

A Poetics of Miscommunication

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**Abstract**

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An analysis of the concept of miscommunication in and through literature. Primary sources include the novels of Samuel Beckett and Reader-response theory, particularly in the writings of Wolfgang Iser. This thesis problematizes the concept of ambiguity within the literary field and argues instead for the rehabilitation of miscommunication as a productive lens through which literature should be viewed. It provides a brief history of the ways in which the concept of miscommunication has been used and is presently used before settling on Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels as the grounds for exploring alternative understandings of the way in which miscommunication can instantiate and improve the overall communicative endeavor. The thesis ends with some of the author's own creative and conceptual writing so as to explore the problem from both a critic's and a writer's perspective.

## Preface:

Poetics always emerges at a point of convergence. By its very nature poetics exists in a state of turbulence. It is something personal but also general; it needs to be understandable if not applicable to all. It sits at the crossroads of philosophy, literary criticism, and creative practice, involving all but beholden to none. It is both singular and plural. It is almost impossible to explore poetics as a field without developing and using one's own poetic lens, but also to develop one's own poetics without an understanding of why and how other people write. My journey in developing a poetics of miscommunication has been one that has involved my growth as both a writer and as a thinker. Writing and thinking, at their core, are inexorably linked. To write something is always to think about it. Yet, at the same time to write something is to deaden thoughts: to place them on the static page is like pinning up butterflies on a corkboard for all to see. Poetics then might be the attempt to not just capture the butterfly, but also to reenact its flight. Samuel Beckett wrote in *Malone Dies* "A thousand little things to report, very strange, in view of my situation, if I interpret them correctly. But my notes have a curious tendency, as I realize at last, to annihilate all they purport to record." (252).

In this thesis I have brought together my own works and those of Beckett into the turbulent realm of poetics. I have attempted to respect the brilliance of Beckett, to show my reader the value I find in his works. However, I have also changed what he said, recontextualized it for my own uses. What follows is not just an interpretation of Beckett, but rather my own version of the process of reading, writing, and thinking through and ultimately beyond Beckett. In this way what I am attempting to make fly here through the art of poetics is not Beckett's butterfly, but my own, which means I was the one to kill and pin it up. Now I have attempted to envision its flight again. It is for this reason I have the temerity to place my own works alongside

Beckett's. Not because they are the same, or do exactly the same thing, not because they are worthy of the same praise, but because I have made them and because I have connected with Beckett's works, in the creation of my poetics. Because of the aforementioned nature of poetics, I could not have understood Beckett's works in the way I have without having written the works I include here, nor do I understand the works in the same way as I did before I studied and wrote about Beckett.

In this way this entire thesis works as an example of itself. It instantiates the values it preaches through creative practice. In his reading of Nietzsche, Peter Sloterdijk commented "It is characteristic of one type of important aesthetic theory that it never discusses a phenomenon without incorporating some element of what is being discussed into the discourse itself" (15). This is certainly the ideal I have aspired towards, to make my work an aesthetic example of itself by including its in very analysis the raw aesthesis of my works. In *Malone Dies* Beckett wrote "Aesthetics are therefore on my side, at least a certain kind of aesthetics. For I shall have to become earnest again to be able to speak of my possessions" (176). I think both of these speak of the same sort of aesthetic endeavors, the sort Nietzsche engaged in, the sort Beckett practiced, and, I believe, the sort of aesthetics poetics work towards. Understood this way, including my own works alongside the analysis of Beckett's becomes an absolutely necessary choice. Without them the connected processes of thought and artistic practice can never come fully back to life, the aesthetic goals of this project can never be complete.

This thesis takes on a tripartite format which serves to both relate and separate its constituent parts. As itself a work of poetics, this thesis attempts to exist simultaneously in the realms of art and criticism. If it were to allow one section to shine through with absolute primacy and certainty, it would inevitably be the expense of the others, and ultimately of the entire

poetics of miscommunication. It is a poetics of miscommunication because it both speaks clearly, but also frustrates the resulting understanding, because it balances competing critical and artistic impulses, and because it provides an armature for writing without over determining the end result. As such, the first section is that of my poetics: it makes the case for the necessity of mediation between the competing critical and creative urges and then attempts this mediation itself. It examines how communication works in writing from an authorial point of view, and outlines the problem of intentionality inherent in writing, and the perils of the ambiguity that results. In place of ambiguity it offers a rehabilitation of the term miscommunication, arguing for a poetics of miscommunication as an alternative way of bringing together reader and text. It is necessary that this section of poetics should begin the thesis because to give that spot to either of the other sections would be to tacitly support their position as prior in both thought and argumentation. Instead, by beginning it with my poetics serves to prime the reader for what is to come as well as the form it will take.

The second section, titled “Beckett and the Poetics of Miscommunication”, explores the poetics through Beckett’s trilogy of novels, and particularly focuses on his use of contradiction to open up spaces and allow the reader and the text to miscommunicate. This section takes on the stance of a reader, and so provides for more critical distance while still arguing for a sort of direct and reflexive instantiation of poetics as art. Looking at Beckett as a reader exemplifies the richness to be gained by reading a text as potential miscommunication. I read Beckett as moving through the removed critical and philosophic form of aporia into the personally instantiated realm of poetics. Just as I argue Beckett does, so too must I take the plunge from the safe philosophical distance into the direct proximity of art itself.

I end with my three of my own creative works. My creative works serve to answer to the promise of the poetics that has been set up, but also to act as a foil to the certainty offered by the preceding critical section. The three works I have chosen to exhibit are “Meaningful Glances”, “Neighbor’s Junction”, and “The Boulder”. The first is a piece of conceptual writing, and the last two more traditional prose fiction. All three of them bear the essential marks of miscommunication in action; however, “Neighbor’s Junction” deals head-on with miscommunication as both an aspect within the story and as a rhetorical strategy. It is primarily about the folly inherent in presuming the outcome of any act of communication, and works and connects my works to Beckett through undercutting the certainty and limits of its own narrative structure. “The Boulder” works to nuance the view of miscommunication and shows the ways in which communication fails even with those closest to us, and the strength negation and contradiction have in regards to making miscommunication work as communication. “Meaningful Glances” is perhaps the most daring creative work in my thesis, it bridges the gap between my creative works and the work of Beckett through a shared style and incompleteness of narrative, and then attempts to build upon that to produce something even larger.

As a piece of conceptual writing, “Meaningful Glances” is less capable of standing on its own than the other two creative texts. The idea for it came about as a result of writer and critic Amaranth Borsuk’s instructions that each of the members in her creative writing workshop should initiate and document some sort of collection. After several weeks of deliberation, I chose to ‘collect’ examples of meaningful eye contact in my day to day life. The criteria were simple, or so I thought: the eye contact must carry some sort of lasting and meaningful message above and beyond the more regular uses of eye contact in conversation, such as emphasis or greeting. This conceit quickly proved much harder to actualize than I initially believed. As the project

went on I became more interested in the cases that seemed less certain, the cases of potential miscommunication. It is here, I think, that the true motivation for my poetics of miscommunication was born. In a certain way, everything I have done since has been related to “Meaningful Glances”. The piece is formatted with a single glance centered on each page, separating the entries, emphasizing their limited and incomplete nature. I intend by placing only one on each page that they can be more than just records of essentially fleeting meaningful glances, some realized, others imagined, that it can produce new glances carrying their own meaning between the text and the reader. Because the text resembles its subject matter, and sticks so close to its narrators flawed and limited perceptions, I see it as taking on the bravado of Beckett’s works, but going beyond even what he did in instantiating my own poetics by mimicking miscommunication in both subject matter and form. I am hopeful that by placing his texts in juxtaposition with my own they might even share a meaningful glance between one another. Taken alone, “Meaningful Glances” might be interpreted by the reader as a solipsistic and incomplete narrative of my own life. It may very well be those things. I hope that placed here, inside this thesis, it might take on life, and in fact share that active internal life which always doubts the possibility of communication but tries anyway with all the texts around it.

The work presented in this thesis draws upon everything I have learned while pursuing my M.F.A. in Creative Writing & Poetics. More than just sum up the work that I have done though, it exemplifies what and why I write. It attempts to take its own form and content into account, and represent the complexities, advantages, and ultimately the personal necessity of my style of aesthetic thought. Creating this thesis has offered me insight into where my artistic and critical practice will go in the future. With self-given permission to miscommunicate, I may now write more openly and put greater trust in my reader not only to understand what I wish to get

across, but in fact to enrich and improve that meaning far beyond any limit set by authorial expectations. I do not need to write or analyze fables and parables with moralistic messages, and instead will write works and create readings which embrace the varieties of human experience and perspective without concern for the authorial message getting lost. In this way I hope this thesis will not be solely for my benefit, but will also open up you, the reader, to the possibilities of miscommunication as both a reader and a writer, and provide you with better options for both the understanding and creation of literature.

## Part 1: My Poetics

The stories I write are lies. They are not bad lies, in fact they seem to be necessary lies. The term lie does not seem to perfectly explain with what my stories are, but it has a necessary gut punch to it. My stories might be termed fables and parables, but I fear these terms have too much cultural baggage. They are fables and parables not in an old-time overly simplified and reductive moral sense, instead they embrace the complexity and difficulty of life, morality, and communication. The lessons are anything but ham-fisted. The term supposition might work well, but I do not want my stories to be mere thought experiments, to disappear as soon as they are done. I want what I write to have a real and lasting effect on the reader. I want them to become some of the necessary lies the reader carries with them from then on. We all have lies we tell ourselves, lies we need to tell ourselves. Self-delusion is a natural part of human life. Certainly, it can grow wild and untamed, grow out of control and into a destructive force. A complete lack thereof is just as unhealthy though. The world is harsh, and our perspectives are inherently limited. To attempt to take everything in, to deal with it all on equal ground, is simply too much, certainly for me and I imagine for any human. As Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* “if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gazes into thee” (52). It is only natural that humans should need some form of escapism. I do not wish for my stories to be mere escapism though, even if they may work for some readers as that. Instead, I imagine my works offering pointers to these deeper issues, outlining them and offering the reader a path to that abyss if they should so choose to take it. But I also imagine them offering something more valuable, and something more literary, examples of human life succeeding, failing, and most importantly, struggling.

This is not to say that this is the exclusively the realm of literature, in fact I see it as the one of the many purposes that art in general fulfills, but there seems to me to be a way in which literature fosters empathy more quickly and easily than many other forms of art. The connections built up to literary characters seem to be closer to the self than connections, capable of short-circuiting the ego more easily and finding a true and lasting place in the reader. Literature allows us to live a thousand lives and bring at least a little something back from each into our own. This process is not, and cannot be so simple as something the author just does for the benefit of the reader though. It is as much a part of the process of reading as it is the process of writing. A slightly amusing example of this problem can be found in author Ian McEwan. In an interview, McEwan cited an example wherein he helped his son with a high school essay about one of his own books. Much to his chagrin and the crowd in attendance's amusement, he recounts that his son received a low grade on that essay, that the grader (who in this case is acting as a critic) disagreed about what the "authorial moral center of the novel" was (McEwan). The crowd laughs, because to the layman it seems absurd that someone else should know the what an author's novel is about better than them, but in literary criticism it no longer serves our purposes to privilege the role of the author, so it seems distinctly possible that this critic's view on the text is equally valid. This points to the problem of intentionality, the impossibility of knowing everything a writer intended, and more importantly the possibility of making gains (meaningful or not) that the author never envisioned. This is one of the ontological holes, or abysses, to which I refer, and which I attempt to explore through my works. To intellectualize it is to acknowledge the problem, but not to fully appreciate it. These sorts of problems have no single solution, only the ones individuals create for themselves in practice. These practical rather than absolute solutions are examples of the necessary self-delusions for human life. I do not believe reading

and writing to be essentially two separate processes, rather one process, one on-going process, which finds itself manifested differently on each side of the equation. On the reader's side we see a phenomenological process, a self-mediated projection of consciousness and moral standing onto what we read, so it may affect us through the process of communication. For each and every writer, grappling with communication will be a primary consideration in forming their own poetics. For now, though, I want to problematize and explore these areas more thoroughly.

