Deep Purple, and the Moody Blues'; '[w]e join the highway and pass a number of towns, a giant billboard for a loan company, a petrol station with gaudy decorations, a glass-enclosed restaurant, a love hotel made up to look like a European castle, an abandoned video shop with only its sign left, a *pachinko* place with an enormous car park, McDonald's, 7-Eleven, Yoshinoya, Denny's...Noisy reality starts to surround us'; '[m]ost of the records were either Bach, Haydn, or Mozart. Also a few records from her girlhood...Pat Boone, Bobby Darin, the Platters.' (Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 4; Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 167; Murakami, *Pinball, 1973*, p. 111.)

<sup>87</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 267.

soccer teams (p. 130) could just as soon pertain to an American high school context. The characters' dialogue is vaguely transatlantic: phrases such as '[h]uh? Eels have jaws?' and '[w]ell, you should check it out sometime' (p. 119) in Goossen's translation indicate, but do not confirm, a faintly American intonation. In terms of other references in the text, there is the obvious reference to Queen Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights*;<sup>88</sup> there are references to Mazda, Perrier (p. 133), *Star Wars* (p. 120), the Barcelona soccer team (p. 126), Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* (p. 130), and Picasso's blue period (p. 143).

As in the case of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, it can be difficult to categorise the references in this text. Distinctions between what constitutes 'local colour' and what constitutes – for want of a better word – a form of 'globalised colour' appear deliberately blurry in stories that seek themselves to depict a 'placeless' suburban Japan. Indeed, a reference to Perrier is as faithful to a Japanese context as a reference to Natsume Soseki, and to deny this fact would be to implicitly expect a self-exoticising portrayal from the text.

There is also another category of reference in this text which will be returned to in this chapter's third section. I will term this a kind of referencing modified by humorous distance, according to which a contextual marker takes on the quality of a figure of speech. The North Pole is technically mentioned in this story, but it has the status of a placeholder, according to one of Murakami's Chandleresque<sup>89</sup> similes: 'It was a simple, straightforward comment, as offhand as if she had announced that the North Pole was in the far north (p. 118). As we will see in Chapter 2's more detailed exploration of influence and genre, this category of reference occurs frequently in Murakami as a result of such similes; however, it is also arguably reductive to dismiss their significance. For instance, such references can be compared to the claim in *Malone Dies* that his

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<sup>88</sup> *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*, trans. by Malcolm C. Lyons, with Ursula Lyons (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Chapter 2 of this study will further expand on the stylistic similarities between Murakami and Chandler. (Rubin, p. 81; Lee Sigelman and William Jacoby, 'The Not-So Simple Art of Imitation: Pastiche, Literary Style, and Raymond Chandler', *Computers and the Humanities*, 30, 1 (1996), 11-28 (p. 17).)



possessions are as safe as if they had been deposited in ‘the Bank of England.’<sup>90</sup> This reference perhaps implies derision towards the imperial centre, as Malone’s clothes are not safe – in fact, it is hinted that they have been dumped on a rubbish heap.<sup>91</sup> The ‘Bank of England’ serves here as a signifier for abstract bureaucracy that, in Kafkaesque fashion, proves untrustworthy. In Murakami’s case, the seeming arbitrariness of such similes may cause readers to discount them as absurd. However, even the fact that such references are themselves a very specific nod to Chandler’s prose style places them within a politically weighted intertextual framework. It is significant that even an apparently arbitrary, humorous simile such as the North Pole reference may possibly itself be located in an Americanised literary tradition.

However, even the idea that Murakami’s repetitive texts form a coherent whole could just as easily mislead the reader. The similarity of Murakami’s narrators hints at both continuity and variation in a manner similar to the *Watt*-like ‘vermicular series’<sup>92</sup> of Beckett protagonists. As Christopher Taylor notes, ‘Murakami Man is an instantly recognisable character, although his names and biographies naturally come and go.’<sup>93</sup> This dialectic between continuity and variation can also be observed with relation to Murakami’s indoor spaces. When analysed, the ‘House’ in which Habara inexplicably resides is a good example of a misleading reference. Confining interiors feature throughout the Murakami *œuvre* to a number of ends. Thus, examining the *œuvre* for past instances of such situations proves inconclusive. For instance, this arrangement is reminiscent of the apartment in which Aomame hides out in *1Q84*. It too has been stocked with supplies: ‘Someone had meticulously calculated what and how much would be needed for a healthy thirty-year-old single woman to live here alone for a short time.’<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 251.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 378.

<sup>93</sup> Christopher Taylor, qtd. in Ellis et al., p. 550.

<sup>94</sup> Murakami, *1Q84*, p. 520.

Similarly, it recalls the houses in the strange world to which Kafka journeys through a forest in *Kafka on the Shore*, a considerably more metaphysical place.<sup>95</sup> The House in ‘Scheherazade’ is also reminiscent of the Rat’s mountain villa in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, which, as we will shortly discover, appears to be both a real location and a purgatorial site of encounter with strange characters such as the Sheepman and the ghost of the Rat. In short, much as Matthew Carl Strecher’s diagram of physical and metaphysical realms in Murakami novels shows,<sup>96</sup> periods of reclusion in isolated rooms recur throughout the *œuvre*, but for crucially varied reasons.

In his article ‘The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism’, Rawdon Wilson summarises three kinds of fictional worlds accordingly: in the first, ‘all the deictics and descriptions operate as if they were being used in the extratextual world and [...] beg comparison to that world’; in the second, ‘self-contained assumptions’ are ‘experienced as axioms’.<sup>97</sup> In the third kind of fictional space, ‘indications of local place are sometimes those of the extratextual world but at other times are those of another place [...] which, if it were to exist purely, would be a closed axiomatic world of the second kind.’<sup>98</sup>

Murakami’s *œuvre* appears to draw alternately on all three categories of this typology. Thus, examining the *œuvre* for past instances of such confined spaces in order to gain contextual knowledge of a text like ‘Scheherazade’ may prove inconclusive. The ‘vagueness’ of this story both encourages and discourages comparison with Murakami’s previous works. On one hand, repeat readers of Murakami may have an idea of the usual ‘world’ to which he refers, and the cultural references with which it is normally

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<sup>95</sup> Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 427.

<sup>96</sup> Strecher, Loc 1488 of 5837.

<sup>97</sup> Rawdon Wilson, ‘The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 209-234 (p. 217).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

populated. At the same time, however, such ‘vagueness’ problematises the idea of a linear pattern of resonances across Murakami’s body of work.

The circumstances of Habara’s imprisonment are left unexplained. In a *New Yorker* interview on the short story, Murakami has cryptically explained that Scheherazade is ‘sending Habara some kind of message’<sup>99</sup> through the stories she repeatedly tells. This ‘message’ could denote a context of subterfuge and imprisonment; it could just as easily be a more nebulous emotional ‘message’ regarding their relationship. Much like the way Jacques Moran in Beckett’s *Molloy* writes ‘[t]he rain is beating on the windows’<sup>100</sup> when it is not raining, the diary entries Habara writes diverge from reality by giving a coded account of events, in ‘simple, cryptic terms that were sure to baffle anyone who might read the diary later’ (p. 114). Murakami’s contextual reticence is mirrored in the short story’s plot, Habara’s self-narrativising revealed as deceptive. Considering ‘Scheherazade’ in light of Wilson’s categories of fictional space helps to explain why it is often difficult to map Murakami’s texts on to a ‘real life’ context, perhaps causing the reader to suspend evaluative responses to factors such as the gendered dynamics in the text. We are not altogether sure of the ‘rules’ governing this fictional space: it may be our world, our world sometime in the future, or a different world entirely. This ambiguity – along with the possible, but inconclusive, suggestion of a dystopian context – holds space for the possibility that the uncommunicative dynamics between characters are intended as critique, based, for instance, on a vision of a future atomised society.

Much as Bennett and Royle argue that Bowen’s self-citations refer both forwards and backwards through her *œuvre*,<sup>101</sup> there is an apparently ‘timeless’ quality to Murakami’s self-referencing. This suggests a stylised mediation of cultural context by

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<sup>99</sup> Deborah Treisman, ‘This Week in Fiction: Haruki Murakami’ (2014) <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-this-week-haruki-murakami-2014-10-13> [Accessed 9 September 2019].

<sup>100</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 170.

<sup>101</sup> Bennett and Royle, p. 108.

which the author imposes his own distinctive ‘brand.’ He leaves just enough familiar cultural references *in* this work – such as the mention of Perrier – to suggest his usual culturally composite yet curiously generic atmosphere. However, the recurrence of absurd or magic realist spaces in his novels also accommodates the possibility that this entire story could be taking place in one of the realms Strecher describes as ‘over there.’<sup>102</sup> Following on from this logic, the recurrent trope of ambiguous realms *itself* becomes part of the Murakami ‘brand’, similar to how, while there are very little concrete cultural references in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, items such as block hats and greatcoats refer to the Beckettian universe at large.

The overarching network of references throughout Murakami’s *œuvre* perhaps becomes a form of created world *in itself*, attaining a curiously stylised status. These references refer to other Murakami-esque references, in a manner that perhaps encourages readers to view the *œuvre* as divorced from a ‘real-world’ context. Thus, while Murakami’s use of references undoubtedly has mimetic origins in an Americanised Japan, his self-reflexive *citation* of this Americanised Japan – and other such ‘cosmopolitan’ exchanges – has become a trope in itself. In the titular quote from *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage*, a character remarks incredulously: ‘You flew all the way to Finland, and you ate a margherita pizza?’<sup>103</sup> The succession of globalised exchanges implicit in this idea – namely that an internationally popular fast food product of Italian origin is being consumed by a Japanese person who has travelled to Finland – evokes a mediated seriality paralleling the international circulation of Murakami’s novels themselves.

Interiors in Murakami can be compared on such grounds to a form of created world akin to the translator’s ‘neither’ space. This comparison becomes particularly

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<sup>102</sup> Strecher, Loc 1488 of 5837.

<sup>103</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Colorless*, p. 209.

obvious when Murakami's indoor spaces themselves are considered in their role as sites of cultural consumption. This idea will be particularly relevant to later discussion of the American-style house in *A Wild Sheep Chase* as something of an isolated cultural microcosm, frozen as it appears in time, its bookshelves containing something akin to 'an intellectual's required reading from 40 years ago.'<sup>104</sup> As stated before, in 'Scheherazade' Habara has very little contact with the outside world. His lack of access to a telephone or the Internet limits such connection, and the culture he is privy to – for instance, the DVDs Scheherazade brings him (p. 133) – is thus frozen in time. This limited cultural consumption is itself a kind of moderated or filtered world, in keeping with Murakami's more pervasive authorial world-creation. As indoor spaces in both 'Scheherazade' and *A Wild Sheep Chase* appear both temporally and spatially compartmentalised, objects within these spaces take on the quality of relics.

I have thus argued that such references in Beckett's and Murakami's work appear as part of an apparently limited framework suggesting a stylised textual world. However, as I will continue to argue, this sense of canonicity throughout a given *œuvre* is also crucially misleading in both authors' cases. Often one text does *not* serve to elucidate another, creating a sense of disconnect suggesting absent or deferred meaning. References thus appear devalued or rendered unreliable. Importantly, in both of the texts I have analysed, denuded architectural spaces are a vehicle of this contextual uncertainty.

Additionally, the manner in which these details self-referentially occur is *inconsistent*: some references are specific while others are left tellingly vague, lending them a 'shorthand' or 'placeholder' quality by which other texts by the same author are implicitly recalled. This additional form of 'inconsistent vagueness' is crucial to the chapter's following section. I will now discuss the manner in which these details are often

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<sup>104</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 240.

interspersed with contrasting vague passages in both authors' texts. This, I will argue, is another way in which a form of discursive control or distortion is imposed on the world of the text, apparently distancing it from mimetic representation.

## 1.2 . 'An odd house the more I looked at it':<sup>105</sup> Suspect References in *Malone Dies* and *A Wild Sheep Chase*

### 1.2.1

*One day, much later, to judge by his appearance, Macmann came to again, once again, in a kind of asylum. At first he did not know it was one, being plunged within it, but he was told so as soon as he was in a condition to receive news. They said in substance, You are now in the House of Saint John of God, with the number one hundred and sixty-six. Fear nothing, you are among friends. Friends! Well well. Take no thought for anything, it is we shall think and act for you, from now forward. We like it. Do not thank us therefore. In addition to the nourishment carefully calculated to keep you alive, and even well, you will receive, every Saturday, in honour of our patron, an imperial half-pint of porter and a plug of tobacco.*<sup>106</sup>

In the above passage from *Malone Dies*, there are a number of references that suggest historical context, yet in modified and problematised form. The asylum is only a 'kind of asylum'; when the location is eventually explained, this explanation is given only 'in substance' (pp. 248-249). The tongue-in-cheek tone of the narrative voice is apparent in the repetition of 'once again': 'Macmann came to again, once again, in a kind of asylum' (p. 248). This singsong quality reminds the reader of Malone's presence,

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<sup>105</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 236.

<sup>106</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, pp. 248-249; *Malone Dies*. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

implying a degree of scepticism. Repetition functions here, as in the case of some of *Watt*'s more circuitous passages,<sup>107</sup> to create a tone akin to a student filling a word count.

While 'St. John of God's' is a possible reference to a psychiatric hospital in the southern suburb of Stillorgan,<sup>108</sup> it is worth noting that in the case quoted above, the location is given as 'The House of St. John of God' (p. 249). This slightly different name seems to embellish, making the location less identifiable: the addition of the word 'House' emphasises connotations of physical and even domestic space.

The following sentences can be read in the tongue-in-cheek or bitter tone to which the reader has thus far become accustomed in Malone's narrative. Statements such as '[f]riends! Well well' (ibid.) problematise both the message told to Macmann but also Malone's own narrative. He is arguably both questioning the fictional presences in the institution but also the tone in which he himself is telling the story, as though unsure whether certain flourishes are too hyperbolic.

Little makes the link between Beckett's use of the word 'mansions' in *Murphy* – James Boswell's term for the Bethlem Royal Hospital's asylum cells – and 'pavilions' in *Watt*, originally 'mansions' in the French version.<sup>109</sup> The 'House' of St. John of God is an interesting addition to this lineage of 'vague' buildings. As a cultural marker, the addition of the word 'House' appears to 'vaguene'; however, this word also circles back to Boswell's 'mansions', themselves a specific reference. The 'House' of St. John of God provides an interesting example of a reference that has been *couched* or *framed* in

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<sup>107</sup> 'We shall be here all night./ Be here all night shall we./All night we shall be here./Here all night we shall be'; 'But Mrs. Gorman did not always sit on Watt, for sometimes Watt sat on Mrs. Gorman. Some days Mrs. Gorman was on Watt all the time, other days Watt was on Mrs. Gorman throughout. Nor were there lacking days when Mrs. Gorman began by sitting on Watt, and ended by having Watt sitting on her, or when Watt began by sitting on Mrs. Gorman, and ended by having Mrs. Gorman sitting on him'; 'For daily changed, as well as these, in carriage, expression, shape and size, the feet, the legs, the hands, the arms, the mouth, the nose, the eyes, the ears, to mention only the feet, the legs, the hands, the arms, the mouth, the nose, the eyes, the ears, and their carriage, expression, shape, and size.' (Beckett, *Selected Works Vol. I*, p. 206; p. 282; p. 341.)

<sup>108</sup> Alice Mauger, *The Cost of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public, Voluntary and Private Asylum Care* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, pp. 60-61; Little, 'Closed Spaces', p. 66.

defamiliarising terms; however, in this case the obfuscating term itself provides a further contextual clue.

However, such resonances in Beckett's *œuvre* may not always be as revelatory as they seem. While noting that repetition is 'the fabric of Beckett's work',<sup>110</sup> Damian Tarnopolsky contends that these repetitions do *not* necessarily provide answers, rather deferring them. Beckett's use of repetition provides 'a promise of a meaning' or even 'several meanings'; yet, as he observes, 'it doesn't give us an answer that we can use to get somewhere.'<sup>111</sup> It is arguable that the repeated quality of Beckett's *œuvre* encourages the reader to regard the works as drafts or versions of a singular work, while also containing divergences that problematise this tendency towards neat classification. Indeed, while Little reads *Watt* as a novel narrated by an asylum inmate, he also acknowledges 'structural discontinuities' that problematise this narrative, 'episodes which could not have been experienced by either Sam or Watt, such as the scene preceding the latter's arrival at the tram station which opens the book or the scene following his departure from the train station at the end'.<sup>112</sup>

Such ideas of absent or problematised relation are observable conceptually in *Malone Dies*, in both the representations of Malone's room and the objects within it. Malone's collection of objects is limited, but such objects also appear to change or merge with one another. The stylised and modified quality of these references may contribute to a *sense* of vagueness or contextual unreliability in a text that, in fact, contains abundant contextual markers. Beckett's objects recall both the idea of placement in a system and the unreliability of this system, themes which are also evident in his problematising use of translation.

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<sup>110</sup> Damian Tarnopolsky, 'Staying on the Surface: Figures of Repetition in Beckett's Post-war Trilogy', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui: Revisiting Molloy, Malone meurt/Malone Dies and L'Innomable / The Unnamable*, 26 (2014), 299-311 (p. 301).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>112</sup> Little, 'Closed Spaces', pp. 67-68.



As in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and ‘Scheherazade’, we learn elsewhere that the objects in Malone’s room appear as a limited set. They are initially framed in terms of an easily recalled inventory: ‘I have rummaged a little in my things, sorting them out and drawing them over to me, to look at them. I was not far wrong in thinking that I knew them off, by heart, and could speak of them at any moment, without looking at them’ (p. 190). However, despite this limited quality, such objects are also oddly protean. Sometimes this is a function of Beckett’s language – as Carla Locatelli notes, objects and locations in *Ill Seen Ill Said* appear unfixed, to the extent that in the text’s opening paragraph, ‘even stars and chairs [...] merge into one another, with the help of pronominal vagueness.’<sup>113</sup> This mix of rigidity (a seemingly defined set of objects) and fluidity (some of the objects appear uncertain or subject to change) creates an ‘inconsistent vagueness’ similar to that observable in Murakami’s novels. It is thus perhaps possible that the fact that *some* references are vague introduces an untrustworthy quality to the references that *are* relatively specific.

A useful way to examine this phenomenon is to analyse the objects in Malone’s room. Malone states that he has a number of objects in his room, in a heap. However, these include ‘two or three objects I had quite forgotten and one of which at least, the bowl of a pipe, strikes no chord in my memory’ (p. 191). He does not remember smoking a pipe but remembers the ‘soap-pipe with which, as a child, I used to blow bubbles, an odd bubble’ (ibid.). The bowl of the pipe – itself a fragment of a once-whole object – in turn recalls another, absent, image. This itself is confusing, or at least suggests a slippery plurality of images; especially when taken together with the knowledge that Malone does not understand the origins of *this* current pipe-fragment. Even the memory of the *absent* soap-pipe appears uncertain, emended, recalling Leslie Hill’s statement that repetition in

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<sup>113</sup> Carla Locatelli, qtd. in Fraser, p. 123.

Beckett's trilogy 'dissociates or separates more insistently than it assembles or unifies.'<sup>114</sup>

Applying this reading to Molloy's statement, '[t]he room smelt of ammonia, oh not merely of ammonia, but ammonia, ammonia',<sup>115</sup> Tarnopolsky argues that '[e]ach time Molloy uses the word "ammonia" to tell us what his mother's room smelled like [...] we understand less what he is talking about, not more'.<sup>116</sup> Even the fact that Malone used to blow bubbles with the absent soap-pipe is soon qualified, softened into 'an odd bubble' (p. 191) as though the plural 'bubbles' is somehow excessive.

Descriptions of the objects in the room become stranger still. There is a mysterious packet – a 'little mystery' (ibid.) which Malone promises to eventually expand on yet never does. Intriguingly, he supposes that it could either be a unit of Indian currency – a 'lakh of rupees' – or the romanticised image of 'a lock of hair' (ibid.). It is quite possible that both guesses are fanciful, perhaps even intended to sound far-flung or unlikely.<sup>117</sup> These references have been modified by a form of hyperbole or incongruous humour, a point I will return to in this chapter's final section. What the packet – 'soft, and light as a feather, tied up in newspaper' (p. 191) – contains is never confirmed. Perhaps this style of description renders any concrete references difficult to pin down as they appear to have a hypothetical quality, with the result that they do not *seem* to allude to a definable cultural context.

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<sup>114</sup> Leslie Hill, qtd. in Tarnopolsky, p. 303.

<sup>115</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Tarnopolsky, p. 303.

<sup>116</sup> Tarnopolsky, p. 306.

<sup>117</sup> Interestingly appearing to misquote Beckett's use of the word 'lakh' as 'lack', Phil Baker states, 'Beckett achieved extraordinary things with absence and indeterminacy, which find their emblem in Malone's mysterious 'lack': 'a little packet...It will be my own mystery, all my own. Perhaps it is a lack of rupees. Or a lock of hair.' [T.197]. This over-determined lack contains a hidden plenitude signaled by 'rupees', since the Hindi word 'lakh' signifies a great number. Lack suddenly comes to represent the plenitude of absence'. This argument is interesting as it appears similar to Alys Moody's observations on Beckett and hunger, by which she states that hunger in Beckett presents itself as both politicised and 'vague', a depiction of lack or the inability on an individual's part to engage physically with the world. The elision of the words 'lakh' and 'lack' here is an instance of what I will explore further in Chapter 3 as a 'multivalent vagueness' by which a reference contains a culturally specific significance (lakh) while also carrying resonances, occasionally as in this case through homonymy, with other languages and contexts (lack). Just as Beckett's depictions of hunger allude to multiple political situations while also alluding to *absence itself*, the 'lack/lakh' resonance is, as described here by Baker, similarly evocative of both a linguistic plenitude and an absence. However, Baker's misspelling of 'lakh' as 'lack' is telling. In the manner of a mistranslation, it is as though he has unconsciously glossed 'lakh' as an English word, revealing an Anglocentric bias. (Baker, p. 173; Alys Moody, 'The "Non-Lieu" of Hunger: Post-war Beckett and the Genealogies of Starvation', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 24 (2012), 261-274 (pp. 261-266).)

Perhaps strangest of all is the case of the exercise-book. Malone describes having known ‘perfectly well’ that he had ‘no exercise-book’, yet ‘rummag[ing] in [his] possessions in the hope of finding one’ (p. 203). It is of course possible that he is aware, on some level, that he *must* have owned an exercise-book – why, otherwise, would he attempt this search? Such musings, implicitly the product of an unreliable memory, lend a fluid quality to the description of Malone’s heap of objects: new items appear to self-generate as if by magic.

This section, therefore, puts forward the argument that while Beckett’s locations *appear* to recall those of his previous texts, such references are crucially misleading. A similar dialectic between limitation and variation can be seen in Beckett’s treatment of references to material culture *within* these spaces. In this way culturally specific references are problematised, rendered uncertain, just as indeterminacy softens the reference to the ‘Ballyogan Road’ in *Company*.<sup>118</sup> This can be compared to acts of translation that defamiliarise the author’s native tongue. Beckett’s ambiguous interior spaces often compound this uncertain canonicity, as though they are symbolic of theaporetic space between languages.

However, it is important to elucidate another effect of this ‘inconsistent vagueness’, with reference to the quoted extract. The ‘House of Saint John of God’, the ‘imperial half-pint of porter’, and the ‘plug of tobacco’ constitute possible contextual markers in an otherwise vague passage (p. 249). While such references contain an element of uncertainty themselves, the reader may latch on to them in order to decode the text’s seeming ‘placelessness.’ Thus follows the idea that both authors’ work makes use of the *contrast* between ‘vagueness’ and ‘detail.’

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<sup>118</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 434.

As I have shown, ‘inconsistent vagueness’ creates misleading resonances across a given *œuvre*. In Murakami’s ‘Scheherazade’, for instance, the vagueness of certain references appears as shorthand denoting a connection to previous Murakami works; however, there is a deceptive amount of variation among these works, therefore such connections are perhaps unreliable. I would also like to argue that this preoccupation with sequencing and its opposite, a form of disconnect, is also present formally in the manner in which ‘concrete’ references are interspersed dynamically throughout these texts with otherwise contextually denuded passages.

In a comparison apposite to this study, Junko Matoba discusses the sense of a ‘busy vacuum’ with reference to Beckett’s late plays, comparing his use of darkness to Yohaku, or the ‘undrawn white space of the traditional monochrome painting of Japan’, also called Sumi-e or Su’ibokuga.<sup>119</sup> Focusing on this ‘undrawn, unemployed space’<sup>120</sup> in Beckett’s texts, Matoba quotes Xerxes Mehta’s observation that darkness in Beckett functions to ‘throw the spectator into a physical void’ and ‘create in the spectator a psychological dependency on the image that finally appears.’<sup>121</sup>

The images, for instance the figures (and occasionally only mouths) of the central characters in works such as *Not I*, *Ohio Impromptu* or *Rockaby*, thus appear ‘obsessively present’, in the manner of ‘visions and nightmares.’<sup>122</sup> Similarly, the House of St. John of God in *Malone Dies* perhaps functions as a sudden anchoring of specificity in a Kafkaesque, dreamlike setting. (However, it is worth noting that this is still a *generalised* sort of specificity, denoting as it could any number of Christian-run institutions, or indeed, as this study’s following chapter will explore, a disguised reference to the institutional spaces often represented in testimonial literature.)

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<sup>119</sup> Junko Matoba, ‘Samuel Beckett’s Busy Vacuum: Yohaku in the Late Short Plays’, *Journal of Irish Studies*, 17 (2002), 101-108 (p. 103).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Xerxes Mehta, qtd. in Matoba, p. 102.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

It is interesting, for the purposes of a study connecting the work of Beckett and Murakami, to observe the link between Beckett and Japanese art made here. However, it is perhaps also apposite to take into account some of Matoba's statements regarding the relationship between 'vagueness' and 'detail' in Beckett's work. While Matoba has argued that Beckett's dark or blank space amplifies a given, isolated image, I advance the view that the opposite effect is also possible: an isolated reference, starkly standing out in an otherwise vague paragraph, serves also to emphasise surrounding contextual indeterminacy.

Views on whether this 'surrounding' vagueness serves to highlight or undermine a given cultural marker are interestingly divided. While citing Ulrika Maude's view that Beckett's 'lack of contextual definition [...] functions in a manner which forces us to focus our attention on what *is* described in minute detail',<sup>123</sup> Little notes elsewhere that *The Unnamable's* 'single Artaudian echo' 'cannot be held to constitute a similar critique' to Artaud's problematisation of mental healthcare.<sup>124</sup> It is possible that these seemingly contradictory views constitute a false dichotomy: Beckett's fleeting references provoke overinterpretation in the reader, along with an awareness that these partially articulated markers are also perhaps unreliable. Any reference the reader seeks to elucidate becomes a moving target.

It is worth noting, for instance, that *Malone Dies* is almost entirely devoid of any brand names other than two, which occur in close succession. The Venus pencil – Vénus in *Malone meurt*<sup>125</sup> – that Malone uses, along with the Bird pen given as a gift to Sapo in Malone's story, are mentioned within a page of each other, on pages 203 and 204 respectively; the Venus pencil is mentioned again on page 216. We learn that Malone is

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<sup>123</sup> Ulrika Maude, qtd. in Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 153.

<sup>124</sup> Little, 'Closed Spaces', p. 167.

<sup>125</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Malone meurt* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1951), p. 65.

in possession of another pencil, made in France (ibid.); the French pencil is once again referred to on page 248. These two occurrences of brand names serve to highlight that the text otherwise yields comparatively few such references. They also add to the deliberate resonances between the stories of Malone and Sapo. In short, the reader is perhaps prompted to understand why Malone included the detail of the pen in his story, since he has just been thinking about his pencil. The lack of other brand names in the text encourages this resonance. However, these references reveal themselves to be slippery and protean. Interestingly, in the French version, the 'Bird' (p. 204) pen brand has the longer name 'Blackbird.'<sup>126</sup>

Therefore, it is possible to identify a kind of 'paradoxical vagueness' here by which the presence of detail in Beckett's texts serves to emphasise rather than dispel the surrounding vagueness in a given passage. Such juxtapositions can be regarded as yet another device presenting cultural context as unreliable, at once emphasised yet called into question. This ambiguity leads to the sense that Beckett's references have been modified or filtered through a mediating 'brand.' This slight divergence from realism, comparable to a self-translating author's stylisation of language, can also be observed in Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*.

### 1.2.2

*Straight on across the pasture stood an old American-style two-story wood-frame house. The house that the Sheep Professor had built forty years before and the Rat's father had then bought. Nothing was nearby to compare it to, so from a distance it was difficult to tell how big it was. It was, in any case, squat and expressionless. Painted white, beneath the overcast skies it looked a foreboding gray. From the middle of the mustard-, almost rust-colored gabled roof a rectangular brick chimney protruded. Instead of a fence around the house, there was a stand of evergreens which protected it from the elements.*

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<sup>126</sup> Beckett, *Malone meurt*, p. 58.

*The place seemed curiously uninhabited. An odd house the more I looked at it. It wasn't particularly inhospitable or cold, nor built in any unusual way, nor even much in disrepair. It was just... odd. As if a great creature had grown old without being able to express its feelings. Not that it didn't know how to express them, but rather that it didn't know what to express.*<sup>127</sup>

This 'paradoxical vagueness' is particularly apparent in the description of the American-style house in *A Wild Sheep Chase*. In the above paragraph, the house is described as 'straight across the pasture' (ibid.); a situating sentence that orients the text in what appears to be a spatially simple area. 'The house that the Sheep Professor had built forty years before and the Rat's father had then bought' (ibid.) appears as an almost unnecessarily expository description and thus has the quality of an anxious reiteration. However, despite this insistence on context, there is nothing 'nearby to compare [the house] to' (ibid.). A description of the chimney refocuses to describe the fence *around* the house rather than any further features of the house proper. Much in the manner that the narrative repeatedly digresses from addressing the cabin in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this passage affords a large amount of attention to the American-style house's vague surroundings rather than to the house itself. As in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, a sense of problematised boundaries recalls difficult linguistic transition.

The final sentences are also telling in their focus on the house's relation to its environment. The protagonist's attempts to discern what is so odd about the house appear to largely centre on a sense of loneliness or dislocation. The house is perhaps unsettling because it does not fit into its surroundings, or because its relationship with its surroundings is unclear. The evergreens '[protect] the house from the elements' (ibid.). However, the house seems 'curiously uninhabited' (ibid.), information that implies it no

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<sup>127</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 236. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

longer needs to be protected. The evergreens are thus redundant, or the house has an abandoned yet guarded quality, devoid of inhabitants yet containing important contents.

In a manner that recalls the protean nature of the objects in Malone's room, the house appears to change throughout the description in the quoted passage, growing increasingly opaque and eventually being judged 'an odd house the more I looked at it' (ibid.) The 'concrete' material references are *limited* (as this passage depicts a solitary house in stark surroundings) but also *fluid* (the house has uncertain or difficult-to-describe qualities, such as the roof that is either 'mustard' or 'rust-colored' (ibid.)). The reference to the 'American-style house' (ibid.), which appears to initially offer at least a broad historical context, thus takes on an unreliable quality. Details about the house grow less and less certain as the surrounding vagueness of the pasture and overcast sky appear to encroach on the scene.

The unusual relation between interior and exterior worlds demonstrated in this extract is mirrored by Murakami's use of 'paradoxical vagueness', by which detail in his texts serves to emphasise the surrounding vagueness of his descriptions. The reader is aware that the protagonist and his girlfriend are journeying up a mountain near Junitaki (p. 224); the protagonist has been reading the story of the Ainu shepherd, grounding the area in historical reality.<sup>128</sup> Ostensibly, sufficient markers of place are present. However, it is possible that the vagueness *interspersed* with these markers of place is one of the factors contributing to the house's 'placeless' quality.

To begin with, *A Wild Sheep Chase* is a novel with an interesting relationship to 'vaguening' and temporality. Its position in the Murakami *œuvre* may appear unclear, as the last of the loosely linked *Rat Trilogy* novels before their eventual sequel *Dance Dance Dance*<sup>129</sup> was written. Indeed, after finishing *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami belatedly

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<sup>128</sup> See Chapter 24, 'The Birth, Rise and Fall of the Junitaki Township', ibid., pp. 199-208.

<sup>129</sup> Karashima, p. 119.



wrote *Dance Dance Dance* to revisit the story and characters of *A Wild Sheep Chase*: the chronological order of these novels thus interweaves alternate Murakami universes.<sup>130</sup>

The opening chapter of *Dance Dance Dance* appears to reprise certain ingredients of the plot of *A Wild Sheep Chase* – the ear model, the Dolphin Hotel – yet it is as if these elements are being viewed anew. The story of Boku’s stay in Sapporo is reintroduced and recontextualised with hindsight: ‘Once, a few years back, I spent a week there [...] I was still in my twenties. I checked into the Dolphin Hotel with a woman I was living with.’<sup>131</sup> Boku reflects that ‘the hotel is, as I’ve suggested, as much circumstance as place, a state of being in the guise of a hotel.’<sup>132</sup> *Dance Dance Dance* and *A Wild Sheep Chase* appear linked according to a form of discontinuous continuity, by which the former novel’s events appear recalled from an altered perspective. For the purposes of concision in this study, I will continue my exclusive focus on *A Wild Sheep Chase*; yet study of the interesting relationships between this novel and its ‘vaguely’ linked counterparts presents many fruitful questions.

*A Wild Sheep Chase* is itself notable for its treatment of ‘vague’ content, with some of this ‘vagueness’ related to its translation into English. For instance, Murakami’s editor Elmer Luke updated the novel’s English translation by removing chapter headings that set it explicitly in the 1970s. ‘1970/11/25’, the date of Yukio Mishima’s suicide, becomes ‘A Prelude’; markers of time such as ‘The Rat’s First Letter (Postmarked December 21, 1977)’ are modified to be less specific, becoming ‘The Rat’s First Letter (Postmarked December 21<sup>st</sup>, One Year Ago).’<sup>133</sup> The narrative retains its internal pacing, but its temporal setting has been ‘vaguened.’ In a manner similar to the texts discussed in this chapter’s first section, the novel appears to be set adrift in time; this ‘vagueness’ is

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>131</sup> Murakami, *Dance*, p. 2.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Elmer Luke and Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Karashima, p. 38.

crucially inconsistent, as some of the text's numerous cultural markers arguably betray its temporal location.

Yet disregarding any changes made to the original text, the narrative repeatedly calls attention to the act of referencing itself. Boku and the ear model's discussion of the nameless cat – which leads the chauffeur to name him Kipper – provokes, in turn, a conversation on the naming of inanimate objects such as boats and aeroplanes (pp. 152-153). Boku wonders why the former but not the latter are given names; his girlfriend wishes each individual city bus had its own name (ibid.). This leads to a discussion of such naming practices dwindling in the age of mass production; the characters then jump to discussing train stations and the relationship between location and naming. "If Shinjuku Station were in Ekoda, it would be Ekoda Station," the chauffeur asserts (p. 154). The conversation prompts the reader to consider the serialised or systematic nature of such acts of referencing, but also the quirks within these systems.

Such discussion is later paralleled in the following exchange with the clerk in the Dolphin Hotel:

"Actually, I named this place the Dolphin Hotel because of a scene with dolphins in *Moby Dick*."

"Oh-ho," said I. "But if that's the case, wouldn't it have been better to name it the Whale Hotel?"

"Whales don't have quite the image," he admitted with some regret (p. 176).

Similarly, the black-suited secretary's detailed inventory of all of the breeds of sheep in Japan – '[b]y way of varieties,' he supplies, 'there are in Japan the Southdown, Spanish Merino, Cotswold, Chinese, Shropshire, Corriedale, Cheviot, Romanovsky, Ostofresian, Border Leicester, Romney Marsh, Lincoln, Dorset Horn, Suffolk, and that's about all' (p. 111) – arguably contains an implicit joke based on the connotations of

homogeneity commonly attributed to sheep, as this list conversely contains a wide range of different breeds.

Such discussions provoke thought on both serialised and arbitrary naming. While it might be easy to leave a cat nameless, for instance, the characters agree that train stations are named with good reason. Such conversations can be seen as implicit discussions of the boundaries of ‘placelessness’, questioning the process of ‘vaguening’ itself and opening inquiry into what constitutes essential description. This preoccupation with a kind of methodical sequencing also recalls the serialised grammatical exercises encountered when learning a foreign language. I will return more to this point – the methodical description of objects or household tasks as itself a form of *lingua franca* – in Chapter 5 of this study.

This light-hearted play over names is contrasted with the story of the Ainu shepherd. Formerly named ‘Full Moon On The Wane’ (p. 199), he gives up his indigenous name to take a Japanese one. The humorous dialogue in the limousine foreshadows the darker, imperial undertones of such acts of definition.

The novel itself contains a proliferation of famous ‘names.’ Music references include The Doors, The Rolling Stones (referred to as The Stones), the Byrds, Deep Purple, The Moody Blues (p. 4), Mozart (p. 36), the Beach Boys (p. 80), The Beatles, Paul McCartney (p. 86), Boz Scaggs (p. 88), Chopin (p. 126), Johnny Rivers (p. 134), The Brothers Johnson, Bill Withers, Maynard Ferguson (p. 146), Kenny Burrell, BB King, Larry Coryell, Jim Hall (p. 167), Beethoven (p. 179), Scriabin (p. 212), Nat King Cole (p. 241), The Percy Faith Orchestra (p. 244), Benny Goodman (p. 270), Charlie Christian (p. 288), and the song ‘White Christmas’ (p. 267). There are also occasional references to radio such as an ‘FEN rock program’ (p. 6), and ‘FM music’ (p. 80).

In terms of literary references, Murakami mentions Kenzaburō Ōe, Mickey Spillane, Allen Ginsberg (p. 4), Yukio Mishima (p. 8), Ellery Queen, and Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (p. 35). The Rat speculates in one of his letters that had he been born in the nineteenth century he'd be a better writer, 'maybe not your Dostoevsky, but a known second-rate novelist' (p. 76). Also mentioned are H.G. Wells (p. 111), Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, *The Brothers Karamazov* (p. 126), *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (p. 144), *Sleeping Beauty* (p. 155), *Moby Dick* (p. 176), Plutarch's *Lives* (p. 240), a Conrad novel (p. 259), a volume of *Selected Greek Tragedies* (p. 240), a volume on the *Heritage of Pan-Asianism* (p. 265), a reference work titled *the Mountains of Hokkaido*, a Hokkaido atlas (p. 170), an *Authoritative History of Junitaki Township* (p. 199) that proves surprisingly unauthoritative, and a French-Japanese dictionary (p. 130). Philosophical references, in turn, include Nietzsche (p. 36) and Marx (p. 113).

It is also perhaps important to consider fictional references in this context, such as the aforementioned history of the Junitaki Township, or the volume titled *Bread Baking* that Boku finds in the American-style house (p. 264). Such fictional volumes, and the problems they present for Murakami's translators, have been hitherto observed. While working on the English translation of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* – an effort delayed by six months in 1991 – Alfred Birbaum and editor Luke asked Murakami a number of questions. Among these was whether Burtland Cooper's *Archeology of Animals* existed in real life, Murakami's colleagues comparing it in their correspondence to Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings*.<sup>134</sup> The novel is indeed fictional, as Murakami confirmed;<sup>135</sup> yet as his colleagues observed, the fictional volume may serve as an indirect reference to an important magic realist influence.

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<sup>134</sup> Karashima, p. 71.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Elsewhere, references to actors, films, television and cartoons range from Farah Fawcett (p. 32), Snoopy (p. 46), Bugs Bunny (p. 175), *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* (p. 25), an unnamed ‘old American submarine movie’ (p. 96), *The Magnificent Seven* (p. 154), *The Invaders* (p. 171), *The Alamo*, John Wayne, John Ford (p. 241), and *Duck Soup* (p. 271).

Brand names in the novel are equally numerous, including to Hilton, Prince, and Okura hotels (p. 28), Levi’s (p. 46), Pall Mall (p. 47), Salvation Army (p. 48), Volkswagen Beetle (p. 65), Salty Dog (p. 94), Nikon (p. 109), the Dupont lighter, Bic (p. 112), Heineken (p. 129), 747, Tristar (p. 155), MGM (p. 161), Coke (p. 211; p. 212), Honda, Toyota (p. 214), Larks cigarettes (p. 222), Gillette (p. 246), Seven Stars (p. 247), Four Roses (p. 251), Land Cruiser (p. 259), Cointreau, Campbell’s Soup (p. 265), Löwenbrau (p. 272), Hershey (p. 289), and Ray-Ban (p. 291).

While there is a decided trend towards Westernised references to media and culture rather than East Asian ones, Japanese place names feature heavily. Present-day place names in the narrative – as distinct from the places referred to in the novel’s historical passages – include ‘an old quarter of Tokyo’, Waseda (p. 3), the ICU campus, Mitaka (p. 6), Shinjuku (p. 16), Akasaka (p. 27), Kanda (p. 28), Hokkaido (p. 54), Honshu (p. 79), and Sapporo (p. 84). Shibuya Station, the Odakyu Line, Ekoda Station and Tokyo Station are mentioned, albeit hypothetically, in the course of the discussion of place names themselves (p. 154). Chitose Airport features (p. 160), in addition to references to Asahikawa (p. 192), Nayori (p. 229), the Japan Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk (p. 233), and Tokyo-Haneda (p. 297).

The reader becomes acquainted with the history of the Junitaki Township through the protagonist’s research on this topic: crucially, this historical exposition is assigned the quality of a text within a text. Such historical detail is thus presented as

compartmentalised in relation to the rest of the novel. It is also significant that the *Authoritative History of Junitaki Township* does not live up to its title: ‘The author himself seemed to have gotten bored by the events of the thirties on, his reportage becoming spotty and fragmentary’ (p. 207). ‘Even the writing style faltered,’ Boku reports, ‘losing the clarity of his discussion of the Ainu youth’ (ibid.). The uneven quality of this historical guide is telling, perhaps, for what it reveals about Murakami’s own biases regarding historically informed writing. The *Authoritative History* appears to invest much detail in the personal history of the Ainu shepherd. As his *Underground* interviews show, Murakami himself would go on to write about cultural trauma as filtered through a personal lens, stating that at times ‘inconsistency can be more eloquent than consistency.’<sup>136</sup> Even this historical passage is mediated, rendered subjective, and implicitly interiorised by its positioning as text-within-text.

This selective focus raises interesting points regarding the text’s compartmentalisation through ‘inconsistent vagueness.’ As this study’s following chapter will explore in more detail, the American-style house functions in this novel as a form of cultural microcosm, the books on the shelves outdated. It would be reductive to assert that Murakami’s references can be delineated into groups as simple as those of Japanese *geographical* references and American/European *cultural* references, as though outdoor space signifies ‘Japaneseness’ and interiority ‘foreignness.’ However, as is evident in both the description of Boku’s time alone in the American-style house<sup>137</sup> and in the following extract from *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, indoor spaces in Murakami are

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<sup>136</sup> ‘During the course of my interviews I endeavored to maintain the basic stance that each person’s story is true within the context of that story, and I still believe so. As a result, the stories told by people who simultaneously experienced the very same scene often differ on the small details, but they are presented here with all their contradictions preserved. Because it seems to me that these discrepancies and contradictions say something in themselves. Sometimes, in this multifaceted world of ours, inconsistency can be more eloquent than consistency.’ (Murakami, *Underground*, p. 204.)

<sup>137</sup> ‘That afternoon I baked bread. The Rat’s *Bread Baking* proved to be a thoughtfully written cookbook. On the cover was written: “If you can read, then you can bake bread.” It was no exaggeration. The smell of bread filled the house, making it warm all over. For a fledgling effort, it didn’t taste too bad either. There was plenty of flour and yeast in the kitchen, enough for bread the whole winter long, if it turned out I had to stay. And more rice and spaghetti than I cared to think about’ (p. 264).

often the sites of cultural consumption due to the narratives' focus on methodical sequences in which characters read books, cook meals, or listen to records at home.

Indoor spaces thus occupy a difficult role to define in Murakami: often the sites of compartmentalisation in relation to the 'outside' world, they also function to present a portal to other cultures through the appreciation of artistic media. 'Inconsistent vagueness' and 'paradoxical vagueness' converge here to create a sense of apparent 'placelessness' in what, in the case of *A Wild Sheep Chase* among others, are in fact often referentially dense novels. Thus, indoor space itself physically enacts a surrounding 'vagueness', compartmentalising a given reference to obfuscate its mimetic value.

The third section of this chapter will discuss a final means of such modification of cultural detail. As given references in both authors' work often take on an absurd or hyperbolic quality, I will examine the potential of humour as a distancing effect that serves to superficially mitigate cultural context. Arguably, such humorous incongruity functions in a similar distancing manner to both authors' experiments with self-translation: their humorously employed references create interesting contextual resonances while crucially preserving the possibility that any culturally revelatory significance may be unintended.

### 1.3 ‘The perfect music for cooking pasta’<sup>138</sup>: Humorous Distance in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Mercier and Camier*

#### 1.3.1

*When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along to an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini’s *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.*

*I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been someone with news of a job. I turned down the gas, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.*

*“Ten minutes, please,” said a woman on the other end.*

*I’m good at recognizing people’s voices, but this was not one I knew (ibid.).*

A first-glance reading of this opening paragraph yields two main references that could be loosely termed ‘cultural’: spaghetti and Rossini’s *The Thieving Magpie* (ibid.). However, a more sustained analysis reveals further situating details present in the extract, thus raising the problem of how to define a ‘concrete’ reference. These references range from very ‘specific’ to very ‘vague’, and can be enumerated accordingly:

- 1) ‘the phone’
- 2) ‘the kitchen’
- 3) the pot – suggested by ‘a potful’
- 4) ‘spaghetti’
- 5) ‘FM broadcast’
- 6) ‘Rossini’

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<sup>138</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 5. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.



- 7) '*The Thieving Magpie*'
- 8) 'Claudio Abbado'
- 9) 'The London Symphony'
- 10) 'a job'
- 11) 'the gas'
- 12) 'the living room' (ibid.)

As in the case of the previous extracts, the vagueness of the references is inconsistent here. Household features – the phone, the kitchen, the pot, the gas stove, and the living room – are suggested impressionistically. They are mentioned in the course of an active passage through the house, and not as objects in their own right – 'I turned down the gas, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver' (ibid.). There is a methodical quality to these descriptive passages, insisting as they do on unhurried narration of the kind of detail – such as Toru's turning off the stove before taking a phone call – that may typically be considered superfluous. In contrast to the odd blankness of the house itself, Toru's activities, and his passage through the house, are exhaustively described.

In this extract, the apparent vagueness of the indoor space thus contributes to the sense of the musical reference as ironically specific, as no model types or brand names are mentioned with reference to any of the household objects. A humorous incongruity arises as the narrator's implicit apathy towards his surroundings contrasts with his detailed appreciation of his listening material. However, it is unclear how seriously the reader is meant to analyse the reference to Rossini: at this point in the narrative, it may point towards other expository information. It may be intended to demonstrate Toru's knowledge, or his diligence, or even something akin to a distractable quality in the

narrator. The reader may infer, rightly, that the reference will have some significance to the text as a whole: Book One is titled ‘The Thieving Magpie’ (ibid., unpaginated), and this title seems already to resonate with the avian reference to the ‘Wind-Up Bird’ of both the subsequent first chapter title (p. 5) and of the novel as a whole. The fact that the piece of music is an overture seems to resonate with the novel’s own beginning, so the reader may infer from this that the music serves an introductory or situating function in the text. However, mentioned as it is in passing in the novel’s first paragraph, Murakami’s accessible style appears not to demand the reader’s engagement with the specificities of this intertext.

Crucially, the musical reference itself here is an interesting case of uneven detail or ‘inconsistent vagueness.’ The radio station is unnamed – simply an ‘FM broadcast’ (ibid.) – whereas a large amount of information is supplied regarding the overture itself. While the reference appears woven casually into the conversational style of the novel’s opening lines, it unfolds in quite a rigorously cited order. The reader learns, in this sequence: the composer, the title of the piece being listened to, the conductor, and the orchestra performing the piece (ibid.). This knowledge is imparted with the added implication that Toru is familiar with this piece of music, knowing as he does that the phone call has occurred around the time of its crescendo. In the manner of a cinema script or precise stage directions, the reader can imagine an exact musical accompaniment to this passage, despite perhaps being unable to imagine key aspects of the setting itself. Detail of the interior would, of course, typically be supplied in more visually oriented media such as drama or film; the contextual information provided to the reader has been shaped and modulated in a form of world-creation. This divergence from realism can, again, be thought of as a self-translator’s depiction of subjectivised ‘neither’ space.

Thus, Toru's appreciation of Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie* contrasts humorously with the urgent situation of the ringing phone. The reader is told that Toru 'wanted to ignore the phone' yet finally had to 'give in' (ibid.), suggesting a determination to remain disconnected from the outside world. An opposition between indoor/private and outdoor/public lives is thus announced from the novel's outset, indoor space aligned here with the consumption of European media. Such humorous opposition is achieved through an 'inconsistent vagueness': in a mixing of registers that would be perhaps familiar to Beckett readers, the banality of certain descriptions is countered by the 'high-culture' specificity of others. As in Beckett's case, it is arguable that such mixing of registers is itself informed by a self-translator's perspective. Just as unevenness of tone, neologisms, and inventively customised idioms arise in self-translated prose, both authors derive humour from such incongruity.

Beckett's creative repurposing of idiom from a bilingual perspective is expanded on here by George Craig, in his introduction to the fourth volume of Beckett's letters. It is arguable that such customisations are informed by a humour based on incongruity, as in the case of the following examples, in which unexpected twists are introduced into familiar idioms:

We use the word "bilingual" rather loosely – sometimes to describe those who have been exposed to two languages from birth, and therefore count as native speakers of both; but more commonly to refer to people such as myself who have learned, and are at ease in, two languages, able to respond unhesitatingly to their interlocutors in either. This latter was Beckett's route: school, university, Paris, Roussillon (during the Occupation). For such people the ease is real enough, although, for Beckett as for others, it will be overtaken from time to time by self-doubt, along the lines of "Would *they* have said that?" One of the marks of the bilingual is the ability to make free with either language, inventing or rearranging, as when Beckett, commenting on a particularly barren period in his writing, offers this diagnosis to Avigdor Arikha: "Au bout d'une demi-phrase mentale, c'est la honte. Quintessentialisme senile." (After half a mental sentence shame wells up. Senile quintessentialism.) Or again, in another letter to Arikha: "Réforme vite les Beaux Arts et sus à la peinture, resus." (Get on with reforming the Beaux-Arts,

and up with painting, and up again!) Nor is the making free limited to French and English, as we see in the following invention: talking of business best settled face-to-face, or *viva voce*, Beckett describes his own contribution as “moribunda voce.” This is the Beckett who can say “My only part in the Court productions would be to lend Pat and Donald a hindering hand with That Time.”<sup>139</sup>

Similarly, Rubin states of Murakami’s unusual grammar:

It is important that the word Murakami uses for “I” throughout is *boku*. Although the “I-novel” is a long-established fixture of serious Japanese fiction, the word most commonly used for the “I” narrator has a formal tone: *watakushi* or *watashi*. Murakami chose instead the casual *boku*, another pronoun-like word for “I”, but an unpretentious one used primarily by young men in informal circumstances [...]. This stance normally makes Boku a passive character, which in turn gives rise to a speech habit – or “Haruki-ism” – often used by Murakami’s protagonists when they are confronted by confounding situations: “*Yare-yare*.” This has been rendered into English as “Great, just great” or “Terrific” or merely a sigh, depending on the translator and the befuddling context. (84) Murakami chose to call this fictional persona *Boku* because he felt the word to be the closest (38) thing Japanese had to the neutral English “I”; less a part of the Japanese social hierarchy, more democratic, and certainly not the designation of an authority figure.<sup>140</sup>

However, this innovative use of grammar often leads to a sense that Murakami’s language is inappropriately employed or ‘off.’ On the topic of the novel *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, in which characters who knew each other from childhood address each other with the suffixes *-san* and *-kun*, Rubin states: ‘Even Japanese reviewers have found it curious to have these late-30-something lovers addressing each other as though they were still in the sixth grade, but the effect is to reinforce the importance to the mature protagonist of those idealized moments in childhood.’<sup>141</sup> It is clear from such examples that both Beckett’s and Murakami’s prose styles, informed by

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<sup>139</sup> George Craig, ‘French Translator’s Preface’, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. xxxii-xliii (p. xxxiv).

<sup>140</sup> Rubin, pp. 37-38.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

self-translation, lead to a semantic and grammatical flexibility that often involves the incongruous mixing of registers.

In Murakami novels, cultural references are frequently employed to a humorous end. Adam Kirsch notes that in 1Q84, Fuka-Eri's ability to recite long passages of *The Tale of the Heike* 'is presented as a freakish, almost idiot savant-like ability, and a sign of Fuka-Eri's profound divorce from the actual, modern world.'<sup>142</sup> In some respects, a given reference in Murakami may convey erudition or detailed knowledge without needing to be precisely understood in itself. Often, such detailed knowledge serves a humorous function, and tells the reader as much about a given character's personality as about the cultural item referenced.

Interestingly, what little references are present in this novel's first paragraph have themselves been subject to a history of modification. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, of course, shares an introduction with the short story, 'The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women', Murakami having expanded the latter into a full-length novel at the beginning of 1991.<sup>143</sup> When the English translation of 'The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women' was first published in *The New Yorker*, the reference to 'FM radio' was changed to 'Tokyo's best FM station' in line with editor Harold Ross's technique of establishing the location of a story early in its introduction.<sup>144</sup> In the *New Yorker* story the Rossini opera has been given its Italian name, *La Gazza Ladra*, in keeping with Murakami's original; only later in his translation of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* did Rubin argue for referring to the opera by its English title, in order to emphasise resonances with 'the bird image'.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Adam Kirsch, 'Murakami vs. Bolaño: Competing Visions of the Global Novel' (2017) <https://lithub.com/murakami-vs-bolano-competing-visions-of-the-global-novel/> [Accessed 13 September 2019].

<sup>143</sup> Karashima, p. 60.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.; as Karashima notes, such 'rigorous editing [...] of course, was not unusual for any piece being published by *The New Yorker*.' (Ibid., p. 57.)

<sup>145</sup> Jay Rubin, qtd. in ibid., pp. 222-223.

Despite the carefully chosen nature of these references, they are presented in a manner that can appear tangential to the story. Chikako Nihei posits that, ‘when Murakami’s readers sympathise with his stories, they focus on the narrative rather than the plot or the other works to which he refers.’<sup>146</sup> She notes Yōichi Komori’s criticism of Murakami’s work, the former holding that Murakami’s references in *Kafka on the Shore* – among them citations of the Oedipus myth, Richard Francis Burton’s *One Thousand and One Nights*, Kafka’s ‘In the Penal Colony’, Sōseki’s *The Poppy* and *The Miner*, and a book on the trial of Adolf Eichmann – endorse ‘the Oedipus taboo, misogyny that allows the execution of women, and escapism through introversion and dreams.’<sup>147</sup> Komori’s reading, as Nihei states, ‘[i]nterpret[s] these references as the author’s straightforward endorsement of their implied values’,<sup>148</sup> a reading that of course appears overly literal. However, Komori’s analysis is interesting in that it flags Murakami’s use of such references in, as Nihei states, ‘an unmediated way.’<sup>149</sup> As cultural references are often woven casually into Murakami’s narratives, they may appear to take on the status of placeholders, further instances of the narrative ‘rhythm’<sup>150</sup> Murakami seeks to create. The fact that these references are ‘unmediated’, in Komori’s reading, may mean they are often largely unevaluated in the text, as if the reader is left to decide on their significance. In a further turn, Nihei’s reading would suggest that Murakami’s narratives have an overwhelming or obfuscating effect on the references themselves; in my own reading, the narrative’s calming or conversational tone perhaps deters interpretation of the intertextual content.

Humour often enacts a modifying or distancing effect on such references; frequently in Murakami’s writing, this happens in the case of references to far-flung

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<sup>146</sup> Nihei, pp. 16-17.

<sup>147</sup> Yōichi Komori, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>148</sup> Nihei, p. 16.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 3.

places. When Scheherazade's matter-of-fact statement is compared to someone mentioning that the North Pole is in the far north,<sup>151</sup> this reference to the North Pole is perhaps not to be taken as significant in itself. (Although, in a story centred on themes of loneliness and confinement, it is equally arguable that the image of a denuded landscape is not accidental.) Likewise, in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the whale penis in the aquarium is described as looking like 'an artifact unearthed from the Central Asian desert' rather than 'a product of the Antarctic Ocean' (p. 26). Such references – and their somewhat figurative use in the context of similes or comparisons – are arguably part of Murakami's Chandleresque tendency towards humorous hyperbole. While they technically refer to 'concrete' place names, their humour often lies in the extreme or specific nature of the locations cited. A similar effect has been observed by Little in relation to Beckett's reference to 'Patagonia' in *Catastrophe*. This latter has been interpreted as exaggeratedly signifying 'peripheral' remoteness, while at the same time constituting a reference to Argentinian and Chilean military dictatorships relevant to the text's dynamics.<sup>152</sup> Thus, such references may appear as figures of speech while concealing politicised significance.

This matter is complicated by the fact that Murakami often denies the significance of any of his own similes. To a student's question over the image of an underwater volcano – perhaps symbolising the protagonist's sudden feeling of restlessness and hunger – in 'The Second Bakery Attack', Murakami responded that '[t]he volcano is not a symbol. It's just a volcano.'<sup>153</sup> Rubin states that in response to the incredibly detailed description of Toru's time spent at the bottom of a well in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, many fans have expressed curiosity over whether Murakami himself has ever been down a well. However, as Rubin states, '[t]he answer, quite simply, is no.'<sup>154</sup> The use of

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<sup>151</sup> Murakami, 'Scheherazade', p. 118.

<sup>152</sup> Antoni Libera, qtd. in Little, 'Closed Spaces', p. 247.

<sup>153</sup> Jay Rubin, qtd. in *Tokyo Business Today*, 'Why Haruki Murakami's Works Are Read All Over the World' (2015) <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/91386> [Accessed 9 September 2019].

<sup>154</sup> Rubin, p. 208.

contextual markers to convey humour contributes to the sense that such ‘concrete’ references in Murakami’s *œuvre* have the arbitrary status of placeholders.

In an extension of this absurd perspective, Murakami’s interest in ‘America as a sign’ reveals a direct connection between humour, translation, and the fluid or ambiguous presentation of cultural markers. Illustrating this idea with reference to a phrase – ‘[y]ou’re cookin’ with Crisco’ – encountered during his translation of an American text, Murakami recalls initially not knowing what the brand name ‘Crisco’ referred to. Crucially, the author offers his own interpretation of Crisco based on his imaginings of the foreign signifier, supplying a description paraphrased by Nihei accordingly: ‘it has a solid body and is about the size of a lump of sugar contained in a cube-shaped yellow can, which makes a dry sound when shaken.’<sup>155</sup> He connects this imagined product to ‘the America that I perceive and imagine inside me [...] the America I look at through my small window.’<sup>156</sup>

In this scenario of conceptual translation, cultural references ‘are what you make of them’, an element of their significance left subject to the reader’s own interpretation. Murakami’s reference to the ‘window’ by which he views America, along with his image of Crisco itself as a hermetically sealed reference containing unseen contents, dramatise the translation process in terms of confinement and productive perspectival limitation.

Murakami’s work offers evidence of extensive engagement with this concept, namely the manner in which ‘foreignness’ and cultural signifiers can combine to produce creative interpretations of the world. In *Kafka on the Shore*, Nakata’s unfamiliarity with certain aspects of society means that he refers to a variety of banal terms with a degree of distance, an effect achieved by the use of *katakana* for the words that are ‘foreign’ to him. In this manner, as Nihei notes, the terms ‘finance, department chief, trade concerns,

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<sup>155</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Nihei, p. 38.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.



MITI, and eel are listed on the same level.’<sup>157</sup> Thus, Murakami’s references attain an *apparently* interchangeable quality, as if to allow for the fact that there are certain readers to which they may mean nothing. This perspective provides an interesting counterpart to the casual or presumptive use of cultural markers by authors writing in a dominant literary language.

It is interesting to observe which references are ‘vague’ and which are ‘specific’ in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* at large. In addition to the manner in which references are modified by humour, ‘inconsistent vagueness’ is pervasive throughout the novel. In a manner similar to the effect I have observed in Beckett’s work, a detailed reference highlights the text’s surrounding ‘vagueness’, simultaneously encouraging the reader’s dependence on sparingly employed markers. At the same time, the manner in which specific references are apparently equated with broad ones means that such detailed references maintain an uncertain, ‘placeholder’ quality.

Much like *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* contains many references to American and European culture and multinational brands; as the following analysis will explore, detailed anecdotal references to Japan’s history surface throughout this novel in compartmentalised form. However, such textual interludes are arguably afforded more sustained narrative attention here than in *A Wild Sheep Chase*.

Among the references cited are Coke (p. 18), de Chirico (p. 20), Herb Alpert, Gulliver’s Travels (p. 39), Keith Richards (p. 40), JVC, and the Percy Faith Orchestra (p. 56). When referring to a photograph of the Alps, Toru appears unsure of their geography, guessing the mountain depicted to be ‘Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn or wherever’ (ibid.). However, even those living in European countries close to the Alps may not be able to visually identify specific mountains, so there is arguably nothing particularly suggestive

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<sup>157</sup> Nihei, p. 96.

of Japanese context about Toru's uncertainty here. There are references to Troy Donohue, Sandra Dee (p. 57), Connie Francis, a Tyrolean hat, Cutty Sark, Christian Dior (p. 101), Bach (p. 180), the Beatles (p. 184), Tchaikovsky, Schumann (p. 278), Sprite (p. 318), Haydn (p. 365), Calvin Klein (p. 369), Bose speakers, Keith Jarrett (p. 381), Mozart (p. 406), Poulenc, Bartók (p. 440), Barry Manilow, Air Supply (p. 447), a Porsche Carrera (p. 458), Lizst (p. 467), Robert Taylor, and Vivien Leigh (p. 580).

When searching for parallel Japanese cultural references, the reader may indeed find them, albeit present in a different form. Lieutenant Mamiya's tale of his experiences in the Kwantung Army is afforded two chapters, 'Lieutenant Mamiya's Long Story: Part 1' and 'Lieutenant Mamiya's Long Story: Part 2' (pp. 135-172). The chapter 'The Zoo Attack (or, A Clumsy Massacre)', involves Nutmeg Akasaka's account of the soldiers' shooting of animals in 1945 (pp. 396-414). The reader is told, from the beginning of this account, that its teller 'left nothing vague' (p. 396): it is as though, in contrast to the uncertainty of the novel's main narrative, vagueness has been eradicated from these historical passages. However, the reader is then informed that, despite the detail of her account, Nutmeg was not directly privy to the events in the story: 'While it was happening, she was standing on the deck of a transport ship carrying refugee settlers home to Japan from Manchuria. What she had actually witnessed was the surfacing of an American submarine' (ibid.). Crucially, this account is both historically informed and imagined, extrapolated. As with the case of the passage from the *Authoritative History of the Junitaki Township* in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, these historical sections are often told in the form of a given character's personal account, crucially rendered subjective.

Another important common quality of these passages is that they are recounted in flashback form, appearing to occur – in a manner that resonates with Toru's self-

compartmentalisation in a darkened well<sup>158</sup> – in a world separate from that in which the text’s action takes place. It is thus significant, for instance, that Lieutenant Mamiya’s story is afforded its own two chapters. Rather than appearing as seamlessly integrated contextual detail, these historical passages occasionally create the sense of a dual narrative – Murakami had of course already experimented with a straightforwardly dual narrative in 1985’s *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*<sup>159</sup> – self-consciously foregrounding their own presence. Originally serialised in the magazine *Shinchō*,<sup>160</sup> *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* arguably retains something of this episodic structure. ‘The Zoo Attack (or, A Clumsy Massacre)’ was published in *The New Yorker* as a standalone story – under the abbreviated title ‘The Zoo Attack’ – in 1995.<sup>161</sup> A second extract, namely a version of the chapter ‘The Wind-up Bird Chronicle No. 8 (or, A Second Clumsy Massacre)’ was published in 1997.<sup>162</sup> As David Karashima notes, these extracts promoted and emphasised the novel’s politically engaged focus, with the first story published as part of an issue commemorating the end of World War II.<sup>163</sup>

Thus, while such passages appear to contrast with the novel’s more dreamlike sections, this is not to imply that they function in a manner disconnected from the text. They are arguably an essential counterpart to the novel’s more abstract or absurd ‘present-day’ action (such as Toru and May Kasahara analysing degrees of hair loss visible in male passers-by (p. 111)), providing vital exposition in contrast to the novel’s pervasive sense of repressed cultural trauma. As in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the manner in which these historical sections are sharply delineated increases the sense that they are narrative ‘windows’ to an outside world in an otherwise opaque text. If Murakami sees

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<sup>158</sup> ‘The break between “people” and me is now total’ (p. 392).

<sup>159</sup> This duality is represented typographically, for instance, in the alternation between regular and italicised fonts in the novel’s chapter titles. (Murakami, *Hard-Boiled*, see p. 1; p. 12.)

<sup>160</sup> Karashima, p. 111.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

America through a ‘window’, to an extent he also applies this defamiliarising perspective to Japan.

But what of Japanese markers of place in the novel’s present-day action? They are identifiable, albeit rarely in the form of concrete references to artists, composers, or brand names. Nihei makes the compelling argument that Murakami’s “‘Americanness” is produced only through his characters’ consumption of American cultural products.’<sup>164</sup> It is perhaps apt that Nihei does not localise this Americanised feeling in Murakami’s work: in keeping with his writing on ‘America as a sign’,<sup>165</sup> Murakami’s ‘American’ imagery does not appear easily labelled in terms of the East or West Coasts, or to suburban or urban living specifically. Rather, his most oft-cited references evoke something of a deliberate homogeneity in their loose citation of mass-produced brands and nostalgic musical hits. Indeed, an interesting overlaying effect can be observed by which this sense of Americanness is compartmentalised to scenarios of cultural consumption, seeming to contrast with Murakami’s often specific citation of Japanese geographical markers. This contrast creates further separations and ‘windows’ in the text, as though two different referential ‘worlds’ exist side by side. However, Murakami’s use of bilingually influenced grammar, for instance, complicates this argument, meaning that a sense of ‘Americanness’ is arguably present throughout the text in other, more pervasive forms. In terms of further Japanese cultural markers, Mr. Honda’s house contains shoji paper, referenced with casual familiarity – ‘[w]e had to shout so loud our voices would rattle the shoji paper’ (p. 48). In this house, the reader is told that ‘[i]nstead of a flower arrangement or a calligraphic scroll, the living room’s ceremonial alcove was filled with this huge television set’ (p. 51). Mirroring this juxtaposition, Mr. Honda speaks in a form of poetry that appears both traditional and casually modern – ‘abandon the self, and there

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<sup>164</sup> Nihei, p. 110.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

you are' (ibid.). Needless to say, this form of register-mixing may sound familiar to readers of Beckett.

Offhand reference is made to the 'new houses' filling empty areas of Toru's road following the 'rapid economic growth of the mid-fifties' (p. 12). Murakami mentions the NHK network (p. 51), the Nikkei News (p. 82), and both Kurosawa films (p. 53) and Shochiku domestic dramas (p. 117). However, more often an indifference to specific Japanese public figures is observable in Toru's narrative voice: 'On the TV, some university professor was saying that people's chaotic use of Japanese grammar corresponded precisely to the chaos in their lifestyles' (p. 52). Toru thinks his own name sounds like it would belong to 'some prewar foreign minister' (p. 8). There is a generalising interchangeability to these Japanese references, as though the protagonist has little knowledge of current affairs. This attitude is perhaps most obviously expressed via his thoughts on the dubious figure of Noboru Wataya, with his undeserved status as a public intellectual: 'And so Noboru Wataya came to be seen as one of the most intelligent figures of the day. Nobody seemed to care about consistency any more' (p. 76).

Countering this 'vaguened' view of Japanese contemporary culture is a rather exhaustive inventory of geographical place in the novel's outdoor scenes. Often these references are left unelaborated: 'a coffeehouse near Ochanomizu station' (p. 77); 'the Shinjuku Imperial Gardens or Yoyogi Park' (p. 99); 'the subway entrance by the Wako building' (p. 111). It is possible to posit that despite the many Japanese cultural references in this novel, such references often do not involve as many specific products or brand names, and are often mentioned with a casual familiarity. In such cases, Murakami's depiction of Japan is modified by an uneven attention to detail that itself enacts a form of register-mixing, by which encounters with artistic media are recounted in detail while the novel's setting is dismissed with an assumed familiarity.

This slightly uneven or inconsistent quality to Murakami's 'vagueness' is vital to recognise. As is observable in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, in these novels the domestic sphere is a portal of connection with other cultures. Dichotomies between private and public space are thus problematised, as indoor spaces in Murakami are just as easily the sites of intercultural connection as those of apolitical escapism. This is a novel, then, of divisions and compartmentalisations. Yet at the same time, its epistolary format creates a network of cross-cultural and cross-temporal links. This sense of a network of flashbacks is paralleled in the manner in which incongruous or cross-temporal cultural markers are often attributed to a given character: May Kasahara smokes Hope regulars in a manner problematically signifying her precocity (p. 15) and Creta Kano dresses anachronistically in 1960s style (p. 83). Beckett also makes use of such humorous incongruity through sartorial detail: for instance, Bates observes that in *Murphy* Mr. Kelly's clothes are described in terms of a 'comedy of mismatched and disproportionate items of dress'.<sup>166</sup>

In short, it is arguable that 'inconsistent vagueness' in the text creates a modified and subjectivised rendering of Japanese culture. It could easily be argued that such references in Murakami become, according to a sort of postmodern denudation of meaning, detached from their 'real-world' context and employed to an absurd end. After all, many references and brand names in Murakami appear incongruous, as in the case of the brand names Johnnie Walker<sup>167</sup> and Colonel Sanders<sup>168</sup> being assigned to sentient apparitions in *Kafka on the Shore*. Similarly, for instance, both Janaček's *Sinfionetta*<sup>169</sup> and an Esso sign on a billboard<sup>170</sup> seem to somehow feature in Aomame's crossing to the

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<sup>166</sup> Bates, p. 142.

<sup>167</sup> Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 124.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279. Of the Colonel Sanders character and, by extension, the protagonist Kafka Tamura himself, Giorgio Amitrano states: 'Tamura is a fifteen-year old boy who has chosen to name himself like the writer. This unusual choice makes him a living quotation, a notion not so incongruous in a novel where another character, Colonel Sanders, the iconic founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken, in spite of his human appearance, is actually a "concept" (kannen). Considering the important role that dreams play in Tamura's story (Yeats's sentence "In dreams begins responsibility" is a recurrent quotation), one could say that he is a character made of the same substance as dreams and books.' (Giorgio Amitrano, 'Books within books: literary references in Murakami Haruki', *Japanese Language and Literature*, 49, 1 (2015), 201-220 (p. 207).)

<sup>169</sup> Murakami, *IQ84*, p. 3.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

1Q84 universe. As in Strecher's diagram of physical and metaphysical spaces in Murakami's novels, a space can occupy both categories at the same time; in accordance with this mixing, a kind of metaphysical abstraction is often juxtaposed with jarringly cheerful references to globalised mass production in Murakami's work.

However, a more informed argument may consist in acknowledging the manner in which such seemingly absurd references are in fact integral to themes of conceptual translation in Murakami's work at large. Walkowitz states that in Murakami novels the 'inventive use of multiple writing systems, counterfactual worlds, and popular genres creates an internal climate of traveling narratives that operates in tension with the external movement of his novels from one language to another.'<sup>171</sup> Indeed, references in Murakami's novels that are employed in a seemingly absurd manner are often directly relevant to the diegetic action. In 1Q84 the jazz standard *Paper Moon* has an overt significance to the theme of dual worlds. Images such as 'it is only a canvas sky / Hanging over a muslin tree / But it wouldn't be make believe / If you believed in me'<sup>172</sup> capture both the sense of deceptive realities and the idea that such divisions can be transcended by a kind of all-conquering love, paralleled in Tengo and Aomame's eventual reunion. The imagery in this song chimes overtly with the fact that one of the main differences between 1Q84 and 'normal' reality is that in the former, two moons hang in the sky.<sup>173</sup> In a manner similar to the sentient apparitions of Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders, it is as if the song lyrics that preface the novel's opening have been literalised into being in the parallel world.

Thus, the idea of transport to an alternate universe parallels the cross-cultural connections implicit in Murakami's referencing: Aomame's transition to the world of

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<sup>171</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 16.

<sup>172</sup> Billy Rose and E. Y. Harburg, qtd. in Murakami, *1Q84*, preface [unpaginated].

<sup>173</sup> Murakami, *1Q84*, p. 196.

1Q84 is heralded by a piece of music that itself transports the two passengers in the taxi to another country and era. Similarly, the reference to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie* in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* sets the stage for a novel in which further compartmentalisations, divisions, and crossings will occur.

