ESTRAGON: (looking at the tree). Pity we haven't got a bit of rope.—Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. Fred Eerdekens, *Submit*

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Samuel
Beckett

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett and the Nonhuman

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...

dear figures when all fails a few figures to wind up with part one before
Pim the golden age the good moments the losses of the species I was
young I clung on to the species we're talking of the species the human
saying to myself brief movements no sound two and two twice two and
so on

SAMUEL BECKETT, *How It Is*

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As he crawls through mud and slime, the subhuman or, better, ambivalently human narrator of *Comment c'est* / *How It Is* (1961, 1964) turns to mathematical figures (*chiffres* in French) “when all else fails” to soothe himself with the predictability of rational calculation: “two and two, twice two and so on” (59). He mentions his “species” a handful of times in the spare and syntax-less novel, often in the context of a “loss of species,” or else he describes clinging to and never quite falling from his species: “hanging on by the finger-nails to one’s species” (29). Here we find a narrator who situates himself at the unstable limit of what is human.¹ That Beckett should express ambivalence about the human, in the voices of myriad narrators as well as in his letters and essays, should come as little surprise after the barbarism of the Second World War and the ensuing wave of postwar humanism in France, about which Beckett was famously anti-

1 For further discussion of “loss of species” in *How It Is*, see the contributions to this volume by Shane Weller and Ulrika Maude.

pathic. Yet Beckett's praise of the "inhuman" in Jack B. Yeats's paintings—their "petrified insight into one's ultimate hard irreducible inorganic singleness"—and his relief at Cézanne's rejection of anthropomorphism emerge in letters from the 1930's, revealing that Beckett's gravitation toward the nonhuman pre-dates the war (536; 222; see also Rabaté 2016, 41). Interest in the nonhuman in relation to the human spans Beckett's long career, culminating in the "worsening" of the form of the human in *Worstward Ho* (1983).

A dominant conception of the human, consistent with Beckett's narrator's mention of his species in the same breath as numeric "figures," stresses the capacity for reason and measure (*ratio*). The tie between the human and rationality can be traced to the phrase attributed to the Sophist, Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all things," which Beckett copied into his ancient Greek philosophy notes in 1932. In his contribution to this volume, Shane Weller discusses the ambiguity of Protagoras's phrase, which can be taken to mean either that evaluation proceeds from the human understood collectively as a species (at the expense of other animate and inanimate forms of life) or that measure proceeds from the individual, calling attention to the limits of our human perspective, our limited capacity to see and to know. Weller rightly insists on the importance of this second meaning to Beckett, for whom human mastery and anthropocentrism are anathema. The contributions to this volume illuminate from different angles Beckett's sustained questioning of human exceptionalism—a complacency no longer viable (if it ever was) amid the planetary crises of the 21st century. By revealing the implication of the human within the non-human (and the nonhuman within the human) in Beckett's work—where the nonhuman includes the Earth, animals, technological and social systems, bodily processes, affects and the unconscious—they show how attending to the nonhuman enhances our understanding of the limits and responsibilities of the human vis-à-vis a planet in crisis.

It is not usual to evoke the time and place of writing in an introduction, the aim of which is to set forth in new directions, contextualizing the excellent articles to follow and sketching the importance of the paths of inquiry they develop to the future of Beckett studies. But the subject, Beckett and the Nonhuman, makes me, unlike Beckett himself, who let the crisis of the Second World War shape his writing largely unmentioned, want to tell you that I am writing at the end of April 2020 and that I am in Paris, which is entering its sixth week of lockdown. While research libraries are closed and likely to remain so for some time, I have the vast trove of the internet at my disposal, where there is talk, among recipes for bread, animated yoga for kids and tips for online teaching, of the virus that has claimed more than 200,000 lives, caused grief, fear and suffering, overwhelmed hospitals, closed universi-

ties and incited lockdown measures that will send the global economy into a major recession, having already deprived millions of their jobs and paychecks. There is a certain humiliation, or, rather, humility of the human—we might think of Sophocles' double-edged praise of human resourcefulness, checked only by death: "terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man" (2003). It is likely that a cure and a vaccine will come, but they have not come soon enough to stave off a collective shudder of humility—a humility which, like hubris, is all too human (though "humility" comes from *humus*, lowly, of the earth, and "human" from *homo*, *OED*). Jean-Michel Rabaté reminds us of the rapport between humility and the Earth: "Humility does not mean moral abnegation or abasement but a reconciled sense that one will remain close to the Earth, an Earth that contains the ashes of all the dead along with the fertilizing humus for future plants" (2016, 45). It is humility in this sense, as a closeness to Earth, that we might associate with efforts to conceptualize the nonhuman as it appears—with startling regularity—in Beckett's work.