As a writer, I am constantly in contention with ambiguity. Ambiguity to me is the foremost symptom of the problem of intentionality. Writing finds itself fueled off competing artistic urges, both to create ambiguity and to vanquish it. Life is filled with ambiguity, an unambiguous text would fail to represent reality, undercutting the advantage of even a seemingly perfect act of mimesis. Not every writer seeks to represent though, some seek expression, construction, or even to short-circuit the power of metaphors and representation. All these sorts of writing simultaneously work for and against ambiguity, however the problem is most apparent in cases of expression. Where expression seeks a reader, ambiguity of the wrong sort will *seemingly* stop the communicative process, for the reader will not understand what was expressed. In the cases of expression that does not necessarily seek an outlet, certainly there might be published works of this sort but it is much more common to see this in the form of writing in journals or diaries, ambiguity would defeat the attempt to "get it off your chest" as it were. There is a way that writing seems even more prone to ambiguity and the difficulties of context certainly than daily life, and even more than some other forms of art, such as drama and its derivatives. It even seems possible that some fields of art, such as visual art may see the grace and wrath of ambiguity in an even more direct and powerful way. However, I do not know how to untangle that mystery, the only way I am capable of confronting this problem is in and through

language. It is easy to see how ambiguity works against an author, but it also may also come to their aid. In many spheres ambiguity has been embraced as a part of art for its ability to open up spaces that may otherwise be difficult to engage with or express. Craig Dworkin's *Reading the Illegible* comes to mind as an example of the possibilities to be found explicitly by embracing methods which enhance ambiguity. Even there though, it is always bent to some poetic and artistic purpose. Dworkin writes "as *Camp Printing* manifests by its use of poems from a different context, even phrases with no explicit reference to their production take on an added charge when they are the only readable words in an otherwise illegible page" (73). From this we can see that ambiguity is always a matter of context. Nothing is inherently ambiguous or unambiguous, though language opens up a dazzling multitude of situations in which any phrase can be found to be ambiguous. For the writer, ambiguity contains both promise and threat, it rides in on problems of intentionality and makes its home in the gap between the signifier and the signified. Ambiguity bears a strong familial resemblance to ambivalence. They both place the reader between two (or more) points of indeterminacy, but leave intact a structure by which the answer must only be in specific set of options. In this way they are reductive. The gap between the signifier and the signified should be what delimits meaning, not the smaller subset thereof that ambiguity produces.

As a reader, the story only seems to get worse. Ambiguity seems to show up wherever it is looked for. With the ability to imagine alternative contexts for a piece of writing, ambiguity thereby flourishes. Readers have the ability to read ambiguity into any text. This can easily be interpreted as a power for the reader, as Roland Barthes did in *The Death of the Author*. He writes "all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin:

literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (Barthes 2). This power is also a curse though, while the loss of identity may begin with the author, Barthes quietly implies it will always grow to include the reader as well. Once one is in the habit of seeing the ambiguities of texts, of truly savoring them, ambiguities will haunt the reader wherever they go, appearing before their very eyes even where others do not see them. This can be the source of great humor, of great wisdom, but also of great consternation. This truth in my view has been the important work of the post-structuralists. They have blown apart this hole between the signifier and the signified, shown the linguistic and power structures that can and do reside in the gap. I do not wish to say this endeavor is completed, or no longer worth doing, it seems time to bridge the gap that lies between the models of reading and writing, what separates philosophical writing and the common form of the practice. The reader has had to bear, knowingly or unknowingly, far too much of the burden in theory and literature alike as of late; for examples of this we need to look no further than the gap between the bestsellers and conceptual writing, or ‘literary’ fiction and genre fiction. There is value in all these forms of writing, but the common reader has been scared away by some forms of literature by the onus placed on them. The paradigm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century promised to free the reader, but in doing asked of them a Herculean task. This was seen as a fair compromise, but the task has turned out to be Sisyphean instead.

I do not want to pretend ambiguity is any more or any less than it is; it seems possible another writer may wish to harness this very power and danger I am speaking of, but to me ambiguity seems to be inherently untamable, a wild force knowing no allegiances. Ambiguity has had its day. Now let us focus, not with eyes closed and a return to “the ‘message’ of the

Author-God,” but with an honest appreciation for the work all sides put into making literature communicate (Barthes 4). It is towards this end that I suggest an alternative perspective, one that looks in-between the writer and the reader, one which sees instead of ambiguity places of the most interesting and complex forms of communication. It sees in these abysses the light that escapes, and the moment and process through which the potential energy of miscommunication is turned into acts of successful communication.

I am afraid of over-simplifying the ways and reasons in which and for which people write. I do not wish to make hard and fast rules as to what is and is not literature, instead I wish to explore how literature works, and how to make it work better. I do not believe everyone necessarily writes for communicative purposes, though examples that are truly non-communicative seem quite hard to come by. The work of Henry Darger come to mind as one potential example due to his seeming lack of interest in a readership, though due to the aforementioned problems of intentionality, truly discovering whether that is the case seems impossible. Certainly, arguments can and should be made, beliefs should be formed, but knowledge seems beyond our grasp. I do believe looking at writing from a communicative standpoint will bear fruit, though, for even if communication was not the end-goal in every case, it always seems to be an emergent phenomenon from the dual process of reading and writing. For the writer, there is much to be gained from looking at writing as communication. This can be seen in the practical success of reader response theories, pioneered by Wolfgang Iser. On a more theoretical or poetic level, it can be seen by the closer relationship to readers that it fosters, in a more common parlance, as a better understanding by the author of their intended reader. On a more personal level, it can be seen through the evolution of my writing within the M.F.A.

program. I ruminated on these issues in my early writings, and have sought to explore them with an open-minded and wholehearted vigor in this thesis.

If I may be allowed a digression, it seems possible that readers might object to the phrase ‘theoretical or poetic level’ above, for it seems to be using two separate fields as analogues. Certainly, Plato would stand behind the same objection, for he spoke of the “old quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (Plato as qtd. in Griswold). So too have there been many who argued the same in his wake. The artistic / aesthetic and philosophical / logical do seem to clash when seen as worldviews, and this does seem to be how Plato was speaking of them (Griswold). But, part of the essential goal of this project is to bring together clashing perspectives and find the point where they are able to communicate with one another. I believe that this point of synthesis can be found in the realm of poetics. For me, the philosophical need for analysis and the artistic urge to create come together there. It is not a dialectic with a minor and major term, but a synthesis of different perspectives, where they meet on neutral ground. Both can be engaged individually as worldviews and are capable of illuminating much. However, given a sufficient familiarity with each, they can both be adopted to form a temporary ambivalence between the two, to create a turbulent and unstable zone of thoughtful, artistic practice. By accepting both, neither as prior, it is possible to see they are merely different systems of value each attempting to explore objects and ideas the whole of which can never be seen completely from within any one system. Much like the two dimensional people in Abbott’s *Flatland*, we are tasked with understanding things beyond the capabilities of our perceptory apparatus. These systems are merely the toolsets we use, as appropriate, to do so. Much akin to Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, each of these systems on its own will always contain some axioms that are inherently unprovable from within the system, but on which they must necessarily rely. However, our strength lies in our ability to change and

combine perspectives, to get a better idea, over time, than is possible in any one moment. This, as a microcosm, reflects the overall goals of this project, to bring together opposing viewpoints and explore how communication works in and through them.

The reader, I believe, is always taking on a communicative view, whether they are aware of it or not. They are always in the position of seeking to understand all the views a text offers. I see it very much so as a process of proffering followed by acceptance and refusal. To be clear, it is not a matter of accepting what a text offers the reader or rejecting it; the process of reading is always in choosing what to accept and choosing what to reject, because to the reader it is all failures of understanding, and in this way potential miscommunication, until the reader filters and decides which of these messages they wish to commune with. This is, essentially what communication is, to commune, or come together with other people, and share messages or meanings. How then, is this process possible with texts? Though they are created by people, they are not people per se, and they cannot engage in the dance of living language necessary to connect in the same way with people. Communication always requires a coming together of terms, an agreement concerning referents, an aligning of perspectives. These things generally happen subtly and unconsciously, though where more advanced or specialized projects are undertaken a clear setting out of terms is often necessary. Imagine if doctors had to agree on terms concerning the contents of the human body, the identity of specific drugs, or the amounts of specific measurements on the fly. There is good news, though, when humans do this, our empathetic abilities, general similarities, and forms of non-linguistic communication make reaching a middle ground easier than in the case of reading. This seems a place where a concept such as Chomsky's language-learning apparatus, or the studies of linguists and cognitive

scientists might shed further light on the simultaneous ease and difficulties of interpersonal communication.

The primary interest of this project lays in the way this same process works in literature, so we return to that focus. To say texts are not people and that they cannot come together with humans in the same way is to tell far too short a story though. This not to say that there is a separate process for the understanding of texts, one of interpretation rather than communication, or anything of the sort. It is to say that in the process of reading we have learned to account for and subconsciously adapt to certain peculiarities of authors and of the written word itself.

Because texts have authors (with the notable and not at all irrelevant exception of computer generated texts), though we are not able to actually exist in the same space and commune with them, we are able to imagine doing so. This can be seen as the source of much of the work of classical interpretation, the attempts by the philologists of past centuries to uncover like so much buried treasure the one true and proper meaning of a particular work as intended by its author.

The pitfalls of this type of thinking should be clear from the previous paragraphs, and have been explored to a great extent by others, such as Barthes and Derrida. However, there seems to be quite a way in which texts do have moral standing over human beings; they seem to contain knowledge concerning what it is to live a human life and how human lives should be lived. This standing cannot be essential for literature, its meaning is just too variable, and a set of words can never amount to a human life. It only has this standing because we the reader grant it as much.

We do so unevenly and in amounts that both depend on the individual reader and their intentions. This process however, is what is capable of making a particular text a piece of literature. The way in which we go about doing so is by projecting a level of consciousness onto the text. No doubt, its author had a mind and consciousness of their own, but barring their presence that is not

an option to engage in communication with. It is possible that we only do so *because* the writer had consciousness, and presumably chose to present these particular words in this particular order for a reason. This may explain the way in which we can be both distrustful and amused by computer generated texts, for they can either present the risk of texts with no guiding consciousness at all, or we can be entertained by their similarities to the texts of those who we would like to think are essentially stringing words together at random. This particular work is always done on the reader's side of the equation. It is not enough for the reader to simply imagine the book as an expression of a consciousness; though, reading comes from meeting that projection in the middle ground, and engaging with it in an act of communication between equals. From here the reader is easily overwhelmed by multifarious meanings that come springing out of the printed page. To them at this point all the meanings of a word, phrase, or text are in fact potential miscommunications, which they must use their own context, knowledge, and judgment to pare down into usable and useful communication. Reading then is the process of projecting consciousness onto a text and then self-mediating with it in an attempt to discover a discrete meaning that is useful to the one who so participates. Writing acts as the flipside to this mode of understanding.