Hence, while there is an incongruous humour to such literalised references, they arguably run parallel to Murakami's 'translationese' preoccupation with cross-cultural connection. When Habara asks Scheherazade about her former life as a lamprey eel, it appears that the thoughts of lampreys cannot be translated into human terms. "Lampreys think very lamprey-like thoughts," she informs him, "[a]bout lamprey-like topics in a context that's very lamprey-like."<sup>174</sup> This experience thus appears to have no human equivalent; however, the story ends with a series of vivid underwater images as Habara imagines being a lamprey eel himself.<sup>175</sup> Both the translatable and the untranslatable are contained in this encounter, and an absurd reference acts as the catalyst for Habara's empathic identification.<sup>176</sup>

Thus, it is reductive to simply argue that the manner in which Murakami's references have been modified by humour makes them appear absurd or defamiliarised. In keeping with Walkowitz's perspective, I aim to advance the idea that these references are the markers of a broader preoccupation with othering, (mis)translation, and (mis)interpretation in Murakami's work. One way that this 'translationese' effect is conveyed is through the humorous mixing of registers, along with a broader preoccupation with incongruity or the passage between worlds. In this manner, references

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<sup>174</sup> Murakami, 'Scheherazade', p. 121.

<sup>175</sup> 'Habara closed his eyes and stopped thinking of Scheherazade. Instead, he thought of lampreys. Of jawless lampreys fastened to rocks, hiding among the water-weeds, swaying back and forth in the current. He imagined that he was one of them, waiting for a trout to appear. But no trout passed by, no matter how long he waited. Not a fat one, not a skinny one, no trout at all. Eventually the sun went down, and his surroundings were enfolded in deep darkness.' (Ibid., p. 145.)

<sup>176</sup> In an interesting paradox to which this study will later return, in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Apter refers to the statements '[n]othing is translatable' and '[e]verything is translatable' as two 'poles of translation theory' that 'consistently emerge.' (Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 8.)



that are often directly relevant to the political thrust of the text are couched in ironic distance.

While this chapter has hitherto discussed the connections between stylisation and insularity with reference to such world-creation, it is interesting to observe that some instances of this stylisation also appear to strive towards a certain kind of, albeit imperfect, cross-cultural understanding in Murakami's work. However, we will see with reference to Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* that this connection between absurdity and perspectival limitation is not always a kind one. As this chapter's final section will reveal, references modified by ironic distance in the text have their place in Beckett's early work. Often appearing in the derisive tone of an author beginning his career, uncertainly situated between satire of his own privilege and unflattering depictions of those less fortunate, references in *Mercier and Camier* dramatically juxtapose 'high' and 'low' culture.

### 1.3.2

*The first thing one noticed at Helen's was the carpet.  
Will you look at that pile, said Camier.  
Prime moquette, said Mercier.  
Unbelievable, said Camier.  
You'd think you never saw it till now, said Mercier, and you wallowing on it all those years.  
I never did see it till now, said Camier, and now I can't forget it.  
So one says, said Mercier.<sup>177</sup>*

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<sup>177</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 400. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

It is perhaps apposite to end with the above extract from *Mercier and Camier*, as it overtly enacts the phenomenon of the humorous or ‘placeholder’ reference. It is arguable that much of the humour of this passage derives from the unusual level of attention that Mercier and Camier pay to a detail of the room’s décor. The moquette carpet in itself is arguably inessential to the text, the narrative deriving its absurdity from the characters’ fascinated discussion of this trivial detail. This juxtaposition opens an implicit distance between the narrative and its spatial setting, as if such contextual details are themselves subject to debate and vulnerable to erasure.

This paragraph takes the form of an abrupt change of scenery: the preamble to the passage sees Mercier and Camier struggling in turn to put up an umbrella. Neither of them is able to carry out this task, and Mercier consequently throws the umbrella on the ground to destroy it: ‘With both hands Mercier raised the umbrella high above his head and dashed it to the ground. He used another nasty expression’ (p. 399).

A marked contrast is set up between the violent destruction of the umbrella and the delicate tones by which the traveling pair remark on the décor of Helen’s apartment. Words such as ‘pile’ ‘moquette’ ‘wallowing’ and ‘[s]o one says’ (p. 400) appear employed with a crucial, uncanny wrongness. Even Camier’s dismissal, ‘[u]nbelievable’ (ibid.), appears unnecessarily grave. The reader may be slightly unclear on the motivations behind Mercier and Camier’s sudden adoption of this tone, consigning (what may be) their banter to the realm of innuendo or private joke. This exchange appears as a parody of connoisseurship or otherwise sophisticated language, much like the ‘polite drawing room conversation’<sup>178</sup> that Beckett sought to mock in *Endgame*.

Their arrival at Helen’s is heralded by the introduction: ‘The first thing one noticed at Helen’s was the carpet’ (p. 400). While this statement *appears* to function as a

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<sup>178</sup> Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider, qtd. in Laura Salisbury, *Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 125.

form of unbiased situating introduction, it is itself subjective. The French-inflected formality of the use of ‘one’ instead of a more colloquial equivalent – ‘the first thing you noticed’, for instance, or simply ‘the most noticeable thing’ – increases this air of pseudo-formality.

However, the contrast between the vulgar and violent destruction of the umbrella and the pseudo-sophistication with which the moquette is discussed is not a neat one. On examination, the language used to speak about the carpet is equally questionable.

Camier’s exclamation, ‘[w]ill you look at that pile’ (ibid.), is humorous for its brashness and seemingly Irish inflection. Furthermore, given that Mercier and Camier often speak in vulgarities – the discussion of the ‘all unfuckable’ (p. 399) that occurs immediately prior to this scene is notable – ‘pile’ has its own low connotations as a colloquial term for haemorrhoids. Camier’s answer, ‘[p]rime moquette,’ prompts Mercier to marvel: ‘Unbelievable’ (p. 400). Their interest in the carpet appears overblown and hyperbolic.

The image of Camier ‘wallowing’ on the carpet – spoken with what is possible to interpret as another Irish construction, ‘and you wallowing on it all these years’ (ibid.) – arguably plays again with ‘unsophisticated’ or ‘low’ language through the employment of informal Hiberno-English. As if to cancel out this play on sophistication, their discussion of the carpet dissolves into indeterminacy, as Camier insists he has never seen the carpet before and Mercier grudgingly disputes this claim (ibid.).

The juxtaposition of the umbrella scene and the carpet scene rests on an *apparent* contrast between ‘high’ and ‘low’ tones; on closer analysis, this binary is not neat. This ambivalent register-mixing is mirrored in Beckett’s treatment of the material references involved in both of these dialogues. Both the carpet and the umbrella scene depict the characters’ troubled relationship to an inanimate object; both the dismissal and the exaltation of objects is used for comic effect here. In this manner, items that may serve as

tangible links to a 'real world' context are treated with comic distance. Bates observes that, 'Beckett's creatures retain a curious, antibourgeois relationship to possessions or property,' according to which they 'simultaneously seem obsessed by and strangely negligent of them or it.'<sup>179</sup>

The abrupt devaluation and dismissal of these objects is mirrored, also, in Mercier's reaction to Watt breaking Camier's stick. Camier laments that the stick was his father's, to which Mercier responds, 'I never heard you speak of it.'<sup>180</sup> Bates uses this dialogue as an example of the manner in which sticks are 'taken for granted by Beckett's host of dedicated, ancient walkers.'<sup>181</sup> It is also notable that an object such as a stick, passed down through the family, signals generational continuity and contextual stability. However, just as soon as this background is suggested, it is 'vaguened' in a humorous reversal as Mercier invalidates Camier's sentimentality.

Following the umbrella scene, this jump to an indoor location is jarring, not least because Beckett provides the reader with very little situating description of Helen's apartment. The room appears to the reader as filtered through Mercier and Camier's dialogue, and, by extension, through the unreliable perspective of the third party narrating their actions. The passage from outdoor to indoor space is framed by contrasting registers: crucially, Mercier's destruction of the umbrella is associated with vulgar language, using as he does an unelaborated 'nasty expression' (p. 399) as he dashes it on the ground.

*Mercier and Camier* is of course a significant text with relation to the process by which the reader is prompted to elucidate a given reference through recourse to preceding Beckett novels. It functions as both an early and a late Beckett text, its French version written in 1946 and published in 1970, with an English self-translation published in

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<sup>179</sup> Bates, p. 15.

<sup>180</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>181</sup> Bates, p. 150.

1974.<sup>182</sup> In this manner the novel spans Beckett's *œuvre*, discounting possibilities of its neat situation within a chain of Beckett references. In a similar manner it is difficult to place Mercier and Camier themselves. They are continuously on the move, if not being forcibly moved on (p. 389), and while not exactly relying on 'alms' (p. 383), they are put up at night by an acquaintance and an innkeeper in turn (p. 400; p. 416; p. 435.). Their insistence on remarking on their surroundings in an urbane and sophisticated manner feeds into the Beckettian trope of characters that, while currently dispossessed, 'sound as though they have PhDs.'<sup>183</sup>

Seán Kennedy calls the text's subsequent English translation 'somewhat impatient'; and a 'paring down' of an 'already sparse text.'<sup>184</sup> Citing Steven Connor's estimation that 12 per cent of the French original was cut in this process, he also notes the distinctly Irish tone of these amendments.<sup>185</sup> However, this sense of Irishness is not neat: while 'un omnibus' in the French is changed to the Dublinese 'slow and easy', a reference to Co. Wicklow's Old Military Road – present in the French as the more generic 'l'ancien chemin des Armées' – has been 'vaguened' away.<sup>186</sup> Kennedy's preface quotes Ruby Cohn's summation of *Mercier and Camier's* location as 'vaguely Ireland',<sup>187</sup> but the link between Irishness and 'vaguening' is ambiguous here. The fact that the text's condensation has been accompanied by increased Irish references may provoke an association between Irishness and a form of reduction to the text's 'essence'; however, the fact that some of these Irish references have also been rendered *less* specific in translation problematises this idea. Chronologically, tonally, and geographically, the text

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<sup>182</sup> Seán Kennedy, 'Preface', in Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, ed. by Seán Kennedy (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), Loc 23 of 1552; Loc 36 of 1552; Loc 48 of 1552.

<sup>183</sup> Vivian Mercier, qtd. in Paul Murphy, "Idle Youth Waiting for Godot": Destitution in *Waiting for Godot* in Relation to the Irish Performance Tradition', in *Staging Beckett in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, ed. by Trish McTighe and David Tucker (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 89-102 (p. 99).

<sup>184</sup> Kennedy, Loc 50 of 1552.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Ruby Cohn, qtd. in *ibid.*

wanders. Its original title – *Voyage de Mercier et Camier autour du pot dans les Bosquets de Bondy*<sup>188</sup> – indicates that the original certainty regarding place was ‘vaguened’, but that connotations of circuitousness were present from the beginning.

Salisbury comments on Beckett’s mixing of registers with reference to the paragraph in *Molloy* in which the titular character calculates his own rate of flatulence. According to what she terms a ‘humour of incongruity,’ the ‘effort of calculation seems misaligned with the ‘low’ subject matter.’<sup>189</sup> ‘Mathematics as self-knowledge or abstract illumination,’ she states, ‘is reframed as a literally fundamental waste of time, as farting becomes Molloy’s most essential temporal measure, although also his most useless one.’<sup>190</sup> As in the opening paragraph of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, in which Toru’s detailed appreciation of Rossini jars humorously with his disinterest in the ringing telephone, Mercier and Camier’s dialogue over the carpet juxtaposes ‘refined’ tastes with mundane topics. Significantly, this contrast is aligned in terms of an opposition between interior and exterior space. While – as in the case of Molloy’s farting – this incongruity can appear as a satire of academic pedantry, such humour also risks ridiculing the apparently disadvantaged characters who make such arcane calculations, perpetuating the idea that a form of ‘educated’ language seems unexpected in their mouths.

Humour and class perceptions aside, Mercier and Camier’s dialogue perhaps most curiously creates an effect whereby the reference to moquette itself is sidelined. Or rather, the specific type of carpet under discussion<sup>191</sup> appears not as important as the *overall humour* created by Mercier and Camier’s unlikely interest in interior design. Much as

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<sup>188</sup> Van Hulle, p. 129.

<sup>189</sup> Salisbury, *Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, p. 87.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> ‘In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, moquette came to mean wall-to-wall carpeting. However, its historical usage refers to supplementary warp cut or uncut loop pile made on a draw loom. These textiles have a low pile and are thinner than hand-knotted pile carpets. This form of carpeting, made as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is constructed on a loom in the same way as velvet: the supplementary warps loop under the weft and are attached without forming a knot. Moquette is woven in relatively narrow panels (usually 27” or 36”). Larger works are composed of several stripes sewn together. Moquette carpets have been used on floors and tables, as furniture upholstery, and as wall coverings. Production was improved with the invention of the Jacquard loom in France in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The addition of steam power in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century helped mechanise the process.’ (K.K. Goswami, ‘Developments in handmade carpets: design and manufacture’, in *Advances in Carpet Manufacture* (Duxford: Elsevier, 2018), pp. 213-168), p. 318.)

Elizabeth Barry links Beckett's use of cliché to a 'discourse of loss',<sup>192</sup> in such humorous yet crucially hermetic exchanges Beckett appears to highlight the content vulnerable to loss in translation. Arguably, ironic distance functions here to humorously alienate the reader.

Place names are occasionally employed throughout the text in service of what appears to be a form of parodied nostalgia. The falling rain seen through the orange panes of the pagoda recalls memories 'to the one of Rome, of Naples to the other' (ibid., p. 385); Camier states of a 'glorious winter's afternoon' that '[i]t seems like Monaco' (p. 402). There is an idealised reference to time spent in Ladysmith: 'Cloudless skies, garden parties daily. Life lay smiling before us' (p. 438). Some of the humour of these passages lies in the difficulty the reader may have discerning the characters' pasts – such sudden specificity contrasts humorously with the fact that we know little else regarding Mercier and Camier – in addition to these memories' narration in a tone of exaggerated sentimentality.

In the English version, Watt introduces himself with the statement that his self-proclaimed notoriety 'is not likely ever to penetrate to the denizens of Dublin's fair city, or of Cuq-Toulza' (p. 469). In the French version, however, the two locations mentioned here change: 'il y a peu de chances par exemple que ma notoriété pénètre jusqu'aux habitants de Londres ou de Cuq-Toulza.'<sup>193</sup> In both cases, the juxtaposition of a capital city with a smaller, more rural area – Cuq-Toulza being a commune in France's Tarn department<sup>194</sup> – creates an arbitrary-seeming comparison.

However, the Irish reference is added in the subsequent English version in an instance of retroactive specificity. Similarly, this comparison – appearing to be one of

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<sup>192</sup> Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>193</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Mercier et Camier* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970), p. 168.

<sup>194</sup> Maurice Bastié, *Département du Tarn* (Paris: Res Universis, 1992), p. 413.

Beckett's humorous placeholders, employed in the manner of a figure of speech – becomes even more exaggerated in the English version. The phrase 'Dublin's fair city' connotes a clichéd air of sentimentality; it is also then juxtaposed with the unfamiliar place name Cuq-Toulza, which would be perhaps especially unknown to an English-speaking audience. This juxtaposes a well-worn phrase with a surprisingly obscure place name, creating a humorous mixing of registers. In the French version, 'London' is simply 'Londres', with no equivalent cliché.

In this manner, Beckett defamiliarises the reference to his native Ireland by referring to it in the language of sentimental ballads; London does not receive the same treatment and carries a more neutral connotation in the French version. Such references have been crucially modified by humour; disparities between French and English versions reveal a further sense of instability and substitutability. An impression of ironic distance is created, while in reality vital aspects of the translation process are explored through such fluid contextual markers. For instance, the reference to Dublin and its attendant sentimentality in the English version can be seen as a comment on the supposed inseparability between the English language and a form of 'flowery' prose Beckett sought to avoid.<sup>195</sup> Just as Murakami's references take on both a surreal and a surprisingly 'real' significance, these references *appear* easily dismissed or arbitrary, yet offer insight into Beckett's creation of a prose style informed by self-translation.

It is interesting that, despite extensive cuts made in the English version, vestiges of Beckett's early dense style perhaps remain embedded in the tone of this work. Its translation-informed style appears myopic on occasion, using the space between languages in order to exclude access to the text. Beckett's register-mixing performs an inscrutable 'foreignness' in every language. Flashes of this perspective similarly recur in

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<sup>195</sup> David Pattie postulates that Beckett turned to French as an escape from 'the weight of associations and the tendency towards inflated rhetoric that he identified in English.' (David Pattie, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 28.)



later texts, as in the case of *Company*'s equation of 'Bantu' with 'Erse'.<sup>196</sup> One of these languages was spoken in an area geographically closer to the text's inception than the other: when we align the author with his nebulous speaker such juxtapositions appear to place wilful distance between the text and its cultural circumstances. Little discusses Beckett's preoccupation with the mediation of lived experiences not one's own 'through the keyhole'<sup>197</sup> of writing: early texts such as *Mercier and Camier* provide an interesting, if as yet inadequately realised, perspective on the dynamics of such narrative exclusion and perspectival limitation.

Culturally specific references often present an obstacle to the translation process. Writing on Günter Grass's relationship with his translators, Céline Letawe notes that a large amount of their discussions centred on *realia*, or 'those elements unique to the culture of a given people or country which do not exist among other peoples, in other countries, and which are thus sometimes considered as untranslatable.'<sup>198</sup> Contextual markers are thus the sites of complex processes of equivalency, reception, and (mis)understanding.

This chapter has explored why Beckett and Murakami are persistently viewed as 'vague' authors despite the fact that their work contains many culturally specific markers. It has begun by considering the thesis that both authors modify their references in distancing terms: this distancing is connected, I have argued, to a self-translator's perspective, as both authors play with the untranslatable specificity but also with the generic or apparently globally significant nature of their contextual markers. Such

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<sup>196</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 428.

<sup>197</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Little, 'Closed Spaces', p. 24.

<sup>198</sup> Céline Letawe, 'Gunter Grass and his Translators: From a Collaborative Dynamic to an Apparatus of Control?', in *Collaborative Translation: From the Renaissance to the Digital Age*, ed. by Anthony Cordingley and Céline Frigau Manning (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 130-144 (p. 132).

references often become the sites of cross-cultural encounter themselves, enacting the translation process in miniature.

I have first suggested that the limited and repeated quality of their respective references creates a sense of a Beckett or Murakami 'brand' or 'universe'. These seemingly 'concrete' groundings in reality refer ambiguously both forward and backward throughout the author's *œuvre*, making them difficult to temporally situate. Such *œuvres* appear to form discrete realities that diverge from verisimilitude: both authors, it can be argued, modify or filter contextual detail by this means.

This argument has also included the idea that since such objects and references appear finite or at least repetitive, perhaps the manner in which they have been *interspersed* with the surrounding 'vagueness' in both authors' work creates a contrasting effect. Just as it is possible to suggest that an isolated image stands out when surrounded by vagueness, I explore the possibility that the reverse is also true: that Beckett's and Murakami's use of certain references conversely emphasises the aspects of their texts that are thinly sketched or unelaborated by contrast. In this connection I have explored issues of 'inconsistent vagueness' as well as 'paradoxical vagueness' in order to elucidate how this effect is carried out. Generic references are mixed with more specific ones in both authors' *œuvres*, creating a mutually reinforcing effect on both a given reference and the vagueness that surrounds it.

The third part of this argument has furthered this idea of incongruity by examining how such references often take part in a humorous mixing of registers in both authors' work. Put simply, it has asked whether the specificity and relevance of such references often goes unseen due to the fact that they are used in a seemingly ironic manner: for instance, those who may not know exactly what a moquette carpet is may understand, on a more general level, the absurdity of the attention Mercier and Camier afford this feature.

However, the manner in which both authors couch such references in humorous distance reveals their preoccupation with the often accidental absurdity and incongruity arising from the process of (mis)translation. Modifying their references in this way appears to pre-emptively consider their misunderstanding by international audiences. Especially in Murakami's case, this incongruity is often paralleled by a more literal preoccupation with the passage between alternate worlds.

The next chapter of this study will further examine such concealed specificity in both authors' work, exploring their modification of cultural markers in more detail. By considering the role of 'overarching vagueness', a stylistic feature by which architectural spaces themselves enact a form of obfuscating limitation in both authors' *œuvres*, I will examine more instances of 'vaguening' with reference to tenuous or modified iterations of literary genre.

## Chapter 2

### **‘The buildings are all expressionless’<sup>1</sup>: ‘Overarching Vagueness’, Inconsistent**

#### **Interiors**

*Illustrating to Driver how art “accommodates the mess,” Beckett gestured to the nearby neo-classical Church of the Madeleine and declared, “Not this. This is clear. This does not allow the mystery to invade us. [...] But it is different at Chartres. There is the unexplainable, and there art raises questions that it does not attempt to answer.”<sup>2</sup>*

In the above justification of an aesthetics based on vagueness, it is significant that both of the examples Beckett uses are architectural. Indeed, interior space is often the site of Beckett’s and Murakami’s fraught relationships to literary genre. In both authors’ prose, architectural settings may seem characterised by a haphazard inconsistency of detail; this chapter will contend that this apparent ‘vagueness’ can be mapped on to various subversions of generic convention. If Chapter 1 viewed objects and brand names as culturally transitional sites of ‘vagueness’ in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work, Chapter 2 will expand this focus to their patchily described architectural spaces themselves, examining the confined sites in which such aporetic cultural markers are often found. I will thus extend my analysis to view genre as, for both authors, an aporetic space in itself, aided by a concept I will refer to as ‘overarching vagueness.’

Thus, if Chapter 1 introduced the idea of repeated references themselves as a form of structuring or interiorising ‘world’, Chapter 2 will examine what little is said about architectural interiors *themselves* in the study’s core texts, likening these porous spaces to

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<sup>1</sup> Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 448.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Fraser, p. 125.

both authors' tenuous iterations of a variety of literary genres. In this manner, I aim to observe the nebulous qualities of both physical and formal 'structures' in Beckett's and Murakami's work.

At its base, this chapter explores the idea of genre as a signifier for national 'belonging', as this second section of my argument will demonstrate the manner in which both authors' subversion of literary forms can be seen to parallel their self-translating perspectives. An argument in praise of Beckett's and Murakami's 'transcendence' of nationally informed genre may cite Gaston Bachelard's still-salient theoretical contribution to how we view indoor space. Bachelard described houses as fulfilling a unifying function, without which a person would be 'a dispersed being';<sup>3</sup> in his view, the house 'constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.'<sup>4</sup> The house is a 'vertical being' and a 'concentrated being', according to Bachelard, appealing to 'our consciousness of verticality' and 'centrality.'<sup>5</sup> Bachelard's ideas on architecture as unifying are important to consider in light of both Beckett's and Murakami's purported ambivalence regarding their national literatures. While both authors' indoor spaces are frequently seen to signify bodily or psychological interiority,<sup>6</sup> it is also important to apply such readings of the house as cultural microcosm to these texts.

In Bachelard's view, the first house one inhabits 'engrave[s] within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting.'<sup>7</sup> This view privileges the idea of a single location as carrying out an originary or formative role. However, as author-translators both Beckett and Murakami compromise the idea of a text's 'native' or 'source'

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<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> As Jennifer Birkett notes, for instance, the 'claustrophobic' setting of *Endgame* has led post-1970s productions to stage it variously in both a skull and a womb. Likewise, Uchida Tatsuru comments on the rather overt connection in Murakami's novels between confined underground space and a retreat into psychological interiority, a view corroborated by Matthew Carl Strecher. (Birkett, p. 125; Uchida Tatsuru, qtd. in Strecher, p. 7.)

<sup>7</sup> Bachelard, p. 15.

language,<sup>8</sup> challenging the idea that a text has a definable ‘home’ country. In Murakami’s case, this flexibility even extends to subsequent changes made to his texts in translation.<sup>9</sup> If Murakami’s translationese style obfuscates the text’s ‘source’ setting, his flexible attitude to translation by others also renders aspects of his translation process interestingly ephemeral. In a literalisation of this idea of problematised drafts, Karashima notes that no unabridged translation of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* exists, as Alfred Birnbaum and Elmer Luke did not keep copies of early drafts or proofs when working on the text.<sup>10</sup>

It is thus perhaps telling, in light of both authors’ ambivalence towards cultural rootedness, that their indoor spaces are characterised by absence, blankness, or disconnect. However, it is difficult not to view such depictions of interior space as conducting their own – at times even unintentional – relationship to cliché. Both authors’ insular worlds seem to reiterate a form of gendered ‘escape’ from, or ‘confinement’ within, domestic or familial space. Later stages of this argument, notably Chapters 3 and 5, will touch on the manner in which Murakami’s characters often inhabit their unusually-behaving architectural spaces in the wake of divorces and breakups. Little has observed the manner in which Beckett characters – from Belacqua to both Krap and Krapp – confine themselves in parallel with their existence ‘in antagonistic relation with the societies in which they refuse to fully participate.’<sup>11</sup> Much as Nugent-Folan’s

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<sup>8</sup> Sinéad Mooney states that for Beckett, ‘self-translation both doubles and abolishes the original by compromising the originality.’ (Sinéad Mooney, ‘Beckett in French and English’, in *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 196-208 (p. 196).)

<sup>9</sup> Murakami is, for instance, flexible regarding the idea of indirect translation, arguing that if an author waits for the perfect translation, they may not achieve international reach in their own lifetime. He states: ‘You can’t tell a 45-year-old author “This will be translated 60 years from now, and then you’ll be famous in Hungary”’. This approach has generated criticism: Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner asks, ‘[i]s the *timing* of a translation more important to Murakami than accuracy and quality?’ However, Murakami’s flexibility regarding translation is nuanced. Albeit stating that direct translation from the Japanese is the ‘most proper’ option, he acknowledges that this may not always be possible. Cultural differences, such as the fact that Japanese customs surrounding editorial practices are less strict than those of English-speaking countries, must also be considered. Murakami does not disregard translation errors, after all: he simply argues, ‘there are more important things to think about.’ It is also important to note that Murakami has been uncompromising on occasion. He refused his American editor’s request to shorten the title *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, stating that while it ‘may be a long, ridiculous title’ it was ‘the only possible one’ to capture the novel’s dual narrative. (Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 394; Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner, qtd. in Rubin, p. 392; Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 394; Rubin, p. 397; Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 395; *ibid.*, p. 130.)

<sup>10</sup> Karashima, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Little, ‘Closed Spaces’, p. 10.

investigation into Beckett's Steinian echoes raises important questions regarding the erasure of female literary influence,<sup>12</sup> any analysis of the following extracts based on the idea of genre-as-home seems inevitably gendered, as both authors can be read as attempting to write from interior spaces divested of their 'domestic' qualities. Such a discussion may recall, for instance, histories of the novel as a medium dismissed as feminine,<sup>13</sup> or the personification of homelands and mother tongues as female.<sup>14</sup> At times, both authors' efforts to 'escape' conventional literary representations of 'home' risk opening a Freudian line of inquiry almost too obvious to comment on; however, as this chapter will show, the depth and variety of 'vaguened' literary genres informing their work provides a fruitful study of contextual denudation.

While Chapter 3 will investigate this gendered element of both authors' interior spaces in more detail, this preliminary investigation of apparently culturally transcendent space sets the scene for such deconstructions. By subverting literary expectations of interior space as meaningful or revelatory, both authors can be understood as seeking to convey something akin to a postmodern questioning of colonial narratives or jingoistic nationalism. However, in a glaring paradox, the connection between genre and confining representations of 'home' that I expose throughout this chapter reveals how the authors perhaps inadvertently reiterate a gendered literary trope.

This chapter will investigate this idea with the aid of five of the extracts previously examined. I will first focus on two extracts – from Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* and Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* – in which the protagonist's own 'home' features, albeit in a vaguely described incarnation. Questions of writing outside or inside a national literary 'space' will be addressed. The following two extracts – from Beckett's

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<sup>12</sup> Nugent-Folan, 'Ill-buttoned', p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara M. Benedict, "Male' and 'Female' Novels? Gendered Fictions and the Reading Public, 1770–1832", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by Alan Downie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 355-371.

<sup>14</sup> Debra M. Mancoff and Lindsay J. Bosch, *Icons of Beauty: An Encyclopedia of Art, Culture and the Image of Women* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), p. 441.

*Malone Dies* and Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* – feature descriptions of a 'foreign' space, a house that the protagonist journeys to, or is brought to. This section will explore how this 'foreign' space is described in equally 'vague' terms, raising questions of both authors' nuanced adoption/rejection of the literary forms of their acquired language. The final section addresses an extract from Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* that paves the way for Chapter 3's argument, exploring how such 'vague' places are nonetheless inescapably 'placed.'

## 2.1 'What tales had they tongues to tell'<sup>15</sup>: *Ill Seen Ill Said* and the 'Vaguened'

### Gothic

*The cabin. Its situation. Careful. On. At the inexistent centre of a formless place. Rather more circular than otherwise finally. Flat to be sure. To cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes. Depending on her speed and radius taken. Here she who loves to – here she who now can only stray never strays. Stones increasingly abound. Ever scatter even the rankest weed. Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. With none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread. How come a cabin in such a place? How came? Careful (pp. 451-452).*

It is interesting to observe the manner in which the cabin's location is glossed over in this extract, the almost parodically vague words '[c]areful. On' (p. 451) establishing the familiar bifurcated path of the Beckett text as one of 'affirmations and negations'<sup>16</sup> according to which the speaker appears forced yet unable to speak. In the manner of an unconvincing emendation, the building is then described as situated '[a]t the inexistent centre of a formless place' (p. 451). As Nugent-Folan observes, the structure-denoting

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 464; *Ill Seen*. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 285; *The Unnamable*.



nouns ‘centre’ and ‘place’ are negated by the adjectives ‘inexistent’ and ‘formless’.<sup>17</sup> The reader is as yet unsure – and may remain so for the text’s entirety – whether this is a real or imagined location.

The woman seemingly ‘never strays’ (p. 451) from this location. Yet the syntax of this sentence, with its conflicting message of straying and not straying (‘[h]ere she who loves to – here she who now can only stray never strays’ (ibid.)) appears ambiguous. Three short sentences – ‘[w]ith none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread’ (p. 452) – seem like another digression from the task of describing the cabin, echoing the play with grammar that so characterised Beckett’s early and mid-career work.<sup>18</sup> The phrase ‘how come’ is rephrased, more literally, as ‘how came’: the expression defamiliarised in order to expose its meaning, or its inadequacy. While ‘how come’ is often simply used to mean ‘why’, in this context the phrase also literally asks how the cabin came to be where it is. The text is drifting, again, in a direction that may provoke questions: thus, the speaker repeats, ‘[c]areful’ (p. 451). Architectural space appears vague and dispersed here, as a seemingly situating passage repeatedly veers away from addressing the cabin.

*Ill Seen Ill Said* takes place in an indoor space, at least partially. Yet aside from detailed descriptions of isolated objects, such as the ‘old deal spindlebacked kitchen chair’ (ibid.) the space is darkened and unclear. It is even arguable that indoor space functions as a base of sorts in the text, a vantage point from which the woman observes the sky. On the first line the reader is told: ‘From where she lies she sees Venus rise’ (ibid.).

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<sup>17</sup> Nugent-Folan, ‘Ill buttoned’, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Jennie Skerl observes that the ‘pot passage’ in Beckett’s *Watt* ‘shows another way in which *Watt* devalues language as a tool of knowledge,’ characterising the passage as ‘the reduction of words to mere meaningless sounds by word play’ through ‘juxtaposition, repetition, and rhythm’. (Jennie Skerl, ‘Fritz Mauthner’s “Critique of Language,” in Samuel Beckett’s “Watt”’, *Contemporary Literature*, 15, 4 (1974), 474-487 (p. 480).)

The narrative oscillates between viewpoints, denying the reader a unified situating perspective.<sup>19</sup> Rather than serving to pinpoint the cabin's dimensions, this multiple viewpoint further confuses and obscures. In light of such 'vagueness' of perspective, Masaki Kondo compares this novella to Noh drama, citing its use of *ma*, a Japanese spatial concept signifying 'the space between two things', originally an area between two pillars framing the doorways of wooden structures.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting, in relation to this chapter's theme, that the concept of *ma* has, itself, an architectural origin.

The cabin was built 'in the far past'; an unnerving sentence links it to an evil force, describing it as a 'culprit' (p. 451). Such an introduction would seem to align the house with a Gothic presence. These sentences are structured according to a tangled syntax, obscuring their meaning: 'Implying furthermore that it the culprit. And from it as from an evil core that the what is the wrong word the evil spread' (ibid.). Ambiguity over whether the woman is alive or dead suggests, but does not confirm, 'haunted house' imagery.

Much as the sentences articulating this 'evil' are syntactically unclear, the reader learns little about the building. It is viewed from without: '[t]o the imaginary stranger the dwelling appears deserted' (p. 453). However, to further this Gothic atmosphere, the building appears to take on an anthropomorphised role of obscuring that therein, as in the sentence '[t]he eye glued to one or the other window has nothing but black drapes for its pains' (ibid.). This double-apertured gaze is paired with the human gaze, implying an attempted interaction that has proved fruitless.

The contents of the house appear unreadable. A 'still shadowy album' (p. 454) is described. The old woman is seen, again as by another watching her: 'what scenes they

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<sup>19</sup> Masaki Kondo states that there are 'three categories of eyes' in the text: 'the old woman's eyes, those of some intimate but absent person watching her, and the impersonal eyes viewing all the scenes without a body.' (Masaki Kondo, "'Ill Seen Ill Said'" and "'Igitur'", *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004), 75-86 (p. 76).)

<sup>20</sup> Kondo, *'Ill Seen Ill Said [...] Ma'*, p. 67.

can possibly be that draw the head down lower still and hold it in thrall' (ibid.) Whether she is a living figure, or – as suggested by the fact that she has begun 'to appear' 'little by little' within her walls '[t]hrough she within them no more' '[t]his long time' (ibid.), a ghost – she appears to be searching for information, as evidenced by her perusal of the album. Whether the photographs provide resolution to her is unclear: any grasp on this situation is denied the reader.

The interior of the house appears obscure even from the perspective of the woman herself: she can 'just make out the rafters' in 'the dim light the skylights shed' (p. 456). Uncertainties of perspective recur. In the case of the photograph album, the old woman may be privy to its contents but the reader is not; in the case of the rafters, the old woman cannot see them herself. In a further limitation of perspective, she does not appear to wish to see the house's interior: 'She is done with raising her eyes' (ibid.).

When a room is described, it often becomes visible in increments. The view of 'a pallet and a ghostly chair' is '[i]ll half seen' (p. 454). Several other objects like the album are alluded to. A buttonhook, a torn-out page, a key, and a greatcoat are described in detail. The buttonhook hangs by a nail; its 'oval handle is wrought to a semblance of scales', and '[a] lifetime of hooking has lessened its curvature' (p. 455). While it is implied that the object has a past, this past is uncertain: 'Child's play with a pliers to restore it. Was there once a time she did?' (Ibid.) It is ambiguous whether the speaker watching the old woman is the source of this uncertainty, or if the old woman herself is uncertain of these details. Given details suggest a history, but then prove to reveal very little. The notebook page found in the depths of the coffer, 'empty after long nocturnal search', yields nothing but the near-illegible writing: 'Tu 17. Or Th. Tu or Th 17' (p. 463).

The cabin is a collection of disparate *things* rather than a unified whole, presented either in mathematically precise measurements or through isolated items. In contrast to Bachelard's description of the house's unifying function,<sup>21</sup> the cabin appears far from unifying in its presence: its body of images does not stabilise. Rather than being reassuringly vertical, it is often described in terms of its surrounding location's circumference. Similarly, it appears more dispersed than, to borrow Bachelard's term, 'concentrated'.<sup>22</sup> While it serves as a base to which the woman is confined, it is described in terms of dismemberment and disconnect.

In keeping with ideas established in Chapter 1 of this study, the exhaustive amount of description afforded to features of the cabin's interior may initially appear to disprove the argument that Beckett's indoor spaces are vague. However, while isolated objects are described, a general sense of the cabin's structure remains nebulous and difficult to picture. In what is perhaps an aptly architectural metaphor, my term 'overarching vagueness' denotes the sense that Beckett's and Murakami's indoor spaces fail to cohere into imaginable structures despite the attempted definition of numerous objects and areas within them. This sense of uneven description is illustrated, for instance, by Little's observation that Beckett's 'The Expelled' 'opens with so intense a focus on the steps the protagonist is thrown down that the nature of the place they belong to is ignored.'<sup>23</sup>

This uncertainty regarding definition is significant to the two occasions on which the word 'home' is presented as an exclamation in the text: '[...] before she reaches home. Home!' (p. 457) As this flash of humour suggests, such a description is exaggerated or insufficient where this building is concerned. 'Home', with its cosy

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<sup>21</sup> Bachelard, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 87.

connotations, hardly fits. Yet, as the woman appears inextricably bound to this space, it seems to be the only word suitable. Hamilton's research into Neolithic structures is again relevant: arguably, 'home' may only be a word applicable to the living, and thus does not apply in the woman's case. Can a ghostly presence be said to 'live' somewhere? Beckett suggests the cabin is not a 'home' exactly, but does not supply information regarding what the building *is*, save its composition from slates 'brought from a ruined mansion. What tales had they tongues to tell' (p. 464). In a characteristically Beckettian affirmation/negation of detail, a history is at once suggested to and denied the reader.

David A. Hatch contends that this text is a 'subversion' of the Irish Gothic as written by Le Fanu, Stoker, and Wilde.<sup>24</sup> In his view, Beckett challenges the 'ideological forces of aesthetics, nationalism, and religion that inform these traditions.'<sup>25</sup> The trapdoor that may reveal 'grisly' contents evokes Gothic tropes while 'subtly challenging their function';<sup>26</sup> the sheet of paper is destroyed by the woman, 'instead of functioning as a clue or key'.<sup>27</sup> A parallel emerges between Beckett's attempt to write outside of the strictures of the Irish Gothic tradition and his 'vagueness' of indoor spaces, such tropes their own, albeit theoretical, 'space' to be escaped. However, the text of *Ill Seen Ill Said* appears irrevocably tethered to its indoor setting. Beckett's use of 'overarching vagueness' ensures that indoor space appears incoherent, ever-changing, and divested of its connotations in this novella; yet such descriptions of interiors are anxiously reiterated nonetheless.

However, unconventional interior spaces are themselves a documented feature of the Irish Gothic: Boxall's *Since Beckett* comprehensively discusses the appearances of curiously behaving architecture in the novels of both Bowen and Maria Edgeworth,

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<sup>24</sup> David A. Hatch, 'Irish Gothic Modes in Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*', *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 33, 2 (2016), 94-120 (p. 94).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

relating these spectral ‘homes’ to the uncertain temporalities observable in Beckett’s writing. In Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*, the dilapidated front entrance of the titular landlord’s ancestral home means the characters must use the back gate, signalling a ‘now impassable’ Anglo-Irish way of life.<sup>28</sup> As Boxall describes, Bowen’s story ‘The Back Drawing Room’ brings together two such anterior spaces. In a back room in what may be London, a cosmopolitan gathering dines; a mysterious guest interrupts the evening with the ghost story of a ‘big house’ burnt down amid the Troubles, that has nonetheless ‘somehow lingered on [...]’<sup>29</sup> In this manner, the teller opens a ‘seam’ between the two back rooms, demarcating a movement ‘from the first room to the second’ but also ‘in the opposite direction.’<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Boxall describes the ‘threshold’ activated by this story in terms of a movement, albeit circular, from ‘vagueness to the vividness of a specific place’ and vice versa.<sup>31</sup> Boxall connects this story to the ‘dear old back roads’<sup>32</sup> of Beckett’s *Company*, noting how the speaker in this text, situated in a vague and darkened space, recounts memories unusually ‘rich in geographical detail.’<sup>33</sup> However, it is difficult to know whether the same contrast can be observed in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. As the objects in this text appear to promise a past without leading to further exposition, the spectrally returning details that may suggest an Anglo-Irish history appear partially stripped of their significance.

Such a reading of *Ill Seen Ill Said* may thus view the text as Beckett’s attempted – and spatially informed – negotiation of his own complicity with the limited perspectives of an Anglo-Irish literary tradition. This seeming awareness of privilege is not without its pessimism, as *Ill Seen Ill Said*’s confusing gaze seems to stage the impossibility of the

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<sup>28</sup> Boxall, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Boxall, p. 31.

author's critiquing 'big house' literature other than from some shadowy 'within.' When we view, as Hatch does,<sup>34</sup> the Irish Gothic as a facet of 'big house' literature, Beckett's subversion of such forms seems premised on the idea of countering vagueness with further vagueness. In short, Beckett's reworking of 'big house' literature at a distance raises the question of how to 'vaguene' a literary genre that is itself prone to an uncanny, partially erased-seeming strangeness in its representations of interior space. This task is perhaps further complicated by an existing, iconic instance of Gothic literature as self-parodying in this focus on 'clues' relating to a buried past: it is worth remembering that Austen herself, memorably referred to by Beckett as 'the divine Jane',<sup>35</sup> subverts tropes of Gothic architecture as revelatory in her *Northanger Abbey*.<sup>36</sup>

Such aporetic perspectives therefore inform what Little refers to as a 'residual domesticity'<sup>37</sup> in Beckett's writing: memorably, original typescript references to the characters in *Endgame* as a (perhaps 'big house'-style?) family and their 'factotum' were 'vaguened' away.<sup>38</sup> *Ill Seen Ill Said*'s uncategorisable 'home(!)' can be similarly viewed in terms of such unhomey dwellings.

In later texts such as *Stirrings Still*, the objects within such interior spaces will be themselves removed. Van Hulle notes that early manuscripts of *Stirrings Still* included reference to a bed, a heart-shaped chamber pot, and a nightlight; all three details were subsequently omitted, leaving only the room itself.<sup>39</sup> However, it is interesting to view *Ill Seen Ill Said* as a precursor to this more extreme 'vaguening', articulating as it does an environment in which given details remain yet the space connecting them appears

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<sup>34</sup> Hatch, pp. 114-115.

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 14 February 1935', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig and Dan Gunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 249-252 (p. 250).

<sup>36</sup> 'This is strange, indeed! I did not expect such a sight as this! An immense heavy chest! What can it hold? Why should it be placed here?

Pushed back too, as if meant to be out of sight! [...]' (Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (London: Richard Bentley, 1848), p. 133.)

<sup>37</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 111.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.

<sup>39</sup> Van Hulle, p. 122.

uncertain and eroded. Such examples almost suggest a series of efforts, on Beckett's part, to determine to what degree context may be omitted. Yet as the above examples show, this sense of abstraction appears stubbornly, asymptotically unreachable.<sup>40</sup> It appears inevitable that Beckett's texts are 'placed', however tenuously. It is thus perhaps apposite to conclude this section with this idea of attempted or even failed escape from a given literary 'space.' Much in the manner that Beckett's indoor space is digressed from yet perpetually returned to, indoor space in Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* takes on a similarly uncertain role.

## 2.2: 'This, I told myself, was "home":<sup>41</sup> Ambiguous Domesticity in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

*When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along to an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's The Thieving Magpie, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.*

*I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been someone with news of a job. I turned down the gas, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.*

*"Ten minutes, please," said a woman on the other end.*

*I'm good at recognizing people's voices, but this was not one I knew (p. 5).*

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<sup>40</sup> See other instances of the asymptote in discussions of Beckett's writing. (Paul Sheehan, 'Modernism: Dublin/Paris/London', in *Beckett in Context*, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 139-149 (p. 157); Ruby Cohn, 'The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage', in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 162-171 (p. 168).)

<sup>41</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 46. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.



In contrast to the above discussion of *Ill Seen Ill Said's* Gothic elements, the opening paragraph of Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* appears worlds apart from such sombre themes. The language is upbeat and casual. On a superficial level, nothing about the setting appears 'traditionally Japanese': Western readers may picture this scene as taking place in the homely, familiar universe of a *Friends* apartment kitchenette.

'Overarching vagueness' characterises this interior: as Myles Chilton notes, the rooms are 'described minimally, leaving no impression of size, shape, light, or decoration.'<sup>42</sup> Rather, '[i]t is enough for Okada to gesture towards the probability and normality of an average Tokyo suburban house.'<sup>43</sup> Casual familiarity pervades the prose: the kitchen is simply 'the kitchen', the protagonist's phone is simply 'the phone' (p. 5). A cosy and perhaps slightly fashionable scene is conjured by the combination of Rossini's music and a boiling potful of spaghetti; besides this, the reader learns little other than the fact that the telephone is located in the living room and not the kitchen.

This passage also reveals that the protagonist is waiting for calls back from prospective employers. Toru is currently unemployed; as early as the opening pages of the novel, he is seen completing household tasks, such as ironing shirts, while his wife is away at work (p. 6). He appears as a solitary character, disconnected from the 'public' world; the backdrop he occupies has a blank or vacuum-like quality.

Toru's domestic situation appears performative: he calls the house he shares with Kumiko 'home', unconvincingly stating: 'We were doing a proper job of carrying out the responsibilities that we had been assigned to perform at home' (p. 46). However, on a more pervasive level throughout the novel, disconnect between the characters themselves

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<sup>42</sup> Myles Chilton, 'Realist Magic and the Invented Tokyos of Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 39, 3 (2009) 391-415 (p. 398).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

is figured in analogies of indoor space. The emotional distance between Toru and Kumiko – or, phrased less romantically, the fact of Kumiko’s independent subjectivity – is described as ‘a big, dark room’, in which Toru stands with a cigarette lighter illuminating ‘only the smallest part’ (p. 30).

Interactions are described using analogies of layers, windows, and partitions. Malta Kano’s eyes are ‘all surface’ (p. 38) and look as though she is ‘staring into the window of a vacant house’ (p. 43); Noboru Wataya appears as though his face is ‘not his real face’, a face covered with a ‘quite different’ layer of something else (p. 77). Such structural metaphors of depth and concealment are predictably gendered. While Malta Kano’s eyes are albeit described as ‘mysterious’ in their ‘lack of depth’ (p. 38) – implying perhaps a *concealed* depth – they convey a shallow impression, while Noboru Wataya’s dissembling face has multiple coverings. (He is also described as appearing to belong inside a television, as if there is always a ‘layer of glass’ (p. 77) between him and those he addresses).

In keeping with what seems a pervasive sense of urban alienation in the novel’s many interwoven yet discrete storylines, the body is either confined to narrow spaces, or figured physically as an inanimate space itself. The boy in Chapter 11 feels as if ‘his self had been put into a new container’ (p. 421). Toru envisions himself as the ‘vacant house’ on his road, with its ‘flightless stone bird’ statue (p. 368). A woman who Toru considered an affair with in the past has an oddly specific fear of ‘culverts’, due to having narrowly escaped being sucked into one such drainage ditch as a child (p. 105). Cinnamon’s commitment to his computer is such that ‘reality resided for him not so much in the earthly world but in his subterranean labyrinth’ (p. 467). Vaguely described spaces abound: in a letter to Toru, May Kasahara writes that she is working in ‘a certain factory’

(p. 415); Toru looks for his missing cat in the oddly constructed blind alleyway behind his house (p. 12).

While indoor spaces in this novel are occasionally the sites of hallucinatory revelations, such as Toru's experiences while hiding in the well (p. 166), such interiors just as often function to divide and obscure. To return to Chilton's observation, while the 'invented' spaces in the novel are described vividly, the more mundane spaces of Tokyo housing are left undescribed with an assumed familiarity. Interiors thus occupy a difficult status in this novel: they appear either too familiar to warrant talking about, or they behave mutinously, the sites of disappearance and engulfment.

This study will attempt to avoid over-emphasis of Murakami's Japanese context in the analysis of his work; nevertheless, this short section will highlight some of the ways in which Murakami's ambivalence regarding 'national' literature resonates with Beckett's transcultural position. A brief comparison regarding indoor space in the works of another Japanese author is perhaps apposite here.

Yasunari Kawabata has been described as a 'bridge-builder to the West.'<sup>44</sup> The first Japanese author to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968<sup>45</sup>, one year before Beckett, his work has been hailed, Francis Mathy notes, as 'particularly Japanese' while also managing to explore 'the depths of the human condition.'<sup>46</sup> Crucially, in Kawabata's work, a form of traditional and aestheticised 'old Japan'<sup>47</sup> manifests itself in closed-off spaces, such as the tea-room in *Thousand Cranes*<sup>48</sup> and the confined environment –

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<sup>44</sup> Francis Mathy, 'Kawabata Yasunari: Bridge-BUILDER to the West', *Monumenta Nipponica*, 42, 3 (1969), 211-217.

<sup>45</sup> Sidney DeVere Brown, 'Yasunari Kawabata: Tradition Versus Modernity', *World Literature Today*, 62, 3 (1988), 375-379 (p. 375).

<sup>46</sup> Mathy, p. 217.

<sup>47</sup> Sidney DeVere Brown observes that Kawabata's work offers little acknowledgement of modern Japan: 'Kawabata wrote about small shopkeepers, craftsmen, and silk traders in the export business', rather than representing the large industrialists and bankers of the 'New Japan.' Thus, his image of 'old Japan' catered to Western imaginings of the country: as Roy Starrs says, this 'traditionalism' attracted Western readers 'delighted not to be confronted by yet another Japanese clone of Kafka or Camus.' Indoor space noticeably recurs in his work. Kinya Tsuruta notes that throughout his *œuvre*, 'Yasunari has consistently used literary devices which mute the intensity of everyday reality', his novels set in spaces that reduce 'the glare and rawness of the real world'. (DeVere Brown, p. 379; Roy Starrs, *Soundings in Time: The Fictive Art of Yasunari Kawabata* (Surrey: Japan Library, 1998), p. 70; Kinya Tsuruta, 'The Flow-Dynamics in Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*', *Monumenta Nipponica*, 26 (1971), 251-265 (p. 251); *ibid.*, pp. 251-252.)

<sup>48</sup> Tsuruta, p. 251.

‘sealed in a tin can’<sup>49</sup> – of the tournaments in *The Master of Go*. Tradition and modernity are thus represented as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ worlds: in the opening scene of *Snow Country*, a reconciliation between past and future Japan is notably conveyed by way of Shimamura’s train journey through a tunnel.<sup>50</sup>

Murakami only began reading Japanese literature once he was living in America, teaching in universities such as Princeton and Tufts.<sup>51</sup> While his Japanese peers had grown up reading Mishima and Ōe, he preferred Capote, Updike, and Chandler.<sup>52</sup> Murakami states, however, that ‘[r]eading Japanese novels in a foreign country was a very valuable linguistic experience.’<sup>53</sup> Given that he only began to seriously read Japanese literature once his career was established, it is unlikely that Kawabata’s influence was at the forefront of Murakami’s mind when he first began to craft his Chandleresque prose.

However, while Kawabata’s depictions of indoor space as a microcosm of the Japanese nation quite possibly had little effect on Murakami’s writing, Murakami is thought to have been at the forefront of the *iyashi* or ‘healing literature’<sup>54</sup> movement of 1990s Japan.<sup>55</sup> Such writing is generally thought of as apolitical,<sup>56</sup> and often features relaxing sensory descriptions set in indoor spaces:<sup>57</sup> a prominent example is Yuki Kurita’s ‘Oteru Moru’ (Hotel Mole), a novel featuring a ‘sleep hotel’ replete with many soporific descriptions of furniture.<sup>58</sup> Murakami’s meticulous description of cooking while listening to music in the above extract is a sequence arguably typical of an *iyashi* novel. It is significant, too, that Toru is seen ironing shirts when upset (p. 6): Paul Roquet notes that

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<sup>49</sup> Yasunari Kawabata, *The Master of Go*, trans. by Edward G. Siedensticker (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Yasunari Kawabata, qtd. in DeVere Brown, p. 376.

<sup>51</sup> Murakami and Kawai, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 151.

<sup>53</sup> Murakami, in Murakami and Kawai, p. 43.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Roquet, ‘Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm: Mood Regulation in Contemporary Japanese Fiction’, *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 35, 1 (2009), 87-111 (p. 90).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

characters in *iyashi* novels often respond to troubling situations by completing methodical tasks such as housework or self-care. He cites the example of Kurita's 2002 novel *Hamizabezu*, in which a young woman, annoyed at the persistent advances of a male coworker, unplugs her telephone and goes to take a shower.<sup>59</sup>

Murakami's writing can be characterised by a sense of detachment that subverts the traditional, introspective form of the Japanese 'I-novel' (*shishōsetsu*).<sup>60</sup> He has called the I-novel 'cloying' as it fails to 'relativize' the self.<sup>61</sup> Instead, he seeks detachment in his writing – phrases such as *yare yare* (untranslatable), *sō iu koto da* (so it goes) and *sore dake da* (that's all) indicate what Fuminobu Murakami calls a 'resignation towards reality', comparing them to 'the expletives that people murmur to themselves when they step outside a traumatic occasion'.<sup>62</sup> *Iyashi* literature developed in 1990s Japan,<sup>63</sup> in the wake of both the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyō gas attacks.<sup>64</sup> While Kenzaburō Ōe has criticised Murakami's reliance on such writing as he does not 'take an active attitude toward society',<sup>65</sup> Kurita defends the ambient genre as a political statement in itself: 'When I read a novel or see a film, and it displays tragic events just as they are, I think "but I already knew that..." I want to say "but even then there are people who are trying to move forward."' <sup>66</sup> It is perhaps a false dichotomy that ambient literature turns away from political reality by situating itself in 'private' spaces, as the domestic sphere can be equally seen to reflect a given cultural moment; an equally interesting debate regarding ambient literature might discuss whether it subverts or endorses a materialistic praise of 'things.'

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>60</sup> As Fuminobu Murakami states, the I-novel is focused on 'an introspective narrator's self-consciousness'. (Fuminobu Murakami, p. 30.)

<sup>61</sup> Murakami, in Murakami and Kawai, p. 42.

<sup>62</sup> Fuminobu Murakami, pp. 30-31.

<sup>63</sup> Roquet, p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>65</sup> Kenzaburō Ōe, qtd. in Roquet, p. 106.

<sup>66</sup> Yuki Kurita, qtd. in Roquet, p. 109.

Yoshimoto, another writer associated with this movement, writes frequently from indoor spaces. The protagonist of Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* states, 'I want to breathe my last in a kitchen.'<sup>67</sup> Her 2002 novel *Goodbye Tsugumi* is set in the hazy, nostalgic space of a coastal guesthouse.<sup>68</sup> In another short story, 'Helix', a couple watch a skyscraper explode from the darkened vantage point of a closed café at night.<sup>69</sup> John Whittier Treat elaborates on the backhanded reception of Yoshimoto's work in Japanese literary circles: she has been 'labeled the cutting edge of the new Japanese "minimalism" [...] the perfect pop-cultural disposable (*tsukaisute*) author, like the manga comic books with which she is legitimately compared.'<sup>70</sup> Like Murakami, her works are easy to read, often contain sparse characterisation and thinly sketched settings, and, in the manner of ambient literature, exercise a certain cautious 'avoidance of psychological interiority'<sup>71</sup> while often still being *physically* set in interior spaces. Indeed, while her novels deal with what may be normally considered weighty themes such as grief and family relationships, they are ultimately lighthearted, eschewing excessive introspection. Nonetheless, Yoshimoto's writing provides an important perspective on the *iyashi* debate: while seeming to consist of shallow depictions, her bright, readable spaces provide an arguably subversive take on the form. Yoshimoto's writing thus complicates criticism based on the *iyashi* genre's apathetic perspective.

It is worth noting the gendered element to Yoshimoto's fiction, influenced as she is by *shōjo manga*, or comics for teenage girls:<sup>72</sup> Yoshimoto's spaces can be read as sites of resistance to patriarchal norms. As in the story 'Newlywed', in which a man meets an

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<sup>67</sup> Banana Yoshimoto, *Kitchen*, trans. by Megan Backus (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Banana Yoshimoto, *Goodbye Tsugumi*, trans. by Michael Emmerich (New York: Grove Press, 2002); John Whittier Treat, 'Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject', *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 19, 2 (1993), 353-387 (p. 367).

<sup>69</sup> Banana Yoshimoto, 'Helix', in *Lizard*, trans. by Ann Sherif (Great Britain: Faber, 1995) pp. 53-69; Chilton, p. 392.

<sup>70</sup> Whittier Treat, p. 357.

<sup>71</sup> Akio Nakamata, qtd. in Roquet, p. 90.

<sup>72</sup> Whittier Treat, p. 357.

entity on a train that speaks ‘not any one language from any one country’,<sup>73</sup> and appears to change gender at will,<sup>74</sup> such resistant space can be theorised as counteracting the ‘masculine’ and scripted urban space of Tokyo. (This short story was serialised on posters aboard the Higashi Nippon Japan Railway stations from January to March of 1991,<sup>75</sup> a particularly satisfying instance of a story inhabiting the liminal space in which it was set). Indeed, on examination, many of Yoshimoto’s novels take place in spaces alternative to heteronormative culture. There is a focus in her work on unconventional or assembled families.<sup>76</sup> In *Kitchen*, the female protagonist moves in with a male friend and his mother in the wake of her grandmother’s death, forming a chosen family;<sup>77</sup> in *Goodbye Tsugumi*, the protagonist’s father is rarely mentioned, the novel’s main action occurring in the nostalgic seaside world inhabited by the female protagonist and her mother.<sup>78</sup>

Many of Yoshimoto’s protagonists are female; many of her novels focus on relationships between women. As the protagonist of ‘Asleep’ says, ‘[w]omen friends are the best, they really are.’<sup>79</sup> Whittier Treat explains that *shōjo* culture occupies its own space outside of heteronormative society: ‘one might well argue that *shōjo* constitute their own gender [...] importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual reproduction.’<sup>80</sup> Yoshimoto’s female friendships thus occupy a resistant alternative space, providing an important counterexample to the above idea that writing rooted in indoor space is necessarily to be interpreted as an apolitical shutting-out of the world. Such representations also provide an illuminating alternative perspective to Murakami’s focus on flashbacks and uncertain temporality. In Murakami stories such as ‘The Second

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<sup>73</sup> Banana Yoshimoto, ‘Newlywed’, in *Lizard*, trans. by Ann Sherif (Great Britain: Faber, 1995), pp. 1-19 (p. 8).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>75</sup> Banana Yoshimoto, ‘Afterword’, in *Lizard*, trans. by Ann Sherif (Great Britain: Faber, 1995), pp. 175-177 (p. 176).

<sup>76</sup> Whittier Treat, p. 369.

<sup>77</sup> Whittier Treat notes that in this family, ‘[b]lood ties and genealogy are less important than circumstance and simple human affinity.’ (*Ibid.*)

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>79</sup> Banana Yoshimoto, ‘Asleep’, in *Asleep*, trans. by Michael Emmerich (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), pp. 107-177 (p. 111).

<sup>80</sup> Whittier Treat, p. 364.

Bakery Attack'<sup>81</sup> and 'Scheherazade', nostalgia for a given character's youth is figured in terms of a breach of locked indoor space, memory itself portrayed as by turns compartmentalised and oddly indistinguishable from the present. It is interesting to contrast 'Scheherazade', a story that notably contains sexualising and voyeuristic portrayals, with Yoshimoto's depiction of nostalgic, compartmentalised space as separated from conventional heteronormativity. Considering Yoshimoto's work brings the multivalency of *iyashi* literature into focus, illustrating the diverse ways in which a seemingly 'vaguened' form has been applied.

While the range of examples employed throughout this section do not claim to be in any way representative of indoor space in Japanese literature as a whole, when compared in this way they demonstrate the manner in which architectural interiors have featured in literary demonstrations of both the return to and the escape from cultural context. While novels such as Kawabata's *Snow Country* view tradition in terms of enclosed areas, 'ambient literature' also uses indoor space as a means of resisting and escaping aspects of Japanese society, such as the trauma of natural disaster. Furthermore, domestic space in Yoshimoto's writing is represented as functioning outside of the dual confinement of heteronormative roles and urban atomisation.

Indoor space thus takes on paradoxical connotations of freedom and confinement in such examples: in Yoshimoto's and Murakami's cases, its representations involve a convoluted move to both eschew and embrace national context. It is worth remembering that ambient literature is itself paradoxical: while encouraging escape from what Roquet calls 'the affective appeals' of 'contemporary Japanese media', it was also 'aimed at the creation of new consumer desires and demands for self-care.'<sup>82</sup> Given Murakami's

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<sup>81</sup> Haruki Murakami, 'The Second Bakery Attack', in *Desire*, trans. by Jay Rubin, Ted Goossen, and Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2017), pp. 1-19 (p. 7).

<sup>82</sup> Roquet, p. 88.



ambivalence over Japanese literary ‘space’, it is thus perhaps important to consider that his domestic spaces appear vague, either left casually unelaborated or functioning to mysteriously entrap and conceal. As with Beckett, Murakami’s subversion of, or complicity within, the *iyashi* genre is debatable, as other writers of *iyashi* literature wrote in a similarly interiorised manner.

An interesting commonality emerges between Beckett’s use of the Irish Gothic and Murakami’s relationship to *iyashi* literature, vastly different as these genres may be. In both cases, ‘vagueness’ affords something like a plausible deniability with relation to the work’s cultural ‘placing.’ Both authors advance a nuanced generic reworking that seems to further ‘vague’ a genre already given to contextual sparseness. By contrast, the next two sections of this chapter will focus on both Beckett’s *Malone Dies* and Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase*, two novels that I read as employing referential frameworks based on ‘non-native’ or borrowed genres: namely, literary traditions associated with both authors’ acquired languages, in this case French and American English respectively. The following examples offer an alternative view of both authors’ generic reworkings, exploring the limits of subversion and appropriation in such contexts. I will discuss the manner in which Beckett employs elements of testimonial literature at a distance, while Murakami writes a denuded version of the ‘hardboiled’ detective novel.

The following sections will thus further build on my argument by outlining the manner in which ‘foreign’ space appears *as* vague as domestic space in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work. Beckett obfuscates the institutional imagery of testimonial literature in *Malone Dies* by adding incongruous or absurd details to the text’s setting, and employing a distancing frame narrative through the character of Macmann. Murakami’s writing comments on stereotypes and thinly sketched portrayals that have informed both American and Japanese contexts, placing his descriptions of ominous architectural spaces

both within and outside of the *noir* tradition. Crucially, both authors defamiliarise the influences of these genres on their work.

### 2.3 ‘What happened afterwards’:<sup>83</sup> Institutional Space in *Malone Dies*

*One day, much later, to judge by his appearance, Macmann came to again, once again, in a kind of asylum. At first he did not know it was one, being plunged within it, but he was told so as soon as he was in a condition to receive news. They said in substance, You are now in the House of Saint John of God, with the number one hundred and sixty-six. Fear nothing, you are among friends. Friends! Well well. Take no thought for anything, it is we shall think and act for you, from now forward. We like it. Do not thank us therefore. In addition to the nourishment carefully calculated to keep you alive, and even well, you will receive, every Saturday, in honour of our patron, an imperial half-pint of porter and a plug of tobacco.*<sup>84</sup>

Macmann, himself a character invented by Malone, is pictured here in an interior space described, with characteristic Beckettian negativity, in terms of what it is *not*: ‘It is not a room in a hospital, or in a madhouse, I can feel that’ (p. 177). Just as Molloy knows that he is in his mother’s room but not how he arrived there – ‘[p]erhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind’<sup>85</sup> – the reader learns little of the outside world in *Malone Dies*. While there appear to be many other people and rooms in the house, Malone’s room lacks the features that would mark it out as an institution: ‘No, this is just a plain private room apparently, in what appears to be a plain ordinary house’ (p. 177). When he tries to imagine the rest of the house, he posits: ‘Perhaps after all I am in a kind of vault’, but soon after wonders whether there are ‘other vaults even deeper than mine’ (pp. 212-213).

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<sup>83</sup> On awarding Beckett the Nobel Prize in 1969, the Swedish Academy described his work as addressing ‘what happened afterwards’. (Emilie Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 130).

<sup>84</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, pp. 248-249; *Malone Dies*. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>85</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 3; *Molloy*.

However, he then reasons, ‘there is nothing to be gained by my saying I am in a basement if there are tiers of basements one on top of another’ (ibid.). The surreal image of stacked basements itself effects a divorce from context – is a basement still a basement if it isn’t at the bottom of a building, or rather, if all the floors are basements, do they cease to be basements? Nothing about the house seems definable or certain.

It is thus interesting that in the extract above, the site of the action (or inaction) in Macmann’s story is further specified to be an asylum. Does Malone himself know, on some level, that he is in an asylum, projecting this knowledge on his character? This narrative oscillation is another instance of the ‘vagueness’ of perspective so frequently shown in Beckett’s texts. Next comes the strange locution, ‘plunged within it’ (p. 249). This seems like an odd manner of discussing a person’s location within a building. Its spatial connotations would suggest depth, lending evidence to the idea that Malone is underground. However, to ‘plunge’ is not a verb commonly associated with the human navigation of buildings. The explanation that situates Macmann in the House of Saint John of God is prefaced by the qualifier ‘in substance’ (ibid.), rendering this description unreliable. The words appear intended as a summary or placeholder, a means of shortening a direct quotation. Therefore, any markers of location are perhaps too rendered unstable.

While, as Emilie Morin notes, ‘interviews and memoirs [of Beckett] portray a writer peculiarly unqualified for political activity’, his correspondence and notebooks show he was attuned to ‘the long history of political myths in the Irish Free State, Nazi Germany and France in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the Algerian War of Independence.’<sup>86</sup> Morin observes that Beckett’s texts ‘represent the aftermath of the Holocaust through their very omission of clear historical landmarks.’<sup>87</sup> She cites

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<sup>86</sup> Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Dominick LaCapra's comparison of Beckett to authors such as Kafka and Celan, as they created 'testimonial art', a 'writing of territorized disempowerment as close as possible to the experience of traumatized victims without presuming to be identical to it.'<sup>88</sup> Beckett's indeterminate spaces are repeatedly the sites of such oblique politicisation.

However, needless to say, writing of extreme hardship one has not directly experienced is a difficult task to carry out sensitively. Later chapters, most notably Chapter 3, will further explore what I will term 'multivalent vagueness' in Beckett's and Murakami's work, a trait that can be linked to such questions of testimonial literature and lived experience. According to this form of 'vagueness', a single allusion or reference can denote multiple cultural experiences. This approach risks creating a form of 'lowest common denominator' indeterminacy: attempting to give voice to (perhaps unrepresentable) suffering, in a manner that avoids certain identifying details, arguably risks appearing inaccurate or lacking in nuance. Interestingly in this connection, Little observes the manner in which '[i]n his work after *Malone Dies*, the decisions made not to represent institutions of confinement allow for a political body of work which nonetheless avoids testifying on behalf of particular individuals.'<sup>89</sup>

Alys Moody's analysis of hunger and starvation in Beckett's writing, notably including the works of the trilogy, provides an insightful analysis of the ethics of this perspective. As Moody notes, hunger has contextual relevance to both the Irish Famine and post-war France.<sup>90</sup> However, hunger is also 'structurally isolating',<sup>91</sup> as Moody observes, signifying as it does an inability on the subject's part to assimilate outside elements into the body. It thus connotes 'ambivalence over location and history.'<sup>92</sup> Hunger is both apolitical, simply a bodily reaction, but also politicised: Moody notes the

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<sup>88</sup> Dominick LaCapra, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Little, 'Closed Spaces', p. 224.

<sup>90</sup> Moody, p. 261; pp. 265-266.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

example of hunger strikes.<sup>93</sup> (Indeed, it is difficult not to recall Malone's musings on Terrence McSwiney, an unambiguously specific reference;<sup>94</sup> however, the experience of protest and deprivation would arguably also resonate with readers unfamiliar with the reference's Irish context.) Hunger can be thought of as a state defined by absence: writing about it vaguely recalls multiple contexts without claiming a monopoly of experience on any one.

While Beckett's own, often dangerous, Resistance activities have been well documented – Lois Gordon describes how Beckett joined the inhabitants of Roussillon as they fought the enemy by night and picked grapes by day<sup>95</sup> – it is important to remember that the experience of hunger in an Irish context is for Beckett largely a conceptual one. As Moody says, 'if Ireland provided Beckett with a cultural and political tradition of hunger, it was France that allowed him to become intimately acquainted with the everyday realities of deprivation and malnutrition.'<sup>96</sup> It may be argued, however, that Beckett did not directly experience the worst of either of these historical moments. It is thus interesting to observe the techniques of defamiliarisation Beckett employs: he cites specific details relating to Vichy France, yet they are present in a 'vaguened' form and thus can also appear, when given an alternative reading, absurd and ostensibly 'apolitical.' This technique raises questions over which aspects of a historical tragedy are representable, especially given the author's own distanced perspective.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>95</sup> Lois Gordon, 'France: World War Two', in *Beckett in Context*, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 109-125 (p. 118).

<sup>96</sup> Moody, p. 266.

<sup>97</sup> David Houston Jones elaborates on this connection between Beckett's indoor spaces and the impossibility of representing Holocaust experiences, with relation to the artwork of Miroslaw Bałka. He states: 'On 13 October 2009 a huge hangar-like structure was unveiled in the Tate Modern's turbine hall. Due to the sheer size of the walls on three sides and the uniformly black interior, the eye struggles to distinguish forms within. Penetrating so far, it can go no further. The pupil struggles to take in the darkness. Entering the box, the searcher resorts to touch. Floor and wall are of a dense material covered with fabric; the searcher's hand makes a sound like dead leaves. Imagine then the silence of the steps. In the near-darkness the searcher can but advance, hand outstretched, towards the limit of the chamber. The gloom and press make recognition difficult. Miroslaw Bałka's *How It Is* [...] eerily echoes the archival drama of Beckett's closed space works: this is a space which promises the recovery of knowledge, like a black box, like the archive. The work has the capacity to house a repertoire, and yet that repertoire is apparently absent from its huge expanse. Like *The Lost Ones*, its promise of knowledge encounters intractable epistemological difficulties: sight is initially disabled by the extreme darkness. As the pupils adjust, the viewer is able to see dimly, but only in the direction of the exit, where weak light persists. The dark figures of the other searchers stand out, but when the gaze returns to the interior, dark descends. The viewer's negotiation of the work, then, is made

As Morin observes, the universe of Malone's institution includes individuals in striped cloaks and keepers who carry sticks and lanterns; the inmates receive standard rations of soup.<sup>98</sup> Malone's thinking appears informed by 'exclusions' based on fascist discourses of racial purity, mentioning as he does 'inferior races' in his search for 'a kindred spirit.'<sup>99</sup> More specifically still to the theme of indoor space, Morin posits a similarity between the building described in this text and Drancy, an internment camp north of Paris.<sup>100</sup> Its architecture featured 'medium-rise buildings towering over a central yard'.<sup>101</sup> She links Malone's position either 'on the mezzanine', 'a kind of vault,' or 'a wide trench or ditch with other vaults opening upon it', to the fact that members of French Resistance networks were kept in solitary confinement units distinct from the rest of a given concentration camp building: such 'Bunkers' were used in camps such as Dachau, Neuengamme, and Ravensbrück.<sup>102</sup> As Morin states, these details suggest highly specific knowledge on Beckett's part.<sup>103</sup>

Such valuable observations shed light on some of the institution's more improbable architectural features. However, other aspects of Malone's dwelling are more difficult to pinpoint historically. In tension with the culturally specific references Morin aptly flags is a range of features less easily placed. In Malone's opinion at least, the floor of his room appears at one point to be 'whitening' (p. 216) – interpretations relating to a withdrawal into psychological interiority beckon again here, as the floor recalls the inside of a skull. Nonetheless, it is to be noted that a floor, perhaps carpeted, could conceivably

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difficult by its darkness, cold and immense scale, all of which equally afflict the protagonists of Beckett's closed space works. This is an archival space over which the human subject can never attain mastery; the diminutive human figures become mere terms in an informational conundrum. Like the searchers of *The Lost Ones*, the occupants of Balka's *How It Is* themselves become the archival repertoire: the disorientated search for meaning is one of the essential structures of the work, which can only be viewed from a distance, remote from the search. Balka's work pursues the indirection of Beckettian testimony: like Beckett, it carries echoes of atrocity which remain unspoken and subsist only in formal terms.' (David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 171.)

<sup>98</sup> Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, p. 170.

<sup>99</sup> Emilie Morin, 'Beckett's Inquests: *Malone Dies* and the Mysteries of the State', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 26 (2014), 137-150 (p. 140).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

fade with age. Arguably, the strangeness of Malone's observation lies in the term 'whitening.' In the manner of a poor or idiosyncratic translation, it is perhaps not the most accurate word to use, and therefore renders absurd what may be a rather normal phenomenon. According to a similarly strange description, the floor makes a mystifying noise 'both sharp and dull' when hit with his stick (p. 217). The room seems improbably featureless, its lack of light and shade verging on scientifically impossible: 'there is really no colour in this place', he states, positing that 'it is as bright under my bed as it is under the ceiling, which admittedly is not saying much' (p. 214). Malone recalls that its wallpaper was, at one time, adorned with a 'writhing mass of roses, violets and other flowers in such profusion that it seemed to me I had never seen so many in the whole course of my life, nor of such beauty' (p. 217). However, this pattern appears to have faded. There is a delirious quality to these observations, particularly those of the 'writhing' flowers. Absurdity and possibly imagined elements balance any overtly identifying markers of place.