We have seen a surge in recent decades of movements in theory and philosophy that decenter the human, reassessing its oppositional relation to the nonhuman. The flourishing of subfields such as science and technology studies, affect theory, animal studies and ecocriticism, as well as the emergence of new materialism, posthumanism, speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, demonstrate a confluence of efforts to think of the world as existing independently of human conceptions of it (a move away from social constructivism) and to relax the boundary between human and nonhuman, viewing the human as integrated within and permeated by the nonhuman world. If, as Bruno Latour claims in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), modernity is marked by a severance between human and nature, we are now not only questioning the viability of this separation, but also assessing the damage caused by unchecked human mastery over the environment and its resources. To name our epoch the Anthropocene is to register the impact of human industrialization on the Earth's geology and ecosystems, especially anthropogenic climate change. Attention to the nonhuman also shifts our conceptions of subjectivity and agency; instead of an autonomous, willing subject (the subject of liberal humanism), we find the human implicated in a larger network of forces in which it participates. We find renewed interest in forms of nonhuman agency. Inspired by Latour's Actor Network Theory, Jane Bennett interrogates the self-organizing capacity of matter, and Katherine Hayles extends a "nonconscious cognition" to other life forms and to complex technical systems (2017, 9; see also Latour 1987).

In *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015), Richard Grusin defines the nonhuman broadly as "animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, mate-

riality, or technologies" (vii). He remarks that affectivity might seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion, but less so in light of William James's claim that human emotion is inseparable from material bodily processes—a discussion Ulrika Maude takes up in her contribution to this volume. Grusin also writes that most of the problems we face in the 21st century involve our traffic with nonhumans (climate change, drought, famine, biotechnology, intellectual property, privacy, genocide, terrorism, war) (vii). Signs of our entanglement with the nonhuman in everyday life are also abundant; we are continually affected by the environment, weather patterns, machines, artificial intelligence, Siri's voice, robot pets, animals, vegetable, viral and microbial material, the buried forests we drill and refine for oil—in short, everything with which we share the Earth.

As timely as critical engagements with the nonhuman may be, they are not unique to the 21st century. We find precedents in the philosophy of Leibniz and Spinoza and in the thinking of the pre-Socratic atomists, Democritus, Epicurus, and their Roman heir, Lucretius, that Beckett so admired. Beckett's distrust of anthropomorphism has been linked in part to aspects of Ancient Greek atomism (Ackerley, 149).² It is in part to acknowledge this long tradition of anti-anthropocentric thought that we, the editors of this volume, prefer the term nonhuman to *posthuman*. Although most posthumanist thinkers specify that the posthuman does not imply a rejection of the human but rather "an enlarged sense of community, which includes one's territorial or environmental interconnections" (Braidotti, 190; see also Hayles 1999 and Wolfe), the prefix *post-* suggests a move "beyond." Nonhuman, on the other hand, is teleologically neutral, implying a long history of human imbrication with its animate and inanimate surroundings.³ As two contributors to this volume (Joseph Anderson and Marc Farrant) demonstrate, Beckett does not go so far as to privilege the animal or mineral over the human and stops short of embracing materialism. With Beckett, we cannot be "beyond" the human. What the essays in

2 Anthony Uhlmann argues that the "sudden swerve" mentioned in *How It Is* ("écart" in the French) (58–59) refers to Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. "Swerve" and "écart" are both used to translate "clinamen," which is associated with Lucretius' explication of Epicurus; the clinamen or swerve is what sets the universe in motion. One among countless atoms falling in parallel lines swerves and collides with another, setting off a chain of causal interactions that expands to make up the universe as we know it (106).

3 Grusin writes, "the very idea of the posthuman entails a historical development from human to something after the human, even as it invokes the imbrication of human and nonhuman in making up the posthuman turn. The nonhuman turn, on the other hand, insists (to paraphrase Latour) that "we have never been human" but that the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman" (ix–x).

this volume do is not so much apply the theoretical frames of posthumanism or object oriented ontology or new materialism (etcetera) to Beckett's corpus; instead they mine Beckettian ambivalence and probe the complex intermingling between the human and the nonhuman in his work, thereby contributing to and intersecting with ongoing efforts to theorize the human in relation to the environment, animal life and technology.