The work of a writer is to make the process of reading (understood in the above way) easier or harder according to their intentions. They are no more capable of starting or stopping the process completely than of writing texts that have only one clear and absolute meaning throughout time. It is in fact the craft of writing to *change* the communication that is going on between the reader and the text. This is the root from which both writing and miscommunication grow out of. According to Calvert Watkins *American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* the prefix 'mis' comes to us through Old English through the German prefix of Miß, with

a basic meaning of “difference, change.” Even that prefix comes to old German through the shared root ‘mei’ which finds in its linguistic descendants both commute and commune, to change and to come together (Watkins 54). This is exactly what I see miscommunication doing, changing the way in which we come together. While the prefix ‘mis-‘ has borne a negative connotation through most or all of its time in the English language, it is time to redeem miscommunication’s place in the lexicon. Time to accept that a writer’s role is to miscommunicate, to change how we communicate with their texts. Each text demands its own handshake, sets its own terms for the meeting, and it this ground that the author can shift depending on what they wish their text to be like and to do. To form a poetics for me then is to set the stage on which my texts will inevitably miscommunicate with the reader. If they are to fill in for and inform the necessary lies of the reader as I want them to, then they must be capable of miscommunicating with the reader as such. Writing for me is about making sure my works tell the right falsehoods in the right way so that they not only speak to the reader, but so that they change the way the reader sees the world. This need not be and should not be an extravagant change; I do not imagine myself nor wish to be a writer of pop-philosophy that people use to justify their beliefs, as with the works, for example, of Ayn Rand. Rather, it should be no more than a subtle opening up of perceptory options. An invitation to view the labyrinth of human life diachronically, and to appreciate the perspectives humans are capable of and the value inherent in each of them.

## Part 2: Beckett and the Poetics of Miscommunication

My own interest in miscommunication comes fundamentally from an interest in hermeneutics and questions of meaning. It seems natural to me to ask questions of fidelity about the meaning creation process. How can we know that the meaning that got through was the right one? To know that it did not warp and bend in the trip? How can we make sure the proper translation took place from words to thoughts, even assuming the fidelity of the words in the first place? It is out of these sets of questions that I began to look into both my works and others from the lens of miscommunication. Communication is by its nature perspectival. In order to work under normal circumstances communication requires two separate consciousness' each of which attempts to share some portion of their perspective towards the shared goal of building understanding. This process is fraught enough with difficulty that shelves of self-help books, psychological and sociological texts attempt to improve just small parts of it. Entire industries exist in every realm of life, from education, to business, and marriage, that seek to help mediate issues with interpersonal communication. But I am not a businessman, nor a counsellor, so I seek to work on the question in the realm I do practice in, writing. That problems in communication are almost always solved by the addition of a professional mediator is a good first clue that literature has an important stake in this question too, for it will be argued it is mediated, through the process of reading rather than by another human being. So, it seems natural to look to the field of literary theory to see how this question links into the prevailing thought. The question though does not find a resting place, if post-structuralist thought in the vein of Derrida is correct, meaning constantly branches out from language and therefore from literature. The concept of a check for fidelity seems absurd. This conflicts with the way everyday people think and talk about the possibility of miscommunication, for it certainly seems like a real thing that has the potential

to increase or decrease based on circumstances. It is possible it is a large scale error on the part of cognition, that in fact there is no such thing as miscommunication. There is a major theory in the field of ethics called 'Error Theory' that argues essentially the same thing about the concept of morality, it's all just a mistaken way of talking about preferences, one grounded in a flawed perceptory apparatus (Ayer 18). However to take such a position seems extreme, it does not seem prudent to give up hope concerning the standard conception without at least a fight. And why turn on the theory, fight an uphill battle against it, when we can embrace it? So we return this concept that the common solution to miscommunication is mediation. The process of reading is always a process of mediation: in that the text always comes between the author and the reader, and as will be argued there is even yet another layer of self-mediation that lays between the text and the reader. So why does this specter still haunt literature, why hasn't it given up the ghost? Perhaps the perspective has just been reversed: miscommunication does not have to destroy the communicative process, but can actually enhance it. Does personal context really explain all the variability in human understanding, fully explain why meaning should keep branching out and out ad infinitum? Perhaps miscommunication works as a form of linguistic mutation, constantly adding in new options for meaning, essentially at random to the linguistic pool, only so they might be pruned out if they serve no purpose? What then of art, the practice of writing, and of criticism? This is the spirit of the investigation I enter into, to see if miscommunication might be saved from the public malaise it suffers. After all, miscommunication is not the opposite of communication. That would be no communication at all.

If miscommunication is mutational, part of an adaptory process of language, then what could we expect to see? There should be new words, born out of mistakes, and certainly there

are, etymologies are filled with what in the days of prescriptivist linguistics would be called bastardizations and corruptions. The same should apply to entire phrases as well. The disagreement in Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook* around the phrase "Mr. Slick and Mister Brother are one of the two most baddest dude in town, and Sutter Street," comes to mind and, while fictional, seems indicative that the process works on that level as well (Mackey 26). Immediately in the text individuals start attempting to parse it and determine what is attempting to be expressed, some arguing that it is merely an accident, the result of "bad schooling" while others launch into the 'purposeful' meaning of this non-traditional bit of language, but there is no reason why it cannot be both accidental and meaningful (Mackey 27). If we are to take Derridean theory seriously, it must be meaningful, so the real action that is taking place after this potential 'mistake' is in on the part of the readers, it is in fact in the act of interpretation where all the action happens. So the question becomes what if the entire process is interpretation? Certainly, it could be a case of cooperation; we merely assume the other person is following the same rules and assumptions as we are in language, and so any travel off the beaten path of language must be followed carefully for its meaning, and if none can be ascertained the only natural solution is to assume it is accidental and move to the closest sensical translation we can. This is the essential concept behind Paul Grice's cooperative principle of communication, and his maxims for successful communication (Grice 28-29). But what then of literature? There is no clear other person to speak to. Older explanations likely would have fallen on the author's intention and left it at that. The claim of being able to clearly and absolutely ascertain an author's intentions seem to have died by the 20<sup>th</sup> century though, leaving nothing behind in its wake but unresolved questions. However, that is not the only path through. We can focus instead where that interpretation takes place, inside the reader. A phenomenological understanding will still require

an accounting for how literature is able to both encapsulate and simultaneously mediate miscommunication, which will be explored and argued using the works of Samuel Beckett. Beckett has been chosen not because his works provide special insight unavailable in other works of literature, but instead because his works are prone to complex readings which themselves question the nature and possibility of meaning being expressed. If a redeeming value is to be found in miscommunication, it makes sense to look to works that problematize the everyday understanding of communication without resorting to vagueness or ambiguity and their resultant relativism or nihilism.

Before launching into literary analysis, it behooves us to understand more fully the dominant paradigm of communication, and where that line of thought has gotten us. Communication and miscommunication seem to have become larger and larger popular concerns over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the modern techniques of communication have been embraced to greater and greater extents by corporate culture and public interests, we have also seen a backlash against what is perceived as inauthentic communication. One of the effects of this backlash has taken place in the form of an increase in purposeful use of irony, most prominently in media and entertainment. This traces its roots back to a feeling that the language that was once subversive, the former language of the counter-culture, has been coopted to ends not in-keeping with the attitudes that spawned those movements. Both the popularity of and the push against cultural forces such as reality television and viral marketing show the reality of this conflict over how the tools of communication are to be used. This phenomenon is also evident in an academic context in the relabeling and restructuring of traditional humanities-based rhetoric departments into considerably more popular communications departments using a hybrid of humanities and social sciences methods. This cannot be explained by a sudden increase in the

difficulty of communications, for while going back into older forms of English with more fluid rules of grammar and spelling can be challenging for a current English speaker, that the language still operated fine for communicative purposes before the series of varying successful reforms throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century seems indisputable. Even with the split in spelling, vocabulary, and pronunciation between American English and rest of the world, inter-readability remains no major problem, so the question becomes why did the tools of communication and the risk of miscommunication become such a large concern during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond?

Winston Weathers identifies this concern as “the communication pathos”, connecting it with an increased semantic awareness and the likening it to the changes that took place in science throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Weathers 19-23 & 38-40). He argues that as a delayed result of the industrial revolution, and in particular as a response to the chaotic worldview presented by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution this pathos began to take hold (Weathers 29-36). Julia Kristeva speaks of “the disintegration of literature”, demarcated by Roland Barthes as a “tragic awareness (around 1850)” as the time of the classics and romantics came to an end (Kristeva 187). Weathers argues that his communication pathos can be seen through the writings of the Anglo-American modernists saying they “have maintained a constant survey and analysis of a variety of communication problems and have helped formulate a variety of semantic positions” (43-44). Weathers regards literature as a bell weather, both showing what people at the time thought, and informing the common reader at the time what to worry and think about. Weathers argues that “Nearly every major writer of the twentieth century reveals, if not a consciously organized semantic awareness, at least a sensitivity to communication problems that, by the time his canon is complete, takes on the dimensions of a complete and intricate semantic structure.” (67). While the semantic awareness Weathers speaks of may have blossomed in the writing of

the modernists, the essential challenge it deals with, the threat of miscommunication, cannot be something which only came about within the past century. Miscommunication in and through literature cannot be considered something which will end, but rather it is an essential part of literature that has come to the forefront of interest. The question is not just why miscommunication has become such a large concern for both the individual and society, but even more so what can be done to redeem the concept of miscommunication from its current pathologization, so we might see the light it can shine on questions of hermeneutics.

While 1850 may mark the beginning of the larger intellectual concern with language and communication, it actually presented a drop in how much it was written about in general (see table 1). This likely relates to highly prescriptivistic and positivistic values of the post-enlightenment concerning language. This can be seen in academic attempts to explain and proscribe concerning language, which came to a head around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning with Gottlob Frege's 1892 paper *On Sense and Reference*, followed by Bertrand Russell's 1905 response *On Denoting*, the current analytical branch of Philosophy of Language had been born. It would not see another major boon until the introduction of J.L. Austin's speech act theory in his 1955 lecture series *How to Do Things with Words*. It is highly interesting that just around this time the word 'miscommunication' is coined and begins to see a huge increase in use, year over year. (see table 2). Austin though, in his attempt to explain how spoken language and written language are able to instantiate meanings in the real world felt it necessary to exclude literature for as he says "Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously' ... I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem" (Austin 9). For Austin, this is a matter of intentionality, poems and literature are not written to *do things*, as his lectures were entitled, a poem or a novel cannot have the illocutionary force to marry people, or to make

someone a president. For this reason, he wrote them off as ‘non-serious’ uses of language. As J. Hillis Miller would much later point out in his text *Speech Acts in Literature*, this about as a result of Austin entering a double-bind, where Austin both requires honest intention to create a performative utterance, which is to say, something like make a promise (for an insincere promise is not one at all), but at the same time “the performative must *not* depend on the intentions or sincerity of the one who speaks... if he is to attain his goal of securing law and order, the words themselves must do the work, not the secret intentions of the writer or speaker” (Miller 29). So, the dominant paradigm in the study of communication for quite some time held that literature could not be considered ‘normal’ speech, and had to be cordoned off into its own special category. In the time since, theorists such as Mary Louise Pratt and J. Hillis Miller have made convincing arguments to open up literature as a regular and natural part of speech by showing the ways in which all speech acts act performatively, simultaneously existing in and creating their own context. In this way the speech acts of literature and poetry are no more or less felicitous than any other more ‘ordinary’ speech act. However in the search for a poetics of miscommunication it will in fact be argued that literature and storytelling do have the ability to create meaning above and beyond that of the ordinary phrase. This ability comes from literature’s creation of potential miscommunication by manipulating context and using the reflexive nature of narrative to cut off the ceaseless and seamless nature of reality. That, in fact, by doing so additional meaning is not only created for the reader, but the possibility of effective communication is further instantiated. Rather than speech act theory, it is a different approach that will provide the most fertile ground in the search to redeem miscommunication.