David Houston Jones makes a similar point regarding a representation of 'vague' or unclassifiable indoor space in Beckett's *Unnamable*. He considers the fact that, at one point in the narrative, the narrator's family appear to have been imprisoned in an undefined building. The building is described, as Houston Jones says, in terms of 'concentrationary innuendo': 'the allusion to a yard of "dirt and ashes" suggests a camp or compound, but subsequently softens into the unverifiable "campus"'.<sup>104</sup> Thus, he states, 'unlocalisable reference and indeterminate viewpoint combine the work's unsituated suggestions of atrocity with a distressed ontology.'<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Little observes the manner in which 'The Expelled' features a residential house in which the staff

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<sup>104</sup> Houston Jones, p. 32.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

members live in dens described in the French original according to the strangely organic term ‘alvéoles.’<sup>106</sup>

Adopting the testimonial narrative, with its connections to the post-war literature of mainland Europe, is a means for Beckett to respectfully inhabit a literary space not his own. This acknowledgement of experiential limits parallels the vague and, at times, absurd representation of indoor space in the novel – the institution in which Malone finds himself is understood only imperfectly, and many areas appear unseen by reader and narrator(s) alike.

However, there is another generic form at play here that merits discussion. Morin notes the presence of a ‘strained relation’ to the ‘conventions of detective fiction’ in *Malone Dies* due to its logic of ‘disappearances, deaths, searches and inquests.’<sup>107</sup> Morin states that the preceding novel *Molloy* carries connotations of an assassination plot perhaps lost in translation to English: phrases such as ‘s’occuper de Molloy’ become simply ‘see about Molloy’, thus losing their sinister double meaning.<sup>108</sup> As she notes, the subsequent *Malone Dies* is further removed from this genre, a text less concerned with exposing ‘a clearly defined social reality’: rather, its characters appear preoccupied with ‘honing mechanics of deduction’ in a ‘vaguened’ Vichy France filled with ‘semi-secretive bodies’.<sup>109</sup> Focused as the following section is on Murakami’s use of *noir* tropes, it is interesting to consider that both Beckett and Murakami borrow elements of the detective genre, but that such markers are often loose or generic. Morin notes that while Beckett frequently read detective fiction such as the works of Agatha Christie, the trilogy novels display an ‘uneasy fusion of genres’ including ‘autobiography, travel narrative and testimony’, perhaps rendering neat categorisation less possible.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 71.

<sup>107</sup> Morin, ‘Beckett’s Inquests’, p. 138.

<sup>108</sup> Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, p. 172.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.



A parallel can be drawn here with Murakami's use of 'vaguened' detective novel tropes. Murakami states that he uses 'Chandler's method' in *A Wild Sheep Chase*: the narrator is a 'lonely city dweller' who becomes drawn into 'complicated situations', which result in him only finding what he is looking for once it has been 'ruined or lost.'<sup>111</sup> Murakami states: 'One West Coast reader saw the connection. Referring to Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, he called my novel *The Big Sheep*. I felt honored by this.'<sup>112</sup> Murakami's Boku appears unwillingly drawn into the *noirish* machinations of a corrupt underworld; Beckett's Malone can be located at a similar remove to the 'vaguened' crime plot of the preceding novel *Molloy*. His 'modest investigations'<sup>113</sup> – as Morin posits – parallel Moran's search in the preceding novel, yet only at a tangent. As in Beckett's case, the presence of the detective novel in Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* appears debatable and confusing. Murakami's use of *noir* tropes resonates with the discussion in Chapter 1 of references modified by humour or incongruity, as it can at times be difficult to read Murakami's 'vaguening' of this genre as endorsement or critique.

Of course, this novel contains elements that do not directly fit into the detective genre either, such as conversations in darkened rooms with ghosts.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, it may even be erroneous to say that Murakami uses a form of 'vaguened' detective novel trope, since certain 'hardboiled' plots were arguably 'vague' and diffuse to begin with, failing to offer resolution. Indeed, Steffen Hantke states of Chandler's plots that ultimately, '[a]lthough the truth, fully or partially, emerges, people are killed, justice proves elusive, and the world remains a dangerous and godforsaken place.'<sup>115</sup> It is therefore difficult to

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<sup>111</sup> Rubin, p. 81.

<sup>112</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>113</sup> Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, p. 177.

<sup>114</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 275.

<sup>115</sup> Steffen Hantke, 'Postmodernism and Genre Fiction as Deferred Action: Haruki Murakami and the Noir Tradition', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 49, 1 (2007), 3-23 (p. 5).

identify whether certain aspects of Murakami's sparseness pay specific homage to the detective novel form, or employ a more genreless 'vaguening.'

The following section will discuss Murakami's version of 'hardboiled' fiction with reference to *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Addressing as it does the resistance to a right-wing Japanese political leader, *A Wild Sheep Chase* enacts a critique of fascistic nationalism through a genre – itself not without its problematic aspects – borrowed from another language and culture. In this manner, the adoption of genre enacts a translational distancing, as when writing in a foreign language to attain clarity. However, as discussed, the 'vague' nature of Murakami's writing makes the cultural 'origins' of certain literary techniques difficult to pin down, creating uncertainty over where detective-novel pastiche ends and 'vaguened' social commentary on Japan begins. It is significant that both it and *Malone Dies* involve unfamiliar indoor spaces journeyed to by the author, addressing but not fully 'inhabiting' the literature of the adopted language.

It is also worth considering the detective novel form with reference to representations of indoor space in both authors' work. The novels discussed here feature characters arguably themselves searching for 'clues': even if, as in Malone's case, their uncertainty extends to information as basic as their own whereabouts. Instead of revealing sought-after information, indoor space often contributes to the sense of irresolution in these works.

However, it is arguable that rather than simply writing from a place of nihilistic futility, both authors use the 'multivalent vagueness' of their indoor spaces in an attempt to extend a form of empathic 'space' between cultures. Beckett, as this section has shown, employs a 'vaguened' form of testimonial literature in an attempt to represent post-war devastation at a distance. Murakami uses 'hardboiled' forms to navigate the Americanised culture of post-war Japan, also using this style to observe Japanese society through

borrowed cultural referents. Indeed, as Steffen Hantke notes, ‘Murakami deconstructs *noir* itself, divesting it of its power to define a postmodern Japan that only exists in a politically conservative Japanese imagination, or in a peculiarly postmodern type of Orientalism within the Western imagination.’<sup>116</sup>

#### 2.4 ‘The Big Sheep’<sup>117</sup>: Dispersed Noir Spaces in *A Wild Sheep Chase*

*Straight on across the pasture stood an old American-style two-story wood-frame house. The house that the Sheep Professor had built forty years before and the Rat’s father had then bought. Nothing was nearby to compare it to, so from a distance it was difficult to tell how big it was. It was, in any case, squat and expressionless. Painted white, beneath the overcast skies it looked a foreboding gray. From the middle of the mustard-, almost rust-colored gabled roof a rectangular brick chimney protruded. Instead of a fence around the house, there was a stand of evergreens which protected it from the elements. The place seemed curiously uninhabited. An odd house the more I looked at it. It wasn’t particularly inhospitable or cold, nor built in any unusual way, nor even much in disrepair. It was just... odd. As if a great creature had grown old without being able to express its feelings. Not that it didn’t know how to express them, but rather that it didn’t know what to express.*<sup>118</sup>

This passage is notable for its specificity: the first line of the paragraph offers a thorough architectural classification of the building in question. However, this description is made as the speaker approaches the house: the narrator and his girlfriend have recently been dropped in the surrounding countryside (p. 232). While the house originally appears classifiable, the following descriptions grow less certain. It is strangely detached from perspective: ‘from a distance it [is] difficult to tell how big it [is]’ (p. 236). It is ‘squat and expressionless’, like a hiding entity (ibid.). While it has been painted white, in contrast to

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 81.

<sup>118</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 236. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

the sky it looks grey (ibid.). It appears subject to change given its surroundings, malleable and vague. Describing even basic qualities such as its colour appears difficult. Just as it looks grey although it is white, the roof is ‘mustard’ but ‘almost rust-colored’ (ibid.). In a process of elimination, the narrator describes what the house is *not*: ‘It wasn’t particularly inhospitable or cold, nor built in any unusual way, nor even much in disrepair’ (ibid.). A small forested area protects it ‘instead of a fence’ (ibid.) – another description based on the absence of an expected element. This description can be classed under the rubric of ‘overarching vagueness’: it initially appears to supply abundant, even exhaustive detail. However, like the pseudo-precision of Beckett’s measurement of the cabin in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this detail appears to obfuscate rather than clarify.

The image of a ‘stand of evergreens’ foreshadows motifs such as the forest into which the protagonist walks in the later novel *Kafka on the Shore*, gradually abandoning all his belongings on the journey.<sup>119</sup> The buildings in the community he arrives at are also ‘expressionless.’<sup>120</sup> In both cases, inscrutable houses surrounded by forests are the site of retreat into psychological interiority; it is significant that this journey takes place here in an ‘American-style’ house. This reference suggests the articulation of a national ‘self’ through inhabiting the literature of the adopted language, a portrayal that appears in this case to contain an element of recourse to ironic stereotype – Sianne Ngai elsewhere comments on the received view of ‘the Asian as silent, inexpressive, and, like Bartleby, emotionally inscrutable’.<sup>121</sup>

The house thus appears as an uneasy combination of thinly sketched portrayals, itself something like a demonstration of descriptive crudeness. As the following section will explore, Murakami uses stylistic frameworks borrowed from American fiction in

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<sup>119</sup> Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 427.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>121</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 93.

order to comment on Japanese culture at a distance: his use of the ‘American-style house’ as the site of supernatural self-confrontation is thus culturally loaded. This dual perspective parallels Beckett’s performative or self-reflexive bicultural writing; the final sentences of the above extract, which posit at first a failure to express together with not knowing *what* to express (p. 236), can even be observed to carry Beckettian resonances<sup>122</sup> that arguably speak (or do not speak) for themselves.

However, this seemingly throwaway resonance merits further attention. In ‘Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit’, Beckett’s ‘nothing to express’ statement appears satirical, as his likeness performs a kind of pseudointellectual prickliness.<sup>123</sup> However, the reader may also be aware that Beckett aimed to create an art based on inability in his work, and was clearly to some degree genuine in this desire; the extent to which the author himself ‘meant’ the circuitous statement from the ‘Three Dialogues’ thus appears up for debate.

Murakami’s description of the American-style house as having ‘nothing to express’ initially appears a mild, conclusive statement, rounding off a paragraph in which a sense of tension has been built. The line appears inessential, intended perhaps to slow the rhythm of the description, or to momentarily ease tension in an ominous scene. The protagonist deciding that the house possibly has ‘nothing to express’ seems to blunt the sense of threat emanating from the vacant space. The line says nothing definite, or does not appear to; personifying the house as a truculent being even creates an endearing image.

Both statements can be classified according to a kind of humorous ambiguity. This is a mild, uneasy humour, similar to the sustained or exhausted non-jokes Salisbury

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<sup>122</sup> It is worth returning to the, albeit ironic, pronouncement in Beckett’s ‘Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit’ contrasting Tal Coat’s art with “[t]he expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.’ (Beckett, ‘Three Dialogues’, p. 556.)

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 559.

observes in Beckett's writing.<sup>124</sup> Both statements may be intended to appear flippant and superfluous, devised as if their authors were more concerned with rhythm than the words themselves; both statements also may reveal significant elements of the author's perspective.

It is thus interesting to bring these two passages together in order to discuss the connection between 'vaguening', stylised representation, and the inability to 'express.' In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Boku compares the house's 'real life' incarnation to a photograph of this scene he has seen prior. He has 'the sense that the scene had been temporarily thrown together in order to match the photograph' (p. 236). The 'Three Dialogues' begin with Beckett's 'B' character describing an artwork to which the reader has not been introduced: 'Total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object. Question of degree.'<sup>125</sup> Murakami's depiction of house-versus-photograph alludes to an interesting, translational confusion between original and copy; Beckett's paradox of an artwork 'complete with missing parts' brings to mind the consideration of compositional lacunae as part of the work itself. Both statements appear indicative of an aesthetics of translation-informed irresolution. The 'Three Dialogues' culminate in Beckett's approving summation that Van Velde's art offers a form of originality through negation, diverging from the simple imitation of prior influences,<sup>126</sup> with the latter derivative type of work described as 'doing a little better than the same old thing'.<sup>127</sup> Both quotes appear linked to the respective authors' relationships to influence and verisimilitude, and perhaps by extension to their avoidance of derivative or essentialising contextual representation. On the way to reach the American-style house, Boku and the ear model have journeyed along a precarious, crumbling cliffside (pp. 231-232) in a landscape that begins to appear

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<sup>124</sup> Salisbury, "'So the Unreasoning Goes'", p. 372.

<sup>125</sup> Beckett, 'Three Dialogues', p. 555.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556.

increasingly metaphorical and defamiliarised.<sup>128</sup> Duthuit's question regarding Tal Coat and representational art – 'are we not on a quite different plane?'<sup>129</sup> – could apply to both contexts.

The American-style house is not the first vaguely defined interior space in the novel. Notably, the novel's second chapter starts with the protagonist detailing how he is able to walk the sixteen steps down his apartment corridor 'straight as a ruled line', no matter how drunk he is (p. 13).<sup>130</sup> This familiar attitude to the indoor spaces of urban Tokyo, implied in the later novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, appears even more obvious here. The reader learns little about the protagonist's apartment in *A Wild Sheep Chase*. The hallway is 'concrete' and filled with 'cool morning air' (p. 13). This description creates a sense of emptiness and even serenity, as evidenced in the precision with which the man's drunken walking is described: 'I'd throw back my shoulders, straighten my spine, hold my head up, and draw a deep lungful of the cool morning air' (ibid). Indeed, more attention is given to this inventory of the body than to the setting itself.

Other descriptions are tinged with habit: he finds himself 'planted square in front of [the] doorknob, as always' (p. 14). However, the reader learns that there are 'two days' worth of newspapers' in the mailbox (ibid.). The disused quality of the space renders it only more ambiguous: home, here, is presented as divested of its usual cosy significance. Throughout the interaction between the protagonist and his ex-wife, which, as Yoshio Iwamoto notes, 'skirts everything that might be thought of as essential for an

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<sup>128</sup> Descriptions of the mountain vista leading to the Sheep Professor's house occasionally attain an eerie hyperreality: 'The road led us straight up through this sea of birches. It was barely wide enough for a jeep and absolutely straight. Not one bend, no steep slopes. If you looked ahead, everything was sucked into one point. Even the black clouds passed directly over that point' (p. 234).

<sup>129</sup> Beckett, 'Three Dialogues', p. 555.

<sup>130</sup> As the following descriptions will show, there are a great many references to architectural space in this novel. Among them is the rather striking description of the Boss's house, which appears an incompatible mix of architectural styles (pp. 69-70). This description reads like a rather obvious comment on a defunct or inconsistent political ideology. It has been omitted here, in order to focus on certain more subtly telling images of indoor space throughout the novel.

understanding of their situation’,<sup>131</sup> the apartment functions as a fractured and dispersed space. There is a ‘withered potted geranium’ between them and a ‘short ray of sunlight divid[ing] the table’, leaving him ‘in light, her in shadow’ (p. 15). The shadow is, however, described as ‘[c]olorless’ (ibid.); a seemingly accurate description that becomes harder to picture when considered.

The apartment is not described, in this case because the protagonist is familiar with this space; however, the familiar space is also denuded of its usual connotations in the aftermath of the protagonist’s divorce. While antithetical, both effects lead to a ‘vaguened’ impression. ‘Vaguening’ in this case is the result of both familiarity *and* unfamiliarity, or a combination of the two. Considering this start to the novel, it is perhaps relevant that the American-style house belonging to the Sheep Professor is similarly vague. Both the ‘home’ space and the space journeyed to at this latter, crucial point in the novel are afforded the same lack of description. While specific objects or features within these spaces are described, a sense of ‘overarching vagueness’ pervades. A parallel can be drawn with the way neither literary nor linguistic space, be it Japanese or American, is fully ‘inhabited’ in Murakami’s work.

The American-style house is located in a purgatorial area of rural hills, an ‘alien’ landscape in which the sky is a ‘moist, uniform gray’ (p. 233). The house, as discussed, is familiar from photographs that the narrator has seen; he is unsettled on seeing it in real life, as the ‘depth of the actual place seem[s] artificial’ (p. 236). Its interior is ‘unnaturally dim’, so much that ‘in the darkness, time turn[s] on its head’ (p. 238). It momentarily causes the narrator’s memories to ‘crumble’ (ibid.), as if enacting an instant process of ‘vaguening.’ When this sensation abates, he is met with ‘a plain gray space, nothing more’ (ibid.)

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<sup>131</sup> Yoshio Iwamoto, ‘A Voice from Postmodern Japan: Haruki Murakami’, *World Literature Today*, 67, 2 (1993), 295-300 (p. 297).



Rather than forming a coherent unity, the house appears disconnected from itself, compartmentalised. Going upstairs is like entering ‘a different atmospheric layer’ (p. 239). The house has been recently occupied by the Rat: the clock wound a week prior, the kitchen stocked with food and fuel for the winter, and a Conrad novel on the bedside table (ibid.). However, there are no documents present that might serve to reveal the circumstances of the Rat’s disappearance: ‘No diary, no notebook, nothing’ (ibid.). The bookcase is filled with a collection of ‘[u]tterly useless’ prewar editions, an ‘intellectual’s required reading forty years ago’ (p. 240). In summary, the house raises more questions than it resolves: the living room is ‘the vacant aftermath of a room’ (p. 241).

It is perhaps apposite here to discuss Murakami’s adoption of ‘hardboiled’ tropes: comparisons present themselves with Beckett’s writing of an ‘aftermath.’ As Jonathan Ellis and Mitoko Hirabayashi note, Murakami ‘fell in love with the hardboiled fiction the American sailors left behind in Kobe’s secondhand bookstores.’<sup>132</sup> Murakami’s representation of post-war Japan in a manner that self-reflexively foregrounds Americanisation is paralleled in *A Wild Sheep Chase*’s use of genre. For instance, Strecher compares the journey up the steep mountain path to the house in the quoted extract as ‘a journey of passage from the world of the living to that of the dead, what Japanese literary convention terms the *michiyuki*.’<sup>133</sup> However, the trope of an escape to a rural area – as enacted in the quest that takes the narrator and his girlfriend to the Sheep Professor’s house – can also be read as a *noir* reference.

Steffen Hantke compares the trajectory of the novel – its move from the ‘postindustrial urban alienation’ of Tokyo, ‘worthy of Chandler’s Los Angeles or Wilder’s Hollywood’, to the rural island location of Hokkaido<sup>134</sup> – to the ‘brief rural

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<sup>132</sup> Ellis et al., p. 548.

<sup>133</sup> Strecher, Loc 1662 of 5837.

<sup>134</sup> Hantke, p. 12.

idyll’ at the end of David Goodis’s *Shoot the Piano Player* (1956), or Dix Handley’s ‘failed return’ to his childhood rural Kentucky in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950).<sup>135</sup> Hantke makes the crucial observation that such escapes to rural space are often failed, as *noir* characters typically die or are ‘reeled back into the iron maw of the city.’<sup>136</sup> Hantke compares this to how in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, ‘Hokkaido does not offer an escape from the corruption and political machinations in Tokyo.’<sup>137</sup> As Murakami’s adoption of *noir* tropes shows, escape from the city into a peripheral ‘other’ or ‘outside’ space has similarly claustrophobic results. To reprise the analogy of Japanese literature as a ‘home’ space and American *noir* literature as an ‘outside’ space, Murakami appears limited by both. He thus uses something like a self-fashioned ‘neither’ perspective in order to comment on both cultures.

Murakami’s characters are derived from the ‘hardboiled’ universe;<sup>138</sup> Hantke notes that while ‘Murakami employs this [same] protagonist throughout his work, often leaving him nameless to allow for the reader’s projection of continuity from one novel to the next’, he also uses this character even in his non-‘hardboiled’ novels.<sup>139</sup> Murakami thus makes these borrowed characters his own,<sup>140</sup> to the extent that his ‘hardboiled’ prose is used almost for comic effect, describing mundane activities ill-suited to the *noir* genre. As Susan Fisher observes, ‘his imitation of the hard-boiled style is ironic. Murakami [...] is parodying [its] stylistic conventions, using an American tough-guy style to recount the misadventures of his bookish, melancholy Japanese protagonists.’<sup>141</sup>

It can be difficult to apply politicised readings to a reference that is being employed, at least in part, for its incongruity. Chapter 1 discussed instances in both

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Hantke, pp. 6-7.

<sup>139</sup> Hantke, p. 5.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Susan Fisher, ‘An Allegory of Return: Murakami Haruki’s “The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle”’, 37, 2 (2000), 155-170 (p. 160).

authors' work in which a given reference is couched in ironising terms, this irony being itself a form of 'vaguening.' As Philip Hanson notes, 'American film *noir* shares with German Expressionism its emphasis on subjective psychological states and its paranoia over authority as corrupt as the criminal world.'<sup>142</sup> By choosing to rework a literary form associated with Depression-era American identity in crisis, Murakami employs the narrative of a collapsing national confidence in a new setting; ambiguity is preserved over whether this homage is intended as sympathetic or critical.

While Fisher's observation of the parodic element to Murakami's employment of *noir* tropes is apposite, other similarities between Murakami's writing and the 'hardboiled' genre seem less ironic when investigated. For instance, it is interesting to take into account Jacques Barzun's observation that Chandler wrote to 'hold the interest of the half-educated while tickling the fancy of the intellectual.'<sup>143</sup> The rather dated classism of such a statement aside, a parallel can be drawn between Chandler's and Murakami's calculated attitudes to audience reach, as both arguably call attention to false dichotomies separating the pop-cultural from the profound. (Rubin's statement comparing Murakami's writing to a 'pastel-colored'<sup>144</sup> Beckett is again perhaps relevant here.)

Tellingly, certain Americanised traits of Murakami's writing have been misinterpreted as evidence of his Japaneseness. Edward Dimendberg notes that, according to Georg Simmel, *noir* characters are blasé;<sup>145</sup> Murakami's narrators are similarly detached. However, in Jay Fielden's review of Murakami's *Men Without Women*, he implicitly connects this blasé quality to the Japanese, remarking on the 'Zen koans that fall frequently from the mouths of these emotionally cramped men.'<sup>146</sup> While no one

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<sup>142</sup> Philip Hanson, 'The Arc of National Confidence and the Birth of Film Noir, 1929-1941', *Journal of American Studies*, 42, 3 (2008), 387-414 (p. 388).

<sup>143</sup> Jacques Barzun, qtd. in Lee Sigelman and William Jacoby, 'The Not-So Simple Art of Imitation: Pastiche, Literary Style, and Raymond Chandler', *Computers and the Humanities*, 30, 1 (1996), 11-28 (p. 13).

<sup>144</sup> Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>145</sup> Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 139.

<sup>146</sup> Jay Fielden, 'New from Murakami: Tales of Cool Cars, Shinto Spirits and Lost Love' (2017)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/books/review/men-without-women-haruki-murakami.html> [Accessed 19 September 2018].

culture has an undisputed claim to blasé-ness, Murakami's seemingly 'vague' writing draws attention to such preconceptions.

Elsewhere his outlandish similes could be easily mistaken for errors of idiomatic translation from the Japanese; however, it is just as likely that they have their roots in Chandler's writing. As Lee Sigelman and William Jacoby write, Chandler is known for his 'incessant and colorful use of similes'<sup>147</sup> such as '[h]e looked about as conspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food' or '[h]is pale eyebrows [were] bristling and stiff and round like the little vegetable brushes the Fuller Brush man gives away.'<sup>148</sup> In comparison, Murakami's similes – '[s]ix pull-tabs lay in the ashtray like scales from a mermaid',<sup>149</sup> or 'their heads were as empty as the young D.H. Lawrence's piggy bank'<sup>150</sup> sound decidedly familiar.

Interestingly, Murakami's 'hardboiled' writing espouses a style that is itself an expression of apparent cultural placelessness. Writing on *film noir* – the genre having grown out of 1930s and '40s 'hardboiled' crime fiction<sup>151</sup> – Dimendberg states that such films centred on 'traumas of unrecoverable time and space, the inability to dwell comfortably either in the present or the past'.<sup>152</sup> Noir is stuck between 'longing for older urban forms combined with a fear of new alienating urban realities'.<sup>153</sup> Novels such as Cornell Woolrich's *The Black Curtain* – its film version titled *Street of Chance* – feature characters that lack coherent selves, instead 'vaguened' into a series of dispersed objects. Its amnesiac protagonist becomes lost, forgetting who he is as there are no receipts or

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<sup>147</sup> Sigelman and Jacoby, p. 17.

<sup>148</sup> Raymond Chandler, qtd. in Sigelman and Jacoby, p. 17.

<sup>149</sup> Murakami, 'The Second Bakery Attack', p. 8.

<sup>150</sup> Haruki Murakami, 'On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning', trans. by Jay Rubin, in *Desire*, trans. by Jay Rubin, Ted Goossen, and Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2017), pp. 20-26 (p. 25).

<sup>151</sup> John T. Irwin, *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. xi.

<sup>152</sup> Dimendberg, p. 1.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

addresses in his pockets – implying, as Dimendberg states, the metropolis’ dispersal ‘into a jumble of disconnected details’.<sup>154</sup>

Furthermore, as Hantke notes, by critical consensus ‘there never was such a thing as film noir’, founded as the genre was on false connections such as an erroneously posited link with German expressionist cinema.<sup>155</sup> Thus, as Thomas Elsaesser says, *noir* has ‘no essence’.<sup>156</sup> Notably, such descriptions resonate with the sense of ‘overarching vagueness’ in Murakami’s novels, according to which individual details of the novel’s surroundings refuse to cohere into an easily pictured whole. The dispersed urban world of *noir* and ‘hardboiled’ fiction documents uncertainty over national identity and pessimism regarding the possibility of community; it is therefore significant that Murakami applies its framework to a Japanese setting. This use of *noir* tropes can be read as a statement that similar processes of urban anonymity and displacement are happening in cities all over the world, or even as a comment on Americanised globalisation. By writing in a Western tradition that is itself a placeless one, Murakami arguably suggests an Americanised style without inhabiting it fully.

Understandably in the context of this critique, which appears centred on the author’s perceptions of both Japanese and American norms as homogenising, the idea of the ‘sheep’ has given rise to a number of interpretations. The slightly chaotic sense of intrigue motivating *A Wild Sheep Chase* is itself worthy of examining in terms of its (non)relation to ‘hardboiled’ tropes. Saburō Kawamoto holds that the sheep in question stands for the revolutionary spirit of Japan’s 1960s and 1970s student movements.<sup>157</sup> Haruka Fukami contends that the ‘sheep’ represents ‘Japan’s aggressive expansion on the Chinese continent; the woolen and worsted industry as one of the developments of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>155</sup> Hantke, p. 9.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>157</sup> Saburō Kawamoto, qtd. in Fuminobu Murakami, p. 20.

industrialism; and the Boss' claim to the whole underside of post-war politics, economics and media.'<sup>158</sup> Herein lies a possible hazard of 'vaguening.' While the idea of spirit possession by a sheep carries obvious connotations of uniformity, the absurdity of Murakami's plot lends itself to differing interpretations. Of course, the 'sheep' itself has a culturally specific explanation attached to it: as the Sheep Professor explains, '[i]n parts of Northern China and Mongol territory, it's not uncommon to hear of sheep entering people's bodies. Among the locals, it's believed that a sheep entering the body is a blessing from the gods. [...]' (p. 189).

Laura Clark offers a further, trenchant perspective on the symbol of the 'sheep', noting that while much scholarship on *A Wild Sheep Chase* has focused on the interpretation of 'later generations coming to terms with Japan's colonial and imperial past',<sup>159</sup> it is as much a critique of masculinity<sup>160</sup> in contemporary Japanese culture. Clark reads the novel as a commentary on the 'salaryman ideal', a social status 'perceived as being achievable through hard work and the consumption of middle-class products such as washing machines, televisions, and refrigerators.'<sup>161</sup> The value placed on domestic consumer products here can be linked back to the cultural moment that produced *iyashi* literature. This raises further questions over Murakami's complicity or critique of this movement. Are Murakami's domestic connoisseurs an endorsement of this consumerism, or intended as cautionary tales?

It is thus perhaps relevant that Murakami's customisation of the detective novel, in Hantke's words, 'deprofessionaliz[es]' the detective figure, setting him apart from the 'Spades and Marlowes' who, at 'Chandler's own strong insistence, [...] are in it for the

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<sup>158</sup> Haruka Fukami, qtd. in Fuminobu Murakami, p. 20.

<sup>159</sup> Laura Clark, 'Heteroglossic Masculinity in Haruki Murakami's 'Sheep Chase'', *New Voices in Japanese Studies*, 9 (2017) [unpaginated].

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

money'.<sup>162</sup> By contrast, Murakami's protagonists are often unemployed or working in small literary professions. As Hantke notes, they frequently find themselves on their quests by accident; they conduct activities – he also cites cooking pasta – that are 'explicitly coded as domestic or feminine.'<sup>163</sup> However, he writes that such traits, particularly a 'peculiar lethargy', can be observed in the characters of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe too.<sup>164</sup> It can thus be difficult to tell where the detective-novel homage ends and the social commentary on Japan begins. The absurdity of the novel's plot, and its ambiguous cultural signifiers, can be read as deconstructing both Japanese and American cultural tropes. Murakami arguably plays on the reader's tendency to essentialise an author's writing style to their birthplace.

Murakami's 'overarching vagueness' advances the idea of genre as confining, even if such generic frameworks offer the opportunity for parody and incongruity. Boku's supernatural encounter with the Rat is striking as it coincides with something akin to a momentary departure from context, during which indoor space appears to 'step back' (to employ a perhaps appropriately personifying analogy). It is significant that the room in the Sheep Professor's house becomes both dark and cold during this conversation,<sup>165</sup> the space no longer presented as clearly domestic: Boku feels he is 'crouching in the bottom of a deep well' (p. 275). More supernatural than *noir*, this poignant final conversation jars as if snipped collage-style from a different novel. Imagined or empathic space is prioritised here in a manner crucially detached from the overarching 'structure' of the detective novel form. In keeping with this departure from genre, the interior space itself appears to recede.

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<sup>162</sup> Hantke, p. 6.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> It is worth noting that this plot device – by which a pivotal or revelatory conversation occurs in a darkened space – notably also happens in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. (Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 244; p. 574.)

However, it would be a considerable leap to suggest that, by creating such spaces, Murakami entirely transcends the cultural moment in which he writes. Indeed, I will close this chapter with a comparison in this vein, referencing Chapter 1's extract from *Mercier and Camier*. The oscillatory descriptions of indoor space in this narrative recall David Addyman's observation that in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, the narrator 'has no alternative but to experience his endless displacement *taking place* – i.e., to experience it *in place*.'<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, this wandering can be specifically 'placed' in relation to an important influence, namely Flaubert's own rewriting of the *picaresque* in his *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Throughout *Mercier and Camier*, words continually bump up against the fact of their circumscription in place: 'Waiting,' says Camier, 'and keeping waiting can only be with reference to a pre-arranged terminus.'<sup>167</sup> In this text, indoor space appears initially minimal: in comparison to bedbound characters such as Malone, Mercier and Camier are often seen outdoors and journeying. However, on the occasions when indoor spaces feature in the novel, they appear continually disputed and difficult to categorise. In a characteristically Beckettian paradox, such spaces are 'vaguened' yet reiterated in the descriptive process, as though the narrative voice is preoccupied with their classification. In this manner, ideas of genre as confining appear at once presented and evaded. I will thus discuss *Mercier and Camier* in terms of its relation to Flaubert's aforementioned text, flagging both novels' tenuous relation to the *picaresque* and their satirical takes on the accumulation of intertexts. Via this line of argument, I will explore the manner in which 'overarching vagueness' contributes to Fraser's charge of 'epistemological restlessness'<sup>168</sup> in Beckett's work.

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<sup>166</sup> David Addyman, 'Phenomenology "less the rosy hue": Beckett and the Philosophy of Place', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33, 4 (2010), 112-128 (p.124).

<sup>167</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 387.

<sup>168</sup> Fraser, p. 118.



## 2.5 ‘Visibility nil’:<sup>169</sup> Obscured and Obscuring Spaces in *Mercier and Camier*

*The first thing one noticed at Helen’s was the carpet.*  
*Will you look at that pile, said Camier.*  
*Prime moquette, said Mercier.*  
*Unbelievable, said Camier.*  
*You’d think you never saw it till now, said Mercier, and you wallowing on it all those years.*  
*I never did see it till now, said Camier, and now I can’t forget it.*  
*So one says, said Mercier (p. 400).*

Much like the indoor space in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, Helen’s apartment is described in terms of isolated details. The carpet is initially exclaimed over as ‘prime moquette’ (ibid.); however, even this term becomes destabilised in the following lines. It is initially stated that the carpet is ‘the first thing one noticed’ (ibid.). It then becomes apparent that it is a longstanding feature of the room: ‘You think you’d never saw it till now’ (ibid.). This latter line would appear to contradict its noticeable nature. More strangely still, Camier insists that now he ‘can’t forget it’ (ibid.), despite the fact that it would appear he has on prior occasions. The final statement, ‘so one says’ (ibid.), further suggests that Camier’s perspective is unreliable.

Where Helen lives is only ever explained conditionally. Mercier states that ‘these different ways all lead there with equal success’ but only, he qualifies, ‘if I know where we are’ (ibid.). Helen’s is a place of refuge, in any case: on the previous page, the reader has learnt that Mercier and Camier look forward to arriving there so that they can ‘put their things to dry, before the fire or in the hot-cupboard with the boiler and hot water pipes’ (p. 399). Aside from these amenities, little more is learnt about the apartment. While Little describes Beckett’s post-war work as bringing together what Alain Badiou

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<sup>169</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 412. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

formerly divided into ‘spaces of wandering’ and ‘closed places’ in his texts,<sup>170</sup> Helen’s apartment seems to prefigure this melding of categories. It is an indoor space that appears protean and subject to debate, in keeping with a more pervasive form of epistemological ‘wandering’ in the novel.

Indeed, if Mercier and Camier’s disputed circumscription of this space appears intrusive, the novel itself is situated pointedly in relation to Flaubert’s prior satire of the acquisition and mastery of knowledge. Sjeff Houppermans aptly notes the text’s abundant parallels with *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, observing that the latter’s ‘two anti-heroes’ are former copyists who experiment, dilettante-like, with farming and industry as Flaubert ‘ridicules the bourgeois society of his time’.<sup>171</sup> In Flaubert’s original novel, which appears overstuffed with citations from a variety of disciplines, intertexts often appear as if referenced improperly, with no supporting theoretical contextualisation. As Leo Bersani notes, this oddly fragmentary abundance of intertextual detail creates the impression that ‘esthetic theory [is] speaking directly – not a particular theorist of esthetics, but the sourceless theory itself.’<sup>172</sup> *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is itself a novel of ‘overarching vagueness’, its presence in *Mercier and Camier* ‘vaguened’ further as Beckett eschews direct intertextual reference to this source.

An excellent example of this process of indirect referencing comes in the form of *Mercier et Camier*’s Dante quotation, omitted in the English translation. As Van Hulle notes, Mercier explicitly wonders whether ‘[l]o bello stilo che m’ha fatto onore’ is a quotation.<sup>173</sup> The line itself comes from a passage relating to influence and mentorship, in

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<sup>170</sup> Alain Badiou, qtd. in Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 68.

<sup>171</sup> Sjeff Houppermans, ‘Samuel Beckett and the French Tradition’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 13, 2 (2004), 164-176 (p. 167).

<sup>172</sup> Leo Bersani, ‘Flaubert’s Encyclopedism’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 21, 2/3 (1988), 140-146 (p. 141).

<sup>173</sup> Dante Alighieri, qtd. in Van Hulle, p. 45.

which Dante acknowledges Virgil as his teacher. This style of referencing by omission chimes with Anna Shidlo's summation that the novel is a 'web of [...] evasions'.<sup>174</sup>

Indeed, while appearing to detour around important references, the text also meanders stylistically and thematically. *Mercier and Camier's* 'epistemological restlessness'<sup>175</sup> is paralleled by an uncertain, plural narrative style, by turns confusing and empathically inclusive.<sup>176</sup> The novel's narrator does not always agree with the protagonists, and, as Shidlo notes, 'delays exposing important items', and 'interrupts his narrative with long digressions and misleading summaries, which omit significant episodes.'<sup>177</sup> While this invisible third voice at times corroborates Mercier and Camier's statements – '[i]t was indeed cold. It is indeed cold, said Mercier' (p. 395)– the statement, 'the first thing that one noticed at Helen's was the carpet' (p. 400) is then disputed by Camier, who has been unaware of this detail all along. This hint of disagreement between an invisible narrator and the characters they observe creates a Beckettian *aporia* over even mundane descriptions. Due to their flawed mediating perspective, this third voice can be viewed as a form of unreliable *translator* as well as an unreliable narrator.

This translational quality further obfuscates an uncertain text, *Mercier and Camier* itself based on a novel that uses sources in creatively 'vaguened' ways. Chapter 1 briefly discussed George Craig's experience translating Beckett, and it is again perhaps apposite to note that Beckett's use of French was often esoteric, even in personal letters. Craig notes, for instance, Beckett's use of the invented phrase 'vous garou' – an adaptation of the French word for werewolf, 'loup garou' – to illustrate his view of the formal 'vous' as

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<sup>174</sup> Anna Shidlo, "'The Horror of Existence': A Labyrinth of Evasions in 'Mercier et Camier'", *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 7, 1 (1998), 231-244 (p. 231).

<sup>175</sup> Fraser, p. 118.

<sup>176</sup> This uncertainty of perspective extends to the seemingly interchangeable characters of Mercier and Camier themselves. Rebecca Sanchez observes that they sometimes appear 'completely separate and recognisable as such'; at other times 'interdependent': a state, she notes, captured by Beckett's term "interindependency". The narrating voice itself 'lose[s] track of which character is which' – such collective narration even resulting in the 'non-normative pronoun usage' of phrases such as "[w]oe is us" and "let us sit us down." (Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Rebecca Sanchez, "'Perfect Interindependency': Representing Crip Futurity in Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*", 15, 2 (2016), 59-70 (pp. 66-67).)

<sup>177</sup> Shidlo, p. 233.

dreaded or maligned.<sup>178</sup> Such near-untranslatable phrases demonstrate a deft yet unconventional use of idiomatic French; crucially, they often contain an invented dimension. Arguably, Beckett makes use of French sources such as Flaubert in a similar way: these influences are followed closely yet at a crucial slant, as if elements of this literary lineage have been wrongly relayed.

A pervasive ‘overarching vagueness’ adds to this plural, esoteric perspective. Like the description of indoor space in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, only certain features within a given interior space are described in detail in this text. In the case of Helen’s living space, the cockatoo in the corner is the focus of this attention. The entire paragraph devoted to the bird’s appearance immediately follows the disagreement about the carpet. ‘If that evening the carpet in particular caught the eye, it was not alone in catching it, for a cockatoo caught it too’.<sup>179</sup> This subject change diverts the narrative from any further description of the indoor surroundings.

The sentence mentioning both the cockatoo and the carpet introduces further ambiguities. Is the carpet really the first thing one would notice, then, if it is also ‘not alone’ in catching the watcher’s eye? The fact that the narrative voice notes how ‘*that evening* the carpet in particular caught the eye’<sup>180</sup> also appears as an emendation. This latter piece of information seems akin to an admission on the narrator’s part, in light of Camier’s failure to notice the carpet until now, that perhaps it was only notable on that particular evening.

The cockatoo is situated in a manner difficult to picture with relation to the rest of the room. Its perch ‘[hangs] from a corner of the ceiling’, and it rocks ‘dizzily’, by ‘conflicting swing and spin.’<sup>181</sup> The reader is also told that ‘beneath it, on the carpet, a

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<sup>178</sup> George Craig, *Writing Beckett's Letters* (London: Sylph Editions, 2011), p. 24.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* (Italics mine).

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

great news-sheet was spread.’<sup>182</sup> One corner of the room is thus brought into focus. The swinging perch and the floor, spread with newspaper, are, if not easy to picture, then at least somewhat imaginable. As a result, description has something akin to a spotlighting effect here. In the concluding summary of this chapter of *Mercier and Camier*, the room will be described only in terms of isolated features, heightening this sense of ‘overarching vagueness’. ‘At Helen’s. The cockatoo. The Kidderminster.’<sup>183</sup>

*Bouvard et Pécuchet* is a novel itself governed by a fetishistic attention to detail.<sup>184</sup> Nathaniel Wing observes that references in this novel have an oddly uniform quality, almost as if they can be easily detached from their surrounding context and resituated in another part of the story:

one can choose at random virtually any sequence to illustrate [the protagonists’] intense interest in the particular, whether it be their discussion of the proofs of Christianity, their practice of phrenology, their research in the library of Caen into the life of the Duc d’Angoulême, or their display of the elaborate constructions in their garden.<sup>185</sup>

While Houppermans notes, for instance, that a certain descriptive passage in *Mercier and Camier* echoes Flaubert overtly,<sup>186</sup> Beckett ‘vaguens’ direct intertextual reference to this novel. Thus *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a novel composed of jumbled intertexts, is itself not mentioned by name in Beckett’s text. As has been demonstrated in the above examples, in Flaubert’s novel these intertexts are themselves often imperfectly sourced. Additionally, the protagonists’ specialised knowledge is quoted in lengthy

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>184</sup> ‘The protagonists’ desire for detail is fetishistic in that they repeatedly sanctify this or that object, as Bernheimer has shown, but the text is fetishistic in a more powerful sense because it sanctifies systems as such.’ (Nathaniel Wing, ‘Detail and Narrative Dalliance in Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*’, *French Forum*, 13, 1 (1988), 47-56 (p. 52).)

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>186</sup> Houppermans, pp. 167-168.

passages, seemingly at random and in a manner that appears to devalue the relevance of such information to an oversaturated text.

Features such as its ‘social satire’, its focus on characters who make a ‘voluntary departure from home’, its depiction of ‘adventures among various marginal groups in society’, and of ‘experiences as a student’ place *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in uneasy relation to the *picaresque* genre.<sup>187</sup> However, as Howard Mancing notes with relation to the above characteristics, the *picaresque* is overall a ‘basically undefinable genre’,<sup>188</sup> vulnerable to generalisations based on the presence of an episodic narrative.<sup>189</sup> Interestingly, Mancing observes the ‘idea expressed in many picaresque novels that they supercede the previous ones, often as the last in a long and distinguished line, the ultimate exemplar of the genre, the culmination of the tradition.’<sup>190</sup> However, despite this focus on the genre’s canonicity and continuity, it is also a form of which ‘change and adaptation’ are ‘basic features.’<sup>191</sup>

*Bouvard et Pécuchet* itself appears to stage a satire based on appropriative attitudes to genre, as the novel’s economically comfortable protagonists do not experience the ‘struggle for existence’, ‘ignoble birth’ or ‘hunger’<sup>192</sup> associated with the *picaresque*. Thus, along with an ‘overarching vagueness’ by which the novel’s intertexts are called into question, the novel’s relationship to genre is itself tenuous and ‘vaguened.’

This sense of ‘epistemological wandering’ is found throughout *Mercier and Camier*. Both interior and exterior spaces in the novel appear persistently difficult to categorise. Shortly after they meet at their ‘appointed place’ (p. 384), they shelter under a pagoda in a park. The speaker appears to falter in describing this area. The pagoda ‘had been erected here as protection from the rain and other inclemencies, in a word from the

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<sup>187</sup> Howard Mancing, ‘The Picaresque Novel: A Protean Form’, *College Literature*, 6, 3 (1979), 182-204 (p. 185).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

weather' (p. 185); the park is 'not properly speaking a square, but rather a small public garden at the heart of a tangle of streets and lanes' (p. 385). The orange panes of the pagoda, moreover, create a nostalgic distortion whereby 'the rain seemed golden and brought back memories [...] to the one of Rome, of Naples to the other' (ibid.). Such memories are 'mutually unavowed' and recalled with 'a feeling akin to shame' (ibid.). Like their divergent reactions to the Kidderminster carpet, indoor space has a different effect on each character. The feeling produced by the space is not unified or agreed on, and instead appears as if it would cause tension if articulated. As in a later description of a fogged train window ('Visibility nil' (p. 412)) indoor space appears, in such situations, to obfuscate and confuse.

Parallels can be drawn here with the idea of genre as confining: on two occasions in the novel, Mercier threatens to throw himself out of the window of a house in which he has just been put up for the night (p. 400; p. 416). On the first of these occasions, in Helen's, he does not want to sleep on either the bed or the couch, as if neither space can contain him (p. 400). On the second, he matter-of-factly threatens to throw himself out of the uppermost floor of a saloon, 'should occasion arise' (p. 416). However, counter to such suicidal claustrophobia is the idea that indoor space is returned to regardless. In a narrative in which it appears to frequently rain (ibid., p. 384; p. 399; p. 401), the protagonists ambivalently take shelter in places such as archways, 'not knowing where to go' (p. 401).

Indoor space figures in other ways as both confusing and inarticulable throughout the narrative. A village they enter is 'just one long street' in which the buildings seem oddly indistinguishable: they enter an inn to learn that it is instead a grocer – 'Messrs. Clappe and Sons, Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Suppliers' (p. 413). Camier asks whether the next establishment is an inn or a fish market, and the man who welcomes

them inside seems unable to find words to describe it: ‘It’s not the Savoy, but it’s...how shall I say?’ At length he ventures that it is ‘snug’, although this description appears to only have been chosen because there is ‘no other word’ (ibid.). On meeting the proprietor of the inn, Mercier immediately confesses that he has seen him in his dreams, figured with an architect’s specificity ‘on a threshold, or at a window’, with the light behind him, seen from ‘across the alley’ by Mercier ‘plunged in deepest shadow’ (p. 414). This description itself, of course, appears to stage an encounter fraught with representational difficulty and voyeuristic inequality.

Notably, *Mercier and Camier* can be viewed as a version of Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet* ‘without the house.’ Flaubert’s protagonists relocate to a rural property in order to carry out their diffuse and elaborate studies: as Frances Ferguson notes, they ‘create their home as a kind of laboratory, an expansive test kitchen in which to try out various different bodies of practical and abstract knowledge.’<sup>193</sup> In this space, they are compartmentalised away from the world, and even secretive to one another, albeit appearing to be in humorous synchrony.<sup>194</sup> Mercier and Camier’s journey has no such domestically-oriented goal. Without fixed confinement in interior space, and existing amid the spectres of Flaubert’s intertexts, *Mercier and Camier* itself stages something akin to a literary experiment through its conspicuous denudation of French canonicity.

Indoor space proves a continual preoccupation, despite the fact that it is described with such apparently laborious difficulty. While the ‘overarching vagueness’ of Beckett’s indoor spaces should seemingly allow any excessive description to be avoided, instead it appears to present further problems of articulation, as if the narrative is in dispute with itself over how to make such imprecision plausible. This ‘overarching vagueness’ is paralleled by – and often related in terms of – a ‘vague’ and plural perspective by which

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<sup>193</sup> Frances Ferguson, ‘Too Much Information: Flaubert’s “*Bouvard et Pécuchet*”’, *MLN*, 125, 4 (2010), 783-802 (p. 796.)

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 797.



differing viewpoints are elided, confused, or refuted. This creates a sense that the narrative is being relayed through several channels in an unreliable process of translation. Fixed ‘place’, either physical or perspectival, is avoided – the characters are on the move throughout the text – yet, nonetheless, interiors are continually described. This is not the only contradiction in a text that may be described as tonally diffuse: while Chapter 1 of this study argued that Beckett’s mixing of colloquial and academic registers appears unsympathetic, at times the narrative could just as easily be read as deconstructing such elitism.

Thus, regarding both intertextual and sociolinguistic markers in the text, it can be argued that Beckett’s attempts to ‘vague’ remain inextricably bound to place. In a manner intertwined with this discussion of ‘overarching vagueness’, my argument in this final section has repeatedly focused on *Mercier and Camier*’s uncertain narrative plurality. Importantly, a possible reading dictates that the text’s multiple voices do not seem a pessimistic statement regarding pluralistic or inclusive modes of narration themselves: Rebecca Sanchez notably reads this ‘interdependent’ narrative as anticipating disability theory, if obliquely.<sup>195</sup> However, this plural narrative may be read as Beckett’s foregrounding of the limits of his own translational perspective. The text wanders uncertainly in French literary space; its characters employ ‘low’ Hiberno-English with an indeterminate degree of irony. If Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase* appears to search for a counterfactual narrative space, free, if momentarily, from the confinement of genre, *Mercier and Camier* appears to stage a tension between a desired translational perspective and the limiting bias of place and privilege.

This chapter has discussed the links between self-translation, subverted genres, and representations of interior space characterised by an ‘overarching vagueness.’ *Ill Seen*

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<sup>195</sup> Sanchez, p. 59.

*Ill Said* both takes from and pastiches the Irish Gothic. Set in a space that is vague and dispersed, described in terms of isolated objects rather than a centralising atmosphere, this novella appears to take place both within and without the Anglo-Irish tradition. Similarly, having written at the forefront of *iyashi* or ‘ambient literature’, Murakami uses indoor space in novels such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* to both escape from, and situate the novel within, contemporary Japanese history. However, as novels such as *Malone Dies* and *A Wild Sheep Chase* show, ‘alien’ spaces – spaces that are not the protagonist’s house, that are journeyed to (or in Malone’s case, arrived in with no memory of the journey) are described in equally vague terms. In a manner reflected by both novels’ indeterminate indoor spaces, neither author fully ‘inhabits’ the adopted form. Finally, the oscillating, pseudo-*picaresque* narrative of *Mercier and Camier* illustrates the tension between attempted ‘vaguening’ and inextricable situation in place.

Crucially, many of the genres addressed throughout this chapter are notable for their existing relationship to ‘vagueness.’ Much as Beckett’s (non) quotation of Dante’s *‘fioco’*<sup>196</sup> ‘vaguens’ a reference to vagueness itself, these intertextual links appear based on layers of obfuscation. Both the Gothic and the ‘big house’ novel contain existing indeterminacies based on interior space, and *iyashi* literature is premised on a deliberate respite from current events. Testimonial writing, as approached in *Malone Dies*, is conducted with an awareness of unrepresentable trauma. ‘Hardboiled’ novels grew from a *noir* tradition based on urban dispersal and disconnect. Much in the manner that this latter genre is posited to have never existed in a ‘true’ or ‘original’ form, the *picaresque* is a broad and disputed category, employed by Flaubert at a tangent and by Beckett at an even further remove. The traditions that Beckett and Murakami write ‘from’ and ‘towards’ thus

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<sup>196</sup> Dante Alighieri, qtd. in Van Hulle, p. 45.

perhaps fuel the sense of ambivalence in their works, the already-‘vague’ genre providing plausible deniability should the work be connected to a given cultural context.

The partial evasions of genre enacted in these texts are mirrored in both authors’ representations of indeterminate architectural confinement. The third chapter of my study will further elaborate on this connection between genre and gendered domestic space. Combining Chapter 1’s focus on *realia* and ‘paradoxical vagueness’ with Chapter 2’s exploration of ‘overarching vagueness’ and the ‘escape’ from genre, Chapter 3 will discuss what I term ‘multivalent vagueness’ in both authors’ work. The latter term refers to both authors’ use of a form of overdetermined reference, by which a given detail can refer to multiple cultural contexts. I examine these fluid cultural markers through the lens of gendered interior space in this study’s core extracts, with a view to discussing the exclusions on which the texts’ apparently cosmopolitan perspective often rests.

### Chapter 3

#### **‘Perhaps she goes with the room’:<sup>1</sup> Multivalent Vagueness and Gendered Spaces**

It is perhaps unsurprising that Murakami uses architectural images when discussing translation. As Anna Zielinska-Elliott and Ika Kaminka paraphrase, ‘Murakami (2006:29) once provided a fitting simile for thinking about the translation process when he likened it to gaining access to a house: the translator first needs to safely clear what he terms the ‘front yard’; how far he or she manages to get inside the house, past the ‘front room’ to its ‘central room’, where the meaning of the story is to be found, ‘is a separate issue’.<sup>2</sup> It is striking that both translation and its associated failures, such as a kind of mistranslation and obliqueness, are spatialised here in terms of relative distance from the centre of a house. This image recalls the manner in which – as the first two chapters of this study have demonstrated – references in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work are couched in distancing terms, as though a text’s ‘vagueness’ itself takes on the role of a surrounding architecture. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, translation and interior space converge in more than one way in Beckett’s and Murakami’s *œuvres*.

Frequently employing interior settings in their novels allows both authors to write in a manner that – superficially at least – avoids obvious markers of place. Hence, it can be argued that indoor space facilitates their attempted transcendence of cultural divides, going some way towards providing a nationally ambiguous setting. However, the manner in which both authors conceptualise interior space is rigidly gendered. Thus, the very

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 179; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Zielinska-Elliott and Ika Kaminka, ‘Online Multilingual Collaboration: Haruki Murakami’s European Translators’, in *Collaborative Translation: From the Renaissance to the Digital Age*, ed. by Anthony Cordingley and Céline Frigau Manning (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 167-191 (p. 174).

element that allows both authors to attempt a transcendence of nation in their work is also that which limits it to a perspective often informed by the male gaze. This chapter will examine some of the ways in which indoor space functions to divide and obscure in the novels I examine, serving to sideline the novel's female presences. I will examine in particular a trope by which a certain 'vagueness' assigned to female characters – which can vary from representations of women as mysterious to simply irrelevant – causes them to be symbolically aligned with the ambiguous architectural spaces they inhabit. Thus, both authors' culturally transcendent 'vagueness', often informed by spatialised interiority, becomes troubling when it 'shuts out' female characters.

I will return to Murakami's original quote before moving on. Likening the translation process to the domestic sphere is itself darkly apposite to biases informing which works are judged 'universally' relevant. While writing by women is often dismissed as trivial should it focus excessively on the domestic, spatial interiority is conversely the mode by which Beckett and Murakami often attempt to transcend cultural divides. It is possible that such a focus on the domestic sphere would perhaps not be interpreted as a culture-bridging act should it be employed by a female writer. In *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers*, Vike Martina Plock states that work by authors such as Bowen and Woolf risked being seen as 'perishable and intellectually vacuous' should it be 'associated too firmly with mainstream or female literary culture,' a genre that had its 'origin and intended endpoint in the lady's drawing room.'<sup>3</sup> In a more contemporary example, in her essay 'On Pandering,' Claire Vaye Watkins states that in trying to convey her experiences of motherhood, she is assailed by the feeling that such domestic writing is 'quaint' or 'unserious.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Vike Maria Plock, *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Vaye Watkins, 'On Pandering' (2015) <https://tinhouse.com/on-pandering/> [Accessed 11 Nov 2019].

A parallel can be drawn here, for instance, with Rebecca Solnit's work on the gendered implications of *flânerie*.<sup>5</sup> Just as European modernist 'multiculturalism' was due in part to a wealthy coterie of creators with the means to travel,<sup>6</sup> the ability to move in the manner of a *flâneur* between cultures is often a privilege. However, while *flânerie* appears primarily associated with the public urban domain,<sup>7</sup> it is perhaps significant to note that in the case of this study's core texts both authors also demonstrate their cultural *errance* by way of the domestic sphere. While Beckett's and Murakami's interiors are confining, they also serve as portals between cultures – a paradox that is in itself interesting. As previously mentioned, interior space in these cases appears to even *facilitate* cultural transcendence. For Beckett and Murakami, conceptual 'translation', attempted 'universalism', and spatialised interiority appear troublingly linked.

In this connection, it is important to note that this gendered perspective is pervasive throughout both Beckett's and Murakami's work, and is not unique to their descriptions of interior spaces. Beckett's writing is rife with examples of gendered bias, a trait that has been infrequently acknowledged in studies of his work. The few studies addressing this area hint at the scope of this underrepresented topic. Rina Kim describes

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<sup>5</sup> Discussing the evolutionary theory informing biases regarding even an act as basic as walking itself, Solnit states: 'Some [...] say that the adaptation of the female pelvis to large-headed babies makes women worse walkers than men, or makes all of us worse walkers than our small-brained ancestors. The belief that women walk worse is widespread throughout the literature of human evolution. It seemed to be another hangover from Genesis, the idea that women brought a fatal curse to the species, or that they were mere helpmeets along the evolutionary route, or that if walking is related to both thinking and freedom, they have or deserve less of each. If learning to walk freed the species – to travel to new places, to take up new practices, to think – then the freedom of women has often been associated with sexuality, a sexuality that needs to be controlled and contained. But this is morality, not physiology.' On writers and walking, Solnit observes: 'all the writers on walking seem to be members of the same club – not one of the real walking clubs, but a kind of implicit club of shared background. They are generally privileged – most of the English ones write as though everyone else also went to Oxford or Cambridge, and even Thoreau went to Harvard – and of a vaguely clerical bent, and they are always male'.

Later, she notes of Walter Benjamin that, 'Benjamin himself never clearly defined the *flâneur*, only associated him with certain things: with leisure, with crowds, with alienation or detachment, with observation, with walking, particularly with strolling in the arcades – from which it can be concluded that the *flâneur* was male, of some means, of a refined sensibility, with little or no domestic life.' (Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 43; p. 123; p. 199.)

<sup>6</sup> 'The consolidation of high modernism around values of formal and allusive complexity has had consequences for both modernism and the classics in the twentieth century – the writings of Joyce and Eliot would seem to imply that both the classics and modernism were intended for a coterie of specialist readers. Although linguistic and interpretive competence served as a signal of cultural cachet and class distinction in the early twentieth century (Stray 1998), in the twenty-first century, the values ascribed to modernism, particularly in its engagement with the classics, have made both vulnerable to charges of being elitist, Eurocentric and *passé* (Graziosi and Greenwood 2007: 14).' (Leah Flack, 'Lost and Found in Translation: The Genesis of Modernism's Siren Songs', in *The Classics in Modernist Translation*, ed. by Miranda Hickman and Lynn Kozak (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 144.)

<sup>7</sup> As Solnit states: 'The *flâneur* arose, Benjamin argues, at a period early in the nineteenth century when the city had become so large and complex that it was for the first time strange to its inhabitants.' (Solnit, *Wanderlust*, p. 199.)

the manner in which the narrator of 'First Love' assigns sexual complicity to an unwitting (archetypal) female figure: 'women smell a rigid phallus ten miles away and wonder, How on earth did he spot me from there?'<sup>8</sup> Kim notes that the narrator 'condemns the sexually provocative female' in this scenario, emphasising her ability to detect male arousal from a distance and thus assigning her an active role in a situation in which she is passive or unaware.<sup>9</sup> The narrator's description in this instance is, of course, not without its absurdity: in this case, humour is derived from the narrator's implicitly eccentric views. Humour, itself, often works in tandem with misogyny in Beckett's texts, apparently masking the latter. Gontarski notably observes the manner in which Beckett eliminated scenes from *Happy Days* that may have 'increased audience sympathy for Winnie and created a fuller human being'.<sup>10</sup> These include reference to a past sexual assault and a 'fabricated exchange' where Winnie impersonates Willie, showing nuanced self-awareness of her own need for communication.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, Gontarski states, these emotional scenes are 'anti-comic.'<sup>12</sup> The idea of a woman's pain as generating slapstick entertainment is particularly overt in *Mercier and Camier*, when an unknown woman's sudden and violent injury has an explicitly positive effect on the protagonists. She is described contemptuously as 'a big fat woman writhing feebly on the ground' following a road accident; on witnessing this scene, Mercier comments that he feels 'a new man already.'<sup>13</sup>

This scene is undeniably similar to the injury of Lady Pedal at the conclusion of *Malone Dies*.<sup>14</sup> This character is also associated contemptuously with notions of supposed bodily 'excess' – she is a 'huge, big, tall, fat woman' whose 'plump red face' seems to

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Rina Kim, 'Memories and Melancholia in Beckett's Four Novellas and Molloy', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 16, 1 and 2 (2006/2007), 278-289 (p. 281).

<sup>9</sup> Kim, p. 281.

<sup>10</sup> Gontarski, *Beckett's 'Happy Days'*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, pp. 404-405.

<sup>14</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 280.

‘pullulate.’<sup>15</sup> This gratuitous form of narration occurs with surprising frequency in Beckett’s texts, from Molloy knocking on his elderly mother’s head<sup>16</sup> to recurrent associations between femininity and a kind of exaggeratedly degrading language.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these overt, even difficult to ignore, instances of misogyny, this dimension of Beckett’s work is rarely emphasised, and often risks being overshadowed by generalising discussions that serve to reinforce the texts’ profundity. For instance, while acknowledging the presence of pervasive misogyny in Beckett, Paul Stewart considers it alongside the theme of misopedia as illustrative of pessimism in the author’s work over the future of humankind.<sup>18</sup> Chris Ackerley connects the misogyny displayed by Beckett’s early narrators to a form of self-flagellation revealing more about their own inadequacies than those of the women they deride.<sup>19</sup> In his view, such portrayals are ironic and self-aware.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps these cases serve to illustrate the manner in which Beckett’s reputation – that of an author whose work has been overwhelmingly invested with ‘big questions’ regarding the human condition – serves to work against acknowledgment of such flaws in his *œuvre*. It is difficult not to view misogyny as serving some greater purpose in his work; it is likewise, perhaps, difficult to explore this theme without appearing to defend its relevance.

Notably, many of the examples of misogyny in Beckett texts quoted above occur in the public sphere, or involve women seen in outdoor spaces. Conversely, this chapter will maintain this study’s focus on architectural interiors in both authors’ texts. Likewise, in a manner that refers back to my introduction on Murakami and misogyny, the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 14; *Molloy*.

<sup>17</sup> In Beckett’s *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, the Smeraldina’s ‘body [is] all wrong’, ‘slobbery-blubberty’, ‘bubbub-bubbub’, an example Ackerley notes; in *How It Is*, the word ‘CUNT’ recurs. In these examples, images or insults associated with the ‘female’ body (even as this association is itself essentialising) themselves appear to connote a kind of linguistic aberration, as illustrated here through quirks such as neologisms and capitalisation. (Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. by Eoin O’Brien and Edith Fournier (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), p. 14; Ackerley, p. 59; Beckett, *Collected Works Vol. II*, p. 464; p. 481.)

<sup>18</sup> Paul Stewart, ‘Samuel Beckett’s Misopedia’, *Irish University Review*, 41, 2 (2011), 59-73 (p. 64).

<sup>19</sup> Chris Ackerley, ‘LASSATA SED: Samuel Beckett’s Portraits of his Fair to Middling Women’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 12 (2002) 55-70 (p. 55).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 58.



examples I draw from in this chapter will mainly focus on insidious rather than overt instances of the issue. With this line of inquiry I aim to explore the idea that Beckett's and Murakami's indoor spaces are not free of misogyny: rather, they function as a microcosm of the 'outside worlds' seen in the texts. Much as with my treatment of Murakami's work, I will focus on the Beckett texts' iterations of a tradition of pervasive misogyny rather than giving attention to their more deliberately shocking moments.

Indeed, in a similar manner, Murakami's misogyny is not solely a feature of his interior spaces. *Men Without Women*'s first story, 'Drive My Car', begins with predictably gendered generalisations regarding female drivers;<sup>21</sup> we are introduced to the fast-paced, urban life of 1Q84's Aomame, a frequently sexualised character, as she sits in the back of a taxi during a traffic jam.<sup>22</sup> Gendered tropes in Murakami – such as the fixed roles assigned to younger and older women in the texts<sup>23</sup> – are arguably so ubiquitous as to resist association with solely 'private' or 'public' spaces in his work. In my following analyses I will illustrate the fact that for both authors, confined settings do not guarantee distance from gendered bias even as they appear to create politically neutral or blank spaces.

Throughout this chapter, I will thus examine the gendered dynamics of each extract through the lens of both authors' treatment of indoor space. I aim to set the argument that both authors' work transcends national context against the manner in which it reveals the gendered biases of their respective eras. I will challenge the idea of what I term a 'multivalent vagueness' in both authors' work, by which, according to a form of overdetermination, their references have a specific significance to their cultural context but are also understandable to audiences unaware of such context. This 'multivalent

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<sup>21</sup> Haruki Murakami, 'Drive My Car', trans. by Ted Goossen, in *Men Without Women* (London: Vintage, 2014), trans. by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen, pp. 3-40 (p. 3).

<sup>22</sup> Murakami, *1Q84*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ellis et al., p. 550.

vagueness' can simply mean that a reference has a 'hidden' specific meaning while also being more internationally understandable; however, in certain cases, such as that of Malone's 'Up the Republic!',<sup>24</sup> this multivalency means that a given reference could denote different cultural contexts to different audiences. This chapter will examine instances in which architectural space helps to facilitate such 'multivalent vagueness.' As previous chapters have demonstrated, in some of the examples enclosed settings provide a form of blank canvas to offset a culturally specific reference, affording such markers of place a form of plausible deniability. In other instances, the architectural space itself functions as a form of unstable referent. For instance, the cabin in *Ill Seen Ill Said* appears vague enough to recall specific imagery of Irish megalithic passage graves at the same time as it evokes Gothic architectural tropes.

However, in all of these texts, indoor spaces play an instrumental role in gendered divisions. Hatch states that among the Gothic elements observable in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is the central dynamic between the woman and 'a brooding, predatory entity';<sup>25</sup> as Chapter 2 began to explore, this dynamic is often framed in spatial terms. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the strange events in the American-style house only begin once the narrator's ear model girlfriend mysteriously disappears: according to a troubling trope in Murakami's works, she appears to have an almost architectural role herself as a form of threshold or conduit between worlds. Similarly, my analysis of 'Scheherazade' will explore the many – and in this case quite obvious – ways in which indoor space reflects the dynamic between the story's central characters. Following this, I will discuss Beckett's *Malone Dies*. It is perhaps especially apposite to consider 'Scheherazade' and *Malone Dies* as paired or corresponding texts, as both plots involve male characters in vaguely institutional spaces, tended to by women who appear to take on a hybrid role as something akin to both carer

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<sup>24</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 229; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>25</sup> Hatch, p. 94.

and prison-guard. Finally, I will discuss how architecture reflects a form of problematic unreliable narration in Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

It can be difficult to advance a reading of gender and interior spaces in both authors' work without relying on a vein of early psychoanalytic interpretation often criticised for its misogyny.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, an evident point of overlap between psychoanalysis and the study of interior spaces comes in the form of Sigmund Freud's statement, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that 'dwellings were a substitute for the mother's womb, that first abode'.<sup>27</sup> Authorial intention further complicates such a reading, as Beckett's own accounts of intrauterine memories loom large in discussions of confinement in his work: such accounts evidenced, for instance, by his note-taking on Otto Rank's theory of birth trauma.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Beckett's psychoanalytic influences were multiple, ranging from his sessions undertaken with Wilfred Bion to explicit references to a lecture by C. G. Jung.<sup>29</sup> To read anything else into an *œuvre* that evidently plays – at times ironically – on psychoanalytic imagery can appear wilfully evasive. Similarly, Murakami's repeated use of subterranean imagery to denote repressed memory appears psychoanalytically influenced;<sup>30</sup> in a related point, Strecher has discussed the overt Oedipal references in

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<sup>26</sup> 'On the one hand, Freudian theory as a whole has been seen as an influential example of sexist theory, so that Freud is taken as an important contemporary enforcer of sexism. On the other hand, in a move that some may consider paradoxical, the Freudian texts have been understood as a resource for feminist analysis, as material with which to design a feminist remedy for sexist culture as a whole.' (Judith Van Herik, qtd. in Kirk A. Bingaman, *Freud and Faith: Living in the Tension* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 107.)

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere (Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2010), p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> J.C.C. Mays states that, 'while the trilogy returned to a situation Beckett, the author, left behind with childhood, his subsequent writing pushes further back and engages with a time just before he was born.' Similarly, Graley Herren observes Beckett's note-taking on Otto Rank's theory of birth trauma, stating: 'Rank posits that the first libidinal attachment stems from the physical attachment of the foetus to the mother in the womb. This original condition is perceived (if only in retrospect) as ideal, one of complete unity between subject and object in which all the needs of the foetus are perfectly satisfied. The forcible detachment from the mother during birth is thus perceived as a catastrophic eviction, the 'trauma of birth.' 'Birth was the death of him', as Beckett phrases it in *A Piece of Monologue* (CDW, 425). According to Rank, the lingering effects from this trauma, combined with regression fantasies of returning to the womb, dictate the terms for all the postnatal subject's deepest fears and desires: 'just as the anxiety at birth forms the basis of every anxiety or fear, so every pleasure has as its final aim the re-establishment of the intrauterine primal pleasure' (17).' (J.C.C. Mays, 'Irish Beckett: A Borderline Instance', in *Beckett in Dublin*, ed. by S. E. Wilmer (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992), pp. 133-145 (p. 140); Graley Herren, 'Working on Film and Television', in *Samuel Beckett in Context*, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 192-204 (p. 199).)

<sup>29</sup> Kim, p. 283.

<sup>30</sup> Murakami himself has explicitly figured the unconscious as having an architectural layout, positing that the top two 'floors' are public, while the private realms of the self are akin to two basement rooms. The first basement, he imagines, is a room not used 'much in our daily life, but sometimes we come in, vaguely hang around the place.' (Notably, 'vagueness' is a characteristic of the activities carried out in this space.) He continues, 'my thought is that underneath that basement room is yet another basement room' in which we 'wander about in the darkness' seeing things 'you wouldn't see in the normal parts of the house.' Interestingly, this image recalls the 'tiers of basements' in which Malone suspects he resides. (Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Strecher, Loc 548 of 5837; Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 213; *Malone Dies*.)

*Kafka on the Shore*.<sup>31</sup> The question thus emerges: is it possible to analyse indoor spaces in Beckett and Murakami without recourse to now-outdated elements of psychoanalytic theory? Do readings that deviate from this perspective risk naïve anachronism?

It is perhaps apposite to again remember Little's argument, paraphrasing Baker, that '[s]ubscribing to the 'underlying assertion of womb as paradigm' in Beckett's novellas misses out on the multiple interpretations they suggest'.<sup>32</sup> While beginning from the premise that such psychoanalytic influences are foundational to an understanding of both Beckett's and Murakami's work, I aim to build on this understanding to explore new ways in which their spaces can be read. This reading will be supported by a comparative discussion based on subsequent reformulations of the uncanny in literature by female authors. It is this, originally psychoanalytic, concept of the uncanny – specifically when viewed in its uneasily reclaimed capacity in feminist and decolonial contexts – in which my study is most interested.

As Chapter 4 of this study will discuss in more detail, reclamations of the uncanny have historically been used as a way of 'writing back', and notably have their place in a tradition of decolonial literature; it is important to acknowledge this history itself when discussing contemporary appropriations and reformulations of the concept. Additionally, the Beckettian 'uncanny' is, of course, often itself related to decolonial thought. Bixby states that 'Beckett's hybridity designates a history, a politics, a rhetoric of postcoloniality, even as his liminal positioning resists assimilation within the structures of the nation-state and instead enables the parodic subversion of national belonging associated with the strategies of minor literature and minority discourse.'<sup>33</sup> This perspective is evidently emblematic of a wider critical trend by which Beckett's inability

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<sup>31</sup> Strecher, Loc 2865 of 5837.

<sup>32</sup> Phil Baker, qtd. in Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 74.

<sup>33</sup> Bixby, p. 34.

to engage with either the newly postcolonial Irish government nor the conventions of his Protestant upbringing lends him a form of dislocated or hybrid status.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Bixby cites Homi Bhabha's observation that 'the liberatory people who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity.'<sup>35</sup> He makes use of Bhabha's idea of the 'unhomely' to discuss Beckett's work, defined in Bhabha's words as 'the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world...that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.'<sup>36</sup>

While Bixby quotes another statement of Bhabha's that the unhomely 'has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations'<sup>37</sup> – suggesting that such 'unhomely' writing does not necessarily have to come from literal situations of traumatic exile – there are nevertheless problems with equating Beckett's experience of emigration with more racially charged experiences of postcolonial dislocation. In short, while Beckett's cultural perspective was indeed a liminal one that enabled him to write from a place of productive disengagement, not all cultural experiences of liminality are the same. While liminal space is an umbrella term that appears by definition 'vague', it obviously contains a multiplicity of varying experiences. This chapter in part aims to investigate the variations in perspective within literary situations considered 'liminal' and thus 'vague.'

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, in *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd states: 'For the young Sam Beckett, the sense of estrangement had been [...] keen: his parents, unlike many other Protestant families, were not Empire loyalists, but they were certainly not Irish republicans (531) either. They lived in something akin to a cultural vacuum [...] it is hardly surprising that their son should have eventually set up shop in the void'.