Not only does the term nonhuman (as opposed to posthuman) acknowledge a lineage of anti-anthropocentric thought, but it is also capacious enough to include the *anti*-human (Beckett's reaction to postwar humanism), the *in*-human (treatment of prisoners in concentration camps and practices of torture) and the *de*-humanizing objectification of persons by ostracization or exclusion (for further discussion of Beckett's outcasts and vagabonds in this context, see Anderton's contribution to this volume). A number of essays in the present volume address Beckett's postwar anti-humanism, and two of Beckett's nonfiction works from the mid 1940's appear often. In them, Beckett disparages humanism in favor of "true humanity" (*l'humanité vraie*) (1983, 132). "The Capital of the Ruins," drafted as a radio broadcast in 1946, describes Beckett's work for the Irish Red Cross hospital in Saint Lô, and "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon," written in French in 1945, voices frustration at how the term "human" is bandied about as a touchstone in times of crisis (131). Beckett's critique of humanism—his refusal to valorize the human at the expense of all else—has been explored more broadly in Beckett studies by examining his praise of painterly abstraction (Brazil), the prominence of animals and of technology in his work (Bryden; Maude) and the material kinship between the human body, objects and the Earth (McMullan). Jean-Michel Rabaté's *Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (2016) threads together attention to animals, descriptions of machines and hyper-rationalism, the philosophical contexts of anti-humanism and the "posthuman," which Rabaté traces not to cyborgs but to James Joyce's description of Molly Bloom in a letter from 1922 (38–39). In 2018, a "Beckett and Technology" conference was held in Prague, and the academic year 2020/2021 includes in its planning two conferences on Beckett and ecology: "Beckett and Nature" and "Beckett and the Anthropocene." Monographs are also in progress about Beckett and the Anthropocene, and about Beckett and ecology. How might the present volume add to and focus this expanding conversation in Beckett studies?

The volume is divided into four clusters: postwar anti-humanism (Weller, Simpson), animal and telluric perspectives (Anderton, Farrant, Atkinson), the inner body and the body in space (Little, Maude) and technology, machines and the hyper-rational at the limit of the human (Rabaté, Thobois, Thoelen). Each of these clusters gives onto paths for further study and invites the stitch-

ing of interconnections between them, both to illuminate facets of Beckett's work and to demonstrate its relevance to the work of theorizing the nonhuman in our 21st-century context.

1 Antipathy to Postwar French Humanism

In the first essay in this volume Shane Weller charts Beckett's attitude toward the human across the span of his career, with particular emphasis on Beckett's postwar writing, which mocks a prevailing anthropocentric humanism expressed in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) (with its strong appeals to will and action). In addition to Beckett's postwar nonfiction, Weller takes up a little-known essay by Francis Ponge that Beckett translated in 1949. While Ponge's *Le parti pris des choses* (taking the side of things) might suggest a materialist bent, the essay Beckett translated (on Georges Braque) calls for an integration of the divine within the human, which Beckett finds ludicrous. Weller shows, nevertheless, that Beckett borrows other material from Ponge—such as the idea of the human as disorder and chaos explored in *The Unnamable*—as he undoes the classical philosophical distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Hannah Simpson also attends to Beckett's dissent from postwar French humanism, but focuses on its ethos of compassion, which Beckett exposes as hypocritical in his play, *Eleutheria*, written in French in 1947. Though Beckett may have acted humanely during the war (through his work with the resistance), Simpson cautions against reading a “spotless humanitarianism” into his art. She demonstrates how *Eleutheria* works to make the spectator both complicit in and indifferent to the suffering of others. By engineering an indifference to the physical pain of others, Beckett's play disturbs the complacent humanism so prevalent in postwar France.

2 Animal Perspectives and the Point of View of the Earth

The next cluster of essays addresses perspectival alternatives to humanism, exploring the points of view of animals and the Earth. Joseph Anderton explores a series of encounters between the down-and-out narrator of the *nouvelles* and various animals, while Douglas Atkinson and Marc Farrant make inroads into “Eco-Beckett,” illuminating intersections between Beckett's work and conversations about sustainability and the environment. For Anderton, the narrator of the *nouvelles* lacks characteristics we associate with the human—characteristics listed in Simone Weil's account of the human in *The Need for*

Roots (1943). Yet Anderton argues that the narrator is no more kin or “kind” with animals. The undecidability of the narrator’s identity—human, animal or other—and Beckett’s weakening of the divide between animals and humans, leads Anderton to link the *nouvelles* to contemporary ecological thought, particularly the inter-species “making kin” called for by Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton’s critique of the severance of the human from nature. Next, Marc Farrant notes the difficulty of fully “grasping” or cognizing the severity and imminence of our current climate crisis. Borrowing from Heidegger and Blanchot, Farrant reads “The End” as an exploration of human finitude, arguing that it is our mortality (more so than our materiality) that makes possible an “Earth-view,” as opposed to a worldview (etymologically, “world” means age of man). Both Anderton and Farrant point out that Beckett does not go so far as to privilege material being or animal being at the expense of the human; his critique of humanism is always more ambivalent.