In his introduction to *The Act of Reading*, one of the seminal texts in the creation of reader-response theory, Wolfgang Iser argues “the literary work is a form of communication, for

it impinges upon the world, upon prevailing social structures, and upon existing literature. Such encroachments consist in the reorganization of those thought systems and social systems invoked by the repertoire of the text; this reorganization reveals the communicatory purpose” (Iser ix). He offers to the reader a theory in which meaning is neither contained in the text, nor in the reader, but in a mediated in-between, in the very act of reading itself. Iser argues that “it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to ‘communicate’ with the reader, in the sense they induce him to participate both in the production and the comprehension of the work’s intention... this, however, is not the same as saying comprehension is arbitrary, for the mixture of determinacy and indeterminacy conditions the interaction between the text and the reader” (24). From Iser’s use of the word ‘indeterminacy’ the reader might wish to draw the conclusion that ambiguity works to enhance the reader’s involvement in a text. However, this understanding does not hold up to Iser’s later statements, when he says:

indeterminacy arises out of the communicatory function of literature, and as this function is performed by way of the formulated determinacies of the text, clearly, the indeterminacies arising from the formulated text cannot be without a structure. There are in fact two basic structures of indeterminacy in the text—blanks, and negations. These are essential conditions for communication, for they set in motion in interaction that takes place between text and reader, and to a certain extent they also regulate it. (182)

In this we can see that it is not ambiguity that opens up the indeterminacy of the text, but in fact the reader’s relationship to the text’s self-created structure. Iser continues on to say “as blanks mark the suspension of connectability between textual segments they simultaneously form a condition for the connection to be established” (195). The communicative process inherent to

reading then does not rely on the author providing them with ambiguous possibilities to decide upon, but actually lies in the reader's ability to synthesize the varied perspectives inside the text with their own personal experiences in the mediated middle ground of reading.

What then though of when the 'reorganization of thought systems and social systems' is turned upon the very communicatory purpose Iser wrote of? This will be the theoretical armature this paper builds its argument upon, seeking in Beckett those places where literature folds back upon itself and offers miscommunication as a form of communication. To do so is to seek some of the most troubled examples of communication, and to instantiate the entire endeavor through them. Iser argues reading is a matter of new experience changing old, at the same time as old affects new; however, he argues the true communicative power of literature lies in active participation in the aesthetic experience. He writes "The ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience... however, this position is not entirely nonpragmatic, for it can only come about when existing codes are transcended or invalidated" (Iser 134). So then, that brings us to Beckett, who subverts the communicative 'code' of literature and its underpinning meta-narratives by bogging down this process, and in doing so creates an aesthetic experience giving the reader vantage concerning both the work and language itself.

Throughout Beckett's trilogy of novels the reader can see him progressively moving away from the traditional forms of the novel. The lines between character, setting, plot, and narrative are increasingly blurred as he rejects the usefulness of these as distinguishable entities to what he wishes to write. In this way Beckett's novels can be seen as taking an interest in limits, boundaries, and frontiers, where to meet them and the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of overcoming them. Beckett, being the writer he was naturally gravitated towards making these

points simultaneously through and about language. A measurement can never be more exact than its tool, so it seems a natural place for the expansion of such an analysis. Beckett though did not seek to create an even-keeled analysis, he sought to truly explore not through critical distance, but through direct proximity to the contradictions at hand. Beckett wrapped himself in impossibilities, seeking no respite from paradoxes, particularly in the places where they imperiled his entire endeavor. As Beckett wrote in *Worstward Ho* “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” (89). Failure was not anathema to his project, but essential. To chase after failure in writing, to make it a goal, is to personally take in and instantiate the problems of intentionality rather than shying away from them. To do so was to make all of his writings about writing, not merely as examples thereof, but as seminal texts which are to decide the vitality of any attempt at writing. It is for these reasons I find myself drawn as both a writer and a thinker to Beckett. He took on the far limits of writing, he explored limits as both the indescribable and our very methods of describing, he wrote about everything by writing about nothing. In *Watt* he wrote “For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man” (61). This is simultaneously both how Beckett wrote and what Beckett wrote about.

I come to Beckett to appreciate how he expressed the inexpressible, how he took in good faith all of the problems of intentionality and mimesis and included them in good faith in his writings. Beckett’s trilogy of novels are rich ground for understanding what he was attempting to do as a writer because they came about at a time of great artistic turmoil and productivity for him. Writing did not come easily to Beckett, which is perhaps exactly why it is so important what he worked so hard to produce. Barely three pages into *Malone Dies* he wrote “Perhaps I

shall not have time to finish. On the other hand perhaps I shall finish too soon. There I am back at my old aporetics” (175). Aporetics is practice in philosophy of raising objections such that the argument comes to an impasse, or more tellingly a paradox, such a concept points to the limited nature direct and clear philosophical argumentation, as well of language itself. This is the draw of Beckett, an author who does not back down from intellectual challenge or difficulty by merely writing it off as an ambiguity or a paradox, but instead rushes in to meet it full on, problematizing it and challenging difficult or impossible concepts so we can recognize them by the shadows they cast.

There is another meaning of aporia as well though, a rhetorical one which requires the speaker express doubt (often feigned) before asking how to proceed. Beckett cannot be accused of mere sophistry; however, this type of aporetics is no less relevant to his works, for it will always be through the reader’s engagement that the text continues, and ultimately he leaves it on their shoulders to fully grapple with the questions he raises.

Aporia cannot be the entire story though. For while many laud Beckett for his philosophical depth, it is far from the entirety of what he does. During an interview Beckett said “if the subject of my novels could be expressed in philosophical terms, there would have been no reason for my writing them” (Beckett as qtd. in D’Aubarede 217). His goal in writing was beyond being merely aporetic, and reached into the realm of the poetic. It is important to look at the phrasing of Beckett’s quote for he says much of interest there. He is upfront that his novels, to him, do have a clear subject, which shows even as he writes about problems of intentionality he is not merely the disinterested philosopher but actively involved in such problems as an artist. Secondly, and much more importantly, he speaks of expressive need to write. He does not deny the potential value of philosophical insights, but if the subjects of his novels had been expressible

as such “there would have been no reason for **my** writing them.” So, there is something both internal and expressive about Beckett’s trilogy of novels, even as he writes of “the inadequacy of language to express reality and the radical resistance of experience to reification within form” (Bolin 129). This problematizes a narrative of Beckett as the deep philosopher, offering up aporetics to show the failures of language, expression, modernity, and the self. Instead Beckett was involved in the trenches of these failures himself through his works and clearly himself had something to express through his works even as he fought against classical Cartesian conception of the ego, or as Barthes put it in literary terms, the “Author-God” (4).

So then, how might we make heads or tails of his work, to understand what he was attempting in showing the reader the failures of language through the tools of language itself? Various critical approaches might promise us a way through. Enrico Garzilli regards Beckett’s trilogy as best understood under the field of mythology as concerned “with the search for existence, for being, for definition” and that *The Unnamable* and the other novels in his trilogy “can be seen as parodies of the creation the creation myth” (McCarthy 88). Where Dieter Wellershoff argues it is the end of myth, how “Beckett now demonstrates that language is the fundamental deception” and that he moves beyond the old styles as his trilogy progresses (Esslin 102). Beckett has been a very important writer to French post-structuralist thinking, including scholars such as Derrida. For example, Richard Begam argued in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* that Beckett’s trilogy itself is a post-modern move “toward a third term,” in which “everything and its opposite are true (Begam 175 & 180). In particular he argues “*The Unnamable* delivers us, in a way no previous novel ever has, into a new literary domain where we explore a world not of transcendence but of contingency, a world not of truth but of fiction, a world not of finding but of making.” (Begam 183). It seems the critical consensus on Beckett

resembles Beckett's writing itself. If we are generous we will view it as aporetic, and if cynical we might see it as relativistic or nihilistic. However, Samuel Beckett once wrote "Let us hope the time will come... when language is most efficiently used where it is being efficiently misused" (Beckett *Disjecta* as qtd. in Begam 151). As is often the case, Beckett's words seem to contradict themselves on first reading, but in doing so he puts on the inevitable path towards looking at his works communicatively.

Our attempt to look at Beckett's trilogy from a communicative standpoint will not be an attempt to unearth the true meaning behind his texts, or to find out his one true authorial intent. Rather it is to engage in the games he is playing and look for those moments where we might learn something about the game itself, so as to be better players and creators ourselves. While acknowledging the debt owed to Wittgenstein, I also take this metaphor from Beckett himself. Malone writes "I shall never do anything any more from now on but play... But perhaps I shall not succeed any better than hitherto. Perhaps as hitherto I shall find myself abandoned, in the dark, without anything to play with. Then I shall play with myself." (Beckett 174-175). The reader is aware that the ordinary rules of reality do not necessarily apply to fiction, and it is up to the author to create a framework in which the results of reading are neither over-determined nor impossibly vague. The reader is always attempting to discover the rules as they go, in doing so they both put an implicit trust in the author's construction, but also reserve the right to make judgments about both the parts and the whole. To attempt to uncover the author's intention and make meaning for ourselves is the dual game we play every time we read. Reading features an inherent self-reflexivity in this, in the way we imagine the book as another but it is accessible only through ourselves and bears its mark on us. Beckett speaks of Malone participating in this style of playing with himself. By writing he imagines the reader and how they will understand

and misunderstand what they read, what they will think of it, he makes the game by imagining how it will be played; and on the inverse the reader plays in their attempt to discover the author's intentions and create a useful and relevant meaning for themselves, they imagine why they themselves would write such, and in doing so play the game by imaging how it was made.

However, it is easy to see where Beckett might have chided against such a concept, or at very least its applications and stricter adherents. Certainly there are tropes, habits of reading, and assumptions that abound. It might be possible to say these are overwhelmingly the contents of our daily language, for in most cases the societally set decorum does seem to win out over honest and sometimes unpleasant expression. It is easy to read Beckett not only as subversive, something he certainly was, but as a subversive, someone whose interest lies exclusively in the destruction of power structures without any larger goal. John Bolin argues Beckett's *Three Novels* "set out to subvert the novel's narratives of self-discovery (especially the fictional diary and the *Bildungsroman*); equally they work to disturb our faith in an aesthetic that might either posit the artwork as a consolation for suffering... or, alternatively, regard the novel as a socializing tutor of thought and feeling." (113). It is completely possible that a sense of anger over injustice could motivate a person to write against the structures of power and identity (and Beckett almost certainly saw a connection here), however given what has already been said, it seems more likely that Beckett was much too personally tied up into his writings and the questions behind his writings for *only that* to be his motivation. Beckett wrote "I must simply be on my guard, reflecting on what I have said before I go on and stopping, each time disaster threatens, to look at myself as I am. That is just what I wanted to avoid. But there seems to be no other solutions." (183). I see in this the same sense I have of fiction not as a Nussbaumian teacher, but as the stuff of necessary self-delusion, as capable of telling us about identity because

it is a necessary component thereof, one which we dare not acknowledge lest we risk the whole, and the enterprise come crumbling down. These seem to be the stakes for Beckett, or at least for me as I read Beckett, we find out the ways in which language has both a Heideggerian danger and saving power, and the way it always comes between perception and reality to form identity.