Similarly, Anthony Cronin recounts Beckett's upbringing in terms of a culturally disengaged 'neither space': 'One night Bill took the two boys up the Glencullen road to a spot where the flames which now lit the night sky could be clearly seen [...] Sam later recalled the night with horror.' Similarly, he recounts that '[t]he Beckett household, like most of their neighbours, had no politics except a silent and unexpressed loyalty to a regime which had vanished forever.' (Kiberd, p. 531; Anthony Cronin, *The Last Modernist* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 36.)

<sup>35</sup> Homi Bhabha, qtd. in Bixby, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Bhabha's use of the 'unhomely' is an example highly apposite to this study, as the former is a theory of European origin applied by a range of decolonial writers responding subversively to Eurocentric norms. While they are iterations of the same concept, the idea of the 'uncanny' as developed by Ernst Jentsch<sup>38</sup> and subsequently Freud,<sup>39</sup> and the decolonial uncanny as discussed by Bhabha and, as Chapter 4 will highlight, Édouard Glissant, arise from quite different circumstances. In this chapter I aim to demonstrate the manner in which a psychological concept based on an unsettling 'vagueness' takes on different connotations depending on the cultural situation to which it is being applied.

However, it is interesting to consider that this latter idea, namely that 'vaguening' differs in its political bent depending on the identity or cultural circumstances of the 'vaguener', itself poses problems when discussed in the context of Bhabha's theories. Bhabha's 'Third Space' is, after all, characterised by an ambiguous rather than an adversarial relationship between coloniser and colonised, in which 'the structure of meaning and reference [is] an ambivalent process.'<sup>40</sup> My argument, based on the fact that 'vaguening' acquires a different tone in different cultural contexts, seems by turns affirmed and negated by Bhabha's idea of the 'Third Space.' On the one hand, Bhabha argues that 'the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity',<sup>41</sup> which troubles the idea that 'vaguening' has a fixed cultural significance (for instance, as a tool of domination in some contexts, or as a means of subversion in others: these meanings being tied in some inextricable way to the cultural circumstances of the authors involved.) On the other hand, according to Bhabha's idea of 'mimicry' as both 'challeng[ing] and reinscrib[ing] colonial power'<sup>42</sup> we can quite easily situate 'vaguening'

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<sup>38</sup> Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)', trans. by Roy Sellars, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, ed. by Jo Collins and John Jervis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 216-228.

<sup>39</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', to in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), pp. 121-158.

<sup>40</sup> Homi Bhabha, qtd. in M. Adryael Tong, 'Gender and Sexuality in Postcolonial Perspective', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Benjamin H. Dunning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 117-136 (p. 119).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

in a colonial history, as an unstable and contested form of obfuscation linked to the privilege of leaving one's experience unexplained.

Ideas of the uncanny are intimately linked to such issues of reclamation. Vulnerable to charges of an implicit Eurocentric, male-centred perspective, and arguing for a view of gendered relations based on something akin to archetypes, Freudian theory itself appears to assume a privileged and 'vaguened' universality. Authors who reclaim the Freudian 'uncanny' from a marginalised position can be read as staging resituated particularisations of what was originally a broad or homogenising theory. By the same token, the range of literary reclamations of the uncanny in feminist and decolonial contexts – a small fraction of which will be discussed in this and the following chapter – perhaps signals the need for a greater vocabulary regarding contemporary representations of cultural trauma.

Chapter 3 of this study will focus on 'vaguening' and the female-authored uncanny, while Chapter 4 is threaded through with considerations of the decolonial uncanny. While this chapter moves from an introductory discussion of Beckett, Bhabha, and canonicity to an exploration of female-authored 'unhomeliness', it aims to remain mindful of simplistic equations of female experience with nonwhite experience.

Thus, this chapter has as its core aim the exploration and recognition of the nuances at play within the broad category of 'liminal space.' While the following chapters will discuss more international 'vaguening's', I will first begin closer to this study's dual 'home.' I will set my analysis of gender and architecture in Beckett's and Murakami's work against several texts by female authors – both Irish and Japanese – that make use of tropes based on unhomey or uncanny architecture in a similar way. My aim, in the process, is to reveal the manner in which 'vaguening' is a widely varied political statement depending on the context in which it is enacted.

Countering the five core extracts in this chapter are a range of brief comparative studies. I set these texts against Burns's *Milkman*, Tsushima's *Territory of Light*, Flattery's 'Track', and Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*. I will explore the manner in which these mostly more contemporary novels by female authors use similar imagery of uncanny or otherwise 'vaguened' space. In the case of authors who overtly reference Beckett, such as Flattery,<sup>43</sup> this uncanny imagery can be considered as a means of subverting the forms employed by a male-authored canon. Notably, in many of these novels, vague interiors are associated with experiences of dissociation or alienation for their female protagonists. Crucially, there is also an element of 'conceptual translation' arising from a cross-cultural encounter in all of these texts; in short, the authors make use of multiple forms of 'vaguening' based on both geography and gender. In all of these cases, the female protagonist's deviation from societal norms causes them to be likened, or causes them to liken themselves, to uncanny spaces. In Burns's *Milkman*, for instance, the protagonist's traumatised disengagement from her surroundings causes her to be compared to a local block of buildings known as the 'ten-minute area.'<sup>44</sup> In Tsushima's *Territory of Light*, the protagonist carves out a life for herself and her daughter following her divorce, but is much more comfortable spending time in the abandoned apartment below her own.<sup>45</sup> This likening of women to uncanny interior space appears at certain times stigmatising and at others almost empowering, as evidenced in the escapist fantasies of Flattery's protagonist in which she wanders an airport terminal.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, while ostensibly a means of writing without overt cultural ties, 'vaguening' is far from a neutral act. By first uncovering some of the gendered underpinnings of

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<sup>43</sup> Nicole Flattery, 'Abortion: A Love Story', in *Show Them A Good Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 65-150 (p. 93).

<sup>44</sup> Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 180.

<sup>45</sup> Yūko Tsushima, *Territory of Light*, trans. by Geraldine Harcourt (UK: Penguin, 2018), p. 114.

<sup>46</sup> Nicole Flattery, 'Track', in *Show Them A Good Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 151-174 (p. 164).



‘vague’ architectural space in these works, this chapter will open a discussion – to be carried on in Chapters 4 and 5 – of the implications of ‘vaguening’ on a global level.

### 3.1 *Ill Seen Ill Said*: Temporal Vagueness, Archetypal Femininity

*The cabin. Its situation. Careful. On. At the inexistent centre of a formless place. Rather more circular than otherwise finally. Flat to be sure. To cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes. Depending on her speed and radius taken. Here she who loves to – here she who now can only stray never strays. Stones increasingly abound. Ever scatter even the rankest weed. Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. With none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread. How come a cabin in such a place? How came? Careful.*<sup>47</sup>

Chapter 1 briefly touched on Hamilton’s article “In the Dim Light”:

Archeoastronomy in Beckett’s *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and will now return to this reading in greater detail. Hamilton argues that references to archeoastronomy are present in *Ill Seen Ill Said* to the effect that megalithic sites – spaces in the vein of, but perhaps not precisely referring to, the Newgrange, Dowth, and Knowth passage tombs<sup>48</sup> – present striking parallels with certain indoor spaces in Beckett texts, such as those in ‘All Strange Away’, ‘Long Observation of the Ray’,<sup>49</sup> and *Ill Seen Ill Said* itself. References to passage graves in this latter text recall what Hamilton calls ‘the ‘ruinstrewn’ Irish megalithic landscape’:<sup>50</sup> they are recognisable to those familiar with Irish megalithic sites yet also function on a more abstract level as barren or tomblike spaces. As Hamilton notes (citing Marija Gimbutas),<sup>51</sup> the oval shapes of Neolithic graves link them to both eggs and

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<sup>47</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, pp. 451-452; *Ill Seen*. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>48</sup> Hamilton, p. 317.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*; *ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>51</sup> Marija Gimbutas, qtd. in Hamilton, p. 324.

wombs, thus placing *Ill Seen Ill Said* ‘within the traditional Beckettian womb/tomb theme’<sup>52</sup> more generally. This can be considered as an instance of a ‘multivalent vagueness’ by which such references are Irish yet internationally understandable; importantly, indoor space is the vehicle of this ambiguity.

As cited in Chapter 2, Hamilton notes that terms associated with the construction of passage graves, such as ‘flag’ and ‘slab’, are used with reference to the woman’s cabin.<sup>53</sup> I would like to argue that such terms further elide descriptions of the cabin with descriptions of the surrounding area of standing stones. What little the reader knows about the cabin would point to the fact that it is a modern structure, built with ‘slates [...] from a ruined mansion’ (p. 464). Furthermore, the fact that it is referred to as a ‘cabin’ throughout appears to discourage the reader from coming to the conclusion that it is a grave of sorts. Such language relating to passage tombs is therefore perhaps symbolically being used for a building not of this origin. However, by a process of deferral, the idea of passage graves is both evoked and absent in descriptions of the cabin. The cabin itself functions to articulate a kind of *aporia* towards cultural specificity.

Indeed, much like the curtain/greatcoat hybrid discussed by Nugent-Folan,<sup>54</sup> it is possible that the description of a passage grave is being displaced or deferred by being assigned the term ‘cabin.’ This runs parallel to other instances of ‘multivalent vagueness’ in the text. Hatch interprets the diminishing ‘clover’ as evoking connotations of shamrocks, a plant with an Irish significance perhaps too evident should it be named directly.<sup>55</sup> The reference to clover thus obliquely evokes the shamrock without mentioning it. This resonates with Enoch Brater’s interpretation that the woman’s pale skin and stiff hair can be seen as oblique references to Celtic dress, evoking the use of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Nugent-Folan, p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> Hatch, p. 111.

woad paint and lime wash.<sup>56</sup> Such interpretations allow for the possible existence of numerous unnamed Irish references in the text.

In Hamilton's reading the woman is presented as allied with nature rather than with the impositions of historical time, 'resid[ing] within the rhythmic cycles of the natural universe.'<sup>57</sup> Her 'rotational presence within different locations' is 'unburdened by human-time', appearing more influenced by 'seasonal change' and matching 'the movements of celestial bodies'.<sup>58</sup> The woman's manner of existing in time appears governed by cyclical moments that are 'personal' and 'obscurely discrete'.<sup>59</sup> Her actions appear conducted in a way that deviates from implicitly patriarchal 'calculable'<sup>60</sup> history.

Hamilton describes the figure of the old woman in terms of Deleuzian immanence, due to her situation 'within the epistemological aporia between primordial prehistoric and calculable modern epochs', she 'cannot be unified by one synthesizing subject.'<sup>61</sup> As Hamilton notes, 'the old woman navigates a space the narrator cannot completely survey'.<sup>62</sup> Indoor space functions to divide and obscure here. The reader is told that '[t]o the imaginary stranger the dwelling appears deserted' and '[t]he eye glued to one or the other window has nothing but black drapes for its pains' (p. 453). The cabin is inscrutable and thus functions in some ways to shelter or hide the woman. Likewise, the exact area denoted by the cabin is unknown: as discussed, it is often unclear whether the 'zone of stones' or the cabin itself is being referred to.<sup>63</sup> The cabin may not simply function as an imprisoning structure in which the woman is confined; indoor space can be read to convey the unrepresentability of the woman's experience.

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<sup>56</sup> Enoch Brater, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>57</sup> Hamilton, p. 316.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>63</sup> Hatch, p. 103.

This limited perspective can be read as an instance of a kind of tactful ‘vagueness’, avoiding direct ventriloquising of the woman’s experience and instead viewing her from without; it is conversely a voyeuristic and at times a threatening gaze.<sup>64</sup> Troublingly, the distinction between these motives – respectful or voyeuristic – appears at times elided, as the reader is often uncertain whether the voice narrating the woman’s actions is that of the invasive male watcher or a more impartial third entity. Hatch goes so far as to interpret the statements in the quoted extract, ‘[t]he cabin, Its situation. Careful. On’, as spoken by the ‘entity, denied substance, [that] attempts to seize the woman with his gaze’.<sup>65</sup> Thus, even the narrated statements that appear impartial may be issued by a voice complicit with the stalker-figure’s voyeurism. Hatch interprets such repeated statements of ‘[c]areful’ as the watcher’s ‘obsessive’ reminders to stay hidden as he keeps the cabin ‘under constant watch.’<sup>66</sup>

The following close reading of the quoted extract will take Hatch’s characterisation of this narrating voice as ‘obsessive’ as its point of departure. However, the reading this chapter will advance is that there is a – nonetheless equally problematic – *assembling* or *devising* aspect to this narrative voice that has an important bearing on the text’s gendered dynamic. My argument synthesises elements of both Hamilton’s and Hatch’s readings to arrive at a distinct conclusion. Hamilton appositely highlights the female figure’s resistance to historical classification; Hatch observes the text’s controlling gaze. Informed by both readings, I will argue that a dynamic based on circumscription –

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<sup>64</sup> The text’s imbalanced perspective is consistent with what Laura Mulvey defines as ‘a determining male gaze project[ing] its phantasy on to the female figure’. While the female figure in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is not explicitly sexualised, the perspective of the text could be read in terms of Mulvey’s dichotomy of ‘active/male’ and ‘passive/female.’ This form of reading has been arguably anticipated and refuted by Ackerley’s statements regarding Beckett’s satirical misogyny: notably, Ackerley argues that Beckett’s early portraits of women work beyond the simple binary of ‘the subject as gendered male, the female as object of his gaze’. While, in the following section, I argue that a discernable misogynistic gaze in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is constructed with a self-aware intention, it is difficult to tell the extent to which this text disrupts or troubles essentialising readings of its female character. (Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 833-844 (p. 837); Ackerley, p. 56).

<sup>65</sup> Hatch, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

and the resistance to circumscription – is reflected in the text’s prose style, particularly in the manner in which indoor space is repeatedly outlined.

Many of Beckett’s closed-space texts have what I will term an ‘in progress’ quality, similar to the much-amended *Happy Days* typescript. Their speakers appear mired in the process of devising or demarcating a given physical space. In ‘The Lost Ones’, the specificity of the measurement ‘fifty metres round and sixteen high’ is negated by the dismissive ‘for the sake of harmony.’<sup>67</sup> Such spaces appear hypothetical, spoken into being: by this logic, they could vanish into vagueness as soon as they have been conjured. Similarly, in the above extract the woman and her cabin appear in the process of being devised or created by the narrating voice. The reminder, ‘[c]areful’ (p. 451) by which the narrative voice keeps itself in check, appears furtive, as Hatch notes, but also crucially suggests a connotation of structuring or ordering. In this manner, linguistic excess and unnecessary ‘local colour’ are continually avoided. In a manner that resonates with the binaries between calculable historical time and prehistoric ‘vague’ time discussed in Hamilton’s reading, this masculine ‘ordering’ narrative circumscribes the woman’s presence from the outset of the text.

The statements ‘rather more circular than otherwise finally’ and ‘flat to be sure’ (ibid.) mix colloquy with pseudo-precise calculation. The lines ‘[t]o cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes. Depending on her speed and radius taken’ (ibid.), are disconcerting when interpreted as a voyeuristic figure’s repeated observation of a woman’s movements through her private dwelling.

While concrete details such as the ‘pisciform’ (p. 455) buttonhook and the scrap of paper searched for in the dresser (p. 462) ground the woman in a conceivably more modern (yet still Gothically ‘vaguened’) era, the prehistoric references in the text

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<sup>67</sup> Beckett, ‘The Lost Ones’, in *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), pp. 381-399 (p. 381).

repeatedly pull the woman out of her historical context and ally her with essentialising ‘natural’ and ‘celestial’ imagery. This switching between eras can itself be thought of in terms of a form of circumscribing gaze. As Hamilton notes, ‘these elements of archeoastronomy function to disorder chronological time, and to resist the old woman being inscribed with any temporal markers of an identifiable historical being.’<sup>68</sup> While this reluctance to inscribe the woman in time can be read as an empathic ‘vagueness’, it can also be read negatively. Her specific story is repeatedly ‘universalised’ and broadened to become a nebulous female archetype. By being taken out of history her character is afforded little agency within a ‘real world’ context, instead subject to a mythologising gaze.

Pervasive in this narrative is a sense of perspectival limitation. This is observable in the manner in which the authority of the narrative voice falters halfway through this quoted extract. The line ‘[h]ere she who loves to – here she who now can only stray never strays’ (p. 451) is articulated with difficulty. This is not the first statement spoken on behalf of the woman, nor the first in which a female pronoun has been mentioned. It has been preceded by the sentence ‘[t]o cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes’ (ibid.). However, this statement – regarding the woman ‘loving’ to stray, or ‘only’ straying – is perhaps more subjective or analytical and thus appears articulated with increasing doubt. The narrative voice shies away from the assertion that the woman ‘loves to’ stray, appearing unsure of its own message.

The following sentences veer away from the personal into a description of the landscape. As discussed in Chapter 2, this description appears to radiate outwards, taking in first the stones that ‘increasingly abound’, the ‘ever scatter’ weeds, and finally the surrounding ‘meagre pastures’ (p. 452). However, the narrative aporetically returns to the

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<sup>68</sup> Hamilton, p. 315.

question of why the cabin is located ‘in such a place’ (ibid.). This expression of uncertainty again recalls the ‘in progress’ quality of such Beckett texts: it self-reflexively calls attention to the text’s constructed nature, as if to suggest the choice of location is arbitrary or in the process of being invented.

However, it is also possible that the binaries setting what can be loosely termed a kind of masculine order against feminine ‘natural’ or prehistoric time are deconstructed in this text. As discussed, it is reductive to claim that the ordering narrative voice is unflinchingly precise: its pseudo-mathematical fallibility regarding the measurements of the cabin and the surrounding zone of stones can be read as a deliberate subversion of a kind of epistemically violent need for ‘certainty.’ The faltering and aporetic quality of the language, which I argue becomes more apparent throughout the quoted extract, itself appears imprecise;<sup>69</sup> conversely the woman herself is also arguably a ‘precise’ or ‘ordered’ presence, as her movements are reliably aligned with repetitive celestial cycles.

Hatch illustrates *Ill Seen Ill Said*’s affinities with the Irish Gothic, and Hamilton’s reading suggests that the text’s references to prehistory are both specifically Irish and resist chronological placement. However, both the text’s prehistoric and Gothic elements are governed by a view in which the woman is confined to an interior space and seen in essentialising terms. As evidenced in the description of her face as a ‘calm slab’ (p. 458), she is at times even compared physically to the interior space. Hence, the interior focus that allows the text’s setting to be rendered culturally ambiguous through ‘multivalent vagueness’ conversely also confines the text to a rigidly gendered perspective.

Both woman and cabin appear as uncanny presences. The cabin is both inhabited and abandoned, both house-like and grave-like. Similarly, the woman has a ‘there-but-

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<sup>69</sup> As Elizabeth Barry notes, the ‘preoccupation with precision, and its seductive dangers, develops in Beckett’s later writing, where his engagement with the conventions of classical realism wanes. What results from this preoccupation, however – as Beckett is well aware – is precisely the opposite of what his narrators intend: an inevitable fall into imprecision. In trying to be precise they both overdo it and yet never say enough. As Molloy memorably comments, ‘whatever I said it was never enough and always too much.’ (Barry, p. 57.)

not-there' quality. Suggestions that she is within the walls 'no more' despite beginning 'to appear' suggest that she is a ghostly presence, or that her habitation in the cabin is strangely intermittent (p. 454). Interestingly, this likening of a female character to an uncanny spatial structure resonates with descriptions of the 'ten-minute area'<sup>70</sup> in Anna Burns's contemporary novel *Milkman*.

*Milkman* thematically addresses conceptual translation and 'vaguening' while also evoking gendered images of uncanny or disused space. Stalked by the predatory Milkman and subject of rumours among her community based on their purported relationship, the young protagonist's internalisation of trauma causes her to assume a state of being – referred to at a Beckettian linguistic slant as a 'numbance' – according to which she becomes 'inaccessible'<sup>71</sup> to both others and herself. She becomes known for being 'a bit eerie', conveying the impression that 'there was nothing there when there was something there, while at the same time, as if there was something there when there was nothing there.'<sup>72</sup>

*Milkman* is, itself, a novel of fraught conceptual 'translation.' Its Beckettian resonances are overt. As Clare Hutton notes, Burns mixes 'vaguened' cultural references with invented terms. In Hutton's view, terms such as 'Somebody McSomebody' and 'stalk-talk' are 'unique to the perspective of 'middle sister'.<sup>73</sup> However, as Hutton states, Burns also includes customisations of existing Hiberno-English syntax and phrases, such as 'beyond the pale.'<sup>74</sup> I would like to add to these points the observation that such phrases are sometimes tailored and adapted: 'middle sister' uses the neologism 'beyond-the-pales' to refer to those rejected by the community, in a slightly modified version of the manner in which the expression is usually used. The third group of terms employed in

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<sup>70</sup> Burns, p. 180.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 178.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>73</sup> Clare Hutton, 'Moment and Technique of *Milkman*', *Essays in Criticism*, 69, 3 (2019), 349-371 (p. 358).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



the novel, according to Hutton, are ‘words and descriptions which more neutrally model the features of the frighteningly dysfunctional [...] world in which the action takes place’<sup>75</sup>, these ‘vaguened’ terms including words such as ‘plainclothes people.’<sup>76</sup>

Conceptual translation, and the need to inhabit the literatures and histories of other cultures as a form of escapism, pervades *Milkman* on a thematic level. As Hutton notes, the protagonist ‘is learning French and thinks about language quite precisely.’<sup>77</sup> Her ‘wee sisters’ are going through a ‘Joan of Arc phase’, and disapprove of Britain – here ‘vaguened’ to ‘over the water’ – not due to ‘the usual legacy of history’ but due to ‘their very natural support of the French.’<sup>78</sup> In one of the darker cases of this cultural transposition, a local boy commits suicide due to the threat of nuclear war between Russia and America,<sup>79</sup> displacing the unrest of the Troubles into this more distant outlet.

Earlier in the novel, the protagonist encounters the Milkman in a part of the town known only as the ‘ten-minute area’, which she describes as ‘some bleak, eerie, *Mary Celeste* little place.’<sup>80</sup> The place appears both inhabited and uninhabited: its four shops have ‘unlocked doors’ and ‘clean fronts’ that suggest ‘life – not visible perhaps at that moment – was nevertheless going on behind them.’<sup>81</sup> The fact that a German bomb left over from the war has recently exploded in the area, harming no one but destroying one of its three churches,<sup>82</sup> further cements its status as a strangely liminal space in an otherwise segregated community. The bomb is ‘an old bomb, a history bomb,’ thus leading the residents to conclude: ‘Not their side. Not our side.’<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 363.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

It is therefore significant that an instance of the Milkman's stalking occurs in this liminal setting.<sup>84</sup> The area comes to signify not only trauma but overlooked or unclassified trauma. As Hutton notes, *Milkman* is a novel addressing the 'realities of what it is like to be formed by a place and time in which violence, corruption, and instability are the norm, and stalking, coercion, and sexual harassment creep under the radar.'<sup>85</sup> The area is vague and unclassified: the protagonist is unsure of 'the provenance of the eeriness of the ten-minute area', and her mother discourages her from posing such questions.<sup>86</sup> The space is also aligned with her father's childhood trauma, another experience that appears discounted or erased by the community: 'Like da, according to ma, it [the ten-minute area] also entertained no hope to brighten up. 'Too stuck,' she said, 'too lingering, too brooding. [...]'<sup>87</sup>

Not only does the ten-minute area form a backdrop for an encounter with a figure whose predatory nature is largely overlooked by the community, but the protagonist later comes to be seen, in her 'numbance', as literally resembling the area herself: 'A bit eerie, a bit creepy, they decided, adding that they hadn't noticed before but it was that I resembled in my open-but-closed perspective the ten-minute area.'<sup>88</sup> The dismembered cat's head the protagonist finds in the street in this area provides an echo of the gendered violence by which 'men and boys killed [...] cats': cats being seen as 'subversive, witch-like, the left hand, bad luck, feminine'.<sup>89</sup> The cat's head is itself an uncanny image of disconnect, linked with the ten-minute area's mystery as it is found 'amidst the uncleared rubble' of the explosion site.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>85</sup> Hutton, p. 367.

<sup>86</sup> Burns, p. 83.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

*Milkman* is an interesting example of an overlap between descriptions of female characters and ‘vaguened’ architecture. Burns’s removal of place-names ‘universalises’ the Ardoyne<sup>91</sup> to emphasise its affinities with other areas affected by longstanding violence; at the same time, it declares the impossibility of such ‘vaguening’ by evoking a politically fraught state in which no gesture is ‘neutral.’ As she observes, ‘it was believed you could tell ‘their sort from over the road’ from ‘your sort this side of the road’ by the very physical form of a person’, as ‘you created a political statement everywhere you went’.<sup>92</sup>

Both *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Milkman* are texts informed by a sort of ‘conceptual translation’; they reveal a concern with which references are specific and which are broadly applicable. Both thus make use of a form of ‘multivalent vagueness’ by which culturally specific references take on an international significance. Crucially, they both contain architectural ‘ten-minute areas’ – the area in *Ill Seen Ill Said* takes the woman ‘from five to ten minutes’ (p. 451) to cross. In both novels, trauma and a form of perspectival ‘vaguening’ are conveyed through a convergence of temporality and liminal architecture.

Both texts comment on gendered dynamics via an ambiguity of architectural space. I would like to argue that since the texts address issues of ‘vaguening’, they are also preoccupied with the power structures informing this purported vagueness. Both narratives have an uneasy relationship with such ‘vagueness’: in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the ‘objective’ narrating voice overlaps uncomfortably with the voyeuristic presence preying on the woman. However, a kind of perspectival limitation in *Ill Seen Ill Said* suggests, perhaps, a form of tactful or empathic ‘vaguening’, as it portrays the woman’s intimidation and suffering without directly appropriating this trauma. In *Milkman*, the

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<sup>91</sup> Hutton, p. 351.

<sup>92</sup> Burns, p. 25.

young protagonist is a victim of erasure in a time of cultural trauma considered more 'public', showing the harm such 'vagueness' can cause. However, the narrative itself, with its various circumlocutions, appears marred by an inescapable 'vagueness.' Burns' circuitous style evokes the fraught nature of communication within a traumatised community, along with the difficult process of self-expression outside of a colonial language and narrative. In both Beckett and Burns, 'vagueness' appears informed by the identity and circumstances of the 'vaguener.'

The nuances of such 'vagueness', and the gendered dynamics it reveals, are particularly and often troublingly evident when reading Murakami's fiction. Taking into account such points, this chapter will now move to a reading of Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*.

### 3.2 Windows, Ears, and Apparent Apathy in *A Wild Sheep Chase*

*Straight on across the pasture stood an old American-style two-story wood-frame house. The house that the Sheep Professor had built forty years before and the Rat's father had then bought. Nothing was nearby to compare it to, so from a distance it was difficult to tell how big it was. It was, in any case, squat and expressionless. Painted white, beneath the overcast skies it looked a foreboding gray. From the middle of the mustard-, almost rust-colored gabled roof a rectangular brick chimney protruded. Instead of a fence around the house, there was a stand of evergreens which protected it from the elements. The place seemed curiously uninhabited. An odd house the more I looked at it. It wasn't particularly inhospitable or cold, nor built in any unusual way, nor even much in disrepair. It was just... odd. As if a great creature had grown old without being able to express its feelings. Not that it didn't know how to express them, but rather that it didn't know what to express.<sup>93</sup>*

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<sup>93</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 236. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

*A Wild Sheep Chase* is notable for its representations of Japanese history as compartmentalised, rather than as a backdrop continually informing the present: Chapter 2 has previously discussed the manner in which the dense historical passages, such as the story of the Ainu shepherd,<sup>94</sup> appear ineffectively integrated with the main plot of the text, at times creating a jarring contrast between ‘specificity’ and ‘vagueness.’ Historical content underpins *A Wild Sheep Chase* at a distance. Iwamoto notes Boku’s ‘indifferent response’<sup>95</sup> to the news of Yukio Mishima’s suicide that serves as the novel’s backdrop.

This sense of distance is, of course, intensified by Luke’s subsequent cuts to this reference in the English translation. Where a literal rendering of the Japanese original refers to ‘that strange afternoon of November 25, 1970’, this date becomes simply ‘[t]he twenty-fifth of November’ in the English translation.<sup>96</sup> Of the reference to footage of Mishima on television, Karashima states that ‘[r]eaders outside of Japan may not recognize the reference to Mishima’s suicide even with the mention of the year’; with the date removed, ‘it seems virtually impossible to make the connection, especially because it was not all that unusual for Mishima, who starred in films, to be on television.’<sup>97</sup> Luke’s broadening of the reference lends it a form of apparent temporal and cultural flexibility. The brief depiction of Mishima could refer, technically, to any of his televised appearances and roles, without specifically signifying his suicide. Iwamoto states that the Mishima Incident was ‘seen by critics as a marker for the end of the politically tumultuous 1960s and the beginning of the politically apathetic, economically prosperous 1970s.’<sup>98</sup> In this context, Boku’s indifference can be seen as emblematic of the time period to follow.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 199-208.

<sup>95</sup> Iwamoto, p. 297.

<sup>96</sup> Karashima, p. 39.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>98</sup> Iwamoto, p. 297.

Uninhabited as it seems, it is difficult to think of the American-style house as overtly indicative of gendered dynamics in this text. However, much in the manner of the cabin in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this house is the site of a ‘multivalent vagueness’ at the same time as it reveals a limiting gendered perspective.

Murakami’s depiction of this space is governed by an apathy that can be read as both internationally applicable and specific to a Japanese context. Notably, the quoted extract begins with an abbreviated history itself: this reminder of the story behind the Sheep Professor’s house appears relevant to the fact that the space reveals itself as a site of historical ‘aftermath’ (p. 241). Personification recurs: while imagery of the house as sentient superficially creates an ominous and even Gothic theme, it is interesting to read the house’s anthropomorphised ‘body language’ as apathetic rather than menacing. It is ‘squat and expressionless’, a decidedly comical image; the stand of evergreens which ‘[protect] it from the elements’ (p. 236) suggest a withdrawn or disinterested appearance. While Boku has initially characterised it as appearing ‘a foreboding gray’ beneath the overcast sky, he revises this opinion, conversely noting that ‘[i]t wasn’t particularly inhospitable or cold, nor built in any unusual way, nor even much in disrepair. It was just... odd’ (ibid.).

This description avoids committing to a definite or unified characterisation. The house can be seen to mirror this indecision, appearing similarly noncommittal. Its comparison to ‘a great creature’ that has ‘grown old’ (ibid.) further evokes the idea that the house is somehow a personification of overlooked history. The final lines, regarding the house’s (non) expression of its ‘feelings’ (ibid.), are perhaps key to a reading that argues for the house’s sense of apathy. These lines suggest that the house is not experiencing any *particular* difficult feelings it cannot express. Rather, it appears not to know ‘what to express’ (ibid), as though it is redundant, at a loss. Architectural space

facilitates both a situation in and a withdrawal from history in this extract, conveying a cultural commentary on apathy specific to a Japanese context at the same time as remaining understandable to a broad range of readers with less knowledge of the text's political significance.

As previously discussed, the forest surrounding the house can be seen as a more subtle incarnation of the forest into which Kafka journeys to an afterlife-like realm in *Kafka on the Shore*.<sup>99</sup> Forests appear associated in both cases with either the death process or a journey to another dimension, the latter possibility creating further distance from 'real world' history. It is worth noting at this juncture that for readers of Kenzaburō Ōe's fiction, this self-created mythological topography may appear familiar. Rubin notes the similarity between Ōe and Murakami, observing that they have both written on the topic of dangerous religious cults, in addition to creating fictional works that 'examine questions of memory and history, of legend and storytelling, and both continue to probe into the dark forest of feeling in search of who they are as individuals, as citizens of the world, and as Japanese.'<sup>100</sup> It is perhaps appropriate here to briefly cite some similarities between Murakami and Ōe's imagery.

Ōe's use of forest imagery is both mythologically rooted and specific to his upbringing. He states: 'My village, on Shikoku Island, is surrounded by dense forests and cut off from the other villages. So the villagers have created many village myths and much of my writing is based on those myths.'<sup>101</sup> Ōe frequently references 'the valley in the forest'<sup>102</sup> as a place of childhood memory to which he longs to return. In Murakami novels, the recurrence of such spaces as wells, forests, hotel rooms, and elevators as

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<sup>99</sup> Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 427.

<sup>100</sup> Rubin, p. 236.

<sup>101</sup> Kenzaburō Ōe, in Kenzaburō Ōe and John Nathan, 'A Mythical Topos: A Dialogue', *Grand Street*, 55 (1996), 39-46 (p. 44).

<sup>102</sup> Kenzaburō Ōe, *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!*, trans. by John Nathan (London: Atlantic Books, 2002), p. 103.

portals of contact with metaphysical realms speaks to a similar, if often more urban, mythological topography.

Many of Ōe's characters are named after animals, such as the character of Bird in *A Personal Matter* and that of Isana, meaning 'whale', in *A Flood Unto My Soul*.<sup>103</sup> These unusual names recall those of Murakami characters such as the Rat and the Sheepman; the protagonist of Ōe's *The Silent Cry* is implicitly associated with a rat.<sup>104</sup> This latter character works on a translation with his deceased friend,<sup>105</sup> as discussed in Chapter 1, in Murakami lore the Rat sends Boku manuscripts of his finished novels,<sup>106</sup> and is revealed at the end of *A Wild Sheep Chase* to be recently deceased (p. 279). Similarly, in *The Silent Cry* the character of Gii the Madman has many parallels with the Sheepman: he is a character associated with liminal space, treading 'the narrow interval between day and night'.<sup>107</sup> Importantly, his background suggests defection from war: 'It was to avoid being caught by the army that he ran off into the forest in the first place'.<sup>108</sup> The Sheepman himself also appears to live in the forest, living on a diet of tubers and shoots, and believes he is still avoiding conscription to a war long-ended (p. 263).

It is interesting to explore the affinities between Ōe and Murakami with reference to 'multivalent vagueness.' Ōe himself is an author known for his 'cosmopolitan' multilingualism,<sup>109</sup> and for producing referentially dense works influenced by Blake and Dante among others.<sup>110</sup> As Sanroku Yoshida notes with reference to Ōe's forest imagery, it is significant that such references to forests contain a double entendre: *mori* means both

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<sup>103</sup> Sanroku Yoshida, 'The Burning Tree: The Spatialized World of Kenzaburō Ōe', *World Literature Today*, 69, 1 (1995), 10-16 (p. 11).

<sup>104</sup> "'Your bodyguard told me I was a rat.'"

"A rat? The philosopher's nickname was 'Rat,' too," Takashi said'. (Kenzaburō Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, trans. by John Bester (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p. 36.)

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>106</sup> Murakami, *Hear*, p. 148.

<sup>107</sup> Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 53.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Ōe has worked on translations of W. B. Yeats, stating, 'I hope that when I translate Yeats, the reader hears some of the music of the original.' Similarly, he has worked on a collection of French translations of Japanese stories then published by Gallimard. (Ōe, in Ōe and Nathan, p. 41; Kenzaburō Ōe, in Kenzaburō Ōe, Steve Bradbury, Joel Cohn and Rob Wilson, 'The Myth of My Own Village', *Mānoa*, 6, 1 (1994), 135-144 (p. 137).)

<sup>110</sup> Ōe, in Ōe and Nathan, p. 41.



‘forest’ in Japanese and ‘death’ in Latin.<sup>111</sup> This translation-based allusion is itself an instance of ‘multivalent vagueness.’ Murakami’s similarities to Ōe can be conceived of as a hint at a Japanese influence, but crucially a Japanese influence who himself references a varied range of sources including much European literature and philosophy. I thus argue that such possible references to Ōe are themselves ‘multivalently vagued’, suggesting a Japanese literary influence that is crucially itself a multicultural one.

To return to this section’s earlier point, the sense of solitude that the house evokes also appears intensely personal and internal, another factor that ostensibly detracts – if read superficially – from its contextual rootedness. Indeterminate descriptions of the landscape and house can rather obviously be read as a pathetic-fallacy projection of Boku’s own attitudes; as implied during the conversation between Boku and his ex-wife at the opening of the novel (pp. 14-18), the protagonist is a blasé character perhaps largely unaware of others’ emotions.

When Boku wakes alone to find the ear-model has left while he was asleep, he thinks: ‘She was, in fact, not here. The vacated atmosphere of the house was final, undeniable. It was a feeling I had known well in the couple of months between the time my wife left me and the time I met my girlfriend’ (p. 243). The space takes on a lonely atmosphere at this point in the novel, appearing to confirm the existence of a straightforward house-as-self metaphor underpinning Boku’s relationship to the interior. In an *œuvre* in which women so often appear and disappear in the manner of apparitions, it is worth noting that the mysterious and possibly hallucinated characters frequenting the house in *A Wild Sheep Chase* – the Rat, the Sheepman, and Boku himself – are all male. It is thus possible to read the American-style house as a gendered space based on Boku’s

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<sup>111</sup> Yoshida, p. 11.

own perspective. However, a more in-depth examination of Murakami's male characters and how they relate to household spaces may be appropriate at this juncture.

Indeed, the link between men and indoor space in Murakami resonates with Japan's *hikikomori* phenomenon. Marc Hairston defines *hikikomori* – a term meaning to pull inwards or retire – as being ‘in most cases [...] young males (although a significant fraction are female) in their teens or twenties who have developed a psychological fear of social interaction with the outside world and who spend all their time in their room at home.’<sup>112</sup> This is similar to the term *otaku-zoku*, coined in 1980s Japan to describe what Whittier Treat calls ‘introverted young adult males fond of video games, computers, and comics.’<sup>113</sup> Hairston notes that Murakami's characters are ‘wounded loners, cut off from the larger social structure of Japan.’<sup>114</sup> He cites the examples of the nameless technician protagonist of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* and Kafka Tamura from *Kafka On The Shore* as he is ‘a loner from a broken home’ who ‘takes refuge by hiding in a library.’<sup>115</sup> Perhaps most importantly for this study, he also cites Toru from *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, as he has ‘lost both his job and his wife’, ‘withdraw[ing] into his house to puzzle out why all this has happened to him.’<sup>116</sup> Hairston notes Toru's passivity, how he lets ‘events come to him rather than trying to affect them’.<sup>117</sup> Hairston notes that both Murakami's characters are *hikikomori*-like in that they are ‘intelligent but too different to fit into the norms of rigid Japanese society.’<sup>118</sup>

In this manner, indoor space takes on a cultural significance that extends beyond Murakami's reworking of Kafkaesque ‘vaguened’ spaces. However, it is also arguable that Murakami's men are not the typical *otaku* or *hikikomori* – many of them, with their

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<sup>112</sup> Marc Hairston, ‘A Cocoon With A View: *Hikikomori*, Otaku, and *Welcome to the NHK*’, *Mechademia*, 5 (2010), 311-323 (p. 311).

<sup>113</sup> Whittier Treat, p. 354.

<sup>114</sup> Hairston, p. 320.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

active dating lives and urbane consumption of culture, could be considered far from it. They may share certain qualities with this demographic in that they are often isolated and well-phrased in certain niche interests, but the comparison largely ends there. Cooking, along with their appreciation of whiskey, jazz, and hard-boiled American fiction, seems to function in this context as affirmation of their intellectual masculinity.

Importantly, this model of bachelorhood is not a uniquely Japanese one. Murakami Men fit into Catalina-Ionela Rezeanu's description – paraphrasing A. Meah and P. Jackson – of how contemporary 'men's involvement in culinary activities does not represent a democratization of domestic tasks, but rather a redefinition of masculinity.'<sup>119</sup> She goes on to describe how contemporary cookery programmes featuring male chefs cause men to be 'more present in the kitchen', defining 'a new way of cooking, not for nurturing the family, but as a hobby, as a lifestyle option, as a display of their complex personality'.<sup>120</sup> Just as Chapter 2 discussed how – in Steffen Hantke's words – Murakami 'deprofessionaliz[es]'<sup>121</sup> the detective figure by making his lead characters frequently unemployed, Murakami's male archetypes often appear modified, both indicative of a cultural phenomenon yet also crucially deviating from this norm.

Murakami's representation of the American-style house carries a number of specifically Japanese connotations. It recalls the housebound isolation of the *hikikomori* while also hinting at the 'multivalently vaguened' works of Kenzaburō Ōe. The house's personification as an 'apathetic' presence reflects the political apathy of 1970s Japan post-student uprising: Murakami's work is thus easily understandable to non-Japanese readers, while itself reflecting with 'hidden' specificity a zeitgeist characterised by a certain depoliticised 'vagueness.' The American-style house provides a valuable example

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<sup>119</sup> A. Meah and P. Jackson, qtd. in Catalina-Ionela Rezeanu, 'The Relationship Between Domestic Space and Gender Identity: Some Signs of Emergence of Alternative Domestic Femininity and Masculinity', *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 6, 2 (2015), 9-29 (p. 20).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Hantke, p. 6.

of the false dichotomy between ‘specificity’ and ‘vagueness.’ The apathy it conveys is both a politically charged comment on 1970s Japan as well as conveying a *lack of or indifference towards* cultural specificity itself.

However, any argument that characterises the interior space described as exclusively apolitical disregards the gendered element of this space. It is notable that the strange or dreamlike events that occur within the American-style house all take place in the ear model’s absence. It is quite overtly signalled that the house is a space of self-encounter for Boku; the sequence involving cleaning an oddly-behaving mirror renders this metaphor still more obvious (p. 269).

Rubin notes that Murakami’s characters ‘take extraordinarily good care of their ears,’ cleaning them ‘almost obsessively so as to keep in tune with the unpredictable, shifting music of life.’<sup>122</sup> Similarly, Strecher connects this focus on ears with Japanese mythology, citing the mythologist Tōji Kamata’s analysis that the power of Japanese deities has often been signified aurally, the presence of the gods heralded by peals of thunder. Kamata states: ‘It is highly doubtful whether humans, had they lacked ears, would ever have discovered the gods.’<sup>123</sup>

Aside from the arguably most evident fact that ears appear sexualised in Murakami’s depictions – the ear model’s ears are praised as an index of her physical beauty (p. 38) – this recurrence of ears is also significant to Murakami’s dual focus on music and the translation process. Imagery of communication through a physical conduit – including the blockages and silencings that may occur in the course of such communication – recurs throughout Murakami’s novels. The narrator of *Hear the Wind Sing* is an unusually quiet child, eventually told by a therapist that ‘civilization is

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<sup>122</sup> Rubin, p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> Tōji Kamata, qtd. in Strecher, Loc 2577 of 5837.

communication’ and therefore ‘[t]hat which is not expressed doesn’t exist’;<sup>124</sup> the ear model in *A Wild Sheep Chase* can disconnect herself from her ears, rendering them ‘blocked’ (p. 34). A particularly disturbing instance of such themes of channelling and transmission is that of 1Q84’s Fuka-Eri, who acts as a ‘conduit’ of sorts through which Tengo and Aomame conceive a child.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the seeming quirkiness of her occupation, the ear model fulfils a very gendered and consequentially unoriginal role: that of the female sidekick who accompanies the male protagonist on his quest. Her presence facilitates many of the absurd conversations in the novel’s first half. It is thus arguable that she is employed as a sounding board by which the reader learns more about Boku’s deadpan and often arbitrary sense of humour.<sup>126</sup> She quite literally provides a listening ear, her role rendered further explicit in *Dance Dance Dance* when her name is revealed to be Kiki.<sup>127</sup> Iwamoto notes that Boku’s introduction to the ear model comes in the form of first seeing pictures of her disembodied ears, ‘thus depriving her of her subjectivity’;<sup>128</sup> Boku’s troubling hallucinatory experiences only occur once the presence of this listening ear (or pair of fetishised ears) has been taken away from him.

Chapter 2 discussed how the American-style house is the site of *noir* and ‘hardboiled’ tropes transposed to a Japanese context; possible references to Ōe’s 1960 *The Silent Cry* are combined with such *noir* tropes together with commentary on Japan’s political apathy. However, it is perhaps arguable that Murakami’s perspective transcends genre divisions but not gendered ones. While such ‘vaguening’ refers to multiple national contexts, the ‘universality’ such representations achieve is unmistakably male-centred. In

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<sup>124</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 26.

<sup>125</sup> Murakami, *1Q84*, p. 911.

<sup>126</sup> As Iwamoto notes, ‘[t]he chitchat they engage in, often bordering on the ridiculous, produces a delightful humor; but in the end it signifies nothing more than the postmodernist “noisy silence.”’ (Iwamoto, p. 298.)

<sup>127</sup> Rubin notes that ‘Kiki’ translates to ‘Listening’ in Japanese. (Rubin, p. 4.)

<sup>128</sup> Iwamoto, p. 298.

Murakami novels, adventure often occurs in the absence of women: both *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* begin with marriages dissolved in divorce and disappearance respectively. It is perhaps simplistic to associate his characters' often difficult journeys with exclusively positive experiences of self-actualisation. However, such *noirish* quests are often experienced from the perspective of unaccompanied men, who encounter occasional female love interests.

The ear model's absence thus has a vital bearing on the enclosure and insularity of the Sheep Professor's house. As already suggested by her ability to 'block' and 'unblock' her ears, this character appears to carry out a regulatory function as a conduit between worlds. This signifies transmission but also, crucially, silence (p. 34). It is arguable that she represents a doorway of sorts: when she leaves the Sheep Professor's house, Boku's isolation is confirmed.

The role of women in Beckett's and Murakami's indoor spaces is a paradoxical one. *A Wild Sheep Chase*'s ear model may be emblematic of a conception of femininity in both authors' work whereby women carry out what appears to be both a regulatory or controlling function while also remaining absent or largely unseen. This trope is most evident at times in which female characters themselves are physically aligned with imprisoning buildings: we will shortly explore this concept further with reference to Beckett's *Malone Dies*. Problematic Freudian connotations are obvious here: as Phil Baker notes with relation to Beckett, the 'dimly understood intimation of sex taking place' suggested by the noises overheard by the protagonist of 'First Love' when staying in Anna's house recall 'intra-uterine disturbances caused by the mother's sexual activity.'<sup>129</sup> It is important to assess the gendered biases reflected in this alignment of women with vague interior space, particularly with reference to similarly 'vaguened'

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<sup>129</sup> Baker, p. 96.

works written from a female perspective. I will thus briefly contrast the example of Murakami's ear model with the close link between women and architecture conveyed in Yūko Tsushima's contemporaneous novel, *Territory of Light*.

First serialised<sup>130</sup> and then published in 1978-9,<sup>131</sup> *Territory of Light* slightly preceded Murakami's literary debut *Hear the Wind Sing*. Tsushima's novel addresses the alignment of architecture with femininity and, in this case, motherhood, but from a female perspective revealing gendered biases around this connection. The novel charts the experiences of the protagonist and her daughter as they move into an apartment alone following the protagonist's divorce. Throughout the novel, the narrator's autonomy is figured in terms of her inhabitation of the physical space of her new apartment. The assertion of selfhood is aligned with economic independence here in a manner that arguably reflects the backdrop of the Japanese economy's bubble years and the *iyashi* movement, a form of writing which, as discussed earlier, is critiqued for being materially focused.<sup>132</sup> However, another of Tsushima's narrators, Kōko in *Child of Fortune*, is not conventionally 'successful', working as a part-time piano teacher and living contrary to the expectations of society and her family;<sup>133</sup> this fact suggests that Tsushima's writing is a more nuanced critique of women's struggle for definition outside of recognised avenues of marriage, motherhood, and career security.

In both *Territory of Light* and *Child of Fortune*, the protagonists are single mothers bombarded by the advice and disapproval of those around them. In *Territory of Light*, the narrator's husband advises her against living alone, saying she should live at

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<sup>130</sup> Jiayang Fan, 'A Japanese Novel Leading the Way to Ferrante' (2019) <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/books/review/territory-of-light-yuko-tsushima.html> [Accessed 18 November 2019].

<sup>131</sup> Yūko Tsushima, *Hikari no Ryōbun* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1979).

<sup>132</sup> 'Ironically, these "healing goods" (*iyashi guzzu*) could promise relaxation in part because they offered a break from all of the other affective appeals encountered daily in contemporary Japanese media. In contrast to commercially motivated affective appeals, *iyashi* goods offered their users the chance to construct a personal affective space free of outside intervention. At the same time, the marketing of these goods gave rise to advertising discourses of "stress relief" and "healing" aimed at the creation of new consumer desires and demands for self-care.' (Roquet, p. 88.)

<sup>133</sup> Yūko Tsushima, *Child of Fortune*, trans. by Geraldine Harcourt (UK: Penguin Classics, 2018), p. 3.

her mother's, and finally offering to search for an apartment with her.<sup>134</sup> She states, 'I didn't want him ever to set foot in my new life.'<sup>135</sup> Figures such as a professor who mentored her husband intervene similarly: 'Believe me,' the mentor tells her, 'nothing goes right for a woman on her own.'<sup>136</sup> Indoor space seems to play a role in society's discomfort with single motherhood throughout the novel. The protagonist is associated erroneously with the building she moves into: 'quite by chance, the man who at the time was still my husband had the same name as the building. As a result, I was constantly being mistaken for the proprietor.'<sup>137</sup> This misapprehension both implicitly perpetuates her tie to her ex-husband, as well as presumably increasing the sense that she is responsible for this new space. The downstairs tenant complains to her over some flooding in the building,<sup>138</sup> and the elderly neighbour complains as the protagonist's daughter has been throwing objects off the roof.<sup>139</sup>

Imagery of falling from heights pervades the narrative. The narrator discusses a childhood story of a boy who fell from a roof and survived, questioning whether this was true;<sup>140</sup> later, a boy from her daughter's day-care centre falls to his death from a ten-story building.<sup>141</sup> Her daughter's dropping of possessions out of the window leads the protagonist to worry that her daughter herself will fall;<sup>142</sup> in a dreamlike sequence, both her and her daughter throw leaves towards the sky and watch them float to the ground.<sup>143</sup> Freedom and escapism are juxtaposed with danger, all of which are figured spatially in terms of confinement and falling. While the protagonist used to have dreams that involved falling from heights, she states, 'now that I lived in a solitary tall building, I

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<sup>134</sup> Tsushima, *Territory*, p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.



never dreamed of falling.’<sup>144</sup> However, she has other vertigo-inducing dreams, such as a dream that she is flying a plane to locate an unspecified missing person.<sup>145</sup>

Architectural imagery pervades the novel. Its first line introduces the building: ‘The apartment had windows on all sides.’<sup>146</sup> The closing paragraphs centre on the protagonist finding a new apartment and saying goodbye to the former space.<sup>147</sup> However, unlike the old woman in *Ill Seen Ill Said* or, as this chapter’s fourth section will discuss, the ‘support liaison’ in Murakami’s ‘Scheherazade,’ the female characters in Tsushima’s novel are not physically compared to indoor spaces. Yet architectural space appears to invade the protagonist’s psyche as well as being the medium by which society’s disapproval of her is articulated. Dream sequences are frequent. When the flooded roof of her apartment is painted with bright silver waterproof paint, she dreams later that she is ‘sitting in a silver, star-shaped receptacle.’<sup>148</sup> The structure is spinning, and a former classmate appears and asks her ‘[w]hy are you such a loser?’<sup>149</sup> While the spinning star is a fantastical structure, it appears informed by the surreal image of the silver roof, which effects a dreamlike combination of indoor and outdoor space. The protagonist compares the roof to ‘a snowfield’ or being ‘adrift at sea’, and splashes with her daughter in the rooftop ‘sea.’<sup>150</sup> A space that has symbolised freedom and possibility is returned to in the protagonist’s dream to signify a loss of control over her life, or an insecurity regarding how others may view her choices.

It is arguable, however, that *Territory of Light* is an incongruous choice in a study of ‘vagueness’ and architecture. Buildings and rooms are if anything extensively described in this novel, to the extent that such passages serve to slow the narrative.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

However, there is a dreamlike or surreal quality to this reliance on architectural space, by which such spaces take on an oddly persistent metaphorical significance.

The protagonist refers to a forest near the apartment she moves into as the ‘Bois de Boulogne’ to visitors, stating that ‘the name of a wood on the outskirts of Paris had stuck in my mind, like Bremen or Flanders, some place named in a fairy tale’.<sup>151</sup> The forest in question ‘belonged to a large traditional garden’ in ‘a former daimyo’s manor’.<sup>152</sup> In an act of conceptual translation the narrator flippantly reinscribes the space with French place names, perhaps another gesture of self-determination following her break from her husband. Strikingly, the Bois de Boulogne is a park known for its history of sex work,<sup>153</sup> and the narrator seems unaware of this connotation. However, there is something puzzling yet fitting about the possibly uninformed use of this signifier in a narrative of uncertainty. Another such expression of flux comes in the form of her clandestine visits to the empty apartment below her own. She states, ‘I’d actually come to feel more at home in the place downstairs than in my own apartment’.<sup>154</sup> Entering the empty apartment is like causing ‘something unthinkable to happen’; the protagonist likens it to ‘magic’.<sup>155</sup> The space is half-lit: ‘the darkness was tinged with the glow of the street’s mercury lamps and signals and neon signs, filtering through the paper over the window’.<sup>156</sup> Since the windows of her apartment building are ‘identically shaped’, the protagonist is happy that ‘outwardly at least, the apartment I rented and the empty one downstairs could trade places and nobody would know’.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Notably in regard to the park’s history, both following articles by The Guardian and Time Magazine use the image of a figure photographed in the Bois de Boulogne in order to illustrate debates around sex work. (Angelique Chrisafis, ‘How prostitution became France’s hottest social issue’ (2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/sep/24/prostitution-france-hottest-social-issue> [Accessed 8 Jan 2022]; Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, ‘E.U. to Debate Making Buying Sex Illegal’ (2014) <https://time.com/9190/prostitution-europe-brussels-eu/> [Accessed 8 January 2022].)

<sup>154</sup> Tsushima, *Territory*, p. 113.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

This space becomes an (un)homely refuge for the protagonist, arguably representing freedom from the pressures of a narrow view of motherhood and femininity. While the ear model is one of many absent or missing women in Murakami's novels, her disappearance seeming to set a chain of supernatural events within the American-style house in motion, *Territory of Light* reveals a more positive association between femininity, architecture, and a form of apparent absence. Tsushima's protagonist seems to claim this uncanny space as a rejection of expectations that she be uniformly 'nurturing' or 'homely.' From both Murakami's and Tsushima's perspectives, spaces considered 'vague' or 'liminal' are the site of culturally determined gender performances. While these gender roles may not be specific to a Japanese context – as we have seen, the 'Murakami man' is a culturally transcendent invention – both of these novels appear to associate the assignation of a form of regulatory architectural function to women with an act of sidelining or dehumanisation. While Murakami's 'multivalent vagueness' means that his writing is both specifically Japanese while also containing cross-cultural references, the gender politics of *A Wild Sheep Chase* are less welcoming of diverse perspectives. Tsushima's novel, as a contemporaneous exploration of liminality from a female author, subverts and repurposes this 'vagueness' from a female perspective. This chapter will continue such discussion with reference to *Malone Dies*, a novel in which the link between architecture and absent female characters is particularly evident.

### 3.3 ‘[s]eparate study’:<sup>158</sup> Architecture and Gendered Divisions in *Malone Dies*

*One day, much later, to judge by his appearance, Macmann came to again, once again, in a kind of asylum. At first he did not know it was one, being plunged within it, but he was told so as soon as he was in a condition to receive news. They said in substance, You are now in the House of Saint John of God, with the number one hundred and sixty-six. Fear nothing, you are among friends. Friends! Well well. Take no thought for anything, it is we shall think and act for you, from now forward. We like it. Do not thank us therefore. In addition to the nourishment carefully calculated to keep you alive, and even well, you will receive, every Saturday, in honour of our patron, an imperial half-pint of porter and a plug of tobacco (pp. 248-249).*

Uncertain narration pervades this extract. Phrases such as ‘much later, to judge by his appearance’ (p. 248) suggest that the narrator is not omniscient; as we know that this story is being devised by Malone, it is a humorous quirk of the narrative that he acknowledges uncertainty regarding his own characters. The manner in which Macmann is addressed arguably provokes fears over the loss of bodily autonomy in old age: ‘take no thought for anything, it is we who will think and act for you’ (p. 249). Equally grim is the mention of ‘the nourishment calculated to keep you alive, and even well’; the institution’s upbeat language of rationing and diminishment reads almost as a play on mortality-based dread (ibid.). Age may, or may not, play a role in Malone’s institutionalisation; at any rate, the novel’s interiors create a sense of age as itself a confining structure.

In *Malone Dies*, humour is derived from the reduced functions of aging bodies: aging, like hunger in Moody’s analysis,<sup>159</sup> can be thought of as a supposed ‘universal.’ (It is important to note, however, that cultural and gendered attitudes to aging vary so much as to render this point tenuous.) In a turn common to many Beckett narrators, the

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<sup>158</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 179; *Malone Dies*. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>159</sup> Moody, p. 261.

physicality of the characters in *Malone Dies* is expressed viscerally: Malone states that his ‘arse [...] can hardly be accused of being the end of anything’ (p. 228), and the sexual scenes between Moll and Macmann are conveyed in farcical terms (p. 253). Parallel to its architectural interiority, the narrative is closely circumscribed by imagery of the aging body.

Moll’s appearance seems intended to provoke disgust: her ‘blobber-lip’ (p. 257), her literal tombstone tooth,<sup>160</sup> and her extreme ill health – according to which she is described eventually as ‘beginning to smell’ and prone to fits of vomiting (p. 258) – place her firmly within the ranks of Beckett’s aging bodies. Arguably complicating any analysis of misogynistic descriptions of the body in Beckett’s work is the idea that Beckett depicts all bodies with a similar level of disgust: as Malone says, ‘there is so little difference between a man and a woman, between mine I mean’ (p. 175). However, a reading based on Beckett’s ‘equal-opportunity’ disgust over the body is arguably disingenuous in that it must disregard an existing history of the male gaze in canonically informed literature.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, it is important to consider that while male characters may be described with visceral disgust in Beckett, they are nonetheless afforded large amounts of narrative space. Female characters are, by contrast, both treated with disgust *and* oddly absent. While neither set of descriptions exactly constitutes a rosy view of humanity, a gendered bias is revealed here.

While Moll’s unpalatable physical form is fully realised, she is (perhaps) an invention; the ‘real’ nurse in Malone’s institution is, by contrast, almost entirely unseen. Communication between them appears to have been minimal from the outset. The woman

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<sup>160</sup> ‘Then parting her jaws and pulling down her blobber-lip she discovered, breaking with its solitary fang the monotony of the gums, a long yellow canine bared to the roots and carved, with the drill probably, to represent the celebrated sacrifice’ (ibid.).

<sup>161</sup> It is interesting to set the example of Beckett’s bodies against Mulvey’s citation of Freudian scopophilia in discussions of the male gaze. Mulvey’s argument that ‘looking is itself a source of pleasure’ integral to phallogocentric perspectives seems opposed to the gaze in Beckett’s texts, which often renders female bodies grotesque. Nonetheless, Beckett’s women can be read as retaining something of Mulvey’s ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness*’, palpable in the voyeuristic way they are described: for instance, the reader learns much about Moll’s appearance but arguably quite little about this character’s background or personality. (Mulvey, p. 837.)

– she is not named – initially ‘came right into the room, bustled about, enquired about my needs, my wants’ (p. 179); she had difficulty understanding such needs and wants ‘[u]ntil the day [Malone] found the terms, the accents, that fitted her’ (ibid.). The very fact of her existence is debatable, as evidenced by the dismissal of this memory, articulated in a humorous paradox: ‘All that must be half imagination’ (ibid.). The woman, however, is credited with bringing Malone his stick. In a strange prioritising of objects over human beings, Malone appears more grateful to the stick itself than to the woman who brought it to him: ‘How great is my debt to sticks!’ (Ibid.)

Almost as soon as she has been introduced into the text, this woman’s presence appears to diminish rapidly. He appears to have known very little about her from the outset, aside from the speculation, ‘I believe her to be even older than I’ (ibid.). She is presented dehumanisingly as akin to an aspect of the building itself, as Malone speculates that perhaps ‘she goes with the room’ (ibid.). Malone thus dismisses: ‘In that case she does not call for separate study’ (ibid.) as though she is inseparable from the institution itself. Much like the undefined building in which Malone has found himself, the woman is inscrutable. The more he describes her the less he appears to know, as the reader learns that the woman is no longer as much in evidence. Malone states, ‘[a]ll I see of her now is the gaunt hand’ in the doorway, quickly denying this statement with the addition ‘[n]ot even that, not even that’ (ibid.). Eventually, he supposes that since he no longer directly sees her, she may have died, and it is in fact ‘another hand that lays and clears my little table’ (ibid.).

Gendered relations appear divided here, as if architecture functions to introduce literal distance between male and female characters. While Beckett’s indoor spaces appear to recall multiple political contexts through ‘multivalent vagueness’, with states such as aging and confinement arguably encompassing many different cultural situations,

indoor space functions here to repeatedly articulate a gendered dynamic. This can be seen as another example of 'vaguening' that transcends cultural context in some respects while remaining limited in others.

With reference to his ambiguous cry of 'Up the Republic', Malone states, 'I simply believe I can say nothing that is not true' (p. 229). Of course, the often uncertain nature of Molloy's monologue would suggest that this is a statement intended to create narrative unreliability. This statement could apply to both a French and an Irish context, two very different republics; the fact that Malone then equates this overdetermined slogan with the fluffy endearment 'Sweetheart!' (ibid.) cements the flippancy of his tone, suggesting a critique of romanticised nationalism. Nonetheless, the fluidity of movement between languages and cultures implied by this statement amounts to an assurance of the speaker's authority that may resonate on a deeper, more unintentional level than simply as a demonstration of Malone's delusion: the statement 'I can say nothing that is not true' recalls the entitlement of 'cosmopolitan' modernist narratives.

Another obvious instance of 'multivalent vagueness' in the text is that of the 'Lord Mayor of Cork', a reference that arises when Malone speculates over how long he could 'fast with impunity' (p. 266). As Moody's work on Beckett and hunger shows, this reference is both specifically Irish and applicable to a broader range of contexts. However, the 'multivalent vagueness' in this passage is accompanied by specifically misogynist imagery. The statement is preceded by Malone's plan to capture 'a little girl for example' (ibid.). He goes on to imagine he may 'half strangle her, three quarters, until she promises to give me my stick, give me soup, empty my pots, kiss me, fondle me, smile to me, give me my hat, stay with me, follow the hearse weeping into her handkerchief, that would be nice. I am such a good man, at bottom, such a good man, how is it nobody ever noticed it?' (Ibid.)

This passage is arguably another indication of Malone's narrative unreliability or delusion: according to an absurd mixing of registers, the exaggerated sentimentality of the fantasy – such as detailing that the girl would 'follow the hearse weeping into her handkerchief' (ibid.) – is juxtaposed with an obsessive need to access certain material objects such as his hat and his stick. Both Malone's possessions and his room appear complicit in this fantasy of control: he plans that he would 'jam the bed against the door to prevent her running away, but then she would throw herself out of the window' (ibid.). The interior space that allows the story's setting to remain ambiguous is also used as a site of gendered entrapment. It is an unfortunate paradox that, given a modern reading, the culturally transcendent aspect of such narratives appears in almost inverse proportion to the at times alienating misogyny of their perspectives.

The characters of both Moll and the nameless woman in Malone's own institution are notable in this regard. As Baker notes, both characters are derived from Mlle de Villenoix in Balzac's *Louis Lambert*.<sup>162</sup> They are themselves a case of 'multivalent vaguening.' To readers familiar with Balzac they may be recognisable, especially due to the existing overt references to the novel by which the Louis family in the French translation<sup>163</sup> are rendered as the Lamberts in the English (p. 193). However, details such as Moll's carved tooth render such characters absurd enough to appear unique to Beckett's narrative (p. 257). While these women have both been culturally transposed from a French novel, they are also themselves an 'original' and 'translation.' Moll is implicitly derived from Malone's nameless nurse; it is possible that the events that transpired between Moll and Macmann have happened to Malone. The absent woman in the novel's 'real life' context is described in visceral detail in Malone's purportedly

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<sup>162</sup> Baker, p. 127.

<sup>163</sup> Beckett, *Malone Meurt*, p. 40.



invented story. Parallel to Beckett's vermicular narrators, these female characters form their own series, however thinly sketched.

It is hard not to read the character of Moll – and by extension, her 'real-life' counterpart in Malone's own narrative – anachronistically. As she works in the House of St. John of God, her involvement with someone who may be either a prisoner or a psychiatric patient reads today as a depiction of institutional abuse. Macmann's initial disgust towards Moll, which subsequently turns to a form of affection (p. 256), appears particularly troubling in this context; as does Malone's repressed refusal to attribute any of Moll's fictional actions to the 'real-life' nameless woman in his institution.

Claustrophobic dynamics in which caregivers double as tormentors are obviously not new to Beckett's writing, as evidenced by pairs such as Lucky and Pozzo or Hamm and Clov. Female characters such as Moll are as reprehensible as Beckett's men, and it is perhaps an interesting reading to anachronistically foreground such subtexts. However, the psychoanalytic background by which the text is often read – and by which Beckett himself was extensively informed – serves in part to distract from such readings. Accounts of how the author's own parents met – May Roe having been Bill Beckett's nurse when he was treated for pneumonia in the Adelaide Hospital following a depressive episode<sup>164</sup> – further encourage psychoanalytic interpretations that straightforwardly link interior spaces to memories of the mother-child relationship.<sup>165</sup>

As when studying the decolonial uncanny, it is perhaps apposite to view such depictions of indoor space in new ways. A reading that foregrounds the claustrophobic interpersonal dynamics in these stories reveals the manner in which they are still relevant

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<sup>164</sup> Russell Smith, 'Childhood and Portora', in *Beckett in Context*, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 7-18 (p. 11).

<sup>165</sup> Kim considers Beckett's trilogy and novellas in terms of Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', viewing the texts as reformulations of Beckett's own exile and attempted distancing from a fraught relationship with his mother. As Kim notes, Molloy's mother's room is returned to in re-enactments of birth; the texts censor 'the names of both Ireland and women', as Molloy calls his mother 'Mag' in order to negate the syllable 'Ma.' (Kim, p. 279; p. 283; p. 282; Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Kim, p. 282).

today and can be read in conjunction with more contemporary texts. A similar sense of ‘vaguened’ yet claustrophobic space is present in Nicole Flattery’s short story ‘Track.’ The narrative follows a young woman who moves in with her partner, a once-successful comedian, in New York. She is Irish but doesn’t want to ‘rely on it too heavily, do that whole bit’.<sup>166</sup> His apartment, which is vaguely described, sets the stage for a dynamic in which she takes on a care-giving role: ‘I did small bouncy things around the apartment, swept and wiped surfaces.’<sup>167</sup> The comedian, of course, makes frequent references to his relationship with his mother:<sup>168</sup> similar to how Beckett’s work often self-psychologises,<sup>169</sup> psychoanalytic elements in Flattery’s story are occasionally so evident as to appear ironic.

The comedian’s attitude to the protagonist’s rural Irish background is articulated through imagery of interior space, the largely absent descriptions of interiors mirroring their interpersonal opacities. The protagonist has a ‘usual place’ she sits at the window, prompting the comedian to ask, ‘[d]id you have windows in that place?’<sup>170</sup> (He never refers to Ireland directly.) The protagonist’s response – ‘[n]ot as clean,’ I replied, smacking two fingers on the lower pane of glass. ‘Smaller.’ – is similarly devoid of detail.<sup>171</sup> The fact that she sends a sketch of the apartment home to her mother along with the platitude ‘I’m very happy here’<sup>172</sup> only serves to comically highlight that to the reader, the story’s interior settings are strangely unimaginable.

‘Vagueness’ here articulates a range of cross-cultural encounters and their attendant power dynamics. The comedian’s refusal to acknowledge Ireland by name indicates condescension; the protagonist’s similarly vague response appears to affirm the

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<sup>166</sup> Flattery, ‘Track’, p. 152.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>169</sup> ‘Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, for if you don’t there is the danger of finding them, in your mind, little by little. That is to say, you must think of them for a while, a good while, every day several times a day, until they sink forever in the mud. That’s an order.’ (Samuel Beckett, ‘The Expelled’, in *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), pp. 247-259 (p. 247).)

<sup>170</sup> Flattery, ‘Track’, p. 167.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

inferiority of Ireland's windows. However, her refusal to answer effusively, along with the fact that she maintains the comedian's generalising tone, suggest at a sarcasm he does not pick up on. Dialogue in 'Track' hints at a carefully curated environment in which only certain types of bland and polished communication appear possible. This loaded 'vagueness' then extends to the protagonist's impressionistic missive to her mother, as her sketch of the apartment contains information on her life in its barest and most material form. Much as the passage quoted above discusses windows, the text's perspective appears aware of the protagonist's potential role as a portal between cultures, an obligation she seems to resent and resist. She uses vague terms when discussing Ireland in New York, and when relaying information on her life in New York back to Ireland.

An association between the protagonist's selfhood and a kind of liminal or impersonal space appears to both confine and empower. As a form of dissociative escape the protagonist imagines airport interiors in detail, visualising 'walking uninterrupted through the departure gates, browsing through the duty free, doing various breathing exercises at the carousel'.<sup>173</sup> She appears to turn the apartment into a similarly culturally liminal space in her imagination: 'I practiced my accents so the neighbours would think there was a flurry of people who lived next door, a cultural mix, instead of just a comedian's girlfriend.'<sup>174</sup> However, the same images of liminality are used to describe the jarringly impersonal quality of the protagonist's relationship: 'Then I met the comedian and my life became one impossibly smooth flight.'<sup>175</sup> Imagery of airports and luggage resurfaces to articulate feelings of worthlessness: 'I felt my whole body shrink, like it could fit in a suitcase, be placed on a baggage carousel.'<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

The protagonist's airport-fantasies appear linked to a sense of escape from such confining yet impersonal domesticity. However, there are also undoubtedly more negative readings one may bring to bear on the protagonist's dissociative aspiration to placelessness. In what is arguably an innovative use of deliberate 'vagueness', it is unclear whether the airport-fantasies are emancipatory or dysfunctional. Unlike the 'placeless' *flânerie* for which modernist authors are often celebrated, the processes of erasure and invalidation in 'Track' do not appear as a positive 'vagueness.' However, both *Malone Dies* and 'Track' demonstrate a sense of 'vaguened' Irish identity at the same time as they highlight a range of more disturbing interpersonal 'vaguenesses.' It is apposite to further consider such comparisons between architecture and femininity with relation to Murakami's 'Scheherazade.'

### **3.4 'Nothing of a personal nature':<sup>177</sup> Suburbs and Series in 'Scheherazade', 'Vaguenings' Further Afield**

*Scheherazade's next visit to the House was three days later, after the weekend had passed. As always, she came bearing large paper bags stuffed with provisions. She went through the food in the fridge, replacing everything that was past its expiration date, examined the canned and bottled goods in the cupboard, checked the supply of condiments and spices to see what was running low, and wrote up a shopping list. She put some bottles of Perrier in the fridge to chill. Finally, she stacked the new books and DVDs she had brought with her on the table (p. 133).*

Located as she is in an *œuvre* of female characters notable for their capricious behaviour, 'Scheherazade's' eponymous character appears notable due to her association with routine and regularity at the story's outset. In its character dynamics, 'Scheherazade'

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<sup>177</sup> Murakami, 'Scheherazade', p. 144. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

repeatedly foregrounds conflicting themes of reliability and inconsistency: interestingly, the exploration of these character traits is often achieved through depictions of household tasks and interior space. As earlier chapters have discussed, no brand names occur throughout this passage aside from the mention of Perrier (p. 144). There is a practical and unglamorous cast to the items described. While Murakami often conveys urban life through reference to cosmopolitan or luxurious items – for example during the French restaurant scene in *A Wild Sheep Chase*<sup>178</sup> – the implied setting of this story is far from such a world. One learns little of Scheherazade’s background other than that she is from ‘a provincial city’ ‘a twenty-minute drive away’ from the House (pp. 15-16). She is a ‘full-time housewife with two children in elementary school’, her husband a ‘typical company man’ (ibid.).

The methodical nature of Scheherazade’s actions is evident in the quoted extract. It is possible to imagine that in the ‘vaguened’ House in which Habara resides, Scheherazade’s visits provide not only contact with the outside world but also a measure of passing time. Like the ear model in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, she serves a regulatory function, as a window or connection. Time is implicitly measured, for Habara, in the steady usage and expiration of the food supplies Scheherazade brings. The shopping list she writes up signifies the promise of future visits. The books and DVDs are addressed last, putting necessities before entertainment (p. 133).

The flashbacks depicting Scheherazade’s break-ins are notable for the suburban quiet they suggest. She states that an unoccupied house is ‘like the quietest place in the world’ (p. 124). While the location of the house in her flashbacks is not described, the reader is informed that ‘[q]uiet residential communities in provincial cities like theirs had little crime, and so people were relaxed enough to leave a spare key under a mat or a

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<sup>178</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, pp. 30-38.

potted plant' (p. 125). The built environment of this story is a peripheral one. While Murakami's cities are arguably described in terms of an urban 'placelessness', such suburban banality – as in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle's* domestic scenes – is similarly devoid of cultural markers.