In the last essay of this cluster, Douglas Atkinson puts Beckett in a room with Eco-Deconstruction and makes the persuasive case that each has quite a bit to say to the other. For Atkinson, attention to the nonhuman in both Beckett and Eco-Deconstruction forces us to reexamine our relation to the enviroing world, including language; he gives a history of Eco-Deconstruction (with roots in phenomenology as well as Derridean thought) before showing how a phenomenological “return” to or “renewal” of the intentional world of nonhuman things brings Beckett into alignment with contemporary thinking in philosophical ecology. Atkinson also indicates promising areas of research for Beckett scholars stemming from Derrida’s final seminars, which take up human-animal relations, biodiversity and the natural world.

3 The Body, Viscera and Confined Space

“Can space go on without a body?” is the question that launches James Little’s reading of Beckett’s “closed space” tales. With a nod to Jean-François Lyotard (Can thought go on without a body?), Little interrogates the relation of the human body to the production of space, focusing on *Imagine Dead Imagine* and *All Strange Away*. Concluding that bodies are necessary to the production of space, Little also shows how the figures in the closed space tales, not least through their complex gender configurations, challenge the border between human and nonhuman. Ulrika Maude’s essay moves inside the body, exploring the viscera and automatic physiological processes like breathing and sleep. Departing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea that the inner parts of the body are object-like (the body is both subject and object), Maude underscores the

importance of automatic bodily functions to Beckett's critique of an intentional, willing subject, before moving to discuss human emotion. Drawing on William James, Maude argues that emotions are bodily; we feel grief because we weep, not vice versa. Her tracking of visceral and other automatic bodily functions in Beckett's work culminates in a masterful reading of *How It Is*, in which she lists its numerous references to anatomy and unearths intertextual allusions to Watson's behaviourism and to Pavlov's "spinal dog."

4 Technology and Machines: At the Limit of the Human

The final cluster of essays turns to the human in relation to the hyperrational, to the machine and to technology. Here, too, the boundary between the human and the nonhuman thins. Hybridization is an explicit focus for Céline Thobois and Thomas Thoelen, while Jean-Michel Rabaté reads Beckett's relationship to the marquis de Sade in conversation with Roland Barthes's *Sade-Fourier-Loyola* (1971). Sade emerges in Barthes's reading (as well as in that of de Beauvoir, Adorno and Horkheimer and Geoffrey Gorer) as a figure who pushes reason to absurd and horrific extremes, parodying a Kantian reason that evacuates the human in favor of a machinic rationalism—which may also be "human," in which case the human would look very much like the inhuman. Céline Thobois jumps forward several centuries to suggest that the hybridization of Beckett's personae anticipates posthumanism and the Anthropocene. Inspired by Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and the "techno-human" proposed by Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz, Thobois reads *Happy Days* and *Play*, highlighting Winnie's hybrid at-oneness with her environment and the conditioned responses of the players in the urns. For Thobois, the conditioned silence and behavior of the audience indicates how reactive we are to technology; she encourages the use of new technologies (such as virtual reality) to enhance this aspect of Beckett's work in performance. Finally, Thomas Thoelen looks closely at Molloy's crutches to examine the socio-cultural politics of prosthesis. Moving from disability studies (Ato Quayson) to studies of narrative as prosthesis, Thoelen illuminates Beckett's attack on "sentimentalizing" narratives that victimize and dehumanize disabled persons by reducing them to their disability. He supports this through an original reading of Lousse's sentimental speech to the crowd (an insulting defense of Molloy after he runs over her dog). Thoelen also notes the strange disappearances and reappearances of the crutches in the novel and tracks their presence and absence onto Molloy's feelings of autonomy and agency.

Beckett and the Nonhuman leaves us, then, with four pistes along which to travel with Beckett into the 21st century, as we reassess the foundational assumptions upon which modernity and industrialization were built. We are also urged to devise, as many contemporary theorists are doing, modes of coexisting with what is nonhuman and inhabiting the Earth with greater humility. Beckett's attention to the nonhuman cautions us not to believe too ardently in human exceptionalism and mastery, even as it remains vitally important to grant personhood and dignity to all humans. Like Beckett, we might begin by taking seriously the second meaning of Protagoras' dictum, with its evocation of the limitations of our human perspective. Beckett's work enacts these limitations by instantiating hybridity and by weakening the opposition between human and nonhuman in other ways, for instance by foregrounding the more mineral, animal and telluric aspects of the human. At the same time, Beckett offers us a backstop, a caution against traveling too far into a version of speculative realism that would deny human agency altogether. Perhaps it is this sense of ambivalence, or, better, balance between the human and our technological, animal, earthly and linguistic surroundings that Beckett and the Nonhuman has to teach us.

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