So then, if identity and the treachery of language are what Beckett wrote of in his trilogy, how can it tell us about communication and miscommunication? If Beckett is attempting to subvert the existing codes and tools of literature how can that end up being a case of communication? This argument will take some time to come to fruition, but ultimately it is through the shared step of mediation. Beckett trusted in his readers to see through his contradictions and into the overall picture of the text they are reading being one of many, each of which provides the structure for its own understanding and for the enhancement of other texts. Beckett wrote novels that are simultaneously both highly reflexive and extra-textual. As reflexive novels, they actively constitute the very process of reading as it has been put forth by Wolfgang Iser, and so in this way ask the reader to look into them as a way of looking into their own reading process. This point bears elaboration, but first we must explore Beckett's system of the world. He connects his trilogy up through references to shared characters, abstracted into new situations and given no agency so as to hint that they themselves might be fictional characters within the fiction he is making, created not by Beckett the author, but by protagonist of *The Unnamable*, or Malone from *Malone Dies*. John Bolin argues that "these connections... developed in part for Beckett's early fascination with complicating what he termed 'closure' and 'ending' in the novel" and that ultimately it comes from "Beckett's enduring fascination with the novel's potential to stage authorship as self-authorship and to dramatize the reflexive relationship between the voice and the story it tells" (114). This version of Beckett's interests seems backed

up when the main character of the *The Unnamable* seems to back up such a claim by saying “I have nothing to do, that is to say nothing in particular. I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. No one compels me to, there is no one, it’s an accident, a fact” (Beckett 308).

However, the story does not end there. What does such a relationship of self-authorship and reflexive voice communicate to the reader? It is not simply a matter of exploring Beckett’s experimentations in form, but of what such experimentations mean to the reader, as they go through these books Beckett published and presumably meant to be read. Bolin postulates that Beckett includes his in his work signs pointing to “an awareness of the larger pattern that sounds the voice of Malone behind Molloy, as the latter revisions sound at that of *The Unnamable* behind Malone.” (Bolin 124). This analysis could in fact be extended to include Moran as the writer between Molloy and Malone. This reading is backed up when Malone says “But let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise, in two or three days if I remember rightly. Then it will all be over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave” (Beckett 229). However the ultimate relevance of this is that Beckett’s trilogy comes to resemble the same text repeated over multiple times, becoming more abstract and focusing more on language and the difficulties of communication with every iteration. In fact, that analyses such as Bolin’s are able to take place seems to indicate that even when almost all of the standard literary guideposts have been shorn away, as in the latter two novels of the trilogy, the reader is no less capable of making meaning out of the text and of gaining insight into the world through their own interpretation of Beckett’s words. So then, it seems the best way to look at how communication survives in Beckett’s works will be to explore how it perseveres out in the tundra, even as its standard bearers are taken away, to see how

miscommunication performs when given the opportunity that is usually denied to it. Towards this end we will focus on *The Unnamable*, and to a lesser degree *Malone Dies*, as the more complex and abstract parts of the trilogy. Let us go back to the earlier quotation of Beckett then, and see first how he engages in the efficient misuse of language, and only then see how that creates the path for an efficient use.

Whether *The Unnamable* is a novel is not necessarily a straightforward question. While this may seem an ancillary question, it is in fact quite important. Whether or not it is a novel will change what the text has to say about itself, and resultantly our interpretative strategy when dealing with it. Certainly, it could be understood as something different than a novel, it would simply require a different interpretive framework. We prime ourselves to deal with a business memo differently from a piece of literature, though both can be understood through a communicative or aesthetic lens. From an outside perspective, it seems to be treated as a novel, it communicates to the reader the standard indicators its status as a novel, in particular it has the publishers peritext asserting it as such, in my copy its pairing with the other two novels of Beckett's trilogy, his name and face emblazoned on the cover, as assertion that all three are in fact novels, and all the other standard features ala the table of contents, publisher's information page, and page numbers (Genette). There are several important ways that *The Unnamable* differs from the standard novel though, including a lack of definite characters, a setting no more than hinted at, and no discernable plot. It plays with but does not completely drop its attachment to narrative, offering an encapsulated view in which it is a possibility that Beckett's other works might be contained within it. Beckett's other novels in the trilogy all feature him toying with these particular expectations; however, *The Unnamable* is clearly a further departure than those previous attempts, where even the names and identities of characters are ethereal if not

contradictory. Contradiction is not the end goal here, but a communicative tool of value. As Beckett wrote in *Molloy* “Out? I said. Where? Out! Vagueness I abhor” (94). These apparent contradictions are not merely examples of vagueness, but communicative challenges given to the reader.

Beckett’s trilogy is filled with seeming and actual contradictions, no text more so than *The Unnamable*. He places a trust in the reader to figure out which is which and their relevance beyond the mere continuation of the narrative. His contradictions though rarely carry the weight of assertion, rather they can be read as conflicting suppositions, as in the case of the final lines of *The Unnamable* “...it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” (407). Certainty is not paramount, so long as there is an awareness of terms that seem set against each other. This backs up the claim that Beckett writes through a form of aporetics, but what this really shows us is a submerged hierarchy within Beckett’s writing. Beckett does not leave points vague or ambiguous; he would rather contradict himself than to make the same points uncertain. For him, to challenge understanding, even on points such as the meaning of a phrase or whether an event happened, expresses potential already there and outlines boundaries in a way that offering up ambiguous options to be decided on by the reader is unable to do. It is better to contradict and risk confusion than close off all the potential meanings a reader might produce. Ambiguity is inherently a reductive form of vagueness because the reader will already draw from and make connections to the varied perspectives within a text using Iser’s tools of the blank and the contradiction. The blank asks of the reader that they make connections, without being overly restrictive in limiting the connections they can make. The contradictions makes the reader question what variabilities in perspective could lead to opposite truths. To give them only two

(the bi in ambiguous) or more uncertain 'options' works to limit their interpretive strategy rather than expand it. In *The Unnamable* Beckett draws what can be seen as an extended metaphor for the failures of ambiguity and ambivalence:

If instead of having something to say I had something to do... it would be water, water, with my thimble I'd go and draw it from one container and then I'd go and pour it into another, or there would be four, or a hundred, half of them to be filled, the other half to be emptied, numbered, the even to be emptied, the uneven to be filled, no it would be more complicated, less symmetrical, no matter, to be emptied, and filled, in a certain way, a certain order, in accordance with certain homologies, the word is not too strong, so that I'd have to think, tanks, communicating, communicating, connected by pipes under the floor, I can see it from here, always showing the same level, no that wouldn't work, too hopeless, they'd arrange for me to have little attacks of hope from time to time, yes, pipes and taps, I can see it from here, so I that I might fool myself from time to time.

(390-391)

This shows that a rule-based approach to communication will always ultimately end up as no more than the material busywork of attaching sayings to rules which in fact have no inherent value. Ambiguity limits options to make it easier on the reader, it favors only a select set of possible meanings as an always half-hearted gesture towards openness. With this we can see how ambiguity serves to provide false hope and is ultimately reductive rather than productive to the hermeneutic aspect of the process of reading. We can now launch full speed the analysis of how and why Beckett utilizes miscommunication in his *Three Novels* trilogy.

*The Unnamable* focuses on a nameless “I” (hereafter referred to as The Nameless for simplicity), that finds itself in an unknown location, even the specifics of the location are largely unknown, with no certain identity. By and large, the bulk of the novel comes from The Nameless’ reactions to a series of voices that the reader is never able to directly interact with. No dialogue is presented directly from the voices, and The Nameless at points expresses an uncertainty if they are really are even there, as when he says “Yes, I know they are words, there was a time I didn’t, as I still don’t know if they are mine.” (Beckett TU 348). The sourceless voices work in the same way a novel works for the reader. The Nameless finds itself in uncertain grounds, being told ideas, facts, and most importantly stories without a certainty of where they come from, their veracity, or their purpose; The Nameless is left to sort through them to determine what part of them comes from the other, what of them is true, and their relevance. The metaphor is not perfect, but the reader of literature is put in similar terms, left to determine things such as artistic intent, meaning and relevance from textual precipitates. Following Wolfgang Iser’s concept of reading as a mediated communicative process, the reader is given both the tools and the right to determine these things by their relationship to the text as an aesthetic viewer of a piece of art. The Nameless though finds itself as an unwilling participant in this process, saying “I might well tell another of Mahood’s stories and no more about it, to be understood in the way I was given to understand it, namely as being about me... this will leave me free to consider how I may best proceed with my own affair, beginning at the point where I had to interrupt it, under duress, or through fear, or through ignorance. It will be the last story” (Beckett 320). The Nameless does not wish to be involved in this process, and denies the relevance of stories to his own life, his own project. That project though can easily be seen as seeking Beckett’s goal of literary failure from *Worstward Ho*. In this way, The Nameless engages in the same process as

the reader, but seeking opposite ends, so when he tells stories it is for the express purpose of miscommunicating. The reader on the other hand will always project consciousness onto the piece of literature, treat it like another human being, with the ability to express meaning relevant beyond its specific framing. In much the same way as *The Nameless* then the reader must sort through the 'voices' that come at them to determine what the perspectives inside the work are, what the perspective of the work as a whole is, what they can safely disregard, and ultimately what they believe should be the meaning of the work for them. Beckett himself acknowledges the way we necessarily project consciousness onto books in *Malone Dies* when he writes "For all I ever had in this world all has been taken from me, except the exercise-book, so I cherish it, it's human." (263). *The Nameless* seeks failure, to make this process stop working though, to reach a final end to the literary-narrative/communicative process. It is in fact the reader's action of reading *The Unnamable* which spoils this process for *The Nameless*, which stops him from saying "the last, conclusive word that will leave no more to be said, that word which does not exist and for the sake of which talking exists" (Esslin 92). So here the stakes of miscommunication come into play, how a reader can do the work *The Nameless* refuses the point of and then does anyway, how miscommunication can be turned into communication by reading. However, it is important to remember that *The Nameless* is not the true author of all this, that in fact it, much like it thinks it is, is the unwitting pawn in an act of communication through miscommunication, or miscommunication as communication. So, let us forge on and find other places in which Beckett miscommunicates with us, and why.

Most of the voices in *The Unnamable* are not given any sort of identifier, they remain unnamed just like *The Nameless*, but not even identifiable with something as permeable as *The Nameless*' pronoun "I". Some, however, *The Nameless* does identify some, it is not necessarily

clear whether these names are provided by the voice itself or furnished upon it by The Nameless; in particular, he names Mahood, who tells stories that the Nameless often tries to resist and sometimes entertains, and Worm, a being mostly defined by what he is not. The Nameless spends much of the novel concerned with the voices' purposes and methods. He supposes they might be tricking him with narrative, saying "I mean instead of resuming me at the point where I was left off, they pick me up at a much later stage, perhaps thereby hoping to induce in me the illusion that I had got through the interval all on my own" (Beckett 324). Just as the reader is left to fill in the gaps, whether they be the most inconsequential points, like never seeing someone use the bathroom in the movie, or the most important ones, gaps in the inductive record, caused by something inexpressible or immaterial. The Nameless is concerned not just with the fidelity of the stories in transit, but that they are its stories, and that what it thinks are its stories do not originate in this potential seed of miscommunication. For the reader though, the stories are always heard through The Nameless, they are inherently its, because to us it is always him telling the stories. The risk is not primarily one of fidelity (errors and the inherently difficult nature of translation aside), but risks of understanding. Because the reader is situated in a more stable context, they do not suffer the same existential risk directly, but there is no doubt a way in which literature and art is capable of molding the stories we tell ourselves, providing the material to fill in the blanks. The Nameless worries about how a misunderstood or miscommunicated story, which in its case is just any story, could actually change a person's life. At points he sets himself firmly against the voices, saying "Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never

understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit.” (318). Even outright rejection does not stop the process though. The Nameless desires the possibility of always coming with his own words, language, and stories, of leaving behind the baggage of understandability, of communication. This essentially boils down to a concern that the entire framework of language carries in its essence miscommunication. It asks of the voices “If only they would stop talking for nothing, pending their stopping everything. Nothing? That’s soon said. It is not for me to judge. What would I judge with? It’s more provocation.” (345). To attempt to communicate will always be to invite in the risk, or perhaps it is more of a promise, of miscommunication. It is easy to ask for silence, or nothingness, but this remains an impossibility so long as there are multiple beings of differing and incomplete perspectives. Beckett points out in this, by saying it is a provocation, that the work of communication is always to come.