Much like the methodical household activities she carries out, Scheherazade's appearance is described as unglamorous. Habara states, '[h]er hairstyle, her makeup, and her manner of dress weren't exactly slapdash, but neither were they likely to receive any compliments' (p. 116). Implicit comparisons between the female character and the space she frequents recall the presence of Moll and the nameless woman in *Malone Dies*. In both cases the female character's thinly sketched indeterminacy is aligned with the vagueness of the space that she and the male protagonist occupy. Oddly, certain descriptions physically compare Scheherazade to indoor space. She is 'running to flab' with the result that she gives the impression that 'every nook and cranny had been filled with putty' (ibid.), an objectifying description that likens her, sure enough, to a building. Moreover, by this logic she is also a *vague* building: 'her face lacked focus, so that the impression she left was somehow blurry' (ibid.). In a further description that allies her with enclosed and liminal space, the reader is told that 'those who walked by her on the street, or shared the same elevator, probably took little notice of her' (ibid.). She blends into her surroundings to the extent that she is physically described in problematic terms comparing her to an inanimate architectural structure. The ambiguity of Murakami's interior settings facilitates cultural transcendence; this erasure takes on a misogynistic tone when directed at his female characters.

A central tension is set up between the themes of reliability versus capriciousness in the text. Scheherazade is a 'housewife from a provincial city well on the road to middle age' (ibid.). The vague conditions of Habara's stay in an unelaborated House contrast

with the unremarkable nature of her presence as his assigned ‘support liaison’; the sexual aspect of their relationship, also implicitly among her “support activities”, is described in similarly matter-of-fact terms (pp. 121-122).

Scheherazade’s stories, however, reveal aspects of her personality Habara finds difficult to reconcile with her everyday, suburban existence. The first of these is her account of a past life as a lamprey eel. This prompts Habara to record in his diary the words: “Scheherazade, Lamprey, Former Lives” (p. 121). Similarly, when she tells him the story of her break-ins to the boy’s house, one of his first thoughts is to contemplate what he would write in his diary about her story. He experimentally summarises: “Love Thief, Pencil, Tampon” (p. 128). Much as *Ill Seen Ill Said*’s narrative voice attempts to circumscribe both the cabin’s topography and the woman’s movements, Habara’s understanding of Scheherazade is articulated through concise written summaries. With what may be either paranoia or the justifiable wariness of one imprisoned in a Kafkaesque universe, Habara believes others will read his diary. Of the tampon statement he thinks: ‘He’d like to see what they’d make of that!’ (Ibid.) There are two different circumscriptions at play in the novel: Habara’s own literal confinement through unelaborated bureaucratic circumstances, in which he must rely on Scheherazade’s weekly visits, and his own attempted circumscription of this experience via his diary entries.

Scheherazade initially appears as a deviation from what readers may think of as the typical ‘Murakami woman’: she leads a mundane, suburban existence ostensibly removed from Murakami’s supernaturally inflected cityscapes. This introduction serves to emphasise the surprising revelation of her past behaviour. Much like Murakami’s interlinked Boku narrators, her character brings to mind a Beckettian ‘vermicular’ seriality containing both deviations and recurring themes. Suburban space arguably

functions to mark Scheherazade out in this narrative, precisely for her unremarkable nature; space, in this case, functions as reductive character description in a manner similar to Habara's circumscribing diary entries.

Conflicting themes of risk and reliability are figured through the occupation of indoor space and household objects. While the present-day Scheherazade brings Habara a weekly stock of supplies in a manner that appears regimented and methodical, her past account of the break-ins reveals that she took a pencil from the boy's room (p. 127), graduating to stealing a badge ten days later (p. 131), and finally stole a t-shirt (p. 137). In both past and present timelines, Scheherazade's role is defined through her either providing household items, such as the groceries, or stealing household items, such as the piece of laundry. Lists and seriality pervade these descriptions in a manner that resonates interestingly with Murakami's series of character archetypes.

Scheherazade's break-in stories serve to replace her firmly among Murakami's stock characters. The spontaneous or inexplicable behaviour of female characters is a recurrent theme in the Murakami universe. In the early conversations between Toru and Kumiko in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Kumiko's unreadable nature is articulated through an arbitrary discussion in which she reveals a dislike for certain everyday items – blue tissue paper, toilet paper with flower patterns, and the combination of green peppers and beef<sup>179</sup> – of which her husband was not aware. In both cases, the female character's unpredictability is figured in household terms, even if the division of domestic labour between Toru and Kumiko is not a traditionally gendered one.

The trope in Murakami's writing of women as unknowably capricious is a recurrent and tired one.<sup>180</sup> In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Toru muses to himself, 'I had a few too many women around me these days. And each one came packaged with her

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<sup>179</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217; Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 23; Murakami, *1Q84*, pages cited in main text of following paragraph.



own special, inscrutable problem.’<sup>181</sup> Bewildered statements such as this one, notable in that it uses imagery of both objectification and confinement, are often combined with an attitude of condescension on the male narrator’s behalf. This latter tone is perhaps figured in one of its most problematic incarnations in the relationship between Tengo and the seventeen-year-old Fuka-Eri in *IQ84*: ‘Her concise speaking style was strangely persuasive [...] He could not tell, though, how seriously he should take her.’<sup>182</sup>

At other times, this bemused tone appears to be a critical comment on his male characters themselves, hinting at their lack of emotional insight. As Iwamoto states, the protagonist of *A Wild Sheep Chase* ‘is dejected over and saddened by the failed marriage; but there is no reflection whatsoever on what might have gone wrong, and the matter is soon erased from his consciousness.’<sup>183</sup> However, the numerous references to breasts, accidentally billowing skirts, and – most disturbingly – the physical beauty of Fuka-Eri in the first fifty pages of *IQ84 alone* (p. 11; p. 12; p. 28; p. 30; p. 34; p. 39; p. 43; p. 45; p. 47; p. 50) do not inspire confidence in such work as a uniformly self-aware commentary on gendered relations.

In ‘Scheherazade’, Habara’s housebound passivity has its place in this typical Murakami dynamic. Habara comes to rely on Scheherazade’s visits, but also fears the day they end: ‘Nothing of a personal nature – no vow, no implicit understanding – held them together. Theirs was a chance relationship created by someone else, and might be terminated on that person’s whim’ (p. 144). Both characters are presented as pawns in a greater system that remains unexplained throughout the story.

‘Scheherazade’ is arguably one of Murakami’s more troubling short stories, reading at times like a crystallisation of some of his most recurrent tropes. In the story’s

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<sup>181</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 217.

<sup>182</sup> Murakami, *IQ84*, p. 50.

<sup>183</sup> Iwamoto, p. 298.

flashbacks, stalking behaviour on the female character's part is romanticised; there is likewise an uncomfortable sexualisation of young women in Murakami's descriptions. Accounts of the teenage Scheherazade licking pencils (p. 134) could almost be a depressing parody of the male-authored voyeuristic gaze, a product of the writing reviewer Paul Thomas calls 'uncritically awash in sexism'<sup>184</sup> throughout the seemingly Hemingway-inspired collection *Men Without Women*.<sup>185</sup>

In a related vein, the story's eponymous reference to *A Thousand and One Nights* is itself curious. Murakami often employs intertextual references as titles: *Men Without Women*, *Norwegian Wood*, *South of the Border*, *West of the Sun*, and *1Q84*, among other novels and collections, make use of this technique. While such overt referencing appears anything but vague, it *does* recall processes of rewriting and translation, similar to Murakami's own free interpretations of texts by American authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald.<sup>186</sup>

In his typically matter-of-fact tone, Murakami foregrounds the reference to *A Thousand and One Nights* at the opening of 'Scheherazade': 'Each time they had sex, she told Habara a strange and gripping story afterwards. Like Queen Scheherazade in "A Thousand and One Nights." Though, of course, Habara, unlike the king, had no plan to chop off her head the next morning' (p. 114). This comparison is set up from the outset. However, unlike Scheherazade, who, as Susan Muaddi Darraj notes, 'is [r]evered [...] as a heroine for distracting the sultan Shahrayar from his murderous rampage with intriguing stories',<sup>187</sup> the unequal power dynamic between Habara and Scheherazade is reversed.

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<sup>184</sup> Paul Thomas, 'Haruki Murakami's 7 Stories: "It's Quite Easy to Become Men Without Women"' (2017) <https://medium.com/@plthomasedd/haruki-murakamis-7-stories-it-s-quite-easy-to-become-men-without-women-f5bf785675d3> [Accessed 22 September 2018].

<sup>185</sup> Hemingway's original *Men Without Women* was published in 1927 by Charles Scribner's Sons. (Ernest Hemingway, *Men Without Women* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927).)

<sup>186</sup> Hadley and Akashi, p. 471.

<sup>187</sup> Susan Muaddi Darraj, 'Introduction', in *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, ed. by Susan Muaddi Darraj (Connecticut, London: Praeger, 2004), pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

Murakami's Scheherazade appears to tell her stories in an offhand manner, while the original Scheherazade resorted to them as a means to save her own life. There is the same sense of a possible outcome deferred throughout the story, as Habara fears imprisonment and a future in which he is cut off from the world and human intimacy entirely. Therefore, it is possible that he is occupying a subverted version of the original 'Scheherazade' role, with the woman's stories intended to distract him from a grim fate such as his possible imprisonment or death. Both characters appear to be at the mercy of the aforementioned bureaucratic system, to which the reader is not privy.

However, matters are complicated by the fact that aspects of the character of Scheherazade herself have been historically lost in translation. Muaddi Darraj notes that the character of Scheherazade 'suffered terribly at the hands of translators', a character originally 'an intelligent woman, schooled in literature, philosophy, and history', who was rendered 'shallow' on her introduction to Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>188</sup> References to Scheherazade have themselves, through global circulation, become detached from their original context; in a form of meta-appropriation Murakami modifies this reference further. There is a discernible trend by which what appear to be 'concrete' intertextual references in Murakami in fact point backwards to an unstable or multivalent origin. Just as Murakami's possible references to Ōe cite both a Japanese near-contemporary and an author who himself takes a multicultural stance, Murakami's references to Scheherazade cite a story that has itself become internationally adapted and circulated.

However, other gendered rewritings in Murakami's work are perhaps less intentional. I would like to advance the argument that Murakami's very frequent misogyny is subject to its own losses in translation, often on a literal level. This facet of

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

Murakami's *œuvre* can appear at times to benefit from a critical blind spot, as it is occasionally difficult to separate uninterrogated misogyny from deliberate critique in his work. Iwamoto addresses the lack of subjectivity afforded to the ear model in *A Wild Sheep Chase* in terms of a postmodern preoccupation with surfaces: 'It is not that Boku is intentionally mean and insensitive, only that he is fundamentally more comfortable with exteriors'.<sup>189</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo attributes his success with Chinese readers<sup>190</sup> partially to the fact that 'Murakami's work always involves a gap that prevents its first-person male protagonist from being fully Japanese and completely masculine.'<sup>191</sup> According to this argument, hegemonic narratives of Japaneseness and masculinity are offset by Murakami's cosmopolitan narrators – who 'read Jack London, listen to Bob Dylan, and eat pâté de foie gras and spaghetti.'<sup>192</sup> In Lo's words they are 'soft, irresolute men – homebodies with more dynamic girlfriends or wives.'<sup>193</sup>

It is interesting to view these two readings in conjunction with one another. Iwamoto attributes Murakami's lack of well-rounded female characters to postmodern depthlessness. Cheung Lo addresses only the passivity of Murakami's male characters, seeing this as a subversion of Japanese imperialist narratives. A still stranger statement regarding Murakami and women comes, however, from Strecher's *Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami*. In discussing the development of Murakami's once-passive narrators throughout his *œuvre*, Strecher delineates how *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*'s Toru, for instance, progresses from 'mild-mannered' beginnings to rescuing his wife from a

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<sup>189</sup> Iwamoto, p. 298.

<sup>190</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo notes that '[c]ompared to many other Japanese literary works, Murakami's fiction is exceptionally well received by Chinese readers in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.' Lo observes that Murakami has been extensively translated into Chinese, a generation of younger Chinese writers consequently developing a 'Murakami-esque writing style.' (Kwai-Cheung Lo, 'Return to What One Imagines to Be There: Masculinity and Racial Otherness in Haruki Murakami's Writings about China', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 37, 3 (2004), 258-276 (p. 259).)

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

metaphysical realm and killing the corrupt rapist Noboru Wataya with a baseball bat.<sup>194</sup>

Strecher continues:

This was the signal from Murakami that some of his protagonists were about to drop their nice-guy façade and start kicking some ass. Later protagonists commit even more shocking acts in the name of self-preservation. Fifteen-year-old Tamura Kafka, by the end of his narrative, will have hacked his father to death with a kitchen knife (albeit by proxy), seduced a woman he imagines to be his mother, and forcibly raped a girl he thinks might be his sister (in the metaphysical realm, but still...)<sup>195</sup>

This analysis provokes the question: according to which logic is committing the rape of one's sister considered a sign of positive character development? Strecher appears to use this instance as an example of Murakami's characters overcoming their erstwhile passivity. Not only does this statement appear to be underpinned by a stigmatising view of male 'weakness', it actually seems to consider committing incestuous rape an improvement to the former.

In addition to generating a surprising heterogeneity of readings, misogyny in Murakami's works is itself subject to cultural misinterpretation. Due to Murakami's 'hardboiled' influences, certain aspects of his misogyny may be informed by American literature. His male characters deliver curt Chandleresque lines to their female counterparts: 'you've got long legs and a sharp mind.'<sup>196</sup> According to an othering perspective, Western audiences may attribute the stereotypically gendered dynamics in Murakami's novels to his Japanese context, when some such attitudes are themselves derived from references to existing works of American prose. Murakami's troubling and thinly-sketched gender dynamics enact, perhaps unintentionally, *a kind of 'multivalent*

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<sup>194</sup> Strecher, Loc 386 of 5837.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., Loc 533 of 5837.

<sup>196</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 94; *Pinball*, 1973.

vagueness' themselves, as they both function within and independent of their cultural context.

For instance, an apt example of this multiplicity of meaning is the manner in which Murakami's depictions of urban atomisation – as evidenced through his often isolated male protagonists – should not be attributed unilaterally to Japanese gender dynamics. In 'The Anxiety of Intimacy in Hiromi Kawakami's "The Nakano Thrift Shop"' for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, reviewer M. W. Larson argues that the 'eagerness to understand the country as impotent is likely due to Western perceptions as much as it is to any statistically measurable phenomenon.'<sup>197</sup> Larson goes on to comment that 'birth rates have been falling across the developed world for decades',<sup>198</sup> suggesting that this decline is by no means a uniquely Japanese situation.

Hiromi Kawakami's books can be seen as something of a female-authored continuance/subversion of the Murakami style. Her narrators speak with an offhand breeziness that masks a greater sense of urban atomisation. In *The Nakano Thrift Shop*, Takeo eschews sex, stating '[i]t just got to be too much trouble';<sup>199</sup> the protagonist of Kawakami's *Strange Weather In Tokyo* fears the gendered obligations of relationships, wanting to avoid being 'trapped in the kitchen.'<sup>200</sup> There is a danger that European or American criticism of such work may rely on stereotypes of passivity or 'deviant' sexuality,<sup>201</sup> when the behaviour of, for instance, Murakami's unreliable narrators is not always interpretable along such essentialising lines. Perhaps even more astonishingly,

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<sup>197</sup> M. W. Larson, 'The Anxiety of Intimacy in Hiromi Kawakami's "The Nakano Thrift Shop"' (2017) <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-anxiety-of-intimacy-in-hiromi-kawakamis-the-nakano-thrift-shop/> [Accessed 15 November 2019].

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Hiromi Kawakami, *The Nakano Thrift Shop*, trans. by Allison Markin Powell (London: Portobello Books, 2016), p. 58.

<sup>200</sup> Hiromi Kawakami, *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, trans. by Allison Markin Powell (London: Portobello Books, 2013), p. 56.

<sup>201</sup> The translation encounters that brought Japanese literature to the Anglophone consciousness have been shaped by othering. As Hugh Borton et al. observe, many credit Lafcadio Hearn as 'responsible for the traditional Romantic view of Japan.' Yuzo Ota, for instance, disagrees with Hearn's insistence on stereotypes of Japanese sexual reserve, citing that this is disproved by works such as the *Manyōshū* and the *Tales of Genji*. Ota makes the connection between these generalisations and Hearn's uninformed linguistic position, noting that Hearn's 'virtual illiteracy in Japanese' made it 'difficult for him to detect errors in his own interpretations.' (Hugh Borton, Serge Eliséeff, and Edwin O. Reischauer, qtd. in Daniel Stempel, 'Lafcadio Hearn: Interpreter of Japan', *American Literature*, 20, 1 (1948), 1-19 (p. 1); Yuzo Ota, 'Lafcadio Hearn: Japan's Problematic Interpreter', in *Rediscovering Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Sukehiro Hirakawa (Kent: Global Oriental, 1997), pp. 210-222 (p. 222).)

much evidence points to the fact that misogyny in Murakami's works is also *literally* subject to mistranslation.

In an interview with Murakami titled 'Haruki Off the Shore: Murakami in Sakhalin, June-July 2003', Russian translator and author Dmitry Kovalenin asked Murakami about changes made to his Japanese originals. Kovalenin told Murakami – who appeared unaware of certain changes made by his translators – that Birnbaum had modified certain scenes in both *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* and *Dance Dance Dance*.<sup>202</sup> The removal of cultural markers in translation, often for editing purposes, is an acknowledged phenomenon with relation to Murakami's work. Rubin, for instance, removed references to McDonalds and a Blue Bird model car in 'The Second Bakery Attack', along with generally condensing aspects of the narrator's interior monologue and certain descriptions of the couple's break-in.<sup>203</sup> However, in the case of 'The Second Bakery Attack', such changes appear intended to accelerate the story's plot;<sup>204</sup> crucially, both examples of Birnbaum's edits feature problematic depictions of teenage female characters. Kovalenin explains, '[f]or example, in *Dansu, Dansu, Dansu*, the scene when the protagonist lets thirteen-year-old Yuki drink his piña colada is gone. In *Sekai no owari to hādoboirudo wandārando*, our hero does not kiss the seventeen-year-old girl'.<sup>205</sup> It is important to note that these examples are not cited with reference to how they sexualise underage girls: addressing the troubling nature of both of these examples appears not to have been Kovalenin's point. Rather, the conversation then turns to questions of proofreading and Japanese publishing conventions.<sup>206</sup> Thus, two converse

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<sup>202</sup> Dmitry Kovalenin, in Dmitry Kovalenin and Haruki Murakami, 'Haruki Off the Shore: Murakami in Sakhalin, June-July 2003', *Japanese Language and Literature*, 49, 1 (2015), 109-122 (p. 112).

<sup>203</sup> Karashima, p. 92.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Kovalenin, in Kovalenin and Murakami, p. 113.

<sup>206</sup> "But how does it happen that so many parts of your stories get lost in their English versions?"

"Do they, really?"

"Well, definitely. For example, in *Dansu, Dansu, Dansu*, the scene when the protagonist lets thirteen-year-old Yuki drink his piña colada is gone. In *Sekai no owari to hadoboirudo wandārando*, our hero does not kiss the seventeen-year-old girl in pink underground...."

"Seriously?" Murakami looks a bit stunned. "But then you could not fully understand their relationships!"

processes based on the loss of misogyny in translation are at play here. Non-Japanese audiences may attribute some of the more problematic sexual relationships portrayed in Murakami's work to Japanese culture rather than to the troubling views of a given individual; such audiences are also not privy to the full extent of the misogyny of Murakami's Japanese originals.

It is interesting to contrast Murakami's 'Scheherazade' with Sayaka Murata's 2016 novel *Convenience Store Woman*.<sup>207</sup> Written two years after Murakami's short story, this text can be quite easily put into dialogue with both 'Scheherazade' and Beckett's *Malone Dies*. *Convenience Store Woman* provides a disturbing, albeit female-authored, take on gendered dynamics in both private and public interior space. The novel's protagonist, Keiko, does not fit expectations surrounding femininity: she recalls that when she was a child, she failed to be moved by the sight of a dead bird, and instead suggested to her mother that they eat it.<sup>208</sup> Interestingly, Yūko Tsushima's protagonist in *Territory of Light* makes an almost identical suggestion to her daughter regarding a dead goldfish:<sup>209</sup> both descriptions may be intended to demonstrate the female character's failure to exhibit nurturing traits, and the manner in which their apparent coldness disturbs others. While female friends discuss Keiko's absent love life, she narrates that she felt 'indifferent to the whole thing and had never really given it any thought.'<sup>210</sup> However, this deviation from societal norms does not appear to be an admirable or

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"That's exactly what I mean," I say. "Not to mention *Nejimakidori kuronikuru*, where at least one-half of Volume Three was totally thrown away. Who decides what should be left in or cut out in your foreign editions? You, the translator, the editor, or someone else?" "Well, seriously speaking, I just have no time for such proofreading," he sighs. "Plus, that's not my part of the job. About *Kuronikuru*, I know the situation. But there's something important to be understood. An average Japanese spends three or four hours a day on the train, in to work and back home again. And that's the time of his life he spends reading books. A hanging strap in one hand to keep him steady, a book in the other. He may fall asleep like this, especially after work, and then wake up and keep on reading. If the book is too heavy, it may fall out of his hand, and it's not an easy feat to search for it under everyone's feet. It even may fall upon someone's head. That is why the most popular books in Japan are lightweight palm-size pocket editions. Any published novel gets divided into such "palmbooks" - two, or sometimes three, small volumes. It's not a question of the story's length; the greatest demand made on a book is that it should be easy to hold in one hand...." Murakami shows us the palm of his left hand with long supple fingers. "In the States, though, the situation is almost the opposite. They all drive cars there, and read books mostly before falling asleep. So, all the mass literature gets published in single volumes. But the single volume books have their psychological limits. A book thicker than 400-500 pages is hard to sell. So they have to survive within those limits. Well, what can I do about that? [...]" (Ibid.)

<sup>207</sup> Sayaka Murata, *Konbini ningen* (Tokyo: Bungeishinju Ltd., 2016).

<sup>208</sup> Sayaka Murata, *Convenience Store Woman*, trans. by Ginney Tapley Takemori (London: Portobello Books, 2018), p. 6.

<sup>209</sup> Tsushima, *Territory*, p. 60.

<sup>210</sup> Murata, *Convenience*, p. 37.



empowered one, and there are hints that Keiko is an unreliable narrator with possibly pathological traits: she thinks briefly about killing her sister's baby,<sup>211</sup> and is attracted to the space of the convenience store due to its almost ruthless simplicity as a social order, 'a forcibly normalized environment where foreign matter is immediately eliminated.'<sup>212</sup>

Large parts of the novel take place in the store's featureless setting. The first line states, '[a] convenience store is a world of sound',<sup>213</sup> establishing this environment as a microcosm or heterotopia. While set in a featureless, mass-produced bubble, the world Murata conveys is inflected with East Asian specificity – the store stocks rice balls<sup>214</sup> and cans of coffee,<sup>215</sup> as well as more Americanised snacks such as corn dogs.<sup>216</sup> Translated into English by Ginny Tapley Takemori, the dialogue contains Japanese transliterations such as 'Irasshaimasé!'<sup>217</sup> It is possible to conceive of Murata's convenience store – not altogether positively – as a translational space underpinned by 'multivalent vagueness', containing elements both Japanese and internationally recognisable.

Keiko feels a physical affinity with the space. Since she eats most of her food from work, she is comforted by the thought that her 'body is entirely made up of food from this store'.<sup>218</sup> It is as though her own lack of identification with stereotypes of femininity as 'warm' or empathic is dramatised through her exaggerated devotion to the impersonal work environment. Her 'body responds automatically'<sup>219</sup> to the store's routines, and she can read customers through years of experience. 'A cold drink is often the last item customers take before coming to the checkout till,'<sup>220</sup> she states, for instance, and she can predict one customer's actions before he carries them out: 'Instantly I deduce

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

that he will use electronic money.’<sup>221</sup> Like Murakami’s Scheherazade, she is portrayed as living a repetitive life; like Scheherazade, she is framed as prone to ideas that appear uncharacteristic and surprising given what we know of her personality. Both characters are associated, unflatteringly, with mundane architecture; *Convenience Store Woman* arguably explores the societal factors behind this sense of uncanny disconnect in novel-length detail, providing an interesting counterpart to ‘Scheherazade’<sup>221</sup>’s short-form narrative.

The crux of the novel – and an element in which it is similar to both ‘Scheherazade’ and *Malone Dies* – comes in the form of Keiko’s strange alliance with her coworker Shiraha. Unreliable narrators both, the female and male leads are presented as sympathetic misfits while also displaying morally dubious traits: it is difficult to discern whether this portrayal stigmatises those who find social integration challenging, or whether the novel makes a more nuanced commentary on the effects of urban solitude. Fired from the convenience store for stalking a female customer,<sup>222</sup> Shiraha is unambiguously misogynist; his statements on work-oriented masculinity reveal both the misdirected quality of his hatred and the flawed circumstances in which his misogyny has been legitimised and reinforced. He states: ‘‘nothing’s changed since the Stone Age [...] this is a dysfunctional society. And since it’s defective, I’m treated unfairly.’<sup>223</sup> Both male and female leads in this novel appear affected by the inability to easily define oneself outside gendered roles, even in their more updated forms: singleness, for example, is more acceptable in a female acquaintance of Keiko’s who has a thriving career.<sup>224</sup>

However, their reactions to this society differ. While Keiko appears to find comfort in the store’s reliance on imitation, explaining to Shiraha how ‘you play the part

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

of the fictitious creature called ‘an ordinary person’ [...], Shiraha finds such strictures ‘painful’.<sup>225</sup> The culmination of their uneasy alliance occurs when Shiraha proposes that Keiko keep him ‘hidden from society’<sup>226</sup> in her apartment as a way of avoiding the workforce. Keiko, in return, can pretend he is her husband to avoid pressure from her family over being single.<sup>227</sup> Their arrangement is articulated through the dysfunctional and jarring use of household space. In a manner that recalls abduction or hiding a fugitive, Shiraha hides in the bathroom when Keiko’s sister visits, sitting on cushions in the empty bath.<sup>228</sup> Keiko brings him meals in a washbasin at designated ‘feeding times.’<sup>229</sup> Tellingly, Keiko’s sister would rather accept a lie concerning their purported romantic relationship than address the dysfunctionality of this situation.<sup>230</sup>

Much as in the case of Habara and Scheherazade, what appears to be a gendered domestic partnership is underpinned by a sense of confinement and unspoken strictures. Despite its impersonality, the translational space of the convenience store is also the site of gendered norms, a ‘multivalently vague’ microcosm that serves as a site of political commentary. The apparent banality of this setting acts as the site of a variety of contemporary problems: the effects of urban isolation and dehumanising work, the interchangeable nature of ‘chain-store’ spaces, the societal consequences for men and women not considered conventionally ambitious.

Despite these themes, it is notable that both Murakami’s ‘Scheherazade’ and Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman* are improbably upbeat texts, assuming a light-hearted and even cartoonish tone. Such humorous distance can conceal incisive commentary, as in Murata’s case; as ‘Scheherazade’ demonstrates, this same style may

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

also discourage the reader from connecting the text to a less-pleasant ‘real world’ of misogynistic bias. With such issues of humorous distance in mind, this chapter will conclude with a final example of ‘multivalent vagueness’ in what is perhaps one of the most obviously troubling texts in this study, Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

### 3.5 Conclusion: Challenging ‘gently buyable weirdness’;<sup>231</sup> the Trope of the Dead Girl

*When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along to an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini’s The Thieving Magpie, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.*

*I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been someone with news of a job. I turned down the gas, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.*

*“Ten minutes, please,” said a woman on the other end.*

*I’m good at recognizing people’s voices, but this was not one I knew.*<sup>232</sup>

The blurb of the Vintage edition of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* describes Toru as having a ‘vague and blameless life’. Indeed, the above extract appears to emphasise this very blameless quality: he is detached, entertains an amateur appreciation of the finer things, and is oblivious or withdrawn to the degree that he appears to occasionally see the outside world as a hindrance. Like the Chandler narrators Steffen Hantke discusses,<sup>233</sup> Toru is not a character who seeks out turbulent or surprising events: life, ostensibly,

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<sup>231</sup> Will Harrison, ‘Fiction without Women’ (2017) <https://thebaffler.com/latest/fiction-without-women-harrison> [Accessed 18 November 2019].

<sup>232</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 5; for the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>233</sup> Hantke, p. 5.

happens to him. In perhaps the most obvious illustration of this, Toru is literally whistling to himself when the novel opens (p. 5) as if to illustrate his innocence.

In this first scene the protagonist's activities are divided according to different rooms: Toru is seen first in the kitchen, crossing into the sitting room to answer the phone call (ibid.). In keeping with this transition from one room to another, the narrative moves jarringly from mundane to intriguing when the anonymous female voice on the phone asks Toru for ten minutes to 'understand each other' (ibid.) Uncomfortably, the caller will then coerce Toru into a sexual conversation in a scene soon to follow, which he reluctantly entertains before hanging up (p. 11). The inappropriateness of the caller's behaviour is not addressed, and rather appears intended as a source of mystery with which to begin the novel. Toru's move from the kitchen to the sitting room in order to answer the call anticipates the novel's motifs of compartmentalisation. Everyday life is contained in, or represented by, one space, and the phone calls that will set the novel in motion take place in an adjacent room.

Following a separate call from his wife in which she asks him to help find their cat (p. 8), Toru finds himself wandering in the blind alley between the houses in their estate, a forgotten and nostalgic space described in terms of uncanny disuse. The alley is full of objects such as 'an old, brown, withered Christmas tree', old 'tricycles and hoops and [...] tortoise dolls'; there are 'lawn chairs caked in dirt, as if they had not been used for some months or even years' (p. 13). In a manner typical of the 'inconsistent vagueness' discussed in Chapter 1, stock objects such as the Christmas tree are juxtaposed with their more atypical counterparts – a tortoise doll is, after all, imaginable, but is a much less archetypal image than a Christmas tree (ibid.). This use of 'inconsistent vagueness' foreshadows other inconsistencies and selective engagements with the outside world to be

found in the text; in this case, it appears that the trope of the unreliable narrator is expressed spatially.

It is in this space that Toru meets May Kasahara; the scenes to follow sexualise the young female character, who is described as looking fifteen or sixteen (p. 15). The scene is couched in the tropes by which such voyeuristic writing is so often excused: Toru's withdrawn or oblivious perspective may indicate he is in denial regarding his own behaviour. According to another possible argument, May – predictably – has the quality of an apparition, associated as she is with liminal architectural spaces. Much like *A Wild Sheep Chase*'s ear model, she is a window between worlds. She leads Toru to the well and traps him inside it (p. 254); her role is thus to facilitate Toru's exploration of his own consciousness. The narrative is at this point ambiguous; while May's participation in the rest of the novel suggests that she is neither a ghost nor a memory, she shares with many 'Murakami women' the fact that she is described in ephemeral terms. She is introduced as having recently been in a motorcycle accident (p. 16), and she proceeds to lull Toru to sleep by philosophising about death (p. 20) – details which suggest, at this point in the narrative, that she herself may be already dead.

As Alice Bolin says, paraphrasing James Baldwin's 1949 essay 'A Question of Innocence', '[t]he truest love of any noir protagonist is of course never the femme fatale' as 'American boys in their grievance and longing invented their dream girl, the Dead Girl.'<sup>234</sup> In a point that also relates to Murakami, Baldwin, in the aforementioned essay, has discussed the blameless quality of men in *noir*: the male character, 'for all his tommy-guns and rhetoric, is the innocent, inexplicably, compulsively and perpetually betrayed.'<sup>235</sup> This trope can be witnessed in Murakami, for instance, through the manner

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<sup>234</sup> James Baldwin, qtd. in Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), pp. 9-10.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

in which the wives of ‘Murakami men’ frequently abandon them with little explanation. It is often hinted that the men may be oblivious to the tensions that have caused their wives to leave; conversely, they may be intended as likeable characters justifiably mystified by this turn of events.

‘Murakami men’ appear, by contrast, more comfortable communicating with the young female apparitions that seem to frequently visit them. Interestingly, this focus on what Bolin calls the ‘Dead Girl’ may be not just a *noir* trope but arguably one with its own counterparts in *iyashi* and *shōjo* narratives. Commenting on the deaths of female heroines in Yoshimoto novels, Whittier Treat notes that ‘[d]eath in Yoshimoto Banana’s stories means that teenage women never have to be anything else’.<sup>236</sup> He links this idealising trope to the ‘nostalgic search for the lost object’ of a given character’s past.<sup>237</sup> Such treatment of female characters in Japanese literature originates long before female authors such as Yoshimoto reframed it from their own perspectives. Indeed, while Murakami’s misogyny should not be linked, in some simplifying way, to his cultural context alone, it is obvious that many literary histories are notable for their respective legacies regarding the unequal representation of women. As Will Harrison notes, ‘while he is self-styled as an “ugly duckling” amidst his homeland’s literati, Murakami’s omission of rounded female characters situates him well within the traditions of the Japanese canon.’<sup>238</sup> Citing Pico Iyer’s discussion of Jun’ichirō Tanizaki in *The New York Review of Books*, Harrison states that ‘the male gaze has “long been the dominant point of view in Japanese literature.”’<sup>239</sup> Harrison continues: ‘Murakami has simply given this standard a postmodern facelift, filtering it through his own gently buyable weirdness.’<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Whittier Treat, p. 379.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>238</sup> Harrison, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/fiction-without-women-harrison>

<sup>239</sup> Pico Iyer, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Harrison, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/fiction-without-women-harrison>

Here, again, is an instance of misogyny as ‘multivalent vagueness’: the Dead Girl in a Murakami context can pertain to both American and Japanese literary tropes.

These first scenes involving Toru and May are problematically veiled in the terms of a dream or memory. However, as previously discussed, the voyeuristic way in which such teenage female characters are circumscribed arguably negates such generous interpretations. Just as in certain instances ‘vagueness’ can obfuscate the biases underpinning a text, the ‘vagueness’ of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*’s own gender politics detracts from any commentary such scenes may offer. In *Milkman*, Burns’s ‘ten-minute area’ is a spatial representation of stalking behaviour as overlooked, slipping through the cracks in a turbulent time; the opening of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* compartmentalises its troubling scenes in a manner that may be less self-aware.

Chapter 2 discussed the manner in which often, in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and other Murakami novels, Japanese history is discussed through ‘windows’ in the text, such passages offering precise and detailed engagement with a given character’s personal story. This technique also compartmentalises such sections, with the result that they appear as tangents in relation to the novel’s main action. Frequently, these historical interludes are mirrored by a literal use of compartmentalising spaces, such as darkened wells, throughout *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Unfortunately, it is possible to argue that a similar effect is achieved – either consciously or unconsciously – by passages such as this novel’s opening paragraphs.

In the above extract and its following scenes, a jarring effect is achieved whereby overtly sexual and often misogynistic passages are juxtaposed with scenes of domestic banality; in Murakami novels both the victims and the perpetrators of trauma appear to distance themselves from their own unconscious worlds. As previous chapters have illustrated, metaphors of subterranean space throughout *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*



rather obviously represent journeys into the darkened unconscious. Just as the novel engages inconsistently with traumatic historical material, encouraging the reader to view the historical passages as distinct from the ‘vague’ and denuded present narratives, a similar effect is arguably achieved through the novel’s intermittent engagement with misogynistic content.

It is interesting to briefly note that a similar technique is achieved, to a more overt degree, by Bret Easton Ellis. Violence is juxtaposed with a kind of luxury mundanity in *American Psycho*. This combination is foreshadowed from the novel’s outset, in which the protagonist, Price, is introduced according to a list of the luxury brands he is wearing. Noted in such a manner, the brands appear to fade into banality; interwoven with this introduction is an overwhelming list of disasters as read in Price’s newspaper. The result is a mix of the garish and the metropolitan mundane:

Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti. Pan down to the *Post*. There is a moderately interesting story concerning two people who disappeared at a party aboard the yacht of a semi-noted New York socialite while the boat was circling the island. A residue of spattered blood and three smashed champagne glasses are the only clues.<sup>241</sup>

Viewing Ellis as a potential Murakami influence presents another instance of ‘vaguened’ cross-cultural writing as it relates to a kind of obscured verisimilitude. Once again, Murakami illustrates *themes* of psychological distancing and compartmentalisation in a manner mirrored by his own translational ‘distancing’ on a formal level.

It is worth concluding with a brief return to this idea of ‘intermittent’ misogynistic content. The Murakami chapter this section discusses is subtitled ‘Six Fingers and Four

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<sup>241</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador Classic, 2015), pp. 4-5.

Breasts' (p. 5) for reasons that do not become immediately apparent. The title segues abruptly into the quoted core extract, which is to all intents and purposes a casual domestic scene. This title does not occur in a vacuum, however. For readers familiar with Murakami's existing preoccupation with repetitive and often detailed references to his female characters' bodies, the title may appear as provocative self-referential humor, as though he is immediately resuming this theme from the outset. This self-referencing has its place in the Murakami 'brand' as discussed in Chapter 2. The title additionally illustrates the manner – as discussed earlier with reference to Scheherazade's burglaries – in which the male gaze in Murakami's work is so often disguised by language that emphasises whimsy or quirkiness.<sup>242</sup> This same 'quirky' language provides some of the absurdity that lends Murakami's work its seemingly mistranslated quality. For instance, an Anglophone reader may assume that Murakami's 'A Poor-Aunt Story' refers to an existing Japanese reference or literary form. However, as Rubin points out, '[t]he reader in English must *not* assume that the phrase "poor aunt" has any more significance in Japan than it does in Britain and America.'<sup>243</sup> Similarly, 'Six Fingers and Four Breasts' could be an idiom in translation; in this case, objectifying content is couched in lighthearted and puzzling terms.

In the manner of a postmodern symbol, the strangely numbered breasts are immediately mentioned but then made notable by their absence. The context for the title quote is predictably uncomfortable, as it originates in a question May asks Toru (p. 19). There is no actual character with four breasts, but the idea of a woman with four breasts arises briefly and hypothetically in conversation: hence, the entire chapter is named after

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<sup>242</sup> Indeed, in the above chapter title, the female body in question is fragmented, only described in terms of two component parts. Comparisons with Mulvey's association of the 'castrated' female body with a 'lack' that 'produces the phallus as a symbolic presence' are apposite here. (Mulvey, p. 833).

<sup>243</sup> Rubin, p. 56.

a phenomenon that does not exist. This tiresome play with a present-yet-absent reference quite possibly illustrates a broader point regarding Murakami's absent women.

Arguably – as in the case of the 'Four Breasts' in the chapter title – the repetition of certain retrograde tropes in Murakami verges on the ridiculous, perhaps causing certain readers to become desensitised to the prevalent canonical biases behind such descriptions. The 'hardboiled' misogyny of the texts quickly becomes depthless and even caricatured, as in the case of the tediously repeated descriptions of Aomame's figure in 1Q84. However, more troubling aspects of the text's gaze, such as its voyeuristic sexualisation of young female characters, are less easily disguised. 'Vaguening' may be used subversively in feminist and decolonial contexts; this same 'vaguening', when articulated from a place of privilege, can serve as shorthand to reinforce gendered tropes.

Both Beckett and Murakami are often commended for their crafting of a prose that self-reflexively foregrounds content lost in translation. Their 'multivalent vagueness' subverts false dichotomies based on 'the indeterminate' versus 'the specific.' According to such techniques, a reference can be contextually rooted while remaining inessential to an understanding of the text by international audiences. In particularly sophisticated instances of such a technique, as in Malone's 'Up the Republic!' or Ōe's use of the word *mori*, a given reference takes on multiple meanings according to varying target audiences.

This ambiguity, as I have shown, is often reflected in both authors' treatment of indoor space. The same vague indoor spaces that are used as devices to limit reference to contextual markers – a form of escape from cultural specificity – are also intimately governed by gendered dynamics. The empathic perspective-taking both authors so

frequently display in a cross-cultural regard is often absent in their treatment of their female characters, who remain confined by a male gaze.<sup>244</sup>

‘Concealed’ references to Irish passage graves in *Ill Seen Ill Said* are offset by a voyeuristic textual circumscription of the female character. Similarly, while the Sheep Professor’s house in *A Wild Sheep Chase* contains ‘vaguened’ references to a *hikikomori*-esque withdrawal into the self, relevant to a Japanese context, the ear model serves a one-dimensional – and even architectural – function. The institutional space of *Malone Dies* is relevant to multiple national contexts, suggesting the harrowing experiences of internment camps in Vichy France while also containing possible allusions to experiences of mental illness in Ireland – complete with references to the Lord Mayor of Cork’s hunger strike. However, indoor space in this novel is the site of a gendered dynamic by which the ‘old woman’ feeding Malone is never seen, and the character of Moll is described in terms that provoke disgust. Murakami’s ‘Scheherazade’ features an astoundingly similar central dynamic according to which a woman regularly visits a man confined to an undefined House. This extract shows how for both authors ‘multivalent vagueness’ and misogyny are often connected, as the author’s troubling attitude to female characters appears subject to loss in translation. A final analysis of Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, informed by Bolin’s identification of the ‘Dead Girl’ in American *noir* texts, illustrates the manner in which misogyny in Murakami’s works is subject to varying culturally based interpretations.

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<sup>244</sup> Cross-cultural ‘looking’ is, needless to say, a complex idea. It is perhaps also apposite to consider the following response to Mulvey’s theories, as this study shortly moves to its fourth chapter. bell hooks notes the manner in which ‘[l]ooking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema’s construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” was continually deconstructed.’ Thus, ‘[a]s critical spectators, black women looked from a location that disrupted’. This diversification of perspective, as represented here through the analogy of ‘looking’ from a disruptive location, will be pertinent to my following discussion of reclaimed and redirected ‘vaguening’ in the work of authors such as Kincaid. (bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 122-123.

These close readings have provided material for further analysis in this study's final two chapters. Chapters 1 to 3 have in common the premise that works previously considered 'vague' are in fact replete with cultural detail. However, how we are to view this 'culturally specific vagueness' in relation to globalised literature is debatable. Both authors' performative attitudes to self-translation allow us to think about the possibilities at play in bilingual writing; commending this culture-bridging perspective may itself indicate a canonical bias, assuming as it does that monolingual literature is the norm. Chapters 4 and 5 will take their dialectical structure from what Apter defines as the two opposing poles of translation theory: that '[n]othing is translatable' and '[e]verything is translatable.'<sup>245</sup> In a manner modelled on this central *aporia*, I will ask 'what is untranslatable?' in both authors work, and then finally 'what *is* translatable?', examining further the troubling connection between canonical literature and a supposed 'universality.'

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<sup>245</sup> Apter, *The Translation Zone*, p. 8.

## Chapter 4

### What is Untranslatable?: Towards an Alternate ‘Vague’ Canon

It is arguable that Beckett’s *œuvre* combines a multilingual poetics with a humorous praise of miscommunication, the author having at one point joked ‘I hope words have now failed me’.<sup>1</sup> Beckett’s letter to Axel Kaun famously sees the former eschewing ‘formal English’ in favour of piercing the ‘veil’ of language, viewing ‘grammar and style’ as a ‘mask.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Beckett’s flair for ‘mismaking’, as referred to in Leland De La Durantaye’s titular study, is both subject of affectionate critical reference and of a reputation perpetuated by the author himself. For a writer who strove, in his own way, to slip between cultures and disciplines, this namelessness appears to have been desired, and has if anything been fetishised in Beckett criticism.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, for many, Beckett remains an author whose hollowed-out language evokes pessimism and impossibility, even if this perspective appears undergirded by a certain tenacity in his writing. Boxall describes Beckett’s writing as a ‘poetics of exhaustion, and a poetics of persistence’;<sup>4</sup> Gordon aligns his ‘[r]epeated objects, phrases [and] literary references’ with ‘images of hopelessness and despair’.<sup>5</sup> Beckett’s work has become associated with grief and loss in a manner that bears testament to its wide

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Letter to Mary Manning Howe, 8 April 1989’, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 719.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Letter to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937’, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig and Dan Gunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 516-521 (p. 518).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Shanks’s article ‘The Unnamed Itinerant in Samuel Beckett’s Novellas and James Kelman’s *Lean Tales*’ goes some way towards addressing this critical bias, contrasting Beckett’s negation-based style with the working-class Scottish perspective in Kelman’s stories. The latter texts, Shanks notes, depict ‘the rootlessness of an individual’ and use ‘a narrative voice that is articulated through doubt.’ Shanks notably flags certain unrealistic elements of the nameless and occasionally homeless Beckett narrator via the Kelman comparison: ‘unlike Macmann in *Malone Dies*, the narrator does not begin to enjoy being rained upon’. (Paul Shanks, ‘The Unnamed Itinerant in Samuel Beckett’s Novellas and James Kelman’s *Lean Tales*’, *Scottish Studies Review*, 9, 2 (2008), 109-127 (p. 110; p. 116).)

<sup>4</sup> Boxall, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Lois Gordon, ‘The Existential Dimension’, in *Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot: New Edition*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), pp. 123-134 (p. 126).

applicability. However, the evasions of cultural markers in Beckett's work, and the sense of unbelonging thus created, cannot always be neatly aligned with such negative emotions. In an interesting comparison between Beckett and postcolonial writing, John Erickson states that, '[l]ike the Beckettian narrator who experiences failure in face of the language, the postcolonial writer makes of that failure the basis for a new idiom'; in the latter case, 'contrary to Beckett, namelessness [...] is not solely the source of pain but fascination and salvation as well'.<sup>6</sup> Erickson employs Beckett as a brief example here, and in-depth discussion of the author's work is not the objective in this context. However, his association of namelessness with pain in Beckett's work arguably overlooks the way Beckett himself may have often used his 'placeless' perspective performatively, finding its effect productive.

To analyse Erickson's statement further, there is no doubt that linguistic lack is also used in decolonial writing as a tool of resistance and even of a form of joyful defiance, as I will shortly explore with brief reference to authors such as Glissant. However, as we will see in the work, for instance, of Kincaid, this namelessness may just as often represent a painful effort to express experiences rarely afforded attention in canonical texts. Lack takes on a different tone depending on the speaker, and the valorisation of such linguistic sparseness by authors such as Beckett and Murakami can be seen as a privilege when so many areas of the world remain, in more sinister and systemic ways, deprived of a voice. The glamorisation of self-imposed exile, and the evocation of transient or liminal space as an aesthetic choice, can appear as troubling authorial decisions when considered in conjunction with underrepresented narratives. In short, 'vagueness' is rarely as apolitical as it appears.

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<sup>6</sup> John Erickson, 'Metoikoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 427-450 (p. 436).

Thus, a discussion of ‘vagueness’ with relation to the, at times, burdensome task of representation is vital to any discourse on ‘lack’ and ‘namelessness’ in decolonial writing. Chapter 4 of this study will depart from its usual focus on the six central close readings of Beckett and Murakami in order to discuss three additional authors – Kincaid, Adonis, and Castillo. It will focus on one text by each author – Kincaid’s short story collection *At the Bottom of the River*, Adonis’s poem ‘Celebrating Childhood’, and Castillo’s novel *So Far from God* – using each as a respective point of departure for discussing the three authors’ *œuvres* more broadly.

This study will highlight certain similarities that emerge in this comparison, all the while aiming to acknowledge the breadth of disciplines and cultural moments spanned by these three authors. All three make use of indeterminate representations of interior space; in their work, opacity and the untranslatable are navigated through a fascinatingly varied spectrum of techniques. All three write from cultural backgrounds outside of white Eurocentric and/or North American poles of canonicity. Crucially, their use of ‘vagueness’ alternately disrupts and supplements a sense of their status as ‘peripheral’ writers. They conduct nuanced relationships to cultural erasure, elucidating the manner in which ‘vagueness’ is aspired to in certain contexts – for instance, in light of Glissant’s theory of opacity<sup>7</sup> – and seen as destructive in others.

These authors have been selected on the basis of a certain shared timeline. All three are still living and continue to publish works, yet their writing careers have spanned from the mid- to late- 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. In this manner, they bridge the gap

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<sup>7</sup> Glissant’s ‘opacity’ is, as Celia M. Britton explains, a respect for ‘the Other’s difference, which resists one’s attempts to assimilate or objectify it.’ Thus, ‘the right to opacity’ is ‘a right *not to be understood*.’ In this manner ‘vagueness’ can be seen as a resistance to epistemic violence as it is defined by Spivak. Glissant discusses a form of ‘speech as message’ that is simultaneously ‘speech as screen’: as Britton says, Caribbean slaves developed a Creole which ‘the master did not understand but did not realize that he did not understand.’ (Édouard Glissant, qtd. in Celia M. Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 18; Britton, p. 19; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 20; Glissant, qtd. in Britton, p. 27; Britton, p. 25.)



between Beckett's (post)modernist era and that of contemporary writing. I will assess each of these authors in terms of the typology of 'vaguenesses' I have delineated throughout this study, through the terms 'overarching vagueness', 'paradoxical vagueness', and 'multivalent vagueness' respectively. This chapter will take the form of a sustained inquiry into the inequalities that a study of 'vagueness' exposes in a globalised literary market, drawing attention to both 'vaguening'-as-luxury and 'vaguening'-as-resistance.

As touched on in Chapter 3's conclusion, Chapters 4 and 5 of this study are modelled on what Apter describes as the two 'poles' of translation theory, namely the opposing ideas that '[n]othing is translatable' and that '[e]verything is translatable.'<sup>8</sup> By adapting this binary to ask two questions – 'what is untranslatable?' versus 'what is translatable?' – I will investigate the idea of unequally weighted 'vaguenesses' before interrogating the construct of 'vagueness as universal' in Chapter 5. This fourth chapter, focusing on the question 'what is untranslatable', will examine its three core authors with a view to the heterogeneity of their respective 'vaguening's', outlining certain commonalities in their writing while preserving a view of the vast difference between their approaches. Kincaid's 'vagueness' is discussed here in terms of its link to repeated or limited references; Adonis's 'vagueness' is presented as strikingly linked to temporal subversion, centred on a reordering of canonical lines; and Castillo's 'vagueness' is discussed largely with reference to the opacity produced by incongruous register-mixing. All three authors have unique means of approaching the incommunicable. In this manner, a study of their respective work arguably subverts the idea that the incommunicable is somehow a depoliticised 'common ground.'

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<sup>8</sup> Apter, *The Translation Zone*, p. 8.

There are many moving parts involved in any discussion that attempts to praise ‘vague’ literature. It is perhaps helpful to start with some fundamental ideas around bias and ‘vagueness.’ An author from a canonical ‘centre’ may be praised, as Beckett is,<sup>9</sup> for making their work accessible to those in situations completely unlike their own. However, this view, when carried to an extreme, can be problematic in its proximity to ideas of a colonial ‘saviour’ role. If literature is being considered as an ethical tool to narrate difficult experiences or bring together communities on an international scale, the idea of unidirectional dissemination from ‘centre’ to ‘periphery’ is dubious. Daniel Hack’s study, *Reaping Something New: African-American Transformations of Victorian Literature*, is fascinating in this connection. Focusing on the reclamation of, for instance, Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ by thinkers such as Frederick Douglass,<sup>10</sup> Hack highlights the manner in which canonical literature can take on novel connotations when circulated in cultural circumstances different from those of its inception. This idea of reclaiming the canon can undoubtedly be subversive, offering, as Hack notes, potential for incongruity and even parody;<sup>11</sup> conversely, given an optimistic reading, such reclamations can be used to celebrate common experiences across cultures. However, a possible concern attached to this line of thinking – when it uncritically commends the

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<sup>9</sup> The following quote, from the final paragraph of Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, is very touching and perhaps worth quoting in full: ‘[Beckett’s] plays continue to be performed in devastated cities where hope is a scarce commodity; in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for example, a New Orleans performance of *Waiting for Godot* offered a powerful reflection on the tragic situation of the city’s inhabitants. Many continue to find solace in the calls for courage and fortitude that remain central to Beckett’s work, and the humour with which it presents ‘going on’ as the only possibility: indeed, these are the qualities that spurred the Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp on the West Bank to stage a performance inspired from *Waiting for Godot* to mark their return after the assassination of their founder and mentor, Juliano Mer Khamis. Recent news stories refract a wider feeling that no other writer portrays hardship with quite the same accuracy and gravity. A BBC news report states that, in Syria, a man who has lost everything found fleeting consolation in memories of Beckett’s humour, perceiving the absurd wait of his dispossessed characters as a reflection of Syria’s political situation. Another depicts an actor from Damascus, granted asylum in Sweden and pondering a performance of *What Where* as a way of explaining what torture might be to those around him. Yet another report describes conversations with two destitute Syrian children living on the streets of Beirut, who have heard about *Waiting for Godot*. They have no doubt that the play reflects their own lives, and the game they have coined – ‘I am Samuel Beckett!’ ‘No, I am Samuel Beckett!’ – is perhaps the simplest and most moving tribute to the vitality of Beckett’s political imagination. When death, violence, and forced displacement are immediate political realities, Beckett’s writing becomes much more than literature.’ (Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, pp. 251-252.)

<sup>10</sup> ‘Frederick Douglass reprinted “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in 1855 immediately upon its publication; Anna Julia Cooper quotes *In Memoriam* just weeks before Tennyson’s death in 1892; W.E.B. Du Bois juxtaposes decades-old poetry by Tennyson with newly published British poetry at the turn of the century.’ (Daniel Hack, *Reaping Something New* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 9.)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27; p. 53.

original canonical work itself – is the extent to which it may serve to reaffirm or legitimise the status of certain Eurocentric works as ‘classic’ or universally applicable, as opposed to remodelling the ‘canon’ along more culturally diverse lines.

Secondly, an author ‘vaguening’ from a literary ‘periphery’ may be criticised for mimicking canonical norms, as it is typically cultural centres that define the terms of ‘universality’ and ‘default’ experience. In Brouillette’s view, a prevalent sense of anxiety in postcolonial literature stems from this dissonance: ‘for the postcolonial writer the problem is the politicization of incorporation into a discredited global sphere.’<sup>12</sup> In a similar situation, should authors writing from marginalised backgrounds be praised for their ‘placelessness’ or ‘accessibility’ by readers from a canonical centre, such supposed accolades may understandably appear condescending. As Spivak astutely notes, ‘[t]he putative center welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order better to exclude the margin.’<sup>13</sup> It is this latter situation that is perhaps of most relevance to this chapter’s argument. Writing on Kincaid’s, Adonis’s and Castillo’s respective work as a white European scholar, I am aware that any praise of their avoidance or disguising of cultural markers in favour of a supposed ‘universality’ voices an expectation that such authors should make their work digestible in the eyes of canonical ‘centres.’ Such an expectation implies that these authors may alienate audiences through excessive use of ‘local colour’ or non-Anglophone terms; it implicitly upholds a white, Eurocentric, or Anglocentric view of what is ‘vague.’

There is also a responsibility involved, in the writing of this thesis, to acknowledge that the authors reaching us from – in the case of this study – Antigua, Syria, and the Mexican/Texan border respectively, have themselves achieved sufficient popularity in canonical ‘centres’ to find their way to me, the aforementioned Irish reader.

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<sup>12</sup> Brouillette, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, London: Methuen, 1987), p. 107.

It is therefore just as important to investigate *why* Kincaid, Adonis, and Castillo have, out of so many others, been internationally recognised. It is perhaps worth returning to Bhabha's statement, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this study, that 'the liberatory people who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity.'<sup>14</sup> The idea that those writing from a liminal position are somehow 'best' qualified to convey a given cultural moment is understandable: the author in this situation may be easily able to disseminate ideas between 'central' and 'peripheral' cultures. Brouillette notes the prevalence of this focus on a 'language of exile [and] hybridity' in the postcolonial literature that 'achieves greatest success in the current market'.<sup>15</sup> This idea makes one conscious that in a literary context, one is only reading the authors *most* in contact with cultural 'centres', and that the literature of those in more marginalised positions may go without being disseminated due to its distance from the 'default' perspective. To theorise around 'vagueness' is to accept certain limitations to one's study: perhaps, for instance, this thesis will exclude authors who convey their experience through the equivalent of a Joycean precision of detail.

This chapter will thus attempt to avoid viewing Kincaid, Adonis and Castillo as directly representative, in some catch-all manner, of their respective cultural milieus. In summary, if to be 'vague' is sometimes equated with mimicking certain canonical norms, then there is a danger that authors from around the world who write in a 'vague' manner have been accepted on the grounds of their likeness to a form of biased 'universality.' However, as in the case of this chapter's core authors, there is more than one way to write 'vaguely', and such indirection may also signify a resistance to epistemic violence or an acknowledgment of the difficulties involved in literary representation.

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<sup>14</sup> Homi Bhabha, qtd. in Bixby, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Brouillette, p. 61; Timothy Brennan, qtd. in *ibid.*

It is also important to consider the idea that Beckett and Murakami are themselves not exactly ‘vague’ at all. The concept of ‘paradoxical vagueness’ is, after all, foundational to this study. In keeping with this theme, my fourth chapter will be informed by the idea that there are perhaps *no* vague authors addressed in this thesis, only authors who assume either an audience’s complicity in, or distance from, their subject matter. In this manner the study of such ‘vagueness’ resembles certain aspects of the theorisation of unreliable narrative.<sup>16</sup> ‘vaguening’ could be alternatively taxonomised in terms of what the audience ‘is meant to realise’ or ‘needs to know.’ However, such categorisations are complicated by the fact that a ‘target’<sup>17</sup> audience may find cultural references to interpret where there are perhaps none. This kind of misinformed reading occurs, for instance, when an author such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s ‘vaguened’ settings are subject to orientalisering stereotypes of delicacy;<sup>18</sup> this idea could also be easily applied to analyses of the reception of Murakami’s work.<sup>19</sup>

This form of conceptual mistranslation – which could be termed a ‘misapprehension factor’ – brings an added instability to any neat analysis of vagueness as intentional, as readers may filter out aspects of a narrative not easily reconcilable with their understanding of reality. In the work of authors such as Kincaid, in which, for instance, *obeah* practices such as ‘special baths’<sup>20</sup> are detailed with the mundanity of

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<sup>16</sup> As Wayne C. Booth states, unreliable narrators ‘make stronger demands on the reader’s powers of inference than reliable narrators do.’

Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 1983), p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> I use the term with ambivalence in this context, as this study of ‘vaguening’ seeks to untangle the often multivalent and overdetermined politics of which demographic an author writes ‘for’: in short, of who is expected to (mis)understand a given reference.

<sup>18</sup> Romit Dasgupta describes the manner in which, ‘Ishiguro’s Japanese connection is frequently underscored’, and Ishiguro himself has complained that *An Artist Of The Floating World* was met with a kind of orientalisering condescension in the West: ‘People have not paid much attention to the ideas and just treated it as an exotic kind of little thing, and drawn comparisons to Japanese painting and brushwork, carp splashing about in still ponds. I’ve had every kind of Japanese cliché phrase – even Sumo wrestling.’ (Romit Dasgupta, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro and “Imagining Japan”’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro in a Global Context*, ed. by Cynthia F. Wong and Hülya Yildiz (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 11-22 (p. 12); Kazuo Ishiguro, qtd. in Wai-Chew Sim, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 15.)

<sup>19</sup> Rubin, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, in Selwyn R. Cudjoe and Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview’, *Callaloo*, 39 (1989), 396-411 (p. 408).

other household activities, the unfamiliar reader may ‘skip over’ references to such traditions if they are made obliquely.

In brief, this chapter will be aware of how its three authors in focus have been perhaps *accepted* on the grounds of their supposed ‘vagueness’, at the same time as it acknowledges that their writing is perhaps *not vague at all*. Adonis’s section title ‘Celebrating Vague-Clear Things’<sup>21</sup> neatly illustrates this paradox. The author’s celebration of vagueness is self-reflexively pinpointed, and thus afforded precision. Formally, this subtitle works to group and categorise the poems that follow as pertaining to ‘vague-clear things’, thus offering a taxonomy in itself (albeit a broad one!). Such overt signalling of indeterminacy arguably has the effect of explaining a joke: is vagueness still vague if it is clearly demarcated?

The methodology of the following three sections will work to mitigate a homogenising or tokenistic reading of these three authors. This is a thesis interwoven with the study of conceptual (mis)translation, and it attempts to acknowledge the limitations of my own cultural position. I aim to assemble this study of three authors from an alternate ‘vague canon’ in order to facilitate further scholarship on non-Eurocentric ‘vaguening’: rather than assuming expertise on any of the cultural circumstances discussed, I aim to open the conversation on each author in the manner of an introduction. I will apply a form of ‘distant reading’ by studying the three authors’ respective bodies of work without assuming overt comparisons between this material and the content of my core texts. Rather, I aim to problematise the typology of ‘vagueness’ I have hitherto used as an analytical framework.

A driving force behind this study’s more theoretical final chapters is the idea that traits such as ‘placelessness’ and multilingualism are celebrated in the work of Beckett

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<sup>21</sup> Adonis, ‘Celebrating Vague-Clear Things’, in *Selected Poems*, trans. by Khaled Mattawa (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 257-274 (p. 257).

and Murakami, whereas such characteristics have long been present in the work of authors writing from marginalised and/or decolonial perspectives. Rather than straightforwardly transferring the terms by which I discuss the writing of Beckett and Murakami – chiefly my categories of ‘paradoxical vagueness’, ‘overarching vagueness’ and ‘multivalent vagueness’ – to discuss authors writing from less frequently represented cultures, I aim to use the typology as something akin to a set of variables. If it is possible to analyse Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘vagueness’ according to certain tropes or features – such as bilingually informed syntax or a certain opacity of setting – then it is also possible to use this lens to demonstrate that such criteria can be read into the work of many authors writing from liminal or multilingual positions. Given the large proportion of the world that is *not*, for instance, monolingual, this chapter will allow for the possibility that the cultural ‘transcendence’ fetishised in the *œuvres* of Beckett or Murakami is closer to an everyday reality for many. As Walkowitz notes with reference to Lahiri’s *In Other Words*, ‘migrant writers have to think about languages all the time.’<sup>22</sup>

A study of such strikingly different authors necessitates a varied approach. I will discuss each author in terms of their unique relationship to ‘vagueness.’ I will read Kincaid’s work with special attention to repetition: while her *œuvre* is notable for its echoed images, such images appear to have an elucidatory effect rather than creating a Beckettian sense of obfuscation. I will discuss this alternate use of repetition – for instance, the manner in which Kincaid employs cyclical imagery around a speaker’s childhood memory, allowing the repeated images to cohere rather than lose meaning through repetition – with brief reference to the writing of Glissant.

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<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Walkowitz, ‘On Not Knowing: Lahiri, Tawada, Ishiguro’, *New Literary History*, 51, 2 (2020), 322-343 (p. 330).

There are striking similarities between Kincaid's repetition and the kind I have discussed with reference to Beckett and Murakami: both forms, after all, seem to use the echoed references themselves as an overarching structure in an otherwise 'vague' *œuvre*. In a manner similar to Beckett's and Murakami's use of grouped or inventoried references, Kincaid's repetition often involves lists of household objects or tasks. Interior space appears to have a predominant function here, and is often represented as confining yet nebulous. However, my section on Kincaid will argue that repetition often functions in her writing as a means of self-assertion through the gradual uncovering of trauma by the speaker, as opposed to as a form of privileged world-creation. This comparison will serve to further highlight the link between repetition and 'vagueness' that has evolved throughout this study.

It is clear that repeated references can create the sense that an author is working with limited elements; it is interestingly counterintuitive that reused cultural markers appear to cement the apparent 'vagueness' of a work rather than clarify its temporal and spatial location. More interestingly still, the connection between limitation and repetition is highly relevant to ideas of a 'stripped back' or 'impoverished' aesthetic, a style often involved in glamorised appropriations of 'exile.'

My study of Adonis will focus on his use of architectural metaphor – particularly in his discussions of poetic form, and his reconstruction of the literary *dīwān*, or archive<sup>23</sup> – in terms of how it has contributed to his controversial status as a figurehead of cultural exchange between Arabic and European literary fields. My analysis will be informed by an account by the poet Shawqī Abed Al-Amir of Adonis's presence on a literary pilgrimage to Arthur Rimbaud's house in Aden, Yemen. This account has been

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<sup>23</sup> Robyn Creswell, 'Crise de vers: Adonis's *Dīwān* and the Institution of Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, 17, 4 (2010), 877-898 (p. 880).



fictionalised, and in fact – as Lucine Taminian’s study notes<sup>24</sup> – Adonis does not appear to have been present on this occasion. However, in acknowledgement of Adonis’s celebration of ‘vagueness’, this study will use his imagined presence at this scene as a means to discuss architecture, indeterminate cultural markers, and the poet’s own complex relationship to European canons such as that of French surrealism.

Finally, I will read Castillo’s *So Far from God* with reference to the *rasquachismo* style, a fragmentary and often domestically oriented aesthetic.<sup>25</sup> This technique has particular affinities with the ‘paradoxical vagueness’ and ‘overarching vagueness’ discussed so far in this study. I will situate *So Far* in the context of Castillo’s other works, paying special attention to its light-hearted quality. Castillo’s body of work includes poetry,<sup>26</sup> short stories,<sup>27</sup> drama,<sup>28</sup> nonfiction essays,<sup>29</sup> a family memoir,<sup>30</sup> a novel in verse,<sup>31</sup> a book for children,<sup>32</sup> and a series of fictional letters which can be read in varying permutations.<sup>33</sup> Placed as it is in a culturally specific *œuvre* composed of varying and often politicised forms, *So Far* has attained recognition – in Castillo’s analysis – due to its comparatively accessible quality.<sup>34</sup> I will thus discuss Castillo’s writing in a manner informed by the link between ‘vagueness’ and ‘digestibility.’

This chapter aims to explore prior uses of ‘vagueness’ in decolonial contexts, while acknowledging that literary ‘vagueness’ appears a fraught issue often involving compromise. This chapter will have the idea of untranslatable or unequal ‘vagueness’ at its core, exploring the idea that a divide exists between ‘vagueness’ by dominant cultures

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<sup>24</sup> Lucine Taminian, ‘Rimbaud’s House in Aden, Yemen: Giving Voice(s) to the Silent Poet’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 13, 4 (1998), 464-490 (p. 474).

<sup>25</sup> Ricardo F. Vivancos Pérez, *Radical Chicana Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Ana Castillo, *I Ask the Impossible* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Ana Castillo, *Loverboys* (New York, London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Ana Castillo, *Psst...I Have Something To Tell You, Mi Amor* (Texas: Wings Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Ana Castillo, *black dove: mamá, m'hijo, and me* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Ana Castillo, *Watercolor Women, Opaque Men* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Ana Castillo, *My Daughter, My Son, The Eagle, The Dove*, illustrated by Susan Guevara (New York: Dutton Books, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Norma E. Cantú and Ana Castillo, ‘A Conversation with Ana Castillo’, *World Literature Today*, 82, 2 (2008), 59-62 (p. 61).

versus ‘vaguening’ by those less represented. I will pay special attention to the pertinent question of ‘vagueness’ as a tool of resistance. While acknowledging the rich and groundbreaking history of decolonial ‘vaguening’, I will also aim to question whether such ‘vagueness’ is a sustainable literary technique for the modern era.

Is there a place for ‘vague’ writing in urgent times of conflict, or in the narration of experiences often already underrepresented and minimised? Does all ‘vague’ writing involve some degree of political disinterest or silence, perhaps rendering it an increasingly outdated form? While ‘vagueness’ is stylistically interesting in literature, how might this praise of erasure translate to a ‘real-world’ context?

In what appears as a valorisation of silence taken to its extreme, in 2018 the *New York Times* published an article by Kate Andersen Brower praising Melania Trump’s ‘quiet radicalism’.<sup>35</sup> Citing publicity decisions such as her limited social media engagement on the first anniversary of the presidential inauguration, the article argues: ‘She may not be progressive. She may not be political. And yet Mrs. Trump may end up doing more than any of her predecessors to upend our expectations of the slavish devotion a first lady must display towards her husband.’<sup>36</sup> The article appears to argue for an uncomfortably congratulatory attitude towards a ‘bare minimum’ approach, as if to suggest that the refusal to overtly reference a political moment constitutes resistance in itself. ‘Vagueness’, as it relates here to media presence, allows varying interpretations (complicity, resistance) to be projected on to the personality in question. Elsewhere, Roisín Kiberd’s essay ‘Bland God: Notes on Mark Zuckerberg’ provides rich examples of an uncomfortable, (de)politicised ‘vagueness.’ A Facebook company hoodie, found unexpectedly in a charity shop, is originally remarked on for its ‘strategically luxurious’

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<sup>35</sup> Kate Anderson Brower, ‘The Quiet Radicalism of Melania Trump’ (2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/opinion/melania-trump-radical.html> [Accessed 10 September 2020].

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

design, ‘sewn from the softest cotton and dyed to a muted, achromatic grey.’<sup>37</sup> The garment bears ‘no outward sign of branding’, and appears identical to those worn by Zuckerberg himself.<sup>38</sup> Using this item as a point of departure, the essay investigates Zuckerberg’s ‘vague’ persona: his largely mysterious personal life, his public image ‘so ordinary as to be inscrutable’,<sup>39</sup> and his apparent striving towards an ‘all-things-to-all-men’ accessibility. ‘[Y]ou get the sense,’ Kiberd writes, ‘that Zuckerberg would like to be everybody’s friend’, but must contend with the ‘middling-to-negative’ portrayals of himself that consistently emerge.<sup>40</sup>

Such contemporary examples provide insight into the ties between ‘vagueness’, branding, and publicity; they both seem to convey the sense that a biased ‘universality’ is still considered desirable in the public eye. ‘Vagueness’ elicits a kind of curiosity, even as it may be linked to wealth and power; a pertinent question is whether such ‘vagueness’ can still be reclaimed in the narration of underrepresented experience.

Silence is often far from productive, and in a time of literary decentrings, we must ask how far indirection can take us. Keeping such questions in mind, the following chapter will document a series of alternate ‘vaguening’s’, to explore the mutable dynamics behind any assumption of audience familiarity.

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<sup>37</sup> Roisin Kiberd, ‘Bland God: Notes on Mark Zuckerberg’, in *The Disconnect* (Great Britain: Serpent’s Tail, 2021), pp. 46-73 (p. 46).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

#### 4.1 '[...] this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house'<sup>41</sup>: Lists, Seriality, and Interior Space in Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River*

*That the great misery and much smaller joy of existence remain unchanged no matter what anything is called never checks the impulse to reach back and reclaim a loss, to try and make what happened look as if it had not happened at all.*<sup>42</sup>

Kincaid's body of work can appear as an *œuvre* filled with lists. Her readers will notice what seem to be linked or echoed references among her novels, such repetition forming an inventory or list-like structure in itself. This characteristic is perhaps most obvious in the case of the companion pieces *Annie John* and *At the Bottom of the River*.<sup>43</sup> In addition to these texts, the title of *The Autobiography of my Mother*<sup>44</sup> voices a preoccupation with a mother-daughter relationship in which the self appears unstable or fluid, a theme which can be observed on a more pervasive level in the former two novels.<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, Kincaid's nonfiction collections *My Garden Book*<sup>46</sup> and *Talk Stories*<sup>47</sup> were originally serialised in *The New Yorker*, and such works could be characterised as formally repetitive due to their collated structure. However, as distinct from such overt observations, it is possible to observe an additional sense of seriality on a structural and syntactic level in Kincaid's writing.

This seriality can be connected to what Walkowitz refers to as an 'excessive literalness' in Kincaid's work, which Walkowitz associates with 'translatese'.<sup>48</sup> Kincaid's prose can be characterised by a methodical turn of phrase which, in light of this study,

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<sup>41</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, 'Girl', in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 3-5 (p. 4).

<sup>42</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, 'Flowers of Evil', *The New Yorker*, 5 October 1992, p. 159.

<sup>43</sup> Wendy Dutton states that *Annie John* and *At the Bottom of the River* are 'companion pieces or sister texts', in which *Annie John* 'fleshes out the fantasy and the philosophy of *At the Bottom of the River*'s poetry'. (Wendy Dutton, 'Merge and Separate: Jamaica Kincaid's Fiction', *World Literature Today*, 63, 3 (1989), 406-410 (p. 406).)

<sup>44</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother* (New York: Plume, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Dutton, p. 407.

<sup>46</sup> Agnese Fidecaro, 'Jamaica Kincaid's Practical Politics of the Intimate in *My Garden (Book)*', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 1/2, 34 (2006), 250-270 (p. 250).

<sup>47</sup> Ian Frazier, 'Foreword', in Jamaica Kincaid, *Talk Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. xi-xx (p. xi).

<sup>48</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 179.

appears to recall both the writing of Beckett *and* Murakami. ‘What to do about lunch?’ she asks in *Talk Stories*. ‘So far, we have tried having it with different sets of people; we have tried having it with the same set of people; we have tried having it alone; we have tried not having it at all.’<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, of Boz Scaggs, she observes: ‘Sometimes he sang and played a white guitar, sometimes he sang and played a gold guitar, sometimes he sang and played a piano, and sometimes he sang and danced around.’<sup>50</sup> Such observations are found in what may be Kincaid’s writing at its most light-hearted, and are arguably unrepresentative of her novelistic prose. However, these permutations expose what can appear by turns a bemusement and cynicism with the social events Kincaid observes in her ‘Talk of the Town’ pieces, a sense of absurdity also present in her darker writing. *The Autobiography of my Mother* contains striking three-part sentences based on negation, reminiscent of Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase* extract: ‘We entered the village in the dark. There were no lights anywhere, no dog barked, we did not pass anyone’;<sup>51</sup> ‘She sang a song, but it had no words; it was not a lullaby, it was not sentimental, not meant to calm me when my soul roiled with the harshness of life.’<sup>52</sup>

This repetition intensifies around uncertain memory: in *My Garden (Book)*, Kincaid says, ‘I have eaten the fruit of pond lilies, they were delicious, but I can’t remember what they tasted like, only that they were delicious and that they were delicious, and that no matter that I can’t remember exactly what they tasted like, they were delicious again.’<sup>53</sup> The language in this run-on sentence appears alternately to break down and to reassert itself, evoking the impulses to rename and erase evident in this section’s opening quotation. Its uncertainty depicts the memory in question as malleable and overwritten at the same time as it appears to assert the concretion of a past sensory

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<sup>49</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Lunchtime’, in *Talk Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 42-44 (p. 42).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>51</sup> Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother*, p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>53</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Wisteria’, in *My Garden (Book)* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 11-28 (p. 15).

experience. It can be considered as a form of opposite to Beckett's 'ammonia' quote, which also narrates a sensory experience but with what appears to be waning sense of certainty.<sup>54</sup> In Kincaid's description of the pond lily fruit, her repetitions appear to embrace vagueness as a necessary element of memory, rather than a quality to be corrected or eradicated.

Kincaid's use of 'vagueness' contains an incisive awareness of the dynamics of erasure. In *My Garden (Book)*, she states: 'Carolus Linnaeus was born on the twenty-third of May 1707, somewhere in Sweden. (I know where, but I like the high-handedness of not saying so).'<sup>55</sup> In such quotes, she comically repositions the homogenising gaze from Afro-Caribbean to European geography. Her writing contains an evident impulse to 'vague' and universalise, but in a manner that playfully centres non-Eurocentric experience: in an account of travelling in China in the same collection, she states that, 'Benzilan was a town far from anywhere; it is a place where you stay on your way to somewhere else. I deeply loved Benzilan just for that, and in my mind all places of transition should be called that: Benzilan.'<sup>56</sup>

There is a deliberate quality to such vagueness. Kincaid comments on the manner in which 'vaguening' from a privileged perspective can appear euphemistic and even sinister. Of her own reading on the history of England, she humorously observes that the term 'nervous collapse' is used to describe 'the guy who lost France' in the War of the Roses: 'he went stark raving mad, he ruined his country [...] but they have the mildest words for this'.<sup>57</sup> While her writing style itself could be described as 'vague', it also criticises 'vagueness' when articulated from the perspective of a cultural 'centre' towards a 'periphery': in *Lucy*, when Dinah asks the protagonist whether she is 'from the islands',

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<sup>54</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Tarnopolsky, p. 303.

<sup>55</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, 'In History', in *My Garden (Book)* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 153-166 (pp. 160-161).

<sup>56</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, 'Plant Hunting in China', in *My Garden (Book)* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 188-215 (p. 202).

<sup>57</sup> Kincaid, in Cudjoe and Kincaid, p. 403.

she thinks, ‘Which islands exactly do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?’<sup>58</sup> Of her own writing, Kincaid has stated that she does not experience ‘the luxury of longing to be a displaced person’.<sup>59</sup> To her various narrators, ‘vagueness’ is associated with experiences of repeated belittling or used as a tool of redirected erasure: rarely does this ‘vagueness’ seem joyously chosen or aspired to.

However, it is useful in this connection to briefly return to Kincaid’s quote about memory and the water-lily fruit, as this section will aim to explore the existence of a form of affirmative or self-assertive ‘vagueness’ in her writing, linked to the use of repetition in articulating traumatic memory. In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai analyses Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* in terms of its evocation of an ‘irritated’ state.<sup>60</sup> It is worth introducing the idea of a communicative form of ‘vagueness’ with reference to this analysis. This brief detour will explore an instance of ‘vaguening’ as it applies to marginalised experiences, aiming to gesture towards the volume of diversity at play within literature considered ‘vague.’

Ngai describes irritation as a liminal affect, as it is ‘weak or mild anger’,<sup>61</sup> with strikingly physical connotations often oriented around the skin.<sup>62</sup> Such ‘irritation’ is a predominant characteristic of *Quicksand*: Ngai observes that the novel’s seemingly superficial focus subverts ideas of emotion as spatially confined to psychological ‘depths’.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the novel sustains a deliberate interest in what is ‘skin-deep.’ As Ngai notes, the ‘famously enigmatic’<sup>64</sup> protagonist is a biracial woman, a character written at the time of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>65</sup> While her motives appear frustratingly vague, such irritation can be related to experiences of being judged according to one’s

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<sup>58</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>59</sup> Kincaid, in Cudjoe and Kincaid, p. 402.

<sup>60</sup> Ngai, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

race. Arguably implied in Ngai's analysis is the possibility that this strange affective tone conveys irritation with the task of representation itself. The lacunae in the text, which Ngai refers to as 'sores', are part of '*Quicksand*'s use of irritation to [...] [counter] the conflation of "deficient" or "inadequate" expression with *repression*, which it does by vigilantly protecting *Quicksand*'s own expressive and emotional blank spots'.<sup>66</sup> Music, in the novel, is also treated in a manner that emphasises what Ngai calls 'subjective gaps', implying that 'it is the ability to both facilitate *and* not facilitate identifications with constructions of blackness that gives the black-authored artforms in the novel their power'.<sup>67</sup>

In Ngai's view, *Quicksand* is notable for both its preservation of absences alongside its preoccupation with surfaces, two characteristics very pertinent to this study. The 'sores' in this text recall Beckett's imagery of the pierced veil or 'word surface',<sup>68</sup> along with his descriptions of writing in terms of the 'abscess' and 'cavity'.<sup>69</sup> For Beckett, perhaps, this excavation is another activity at which his language fails. Beckett's 'overarching vagueness' means that often a spatialised description appears vague despite containing extensive detail; a comparison can be made here with the manner in which Beckett's repetition of a word or image seldom leads to increased understanding.<sup>70</sup>

Elsewhere, the sleek surfaces of the Murakami universe convey the atomisation of boom-

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<sup>66</sup> In full, the gaps 'enable the text to resist the [...] demand that artforms by racialized subjects be expressive at any cost. *Quicksand*'s use of irritation to challenge the assumption that, in order to politically or aesthetically matter, feelings must be located below the surface or "under the skin" plays a key role in furthering this polemical assertion. In addition to countering the conflation of "deficient" or "inadequate" expression with *repression*, which it does by vigilantly protecting *Quicksand*'s own expressive and emotional blank spots, Helga Crane's strange irritation undermines a longstanding tradition of confining feeling to internal spaces, as well as the moralized opposition between depth and surface used to distinguish feelings viewed as politically efficacious and adequate to their occasions, from those which are not.' (Ibid., p. 207.)

<sup>67</sup> In full, 'the text suggests that black-authored artforms do not necessarily have to promote, confirm, or buttress identifications with either positive or negative constructions of blackness, even if they have the potential to do so. In fact, *Quicksand* seems to suggest that it is the ability to both facilitate *and* not facilitate identifications with constructions of blackness that gives the black-authored artforms in the novel their power – much the way Glenn Gould's power as an artist resides, as Giorgio Agamben has argued, in his exercising his potential to *not*-play as much as his potential to play. (38) To put this slightly differently, it is as if *Quicksand* were polemically asserting the right of black artforms to create and *preserve* "blank spots," shedding new light on the novel's motivation for preventing its own emotional or expressive gaps from being "filled.'" (Ibid., p. 200.)

<sup>68</sup> Beckett, 'Letter to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937', p. 518.

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 18 October 1932', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig and Dan Gunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 133-136 (p.134).

<sup>70</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Tamopolsky, p. 303.



era Japan: while his blind alleys,<sup>71</sup> elevators,<sup>72</sup> and culverts<sup>73</sup> often evoke concealed depths in overtly psychoanalytic terms, these interior journeys do little to dispel the sense of irresolution when novels such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* or *A Wild Sheep Chase* conclude.

Even this brief inventory of surfaces illustrates how ‘vagueness’ can be treated differently by literary ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries.’ Beckett and Murakami appear in such cases to write according to a poetics of ‘vagueness’ that promises uncovering yet rarely achieves such conclusions; Larsen, in Ngai’s analysis, writes with a nagging awareness of the focus on surfaces themselves. Thus, while all three authors write in a manner that can be said to feature gaps, lacunae, and a spatialised imagery of depth and surface, this seeming preoccupation with the ‘vague’ has strikingly different contextual connotations.

Kincaid’s writing adopts a different approach to historical trauma. Unlike Larsen’s politicisation of the surface, Kincaid often focuses on spatialised depth and revelation, as in her image of the submerged house in *At the Bottom of the River*’s titular story.<sup>74</sup> A similar image is also present in *The Autobiography of my Mother*, in which the speaker describes her childhood memories as appearing to occur in a faraway area like ‘a dollhouse’ ‘at the bottom of a hole’.<sup>75</sup> However, despite such differences it is possible to discern, with the help of the aforementioned brief detour into Ngai’s analysis of *Quicksand*, that there is perhaps a similarly ‘irritated’ affect present in Kincaid’s repetition, something of an urge to represent lived experience along with a certain preservation of what Glissant refers to as the ‘right to opacity’.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Murakami, *Hard-Boiled*, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘At the Bottom of the River’, in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 62-82 (p. 75).

<sup>75</sup> Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother*, p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 189-190.

It is, of course, perhaps too obvious to point out the Beckettian resonances of this simultaneous urge and unwillingness to speak. There are affinities with such ‘paradoxical vagueness’ in Kincaid’s work: bizarrely, her ‘Talk of the Town’ stories were identified and reported to her family despite the fact that such work was anonymously authored and made no reference to Antigua.<sup>77</sup> While superficially appearing not to contain identifying details, Kincaid’s writing evidently conveys a powerful sense of its cultural moment.

Discussing repetition in Glissant’s writing, Celia M. Britton notes that while the reader ‘often lacks [the] cultural knowledge’ necessary for the understanding of [certain] images, ‘the text compensates for this by building its own context through the repetition of a given image, with variations and refigurations, so that the reader accumulates and links together different partial aspects of the image, and its meaning becomes progressively clearer.’<sup>78</sup> An example of this, for instance, is Glissant’s repeated allusion to the ‘moitié droite du cerveau’ (right side of the brain), a reference that recalls amputations carried out on slaves.<sup>79</sup> While, according to Bates’s argument, Beckett’s well-worn objects appear to bleach and degrade in his later work,<sup>80</sup> it is possible to conceive of Kincaid’s references as accumulating clues, or fragments that gradually cohere to form a recollected experience. Kincaid suggests – with relation to an incident during her childhood in which her mother burned her books – that ‘it would not be so strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to life by writing them again and again until they were perfect, unscathed by fire of any kind.’<sup>81</sup> This ‘process’, as Britton terms it with reference to Glissant, ‘of indirect, deferred

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<sup>77</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, in Jamaica Kincaid and Brittnay Buckner, ‘Singular Beast: A Conversation with Jamaica Kincaid’, *Callaloo*, 31, 2 (2008), 461-469 (p. 467).

<sup>78</sup> Britton, p. 156.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>80</sup> Bates, p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 198.

understanding'<sup>82</sup> can be seen as a counterpart to the ironically stylised textual 'worlds' created by Beckett's and Murakami's repeated references.

Such seriality is evident, for instance, in 'Girl', *At the Bottom of the River*'s opening story. The text presents itself as a list of instructions mainly regarding politeness and domestic activities, the subject matter itself evoking a sense of seriality regarding the intergenerational relationship described. Since the mother's instructions involve both an internalisation of Antiguan and colonial norms, 'home' or 'rootedness' is aligned with an aporetic space signifying both family and foreignness. Paradoxically, this space is evoked through concrete lists of terms or activities. The speaker is scandalised having made the assumption that the girl 'sing[s] benna in Sunday school';<sup>83</sup> the speaker's instructions contain both traditional knowledge ('don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all'<sup>84</sup>) and guidelines that appear to relate to a form of colonially influenced propriety ('this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest'.<sup>85</sup>)

The collection itself can be seen, on a larger scale, as a series of lists. These lists in turn resonate with each other, and such inventories themselves echo across Kincaid's body of work.<sup>86</sup> In 'In the Night', a childhood imagining involving marrying a woman 'with black bramblebush hair and brown eyes' includes a meticulous description of household objects: 'in the mud hut will be two chairs and one table, a lamp that burns kerosene, a medicine chest, a pot, one bed, two pillows, two sheets, one looking glass, two cups, two saucers, two dinner plates, two forks, two drinking-water glasses, one china pot'.<sup>87</sup> This same reliance on sequences of objects appears to be aligned with an

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<sup>82</sup> Britton, p. 156.

<sup>83</sup> Kincaid, 'Girl', p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> Such lists, for instance, are paralleled in *Annie John*: 'When we went to the grocer's, she would point out to me the reason she bought each thing. I was shown a loaf of bread or a pound of butter from at least ten different angles.' Annie's typical lunches are listed methodically: '(pumpkin soup with droppers, banana fritters with salt fish stewed in antroba and tomatoes, fungie with salt fish stewed in antroba and tomatoes, or pepper pot, all depending on what my mother had found at market that day.)' (Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 15; p. 17.)

<sup>87</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, 'In the Night', in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 6-12 (pp. 11-12).

experience of grounding in the final lines of *At the Bottom of the River*'s titular story. Emerging from a hallucinatory and fluid world, the speaker lists the objects in her room in a series of simple statements. 'In the light of the lamp, I see some books, I see a chair, I see a table, I see a pen; I see a bowl of ripe fruit, a bottle of milk, a flute made of wood, the clothes that I will wear.'<sup>88</sup> She then 'claims[s]' these things, as when she sees them she knows she is connected 'to all that is human endeavor'.<sup>89</sup> In this manner, both the room and the household objects within it help draw the protagonist back to the world following an experience characterised by uncanny alienation. Of course, *At the Bottom of the River* itself, as a collection, problematises the idea of seriality. As a sequence of thematically linked short stories, it is difficult to know whether to consider it a singular work or many. Similarly, its positioning as a form of 'vaguened' counterpart to *Annie John* forges another link across Kincaid's *œuvre*, creating the sense of a series within a series.

Kincaid's use of cultural detail is notable for its lacunary quality. Chapter 1 of this study moved from a discussion of repetition and seriality in Beckett's and Murakami's *œuvres* to a discussion of 'inconsistent vagueness', outlining how both techniques are a means of couching cultural specificity in obfuscating terms. According to this latter idea, cultural detail in both authors' work is interspersed with vagueness with the result that *the surrounding vagueness itself*, rather than the detail, is emphasised. Kincaid's *œuvre* arguably reveals a preoccupation with similar processes of defamiliarisation.

Kincaid often makes self-referential use of the absurdity that accompanies unglossed terms, provoking the reader to consider the unexplained reference as a privilege afforded to writers from dominant cultures. She has expressed resistance to a form of Americanised writing that makes extensive use of brand names. She states, 'I

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<sup>88</sup> Kincaid, 'River', p. 82.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

didn't like the way young white Americans wrote – a deadpan way – and the way they always mentioned products and songs and supermarkets. They don't really write, they just mention things.'<sup>90</sup> According to Kincaid, this style arises from the privileged assumption that 'the reader is just like them, so he understands if you just use some brand name.'<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, such descriptions recall Murakami's use of brand names: while his signature references may be variously read as an expression of cultural heterogeneity or a comment on an Americanised Japan, his writing could be described as resting on similar assumptions to those Kincaid seeks to problematise. Thus, the dynamics of 'vaguening' she explores in her work are perhaps particularly relevant to this study.

On the other hand, culturally specific references when used in Kincaid's own work have a subversive significance. In the case of the 'night-soil men' in 'In the Night', Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert states that 'Kincaid plays on the reader's lack of familiarity with West Indian types and expressions to turn what is commonplace in Antigua – the night-soil men who come to empty the pails in those places where there is no sewer system – into mysterious figures who provide a link to the world of Obeah, magic, and apparitions.'<sup>92</sup> 'In the Night' begins with a description of darkness as undivided by time, eschewing the categories of 'just before midnight, midnight, or just after midnight'.<sup>93</sup> This description – which itself attempts to ascribe qualities to a visually featureless darkness, describing the night as 'round in some places' and 'flat in some places' – concludes its first sentence with ominous mention of 'the night-soil men'.<sup>94</sup> The specificity of this reference is all the more jarring for the fact that it occurs in an otherwise vague introductory sentence. The mysterious description of night thus places

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<sup>90</sup> Kincaid, in Cudjoe and Kincaid, p. 402.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Jamaica Kincaid: A Critical Companion* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), p. 55.

<sup>93</sup> Kincaid, 'In the Night', p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

defamiliarising or mythologising emphasis on the subsequent reference to the night-soil men.

‘Vagueness’ and ‘detail’ are interspersed in this collection in a manner that recalls the ‘inconsistent vagueness’ I have observed with relation to Beckett and Murakami. Speaking about her own hands in ‘Wingless’, the narrator describes them as ‘now vagabond and prodigal, now cruel and careless, now without remorse or forgiveness, but now innocently slipping into a dress with braided sleeves’.<sup>95</sup> The juxtaposition of these abstract qualities with the abruptly concrete image of the dress with braided sleeves enacts a jarring interplay of ‘specificity’ and ‘vagueness.’ This inconsistency in turn recalls ideas of the author’s ‘obligation’ to provide local colour, and the ways in which this obligation can be subverted.

By engaging selectively with cultural detail Kincaid encourages the reader to confront their own selective bias. It is telling that *A Small Place*, an essay on Antigua’s relationship with the white tourism industry, is afforded a deliberately ‘placeless’ title. The vague label ‘*A Small Place*’ appears as a humorous case of ‘universalised’ distancing; in its opening pages, the name of the area is referred to in parentheses: ‘[...] you could stay in this place (Antigua) where the sun always shines’.<sup>96</sup> This grammatical compartmentalisation both draws attention to and effaces the cultural specificity in this sentence. The brackets literally enact a form of ‘inconsistent vagueness’, by which the detail is present yet interspersed with the rest of the text in a manner that discourages the reader from integrating it readily. Elsewhere in the essay, with reference to an event known as ‘The Earthquake’, Kincaid explains the paradox of referring to a specific or local event by a general term: ‘the more meaningful the thing, the more meaningless we

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<sup>95</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Wingless’, in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 20-28 (p. 27).

<sup>96</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 4.

make it'.<sup>97</sup> Just as Beckett had to explain that the place name 'Stepaside' had not been invented,<sup>98</sup> Kincaid also makes use of the fact that certain culturally specific references may be viewed by international audiences as absurd or improbable: 'No real village in any real countryside would be named Table Hill Gordon'.<sup>99</sup> These references highlight the manner in which truth may appear stranger than fiction to the uninformed audience.

Kincaid's juxtaposition of repeated, seemingly consistent references with a pervasive 'vagueness' is consistent with the Glissantian framework informing this reading. Glissant himself describes his theoretical style as a 'constant repetition'<sup>100</sup> in *Poetics of Relation*, arguing that there is a 'consciousness' in '[r]elentlessly resuming something you have already said.'<sup>101</sup> Among his repeated themes he lists 'the balance between the present moment and duration'.<sup>102</sup> Kincaid's writing can be described in terms of a similar temporal balance, by which her individual references (and, indeed, her individual stories) appear both discrete and bookended by vagueness at the same time as they are serial. While acknowledging the need for repetition from the perspective of theoretical articulation of decolonial experiences, Glissant also acknowledges 'discontinuity' as a feature integral, for instance, to oral narratives. 'The texts,' he describes 'neglect the essentials' important to Western realism of 'landscapes, the lesson of scenery, the reading of customs, the descriptions of the motives of characters.'<sup>103</sup> Rather, the oral text aims 'for disguise beneath the symbol' in order to 'express something it is forbidden to refer to'.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, he describes the manner in which the Creole language 'renew(s) itself on the basis of a series of forgettings'.<sup>105</sup> There is

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Antoni Libera, 11 December 1980', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 537-538 (p. 537).

<sup>99</sup> Kincaid, *A Small Place*, p. 78.

<sup>100</sup> Glissant, p. 35.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

therefore a discernible focus on the uncanny in Glissant's work, as characters in both his fiction and nonfiction are rendered withdrawn due to trauma. In *Poetics of Relation* he describes a 'ghostly young man' who one day begins to wander back and forth on a beach at night, never speaking again;<sup>106</sup> a character called Marie Celat, who makes recurring appearances in all Glissant's novels, exists, as Britton notes, 'with the absent existence of those who have withdrawn themselves' and is 'a kind of human Marie Celeste'.<sup>107</sup> It is clear that Glissant's work stages a nuanced interplay of repetition and forgetting, articulating historical trauma in a voice that nonetheless acknowledges the prevalence of 'vagueness' in narratives often erased or minimised.

There is thus a focus on 'vagueness' and the uncanny in Kincaid's domestic spaces. Her descriptions of interiors resonate with the 'overarching vagueness' discussed in this study's second chapter. Therefore, while her work contains lists of household items such as those cited above, the interiors in which such inventories take place often appear imprecisely defined and difficult to picture. In this manner, it can be argued that Kincaid's interiors embody both the repetition and the uncanniness Glissant discusses with relation to a racialised opacity. Kincaid's own delineation of the domestic is comically vague: 'If I were asked to make a definition of domestic space, I would say that domestic space is any space in which anyone might feel comfortable expelling any bodily fluid.'<sup>108</sup> This definition is both broad and repetitive in structure: the word 'any' is repeated three times, as is the word 'space.'

'Overarching vagueness' is equally apparent throughout *At the Bottom of the River* with relation to Kincaid's representations of domestic space. In the title story, the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>107</sup> Britton, p. 124. It is of course worth noting that the 'Marie Celeste' itself is a cultural marker that has been modified over time. As Paul Begg states: 'Over the years a myth would grow up around the Mary Celeste, ensuring that she would pass into the common language to describe any strangely deserted place. The myth entailed a minor name change – *Mary Celeste* is more often than not called *Marie Celeste* – and the story of her discovery and the mysterious disappearance of all those aboard her is immeasurably enhanced.' This existing slippage makes the name 'Marie Celat' perhaps even more interesting in its capacity as a term in an uncanny series. (Paul Begg, *Mary Celeste: The Greatest Mystery of the Sea* (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007), p. 2.)

<sup>108</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, 'The House', in *My Garden (Book)* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 29-48 (p. 36).



house the speaker sees on the riverbed is defined by absence: ‘I could not see anything inside and I had no desire to see what was inside.’<sup>109</sup> The area bordering the house is uncertain: ‘All around the house was a wide stretch of green – green grass freshly mowed a uniform length.’<sup>110</sup> This uniformity makes it difficult to gain perspective on the structure of the house. The grass extends ‘for a distance I could not measure or know just from looking at it.’<sup>111</sup> This recalls the ‘vague’ house of Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase*, bordered by forest.<sup>112</sup> It also recalls the cabin of *Ill Seen Ill Said*,<sup>113</sup> as beyond the grass there are ‘lots of pebbles’ of a ‘white-gray’ colour with a denuded quality, ‘as if they had been in water for many years and then placed in the sun to dry.’<sup>114</sup> This house occupies an empty, uncanny territory: nothing around it moves. ‘There were no living things in the water – no birds, no vertebrates or invertebrates, no fragile insects’.<sup>115</sup> Its surroundings are defined by an overarching absence or stillness, compartmentalised underwater as if it has been preserved in this medium. This house is the site of an experience of apparent self-confrontation in which the character encounters a woman who looks towards a world ‘not yet divided’.<sup>116</sup>

While the collection focuses extensively on domestic interiority, these settings are treated with an assumed familiarity. In ‘Girl’, the family home in which the household tasks take place is undescribed other than through passing references to areas such as ‘the stone heap’ and ‘the clothesline.’<sup>117</sup> Such ‘overarching vagueness’ is similarly present in ‘In the Night’: ‘there is the sound of this house creaking, that house creaking, and the other house creaking as they settle into the ground.’<sup>118</sup> The surrounding area is thus

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<sup>109</sup> Kincaid, ‘River’, p. 75.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 236.

<sup>113</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, pp. 451-452.

<sup>114</sup> Kincaid, ‘At the Bottom of the River’, p. 75.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-78.

<sup>117</sup> Kincaid, ‘Girl’, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> Kincaid, ‘In the Night’, p. 7.

(un)described in a humorously facetious manner. The story ‘At Last’ begins with the subheading ‘THE HOUSE’.<sup>119</sup> However, despite this title, which appears to offer certainty by labelling or circumscribing the scene, the interior described provokes more questions than it answers. The reader learns about the space through a doubtful voice that could perhaps be conjuring the house through memory: ‘I lived in this house with you: the wood shingles, unpainted, weather beaten, fraying; the piano, a piece of furniture now, collecting dust; the bed in which all the children were born; a bowl of flowers, alive, then dead; a bowl of fruit, but then all eaten.’<sup>120</sup> As in Kincaid’s ‘Girl’, the aporetic semicolons separating the items in this list appear to imply both pause and continuation. This first paragraph also contains the parenthetical questions ‘([w]hat was that light?)’ and ‘([w]as that the light again?)’,<sup>121</sup> introducing further vagueness to the space described in a manner that implies either an undetermined light source or a spectral presence. Again, overarching descriptions are eschewed in favour of a list of the items inside the house. The histories of these items are hinted at – ‘[w]here are the letters that brought the bad news?’ the voice asks, for instance, or, ‘[t]hese glasses commemorate a coronation’<sup>122</sup> – but such statements appear only to highlight further lacunae. Described as it is through what appears to be a dialogue, the reader is unsure as to whose perception of the house should be trusted:

Why were all the doors closed so tight shut?  
But they weren’t closed.  
I saw them closed.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘At Last’, in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 13-19 (p. 13).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

This oscillation of narrative focus is perhaps a fitting point at which to pivot this discussion of Kincaid's work to its third and final section, an exploration of 'multivalent vagueness.' Kincaid's repetitions demonstrate a keen awareness of the politicisation of seemingly broad and mundane symbols. In *My Garden (Book)*, she states of her house that '(it was painted yellow, a yellow common to yellow houses in Finland, not the yellow of the Caribbean, the place I am from; this was a deliberate choice on my part and I was expressing something quite common; which is, liking the thing you are not).'<sup>124</sup> This observation signals an awareness of 'multivalent vagueness', acknowledging that even an innocuous choice of décor can reflect Eurocentric bias. The location of the above lines in parentheses conveys the constant dynamics of cultural exchange that determine even what appear to be superficial aesthetic choices in a domestic setting.

The colour yellow, a seemingly broad signifier, recurs throughout Kincaid's *œuvre* in other guises. The American family Lucy stays with live in an almost entirely yellow house, in which 'yellow light' falls on 'pale-yellow linoleum tiles [...] and on the walls of the kitchen, which were painted yet another shade of pale yellow'.<sup>125</sup> The family are themselves likened to daffodils and described in absurd terms: 'in photographs their 'six yellow-haired heads of various sizes were bunched as if they were a bouquet of flowers tied together with unseen string.'<sup>126</sup> Similarly, her reference to Wordsworth's *The Daffodils* has its place in a series of critiques that discuss this poem as emblematic of colonial canonicity.<sup>127</sup> Guyanese poet Grace Nichols's poem *Kicking Daffodils* can be read as a similar critique of English literature;<sup>128</sup> Lorna Goodison, a Jamaican poet, similarly aligns 'the Daffodils' with white male-centric poetic tradition, stating 'I thought

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<sup>124</sup> Kincaid, 'The House', p. 39.

<sup>125</sup> Kincaid, *Lucy*, p. 27.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>127</sup> Ian Smith, 'Misusing Canonical Intertexts: Jamaica Kincaid, Wordsworth and Colonialism's "absent things"', *Callaloo*, 25, 3 (2002), 801-820 (p. 801).

<sup>128</sup> Grace Nichols, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 805.

it was stupid to go on so much about a flower I had never seen.’<sup>129</sup> The speaker in *Lucy* recalls an instance of being praised for reciting this poem as a child, after which in anger she wishes to ‘erase from [her] mind, line by line, every word of that poem.’<sup>130</sup> Through a methodical act of ‘vaguening’ in itself, the protagonist aims to forcibly erase this marker of childhood obedience; tellingly, the poem itself goes unnamed, the reference pointedly implied.

Yellow, too, appears in Kincaid’s ‘Biography of a Dress’, an essay that begins with a description of a childhood photograph.<sup>131</sup> The dress the speaker wears in the photograph is ‘a yellow dress made of cotton poplin’ which is then historically contextualised as ‘first manufactured in the French town of Avignon and brought to England by the Huguenots’.<sup>132</sup> Kincaid goes on to compare the dress’s colour to the mealtime staples of boiled cornmeal and fongie given to her by her mother.<sup>133</sup> Contextualising details, such as the cheapness of cornmeal and the origin of the dress, are terminated with the temporally disruptive interjections ‘([...] but I could not have known that at the time)’ and ‘(but I did not know that at the time)’ and, again, both located in parentheses.<sup>134</sup> Much as Walkowitz observes the intimations of seriality pervading the Kincaid novel *Mr. Potter*,<sup>135</sup> a sense of legacy spans out from these initially simple images: they relentlessly reflect their situation in unequally weighted economies.

A similar repetition of colour as signifier occurs perhaps most obviously in the short story ‘Blackness’ from *River*. In this story, a vaguely defined form of depression – a blackness that, in a manner recalling uncanny interiors, ‘enters [the speaker’s] many-

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<sup>129</sup> Lorna Goodison, qtd. in Smith, pp. 805-806.

<sup>130</sup> Kincaid, *Lucy*, p. 18.

<sup>131</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Biography of a Dress’ (2022) <https://www.shortstoryproject.com/story/biography-of-a-dress/> [Accessed 11 September 2020].

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 179.

tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish'<sup>136</sup> – overcomes the narrative. ‘Multivalent vagueness’ characterises this blackness, itself represented spatially as an undefined area: ‘The blackness fills up a small room, a large field, an island, my own being.’<sup>137</sup> It is tempting to view this blackness as something of an archival space, recalling the dry well in Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.<sup>138</sup> It may signify both a broad experience of disengagement or alienation but also most obviously *appears* to provoke comparisons with the experience of racialised othering. This blackness is depersonalising: when within it, the speaker states, ‘I can no longer point to myself and say “I.”’<sup>139</sup> An ambivalent reaction to essentialisation is evoked by statements such as ‘[t]he blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it’.<sup>140</sup> There are implications of disempowerment implicit in the phrase ‘[i]n the blackness my voice is silent’;<sup>141</sup> conversely, not all aspects of the experience are negative, as evidenced by the line ‘[t]he blackness cannot bring me joy but often I am made glad in it.’<sup>142</sup>

Much as Moody states that hunger in Beckett is both a bodily reaction defined by absence at the same time as a historically politicised state,<sup>143</sup> Kincaid’s ‘blackness’ is a literal absence of cultural signifiers that simultaneously signals a racialised experience of alienation. It also corresponds on a more specific level to the main character’s depressive episode, the experience of which is elucidated further in *Annie John*.<sup>144</sup> It is for this reason that ‘Blackness’ appears to both encourage and problematise racialised

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<sup>136</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Blackness’, in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 46-52 (pp. 46-47.)

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>138</sup> Boulter, p. 59.

<sup>139</sup> Kincaid, ‘Blackness’, p. 47.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>143</sup> Moody, p. 261; pp. 265-266.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Days before it was decided that I was not well enough to go to school, I walked around feeling weak, as if at any moment I would collapse in a heap. If I rested my head on my desk, in an instant I fell asleep; the walk to and from school wore me out, so that I moved at the speed of an old jalopy. Nothing unusual seemed wrong. I did not have a fever. No wild storms raged through my stomach. My appetite was as poor as it had always been. My mother, tugging at my eyelids this way and that, could not see any signs of biliousness. All the same, I was in no condition to keep up in my usual way, so I had to take to my bed.’ (Kincaid, *Annie John*, p. 108.)

interpretations. The character's depression in both books appears to be connected with an adolescent experience of self-realisation, by which the character negotiates a personhood as distinct from her mother's influence.<sup>145</sup> Given the maternal character's association with custom and propriety, it seems inevitable that this self-realisation has a (post)colonially informed bent – perhaps the story/section 'Blackness' relates to the narrator's definition of identity on her own terms.<sup>146</sup> However, the unlocalisable and almost magical quality of the 'blackness' itself arguably resists neat interpretation. It seems to acknowledge facile associations of black identity with otherness and mystery, thus perhaps serving an almost satirical or at least self-reflexive function. Non-Antiguan readers, for instance, may immediately associate 'blackness' with race, whereas this reference could equally denote a sense of lostness, depression, or – as in the case of 'In the Night' – literal imagery of nightfall in a rural landscape.

Perhaps importantly to this argument, Kincaid appears sceptical of the idea of writing that unequivocally centres loyalty to one's origins. She states, '[I]terally, I am a bastard. My parents were not married. I take the bastard view. I don't feel I owe any honor to the group of people I come from.'<sup>147</sup> In a manner that recalls both Beckett's and Murakami's disengagement from the literary circles of their respective nations, Kincaid appears at times unaware of her contemporaries. Of a conference on West Indian women's writing, she stated, '[g]od – I didn't know there were more! That's wonderful.'<sup>148</sup> A tension can thus be discerned in Kincaid's work between the drive to depict a marginalised experience along with an unwillingness to be essentialised to this

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<sup>145</sup> See, for instance, 'What I Have Been Doing Lately', the story that immediately precedes 'Blackness': in this cyclical experience of journey and return, dreamlike imagery recounts a fraught and uncanny experience with the speaker's mother. The corresponding breakdown in *Annie John* – '[i]n the year I turned fifteen, I felt more unhappy than I had ever imagined anyone could be' – is linked to growing tension between the narrator and her mother. During this period, the narrator has a dream of walking that is similar to those described in 'What I Have Been Doing Lately.' (Jamaica Kincaid, 'What I Have Been Doing Lately', in *At the Bottom of the River* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 40-45; Kincaid, *Annie John*, p. 85; *ibid.*, p. 87; pp. 102-103; *ibid.*, pp. 88-89.)

<sup>146</sup> See, for instance, the conversation in *Annie John* in which the narrator asks her father for a wooden trunk separate from the one her mother has handed down to her, another event that immediately precedes the breakdown. (Kincaid, *Annie John*, pp. 106-107.)

<sup>147</sup> Kincaid, in Buckner and Kincaid, p. 464.

<sup>148</sup> Kincaid, in Cudjoe and Kincaid, p. 401.

experience alone, a perspective that appears outdated for its implicit equation of writing that centres a given sociopolitical context with some form of pejorative ‘reduction to’ that context.

However, contrary to such statements by Kincaid, ‘Blackness’ can be read as ahead of its time due to the multivalent quality of its *aporia*: it inventories a number of experiences under the heading ‘Blackness’ in a manner that acknowledges a vast and heterogenous plurality of (non)meaning within this term. The reader is left to acknowledge the fact that the ‘Blackness’ discussed may not be their same assumption of ‘Blackness’ at all. This alternate representation and nonrepresentation recalls Ngai’s analysis of Larsen’s *Quicksand*, as ‘Blackness’ appears to narrate an experience of marginalisation while preserving a sense of resistant opacity.

Whereas Beckett’s ‘multivalent vagueness’, for instance, appears employed to signal a capricious substitutability – as in the quote substituting ‘Up the Republic!’ for ‘sweetheart’<sup>149</sup> – Kincaid’s ‘multivalent vagueness’ can be read to evoke the opposite idea, namely conveying a relentless and inescapable politicisation of even ‘vague’ and innocuous references. However, a neat opposition cannot be drawn here, as elsewhere in Kincaid’s work this ‘multivalent vagueness’ is at times employed in a manner that recalls something of this former type of uncanny substitutability. Kincaid equates seemingly arbitrary statements in ‘What I Have Been Doing Lately’: ‘I could have said, “I have been listening carefully to my mother’s words, so as to make a good imitation of a dutiful daughter.” I could have said, “A pack of dogs, tired from chasing each other all over town, slept in the moonlight.”’<sup>150</sup> (Crucially, which ‘town’ the speaker refers to is not specified.) A woman who the speaker first believes is her mother, and then thinks is a

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<sup>149</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 229; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>150</sup> Kincaid, ‘What I Have Been Doing Lately’, p. 43.

stranger, greets her with the familiar address '[i]t's you. Just look at that.'<sup>151</sup> Both sides of this encounter are marked by a sense of identity as substitutable – it is possible that neither person is who they say they are. In a manner similar to Kincaid's 'vague' repetitions, there may be a connotation of trauma or dissociation in this use of 'multivalent vagueness.' Occurring as it often does against a backdrop of coexisting belief systems, Kincaid's absurdity arguably arises from the threat of conceptual mistranslation. There is a playfulness to this quality, just as a similar multilingual absurdity can be discerned in Murakami or Beckett. However, this sense of absurd opacity can also perhaps be related to more negative experiences of cultural erasure.

Kincaid's work is interpretable in terms of the three forms of 'vaguening' discussed in this thesis's first three chapters. She makes use of what can be thought of as a 'paradoxical vagueness'; while Beckett's and Murakami's repetition appears to stylise and obfuscate, Kincaid's repeated use of images appears to imply gradual revelation. While her use of repeated motifs *seems* dreamlike and uncanny, her images accumulate with the effect that a larger memory or description is eventually constructed. As I have shown, this gradual accumulation of detail often seems a pointed stylistic choice in Kincaid's work, reflecting as her *œuvre* does the manner in which history may be 'vaguened' by its victors.

Similarly, the 'overarching vagueness' discussed in this study's second chapter can also be applied to Kincaid's writing, in which isolated or disconnected details of a given domestic space are often mentioned in the absence of 'scene-setting' description. As I have highlighted, such uneven description may signal a casual familiarity regarding the work's setting: the refusal to provide a situating overview can read in a decolonial context as an expression of resistance through opacity.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.



In the final section of this analysis, I have suggested that a form of ‘multivalent vagueness’, as discussed in Chapter 3, can be read into Kincaid’s work. While a substitutability of reference in Beckett can appear deliberately absurd, Kincaid’s references convey a relentlessly intruding political context. Finally and counter to this point, there are occasional evocations in Kincaid’s work of references as almost arbitrary, an uncanniness that is itself worthy of analysis. This absurd quality can be read, perhaps, as a comment on the stigmatising ‘vagueness’ of othering processes, and the instability of identity such processes can create. It is perhaps apposite at this juncture – a turn, in our discussion, towards a form of translational absurdity – to move on to an analysis of Syrian poet Adonis, another writer who charts a form of ‘double absence’ or betweenness vital to formulations of a non-Eurocentric conception of the ‘vague.’

#### 4.2 ‘Celebrating vague-clear things’:<sup>152</sup> Adonis, Anecdotes, Architecture, Archives

*My thoughts resembled locomotives  
straining out of fog  
and into fog.*<sup>153</sup>

The poetry of Adonis can be thought of as founded on acts of translation. As Adonis himself notes in *The Pages of Day and Night*, ‘[t]he Other has been omnipresent in the creative experience of Arabic poetry’ due to the fact that ‘the language the Arab poet uses contains many languages, old and new’.<sup>154</sup> Arabic poetry is, in Adonis’s view,

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<sup>152</sup> Adonis, ‘Celebrating Vague-Clear Things’, p. 257.

<sup>153</sup> Adonis, ‘The Stage and the Mirrors’, in *The Blood of Adonis*, trans. by Samuel Hazo (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 23.

<sup>154</sup> Adonis, ‘Preface’, in *The Pages of Day and Night*, trans. by Samuel Hazo (Illinois: The Marlborough Press, 1994), pp. xiii-xvi (p. xiv).

‘plural but in singular form.’<sup>155</sup> In a manner similar to both Murakami’s and Beckett’s prose, this sense of translation or betweenness in Adonis’s work leads not, as one may assume, to a sense of abundant reference, but rather to a state of lack in which ‘[a]bsence and exile constitute the only presence.’<sup>156</sup>

Adonis’s imagery often reflects this state of shuttling: in his poem ‘The Captive’, the speaker ‘build[s] an island in my mind’, and passes ‘between the barriers and springs / Of light that made my dream.’<sup>157</sup> In this poem, imagery of ‘harbors’ and ‘a shore’ is paired with the idea of an uncertain passage between sleep and wakefulness.<sup>158</sup> Stating that ‘[b]eing a poet means that I have already written but that I have actually written nothing’,<sup>159</sup> Adonis often incorporates the surreal into his poetry, in which, for instance, a minaret weeps.<sup>160</sup> As in both Beckett’s and Murakami’s cases, lack and absurdity appear linked here, suggesting the poet’s awareness of the simultaneous proliferation and paucity of meaning made possible in situations of conceptual (mis)translation. As Mirène Ghossein states, Adonis’s poem ‘Transformations of the Lover’ ‘brings with it a sense of bewilderment “(what is the poem about?)” due to its hallucinatory imagery including that of “dancing flowers” and a brook described as “walking”’.<sup>161</sup>

Interestingly, Adonis’s poetry acknowledges Arabic poetic traditions that themselves lend nuance to the false dichotomy of ‘specific’ and ‘vague’ writing. In the article ‘Narrating the Self: The Amalgamation of the Personal and the Impersonal in Eliot’s and Adonis’ Poetry’, Imed Nsiri states, quoting Suzanne P. Stetkevych, that ‘the mainstream in conventional Arabic poetry is lyrical modes whereby the personal and the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Adonis, ‘The Captive’ in *The Pages of Day and Night*, trans. by Samuel Hazo (Illinois: The Marlborough Press, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Adonis, ‘Preface’, p. xiv.

<sup>160</sup> Adonis, ‘The Minaret’, in Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, and Samih Al-Qasim, *Victims of a Map: A Bilingual Anthology of Arabic Poetry*, ed. & trans. by Abdullah al-Udhari (London: Saqi, 2005), pp. 91-171 (p. 139).

<sup>161</sup> Adonis, qtd. in Mirène Ghossein, ‘Introduction’, in Adonis, *If Only the Sea Could Sleep: Love Poems*, trans. by Kamal Boullata, Susan Einbinder and Mirène Ghossein (Los Angeles, Copenhagen: Green Integer, 2003), pp. 11-34 (p. 19).

universal interact, giving vent to a multifaceted poetics of lamentation, boast, panegyrics, praise, and elegy'.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, Adonis's poetry can be conceived of as conducting an interplay of 'specificity' and 'vagueness.' While the poetic traditions he acknowledges may indeed already explore the boundaries of the personal versus the general, it is arguable that Adonis himself conducts his own more contemporary 'vaguening', nuanced by his adoption/subversion of Arabic forms.

Lucine Taminian's article 'Rimbaud's house in Aden, Yemen: giving voice(s) to the silent poet', cites a historical tourist brochure that, in turn, recounts an expedition made by a small group of Arab poets in an attempt to find the exact location of Rimbaud's former Yemen home.<sup>163</sup> The account in the brochure, written by Shawqi Abed Al-Amir, describes Adonis as being present on this journey.<sup>164</sup> Adonis is recalled by Abed Al-Amir as stating on visiting the site, "Rimbaud lived in Aden. Indeed, he did. Al-Niffari told me that."<sup>165</sup> In this event, which appears to be a fictionalised retelling, Adonis communicates with Rimbaud via the Sufi poet Al-Niffari, who – as Taminian notes – died in 965 AD.<sup>166</sup> Taminian states that, 'Rimbaud's presence is established through layers of revelation: Adonis's of al-Niffari's.'<sup>167</sup> In this retelling, the search for the architectural space of Rimbaud's former house – a site itself overdetermined with colonial significance – sets the stage for a translational encounter between Adonis and Rimbaud via Al-Niffari. While this event may not have happened, it is telling for what it reveals, in a fellow poet's conception, of Adonis's relationship to European surrealism and canonicity.

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<sup>162</sup> Suzanne P. Stetkevych, qtd. in Imed Nsiri, 'Narrating the Self: The Amalgamation of the Personal and the Impersonal in Eliot's and Adonis' Poetry', *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 9, 2 (2018), 104-109 (p. 107).

<sup>163</sup> Taminian, p. 472.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

There is much to unpack with relation to this account. There have been four attempts to retrace Rimbaud's path in Aden, beginning in 1905.<sup>168</sup> The three poets involved in the attempt discussed here – which took place in 1981 – conducted a search through investigation of the French Consulate's archives in Aden, interviews with Yemeni figures, and a journey to Rimbaud's suspected home.<sup>169</sup> The poets – Eugène Guillevic, Abed Al-Amir, and Sa'di Yusuf – had, as Taminian says, 'no real clue as to where Rimbaud's house was located', but were 'convinced that they could identify his house just by walking through the quarter.'<sup>170</sup> Rimbaud lived in Aden when he worked for a coffee agent; as Taminian states, 'arriving at Aden, he was employed by Alfred Bardey, a French trader, as a foreman overseeing Hindu women workers, mostly wives of soldiers in the Indian regiment stationed in Aden'.<sup>171</sup>

As Chapter 3 of this study discussed, spaces considered 'culture-bridging' or 'liminal' are often the sites of colonially informed power imbalance. Rimbaud's father was in the French colonial army, and this background contributed to the presence and availability of Arabic texts in the house in which the poet was brought up.<sup>172</sup> In response to perceived rejection of his poetry in Europe, Rimbaud had journeyed East in order to make contact with what he reductively referred to as 'the primeval fatherland'.<sup>173</sup> Indeed, Taminian describes the interest in Rimbaud's house as itself perhaps motivated by reclamation or recuperation of this history, 'bestowing a purified image upon the colonial past by reinventing Rimbaud's hybrid identity and representing his house as a site for East-West cultural dialogue.'<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Pierre Petitfils, qtd. in Taminian, p. 468.

<sup>172</sup> Taminian, p. 470.

<sup>173</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, qtd. in Taminian, p. 471.

<sup>174</sup> Taminian, p. 465.

This chapter's second section, therefore, extends its analysis to briefly view this anecdote as a text in itself, using Abed Al-Amir's fictional account as a point of departure by which to study Adonis's own 'vaguening.' There are many reasons why Adonis, specifically, may be a particularly fitting figure to imagine into this setting. His criticism of Islam has garnered controversy, as he describes religion as 'synonymous with enclosure and imprisonment.'<sup>175</sup> Studies such as his extended comparison *Sufism and Surrealism* can be seen to, perhaps problematically, insist on a culture-bridging role.<sup>176</sup> This analysis will therefore take as its first principle the reasons *why* it may be easy to envision Adonis searching for Rimbaud's house – all the while speaking with the ghosts of his Arabic poetic influences – even if this event did not take place. Seeing the anecdote as itself a vehicle for 'vagueness', we will place ourselves briefly in this oneiric setting.

Part of this section's innovative structure comes from the fact that any analysis of 'vagueness' and poetry is perhaps from the outset difficult to develop. Much in the way that the short story form arguably necessitates reduced or contracted exposition, one could argue for the idea of poetry and indirection as inevitably linked. Crucially, other authors in this study – Beckett, Murakami, and in this chapter Kincaid and Castillo – write long form texts even if novel-length prose is not exclusively their medium. Adonis is the only writer studied here who is predominantly a poet. While his writing is arguably 'vague' due to being in poetic form, by the same token it is perhaps apposite to argue that Adonis – who asks, in the poem 'Semiology', '[w]hy is it every time I try to clarify I become more and more obscure?'<sup>177</sup> – writes poetry that is *particularly* 'vague.' By beginning an analysis of Adonis's poetry with this spectral and culturally fraught imagining of his presence – and taking into account this anecdote's location in a text

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<sup>175</sup> Adonis, in Adonis and Houria Abdelouahed, *Violence and Islam: Conversations with Houria Abdelouahed*, trans. by David Watson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 56.

<sup>176</sup> Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, trans. by Judith Cumberbatch (London: Saqi, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>177</sup> Adonis, qtd. in Yair Huri, "'To Flee from All Languages": The Gap between Language and Experience in the Works of Modern Arab Poets', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 27, 4 (2005), 1-16 (p. 7).

intended for international reception, the site of Rimbaud's house now a library and cultural centre<sup>178</sup> – this section will examine the dynamics of literary exchange behind Adonis's 'vaguening.' Taminian cites Bachelard's conception of interior spaces as holding an imprecise yet powerful resonance, 'acquir[ing] emotional or even rational sense by a kind of poetic process.'<sup>179</sup> This analysis and brief historical investigation into Rimbaud's house thus opens our discussion of Adonis's architecturally informed reimaginings of poetic tradition.

Interior space often appears nebulous in Adonis's writing, in which household objects are cited but setting is often absent. With relation to Adonis's poem 'The Crow's Feather', for instance, John Asfour notes that, '[a]s if to deliberately snap the spell when the speaker's poetic vision threatens to cloud itself in romantic terminology, an incongruous rhyme is sometimes used to pair an abstract with a concrete, homely and mundane object.'<sup>180</sup> He lists, among these juxtapositions, the rhyming of the words 'salāh', meaning 'prayer', with 'dawāh', meaning 'inkwell.'<sup>181</sup> Another such juxtaposition involves a triple rhyme between the words 'kursīy' ('chair'), 'marmīy' ('thrown away', with reference to a cigarette butt), and 'mansīy', a romanticised term for the word 'forgotten.'<sup>182</sup> These rhymes can be seen as instances of the 'inconsistent vagueness' discussed in the first chapter of this study as a facet of 'paradoxical vagueness.'

Unlike poems such as Adonis's 'A Grave For New York', in which the words 'New York' appear as a repeated, if overdetermined, address,<sup>183</sup> there are very few if any overt cultural markers in Adonis's poem 'Celebrating Childhood', the work that will be

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<sup>178</sup> Taminian, p. 487.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>180</sup> John Asfour, 'Adonis and Muhammad al-Māghūt: Two Voices in a Burning Land', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 20, 1 (1989), 20-30 (p. 26).

<sup>181</sup> Adonis, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Adonis, 'A Grave for New York' in *A Time Between Ashes and Roses*, trans. by Shawkat M. Toorawa (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), pp. 123-178 (p. 125).

this section's core text. The lines '[y]ou who are descending / from the mountains of the past / how can you climb them again, / and why?'<sup>184</sup> appear vague and therefore easy to conceptualise if read in a different cultural context to that of the poem's production. Similarly, ideas such as '[h]is days are lakes, / His memories floating bodies,'<sup>185</sup> enact a similar if traumatic spatialisation of the past as natural landscape. The metaphor '[t]ime is a door / I cannot open',<sup>186</sup> seems almost deliberately well-worn, and the idea of one's home village as a womb – 'I was born in a village, / Small and secretive like a womb'<sup>187</sup> – appears similarly archetypal. A final observation to add to this analysis is the fact that early on in the poem the lines occur: '[r]ed is the sun's most beautiful throne / and all the other colors / worship on red rugs.'<sup>188</sup> The practice of worshipping in this manner is left unelaborated with an implicit familiarity. Despite the poem's use of 'universal' terms that could apply to many different landscapes, this detail assumes an Arabic context albeit in an understated way.

However, in the manner of 'inconsistent vagueness', while this reference appears culturally specific from an Anglophone reader's perspective, it is itself rather vague and occurs in passing. It presents a further nuance to be considered with relation to references that may *appear* specific but are nonetheless broad. Chapter 1 of this study discussed, in part, the manner in which Murakami employs broad references – such as 'running', or 'pizza' – to the effect that they seem comparatively particular, perhaps due to the manner in which his writing is otherwise denuded of markers of place. However, another nuance to consider is the fact that perhaps a reference to, for instance, 'pizza' – broad though it may be – may be taken up by Anglophone audiences as a sign of the text's 'Western' or

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<sup>184</sup> Adonis, 'Celebrating Childhood', in *Selected Poems*, trans. by Khaled Mattawa (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 259-263 (p. 262).

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

‘urban’ quality. Murakami’s broad references, which appear to make use of the barest minimum of specificity, can be themselves read as challenging the expectation that the text appear ‘exotic’ due to its Japanese setting. Adonis’s reference to rugs in the context of prayer can perhaps be viewed in a similar light: while it is itself a stock or archetypal religious reference, it may stand out to Western readers in juxtaposition with the poem’s otherwise ‘placeless’ quality.

As in Beckett’s and Murakami’s work, the juxtaposition of ‘specificity’ and ‘vagueness’ takes on an almost architectural role in Adonis’s texts; this sense of uneven detail is often mirrored literally in the manner in which these authors treat domestic space as lacking structural unity and characterised by ‘overarching vagueness.’ This latter form of ‘vagueness’ is also frequently observable in Adonis’s writing. Architectural metaphors pervade ‘Celebrating Childhood.’ The poem features ‘a staircase made of light’,<sup>189</sup> imagines the moon as a house, and explores the idea of abandoning one’s body ‘in the rubble of the house / in which [one] was born’.<sup>190</sup> A childhood is also conceptualised as a village, a structure with boundaries that the speaker cannot cross; time is ‘a door’; the same image of the village is compared to the enclosing structure of a womb.<sup>191</sup> In contrast to this, the poem is also rife with celestial imagery, appearing to imagine vast darkness or open spaces: ‘A star is also / a pebble in the field of space.’<sup>192</sup> Many of these images appear to transform ideas such as darkness, or the night sky, into concrete structures. The moon is an old man whose ‘seat is night,’ and ‘light is his walking stick.’<sup>193</sup> The image of space as a ‘field’, or indeed that of the moon as a house, similarly spatialise celestial landscapes. At the level of image and metaphor the poem appears as a series of

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., pp. 262-263.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.



translations. Much like the speaker in Beckett's 'Neither',<sup>194</sup> the poet states that '[l]ove and dreams are two parentheses. / Between them I place my body / and discover the world.'<sup>195</sup> This 'neither' space appears altogether more fulfilling than the lonely shuttling of the entity in Beckett's poem; however, Adonis nevertheless appears to draw in a similar way on the experience of finding something approaching fixity in betweenness.

This study's second chapter frequently discussed the view of genre as architecture with reference to 'overarching vagueness', suggesting that both Beckett's and Murakami's unstable representations of interior space can be paralleled with their avoidance of rigid conceptions of nationally informed literary genre. In *Sufism and Surrealism*, Adonis details the manner in which certain Arabic poetic forms can be viewed in the manner of spatial structures. He links architectural innovation with a similar form of poetic freedom, connecting both literal and metrical senses of 'structure.' He states, '[f]rom an architectural standpoint, the structure of the poetic sentence becomes a form of musical-geometry. It is a structure that basically depends on a knowledge of combinations between sound-letters and silent-letters [...] [t]his knowledge is what enables the poet to make his poem a vast space, which is undulating and still at the same time.'<sup>196</sup> He extends the analogy, stating that due to this geometry, '[i]t is possible for the *qasida* to be a building with arches, windows and domes.'<sup>197</sup> He goes on to compare the stringency with which poetry and architecture have been respectively developed in Arabic culture, arguing that 'the form in Arab architecture has experienced a much richer and more varied development than poetry, and that can be attributed, I believe, to the fact that there has been no standard authority in architecture as has been the case in poetry.'<sup>198</sup> Adonis evinces a negative view of the restrictions linked to Arabic poetic form, critiquing

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<sup>194</sup> Beckett, 'Neither', p. 425.

<sup>195</sup> Adonis, 'Celebrating Childhood', p. 260.

<sup>196</sup> Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, p. 182.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

the belief that such metres must ‘remain unchanged’.<sup>199</sup> He criticises the fear that in the absence of such traditions ‘poetry [would lose] its identity’, and the ‘profound truths that it expresses about Arab identity will disappear’.<sup>200</sup> It is therefore possible to deduce that, similar to the cases of Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘overarching vagueness’, imagery of indistinct architecture in Adonis’s poetry can be related to his aporetic view of poetic tradition. It is therefore striking that he juxtaposes architectural imagery with celestial and natural imagery, in metaphors that often, as I have detailed, evoke darkness or open, unstructured space.

It is similarly easy to view Adonis’s writing in light of the concept of ‘multivalent vagueness.’ *Sufism and Surrealism* itself is an extended comparison of two independently developed movements – one religious and one artistic<sup>201</sup> – on the basis of their shared focus on unknowing. This argument itself appears as one made with an awareness of the multivalency of lack, again recalling Moody’s research on Beckett and hunger: as hunger is a state defined by absence, it is both broadly applicable and redolent of specific political moments.<sup>202</sup> Sufism, as Adonis argues, is itself based on a kind of metaphorical multivalence, as ‘everything in it is itself and something else. The beloved, for example, may mean the beloved, but it may also mean rose, or wine or water or God.’<sup>203</sup>

It is also interesting that, in terms of poetry and architecture, Adonis’s work reveals a preoccupation with the *dīwān*, a term denoting both anthology and archive.<sup>204</sup> It is possible to think of Adonis’s imagining of the archive as a ‘multivalently vagued’ space. This relates especially to earlier arguments surrounding ‘vagueness’ and the archive: Houston Jones, in *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, discusses the

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>202</sup> Moody, p. 261; pp. 265-266.

<sup>203</sup> Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, p. 18.

<sup>204</sup> Creswell, p. 880.

unrepresentability of the archive with relation to Holocaust narratives,<sup>205</sup> and Boulter, in *Melancholy and the Archive*, devotes a chapter to Murakami's 'vaguened' archival spaces, even including architectural iterations of this concept such as Murakami's use of the motif of dry wells.<sup>206</sup> As Boulter states, the archive is something of a space of indecision and the incommunicable: 'any interpretation of the archive,' he states, 'its representation by the author; its subsequent reading by me – is a violation, a defacing, of the response and responsibility to the archive's demand.'<sup>207</sup> The archive is thus a deeply inscrutable space, conceived of equally as unrepresentable and, by this logic, vulnerable to differing interpretations. It is easy to read Adonis's use of the archive as a space to synthesise 'Western' and Arabic influences, in a manner that acknowledges the *aporia* and impossibility of such synthesis. Robyn Creswell notes that in his introduction to his *Anthology of Arabic Poetry*, Adonis acknowledges the difficulties inherent in the anthology form, in Creswell's words 'the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of handing down a certain heritage [*turāth*] or mission [*risāla*: message, epistle] from generation to generation.'<sup>208</sup>

Creswell states that 'Arabic poetic modernism offers neither a flight from the past, nor a flight into the past; neither a mimicry of Western models, nor a mimicry of classic techniques.'<sup>209</sup> In this manner, in Creswell's view, 'what Arabic modernism offers is a series of imaginary, or formal solutions to the crisis of modernity.'<sup>210</sup> Creswell's study focuses on the manner in which the idea of the archive, or *dīwān*, articulates this situation in Adonis's poetic viewpoint. Creswell notes that Adonis refers, in his *Anthology of Arabic Poetry*, to the anthology as a 'poetic museum',<sup>211</sup> a phrase that in Creswell's view

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<sup>205</sup> Houston Jones, p. 171.

<sup>206</sup> Boulter, p. 59.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>208</sup> Creswell, p. 879.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 878.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Adonis, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 879.

‘seems, at first blush, to emphasize the values of conservation and preservation over those echt modernist slogans of revolution and innovation.’<sup>212</sup> Paradoxically, Adonis is thus identifying modernism, as Creswell argues, with ‘an oddly antiquarian practice’ based on ‘cataloguing’ and ‘arrangement for display.’<sup>213</sup> Thus, Adonis’s *dīwān* evokes a sense of temporal synthesis.

Creswell notes that Adonis ‘ingeniously [...] rewrites a conventional literary-historical narrative of pre-Islamic and ‘Abbasid poets in a manner that reproduces the categories of Romantic and Modernist specifically, *symboliste* poetry.’<sup>214</sup> This view allows for a reordering of references, by which Adonis presents an inversion of poetic influence. Adonis’s writing in the *Anthology* serves as ‘a sort of narrative *trompe l’oeil*, making it seem as though Arabic modernism preceded by eleven centuries the French version on which it is clearly modeled.’<sup>215</sup> This reordering includes, as Creswell notes, Adonis referring to classical Arabic poet Abū Tammām as the ‘Mallarmé of the Arabs’, and Abū Nuwās, a particularly decadent writer of ‘wine poetry’, as ‘the Baudelaire of the Arabs.’<sup>216</sup> Creswell connects this atemporality with a kind of uncanny experience. He states that Adonis’s *dīwān* is ‘a kind of crypt, whose opening promises the shivery pleasure of something new (“modernism”) that was always-already there.’<sup>217</sup> The *dīwān* is thus a ‘multivalently vague’ space, an obscure archive in which history is reordered. In this manner, ‘multivalent vagueness’ as articulated through architectural imagery makes space for alternative or subverted views of literary history.

However, Taminian notes that the translation and reading of several Arabic literary works by French authors at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – such as *The*

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<sup>212</sup> Creswell, p. 879.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 884.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

*Arabian Nights* and the Sufi texts *The Birds' Conversation* and *The Advice* – influenced French writing of that period.<sup>218</sup> Taminian notes that Adonis has indeed accurately traced the influence of these Sufi texts on subsequent European writing. Such texts, in her words, contribute to ‘the displacement of rationality’s domination over different literary genres’ in a manner linked to the rise of late 18<sup>th</sup>-century French lyricism.<sup>219</sup> It is therefore possible that Adonis’s rewriting of literary influence hews closer to the truth than to atemporal fantasy. When we take into account the factual basis of this reordering of Arabic and European influence, it is possible to consider Creswell’s reading as perhaps contributing to the murkiness or confusion that accompanies interpretations of the archive. This may provide further evidence that the *dīwān* is something of a cultural blind spot, vulnerable to misreading. This study’s third chapter problematised ideas of liminal space as ‘depoliticised’, discussing the power imbalances that often underpin such contextually denuded representations of interiority. In a manner apposite to such analysis, Adonis’s conception of the *dīwān* appears ‘multivalently vague’ in a manner that has nonetheless been misinterpreted.

I will discuss this reimagining of the *dīwān* with brief, final reference to Adonis’s poem ‘Celebrating Childhood’. The imagery relating to temporality in this poem appears to combine stasis and flux in a manner that problematises the linearity of the speaker’s story. This fluid attitude to time possibly reflects Adonis’s subversion of straightforward categorisations of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ poetic forms. The poet states, ‘oh my past days / they used to walk in their sleep / and I used to lean on them’.<sup>220</sup> Sleepwalking is already an image that combines fixity and movement, often suggesting vague or aimless ambulation. The idea of leaning on a sleepwalker for support (nonetheless, in this case, a

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<sup>218</sup> Taminian, p. 470.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Adonis, ‘Celebrating Childhood’, p. 260.

unit of time being personified as a sleepwalker) combines stasis and motion in an unusual and complex image. In a manner perhaps in keeping with Adonis's frequent evocation of a liminal cultural experience, the speaker in this image appears to seek support from an unfixed entity.

Thus, this tension between the fixed and the animated appears to tie in with other attitudes towards reimagined temporality in the author's work, as discussed with reference to his reordering of the *dīwān* and his experimental attitudes to poetic structure. Elsewhere, the statement '[l]ove and dreams are two parentheses. / Between them I place my body / and discover the world'<sup>221</sup> appears to mix an experience of confinement – the speaker placing himself in a state of imagined textual circumscription – with a broad or expansive experience of discovery. The idea of thriving or learning when in conditions of betweenness is, however, perhaps one of the simpler images in the poem, due to the ease with which readers may relate it to the broader exploration of doubled cultural experience in Adonis's work.

Even the lines 'I remember madness / leaning for the first time / on the mind's pillow'<sup>222</sup> appear to subvert the idea of a transition from 'sanity' to 'madness' as dramatic or agitated, rather juxtaposing imagery of 'madness' with imagery of rest ('leaning on the mind's pillow'). However, the image of the 'pillow' does, after all, recall states of depression or lethargy: thus, this metaphor can also be read straightforwardly, rather than as a deliberate contradiction between movement and stillness. The poem makes use of kinetic verbs – such as to lean, to walk, to discover, and to place one's body – in a manner intriguingly converse to its subject matter, which appears to signal a continually unfolding rebirth or childhood in a manner more associated with fixity. The speaker

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

states, '[m]y childhood is still / being born in the palms of a light',<sup>223</sup> and 'I still follow the child / who still walks inside me.'<sup>224</sup> Imagery of confinement and interiority is common to many of these metaphors: the childhood, personified as an entity itself, is held (albeit nebulously) in the palms of a 'light'; the child who 'walks' is confined within the speaker's adult self; the speaker places themselves within parentheses in order to view the world. When we consider movement as geographical here, as a motion between cultures, this poem appears caught between an impulse towards rootedness and an impulse to extend beyond the boundaries of the speaker's origins. The poem flits, in this manner, between kinetic energy and confinement; the journey or transition taking place is left unclear. The idea of a continual birth may mean, in this context, either a revisiting of childhood memory or a move beyond the speaker's roots. Alternatively, this continual birth could frame the speaker's relationship with their homeland as a lingering one, evolving in spite of movement elsewhere. In a manner that recalls Adonis's reimagining of the *dīwān* as a 'multivalently vague' space, temporality is uncertain here. 'Celebrating Childhood' itself is a poem that makes use of 'multivalent vagueness', as there are few concrete markers within the poem indicating where the speaker has been born, or where their trajectory leads. Adonis's imagery based on birth could signify either a return or a movement away from cultural rootedness.

As even such a brief analysis of 'Celebrating Childhood' shows, it is easy to see why Abed Al-Amir includes Adonis's presence in his account of the journey to visit Rimbaud's house. Adonis's poetry itself consists of oneiric reimaginings of interior space, and his writing can be discussed in terms of the typology of 'vaguening' I have delineated in this study so far. Adonis's poetry can be described as 'paradoxically vague' in that it juxtaposes specific and nebulous imagery in a mutually reinforcing manner.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

Similarly, this apparent ‘vagueness’ challenges Eurocentric perceptions of what a ‘culturally specific’ reference *is* – for instance, is a poem considered ‘specific’ if it assumes elements of an Arabic experience, even if these elements are themselves broad? This ‘vagueness’ appears informed by occupying a cultural ‘translator’ role, as in the work of Beckett and Murakami. It is fitting that Abed Al-Amir’s retelling, featuring the elusive location of Rimbaud’s house, is itself based on an uncertain interior space: Adonis’s presence serves to supplement this sense of cross-cultural reappraisal.

Similarly, Adonis’s writing can be characterised by a sense of ‘overarching vagueness’, often juxtaposing imagery of containment and boundlessness through figuring celestial space as interior space and vice versa. A parallel can be drawn here with Adonis’s view of the poem itself as an architectural structure. Finally, Adonis’s poetry can be viewed in terms of ‘multivalent vagueness’ due to the uncertain temporality it evokes; this study has compared his reconceptualisation of archival space to the tension between stasis and flux in ‘Celebrating Childhood.’

In what is perhaps a fitting continuation of this introduction to an alternate ‘vague’ canon, the final section of this study will turn to an exploration of Castillo’s *So Far from God*. Ideas of the retold account are equally pertinent to Castillo’s work. One of the most predominant – even ‘overarching’ – ideas behind the following analysis of *So Far from God* is that of the unreliable narrative as an interior space in itself. My discussion of Castillo’s work will explore a number of themes such as the recurrence of assorted household objects in her writing, and how this plurality relates to narrative multiplicity. I will, perhaps most importantly, discuss the manner in which uncertainty is often spatialised in Castillo’s work, involving a flight from interior space.



### 4.3 ‘...a vague and undetermined place’:<sup>225</sup> Ana Castillo’s Domestic *Nepantla*<sup>226</sup>

*We have a body of literature that when penned by and about Latinas is considered primarily for Latinas. Being marginalized in this and other ways provokes a sense of segregation, even if one is surrounded by immediate family and community.*<sup>227</sup>

Translation and opacity feature often in Castillo’s writing. Just as Gloria Anzaldúa defines borderlands as ‘vague and undetermined place(s) created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary’,<sup>228</sup> Castillo writes from the space between linguistic and cultural experiences, reflecting a concern with the narratives of those she describes as ‘truly countryless women.’<sup>229</sup> Anzaldúa defines *nepantla* as a liminal state, taken from the Nahuatl term for the boundary between two bodies of water;<sup>230</sup> Castillo’s novels often oscillate between multiple narratives, seemingly located at the confluence of these perspectives. *The Guardians* alternates between four first-person perspectives;<sup>231</sup> while *So Far from God* is narrated by a singular unreliable *mitotera* narrator,<sup>232</sup> the storyteller’s voice rotates between foregrounding the lives of the different sisters in addition to those of other characters. This narrative multiplicity is paralleled on a linguistic level in Castillo’s work – Carmen Tafolla’s introduction to *Watercolor Women, Opaque Men*

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<sup>225</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), p. 25.

<sup>226</sup> ‘[...] radical Chicanas use the term to define an in-betweenness state that is not only geopolitical, but also psychological. In this sense, *nepantla* usually describes situational moments of identity crisis.’ (Vivancos Pérez, p. 81.)

<sup>227</sup> Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, p. 204. Throughout this section I use terms such as *Latino/a*, *Chicano/a*, *domesticano/a*, and *rasquiachismo/a* according to the format in which they have been employed in the quoted sources. An updated approach to these terms would be to employ the gender-neutral suffix -x – *Chicanx*, *Latinx* – or other equivalents such as *Latine* or *Latin@*, to avoid binarised language. In order to reproduce the texts in their original contexts, I do not use the updated terms in this section, for instance during a brief discussion of ‘*domesticana*’ art being viewed as a reclamation by female artists of the ‘*rasquiachismo*’ style. These terms reflect a past shift in critical media towards amplifying the reach of art by women, initially with little focus on gender variance; further advances have been made in acknowledging the work of transgender, nonbinary and other LGBTQIA creators in the intervening time. However, it is of course worth remembering that the complexity of gendered terms itself has a rich but unfortunately ‘vaguened’ history, with certain aspects of binary constructions of gender themselves often linked to the influence of colonial norms on indigenous populations. (See Catalina (Kathleen) M. de Onís, ‘What’s in an x?’: An Exchange About the Politics of “Latinx”’, *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts and Cultures*, 1, 2 (2017), 78-91; Tadashi Donozo, ‘Teaching Alternative and Indigenous Gender Systems in World History: A Queer Approach’, *The History Teacher*, 50, 3 (2017), 425-447.)

<sup>228</sup> Anzaldúa, p. 25.

<sup>229</sup> Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, p. 6.

<sup>230</sup> Anzaldúa, p. 237.

<sup>231</sup> Ana Castillo, *The Guardians* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 3; p. 17; p. 31; p. 69.

<sup>232</sup> B. J. Manríquez, ‘Ana Castillo’s “So Far From God”: Intimations of the Absurd’, *College Literature*, 29, 2 (2002), 37-49 (p. 40).

describes the manner in which Castillo uses bilingualism to add emphasis or density to a given phrase, as evidenced, for instance, in her neologism “cabezaheads”.<sup>233</sup> This word conjoins both the Spanish and English word for ‘heads’, and Tafolla argues that ‘[t]he combination of languages maximizes the power of each in unexpected ways’.<sup>234</sup> This technique is interesting in that it shows the manner in which the increased or repeated explanation involved in bilingual writing can slow<sup>235</sup> rather than clarify.

Elsewhere in Castillo’s writing, spatialised vagueness features as a means by which to articulate such doubled or multiple narratives. Similar to Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s invention of Macondo, the titular imaginary homeland in Castillo’s novel *Sapogonia* appears to display traits of both a psychological and physical location.<sup>236</sup> It is, as Patrick L. Hamilton notes, ‘subject to the passage of time and history’;<sup>237</sup> he criticises Maya Socolovsky’s characterisation of this land as a ‘Borderland Aztlán, a mythical country’.<sup>238</sup> As L. Hamilton describes it, there are ‘two Sapogonias: the idealized mythic space of mestizo origin and the historical reality that has been male-centred and -dominated.’<sup>239</sup>

There are a number of reasons for including an *œuvre* as interdisciplinary and unusual as Castillo’s in this study. Her novel *Sapogonia* has been read as *picaresque*,<sup>240</sup> and her epistolary text *The Mixquiahuala Letters* can be retold according to three different permutations:<sup>241</sup> the search for possible parallels with Beckett would be fruitful here, but I will not develop this particular argument. Perhaps more interesting – with

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<sup>233</sup> Ana Castillo, qtd. in Carmen Tafolla, ‘Preface to the 2017 Edition’, in *Watercolor Women, Opaque Men* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), [unpaginated].