Miscommunication attempted as such does not seem to suffer from the same combined threat/promise that will not allow the voices that plague the nameless to stop. The Nameless says “it is always well to try and find out what one is talking about, even at the risk of being deceived.” (Beckett 354). Miscommunication seems to always take place in the present, as it must always exist in the flux between perspectives. To be deceived in this case does not always seem to be such a bad thing. The Nameless offers up this insight “this voice which has denatured me, which never stops, but often grows confused and falters, as if it were going to abandon me. But it is merely a passing weakness, unless it is done on purpose, to teach me hope.” (344). The key difference here from the water container example is that this hope is taught rather than arranged, it is the hope of an understanding built upon personal ideation rather than of material completion. While we know The Nameless is never capable of embracing such a hope, the reader certainly is. With this we can understand why *The Unnamable* is made up of so many small

stories, particularly those of Mahood, which are summarily questioned and rejected. By offering discrete examples of what is to The Nameless certain miscommunication and what is to the reader potential miscommunication, a cohesive whole can still be created. Because of the reader's mediation, because they project consciousness on the text, they are ultimately responsible for and capable of turning potential miscommunication into actual communication. What about when it is not just nameless voices in an eternal void though? The Nameless tells us "it's his turn again now, he who neither speaks nor listens, who has neither body nor soul... the attempt must be made, in the old stories incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his... the story of the silence that he never left, that I should have never left." (406). It seems clear that communication as such can never say its final word, so we will look now, not where there are only voices and the void, but within one of the Nameless' stories, another level of abstraction down, a little closer to the ordinary, to find that point where miscommunication turns into communication, now that we know to listen to the silence and look in the gaps, that it is the blanks which connect stories not only to each other, but to us as well.

In *Malone Dies* Beckett offered up the line "But for a long time now I have been hearing things confusedly... I would willingly attribute part of my shall I say misfortunes to this disordered sense were I not unfortunately rather inclined to look upon it as a blessing." (201). How can a predilection for miscommunication be both unfortunate and a blessing? The lofty 'blessing' seems much more powerful than the rather pedestrian 'unfortunate' here, letting us know that this predilection might be the sort of thing one might not wish for, but that if one has it would turn out to be of great value and meaning. How then, can we tell the difference between the ordinary cases of miscommunication and these exceptional cases? Beckett goes on to write "I did

not want to write, but I had to resign myself to it in the end. It is in order to know where I have got to, where he has got to. At first I did not write, I just said the thing. Then I forgot what I had said” (201). It is in the act of writing that this predilection for miscommunication finds itself transformed into a blessing. In ordinary language use it inconveniences and disrupts life, but in literary writing that same disruption serves to pry open the reflexive folds of the self and the hermeneutic process. Writing for Beckett is essentially the art of communicating through miscommunicating, which is to say admitting that language can never communicate exactly what it purports to and then using that gap as the very means of communication. Perhaps the most famous quote of *Malone Dies* is “I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing*. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark.” (187). It is at these very moments when art pollutes language, that a phrase so firmly attaches itself to our brain that it changes the very way we perceive reality, those moments where we turn off the lights so we might truly see the darkness, that we can finally realize exactly what language is and how it works, that we can see, if only for a moment, the true nature of that which language shows us only as shadows on the wall. It is in those moments, when we hear that ‘nothing is more real than nothing’, when we are dragged into the dark by miscommunication, that we have in fact been communicated with in the most profound and authentic way of which art is capable of.

In an interview Beckett once said “The time is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear, any more than the light of day (or night) makes the subsolar... Art is the sun, moon and stars of the mind, the whole mind.” (Beckett as qtd. in Cochran 93) It is here that I find in Beckett a poetics of miscommunication, a belief that communication rides on the back of

potential miscommunication, and that in literature this process is a key source of meaning creation. It provides permission as a writer, as if such a thing was ever needed, to miscommunicate with your readers and to trust in the process of reading and their faculties to create meaning relevant to themselves far beyond what you ever planned or intended. It draws from writing's status as simultaneously an intentional communicative act as well as the ability for reading to produce meaning independent of that original intent to create a unified model capable of explaining what have often been seen as the conflicting sides of this dual sided process. It expands art, in both the creation and consumption, into its rightful place as the method through which we come to know ourselves. Neither Beckett nor this paper can tell you how to miscommunicate with your readers, for to do so would be to defeat the purpose of this endeavor, but have faith that to do so is to instantiate the very possibility of communication and to create meaning relevant to human life. To do so is to fulfill the promise of art.

Table 1

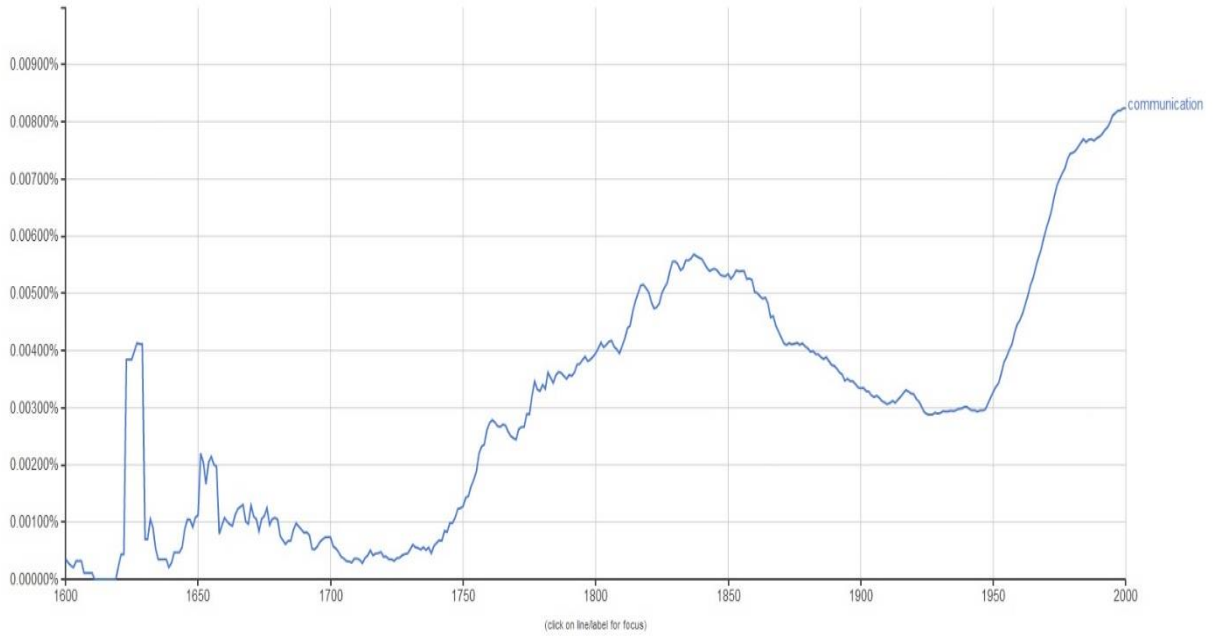
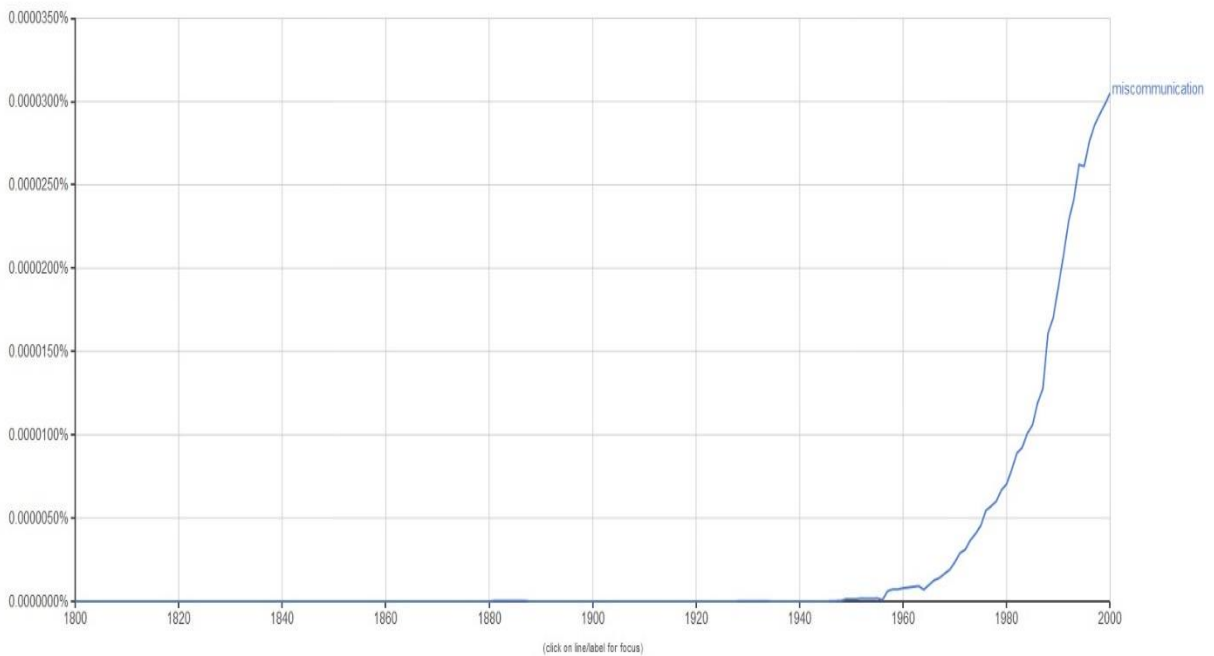


Table 2



Tables created by Google Books Ngram Viewer. Found at: <http://books.google.com/ngrams> (Michel et al.)

## Part 3: My Stories

# Meaningful Glances

January 31<sup>st</sup> 2013 5:20 PM: UW2 student lounge. My classmate Jay is working on a presentation. We meet eyes, his facial expression read boredom, I do a sub-nod during the eye contact expressing my understanding.

January 31<sup>st</sup> 2013 9:36 PM: UW2 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. I walk back into the classroom. Eye contact is made with my classmate Michael, he is smiling conspicuously, expressing a belief I have done something devious. I give a foul expression in return, attempting to display that I actually have been puking in the bathroom.

February 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 1:58 PM: At home, downstairs, in front of my computer. My friend Alex looks at me expressing empathy concerning an inconsequential complaint of mine.

February 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 2:02 PM: At home, downstairs, in front of my computer. My roommate Anthony's and my gaze meet. We both nod, serving to make the current lull in conversation less awkward.

February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 8:29 PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact with Anthony while putting on my jacket to make it clear I am leaving.

February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 9:15PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact from Johnny (friend of Anthony's) to signify he understood my point regarding HD radio being a misnomer.

February 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 2:28 PM: At home, upstairs hallway. My roommate Jake asks if I will or he should take the rent checks in, I look down while answering that I couldn't. I proceed to make eye contact at the moment I ask him to do it.