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> ‘The combination of languages maximizes the power of each in unexpected ways, slowing down the situation in this instance, speeding up or underscoring it in another.’ (Ibid.)

<sup>236</sup> Rubén Pelayo, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Critical Companion* (London, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 28.

<sup>237</sup> Patrick L. Hamilton, *Of Space and Mind: Cognitive Mappings of Contemporary Chicano/a Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), p. 117.

<sup>238</sup> Maya Socolovsky, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> L. Hamilton, p. 118.

<sup>240</sup> Olga L. Herrera, ‘Geographies of Latinidad in Ana Castillo’s *Sapogonia*’, *Confluencia: Revista Hispánica de Cultura y Literatura*, 31, 1 (2015), 159-169 (p. 161).

<sup>241</sup> Lesley Larkin, ‘Reading as Responsible Dialogue in Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters*’, *MELUS*, 37, 3 (2012), 141-165 (p. 142).

relation to the analysis I will shortly begin concerning *So Far from God* – is that the text of the *Letters* itself can perhaps be read as a *nepantla* space, occurring as it does in, as Daniel Abitz says, ‘the tepid, violent, and interruptive space between the two women’.<sup>242</sup> The letters recount the main action of the story in retrospect<sup>243</sup> – the reader is thus aware that the protagonists’ travels are being described at a temporal distance rather than in ‘real time’, problematising any assumption of the novel’s geographical setting. This idea will be relevant to this chapter’s final section, as I will consider – among other spatialised representations of *nepantla* in Castillo’s work – the manner in which the many-voiced narrative itself functions as a liminal space.

Much like Murakami’s unconventional ‘celebrity translator’ presence and his personal attitude to authorship, Castillo’s authorial image is informal. She often addresses the reader in a personal manner, with what could be described as a Murakamian mix of the metaphysical and the mundane. Her essay collection *black dove* contains an account of a near death experience followed by the concise assurance that ‘[t]here’s nothing to worry about’<sup>244</sup> regarding the afterlife; elsewhere there is a similarly Murakamian quality to her narrators’ flippant approach to canonical intertexts, as in this extract from ‘Ghost Talk’:

It’s not how much you know but what you know, right? So i’ve read *Crime and Punishment*, am familiar with Beethoven’s Fifth (who isn’t?), and know that Nietzsche had some concerns about God’s lack of tangibility in the human heart. So you put yourself in neutral and cruise all the way through what seems superficially like a very deep discussion.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Daniel Abitz, ‘Female on Female Violence: A Look Into *The Mixquiahuala Letters*’, *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 44 (2015), 84-98 (p. 98).

<sup>243</sup> Castillo, *Letters*, p. 23; p. 24; p. 31.

<sup>244</sup> Castillo, *black dove*, p. 164.

<sup>245</sup> Ana Castillo, ‘Ghost Talk’, in *Loverboys* (New York, London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), pp. 42-52 (p. 48).

However, rather than celebrating the broad applicability or supposed ‘universality’ of such references, Castillo appears to cite them in order to signal their distance from her speakers’ experience, as in the story ‘Subtitles’:

Behind a closed door at the end of the hall i recognize *Don Giovanni* on the piano. It is the only opera i have ever attended. A fortuitous coincidence for me who can now turn casually to my host and smile: “Ah, *Don Giovanni!*” And he smiles back because the bridge i made by composition recognition makes him less uneasy with this unsolicited confrontation with otherness.<sup>246</sup>

Castillo’s *œuvre* reflects an incisive attention to these moments of supposed connection, and the canonical bias they may serve to reinforce. Castillo describes the relative lack of critical reception to her nonfiction collection *Massacre of the Dreamers* as ‘the most blatant indication that racism does exist and exists for a writer like myself.’<sup>247</sup> Having written *Massacre* in seven years and *So Far from God* in a mere six months subsequently, she observes: ‘everyone can read and get *So Far from God*. Why? Because it’s fiction. We don’t have to believe those terrible stories are true because the book is entertaining’.<sup>248</sup> By contrast, *Massacre of the Dreamers* is the more political work, in Castillo’s words, ‘about being a brown woman, a Chicana, a mestiza’.<sup>249</sup> Castillo’s observations on this contrast in reception are indicative of the pressure on marginalised authors to render a work palatable for ‘worldwide’, canonically informed, consumption.

*So Far from God* is thus a challenging text to study. While I have chosen it over Castillo’s essay-style works due to my study’s broader focus on ‘vaguening’ as it relates to fictionalisation, I have also included it in part due to its fraught relationship to mimetic

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<sup>246</sup> Ana Castillo, ‘Subtitles’, in *Loverboys* (New York, London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), pp. 166-176 (p. 168).

<sup>247</sup> Castillo, in Cantú and Castillo, p. 61.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

representation. It is thus important to remain critical of the text's capacity to optimally reflect Castillo's *œuvre*. It is even possible to view *So Far from God* – written in a deliberately dislikeable *mitotera* tone, a narrative which appears morbidly fascinated with the tragedies of her characters' lives<sup>250</sup> – as a satire in itself, an uneasy 'bridging' gesture similar to finding common ground via recognising *Don Giovanni*.

My study of Castillo's 'paradoxical vagueness' will focus on this mixing of registers, aiming to explore the at times unequal quality of such cultural encounters. In Castillo's writing references are listed and objects inventoried, much as in Beckett and Murakami; Castillo's 'vaguened' domestic sphere can be possibly linked to the concept of *rasquachismo*. In the words of Amalia Mesa-Bains, the latter is 'a worldview' that 'becomes for Chicano artists and intellectuals a vehicle for both culture and identity'.<sup>251</sup> As Mesa-Bains describes it, *rasquachismo* as an '[a]esthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials';<sup>252</sup> she refers to a form of 'feminine *rasquachismo*' as *domesticana*.<sup>253</sup> With reference to this aesthetic in the work, for example, of Sandra Cisneros, Ricardo F. Vivancos Pérez observes a 'contradictory commingling of artifacts coming from both Mexican, US, border and Latino popular cultures' and thus representing 'the menagerie of elements involved in the process of identity formation.'<sup>254</sup> This concept resonates with multiple elements of this study's typology of 'vagueness.'

Notably, the idea of an aesthetic informed by mingled references recalls the humorous use of register-mixing discussed in this study's first chapter. However, certain key differences are observable between the approach adopted by Beckett and Murakami

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<sup>250</sup> Manriquez, p. 40.

<sup>251</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, qtd. in Pérez, p. 150.

<sup>252</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, 'Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana *Rasquachismo*', in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader* (Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 298-323 (p. 300).

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>254</sup> Vivancos Pérez, p. 150.

and that of the *rasquachismo* and *domesticana* styles. For instance, Beckett's and Murakami's occasionally absurd register-mixing couches given cultural markers in an ironic distance that, as I argue, discourages the reader from mapping their work onto a concrete cultural reality.

To suggest that Castillo mixes registers as a simple articulation of her everyday reality, while Beckett and Murakami employ similar techniques to distort and stylise, is to implicitly essentialise Castillo by comparison. This, as I will demonstrate, is far from the case. Castillo's work draws on mythological and religious influence in a manner that irreverently ironises, and her worlds are no less playfully distorted than those of Beckett or Murakami. However, as Castillo's above quotations demonstrate, it is possible that such referencing involves a wry knowledge of the conceptual translation necessary to make oneself heard.

*Rasquachismo* is an interesting entry point for such debates as it relies on what could in a different context be termed a kind of Beckettian 'impoverishment,' an incongruous or improvised-seeming mix of disparate references. In a possibly self-satirising manner, Beckett's privileged protagonist Belacqua professes in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, '[i]f I ever do drop a book [...] it will be a ramshackle, tumbledown, a bone-shaker, held together by bits of twine'.<sup>255</sup> This description resonates, for instance, with the inventory of desultory objects in *Mercier and Camier*<sup>256</sup>; a disparateness arguably paralleled in the novel's own tenuous and fragmentary relationship to the *picaresque*. Already it is possible to contrast the differing cultural milieux of Castillo and Beckett, and how these differences relate to their respective uses of the *picaresque* form. Indeed, as Olga L. Herrera notes, 'Castillo's appropriation of the picaresque also speaks

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<sup>255</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Dream*, p. 139.

<sup>256</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 431.

to the concepts of mobility, migration, and diaspora, as well as that of place and landscape.<sup>257</sup>

As Sara Spurgeon states, *So Far from God* is ‘inspired by a story from early Christian theology, an allegorical tale involving Sophia (wisdom) and her three daughters: Faith, Hope and Charity.’<sup>258</sup> However, Benjamin D. Carson notes, citing B. J. Manríquez, that ‘[t]he utter strangeness and overt artificiality of the plot “all point to an absurdist plot of rebellion against essential beliefs and values, ridiculing the characters’ attempts to find order or ‘meaning’ in their lives”’, thus cementing the novel’s status as “‘ironic allegory’”.<sup>259</sup> This disruption of formula is also present in more specific instances of humorous dialogue. *So Far from God* is peppered with incongruously combined speech patterns that view given intertexts with humorous distance. Quotations are treated with deliberate humour. As the narrator states, ‘since “brevity is the noble soul of wit,” like ese Hamlet said, I will do my best from here on to keep this story to the telling of the events of that day.’<sup>260</sup> The quotation is possibly intended to disrupt expectations surrounding the ‘low’ or ‘gossipy’ tone of the *mitotera* narrator. However, both *Hamlet* and *So Far from God* culminate in the deaths of many main characters; Hamlet is a narrator himself famous for his aporetic relationship with the Christian faith;<sup>261</sup> his hamartia thought to be procrastination,<sup>262</sup> he is arguably a character mired in his own equivalent of a *nepantla* or in-between state. The reference is therefore both incongruous and apt, and it is difficult to know how seriously the reader is meant to consider it as an intertext.

This humorous distance can – in the manner discussed in Chapter 1 of this study – be viewed as a form of ‘paradoxical vagueness’ due to its relationship to inconsistent

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<sup>257</sup> Herrera, p. 161.

<sup>258</sup> Sara Spurgeon, qtd. in Benjamin D. Carson, ‘The Chicana Subject in Ana Castillo’s Fiction and the Discursive Zone of Chicana/o Theory’, *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe*, 28, 2 (2004-2007), 109-126 (p. 119).

<sup>259</sup> B. J. Manríquez, qtd. in Carson, p. 119.

<sup>260</sup> Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), p. 124.

<sup>261</sup> Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 30.

<sup>262</sup> George Detmold, ‘Hamlet’s “All But Blunted Purpose”’, *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 24, 1 (1949), 23-24.

referencing and the consequent mixing of registers. This register-mixing resonates with the way in which, on a broader level, a sense of deliberately inconsistent glossing pervades *So Far*. The novel's untranslated words include character names, such as that of doña Felicia,<sup>263</sup> descriptors relating to the novel's setting such as 'a room in their vecindad',<sup>264</sup> or bilingual sentences, such as 'I've never known a woman más buena.'<sup>265</sup> However, in contrast to what may appear as a simple use of untranslated terms, often throughout the novel other such terms will be glossed for readers. Certain words are translated in asides: 'He didn't like [being called] Chico – which back home meant a roasted corn.'<sup>266</sup> Mention of a *quinceañera* celebration is then followed by the explanatory sentence, '[i]t wasn't until a girl had her coming-out ball at fifteen that she got to go out and be seen at such events'.<sup>267</sup> The mythical figure La Llorona is accompanied by a brief history: 'A woman whom everyone knows, who has existed under many names'.<sup>268</sup>

In the course of a description of characters 'crossing themselves at hearing Sofi call the priest a pendejo, which was a blasphemy',<sup>269</sup> it is conceivable that the narrator is simply drawing attention to the fact that to call a priest a vulgar term meaning a contemptible person is, indeed, a blasphemy. This explanation also serves as further confirmation to non-Spanish-speaking readers that the untranslated word is an insult. However, any reader should arguably be able to infer from context that this term is being used as an insult, spoken as it is during Sofi's violent outburst to the priest. It is thus possible to consider that explanations like this one almost function as ironic *pseudo*

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<sup>263</sup> Castillo, *So Far*, p. 44.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.



translations, adding in superfluous glosses in keeping with what may be intended as the *mitotera*'s gratuitous tone.<sup>270</sup>

Castillo's alternation between the casual use of untranslated terms and an, at times, meticulous habit of explaining customs and cultural specificities to an outside audience can be seen as a particularly interesting instance of humorous register-mixing in the novel. It is possible that the story's ironic perspective extends to the fact that the translational mixing of registers in magic realist writing is *itself* a received or known fact among audiences abroad. Thus, Castillo's narrator introduces a further degree of *aporia* by approaching her supposed role as a translator inconsistently.

There are two conclusions I would like to draw, at this point, from this study of *So Far from God* with relation to my own typology of 'vagueness.' The final section of Chapter 1 included under the rubric of 'paradoxical vagueness' techniques such as inconsistent referencing, register-mixing, and the employment of a humorous distance when citing cultural markers. Such techniques can be related to Castillo's treatment of interior space in two ways. Firstly, it is possible to advance a parallel between the *rasquachismo* aesthetic and the use of disparate or incongruous references. Secondly, it is possible to consider this register-mixing as a means of situating the text in an aporetic space itself, according to a form of 'inconsistent vagueness.' Much as Castillo's *Mixquiahuala Letters* includes an inventory of gifts exchanged between the two protagonists, itself narrating a liminal and one-sided account of their friendship,<sup>271</sup> a juxtaposition can be discerned in Castillo's work between *rasquachismo* and *nepantla* imagery. In both *So Far from God* and *Letters*, collections of items appear in these cases

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<sup>270</sup> 'The condescending attitude of the *mitotera* toward the misfortunes of the characters identifies an intrusive, unreliable narrator, and at the same time engenders in readers a dislike and distrust of the narrative voice, a distrust that naturally extends to distrust of the author, since many readers unconsciously ascribe the narrative voice to the author.' (Manriquez, p. 40.)

<sup>271</sup> Abitz, p. 96.

to be cobbled together in the midst of an undefined space, concrete objects clung to in situations of indeterminacy.

At this point in my argument it is perhaps apposite to turn to discussions of what I term ‘overarching vagueness’ in Castillo’s work, a feature that resonates with the above juxtaposition. While representations of ‘overarching vagueness’ are not obvious in the text, Castillo employs selective description in a manner that creates an interesting unevenness of imagery across the text’s various settings. Some spaces are described in more detail than others, in a manner that appears conceptually related to ‘overarching vagueness’ if not a direct employment of the technique. It is, firstly, interesting to note that much as the narrative switches between registers, epiphanic moments in *So Far* are often accompanied by an abrupt flight from domestic space. It is possible – as in Castillo’s creation of Sapogonia – that these relocations are the spatialised equivalent of the register-mixing enacted in Castillo’s language.

Otherwise, it may appear at a glance that indoor space is afforded a large amount of description in the novel. Objects in Caridad’s trailer are listed in a manner that takes into account their histories and sentimental value. The description of the ‘red Formica kitchen table’, ‘the flea-market wooden-trunk coffee table that the mexicano merchant who sold it to Caridad swore he bought from some indios in Chihuahua’, and the ‘silver and glass nicho with a papier-mâché skeleton on a cart inside’ coalesce to subvert the idea of a trailer as a temporary or characterless domestic space, demonstrating the overtly ‘homely’ nature of its décor.<sup>272</sup>

Following her first encounter with the woman with whom she falls in love, Caridad returns home and stays up all night cleaning her trailer meticulously: ‘She swept, mopped, changed the linen, cleaned the kitchen appliances, scrubbed her bathtub and

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<sup>272</sup> Castillo, *So Far*, p. 114.

toilet bowl, and sang Aretha Franklin tunes.<sup>273</sup> The following day she disappears for a year to live in a cave in the mountains.<sup>274</sup>

Her disappearance is connected, in Sofi's view, with the mysterious incident in which La Loca flew up on to the church roof as a child.<sup>275</sup> Both of these events involve forms of flight, especially since before Caridad's disappearance she has reported a dream in which she was airborne and chased by a winged creature.<sup>276</sup> A year later, Caridad is found, her time in the cave recounted in the manner of hearsay or speculation: 'More than likely she had bathed in the stream that ran a few miles down below, but Francisco would not have ventured to gamble on it.'<sup>277</sup> Caridad's own narrative of this year is telescoped into a brief summary, describing the first sunset she saw on arriving at the cave, and the ensuing months of calm.<sup>278</sup> This journey is based interestingly around domestic versus outdoor space, with both spaces carrying connotations of enclosure and spatialised 'closeting'; Caridad's engagement with her own domestic space is described in detail while her time in the mountains remains vague.

It is possible to discern an aesthetics of disruption and digression here. Much as Caridad's time in the cave takes the form of an elaborate plot deviation – on her first day after this self-imposed exile, she meets by chance the same woman she had fallen in love with and run from a year prior<sup>279</sup> – transitional moments in the novel are frequently described in terms of a sudden break with interior space. La Loca's death and resurrection as a child are framed in terms of her unusual relationship to architecture: at her own funeral she 'lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof.'<sup>280</sup> Similarly, when La Loca has a dream about the monstrous entity known as *la malogra* she goes 'out

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., pp. 89-90.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

to the stall and [sleeps] between two of the horses.’<sup>281</sup> La Loca’s troubled relationship with the living can be understood as mirrored in her association with the outdoors. Such representations can also be connected back to doña Felicia’s dream of the *malogra*, after which she ‘jumped up and ran about the house [...] until she realized it had been a dream and that the thing was not there in her rooms.’<sup>282</sup> The frantic search centres on a confusion of mental and physical spaces; the entity in the dream is itself a vague and cobbled-together creature, and its appearance resonates with prior discussion in this chapter of the *rasquachismo* and *domesticana* aesthetics.

Indeed, these instances are not perfectly analogous with the definition of ‘overarching vagueness’ I have hitherto discussed, according to which descriptions of interior space contain abundant detail yet lack situating spatialisation. However, what they share with the ‘overarching vagueness’ discussed prior is a sense of digression in their descriptions of interiors, along with a comparatively scant attribution of detail to surrounding, in this case outdoor, space. This inconsistency resonates with the disruption of formula effected by Castillo’s humorous register-mixing; it also resonates with the digressive tone of the narrative on a more pervasive level. As Manríquez notes, Castillo’s narrator speaks in ‘irritating double negatives’,<sup>283</sup> a style that is itself circuitous. It is even possible to relate this style to Ngai’s discussion of ‘irritation’ in Larsen’s *Quicksand*, as both novels appear to alternate between the right to opacity and some form of obligation to describe. Both include a spatialised focus on ‘surfaces’ together with a preservation of undescribed ‘depth’ – replicated physically, for instance, in Caridad’s retreat to the cave. This style approaches the *nepantla* experience in a language that can appear meticulous

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Manríquez, p. 40.

and inconsistent by turns, as if reflecting the impossibility of offering an exhaustive account ‘on behalf of’ or ‘for’ one’s culture.

Castillo’s use of ‘vagueness’ – for instance, by relying on hearsay among her characters to create a sense of uncertain multiplicity regarding Caridad’s time in the cave – can be read as a literal depiction of ‘unrepresented’ space. It is at this point that it is perhaps apt to remember Castillo’s discussion of *Massacre of the Dreamers* and digestibility. *So Far from God* appears to preserve and accommodate pockets of fraught incommunicability regarding intersecting identities – in this case, the experiences of queer, working class women of colour – that will *not* necessarily resonate with every reader. Much like the hoarseness of Fe’s voice, which recalls a crackling radio transmission,<sup>284</sup> Castillo’s narrative appears to dip in and out of focus; importantly, the ‘unrepresented’ experience is often spatialised.

With reference to her graduate studies at the University of Iowa, Cisneros discusses the teaching of Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*: ‘I realized that I was the only person in the creative writing workshop that didn’t have the same type of memory as Bachelard did regarding houses. This made me realize my class difference and, subsequently, my gender difference regarding homes.’<sup>285</sup> It is perhaps useful to imagine Caridad’s disappearance into the mountains as a renegotiation of Bachelard’s idea of the house as a space for dreaming. There is pride but also responsibility bound up in the meticulous description of Caridad’s home; it is consequently perhaps important that she journeys outside this space for a period of self-reflection. Such representations of interior space subvert the idea of home as stability or sanctuary; the escape from domestic spaces parallels the deviation from formula present in Castillo’s linguistic digressions and ‘double negatives.’

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<sup>284</sup> Castillo, *So Far*, p. 85.

<sup>285</sup> Sandra Cisneros, qtd. in Pérez, p. 108.

The entity called the *malogra* is a relevant point of reference with which to move the focus of this section's discussion from 'overarching vagueness' to 'multivalent vagueness.' While it is a mythical being rather than an architectural space, there is something of a spatialised vagueness about the *malogra* itself. If read in this manner as a 'space' of sorts, this entity appears described in terms of 'overarching vagueness': it is nebulous, yet made of various objects that appear incongruous at first glance. It has 'no shape' yet is composed of 'pure force.'<sup>286</sup> However, the eclectic nature of its description likens it to other 'multivalently vague' spaces of cultural memory discussed in this chapter. It is 'both tangible and amorphous', a 'thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, or limestone, gold, and brittle parchment.'<sup>287</sup> As Daniel Cooper Alarcón notes, the *malogra* 'is described as a large, voluminous evil spirit made of wool'.<sup>288</sup> Citing Alesia Garcia, Alarcón states that this 'nightmare vision' 'corresponds to New Mexican folklore about an evil spirit called variously La Malogra or La Malora.'<sup>289</sup> However, the manner in which Castillo herself reinvents this entity is important. Again citing Garcia, Alarcón notes that the imagery in which it is described is 'powerfully suggestive of the Spanish conquest of the Americas and its aftermath,' also evoking 'Castillo's interest in criticizing sexual and racial oppression'.<sup>290</sup> The reference has mythical and colonial as well as contemporary significance, as evidenced in the way in which Caridad is brutally attacked by the entity.<sup>291</sup> Doña Felicia's reaction to her dream of the creature reanimates a violent legacy – she 'ran about the house with her escopeta [...] used in the Revolución'.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Castillo, *So Far*, p. 77.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Daniel Cooper Alarcón, 'Literary Syncretism in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 23 (2004), 145-152 (p. 145).

<sup>289</sup> Alesia Garcia, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>291</sup> Castillo, *So Far*, p. 77.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

Can the *malogra* be read spatially, as a form of archived trauma? It is described as an inventory of objects that evoke the sense of a fragmentary past. The signifiers for colonialism that make up its bizarre anatomy appear connected to ideas of ruin and refuse. The wood is ‘splintered’ and the parchment ‘brittle’, two possibly nautical images recalling conquest; its ‘sharp metal’ and ‘limestone’, however, liken it to an architectural structure. Its association with ‘gold’ and ‘wool’, furthermore, evokes objects of economic exchange. These fragmented references lead the reader to imagine the *malogra* as something spatial, a shipwreck or a building.

Perhaps crucial is the syntax of its description, which juxtaposes two groups of objects. The *malogra* can be described in terms of ‘sharp metal and splintered wood’ or ‘limestone, gold, and brittle parchment.’<sup>293</sup> Are these descriptions mutually exclusive, and does their imprecision reflect the distortions of hearsay? This plurality of description formally parallels the ‘multivalent vagueness’ behind Castillo’s reimagining of the *malogra* itself. In this description, she has reconstructed a traditional entity from objects associated with colonisation, creating a retelling of conquest via the experience of the colonised. This description involves a sense of hybridity via the cobbling-together of signifiers from two different cultures: in this sense the fragmentary *malogra* can be linked to prior discussion of the *rasquachismo* aesthetic. Its description is disjunctive in both senses of the word – both in its evocation of disconnect, and in its offer of two opposed choices on a grammatical level. When we read the *malogra* as an archival space – an uncanny repository for the splintered pieces of a cultural trauma – it evokes a sense of archival reordering.

This reordering is paralleled elsewhere in Castillo’s *œuvre*. Much in the manner that Adonis decentres perceptions of Eurocentric modernism through his reimagining of

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

the *dīwān*, Castillo's writing elsewhere effects something of a reconstruction of influence, this time along gendered lines. Discussing her point of departure for the *Mixquiahuala Letters*, she described her 'grandiose' ideas based on 'time shift, tense shift, all this kind of stuff.'<sup>294</sup> Discussing these ideas with a friend, she learned that a similar novel had already been written in the form of Cortazar's *Rayuela* (Hopscotch).<sup>295</sup> Castillo's reaction to this – "[o]h my God, I've already been plagiarized!"<sup>296</sup> reflects the nonlinear temporality of both novels themselves, offering a fantastic reimagining of lines of male-authored influence. It is interesting to link this disruption of literary continuity to Castillo's disruptions of formula, along with the digressive temporality so often seen in her writing. The *malogra* is described in terms that refer to both tradition and conquest, a 'multivalent vagueness' that appears undetermined and dreamlike yet reclaims the narrative of the colonised via a collection of eroded items. The undefined, literally 'woolly' 'overarching vagueness' of its anatomy evokes porous interstices – similar to Larsen's irritating 'gaps' in narrative – meaning that this being can be read as an uncanny space in itself.

Castillo's evocation of the *nepantla* state in her writing resonates with many aspects of the typology of 'vagueness' I have hitherto outlined. Intertextual references are treated with an irony that makes the reader doubtful of the intention behind their application; untranslated words are used but inconsistently, sometimes glossed for non-Spanish speaking audiences. This interaction of 'paradoxical' and 'inconsistent vagueness' has been explored in this study's first chapter. I have then discussed Castillo's use of 'overarching vagueness' in order to outline the manner in which key moments in characters' lives in *So Far from God* are illustrated through the unconventional

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<sup>294</sup> Ana Castillo, in Elsa Saeta and Ana Castillo, 'A MELUS Interview: Ana Castillo', *MELUS*, 22, 3 (1997), 133-149 (p. 136).

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*



occupation of, or escape from, indoor space. Finally, I have discussed ‘multivalent vagueness’ with relation to Castillo’s reconstruction of myth and conquest, reading the dreamlike appearance of the *malogra* as itself an archival space.

Throughout this chapter I have outlined the manner in which many of the ‘vaguening’ techniques Beckett and Murakami use – and are extensively commended for – occur with surprising prevalence as elements of decolonial writing. I have demonstrated that the techniques of ‘paradoxical vagueness,’ ‘overarching vagueness’, and ‘multivalent vagueness’ – themselves highly subjective constructs – can be read as present in the works of this chapter’s three core authors writing from non-Eurocentric contexts.

The curiously domestic *lingua franca* employed by both Beckett and Murakami centres on limited or repeated actions and a sense of the mundane. As their characters calmly iron shirts,<sup>297</sup> or suck stones,<sup>298</sup> there is something imaginable yet curiously uncanny about their meticulous actions. This recurrence of mechanical tasks may be an important component of the internationally accessible, supposedly even ‘universal’ experience both authors are often credited as evoking. Boiling a given ‘existential state’ down to its mechanical actions is something akin to the novelistic equivalent of a literal translation. The argument that such mundane tasks evoke a sense of ‘placeless’ commonality can be made on a few counts: the actions typically involve striving or soothing, they speak to a certain need for routine in crisis. Considering the gendered and economic connotations of household tasks, however, this choice appears unusual; it is possible that this genre of activities would be considered trivial or unglamorous were they written about in detail by authors from marginalised backgrounds.

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<sup>297</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 6.

<sup>298</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 67; *Molloy*.

This study's final chapter will therefore discuss the possibility of observing a *language* of 'vagueness' in such works, considering both the limitations of such a language and the ways in which it has been thought, in Beckett's and Murakami's cases, to transcend cultural divides. Chapter 5 will be informed by the discussions of repetition, seriality, and the referencing of domestic and material culture as discussed in this chapter via the work of Kincaid, Adonis and Castillo. Bringing with it the issues this chapter has raised regarding the translational potential of the mundane, I will turn to a discussion of such tropes in the work of my core authors. Discussing Beckett's and Murakami's work with reference to three theorists of 'world literature' – while acknowledging that this term is itself often unequally weighted – I will interrogate the manner in which both authors' writing can be considered internationally 'translatable.' I will discuss the idea of a certain reliance on concrete objects as a form of *lingua franca* in their work, and the manner in which household items often play a significant role in these motifs. With reference to domestic space and uncanny imagery, I will explore the manner in which both authors use motifs based on objects that are mundane but contain a crucial element of – at times very subtle – unimagability.

I will thus argue that there is a concrete yet, importantly, fungible quality to the objects both authors reference. In this manner, they are perhaps, if not exactly always understandable, broadly imaginable by audiences from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Much like Beckett's and Murakami's defamiliarised syntax, there is something slightly bizarre or arbitrary about these items, as when Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* opens on a disagreement between a couple regarding green peppers and flower-print toilet paper.<sup>299</sup> Much like both authors' bilingual prose, something about these objects and their fetishised importance makes them appear 'foreign in every

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<sup>299</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, pp. 26-27.

language.' I will thus examine a variety of theories which go some way towards discerning what *is* deemed translatable between cultures, along with the biases often implicit in such analysis.

## Chapter 5

### ‘It’s vague, life and death’:<sup>1</sup> What is Translatable?

*A symptom of Boku’s exteriority is his almost fetishistic attention to trivia, to “things.” It is as if a careful tracking of “things” furnishes him with a handle and a grip on a recalcitrant reality.<sup>2</sup>*

In a 2010 article for the *New York Review of Books*, Tim Parks laments the rise of what he refers to as ‘the dull new global novel’, discussing the pressure on authors to ‘be an international rather than a national phenomenon.’<sup>3</sup> He states that ‘more and more European, African, Asian and South American authors see themselves as having “failed” if they do not reach an international audience.’<sup>4</sup> In Parks’ view, such authors consequently make their works easier to translate: included as an example is Kazuo Ishiguro’s evasion of ‘wordplay’ and ‘allusion’.<sup>5</sup>

In ‘World Literature and Literary Value: Is “Global” the New “Lowbrow”?’ , Karolina Watroba offers an interesting response to Parks’s argument. Writing back to this charge based on ‘the dull new global novel’ – and, aptly, citing Murakami as the latter’s ‘undisputed master’<sup>6</sup> – Watroba observes a certain elitism according to which “the local” and “the global” begin to resemble code words for “highbrow” and “lowbrow.”<sup>7</sup> In her

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 218; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>2</sup> Iwamoto, p. 298.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Parks, ‘The Dull New Global Novel’ (2010) <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/> [Accessed 26 November 2020].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Karolina Watroba, ‘World Literature and Literary Value: Is “Global” The New “Lowbrow”?’ , *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5, 1 (2018), 53-68 (p. 53).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

view, this binary perpetuates the assessment of texts in terms of value judgments relating to their allusive density and difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

Both Watroba's and Parks's arguments continue to refer to literature as either globally aimed and vague, or locally inflected and specific. It is therefore interesting to consider their debate at this point in my thesis. Previous chapters of this study have worked to reveal the overdetermination behind references that appear vague at first glance, opening conversation on the mimetic scope of such translational 'vagueness.' 'Vague' texts may initially appear as a lowest common denominator offering, intended to engage the broadest amount of audiences possible at the expense of cultural specificity or political commentary. However, my exposition of techniques such as 'multivalent vagueness' has helped to show that 'vagueness' does not immediately equal accessibility. 'Vague' texts, too, can perpetuate elitism via dense allusivity. Elsewhere, for instance, the irony with which a form of parodied Beckettian 'vagueness' is employed by authors from Kincaid to Flattery demonstrates the subversive potential of 'vagueness', as such apparently indeterminate works conceal an incisive cultural specificity.

Thus far, discussion of the nebulous nature of the 'culturally specific reference' has reappeared throughout this thesis as a common thread, together with the idea that cultural references are themselves the sites of canonical legacy and unequally weighted exchange. This study's final chapter will continue the focus on 'things' to which this study so often returns, keeping in mind the function of cultural references as a 'thing', or a unit of literary value, in themselves. This chapter will chart the recurrence of household items and other such mundane objects as a form of *lingua franca* in both Beckett's and Murakami's work, examining the manner in which these units have been seen to create a sense of uncanny or defamiliarised 'universality.'

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

To begin with, both Beckett's and Murakami's writing appears, in various ways, to reimagine the question of what constitutes a *lingua franca*. This chapter takes its title from Malone's almost farcically indeterminate statement, '[i]t's vague, life and death',<sup>9</sup> in order to illustrate this point. Both authors' writing appears to attempt access to the most literal and pared back aspects of 'humanness'; amusingly, in this quotation, even such qualities themselves are labelled as 'vague.'

Their writing is pervaded by literalised forms of communication. For instance, it is perhaps no accident that two authors extensively preoccupied with translation are also preoccupied with silence. Beckett famously likened language to 'an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness'.<sup>10</sup> In *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* Murakami states that he runs in order to 'acquire a void',<sup>11</sup> extolling the virtues of running 'in [his] own cozy, homemade void, [his] own nostalgic silence.'<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note his representation of silence as its own kind of interior space here. Importantly, this space appears portable and individualised, in keeping with Murakami's self-translating perspective; its sense of calm is notably induced by both repetitive actions *and* a form of travel or peregrination. This 'homemade void' appears deliberately 'vague' yet implicitly linked to meditative practices, making it both 'placeless' and perhaps, in a broad way, culturally 'placed' in contemporary interpretations of Buddhist tradition. Finally, a further notable property of this sought-after silence is its association, for Murakami, with 'nostalgia'; it is 'cosy', and appears linked to comfort, rootedness and a kind of 'home', albeit an abstract and transposable one that may be located in the runner's mind. In this view, silence appears to act as a bridge between rootedness and wandering.

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<sup>9</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 218; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Mary Bryden, 'Sounds and Silence: Beckett's Music', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 6 (1997), 279-288 (p. 279).

<sup>11</sup> Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Secker, 2008), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

The fact that silence is held in such high esteem by two self-translating authors signals its possible use as a form of lowest-common-denominator (anti)communication. Likewise, music reappears in both authors' work as a form of alternative language, from Murakami's jazz-influenced simplicity<sup>13</sup> to the repeated comparisons between orchestral composition and writing,<sup>14</sup> 'talk[ing]',<sup>15</sup> 'chatting',<sup>16</sup> or even 'classical *rokugo* storytelling'<sup>17</sup> observable in his conversation with Seiji Ozawa in *Absolutely on Music*. Alan Mandell states that when directing, Beckett would gesture as if conducting music: 'to signify the end to a pause or silence, he would raise the ring finger and the pinky on either hand. These for him were the equivalent of musical dynamics – a pause was a beat; a silence was a rest.'<sup>18</sup>

Similar to such *lingua francas* is a preoccupation with the physical body in both authors' work, often as viewed or articulated in methodical sequence. Murakami's *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle* features a survey regarding degrees of baldness in male passers-by;<sup>19</sup> late Beckett texts such as *Quad*<sup>20</sup> and 'The Lost Ones'<sup>21</sup> focus on the arrangement and circulation of groups of anonymous bodies in confined spaces. Anthony Cordingley notes this connection, in Beckett's work, between such fraught physicality and the kind of repetition found in foreign language primers, stating, for instance, that 'Beckett's Unnamable cannot escape the disquieting sense that his life is but a "pensum" – a repetitive, dreary lesson dealt out by a schoolmaster.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rubin, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Haruki Murakami, in Haruki Murakami and Seiji Ozawa, *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Harvill Secker, 2011), p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Ozawa, in *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Murakami, in Murakami and Ozawa, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Mandell, 'Alan Mandell' in *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett*, ed. by James and Elisabeth Knowlson (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006), pp. 200-203 (p. 201).

<sup>19</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. III*, p. 475.

<sup>21</sup> Beckett, 'The Lost Ones', p. 381.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Cordingley, 'Beckett's "Masters": Pedagogical Sadism, Foreign Language Primers, Self-Translation', *Modern Philology*, 109, 4 (2012), 510-543 (p. 510).

Following this inventory of wordless languages, this final chapter will draw attention to the presence of a slightly more difficult-to-define *lingua franca* in both authors' work, characterised by a sense of the mundane and a cyclical or list-like reliance on physical objects which I will refer to as 'methodical vagueness.' Of course, this focus on methodical tasks, often completed in sequence or as a series of permutations, overlaps significantly with both the latter themes of music and the body for both authors. Murakami's characters listen to records carefully and, at times, systematically;<sup>23</sup> as when Molloy sucks stones,<sup>24</sup> Beckett's narrators appear to conduct a relationship with the natural world based on flawed or failed bodily integration. Such habits evoke the search for comfort, 'dialogues' that appear to stage a wordless or compromised connection with a given character's environment.

Such repertoires of concrete tasks can occasionally seem literal in a manner that recalls the language-learning process: as Cordingley states, '*How It Is* offers Beckett's most sustained reflection on his own bilingualism, where the issue of repetition is explicitly staged to resemble, and parody, his practice and poetics of self-translation.'<sup>25</sup> Beckett – who in his early 'Proust' stated that the 'only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent'<sup>26</sup> – insisted that he knew 'next to nothing' about his own creative process, as little, he claimed, as 'a plumber of the history of hydraulics.'<sup>27</sup> He elsewhere references 'laborious' writing, comparing it to working with a 'small handsaw in knotty timber.'<sup>28</sup> These representations of the creative process as laboriously physical appear consistent with the way in which Beckett turned to

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<sup>23</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 122; *Pinball, 1973*; Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 146; p. 267; Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 67; *Molloy*.

<sup>25</sup> Cordingley, p. 511.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Proust', in *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV*, ed. by Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2010), pp. 511-554 (p. 539).

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to James Knowlson, 11 April 1972', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 291-292 (p. 291).

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Jocelyn Herbert, 4 December 1977', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 474.



translation in uninspired moments. Describing his work as ‘at a standstill’ in 1973, Beckett nonetheless notes that he participates in ‘little bursts of self-translation here and there.’<sup>29</sup> Even his tongue-in-cheek description of his turn to French as motivated by ‘le besoin d’être mal armé’<sup>30</sup> includes connotations of language as a tangible implement with which to equip oneself. For both authors, translation was a mechanical task in itself, to be carried out in moments of creative impasse.

Like Beckett, Murakami uses mechanical metaphors to describe the writing process; like Beckett, he appears to view translation as a remedy for writer’s block. Murakami describes writing short stories as a ‘joy’, and explains working with this form according to the light-hearted metaphor of ‘planting a garden’; writing novels, by contrast, is like ‘planting a forest’.<sup>31</sup> Uchida Tatsuru notes that elsewhere, ‘Murakami consistently uses ‘digging a hole’ as his metaphor for creation.’<sup>32</sup> When Murakami’s sudden fame caused a period of writer’s block, he nonetheless continued his translation work.<sup>33</sup> For both authors, translation is described as a mechanical process; interestingly, this focus on mechanical processes appears reflected as subject matter in their writing itself.

In Murakami’s *Pinball, 1973*, the protagonist describes his translation work as taking ‘a coin (the original text) in your left hand, plunk[ing] it on your right palm, whisk[ing] your left hand away [...] Simple.’<sup>34</sup> In several similarly concretised and mechanical comparisons, he in turn describes teaching Spanish as ‘like sprinkling water in the desert’,<sup>35</sup> and translation, again, to scooping ‘scum’ from ‘one ditch and dump[ing]

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<sup>29</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Letter to Mary Hutchinson, 16 June 1973’, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 333.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Letter to Hans Naumann, 17 February 1954’, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-1956*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 460-463 (p. 462).

<sup>31</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘Introduction to the English Edition’, in *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, trans. by Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. vii-xi (p. vii).

<sup>32</sup> Uchida Tatsuru, qtd. in Strecher, Loc 267 of 5837.

<sup>33</sup> Rubin, p. 171.

<sup>34</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

it into another one'.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the protagonist of *Dance Dance Dance* describes his journalism as 'shoveling' 'cultural snow.'<sup>37</sup> These tasks are not always of a gruelling or strenuous quality: elsewhere a kind of mechanical mindfulness appears as a recurrent feature of Murakami narrators. Stuck in an elevator, the protagonist of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* scrupulously counts the change in his pockets, stating that '[f]or someone in my profession, knowing how to kill time is as important a method of training as gripping rubber balls is for a boxer.'<sup>38</sup> He counts via an 'assiduous repetition' not dissimilar to Beckett's patterns of stone-sucking: 'What I do is thrust my hands simultaneously into both pockets, the right hand tallying the hundreds and five-hundreds in tandem with the left hand adding up the fifties and tens.'<sup>39</sup>

As if they are merely props to illustrate various actions carried out in translationese, Beckett's and Murakami's objects evoke both seriality and its opposite, a form of discreteness or dispersal. As in the case of May's pacing in *Footfalls*,<sup>40</sup> or Malone's inventories of his half-remembered possessions,<sup>41</sup> these activities are often habitual or obsessive. Such sequences of tasks are thus unusual, absurd, or difficult to imagine, at the same time as purporting to deal with a kind of 'concrete' or easy-to-translate activity. Most importantly, they signal 'relation' – in the sense of Glissant's 'poetics of relation' as translational interconnectedness<sup>42</sup> – at the same time as evoking 'nonrelation' when read as withdrawn or solipsistic behaviours. Self-enclosed and amnesiac, yet conveying some form of concrete commonality, this 'methodical

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> Murakami, *Dance*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Murakami, *Hard-Boiled*, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. III*, p. 423.

<sup>41</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 191; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>42</sup> 'The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges the idea of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.' (Glissant, p. 11.)

vagueness' evokes Beckett's and Murakami's 'vague' interiors themselves, in which given household objects are defined but settings refuse to coalesce into a bounded whole.

It is therefore perhaps apposite to evoke, again, the status of such objects as portals to a former world. The time-capsule quality of the Sheep Professor's living room,<sup>43</sup> Malone's habitual reliance on the twin 'poles' of his pot and dish,<sup>44</sup> and the old woman's buttonhook<sup>45</sup> in *Ill Seen Ill Said* share this relic-like quality. For both authors, 'overarching' and 'paradoxical vagueness' cause such objects to acquire a strange mix of vitality and obsolescence in their purgatorial contexts. As when Boku listens to 'White Christmas' twenty-six times<sup>46</sup> between visits from the Sheep Man, the mundanity of such signifiers renders them all the more jarring.

This latter word 'mundane', with its connection to ideas of 'earth' and the 'world',<sup>47</sup> is itself worthy of examination in this context. Keeping in mind the twin 'poles' of confinement and interconnectedness implicit in both authors' work, this chapter will discuss the manner in which their 'methodical vagueness' contributes to the idea that their writing is broadly translatable. The often amusing 'mundanity' of Beckett's and Murakami's reference-units appears to evoke two kinds of 'world': an attempt at global interconnectedness couched in a microcosmic language of singularity and enclosure. I will thus examine this 'methodical vagueness' according to three different understandings of internationally disseminated literature, with a view to problematising the 'vagueness' of homogenising categories such as 'world literature' themselves.

In a manner consistent with this study's Chapter 4, an examination of these understandings will aim to further explore the question of which narratives – or 'whose worlds' – are deemed internationally relevant. I will begin with a simple analysis of

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<sup>43</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 240.

<sup>44</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 179; *Malone Dies*.

<sup>45</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 455.

<sup>46</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 267.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Hawker and Maurice Waite, *Oxford Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 945.

Beckett's and Murakami's 'methodical vagueness' as a feature of what Walkowitz calls 'born-translated' literature in her titular study.<sup>48</sup> I will move from this comparison to an argument based on Apter's idea of 'translating untranslatably', as described in her *Against World Literature*.<sup>49</sup> This comparison will be slightly more ambivalent, acknowledging the way in which both authors can be viewed as 'translating untranslatably' while discussing Apter's criticisms of naïve metaphors of 'border-crossing'<sup>50</sup> in translation studies. Finally, I will make a slight backward chronological jump to conclude by discussing both authors' defamiliarised 'methodical vagueness' with reference to Spivak's idea of 'planetarity' in her *Death of a Discipline*.<sup>51</sup> This latter stages perhaps the most jarring or oppositional relationship between theory and text, as Spivak may appear an unlikely choice in this connection. This final argument will analyse both authors' use of the uncanny with reference to Spivak's idea of a planet inhabited 'on loan',<sup>52</sup> while acknowledging Spivak's critique of existing models of 'world literature' and comparative literature studies.

At this point in a study that is, in many ways, concerned largely with repeated motifs, there is a certain self-reflexivity to a concluding chapter based on methodical tasks. To contrast with this rather rigid theme, this chapter will take a slightly freer and more analytical, results-based form. Its structure will be looser than the extract-based sequences of Chapters 1-3, departing from investigatory close readings to view the study's core texts in full. Structured along the lines of theoretical findings, it will discuss such 'methodical vagueness' in relation to Walkowitz's theory of 'born-translated' literature through readings of Beckett's *Malone Dies* and Murakami's 'Scheherazade.' It will then move on to consider Apter's idea of 'translating untranslatably', supported by

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<sup>48</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>51</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

examples from Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Finally, it will analyse Spivak's 'planetary' with relation to Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* and Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*.

These three readings will themselves draw attention to the difficult relationship between text and theory. Is one reading 'with', 'against', 'in comparison to', or 'aided by'? Reading 'through the lens of' another's idea implies complicity, while reading 'with reference to' suggests only fleeting comparison. My use of Walkowitz's ideas may appear evaluative, for instance, in using the label 'born-translated' as a metric by which to judge a work's international applicability. However, rather than discerning whether the texts qualify as 'born-translated' literature, my analysis intends to question the efficacy of the term itself in the event that it legitimises the existence of a canonically informed 'world literature' when applied too liberally. My analysis of Apter uses her work to first bolster and then negate an optimistic view of Beckett's and Murakami's work as 'translating untranslatably.' My final employment of Spivak's 'planetary' leaves this theory itself open to critique. As Hayley Toth's 'Spivak's Planetary and the Limits of Professional Reading' persuasively argues, Spivak may indeed choose inaccessible texts in her examples of reading as a tool of cross-cultural empathy.<sup>53</sup> As I draw parallels between the flaws in an internationally informed theory of 'vagueness' and the boundedness of canonically influenced 'literacy', the theory-text comparison broadens to become an inquiry into the limits of empathic imagining.

Pertinent throughout this analysis is the question of gendered and classed domestic labour. As raised in the conclusion of Chapter 4, both authors' 'methodical vagueness' appears to rely in part on a language of household tasks that would perhaps be considered trivial if used by marginalised authors. Alice Bolin compares Eileen Myles'

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<sup>53</sup> Hayley Toth, 'Spivak's Planetary and the Limits of Professional Reading', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 17, 3 (2020), 459-478 (p. 459).

phrase '[l]ife was like doing your laundry' to 'the daily struggle to get and keep work [...] that runs through all of Myles's writing.'<sup>54</sup> Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* begins with a praise of domestic lists, discussing the 'joy in slowly erasing'<sup>55</sup> a day's tasks as the speaker states, '[t]he list is both my map and my compass.'<sup>56</sup> While such prose informed by methodical household tasks is not new, there is a danger that these examples may still be read only in their capacity to illuminate female, queer or working class perspectives. Specific representation of such experiences is sorely needed; nonetheless, the worry remains that had a male, socioeconomically privileged author stated, '[l]ife was like doing your laundry', the comment may be read as unambiguously universal, 'existential' in its Chandleresque concision.<sup>57</sup>

The overwhelming international popularity of Beckett's and Murakami's slightly uncanny domestic worlds contrasts with perceptions of the domestic as 'local', 'intimate', or gendered. Do both authors thus fetishise an 'earthy' or 'concrete' poetics of the mundane in what can appear – for instance, in the case of Beckett characters' laboured inventories<sup>58</sup> – as a glamorisation of physical work and material lack? Biographical analysis of both authors complicates questions of lived experience and a writing of the masculine domestic. Beckett's and Murakami's personal lives indeed appear at times to have been dictated by the very methodical tasks they include in their novels; a reading that seeks to discuss their privilege through this 'mundane' lens is thus complex. Murakami's pre-fame bar work<sup>59</sup> and his disciplined writing regime, aided by regular distance running,<sup>60</sup> both beckon as factors informing a prose based on rhythm and

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<sup>54</sup> Eileen Myles, qtd. in Bolin, p. 226.

<sup>55</sup> Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2020), p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> See the discussion of Chandler's similes in Sigelman and Jacoby, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> From *How It Is*: 'the sack sole good sole possession coal-sack to the feel small or medium five stone six stone wet jute I clutch it it drips in the present but long past long gone vast stretch of time the beginning this life first sign very first of life [...] other certainties the mud the dark I recapitulate the sack the tins the mud the dark the silence the solitude nothing else for the moment'. (Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 412).

<sup>59</sup> Strecher, Loc 336 of 5837.

<sup>60</sup> Murakami, *What*, p. 69.

physicality. He refers to his initial style as ‘kitchen-table fiction’ due to the manner in which he would write for short periods after closing time.<sup>61</sup> As Jean-Michel Rabaté states in his ‘Paris, Roussillon, Ussy’ essay in *Beckett in Context*, ‘[w]hat is striking in all the letters documenting Beckett’s everyday life in Ussy is that one catches him repeating gestures or chores learned when working for food in the Audes’ farm near Roussillon: digging, weeding, cutting, planting, attacking roots, fighting against pests like moles and wild boars.’<sup>62</sup> While I will not go so far as to argue that Beckett’s mud imagery is as agricultural as it is Dantean,<sup>63</sup> the physicality of such tasks can be seen at times to replicate the methodical actions carried out in his work.

As a range of examples throughout this chapter will show, it is precisely the vague quality of Beckett’s and Murakami’s methodical tasks that makes their authenticity – for readers seeking this quality – so difficult to dispute. Both authors employ motifs of physicality both vague enough and personally rooted enough to avoid appearing as a direct appropriation of domestic or manual labour. Adding to the curiously unlocalised quality of these activities is their association with a form of language acquisition or self-translation, as Cordingley has argued with relation to Beckett. Most broadly, this twin emphasis on repeated language and physical tasks recalls a kind of rote learning. This final chapter, with its increasingly pedagogy-oriented focus on texts such as Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*, aims to use such conversations around academic reading and cross-cultural empathy to interrogate perceptions of the ‘universal’ text as prescribed reading. This discussion will lead to a conclusion based on what I will term incomplete or ‘halfway’ acts of imagining on the part of both core authors. I will argue that, much like their curiously indeterminate interior spaces, Beckett’s and Murakami’s work, to borrow

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<sup>61</sup> Murakami, ‘The Birth’, p. xv.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Paris, Roussillon, Ussy’, in *Beckett in Context*, ed. by Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 53-62 (p. 61).

<sup>63</sup> Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 256.

Spivak's phrase, 'stages the question of collectivity'<sup>64</sup> in partially failed, open-ended ways. I will discuss this uncertainty of perspective as indicative of what can be termed a crisis of canonical literature, present from mid-twentieth century to present day 'global' writing.

## 5.1 Ill Said in Every Language: Beckett, Murakami, and 'Born-Translated'

### Literature

*What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It's as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket.<sup>65</sup>*

As Chapter 3 of this thesis has illustrated with relation to 'multivalently vagued' interior space, *Malone Dies* stages the cultural equivalent of conceptual self-translation, using the ambiguity of its setting to create a generic hybrid. As in Wittgenstein's exchange involving the thrown ball, Malone's disorienting 'placelessness' is often staged through methodical engagement with physical objects. His storytelling is mechanical: he lists his proposed stories one by one, resolving to tell '[o]ne about a man, another about a woman, a third about a thing and finally one about an animal, a bird probably.'<sup>66</sup> This task is rather joyless and does not appear to include any excesses of passion, as he promises the stories 'will be neither beautiful nor ugly, they will be calm' (p. 174). He further specifies his plan: 'Present state, three stories, inventory, there' (p. 176).

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<sup>64</sup> Spivak, *Death*, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. Von Wright, trans. by Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 95.

<sup>66</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 175. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.



Malone's telling of the stories, however, begins to vie with his need to inventory his possessions. 'Would it not then be better', he asks mid-account, 'for me to speak of my possessions without further delay?' (p. 175). Much in the way he begins telling Saposcat's story only to occasionally reject it with dismissals of '[t]his is awful' (p. 185) and 'I can't' (p. 190), the possessions in his room are similarly accepted and rejected. 'With my long stick I can rummage in them,' he states, 'draw them to me, send them back' (p. 178).

These spatial oscillations – to 'draw' something 'to oneself', to 'send' something 'back' – recall simplified language-primer motions. More literally, the novel contains many references to language and education as mechanical tasks. Saposcat's parents 'made use of the spoken word in much the same way as the guard of a train makes use of his flags, or of his lantern' (p. 182); his father makes, 'after a silence, a first objection, and then, after a second silence, a second objection' (p. 205). Saposcat himself is often confined until 8 o'clock in the evening 'doing impositions', but 'submit[s] with philosophy to these vexations' (p. 184).

Malone's pencil, and his method of holding it, are described with precision, drawing attention to the pencil itself as physical writing implement (p. 216). The questions that Malone plans to ask the man who appears in his room are methodically numbered from 1 to 21, culminating in a request for an item of stationery: '21. Could you lend me an India rubber?' (p. 265) Malone states '[t]his exercise book is my life [...] it has taken me a long time to resign myself to that' (p. 267). The effect of these statements draws the reader's attention to the acts of repetition implicit in the multilingual writing process itself; by extension, this curiously laboured writing recalls the patterns of international transmission by which translated novels circulate. However, the fact that these actions culminate in a troubling atmosphere of drudgery is of note. Cordingley

references the seventeenth-century academic practice by which ‘teaching the mind to accommodate a foreign discourse was promoted as a key tool in developing the rational faculty’, suggesting that Beckett’s *How It Is* ‘lampoons such idealism.’<sup>67</sup> It is thus possible to read Beckett’s ‘methodical vagueness’ to a number of subversive ends: as a critique of the hegemonic aspects of European modernist multilingualism, for instance, or as a comment on prescriptive educational modes by which canonical works in dominant literary languages are prioritised.

Murakami’s ‘Scheherazade’ is a story similarly preoccupied with the mechanics and method of stories. Habara methodically recalls the events of his confined day; Scheherazade’s storytelling leaves him feeling like ‘a blackboard wiped with a damp cloth’, ‘erased of worries’.<sup>68</sup> The spatial mechanics of Scheherazade’s visits to the House are described with precision. Attention is paid to the process of unlocking doors: ‘Parking in the reserved space assigned to the House, she would carry the bags to the front door and ring the bell. After checking the peephole, Habara would release the lock, unhook the chain, and let her in’ (p. 116). Habara makes himself simple dinners and follows his Perrier with a cup of coffee ‘while watching a DVD or reading’; he is also partial to ‘long books, especially those he had to read several times to understand’ (p. 117). The act of literary comprehension is framed here as another methodical task.

Composition is similarly portrayed in both the descriptions of Habara’s cryptic diary entries and in Scheherazade’s memory of the boy’s handwriting, a script so neat it appears to obscure the message within: ‘Any teacher confronted with penmanship that perfect would automatically give it an Excellent, whether he bothered to read a single line

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<sup>67</sup> Cordingley, p. 512.

<sup>68</sup> Murakami, ‘Scheherazade’, pp. 114-115. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

or not' (p. 131). In these cases, writing both promises and obscures a link to the outside world.

The instalment-based structure of Scheherazade's story creates a pacing centred on repetition, as she provides an account of multiple break-ins to the same person's house. Even the actions within these flashbacks take the form of methodical sequences around the furtive perusal of indoor space: 'To be safe, Scheherazade rang the bell, waited to make sure there was no answer, scanned the street in case she was being observed, opened the door, and entered' (p. 125). It is here that the methodical quality of the narration takes on a troubling aspect. While the story centres on flashbacks that depict an act of voyeurism on the young female character's part, the reader is of course also implicated as a voyeur: large sections of the story meticulously follow the teenage girl's actions. A narrative ostensibly foregrounding a woman's story about her own past is nonetheless circumscribed by a male gaze.<sup>69</sup> As Chapter 1 of this thesis has argued, such reuse of tropes purportedly imbues Murakami's work with an atemporality mimicking his own flashback-driven plots.

Such repetitively evoked gender dynamics may prompt us to consider 'Scheherazade', itself a story of repetitions, in terms of its location in an *œuvre* of troubling gendered archetypes. Such a perspective allows us to consider the misogyny in Murakami's work in light of 'methodical vagueness' itself. Much as Chapter 3 argued, the repeated and self-referential marginalisation of Murakami's female characters may serve to desensitise readers to this element in his work, prompting them to view his thinly sketched women as another amusing glitch in his uncanny universe. Considering the history of literary tropes that has enabled such stories to exist largely uncritiqued may

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<sup>69</sup> If, as Miriam Hansen states, texts constructed for a female gaze – in this context, Hollywood films addressed to a female readership – 'open up space for a female subjectivity' by 'focusing spectatorial pleasure on a male hero/performer', in 'Scheherazade' the male focus of the girl's obsessive gaze is notably absent from the story, and he is represented in terms of his empty bedroom. More descriptive focus on the boy would, of course, be equally voyeuristic and troubling in this context. (Miriam Hansen, 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship', *Cinema Journal*, 25, 4 (1986), 6-32 (p. 7; p. 10).

open a pertinent conversation regarding misogyny and habituation. As if in an unwitting caricature of patriarchal literature, Murakami's gender dynamics appear to illustrate Vladimir's statement in *Waiting for Godot* that 'habit is a great deadener.'<sup>70</sup>

In an *œuvre* of troubling undercurrents it is thus crucial to acknowledge, as Iwamoto does, the preoccupation with surfaces in Murakami's work.<sup>71</sup> This wilful avoidance of depth, along with, as the former notes, a pervasive interest in material 'things',<sup>72</sup> often renders these novels curiously self-reflexive, as if always already concerned with the book as a material object in circulation. Walkowitz states that '[i]n born-translated novels, translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device',<sup>73</sup> stating that 'many feature translators and scenes of translation or intended translation.'<sup>74</sup> It is also worth returning to her summation that Murakami's 'inventive use of multiple writing systems, counterfactual worlds, and popular genres creates an internal climate of traveling narratives that operates in tension with the external movement of his novels from one language to another.'<sup>75</sup> Translation is of course a similar thematic device in Beckett, from the painful coded transmission of language through violence in *How It Is* to the conversation – 'full of axioms'<sup>76</sup> – between the Saposcats. To take this comparison slightly further, the purgatorial absurdity of Beckett's settings may also be seen as a case of translation manifesting as plot.

Much as in the case of what Walkowitz calls Murakami's 'counterfactual worlds', Beckett's landscapes reference multiple cultural settings; in addition to this, the twilight terrain of texts such as *Ill Seen Ill Said* may equally be interpreted as a stylised afterlife. Walkowitz notes that many works of 'born-translated' literature focus thematically not

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<sup>70</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. III*, p. 81.

<sup>71</sup> Iwamoto, p. 298.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 181; *Malone Dies*.

just on acts of translation, but on more concrete methodical sequences that trouble the binary of ‘original’ and ‘copy.’ Walkowitz, for instance, cites Ishiguro’s preoccupation with ‘the series’ ‘the list’ and ‘the clone’.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, she notes that Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* couches descriptions of ‘the institutions of making, evaluating and promoting that constitute world literature today’<sup>78</sup> in discussions of vegetarianism and animal cruelty. In her view, Coetzee ‘asks us to think about the world systems that produce both dinner and novel.’<sup>79</sup>

When viewed in this light, Beckett’s and Murakami’s methodical sequences appear to draw attention to the unequal systems of circulation governing international literature. According to this reading, their language-primer focus on mechanical tasks parallels systems of literary circulation while satirising the hegemonic history of the French, Japanese, and English languages. The uneasily translated quality of these physical descriptions can be read as a form of self-provincialisation, the authors’ language use called into question through defamiliarisation. Walkowitz discusses the manner in which ‘born-translated’ novels trouble the ‘distinction between native and nonnative readers.’<sup>80</sup> She describes Murakami’s self-translations as allowing the ‘second language to create a new kind of first language’;<sup>81</sup> Walkowitz groups Beckett and Murakami together on the basis of this self-translation process. She states that, ‘[l]iterature in dominant languages tends to “forget” that it has benefitted from literary works in other languages. ‘Born-translated’ fiction, therefore, engages in a project of unforgetting.’<sup>82</sup> Thus, she argues that authors like Murakami acknowledge their indebtedness to translation, defamiliarising their first language in order to view its tradition critically.

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<sup>77</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>80</sup> While Walkowitz discusses ‘born translated’ literature as largely a phenomenon of the digital age – albeit noting earlier occurrences of this concept, such as the numerous translations of *Don Quixote* – I would like to argue that it is also possible to view Beckett’s work, which obviously predated the digital age, as an early example of this form of writing. (Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 15.)

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Aptly, Walkowitz notes the presence, with reference to Ishiguro, of a certain ‘architectural’ focus in ‘born-translated’ novels.<sup>83</sup> As, in her words, ‘the idea of novels as bounded containers has been important to the idea of communities as bounded containers’,<sup>84</sup> such novels may seek to broaden such boundaries. This focus on overarching literary frameworks is, sure enough, contrasted with a recurrence of seemingly mundane activities in ‘born-translated’ literature. Such novels, in Walkowitz’s view, portray a sense of ‘unimaginable largeness’,<sup>85</sup> an awareness of the significance of everyday actions on an international scale. Citing Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* – in which the seemingly trivial act of polishing silver is viewed in terms of its global repercussions<sup>86</sup> – Walkowitz demonstrates how ‘born-translated’ literature dissolves the distinction between private actions and overarching inequalities.

A comparison between Beckett’s and Murakami’s indeterminate interiors beckons here: are such vague indoor spaces intended as physical manifestations of an open-ended translational encounter, a kind of empathic intercultural imagining? Both authors’ ‘overarching vagueness’, coupled with their focus on methodical tasks, appears to broaden the idea of linguistic or literary communities as ‘bounded containers’ at the same time as it signals a politicisation of the private, ‘household’ environment. However, it remains to be seen whether this ‘born-translated’ perspective is developed sufficiently in both authors’ work. Tellingly, Walkowitz makes the Beckett-Murakami comparison in brief during the introduction of her study; she does not devote chapter-length attention to either author. For all their parallels with the cases illustrated in *Born Translated*, Beckett’s and Murakami’s respective contributions to ‘born-translated’ literature appear inconclusive when examined. A reading of their ‘vagueness’ as ‘born-translated’ may

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

seem wilful: what Spivak, quoting Lisa Jardine, refers to as ‘recovering some concealed radical message from ostensibly reactionary writing.’<sup>87</sup>

In both authors’ cases, contextual evidence renders the connection to ‘born-translated’ literature ambiguous. Indeed, the *iyashi* literature contemporaneous with Murakami’s writing employs methodical descriptions of self-care and domestic routines to encourage emotional regulation in the face of distressing cultural circumstances.<sup>88</sup> In the case of *iyashi*, any focus on the ‘unimaginable largeness’ of one’s actions is, if anything, eschewed. Similarly, Beckett’s Malone is attached to inanimate ‘things’ in a manner that could all too easily recall psychoanalytic ‘transitional objects’,<sup>89</sup> an idea that is itself the product of a Eurocentric theoretical framework. As we have seen throughout this study, a possible pitfall of both authors’ ‘vagueness’ is the sheer multiplicity of cultural contexts to which it could be seen to refer.

Perhaps a certain intentionality is needed for a work to be ‘truly born-translated’, such novels not simply written for international reach but in a manner that deliberately provincialises dominant literary traditions. In terms of both authors’ repetitions, it is difficult to sort the sincere from the absurd. Passages of ‘methodical vagueness’ in their work appear to parody prescriptive, canonically-influenced modes of learning. Their focus on inventories and sequential tasks evokes translational ‘originals’ and ‘copies’, as if to leave their work open to future subversion. However, as I have argued in Chapter 1 of this study, the formulaic repetitions to be found on a larger scale in both authors’ *œuvres* appear as a form of self-reflexive branding. For two authors who have achieved a form of canonical status based on their recognisably stylised *œuvres*, can this ‘methodical vagueness’ really be said to challenge biases regarding which narratives are considered

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<sup>87</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 153.

<sup>88</sup> Roquet, p. 90.

<sup>89</sup> Kathleen Woodward, ‘Transitional Objects and the Isolate: Samuel Beckett’s “Malone Dies”’, *Contemporary Literature*, 26, 2 (1985), 140-154 (p. 142).

universal?<sup>90</sup> While Beckett's and Murakami's writing appears 'born-translated' in a manner arguably ahead of its time, at moments it replicates, rather than subverts, canonical bias.

## 5.2 '*Beautiful piano solo unfolds, like an ink painting in space*':<sup>91</sup> Beckett's and Murakami's Untranslatable Translations

*I admit that Stepside does look invented.*<sup>92</sup>

In Apter's *Against World Literature*, Beckett makes an unexpected appearance in a section on the Portuguese 'untranslatable' *saudade*. Apter includes direct reference to Beckett in connection with her term 'translating untranslatably',<sup>93</sup> noting the strangeness of his rendering of Rimbaud's 'The Drunken Boat.' She observes Beckett's translation of the phrase 'rutillements du jour' – translated by Louise Varèse as 'blaze of day' – as the decidedly more visceral 'sky's haemorrhage'.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, she notes the presence of the 'curious bricolaged term' 'arch-alcohol' in place of the phrase 'plus fortes que l'alcool', which would be more simply translated as 'stronger than alcohol'.<sup>95</sup> In Apter's view both terms, characterised by 'a kind of over-translation that embraces wild infidelity to the

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<sup>90</sup> Brouillette's elucidation of bias in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* is again useful here. She discusses the manner in which, for instance, 'English is more and more the global vernacular of literary fiction despite the fact that it is not the world's dominant first language.' In keeping with this, she describes the presence of a 'growing consensus' that 'celebrated postcolonial writers are most often those who are *literary* in a way recognizable to cosmopolitan audiences', audiences we can infer are accustomed to a kind of canonical Anglophone literature. Fascinatingly, Brouillette lists the features of this celebrated kind of postcolonial literature as including a predominance of formalism over realism, the realism eschewed – here she quotes Pascale Casanova – 'in all its forms and denominations – neonaturalist, picturesque, proletarian, socialist.' This would suggest a preference for slight stylisation or anti-realism in canonical narratives, a trend that appears interestingly significant when applied to Beckett's and Murakami's 'methodical vagueness.' (Brouillette, p. 59; Pascale Casanova, qtd. in Brouillette, p. 60.)

<sup>91</sup> Murakami, in Murakami and Ozawa, p. 64.

<sup>92</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Antoni Libera, 11 December 1980', p. 537.

<sup>93</sup> Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 146.

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Beckett and Louise Varèse, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Samuel Beckett and Arthur Rimbaud, qtd. in Apter, p. 146.



original and pushes the envelope of translatability’, nonetheless convey the poem’s ‘Rimbaldian deregulation of the senses’<sup>96</sup> in a manner somehow faithful to the original.

In brief, Beckett’s translations are imprecise, but *we know what he means*. Both neologisms can be said to ‘vague’ insofar as they move away from transmitting the poem’s original meaning, foregrounding the translator’s presence. Interestingly, the first example renders the term for ‘blaze’ or ‘reddening’ as a physical bloodiness; the second example’s incongruously employed intensifier rearranges the building blocks of Rimbaud’s sentence. In different ways, both examples show a preoccupation with literalisation and sentence construction, portraying translation as a process of mechanical substitution.

This second section of my argument will expose the manner in which Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘methodical vagueness’ can be seen as a way of ‘translating untranslatably.’ As we have seen with reference to the literalised seriality often displayed in ‘born-translated’ literature, both authors convey their experience through a language of household items and methodical tasks. Their worlds consist of curiously material units, imaginable in their concreteness yet conceivably capable of being replaced by culturally diverse alternatives. I will argue that the slight uncanniness of these reference-units preserves the text’s untranslatability. These defamiliarised objects, perhaps difficult to imagine in *any* culture, celebrate losses in translation as much as they attempt a form of naïve *lingua franca*.

Indeed, it is worth noting that despite Beckett’s apparent focus on the concrete and the visceral in the above translation, the knowledge that his language contains invented, customised, or otherwise ‘incorrect’ phrases undergirds his work with a spectral sense of doubt. Craig describes the ‘elation’ he felt stemming from Beckett’s invention of the

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<sup>96</sup> Apter, p. 147.

name ‘Sapocat’, discussing how he imagined this ‘alien construct’ being created ‘lovingly’ by the author, then ‘quietly lodged in the public domain, where no French reader [would] query it.’<sup>97</sup> Craig links this name to Beckett’s ‘whole (outsider’s) enterprise: creating in the space of French.’<sup>98</sup>

It is possible to observe a similar preoccupation with both literalisation and a kind of untranslatable absurdity in Murakami’s writing. Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* being a long novel, I will confine my discussion of ‘methodical vagueness’ to instances found specifically in its second chapter. This chapter in itself appears governed by cycles and routines. Its introductory role in the novel makes it a particularly apposite instance of the synecdochic employment of household tasks, as the growing distance between Toru and Kumiko is articulated by a disagreement over mundane domestic objects.

The chapter begins with a self-consciously abstract question: ‘Is it possible, in the final analysis, for one human being to achieve perfect understanding of another?’<sup>99</sup> This question encourages the reader to view the ensuing conversations, despite their initial mundanity, as shorthand for a pattern of miscommunication in Toru and Kumiko’s marriage. Already a kind of conceptual (mis)translation is foregrounded. What follows is a series of routines, meticulously described:

[...] I threw the laundry into the washing machine, made the bed, washed the dishes and vacuumed. Then, with the cat beside me, I sat on the veranda, checking the wanted ads and the items for sale. At noon I had lunch and went to the supermarket. There I bought food for dinner and, from a discount table, detergent, tissues and toilet paper (ibid.).

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<sup>97</sup> Craig, *Writing Beckett's Letters*, p. 14.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Murakami, *Wind-Up*, p. 24. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

Certain descriptions appear as detailed inventories of both spouses' respective routines, recounted with choreographic precision. Their actions are interwoven yet independent: 'I started cooking: turned on the gas, put oil in the wok. Kumiko took a beer from the refrigerator and a glass from the cupboard, did a quick inspection of the food I was about to cook, and sat at the kitchen table without a word'; '[w]hile I fried the meat and vegetables, Kumiko went to freshen up. I could hear her washing her face and brushing her teeth' (p. 26). Their conversation turns to lunar cycles and eclipses, as if to render this focus on routines more evident. These stellar connections are themselves described methodically: 'I lived on the earth, the earth revolved around the sun, and around the earth revolved the moon' (p. 28). In what seems a clichéd turn, Toru ascribes the couple's disagreement to the fact that 'it was about time for Kumiko's period' (ibid.), going on to ponder the variation between his past girlfriends' menstrual experiences: 'some were finished in three days, others took over a week, some were regular, others could be ten days late' (p. 29).

Crucially, the disagreement that unfolds between Kumiko and Toru is triggered by two sets of items: blue tissues and patterned toilet paper, shortly followed by beef and green peppers (pp. 26-27). The central conflict – by which Kumiko maintains she has always disliked these things and Toru insists he has never been aware of such aversions – is distilled to centre on what appear to be comically trivial items. Their presence is reiterated: '[s]he came out of the bathroom holding something. It was the toilet paper and tissues I had bought at the supermarket [...] I looked at the box of tissues and the package of toilet paper [...] 'But why did you have to buy *blue* tissues and *flower-pattern* toilet paper?' [...] 'Blue tissues are not going to turn your nose blue.' [...] 'I hate blue tissues and flower-pattern toilet paper' (p. 26). The beef and green peppers are the subject of repeated reference in a similar manner (p. 27). These mundane preferences are articulated

in the form of lists: Kumiko insists to Toru, ‘[y]ou hate telephone covers, and thermos bottles with flower decorations, and bell-bottom jeans with rivets, and me having my nails manicured (p. 26). Toru insists, ‘I don’t give a *damn* what color my tissues are. Ok, black I’d have trouble with, but white, blue – it just doesn’t matter. It’s the same with beef and green peppers. Together, apart – who cares?’ (Ibid.)

As in Walkowitz’s analysis of series, lists, clones and copies in Ishiguro, themes of relation and nonrelation are evoked: it is notable Kumiko has a specific aversion to green peppers and beef being cooked in the same pan. Her issue is not with the items in themselves, but rather the fact of their combination.<sup>100</sup> The triviality of these preferences is insisted on – as in Toru’s dismissive statements above – while their divisive power is implied nonetheless by the manner in which the conversation persists. Crucially, absurd analogies grow from this initially mundane exchange, as when Kumiko translates Toru’s repression into interestingly spatial terms: ‘Maybe you’ve got this deep well inside, and you shout into it, ‘The king’s got donkey’s ears!’ and then everything’s OK’ (p. 29).

Lacking a direct equivalent in their own culture, audiences could imagine alternative items to the flower-patterned toilet paper or the green peppers: these objects serve as placeholders. It is also perhaps worth considering that they relate to both eating and excreting, appearing almost wilfully employed as the vague units of a bodily *lingua franca*. On the other hand, the conversation between Toru and Kumiko is just slightly unimaginable and appears intended as, at least initially, humorous – a further example of the arbitrary conversations popular among Murakami characters.<sup>101</sup> It contains a crucial element of the absurd according to which it may seem ‘foreign’ to any audience. It is

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<sup>100</sup> ‘She shook her head. “I’ll eat green peppers in a salad. I’ll fry beef with onions. But I have never once cooked beef and green peppers together” (ibid.).

<sup>101</sup> Iwamoto, p. 298.

dialogue in the romcom tradition;<sup>102</sup> it is a conversation itself hinging on the untranslatable translation of affective processes into concrete terms.

Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* is a text informed by repetition and routine, in which there is a slight absurdity or unimaginable quality to the methodical tasks described. The text opens with a celestial point of reference: 'From where she lies she sees Venus rise.'<sup>103</sup> The fact that this first line is followed by the progression, '[o]n. From where she lies when the skies are clear she sees Venus rise followed by the sun' (ibid.), further intimates this sense of astronomical order. It is perhaps an obvious point that the woman's 'faint comings and goings' (p. 454) throughout the house mimic these phases in their repetition.

While taking place in vastly different settings, both *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Ill Seen Ill Said* frustratingly posit an essentialising connection between a woman's behaviour and the cycles of celestial bodies, even if neither connection is direct.<sup>104</sup> In both cases, a female character's actions are narrated by the uncomprehending or distant perspective of a male speaker. In *Ill Seen Ill Said* there are allusions to both cyclical temporality and stasis in lines such as, '[d]eath again of deathless day' (p. 463) and '[i]t will always be evening. Always winter' (p. 465), evoking the (non)relation I have observed in connection to both authors' 'methodical vagueness.' Such uncertain temporality evokes both interconnection and discreteness; similarly, the text appears to stage an inconsistent and dubious empathy.

The 'still shadowy' album promises to reveal memories, but the reader is not privy to them (p. 454). Certain objects in the text have the quality of placeholders: the woman rests her hands on 'some convenient support. Such as the foot of her bed' (p. 451). The

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<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey Melton, 'Romancing the American Dream: The Coen Brothers' *Raising Arizona*', *Studies in American Humor*, 3, 1 (2017), 1-21 (p. 3).

<sup>103</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 451. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

<sup>104</sup> The first chapter of this study registered doubt over the status of references such as 'Venus' as cultural markers, and the ambiguity of celestial bodies as 'placed' signifiers is again significant here. The constellations are both observable the world over and interpreted with vast difference in different cultures, similar to how 'eating' and 'excretion' qualify broadly as some form of common human experience yet are subject to a range of differing customs.

narrative voice appears aware of the provenance of certain objects but not others. The woman's dress is difficult to see – there is a '[s]uspicion of lace at the wrists' (p. 460) – and the greatcoat is speculated over, perhaps a 'man's by the buttons' (p. 464). The watcher sees 'the first hazy outlines of what possibly a hutch when suddenly enough' (p. 468). By contrast, it is stated with certainty that the slates on the roof are 'brought from a ruined mansion' (p. 464) – however, the reader is unsure how the speaker knows this. In many of these examples, a 'concrete' inventory of the woman's compulsive movement is interrupted by rifts in the narrative's omniscience.

Objects are mentioned in list-like groups – such as the 'stockings', 'boots' and 'buttonhook' – but they do not behave exactly as objects are expected to: the buttonhook's '[t]rembling imperceptibly without cease' interrupts a mundane inventory with haunted personification (p. 455). 'The pallet. The chair. The coffer. The trap' are listed methodically; in another intimation of grouping or seriality, the scrap of paper is ripped up '[i]n two. Four. Eight' (p. 468). There is thus the sense that an experience has been translated into groups of 'concrete' terms; however, these terms themselves have a fungible quality. The objects seem protean, perhaps most obviously in the case of the curtain/greatcoat.<sup>105</sup> Arguably, these concrete yet absurd serialised actions are a way for the text to 'translate untranslatably.'

The text draws attention to its own grammatical structure, in keeping with its obsessively redrawn spatial parameters. Its ambiguous temporality – is the woman trapped in a purgatorial stillness or animated by celestial cycles? – is mirrored by grammatical anomalies such as '[f]orthwith the uncommon common noun collapsion' and incongruous wordplay such as '[t]o scrute together with the inscrutable face' (p. 469).

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<sup>105</sup> Nugent-Folan, p. 68.

Beckett's work is, of course, occupied on a broader scale with the question of untranslatability. His unexplained cultural markers themselves appear to hint at an awareness of future misunderstanding. It is worth considering, again, his explanation to Polish translator Antoni Libera that the names of places and individuals in *Company* have no hidden meaning, conceding 'that Stepside does look invented.'<sup>106</sup> On one hand, it appears that the arbitrary nature of these names encourages substitution; however, their lack of symbolism may arguably make finding an appropriately random equivalent more difficult. Both authors face a problem by which the quirks of their deliberately 'translationese' prose may be erased when rendered completely in their 'second' language: there is something already 'untranslatable' about their composite style. Beckett arguably finds his way around this issue in instances such as the reference to Glasnevin in *Malone Meurt*,<sup>107</sup> an example of a French rendering which contains more Irish specificity than its English version. While Murakami said in 1989 that he wrote in a manner suited to translation,<sup>108</sup> his work just as often displays a similar preoccupation with the untranslatable. Paraphrasing Rubin's observations, Motoyuki Shibata states that the English expression 'a bed of roses', which appears 'refreshing when literally translated and embedded into Murakami's original Japanese text, becomes nothing but a worn-out cliché again if it is translated 'back' into English.'<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Matthew Richard Chozick notes that Murakami's fiction appears 'almost universally "foreign," while at the same time universally accessible': his characters are 'Japanese with non-Japanese names – such as Cinnamon, Nutmeg, and Malta.'<sup>110</sup> Murakami's unusual use of the *katakana* script, typically employed in relation to foreign loan-words, is carried out with 'vagueness' in

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<sup>106</sup> Beckett, 'Letter to Antoni Libera, 11 December 1980', p. 537.

<sup>107</sup> Beckett, *Malone meurt*, p. 143.

<sup>108</sup> Zielinska-Elliott and Kaminka, p. 179.

<sup>109</sup> Motoyuki Shibata, 'Lost and Found: On the Japanese Translations of Kazuo Ishiguro', *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 46-53 (p. 47).

<sup>110</sup> Matthew Richard Chozick, 'De-Exoticizing Haruki Murakami's Reception', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 45, 1 (2008), 62-73 (p. 63).

mind. He states, '[i]f I put the name in *katakana*, it's more anonymous [...] It's just the same thing Franz Kafka did in *The Trial* with K. If the name of the character is K, it could be anybody. It could be *you*. It could be *me*.'<sup>111</sup> Rather than specifying place and era, these stylistic decisions appear to occasionally allow the text to diverge from realism, as if in an attempt to create an aesthetics of miscommunication that bridges cultural divides. While Murakami uses the formal I-pronoun *watashi* for the 'Hard-Boiled Wonderland' chapters of the eponymous novel, and the more casual *boku* for the 'End of the World' chapters, Birnbaum and Luke rendered this difference through a change in tense, with the present tense making the latter chapters appear, according to their rationale, more timeless.<sup>112</sup> These 'untranslatable translations' seem connected to the stylisation discussed in this study's first chapter, and they occasionally appear undertaken in a manner mindful of unrealistic and inaccurate portrayal. In both authors' cases, it is as though the self-translator's position between cultures makes them more aware of the content vulnerable to loss in translation.

Apter makes specific reference to Beckett's Rimbaud translation in connection with the idea of 'translating untranslatably'; however, I would like to extrapolate from this instance in order to observe that Beckett's and Murakami's fungible references create pervasive sequences of 'untranslatable translations.' The household triviality of their repeated items raises the question of equivalency while rendering their worlds defamiliarised and uncanny. Such strange lists evoke both relation and disconnect in a manner that parallels the uncertain and limited perspective-taking staged in the texts.

Something about this internationally substitutable quality appears, in simple terms, to have proved popular. Yasunari Takahashi adapted *Waiting For Godot* to Noh theatre

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<sup>111</sup> Haruki Murakami, in Ellis et al., p. 562.

<sup>112</sup> Karashima, pp. 69-70.



conventions;<sup>113</sup> in Ilan Ronen's *Godot*, Pozzo speaks Hebrew while Vladimir and Estragon converse in Palestinian Arabic.<sup>114</sup> Aatur Rahman, director of a Bangladeshi production of *Godot*, substituted a papaya for a turnip, probably, Shaheen M. Mahmood notes, 'because turnips were not in season.'<sup>115</sup> Enoch Brater suggests that in *Godot* 'there was always precious little to get rid of', as the objects on stage are 'junk, the generic detritus of a world that might be found and that could be found – give or take a carrot or two – almost anywhere.'<sup>116</sup>

Murakami's works arguably begin, self-reflexively, at this point of international substitution. References to a form of European 'high culture' in Murakami's work are frequently incorporated into the texts in a deliberately arbitrary and absurd manner, transposed to otherwise dreamlike contexts. The protagonist of *Hear the Wind Sing* quotes Kant<sup>117</sup> while conversing with imaginary twins; close to the beginning of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, one character mouths the word 'Proust' to the other in a manner that Rubin notes as particularly absurd.<sup>118</sup> ('[T]ry reading the single word "Proust" on anybody's lips,' he challenges, 'outside of any context, and more especially in the Japanese pronunciation, "*Purūsuto!*"'<sup>119</sup>) Elsewhere, works such as Murakami's 'Dabchick'<sup>120</sup>, named after a non-existent being, set out to be misrecognised.

Murakami himself contributes to some of this ambiguity. When translating *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, Birnbaum and Luke asked Murakami whether the animals named 'cyntetokerus' and 'curanokerus' were inventions, and how such terms should be rendered. Granted, these references are unusual in that they are niche terms as opposed to

<sup>113</sup> Enoch Brater, 'The Globalization of Beckett's "Godot"', *Comparative Drama*, 37, 2 (2003), 145-158 (p. 148).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>115</sup> Shaheen M. Mahmood, 'Beckett in Bangladesh', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 2 (1993), 59-66 (p. 64).

<sup>116</sup> Brater, p. 151.

<sup>117</sup> Murakami, *Wind/Pinball*, p. 88.

<sup>118</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Rubin, p. 119.

<sup>119</sup> Rubin, p. 119.

<sup>120</sup> 'Like "A Poor-Aunt Story", "Dabchick" requires a small warning. The original title, "Kaitsuburi", is a word that means as little to the typical Japanese reader as "Dabchick" means to most readers in English.' (*Ibid.*, p. 67.)

catch-all allusions; however, crucially, they proved replaceable or revisable. Murakami confirmed that he had not invented the terms, but told his colleagues, ‘you can do anything with regard to those miserable creatures. I don’t care at all.’<sup>121</sup> This case – one of translators being expressly granted licence to substitute or amend an already unusual term – seems to showcase this sense of surreal fungibility in Murakami’s texts.

Beckett’s and Murakami’s household tasks, carried out with language-primer simplicity, contribute to such texts appearing ‘foreign’ in every language. The fungible quality of these physical tasks is mirrored strikingly in the authors’ employment of cultural references that appear to anticipate their future translated equivalents. Such traits in both authors’ work can be read in terms of Apter’s idea of ‘translating untranslatably.’ However, many elements of Apter’s *Against World Literature* provide counterarguments to a straightforward view of Beckett’s and Murakami’s writing as internationally applicable.

For one, Apter expresses a distrust of the manner in which ‘the keyword “translation” is broadly applied as a metaphor for non- or extra-linguistic transference, migration, and the traffic in information, things, and commodities. Generally,’ she states, ‘I find it worrisome when translation is used so loosely.’<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the view developed in this section of Beckett’s and Murakami’s material references as ‘untranslatable translations’ rests on the presupposition that a ‘thing’ can be, in some ways, a translation; similarly, this argument assumes that the idea of a ‘reference’ itself encompasses a broad range of terms. Hence, in this mindset, a ‘reference’ can be a pebble or a Rossini opera. Additionally, my proposed theory of ‘methodical vagueness’ suggests that it is not so much the ‘things’ themselves being analysed, but rather their participation in something akin to the actions Apter refers to as ‘migration’ or ‘traffic in information, things, and

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<sup>121</sup> Haruki Murakami, qtd. in Karashima, p. 71.

<sup>122</sup> Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 102.

commodities.<sup>123</sup> While Walkowitz may state that ‘born-translated’ novels draw attention to their own construction through depicting this migratory ‘traffic in things’, Apter asks to specify the act of translation.

Apter also cautions against the manner in which ‘translation studies has flaccidly appropriated metaphors of border-crossing’.<sup>124</sup> The range of media Apter cites tends to be concerned with strikingly literal borders: a photograph by Emily Jacir of ‘a Marlboro ad in the West Bank floating above Israeli tanks on a Palestinian street’, thus using a technique ‘of inserting visual checkpoints and language barriers into public spaces where they are least expected’;<sup>125</sup> Eyal Weizman’s discussion, in *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*, of court proceedings in which a model of a security wall, planned to divide Jerusalem farmland, was referred to as a ‘translation’.<sup>126</sup>

Apter’s *Against World Literature* clarifies the distinction between literal and conceptual translation, the latter being itself an imaginary broadening of the translation encounter to include more vague forms of cross-cultural *flânerie*. While this section has explored the manner in which Beckett and Murakami ‘translate untranslatably’, Apter’s observation of the appropriative language of translation studies keeps in view the fact that not all ‘untranslatables’ are the same.

A common thread emerging throughout this comparison is the act of imagining. Contemporary debates over the primacy of lived experience in fiction are often refuted by claims of the author’s right to ‘imagine’ narratives different from their own;<sup>127</sup> such

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>127</sup> This idea is summarised, albeit in the specific context of YA literature, in *Refinery29*’s article ‘What Is #OwnVoices Doing To Our Books?’ Kat Rosenfeld states, ‘[t]aken to its logical conclusion, this approach to storytelling will set strict and claustrophobic limits on imagination, confining authors according to an ever-narrowing concept of which identities, settings, or narratives are their “own.” But there’s still time for the industry to course-correct, not by sacrificing its focus on diversity, but by relinquishing its stranglehold on the stories themselves.’ A related argument is set out in Layla AlAmmar’s article for *The Guardian*, ‘Are novelists obliged to tell the story of their private life?’, which discusses lived experience of trauma in fiction. While this latter article focuses on authors who *do* have lived experience of their subject matter, AlAmmar discusses the pressure on such authors to disclose traumatic experiences in response to online criticism. Both articles centre on expectations of authenticity in fiction; crucially, many of the individuals discussed are emerging writers from underrepresented or minority backgrounds. Notably, both articles are concerned with cases in which demands for fiction prioritising lived experience have led to underrepresented authors themselves being criticised or discouraged. By contrast,

arguments may hold little weight in contexts where the author's 'imaginings' are poorly researched or exoticising. Both Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* stage acts of incomplete empathy. Both, for instance, presuppose gulfs of incomprehension around gender difference; both employ household tasks and uncertainly demarcated 'homes' as culturally translatable settings, despite the variation in experiences of 'home' on a global scale. Both write in a sparse manner that signals an implicit inflexibility towards diverse reinterpretation, at the same time as their literalised motifs seem to anticipate translation and subversion. It is perhaps apposite, at this juncture, to turn to questions of empathic reading with relation to Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, in order to further discuss the limits of 'methodical vagueness.'

### 5.3 'Vaguened' Collectivities: Beckett's and Murakami's 'Planetary' Perspectives

*I sense vague shadowy shapes [...] they come and go with muffled cries.*<sup>128</sup>

In Spivak's analysis of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the former appears to both commend and critique the 'vagueness' carried out in this modernist text. Indeed, the European works Spivak chooses for analysis in her *Death of a Discipline* convey what she calls 'undecidability between Europe and its other, in sexual difference; and

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criticism of John Boyne's engagement with transgender experience in his novel *My Brother's Name Is Jessica* reflects similar issues of lived versus imagined experience in the case of a more established LGBTQ+ author, where the author's portrayal has been considered irresponsibly under-researched. (Kat Rosenfeld, 'What Is #OwnVoices Doing To Our Books' (2019) <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/04/228847/own-voices-movement-va-literature-impact> [Accessed 14 December 2020]; Layla AlAmmar, 'Are novelists obliged to tell the story of their private life?' (2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/02/are-novelists-obliged-to-tell-the-story-of-their-private-life> [Accessed 14 December 2020], Mark Brown, 'John Boyne hits back at critics of transgender novel' (2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/31/john-boyne-hits-back-at-critics-of-transgender-novel> [Accessed 14 December 2020].)

<sup>128</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 392; *Mercier and Camier*.

undecidability between the human and its other.<sup>129</sup> She explains that in this study she has chosen ‘difficult, even mysterious texts’ that ‘stage the question of collectivity.’<sup>130</sup> In short, Spivak stresses the importance of literature that variously asks ‘[w]ho are we?’<sup>131</sup> and ‘[h]ow many are we?’<sup>132</sup> to the development of a new comparative literature.

As we have seen so far, Beckett’s and Murakami’s texts are uncertain in their address; they likewise appear ambivalently linked to their places of origin in a manner that problematises neat notions of source and target audience. Such texts can be read as staging, if imperfectly, various acts of imagining directed towards an ‘ill seen’ other. The final section of this chapter will attempt to analyse such imperfect imaginings in their capacity to render a work internationally popular. I will demonstrate that, crucially, the uncertain gestures towards otherness made in these texts appear to locate them distinctively in their mid- to late- twentieth century context, linking them to a problematic temporal window in which diversifications of Eurocentric canonicity appeared achievable yet remained, in such cases, largely unrealised.

Spivak’s analysis of Woolf to demonstrate such questioning of collectivity is thus relevant to this discussion of ‘vague’ yet Eurocentrically-influenced texts. Spivak emphasises the reserve in Woolf’s statement, ‘[t]he truth is, I often like women’, stating that her use of ‘often’ rather than ‘always’ is ‘an incredibly important detail about political collectivities’.<sup>133</sup> She notes the instability of narrative voice Woolf employs, observing that the essay begins with a ‘nameless’ first person narrator who is later ‘indirectly given the name Mary Beton’ when she mentions her aunt and namesake.<sup>134</sup> Woolf’s text, in Spivak’s view, signals the ‘impossibility of offering a lecture about the

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<sup>129</sup> Spivak, *Death*, p. 26.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>133</sup> Virginia Woolf, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>134</sup> Spivak, *Death*, p. 40.

true nature of women and the true nature of fiction'.<sup>135</sup> In Woolf's changing voice, '[a] deliberate projection of a collectivity in one name – even a fictive name – is staged as fizzling out.'<sup>136</sup> Such examples illustrate Woolf's *aporia* around defining the 'collectivity' of women to whom she speaks. Similarly, there is a kind of 'positive vagueness' in the conclusion Spivak draws from what she calls Woolf's 'mysterious imaginative undertaking'.<sup>137</sup> She discusses Woolf's wish to be 'haunted' by the ghost of the female writer, Shakespeare's sister, as a means of being 'othered by her, unanticipatably.'<sup>138</sup>

Something like a Spivakian critique of Beckett's and Murakami's texts can be carried out if a similar critical mindset to that of the Woolf reading is assumed. First and foremost, both authors' narrative instability can be considered pluralistic in its scope, displaying an aporetic perspective similar to the 'self-provincialising' discussed earlier in the context of 'born-translated' writing. Contrary to the manner in which their work has been taken to articulate a catch-all or default perspective, Beckett's and Murakami's 'vagueness' can conversely be read as signalling a reluctance to claim one's experience as universal. Critique of their 'vagueness' becomes more interesting when we consider Spivak's use of the term 'planetary' as an alternative to globalisation, the latter being 'the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere.'<sup>139</sup> 'Planetary' defamiliarises the space of the globe, considering its 'alterity' and the manner in which it 'belong[s] to another system': we are therefore inhabiting it 'on loan'.<sup>140</sup> Beckett's and Murakami's defamiliarised 'methodical vagueness' can be connected with this 'planetary' view.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

Chapter 3 has already explored the role of the uncanny in Beckett's and Murakami's 'vaguened' spaces. With relation to Spivak's 'planetary', Toth observes that a certain kind of literary defamiliarisation is linked to the (mis)translation encounter. Toth explains that Spivak uses the term 'teleopoiesis' to convey an act of 'imaginative making', signalling the 'spatio-temporal distance between producer and processes of production on the one hand, and product on the other hand', while nonetheless 'leaving indeterminacies intact.'<sup>141</sup> In Spivak's words, teleopoiesis involves 'looking for our definition in the eyes of the other, as figured in the text.'<sup>142</sup> This form of delayed, distant (mis)imagining appears applicable in Beckett's and Murakami's cases. Both authors' texts seem to contact the reader across a gulf, in a manner that *appears* to render the question of target audience irrelevant; both authors, as we have seen, employ oscillating narrative perspectives. Spivak's term, Toth notes, is itself an 'estranging' modified translation, borrowed from Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*.<sup>143</sup> Toth compares its use to Victor Shklovsky's '*ostranenie*', an 'unintentional neologism' which Toth notes has been described as calling 'attention to [its own] mediation': it has been translated as the self-reflexively wrong '*enstrangement*'.<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, Nihei's study on Murakami uses a comparison with Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation as its point of departure.<sup>145</sup>

Beckett's and Murakami's 'methodical vagueness' can thus be read as a demonstration of this translation-informed uncanny. Such basic yet vaguely 'e(n)stranged' actions stage an awkward and literalised form of imagining, asking the reader to contemplate whether such inventories adequately 'translate.'

If Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* begins with a relationship's disintegration, the earlier *A Wild Sheep Chase* opens on a marriage's aftermath. As

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<sup>141</sup> Toth, p. 461.

<sup>142</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, qtd. in Toth, p. 462.

<sup>143</sup> Toth, p. 461.

<sup>144</sup> Victor Shklovsky, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Nihei, p. 1.

Chapter 2 noted, Boku's apartment is uncanny, appearing recently divested of its homely connotations. Methodical actions occupy him during a halting conversation: 'The water came to a boil. I shut off the gas, let the water cool thirty seconds, poured it over the coffee.'<sup>146</sup> The novel has opened on an obituary, narrated as a list of details: 'The date, a street corner, a person driving a truck, a pedestrian, a casualty, an investigation of possible negligence' (p. 3). The narrator's drunken walking down his hallway, previously discussed, is rendered as an exact science reducible to 'sixteen steps' (p. 13). Elsewhere in the novel, the Rat describes his relationships with women – offputtingly – in terms of household objects. 'Each woman has a drawer marked "beautiful," stuffed full of all sorts of meaningless junk. That's my specialty. I pull out those pieces of junk one by one, dust them off, and find some kind of meaning in them' (p. 82). This statement is followed shortly by a foregrounding of the editing process, as the Rat mentions he has just re-read his own letter so far, noting inconsistencies (ibid.).

Such uncanny inventories are supplemented by more literal instances of self-examination from the perspective of an imagined, occasionally alien other. Boku's dream featuring a talking cow and an attempt to trade an electric fan for a pair of pliers spirals into narratorial musings on a fanciful economy based on objects divorced from their usual functions.

I ask the cow, "Why do you want pliers?" And the cow answers, "I'm really hungry." So I ask, "Why do you need pliers if you're hungry?" The cow answers, "To attach them to branches of the peach tree." I ask, "Why a peach tree?" To which the cow replies, "Well, that's why I traded away my fan, isn't it?" And so on and so forth (p. 67).

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<sup>146</sup> Murakami, *Sheep Chase*, p. 15. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.



This passage explicitly demonstrates the act of imagining an alternate world in which activities are vaguely familiar yet present in alien combinations. The cow's tasks are difficult to understand, partially because they assume prior complicity with an unexplained dream-logic. However, its manner of trading in objects is broadly familiar and understandable from a human perspective. Crucially, the sequence of dream-tasks is laid out methodically: each action leads to the next, even if their exact causal links appear unclear.

Later, the protagonist imagines an encounter with aliens in which none of the references that may lend him credibility as a human have their usual value. This is a throwaway statement, delivered as part of a series of observations on how little it is possible to know (pp. 125-126). His listing of cultural markers, however, is specific and methodical: 'I've read *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *The Brothers Karamazov* three times through. I've even read *Ideologie Germanica* once. I can even recite the value of *pi* to sixteen places. Would I still be a joke? Probably. They'd laugh their alien heads off' (p. 126). In this Beckettian sequence, a series of details is enumerated only to be negated in the final statement. Another such methodical reference list ends in a similar, curious negation: 'At my neighborhood dive, I drank a beer while listening to the latest Brothers Johnson record. I ate my chicken cutlet while listening to a Bill Withers record. I had some coffee while listening to Maynard Ferguson's *Star Wars*.' And after all that, I felt as if I'd hardly eaten anything' (p. 146). This latter quotation recalls Walkowitz's discussion of how Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* draws attention to processes of consumption both literal and artistic.

In these cases, the references themselves take the place of the methodical actions usually outlined in Murakami's list-paragraphs, suggesting that these cultural markers too have a fungible quality. The idea that none of Boku's arbiters of intelligence would mean

anything to an alien evokes both the possibility of non-relation as well as relation through substitutable references. Such doubt over the ‘universal’ accessibility of certain cultural markers links in, once more, with Walkowitz’s idea of self-provincialisation. It also, rather explicitly, involves the act of imagining one’s world and frame of reference in a defamiliarised manner, from the perspective of an alien other. This means of viewing the world at a distance recalls Spivak’s ‘planetarity’ and consequent emphasis of the uncanny in translational contexts. Boku appears aware that, despite all of his cultural knowledge, he is nonetheless inhabiting a world on loan.

A brief clarification is perhaps necessary, at this juncture, regarding the view of these examples as an imagined staging of cross-cultural connection. Needless to say, viewing these fanciful nonhuman encounters as metaphors for translational imagining implies an objectifying view of the ‘other’ culture as animal or alien.<sup>147</sup> However, it equally seems remiss not to mention such hypothetical tangents on Boku’s part, as they appear consistent with his character. The musings quoted above align with a broader sense of the novel viewing the world insistently from without, as when Boku, the ear model and the chauffeur discuss the differing practices around assigning names to ships, aeroplanes, and train stations (p. 154). These musings appear indicative of Boku’s difficulties imagining the motivations of others, despite possessing what appears to be a well-intentioned curiosity about the world. In a manner that recalls Spivak’s idea of being othered ‘unanticipatably’,<sup>148</sup> Boku’s attempts to imagine himself in unfamiliar contexts appear absurd, characterised by misunderstandings and unknowns.

Beckett’s *Mercier and Camier* begins from a similarly ‘on loan’ perspective. Helen’s apartment, as we have seen, appears both familiar and strange to the

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<sup>147</sup> This view is, of course, complicated by the fact that even human characters ‘native’ to the novel’s universe, such as the Rat and the Sheepman, are labelled in curiously animal terms.

<sup>148</sup> Spivak, *Death*, p. 50.

protagonists.<sup>149</sup> While the reader is told that Mercier and Camier ‘did not remove from home’, their journey is described in grandiose terms, ‘driven by a need now clear and now obscure’ (p. 383). Their exploration of what is apparently their ‘native’ land may appear an incongruous addition to this chapter, a series of comparisons mainly set in interior spaces. After all, this last novel takes place largely out of doors. However, descriptions that make use of a form of ‘methodical vagueness’ are frequent throughout the text, to the extent that the protagonists’ logistical quandaries themselves enact a form of confinement throughout their journey.

Mercier and Camier’s mistimed arrivals at the ‘appointed place’ are listed in a methodical manner, soon followed by the dismissal, ‘[w]hat stink of artifice’ (p. 384). Their memories of a recent conversation differ, and their plans for their journey appear grounded in a farcical, vaguely unimaginable materiality. Division of tasks is torturous:

1. Mercier would set off alone, awheel, with the raincoat. Wherever he should stop for the night, at the first stage, he would get in all readiness to receive Camier. Camier would take the road as soon as the weather permitted. Camier would keep the umbrella. No mention of the sack (p. 392).

These objects are cited as units of dialogue. ‘The sack, said Mercier. The umbrella, said Camier. The raincoat, said Mercier’ (p. 393). Mercier lists the bicycle in terms that catalogue its various absences. It is ‘relieved of both wheels, the saddle, the bell and the carrier. And the tail light, he added, I nearly forgot’ (p. 448). There is something imaginable but culturally interchangeable about their activity, as the journey is left vague enough so as to be for any number of purposes.

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<sup>149</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 401. For the duration of this section, page-number references to this primary work will be listed in the main body of the text.

In addition to the limiting or claustrophobic nature of these logistics, Mercier and Camier often appear cut off from their surroundings even as they journey out of doors. As the park closes at the end of the first chapter, Camier makes the curious observation, ‘I sense vague shadowy shapes [...] they come and go with muffled cries’ (p. 392). The crowd in the bar are described in homogenous terms as ‘[a] press of sombre shaggy bulks’ (p. 397). The novel’s inns and pubs form an inventory of temporary accommodation, as the protagonists navigate their surroundings with a mixture of habit and unpredictability. ‘Where do our feet think they’re taking us?’ said Camier. They would seem to be heading for the canal, said Mercier’ (p. 395). At certain points their quest appears urgent rather than leisurely: ‘if we don’t leave this town today we never shall’ (p. 401). Elsewhere, it is referred to as ‘the goal they had assigned themselves’ (p. 436), a description that appears to contain more ambivalent and cryptic connotations.

Their pasts are simultaneously suggested and negated, as in the troubling scene in which two children address Mercier as ‘papa’. He responds, ‘[g]ood evening, my children,’ before dismissing them in a sudden rage (p. 403). He is subsequently referred to, with further ambiguity, as ‘him they had addressed as papa’ (ibid.). Conversely, the man in Messrs. Clappe and Sons greets them as if for the first time, despite the fact that he has hitherto ‘been haunting’ Mercier in visions (p. 413). The barman plays along with the pair’s nonsensical request of ‘a button-fish salad’ or a ‘hopper sandwich’ as ‘[h]e had heard it was better to humour them’ (p. 415). These reference-units, flippantly applied, seem to indicate an invented alterity. *Mercier and Camier* appears to repeatedly stage the questions, ‘[w]ho are we?’<sup>150</sup> and ‘[h]ow many are we?’<sup>151</sup> albeit doing so in a manner that highlights failures in understanding.

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<sup>150</sup> Spivak, *Death*, p. 25.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

This juxtaposition of familiarity and unfamiliarity is perhaps most evident when Mercier and Camier do not greet each other upon meeting at the novel's end, leading Watt to deduce, 'I see you have met before' (p. 469). Names appear to defamiliarise rather than link and identify: when Mercier hears the phrase '[u]p Quin', Camier concludes: 'That must be someone who does not exist' (p. 475). The text conveys extremes of both 'relation' and 'nonrelation': while they appear disconnected from their surroundings and occasionally even each other, the plot is nonetheless sustained by what Rebecca Sanchez refers to as Mercier and Camier's 'interdependency.'<sup>152</sup> In a manner apposite to the questions of collectivity Spivak raises, actions and objects are relentlessly grouped and inventoried despite their place in a novel of tenuous connections. It is perhaps apposite to end on a moving expression of this final idea, when a gesture of intimacy between the protagonists is itself broken down into constituent parts. 'The hands fumbled for one another beneath the table, found one another, clasped one another, one small between two big, one big between two small' (p. 446).

However, the question remains – do readings of these texts according to a form of Spivak's 'planetary' rely on a wilful disregard of context? Spivak's study of comparative literature argues specifically for inclusion of the global South in academic curricula, albeit emphasising the intercultural fluidity underpinning literary markets.<sup>153</sup> It can thus be argued that Beckett's and Murakami's texts are simply not the kind of internationally disseminated writing Spivak means to highlight in her discussion of 'planetary', informed as her perspective is by the need to disturb Eurocentric or 'Western'-influenced bias. Elements of a reading of Beckett and Murakami in Spivak's

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<sup>152</sup> Sanchez, pp. 59-70.

<sup>153</sup> 'The notion, for example, that the world can be divided into knowable, self-contained "areas" has come into question as more attention has been paid to movements between areas. Demographic shifts, diasporas, labor migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization have encouraged a more subtle and sensitive reading of areas' identity and composition [...] Whatever our view of what we do, we are made by the forces of people moving about the world.' (Spivak, *Death*, p. 3.)

terms, nonetheless, appear oddly consistent with the type of literature she often chooses for analysis. Toth emphasises that Spivak's pedagogical fieldwork involves teaching children texts including Tagore, Coetzee, and Shakespeare, 'drawing on particularly prestigious texts and performing accordingly prestigious readings of them.'<sup>154</sup> While there is much to admire in Spivak's theory of 'planetarity', this thesis will now open on to a discussion of the limits of such a reading itself.

Toth argues that Spivak's work 'does not enable but rather forecloses the experience of literariness and its associated ethics and politics.'<sup>155</sup> Among the limits she discusses to Spivak's theory is the fact that 'the ethics of reading, as a response to literariness or *en*strangement, is socio-historically and experientially particular.'<sup>156</sup> Ideas of 'default' and 'universal' narratives are returned to here. In Toth's words, 'we must be mindful that, though we read for the planet, we continue to inhabit the world – a world in which capital of all kinds is unevenly distributed.'<sup>157</sup> Interestingly, Toth proposes the 'provincialization and de-professionalization of ourselves and our work'<sup>158</sup> with relation to existing biases around reading – noting international differences in modes of literary consumption. This includes, for instance, the fact that the boundaries between fiction and reference novels in Zambian literary markets are different to those as demarcated by European conventions.<sup>159</sup>

Interestingly, the term 'provincialisation' recurs throughout the discussions in this chapter, highlighting the need to undermine dominant or unquestioningly 'global' literary 'vaguening.' Again, the link to Walkowitz is apparent, not due to her use of this term alone but with reference to her discussion of the limits of reading on a greater scale. As

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<sup>154</sup> Toth, p. 471.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 459.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 474.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

discussed in Chapter 4 of this study, Walkowitz examines Kincaid's *œuvre* with reference to its exposure of the unequal distribution of literacy. While the latter's novels make use of their own form of 'methodical vagueness,' drawing, as Walkowitz notes, on themes of circulation and legacy, novels such as *Mr. Potter* appear uneasy in their use of literature to highlight illiteracy. As Walkowitz notes, the novel 'measures the distance between the characters' language and the narrator's language' in a manner that 'narrates the gaps.'<sup>160</sup> This style conveys something like a reappropriation of Beckettian *aporia* in its methodical and repetitive awareness of the divides between written and non-written narrative: Kincaid writes in the knowledge that not everyone can.<sup>161</sup>

This chapter's final employment of Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* has attempted to reprise some of these issues, concerned as her study is with the limits of literacy at the same time as it espouses the theory of a limitless and undivided 'planetary' literature.<sup>162</sup> Beckett's and Murakami's 'methodical vagueness' evokes boundedness in its obsession with grouped and circulating objects. On the other hand, their uncanny worlds appear to render everywhere equally 'foreign', by extension perhaps drawing attention to the divisive gatekeeping implicated in the demarcation of a 'dominant' literature. By ending this thesis, hitherto largely concerned with conceptual literary 'vaguening's', on such critique of Spivak's pedagogy, this chapter hopes to provide more literal examples of 'gaps' and 'lacunae' as regards to the unequal circulation and distribution of 'peripheral' literatures.

While this chapter may appear to have produced more arguments against Spivak's text than it has against those of Walkowitz and Apter, *Death of a Discipline* is also to be

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<sup>160</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 179.

<sup>161</sup> 'Mr. Potter adds a new dimension to the project of aggravating readers by treating them, first of all, as readers. This means insisting that any global approach to a novel about Antigua will have to acknowledge the conditions of its own production, circulation, and reception: the fact that some people can read and write a novel, and others, including the eponymous character, cannot; and the fact that the novel will have several beginnings, understood narratively, diegetically, physically, and geopolitically.' (Ibid., p. 188.)

<sup>162</sup> 'Planetary', in Spivak's view, considers the globe as an 'undivided natural space' instead of a 'differentiated political space'. (Spivak, *Death*, p. 72.)

considered here as something of a driving force in the conclusion of this chapter and, furthermore, as a companion to the findings of this thesis as a whole. Toth notes that Spivak's concept of 'planetary' 'locates itself between the text and the world.'<sup>163</sup> While Spivak's focus is informed by practical issues of pedagogy, to an extent all three theories of internationally disseminated literature explored in this concluding chapter negotiate this difficult balance between 'text' and 'world' to varying degrees. A common thread between all three is perhaps that they negotiate a crucial tension, namely the pressure to accommodate cultural multiplicity via the subjective and biased practice of fiction.

Walkowitz's discussion of 'born-translated' literature reflects a rapidly changing, increasingly online global literary market, with its attendant inequalities. By drawing attention to the practice of 'translating untranslatably', Apter investigates how authors can acknowledge the diversity of multilingual experience without advancing a standardised system of literary value. Spivak explores texts that stage an imaginative and defamiliarised understanding of the world. Finally, my own preliminary analysis of 'vaguened' literature – along with my research into alternative and subversive 'vaguening' – draws attention to the boundedness and opacity of Beckett's and Murakami's cross-cultural imaginings. Both authors' 'methodical vagueness' can be read as an imperfect effort to establish startling windows of connection between 'text' and 'world.' In their jarring materiality, Beckett's and Murakami's objects appear as portals of cultural context in otherwise 'vaguened' landscapes. According to an optimistic reading, their frustrated repetitions appear to signal a drive towards intercultural connection: questioning the limits of their individual perspective, aware there is still much work to do.

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<sup>163</sup> Toth, p. 460.



## 5.4 Chapter Conclusion: Imaginative Failures and the Uncanny Canon

Cool and detached as it may seem, the ‘vaguened’ text appears to require the extension of empathy by both writer and reader. John and Beryl Fletcher’s editorial indications of Beckett’s ‘original intention’ in their edition of *Fin de Partie* were justified on the basis that, ‘in pruning his work Beckett undoubtedly improved it, but sometimes compressed things so drastically that the surviving statement is somewhat obscure’.<sup>164</sup> Pountney, on the other hand, argued that such explicatory editorial processes ‘may have a destructive effect on the text’, and that Beckett’s elimination of specifics ‘free[d] the plays from limiting identifications. *This* is his intention.’<sup>165</sup> It is fascinating to consider these two critical approaches to ‘vaguening.’ Do we understand ‘vaguening’ as an editorial strategy, occasionally motivated by concealment, or do we consider the ‘vaguened’ draft itself as the authoritative version of the text? Van Hulle perceptively notes that ‘[t]he wish to know an author’s intentions can be a form of empathy, a basic human quality without which literature would perhaps not even exist.’<sup>166</sup> ‘Vaguening’ provokes us to seek more information, to determine the context of a story’s inception, and to uncover the politics informing a text, no matter how tenuous such traces may seem.

This study’s introduction noted that ‘vaguening’ appears marked by divisive complexity at each stage of the writing process. If opinions differ on how a ‘vaguened’ text should be read at the composition stage, how such texts are received in their final form presents further ambiguities. The kind of ‘vaguening’ for which Beckett and Murakami have been criticised in this study can be read as predicated on a form of flawed or failed empathy. The author, if naïvely, may try to articulate an experience that will

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<sup>164</sup> John and Beryl Fletcher, qtd. in Van Hulle, p. 39.

<sup>165</sup> Rosemary Pountney, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>166</sup> Van Hulle, p. 39.

resonate with many. In turn, the audience may attempt to fill in the gaps in this ‘universalised’ text, supplementing their understanding with known biographical details about the author, or reading their own lived experience into the narrative.

The gaps in this understanding may lead to perceptions of the text as disingenuous, as this biased ‘universality’ can lead to improbable or unsympathetic renderings. It is worth remembering Paul Shanks’ summation, regarding James Kelman’s marginalised characters, that ‘unlike Macmann in *Malone Dies*, the narrator does not begin to enjoy being rained upon’.<sup>167</sup> To return to this chapter’s focus, there are many layers to consider with relation to the connection between ‘methodical vagueness’ and canonical literary forms. If the abstractions that arise as a result of ‘universalised’ writing may lend a curiously unrealistic quality to the ‘vaguened’ text, it is worth considering the uncanny with relation to this concept.

The idea of the uncanny in its various reappropriations recurs as a point of comparison throughout this thesis, culminating in this final instance of Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘methodical vagueness’ as defined by the performance of literalised yet vaguely unimaginable tasks. While uncanny imagery is, as we have seen in Chapter 3, frequently associated with situations of gendered and (post)colonial trauma, I would like to propose a further and perhaps overlooked instance of this concept. It is arguable that biased iterations of a ‘default’ literary narrative display an unintentional sense of the uncanny, premised as the latter is on a slight ‘wrongness’ or defamiliarisation. An argument for the existence of this ‘canonical uncanny’ would perhaps state that when one author attempts to speak for a multitude of narratives not their own, their inevitably limited understanding creates a ‘vague’ and impersonal atmosphere. This indeterminate tone is of course stylised and exaggerated in the texts by this study’s core authors. It is

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<sup>167</sup> Shanks, p. 113.

present in the bot-like permutations that underpin Beckett's *Worstward Ho*;<sup>168</sup> it is conveyed, for instance, by Murakami's oblivious protagonists and enclosing frame narratives.

Thus, much as, in Little's words, Beckett's 'spaces of confinement' paradoxically serve to 'suggest an elsewhere',<sup>169</sup> in both authors' cases there is an arguably self-reflexive bent to this uncanny 'vagueness.' Both Beckett and Murakami conduct a form of failed imagining that appears to allow for their potential ignorance: something like a Joycean sense of 'volitional' error.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, it is difficult not to note the linked connotations of error, imprecision, and 'vagueness' itself. Patrick A. McCarthy calls Joyce's *Ulysses* a 'book of many errors', quoting Fritz Senn's Homeric summation that the novel is one of 'many turns'; McCarthy notes the connections between error and this idea of 'wandering' or 'turning', thus describing error in terms of a kind of conceptual flexibility of place.<sup>171</sup> As this study has hopefully demonstrated, Beckett and Murakami often embrace uncertainty in a manner that appears linked to their translational perspectives. This accommodation of the unknown resonates with Spivak's 'teleopoiesis'

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<sup>168</sup> 'Enough still not to know. Not to know what they say. Not to know what it is the words it says say. Says? Secretes. Say better worse secretes. What it is the words it secretes say. What the so-said void.' (Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. IV*, p. 479.)

<sup>169</sup> Little, 'Closed Spaces', p. 101.

<sup>170</sup> This idea of 'volitional error', posited by Stephen Dedalus when discussing Shakespeare, yields imperfect but interesting results when taken as a statement on Joyce's creative method. *Ulysses* itself consists of a nuanced mix of errors: some unintentional, some wholly intentional, and some based on sources, such as *Thom's Official Directory*, which themselves contained erroneous content. However, as Patrick A. McCarthy writes, '*Ulysses* consists of many instances of factual error, misinterpretation, misreading, and misunderstanding on the characters' part', meaning that error also functions on a broader thematic scale in the novel. He includes examples such as Bloom's misinterpretation of Stephen's reciting of 'Who Goes with Fergus?' as mention of a female paramour. As McCarthy points out, Stephen's quoting of this poem signifies grief over his mother, a depression which prevents him from, among other things, seeking out romantic interests such as that which Bloom ascribes to him. This exchange – along with, for instance, the sailor's humorous confusion of Simon Dedalus with a performer in a wild west show in Stockholm – captures a certain breadth of association, an attention to losses in translation on an international scale, and the sense that a given conversation could be read from any number of perspectives. If Joyce's characters miss the mark, their wrongness is often touching, amusing, or reveals vital information about their own lives. Indeed, *Ulysses* at times appears to derive its energy from the creative potential of mistaken exchanges. It would be a tenuous reading to suggest the novel implicitly advocates for well-meaning ignorance as a stance when considering otherness: rather, such exchanges appear to convey the need to persevere with difficult conversations, even if these attempts are clumsy at first. Van Hulle summarises Joyce's creative errors – and how they can be applied to historical context – well, with the statement that '[a] crucial aspect of Joyce's history of the world is the evocation of the way history *functions*. The focus is not on the transmitted content, but on the transmission, including the transmissional departures.' However, when detached from its original context and used – somewhat apocryphally – as a signifier for Joyce's nonlinear style as a whole, the idea that an author's 'errors are volitional' can appear to signal an arrogant or uncompromising stance on that author's part. I use this phrase deliberately: as demonstrated here, it can be variously interpreted as signifying either the flexibility *or* the inflexibility of an author's perspective. (James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York: Vintage, 1986), p. 156; Patrick A. McCarthy, "'Ulysses': Book of Many Errors', *European Joyce Studies*, 22 (2013), 195-208 (pp. 196-198); Van Hulle, p. 98).

<sup>171</sup> Fritz Senn, qtd. in McCarthy, p. 199.

insofar as it appears to advocate for a form of distant and perhaps inevitably incomplete perspective-taking. Beckett's and Murakami's works are thus premised not just on failed imaginings, but on a form of imaginative failure.

Uncanny behaviour is mechanical, frequently associated with imagery of mannequins and dolls.<sup>172</sup> Uncanny beings, thus, may appear unsettling due to the fact that they seem to be 'going through the motions.' Both Beckett and Murakami demonstrate a self-aware use of cliché; both repeat subtly defamiliarised literary tropes in a manner that could be read as a comment on a form of exhausted canonical reiteration. However, the obfuscating effect of both authors' 'vagueness' on their respective authorial intentions renders the problematic aspects of their work, as discussed in this thesis, flawed: such aspects are not firmly placeable as either satirical or sincere. In addition to this, the uncanny itself is a concept that this thesis espouses with ambivalence, aware of its Eurocentric and Freudian connotations despite its reappropriation in feminist and decolonial contexts.

Both Beckett's and Murakami's writing careers span extensive moments of historical and cultural flux. Beckett wrote during the latter modernist period through to the rise of European post-war testimony; his career continued as recognition grew regarding decolonial thought and feminist perspectives. While, as Morin notes, early translation projects such as his work with Nancy Cunard 'led Beckett to recognise the prejudiced and racist mindset common to his affluent, secluded familial upbringing, and enabled him to learn how to think differently',<sup>173</sup> equally noting his 'militant and compassionate'<sup>174</sup> political stances later in life, she nonetheless observes that 'labour

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<sup>172</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 135.

<sup>173</sup> Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, p. 84; I am indebted to Bates's contribution to the discussion panel 'The Role of the Humanities in the Anthropocene', in which she cited the relevance of *Beckett's Political Imagination* to the issue of Beckett and diverse representation, at the conference 'Samuel Beckett and the Anthropocene', 4-5 December 2020.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

rights, feminism and women's rights were not among his priorities'.<sup>175</sup> It is possible to read Beckett's aporetic 'vagueness' as a response to a situation of changing perspectives: sometimes confident in its starkness, sometimes open to overwriting by another's narrative.

Murakami's career has spanned the last fifty years, encompassing eras such as the aftermath of Japan's student protests and the 'healing boom' of the 1990s. His writing is often lauded for its oblique reflections of such cultural moments. His short story 'A Slow Boat to China', at first glance a series of pedestrian anecdotes, has been read as revealing the extent to which unease over Japan's imperial history manifests in everyday dynamics.<sup>176</sup> He has written on natural disasters such as the Kobe earthquake and conducted journalistic interviews in *Underground* following Japan's sarin gas attacks;<sup>177</sup> more broadly, his work is heralded for its portrayals of atomised life amid the vagaries of late-capitalist cityscapes. His career reflects a growing if occasionally superficial accommodation of diverse narratives: novels in the latter two decades of his career such as *Sputnik Sweetheart*, *Kafka on the Shore* and *IQ84* feature gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters, albeit often discussed in essentialising terms.<sup>178</sup> Murakami's writing style is frequently observed to have moved from a wilful absurdity to a politically engaged focus;<sup>179</sup> at the same time, the troubling gender and age dynamics in his novels often appear unamended by contrast.

To reprise Spivak's language, both authors' work appears to stage the question, again and again, of belonging, appearing to desire yet resist collectivity. Theirs is a literature of

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>176</sup> Will Slocombe states of this story that, "'China" is the absence in the consciousness of the narrator, becoming a symbol for something he cannot quite reach, everything Other to his Japanese Self.' (Slocombe, p. 9.)

<sup>177</sup> Haruki Murakami, *After the Quake*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Vintage, 2003); Haruki Murakami, *Underground*, trans. by Jay Rubin and Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Secker, 2012).

<sup>178</sup> Murakami, *IQ84*, p. 29; Haruki Murakami, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 5; Murakami, *IQ84*, pp. 247-248; Murakami, *Kafka*, p. 193.

<sup>179</sup> 'The career of novelist Haruki Murakami has conventionally been divided into two periods: detachment and commitment.' (A. K. Byron, 'Rethinking the Rat Trilogy: Detachment, Commitment, and Haruki Murakami's Politics of Subjectivity', *New Voices in Japanese Studies*, 9 (2017), 48-70 (p. 48).)

crisis, of ambivalence in terms of who, as authors, they represent. This ambivalence appears to ask what can be accomplished in words alone, a message interpretable as either nihilistic or radically altruistic depending on the reader's level of optimism. Their positions appear to signal an incomplete empathy, caught between adherence to the conventions of a colonially-informed and male-dominated canon and the acknowledgement of alternative stories. This *aporia* can be observed in Beckett's uneasy *via negativa*,<sup>180</sup> it can be observed in Murakami's series of uncertain Boku-narrators, who literally do not name themselves.<sup>181</sup> When put critically, there is a directionless quality to both authors' 'vagueness', as if their speakers are unsure they have anything of note to say. At times nuanced in its uncertainty, this unwillingness to speak too specifically on another's behalf<sup>182</sup> may also contribute to the sense of narrative plurality in both authors' work.

Arguably, this sense of plurality has added to their broad international appeal. A case study of both authors indicates that it is perhaps necessary to further study different forms of 'vagueness' with detailed attention to their relationships to lived experience. The techniques of obfuscation both Beckett and Murakami use can be likened, according to the most broad form of comparison, to the subversions of canonical literature present in writing from marginalised perspectives; as we have seen with reference to such techniques as 'translating untranslatably', Beckett's and Murakami's writing can occasionally appear to fall within the definitions of 'world literature' discussed in this chapter. The typology of 'vaguening' I have explored throughout this thesis gestures some way towards a more textured approach to considering the dynamics of 'vagueness' on an international scale, but extensive examination of 'vagueness' as an overdetermined

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<sup>180</sup> Asja Szafraniec, "'Wanting in Inanity": Negativity, Language and "God" in Beckett', in *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative*, ed. by Colleen Jaurretche (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 213-234 (p. 216).

<sup>181</sup> Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>182</sup> 'As early as his first monograph *Proust* (1931), Beckett claims that 'to speak and act for others' constitutes 'a lie' (*PTD*:64). This inability to testify on another's behalf is a crucial part of Beckett's politics'. (Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement*, p. 7.)

signifier – with all its connotations from erasure to resistance, otherness to opacity – is still needed.

This chapter conclusion has proposed a second form of ‘uncanny’ as linked to the absence of lived experience, or perhaps more precisely to the impossibility of speaking for *all* lived experience. The incomplete empathy staged in Beckett’s and Murakami’s worlds conveys a form of dispossessed power: their texts are vaguely haunted by canonical names, their references to Mallarmé and Kant appearing in otherwise blank terrain. Much as Murakami’s introverted narrators narrate their lives with an incongruous *noir* commentary, both authors’ *œuvres* convey a sense of emptiness in the aftermath of outdated cultural frameworks. Their characters appear – rather obviously, in Beckett’s case – to wait perpetually, pending the invention of new narratives. While such conceptual voids in both authors’ writing can be read, forgivingly, as acknowledgment of this need for alternative perspectives, their voices recall that of Beckett’s *Unnamable* in that they appear as yet unable to halt their speech.<sup>183</sup>

While this incomplete empathy may not have been intentional on either author’s part, their uninformed portrayals of otherness create a literature of cusps, of representational crises. If Beckett’s and Murakami’s ‘vaguening’ tells us something, it is that a new generation of voices is very welcome.

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<sup>183</sup> Beckett, *Selected Works, Vol. II*, p. 407.

## Conclusion

### Contemporary Literature and the ‘Pseudovague’

*[...] perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story [...]*<sup>1</sup>

What happens to all of this ‘vaguening’, we may ask, when it appears in a politically fraught reality? This thesis has interrogated forms of apparent vagueness in internationally disseminated literature; after a point, such attempts to render ‘vagueness’ precise may risk retreating further into interiorised fictions. It is perhaps thus appropriate to conclude this thesis with some further thoughts on the intersection between the ‘text’ and the ‘world.’

Murakami’s 2009 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech is striking in that it seems an amalgamation of the typology of ‘vaguenesses’ explored, and at times criticised, throughout this study. In this short address, according to what appears to be a devil’s advocate argument, the author describes the manner in which threats to boycott his novels led him to appear in Israel out of contrariness: ‘I tend to do the exact opposite of what I am told.’<sup>2</sup> This speech is worthy of a brief, concluding study for the problems it raises regarding an author’s role in international politics. Although Murakami’s focus throughout the speech appears intended as resolutely objective, consisting of a promise to stand with the marginalised regardless of circumstance,<sup>3</sup> such an address also raises

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘Always on the Side of the Egg’ (2009) <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/1.5076881> [Accessed 7 January 2021].

<sup>3</sup> ‘This is not to say that I am here to deliver a political message [...] Yes, no matter how right the wall may be and how wrong the egg, I will stand with the egg. Someone else will have to decide what is right and what is wrong; perhaps time or history will decide. If there were a novelist who, for whatever reason, wrote works standing with the wall, of what value would such works be?’ (Ibid.)



questions over the (mis)alignment of Murakami's words with his actions. Strecher praises the speech as an unequivocal statement 'declaring to his hosts [...] that if they chose to bring their massive military and political power against the individuals protesting in the Gaza strip then, right or wrong, he would stand against them.'<sup>4</sup> While the speech can be seen as an opportunity for political critique productively acted upon, Murakami's acceptance of a monetary prize in this context arguably contradicts his condemnations, and may be seen as involving an element of endorsement.

To return to my earlier point, the speech acts as an uncanny counterpart to the 'vaguening' found in Murakami's fiction. Much like his own unreliable narrators, he begins by referring to himself, in his capacity as a novelist, as a 'professional spinner of lies.'<sup>5</sup> His argument relies on a spatialised analogy with quotable components, in the form of the 'wall' and 'egg' referred to throughout.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps most obviously, his exposition of the individual's struggle against unnamed incarnations of 'the System'<sup>7</sup> is consistent with a similar ethical problem, obliquely referenced and transposed to various political contexts, that Murakami negotiates throughout his *œuvre*.

He opens, therefore, on a note of self-conscious subjectivity, an apparent 'vagueness', and what seems an easily transposed cultural fluidity. He states, '[t]he lies of novelists differ from others [...] in that no one criticizes the novelist as immoral for telling them.'<sup>8</sup> Such framing rhetoric bizarrely recalls Spivak's analysis of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which she discusses Woolf's opening caveat '[l]ies will flow from my lips' in terms of the 'age-old performative contradiction of paradox: I am a liar.'<sup>9</sup> However, Murakami goes on to make the distinction that, '[t]here are a few days in

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<sup>4</sup> Strecher, Loc 203 of 5837.

<sup>5</sup> Murakami, 'Always', <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/1.5076881>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, qtd. in Spivak, *Death*, p. 40.

the year when I do not engage in telling lies, and today happens to be one of them.’<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt self-consciousness and even humour in this contradiction: an introduction as a professional liar, followed by a proclamation of truthfulness in this particular case. I call this focus on lies to attention not in order to doubt, in some personal way, the sincerity of Murakami’s address; rather, I wish to note that crucially, the author himself begins by raising this question of authenticity. His caveat appears to assume a distance between literature and politics at the same time as acknowledging an author’s imperative to make their stance clear in times of crisis. Murakami’s paradoxical language evokes both the limitations and the necessity of the fiction writer’s role in political commentary. However, it is arguable that the act of accepting a literary prize while critiquing the government that have awarded it appears as yet another frustrating Murakamian ambiguity.

There is perhaps something akin to a final form of ‘paradoxical vagueness’ to be explored in this connection, with relation to authorial media presence: as both Beckett’s and Murakami’s writing is seen as stubbornly ‘vague’, instances of their political engagement are all the more weighted. As the introduction to this study originally outlined, awards, speeches, and the membership of literary organisations constitute particularly interesting issues in the case of authors who write multilingually, or who write specifically for a ‘foreign’ target audience. Literary accolades – and their refusal or acceptance – take on particular significance with respect to authors such as Beckett and Murakami, who have deliberately troubled notions of authorial national identity and cultural allegiance throughout their careers. The example of Murakami’s Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech sets up an interesting opposition between ‘vagueness’ and ‘specificity’ as they relate to an author’s political engagement.

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<sup>10</sup> Murakami, ‘Always’, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/1.5076881>

Discussion of Beckett's relationship to literary accolades is often dominated by the image of the author's wayward absences and reluctant fame. The controversy Murakami garnered in 2009 relates to the idea of his public *presence* or appearance in Israel; it is particularly interesting to contrast this example with the Beckettian authorial image, lingeringly characterised by disengagement and an apparent lack of interest in literary success. While perhaps leaning towards excessively negative critique in places, Stephen John Dilks's *Samuel Beckett in the Literary Marketplace* has challenged this perception of the author. Gontarski introduces Dilks's thesis with the summation that 'Beckett commercially exploited his image as an anticommercial artist.'<sup>11</sup> Dilks cites examples such as Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil's famous '[q]uelle catastrophe!' – exclaimed on Beckett's winning the Nobel Prize – as an example of his carefully managed relationship to fame.<sup>12</sup> As Alison Howard states in her review of this work, 'Dilks perceptively poses the question: if Beckett was so private (and if he became exceptionally reclusive following the Nobel Prize announcement), how is it that so many friends and colleagues know the story of Suzanne's despondent reaction?'<sup>13</sup>

This absence is, of course, also politicised, and is perhaps striking for what it tells us about how we wish to see Beckett as readers. Both an asceticism and an awareness of privilege can be read into this understated image; his absence can even be seen to embody the idealism and disinterest in national particularity advertised as criteria for receipt of the Nobel Prize in literature itself.<sup>14</sup>

Dilks's study provides, at times, illuminating examples of the unequally weighted 'vaguenesses' this thesis has attempted to identify. Citing, for instance, Hugh Kenner's

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<sup>11</sup> S. E. Gontarski, 'Foreword: Custodian of His Own Image', in Stephen John Dilks, *Samuel Beckett in the Literary Marketplace* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. xi-xvi (p. xiv).

<sup>12</sup> Dilks, p. 294.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Howard, 'Dismantling the Modernist Myth: Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf in the Literary Marketplace', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36, 1 (2012), 153-162 (p. 156).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Jewell, 'The Nobel Prize: History and Canonicity', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 33, 1 (2000), 97-113 (p. 98; p. 104; p. 105).

summation that Beckett turned to writing in French because he “just felt like it”,<sup>15</sup> Dilks clarifies that ‘Kenner turns what was clearly a strategic move into a whim.’<sup>16</sup> Such mythologisations provide their own problematic ‘vaguening’, as they serve to remove the idealised author from concrete issues of circulation and reception. Dilks is perceptive in the – unfortunately intermittent – instances in which this largely biographical study turns to consider reflections of Beckett’s privilege in his texts. He conjures an image, perhaps hyperbolic, of Beckett’s ‘big house’ upbringing, in which ‘[l]etters were carried to the recipient on a silver tray [and] dinner involved elaborate table settings with knife-rests (of the sort Molloy claims not to recognize).’<sup>17</sup> However, in what is at times a rather relentless study, certain interpretations may leave the element of self-awareness in Beckett’s texts insufficiently acknowledged. Dilks’s summation, for instance, of *Murphy* as concerning ‘a character who struggles to decide which biscuit to eat and who is thrown into disarray by a chess game’<sup>18</sup> seems facetious; studies such as Little’s more recent *Samuel Beckett in Confinement* conduct a more extensive analysis of the – sometimes literally – limited perspectives in Beckett’s work.

Nonetheless, Beckett’s rumoured reaction to the Nobel win is a productive point of departure from which to consider ‘vaguening’ through the lens of the mythologised author. In this concluding discussion of literary awards, my study aims to juxtapose both authors’ purported vagueness with concrete questions of authorial responsibility. Such authors’ respective media relations provide strikingly literal instances in which the ‘real’ world intersects with deliberately vague writing, thus providing an apt concluding paradox to a thesis that has sought to explore the ambiguities of this ‘text-world’ connection.

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<sup>15</sup> Hugh Kenner, qtd. in Dilks, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Dilks, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

This study has demonstrated a variety of attempts to localise a sense of ‘vagueness’ in Beckett’s and Murakami’s writing. This ‘vagueness’ appears – perhaps appropriately – nebulous when confronted. In the texts I have studied, what so often appears as an ambiguity of setting dissipates, when examined, into recurrent characteristics: a limited or repeated set of cultural references, passages describing methodical actions, tenuously employed generic conventions. The situations we, as readers, process as indeterminate are revealed in such cases as hinging on surprisingly consistent factors: ill-described household interiors, cultural markers employed in a manner we are unsure is ironic. At each stage of this argument, both authors’ ‘vagueness’ has been interrogated to reveal its oddly concrete components.

Most frequently, I posit a link between this unusual presentation of cultural references and the domestic settings that recur throughout the study’s core texts. I consider the cultural reference as a form of ‘window’ in the otherwise interiorised text; I imagine these repeated referential frameworks as confining narrative ‘interiors’ in themselves; I explore the way in which interior spaces themselves are represented as disparate and porous, sometimes even aligned with the generic conventions both authors attempt to ‘escape.’ Importantly, I consider the manner in which this instability of interior setting has allowed both authors to create apparently ‘universal’ worlds, spaces that nonetheless perpetuate a sense of gendered and classed compartmentalisation. By broadening my analysis, in later chapters, to include ‘vaguening’ from a range of cultural perspectives, I further contextualise these problems of representation in my core authors’ work, discussing the glamourisation of domestic labour often implicit in their aesthetics of confinement.

This study can therefore be summarised as proposing the existence of something like a ‘pseudovagueness’ in both Beckett’s and Murakami’s work, a term to be employed

in a similar sense to ‘pseudotranslation.’ While assumptions that the core authors in this study write ‘universally’ have been challenged here as outdated, this ‘pseudovagueness’ appears stubbornly and fascinatingly present in much contemporary literature.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘The Boundary,’ published in *The New Yorker* in 2018, is a story told in eerily bland, self-translated<sup>19</sup> prose;<sup>20</sup> it chronicles the interaction between the caretakers of a holiday home and a visiting family. The setting is unnamed; the boundaries, literal and conceptual, between the caretakers’ living quarters and the transient space of the holiday home create a sense of (mis)translated liminality.<sup>21</sup> The narrative is what Walkowitz calls ‘an enfolding of first- and third-person narration’, revealing an intricately reflected gaze: in her interpretation, the story ‘presents what the writer thinks the girl thinks the writer thinks about the girl and her family.’<sup>22</sup> The visiting family leave behind an inventory of discarded objects, such as shells, shopping lists, and a near-empty shower gel container;<sup>23</sup> Walkowitz sees these objects, easily missed in a writer’s account, as signifying ‘the everyday garbage of the non-elite migrant’s experience.’<sup>24</sup> This piece of translationese fiction appears as an almost uncanny summary of the themes addressed throughout this thesis. The story could be very easily described as ‘vague’ in its evocation of an encounter between people of two different cultures,

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<sup>19</sup> As Walkowitz states, ‘In January 2018, the *New Yorker* magazine published a story called “The Boundary,” for which Lahiri is listed in front as author and in back as translator [...] As an object and a text, “The Boundary” seems to feature at least two boundaries: the boundary between “native” and “foreign,” and the boundary between original and translation. But the definitions aren’t clear. Who are the visitors, and who are the hosts? Can this story be read in the original? Is there an original story to read?’ (Walkowitz, ‘On Not Knowing’, p. 332.)

<sup>20</sup> Lahiri’s language is careful and methodical, appearing on the surface to avoid evaluation or analysis. ‘Today, after they introduce themselves, I show them around,’ the narrator begins. Her inventories take the form of careful enumerations: ‘I open the sliding glass door and show them inside: the cozy living room with two comfortable sofas in front of the fireplace, the well-stocked kitchen, two bedrooms.’

Jhumpa Lahiri, ‘The Boundary’ (2018) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/the-boundary> [Accessed 7 January 2021].

<sup>21</sup> The reader is told that, ‘[t]he cottage where [the narrator’s] family lives is a few yards away, behind a tall hedge that forms a kind of screen. For years, our house was just a room that served as both kitchen and bedroom for the three of us.’ The divide between the households is porous, as for instance the narrator can hear the family unpacking when they leave the sliding door of the holiday home open. (Ibid.)

<sup>22</sup> Walkowitz, ‘On Not Knowing’, p. 334.

<sup>23</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri, qtd. in *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Walkowitz, ‘On Not Knowing’, p. 335.

neither culture named.<sup>25</sup> However, the power dynamic implied throughout, and the discrimination faced by the migrant narrator/narrated's family,<sup>26</sup> appear upsettingly clear.

Another such text is, of course, Ní Ghríofa's 2020 *A Ghost in the Throat*, in which the autofictional narrator states that 'the task of translation [...] feels so close to homemaking.'<sup>27</sup> Citing the fact that the Italian translation of *stanza* is 'room',<sup>28</sup> she describes her translation work in terms of 'building' and 'furnishing'.<sup>29</sup> Dotted with lists,<sup>30</sup> the novel challenges perceptions of 'domestic' writing as trivial. Working on a translation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century poem 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire', the narrator recurrently reads everyday objects as both 'texts' and 'rooms.' A list of household chores is a text,<sup>31</sup> breastmilk is described as a Cixousian 'pale text';<sup>32</sup> a knitted cardigan is a text.<sup>33</sup> A garden is a 'green room';<sup>34</sup> a placenta a 'red room'.<sup>35</sup> This repeated focus on texts and rooms appears to evince an interesting contradiction, both evoking the narrator's growing fascination with the *caoineadh* – a form she defines as 'a chant and a keen, a lament and an echo, a chorus and a hymn'<sup>36</sup> – at the same time as it appears to insistently demystify translation as a mundane process. In Ní Ghríofa's novel, glances<sup>37</sup> and landscapes<sup>38</sup> are translations, and a found piece of delph is a 'translate[d]'<sup>39</sup> omen. The *caoineadh*, quoted in asyntactic snippets<sup>40</sup> at the beginning of each chapter, acts as a

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<sup>25</sup> Walkowitz: 'As the story continues, we learn that both families are foreign, though not in the same way: the caretakers are called foreigners because they are migrants to the nation where the events take place; the visitors are foreigners to the seaside, though they may be foreigners to the nation too.' (Ibid., p. 334.)

<sup>26</sup> The narrator states, '[i]n the mornings, from September to June, my father drives me to school, where I feel out of place. I don't mix easily with others; I don't look like anyone else.' Later, the reader learns that the mother in the narrator's family is unhappy in their countryside location, finding the community 'closed'; most shockingly, exposition towards the story's end reveals that before the family moved to this more rural setting, the girl's father was the victim of a racist attack in the city. (Lahiri, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/the-boundary>)

<sup>27</sup> Ní Ghríofa, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 7; p. 26; p. 43; p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 35; p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>40</sup> Chapter 1 is prefaced, for instance, with only the lines, 'how my eye took a shine to you, / how my heart took delight in you,'; other such chapters are prefaced by single lines such as 'for you set a parlour gleaming for me,' and 'An ache, this salt-sorrow of mine, that I

fragmentary core to the novel: the narrator finishes by accepting the unresolved mysteries that linger as gaps in her research.<sup>41</sup> In a less subtly fictionalised novel, the promised parallels between the narrator's life and that of the poet Eibhlín Dubh<sup>42</sup> may have progressed more chillingly into haunting or obsession – the authorial intrusion in Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* comes to mind here<sup>43</sup> – while in Ní Ghríofa's case, these resonances are suggested rather than fully developed. The *caoineadh* itself is, ultimately, an intertextual reference that highlights the vagueness of the world around it. The narrator turns to its sumptuous images in times of traumatic liminality: a difficult birth,<sup>44</sup> the wait for medical test results to return.<sup>45</sup>

We have seen, throughout this study, that projections of 'vagueness' can at times be used to elevate a work to 'universal' status, but also – in negative readings – to dismiss a text as insufficiently topical, a charge perhaps liable to be levelled at Beckett's and Murakami's works themselves. In the process, I have interrogated the manner in which underrepresented authors may be subjected to rigidly context-based readings that fail to acknowledge a text's accessibility or broader appeal; I have also examined the techniques by which authors such as Beckett and Murakami have resisted or discouraged politicised interpretation, thus perpetuating a sense of their writing's 'canonical' applicability.

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was not by your side'. These quotations are presented in lower case and often end in commas or mid-sentence, adding to their fragmentary style.

(Ibid., p. 6; p. 25; p. 85.)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>42</sup> The novel's blurb summarises: 'In the present day, a young mother narrowly avoids tragedy. On encountering the poem, she becomes obsessed with its echoes in her own life, and sets out to track down the rest of the poet's story.' (Ibid., blurb.)

<sup>43</sup> Part Six of Barry's novel, titled 'Eleven Eleven Eleven – Dakota', consists of a fictionalised essay-style account in which the authorial voice outlines research on a novel including a trip to Dorinish Island, a location on Clew Bay visited by John Lennon. The speaker's disconcerting closeness to his subject culminates in lines such as 'I was removed from Dorinish Island in a state of distress', and mentions supernatural sightings. However, even this section arguably contains an element of parody concerning romanticised views of rural Ireland. There is undoubtedly sincerity in this account, guided as it is by 'the feelings that are trapped within these places, and by the feelings trapped within.' However, when discussing the 1960s bohemian exodus to the West of Ireland, Barry is equally humorous regarding the disparity between mysticism and reality, citing 'the great dreariness that Ireland attempts to stay quiet about', the 'savage melancholy' of whitethorn boreens and the 'paranoia' of rainy country evenings. The reader is thus left with the impression that Barry's fictionalisations employ intentional exaggeration at times. (Kevin Barry, *Beatlebone* (Edinburgh, London: Cannongate, 2015), p. 197; p. 199; p. 181; p. 183; *ibid.*; *ibid.*)

<sup>44</sup> Ní Ghríofa, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 135.



There would be no translations without target audiences, and it is perhaps apt that this study of translational ‘vaguening’ end with an observation of readers rather than of authors. Walkowitz appears to read Lahiri’s wonderfully vague ‘The Boundary’ as unequivocally political in the distinctions it draws between elite and non-elite migrant identities. Aoife O’Regan, in her RTÉ review, refers to *A Ghost in the Throat* as ‘an ode to the unwritten women of generations past.’<sup>46</sup> In both cases, texts that could have been accused in decades prior of ‘solipsistic’ or ‘myopic’ interiority are being attentively read in terms of the ‘outside world.’ These readings appear context-based but, crucially, do not reduce the texts to narrowly particularised interpretations. In both cases the intricacies of the author-translator’s position are viewed in terms of their complex resonance with a broader group (non-elite migrant experience; working class or otherwise ‘unwritten’ female experience). The text’s particularity is preserved and praised to the effect that these situating readings do not appear as generalisations – of course Lahiri’s short story does not speak for ‘all’ people of migrant or diasporic identities, nor can Ní Ghríofa’s analysis of one poem reveal ‘all’ overlooked female perspectives. Such contemporary readings can be seen to constitute a version of the critical attention to ‘the circuits through which texts pass as they are produced and received’, an emergent feature of postcolonial scholarship heralded by Brouillette at her study’s end.<sup>47</sup> They signal significant grounds for optimism regarding the future of diversified literatures.

It is difficult to know whether Lahiri’s and Ní Ghríofa’s narratives themselves reconfigure the relationship between ‘text’ and ‘world’ in new ways – although, for instance, as a poet’s first novel that mixes history and autofiction, *A Ghost in the Throat* combines genres innovatively. Nonetheless, it is by no means new knowledge that

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<sup>46</sup> Aoife O’ Regan, ‘Reviewed: A Ghost in the Throat by Doireann Ní Ghríofa’ (2020) <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2020/0828/1161887-reviewed-a-ghost-in-the-throat-by-doireann-ni-ghriofa/> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

<sup>47</sup> Brouillette, pp. 176-177.

discussions of the 'particular' and the 'universal' in fiction rest on a false dichotomy. Rather, perhaps the most striking progress to be observed here lies in how such contemporary 'pseudovague' texts are being received. Their apparent qualities of 'repetition', 'closedness' or 'mundanity' are not criticised, but rather accepted as necessary to give their narratives life and accuracy. The readings presuppose the universal-particular hybrid; the texts are being viewed sensitively in context, in a manner that appears to challenge the myth of the 'apolitical' authorial perspective. Fiction, interiority and the 'real' world are brought together seamlessly in such an interpretation, in a manner that appears to dispense with obfuscating views of literature as divorced from life. Such readings of Lahiri's and Ní Ghriofa's texts reach us, at the end of this study, as if out of a mist. The vagueness is clearing.

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