February 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 4:12 PM: 372 bus along Lake City Way. A row of seats frees up across the aisle from me and I switch. When in my new seat a young man (early highschoolish) in a black seattle-type sweatshirt and mussy hair makes prolonged eye contact with me. Possibly a censure, (maybe he felt his seat was more deserving of a trade-in than mine) I'm not sure.

February 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 5:49 PM: UW1 Upstairs: Ellen looks at me  
incredulously as both overhear a sentence in the middle of a  
conversation. We smile sharing in the joke.

February 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 7:18 PM: UW1 Room 210. I look at my classmate Jay attempting to convey my dissatisfaction about his correctness regarding the lackluster quality of my Rice Crispies<sup>®</sup> treat. I do not believe he received the message.

February 7<sup>th</sup> 2013 12:35 AM: At home, upstairs, hallway. As I walk past I give my roommate Jake a quick glance to re-express my disapproval of the music (metal) being played loudly by our roommate Zack.

February 9<sup>th</sup> 2013 ~6:30 PM: Corner of 45th and University Way,  
Seattle. Whilst scanning for the person I'm waiting to meet a woman  
meets my eye and misidentifies me. A look of recognition crosses then  
leaves her face (misfire).

February 9<sup>th</sup> 2013 6:34 PM: Trabant Coffee Shop, U-District, Seattle.

Shortly after meeting up Jess and I make eye contact during a lull in conversation, familiarity if not intimacy is expressed.

February 10<sup>th</sup> 2013 12:15 AM: House party near I5 and 50th Ave,  
Seattle: Jess and I look at each other in a very long moment. I feel the  
pressure from the eye contact building. After it is clear neither of us  
have anything to say I kiss her.

February 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 ~2:00 AM: Jess' apartment living room couch, U-District, Seattle. A long and very direct look is shared with Jess; it seems to express interest, admiration, and a slight uncertainty. I make a joke about this project.

February 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 3:39 PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact with  
Anthony as he walks in serves as a greeting

February 12<sup>th</sup> 2013 8 PM-4 AM: At home in Lake City and the alley/driveway immediately outside. I am certain there must have been eye contacts used as greetings in this time, likely quite a few of them, but my faculties were distracted hosting Lincoln Day so there is a gap here.

February 12<sup>th</sup> 2013 10:03 PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact across the room with Jess expresses interest despite our relative lack of interaction and the crowd of Abraham Lincolns between us.

February 14<sup>th</sup> 2013 No time listed: UW2 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. Jeanne and I make eye contact directly after making a point for those students interested in pursuing a Ph.D signaling that I should be paying attention. I have spoken with her about my interest in the UC Berkeley Rhetoric program.

Possibly merely incidental to her speech but I suspect not.

February 14<sup>th</sup> 2013 9:10 PM: UW2 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. My classmate Kelle makes a comment expressing interest in my classmate Talena's used bag as trash for her collection. Follows it with a laugh, and searches around for eye contact. I give a reassuring laugh as our eyes meet.

February 15<sup>th</sup> 2013 7:20-7:50 PM: Bento in the Box restaurant, U-District, Seattle. Two looks from Jess that I am quite uncertain of the meaning of in retrospect. I had interpreted them as looks of fondness

February 16<sup>th</sup> 2013 8:31 PM: Dick's Drive-In Lake City parking lot. Eye contact with a beef head looking guy in his twenties expresses surprise and sympathy that his truck would not start.

February 18<sup>th</sup> 2013 5:58 PM: At home, downstairs. A look back at my roommate Anthony expresses a combination of boredom and tiredness

February 18<sup>th</sup> 2013 7:32 PM: At home, downstairs. I make eye contact with roommate my Zack to express my annoyance with certain people present. No look of recognition. Not sure if message got through.

February 18<sup>th</sup> 2013 No time listed: At home, downstairs. Eye contact with Anthony establishes his excitement at the very nice guitar left temporarily at our house.

February 19<sup>th</sup> 2013 6:50 PM: UW2, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. Eye contact with [omitted] establishes sympathy concerning a serious matter [omitted] has shared with me. (Omission of name/pronoun & content due to concerns for the privacy of the individual involved.)

February 19<sup>th</sup> 2013 7:07 PM: UW2, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. A laugh and eye contact with my classmate Michael establishes empathy concerning the creative frustrations evident in his sketchbook.

February 21<sup>st</sup> 2013 10:49 PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact with my roommate Zack let's him know I want to talk to him despite ear buds rendering my previous call for attention inaudible

February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 9:25 PM: At home, downstairs. Zack makes eye contact to express amusement at something in the video game (Guild Wars 2) he is playing.

February 24<sup>th</sup> 2013 7:40 PM: At home, downstairs. Anthony nods to show his understanding and appreciation of an extended joke I was making.

February 24<sup>th</sup> 2013 9:26 PM: At home, downstairs. Justine (friend of Anthony's) and I make eye contact to express resuming our conversation after a clearly heavily inebriated person present made an attempt at changing the subject

February 26<sup>th</sup> 2013 6:56 PM: UW2 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. A smiling glance with Ellen  
as we are both amused by something said in the classroom.

February 27<sup>th</sup> 2013 No time listed: At home, downstairs. Eye contact and an incredulous look on my face to express to my friend Robbie my opinion regarding the ridiculousness of what is being said by others in the room

February 28<sup>th</sup> 2013 6:20 PM: UW2 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, a scan across the room yields a quick glance and a reassuring smile from my classmate Kelle.

March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 10:23 PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact with my roommate Jake serves to express my curiosity as to where he has been.

March 6<sup>th</sup> 2013 9:53 PM: Cooper's Alehouse, Maple Leaf, Seattle. My friend Erin makes and keeps eye contact for an extended period until it's obvious I'm feeling awkward – she reveals it was for the sake of this project afterwards

March 8<sup>th</sup> 2013 6:16 PM: At home, downstairs. Sympathetic look with my roommate Anthony to let him know I feel bad about not going to his concert.

March 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 7:53 PM: Home, alley/driveway. Surprised look from my roommate Anthony when I step out for a cigarette with him.

March 12<sup>th</sup> 2013 3:24 PM: At home, downstairs. Eye contact with Anthony to get his attention so I can express disapproval with the actions of one of his guests (Johnny)

March 13 2013 4:20 PM: At home, downstairs. A look at roommate Jake attempts to express dissatisfaction with the slight sacrifices made in favor of responsibility. Unsure if it got through, can never tell with Jake.

March 14<sup>th</sup> 2014 8:33 PM: UW2 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. Eye contact with Aimee while Sarah tells us to break into small group expresses an interest in grouping (possibly incidental).

March 17<sup>th</sup> 2013 ~10:30 PM: The Old Peculiar, Ballard. Jess winks at  
me at the bar while I'm ordering a drink.

## Neighbor's Junction

It begins November 13<sup>th</sup> 1955. To explain everything, we'd have to start earlier, way earlier, maybe even the beginning of time, but 1955 will do. The war was over, the depression behind America; people were settling into newly formed suburbs, it would be looked back upon as a golden age. Not for Neighbor's Junction though, there it was the end. The town had 29 people, less than many neighborhoods, but as many souls as were willing to live in such a place. Not so much nestled as forcefully jammed deep in the forests of Oregon, the town had only one route in or out, Miller's road. Two important things would happen to the town on this day. One, an unseasonably strong storm that had blown in off the ocean and done damage to the coastal parts of the state the previous night, and second Tom Lubbock's latest and greatest prank.

Late afternoon, November 13<sup>th</sup>, Tom Lubbock was walking down Miller's road, away from the town, with a canvas bag slung over his back crammed with vacuum tubes and other electronic miscellanea for his night's plan. Tom Lubbock was like the lovable town scamp and trickster, a regular Tom Sawyer type, only aged 40 instead of 14. So it was, walking down the road, his greatest prank to date nearing completion, that Tom ran into Frank O'Sullivan, who would be called the town drunk if the town only had one.

"Greetingshhh Neighbor" slurred out Frank, awake for four hours and already a bottle of whiskey deep. Due to the town's name, residents had a habit of calling each other neighbor, whenever and wherever possible. But, rather than drawing people together overtime people had learned how much animosity could be fit into the pronunciation of 'neighbor'.

Tom detected none this time.

“Howdy Neighbor. What can I do for you today Frank?” Tom responded, his mind wrapped up in his coming scheme.

“Well... the mishush told me she didn’t wanna see none of my faish until I brought home I brought home the bacon. I’ll tell you what though...” Frank opened up with his usual candor. At least he was friendly today, thought John while he waited for Frank’s brain to catch up to his mouth.

“... the size shee ish, how fat y’shee, I should turn her into bacon.” At this, Frank bust out laughing. His own wit was too much for him to stand and he doubled over.

Tom waited a couple beats then began to walk, eager to finish preparations when he heard Frank’s voice behind him.

“Tom, ya gots anything to drink?”

Tom stopped and began rummaging through his pack. While searching, a vacuum tube fell out of his bag onto the ground beside him, luckily he had brought spares. Finding one of the two bottles of gin he had brought along for celebration, he opened it and took a swig, then offered it to Frank. Frank gladly accepted the bottle and took a hearty pull.

“Shoo...” Frank began a question as soon as the gin was down his gullet.

“What am I doing way out here? I could ask the same of you, y’know.” Tom countered quickly.

“I told you, wife kicked me out.” Responded Frank

“That doesn’t explain why you’re so far out of town.”

“The lasht time thish happened, I hid a bottle roundsh the-sh partsh.” Frank said, apparently suddenly reminded of why he actually was out here. “What ‘bout you, neighbor?” This time Tom caught the force of the word full on, and knew his entire plot was at risk. He took a large pull from the bottle, much larger than the last one, to buy himself time. He decided it was best to pull Frank in on it to keep him busy, and to buy his silence.

“Well... you see...” Tom began, buying for time. “Look, I’m trying to do something here, something that will blow the town away. You know the war of the worlds?”

“War of the wordsh?” said Frank, matching his verbal stumbles with a physical one at the same time.

“War of the worlds, it was a radio broadcast done by H.G. Wells, and it convinced...” as he spoke Tom could see he was losing Frank rapidly, so he moved straight to the offer. “Look, if you give me a hand and don’t tell nobody ‘bout this, I’ll give you the rest of this bottle.” Tom said, knowing full well he did not need any help, but that if he kept Frank busy he wouldn’t have a chance to blab until the plan had come to fruition.

“Now yer shpeaking my languagsh.” Responded Frank with the speed of a cheetah, or to be more literal, the speed of a drunk offered alcohol. “Whatcha want me to do?”

“Come with me. I’ll show you.” said Tom, continuing down the road.

“Can I ‘ave a nip on the way?” pleaded Frank

“When we get there.” Said Tom, reassured of his grip on Frank’s interest, and by proxy his loose tongue.

Tom and Frank walked down the road, away from Neighbor's Junction for about a mile without incident. Suddenly, Tom cut into the trees, almost leaving Frank to wonder if he had imagined it all before calling for him. Frank continued following Tom deeper into the forest, no idea where he was or where he was going, with only the occasional request for the bottle safely stowed in Tom's bag. Another mile into the woods Tom came to his destination, an abandoned platform up in a tree, from logging days, or abandoned until Tom had discovered it. The platform was protected from the light drizzle that was already coming down by the tree's canopy. They arrived before seven, the sun already most of the way down, and the winds of the storm to come just starting to hit the town. Up on the platform were a variety of haphazardly assembled electronics, with wires running to two nearby trees with an antenna placed in each. With all the equipment there was barely enough room for one person, but Tom shepherded the both of them up there anyway. Frank having sobered up considerably on the walk, Tom decided to offer him the bottle, which Frank gladly accepted. To give Frank something to do Tom asked him to check on the antennas in the surrounding trees, despite having set them up just the previous day. By the time Frank had completed his task Tom had finished setting up the transmitter and checked that everything was in place. At sunset, 7:07pm, Tom set his transmitter to retransmit the station the town got from Eugene, and proceeded to wait.

The storm rolled into Neighbor's Junction around the same time, winds gusting up to 50 miles per hour, and rain pelting anyone foolhardy enough to go outside. Assembled within general store and tavern was most of the town's population, at least twenty-five people. It was one of the only buildings in town with a generator, and even on ordinary days could assemble a well sized crowd. It had been built nearly eighty years prior by Thaddeus Prim, and was run by his Grandson, Jon Prim. Jon was the closest Neighbor's Junction came to a moral center, trusted

to arbitrate disputes, and generally considered to be the most trustworthy man in town. Jon's motto that he'd proudly recite to most anyone he found in a morally questionable position, which wasn't so rarely, was that he had always done good by doing good, and so should they. In fact Jon was just like anyone around there, a little good, a little bad, and mostly just a human being. With rain buffeting the windows and voices getting excited, he decided to turn the radio up, keep the townspeople's nerves in check. At first the music and ads did their job, calming, or at very least distracting the crowd. Storms blew through the town before hitting the mountains all the time, but this was supposed to be the storm of the decade according to the radio, with considerable damage in the communities it passed through. The radio was like gospel to the town, which certainly had no use for a church, the only source of outside information besides the weekly mail delivery and the gossip of those who left the town and yet for some reason returned.

At 7:45PM the radio went briefly to static, filling the entire bar with unease, only to be replaced with a voice announcing it was a special emergency broadcast. The voice, not the usual voice of the radio announcer, but rather a new man speaking with a theatrical grandness announced something that sent the entire tavern into a panic.

"I must inform you that on 7pm, this night, the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1955, the Russians have invaded the West Coast of these United States by sea and by air. Seattle, Hawaii, and Portland have all been lost to Russian ground troops, and the ports of San Francisco and Los Angeles sit under bombardment. The Russians have come here with overwhelming force, and things look grim." The word 'Russian' was almost spit out.

"The National Guard has been mobilized and we here in Eugene stand ready to fight these Russian bastards down to the last man." continued the voice on the radio.

“We have here with us a Lieutenant in the Oregon National Guard. Lt. Philips, please tell the listeners at home what is going on.” The voice continued with its drum-beat pacing, getting more and more excited with every syllable.

Suddenly, there was just static over the radio, dead air in broadcast industry terms, and the entire tavern erupted at once, the trance brought on by the radio announcer’s voice broken. Voices speaking heatedly, tears from some people, and looks of shock on the faces on all could be seen and heard.

Zachary Johnson yelled “I’m going to kill those fucking Russians with my bare hands if I have to, who’s with me!?” and as he prepared to barge out into the storm raging outside the radio came back.

“Shut up y’all. Radio’s back!” yelled out Jon Prim over the commotion. The crowd quieted down, though emotions were still running high in the building.

“Due to tactical concerns Lieutenant Philips has declined to speak on the radio, which this reporter it left to believe is because the fight is going badly.” The voice over the radio said in somber tones.

“This just in, San Francisco has been lost. Oh and what’s this?” The voice faded and was replaced by noises of whistling and then explosions.

“Oh my god” the voice came back “they’re bombing Eugene! They’re bombin...” the voice cut off again. The townspeople went wild, some people were shaking, it was hard to tell if it was from rage or fear, while most just shocked and confused.

Another voice came on the radio, fainter this time, but still audible “You bashtard. Holding out on me.” Followed by the sounds of a scuffle, then dead air. The townspeople didn’t know how to react, but they all assumed the worst.

Zachary Johnson addressed the crowd first “We gotta take this fight to them. Ain’t no Russian going to invade America and get away with it. We kicked the asses of the Japs and Krouts, now I guess the goddamned Commies want some too.”

“You heard the radio, overwhelming forces. What are we supposed to do?” came the voice of Jeb Thompson, the oldest man in town, out of the crowd.

“Fucking kill some commies old man, what do you think we’re supposed to do, just sit here!?” shot back Zachary over the murmur of the townsfolk.

“Now come on, I fought in the war just like you, and we ain’t fightin’ nobody in this storm,” said Jon Prim. Trying to calm the crowd he said “we need to set up defensible positions as soon as this ends and keep our home our own.”

As if to reinforce his point, one of the windows suddenly broke in an explosion of glass as a stray roof tile hit it, injuring Luke Johnson, Zachary’s son, and Colleen O’Sullivan. The boy had a nasty gash in his arm, but nothing he couldn’t recover from, and the woman cut across her face almost as mean as she always looked anyway. The group rushed to help them and board up the window, though not wholly without confrontation. Colleen called the place “a shithole” between howls of pain, and Zachary was quick to take up the point, leaving his wife Mary and the crowd to tend to his son.

“Look, I’m not going to wait here to see what happens. I’m taking action, and if you’re a red-blooded American you’re coming with me. I’m taking as many people as I can and we’re

gonna kill some commies wherever we find them. If Jon wants to wait with the women and children to raped and killed, so be it.”

“Now hold on here” said Jon, attempting to be the voice of reason, but it was already too late, the town’s men, ten in total, with the exceptions of Jeb Thompson and he were already through the door.

Immediately on stepping outside, the men found themselves pushed around by winds and pelted by rain that stung like a fist. Undeterred they gathered rifles, shotguns, and baseball bats, whatever they could find on the moment’s notice, and piled into Zachary Johnson’s 1950 Ford F1 Pickup. It was a tight fit, and uncomfortable for the five men in the back, but they were on a mission.

Meanwhile back at the tavern Jon Prim found himself alienated from his usual position. People hadn’t listened to him. He thought he might have it wrong. Still, though, it was suicide to go out there and someone had to watch over the remaining 13 members of the town present in his establishment. He knew he wasn’t a coward; he had fought in the war like any brave American, but this, this was different. This was at home. Snapping back to attention, he could see the Johnson boy wasn’t doing well. He couldn’t help but think this was all somehow Zachary Johnson’s fault. He had always been a hothead. He corrected himself. It was the Russian’s fault. Just then, the radio made an ear piercing squeal, only to be replaced 15 seconds later with advertisements. When the announcer came on, it was the usual man, with no mention of the events of the night besides the storm, just warnings to stay indoors and call officials if anything is wrong. The remaining townspeople couldn’t fathom what had happened. A two hour invasion, then it was all over.

The town wouldn't get an explanation of what had happened until the next day, when a thoroughly concussed Frank O'Sullivan would come into town claiming Tom Lubbock had set the entire thing up, then jumped from his platform in the trees overcome with regret, pulling Frank with him. Frank said he woke up the next day next to Tom's corpse, the radio equipment destroyed by a tree branch. The truth might have fallen elsewhere. Zachary Johnson, his overturned truck and the bodies of the other seven men were found a month later, by a county sheriff. The road had washed out under them as they sped towards Eugene. By 1960, there were no neighbors left in Neighbor's Junction, only old Jeb Thompson insisting he didn't have anywhere else to go. Whether it was him, the storm, or both, Tom Lubbock got his wish, the town was blown away. Today, it's not even listed on maps, and good luck finding it in a history book, but if you know where to look, the tavern built by Thaddeus Prim still stands, all the windows broken, and one boarded up.

## The Boulder

It was a muggy summer night. Emily walked up to the Yogurt King just a couple minutes past ten. She took up a familiar position leaning against the strip mall's decorative pole, just in front of the store entrance. She could see Sam hustling about inside, trying to close as quickly as possible, and no doubt Sam had seen her as well. She thought of the days ahead, just three weeks until she left for university. She couldn't help but feel in some way she was abandoning her friend, but she knew it was ridiculous to think that. Sam and Emily (never the other way around), had been inseparable since fate brought them together in Mr. Esslin's honors sixth grade English. Their last names were only one letter apart. As far as Emily was concerned that was all that had ever separated them. Emily had spent countless nights over at Sam's house, with its cabinets full of snacks and walls lined with books. Sam's parents always wanted to hear about Emily's latest academic achievement. She was always careful not to brag, and to bring up something smart Sam had said, but she relished in the attention she did not get at home. Both of Sam's parents were teachers. They were kind people who took an interest in their daughter's life and friends. How proud they had been when Emily told them she had gotten into NYU. She was going to be the first in her family to go to university, but not the first to go to college. Her uncle had his associate's in business, and as her father was quick to point out, that had "done fine by him," now he owned an entire chain of car washes. That didn't seem as impressive to Emily as it clearly did to her father.

"Hey, spacecase" said a familiar voice, snapping Emily back to attention.

“Oh hey. How long have you been there?” said Emily as she took in the sight of her best friend wearing a red Yogurt King polo and an expression betraying a lust for adventure.

“Too long, let’s do something.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Come explore this old haunted mental hospital with me. It’s just south of the downtown campus.” Sam’s voice was voice cloying, aware she was asking a lot.

“That sounds illegal and dangerous. Can’t we just do something that’s only one or the other?” Emily pleaded, knowing full well the argument was already lost.

“Come on, get in. It’ll be cool, I promise.” Said Sam, forcefully ushering her friend into her ’98 Jetta.

They drove on for about ten minutes, only the sound of the engine and of REM barely audible on the radio. They were on the way from the safety of suburban strip malls into an artsy, dangerous, interesting, alive neighborhood with bars named after dead philosophers. Emily always imagined she’d end up living someplace like that, but in actuality it always seemed to be Sam who was the one who actually felt comfortable in such places.

“How was work?” asked Emily.

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Okay.”

“How’s your mom?”

“I don’t want to talk about her.”

“Okay.”

The two drove on for another five minutes, both feeling the weight of the silence, until Sam parked and announced they had arrived. Their destination was a dilapidated five story stone building with collapsing eaves and a chain link fence around it.

“Please, let’s just go climb the water tower or something,” pleaded Emily as Sam rummaged around for the big red mag-lite her father had given her with the car.

“We can’t go back now,” said Sam as she locked up the car, mag-lite in hand.

The two scaled with fence with surprising ease, and quickly discovered they were not the first ones to have this idea. One of the back entrances was already unlocked and open. As they walked in, Sam swung the beam of her flashlight around illuminating cobwebs and debris in what used to be a kitchen.

“Sometimes I worry the boulder might not roll back down,” said Emily, trying to overcome her trepidation.

“Hmm?” replied Sam, opening dusty cabinets.

“Sisyphus’ boulder. If he didn’t have to roll it up the hill his life might be meaningless,” said Emily as they left the kitchen.

“It was a punishment. Is it supposed give him meaning?” said Sam as they peered into a room that had once been a classroom. Desks, mostly overturned, were still arranged in something approaching a grid-like pattern.

“Isn’t that exactly what makes it a punishment...? I mean, he has to do a meaningless task, sure. But that he has to do it gives it meaning for him. We all do meaningless tasks all the

time. Think about sitting in the DMV.” Emily followed Sam closely. She was humoring Sam’s activity, so the least her friend could do was humor her thoughts.

“Or working eight hours slinging yogurt.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. So, you’re saying having nothing to do, freedom from obligations, is worse?” said Sam.

They began climbing stairs, leading them deeper into the building, but without vocalizing any clear goal. As they continued the building fell into worse and worse disrepair, evidence of human use and misuse piled up.

“I read that some scholars think Sisyphus belonged to a cult that worshipped Prometheus.” Emily heard a loud ‘crack’ and jumped to the side as a step broke.

“That would be ironic” Sam said coolly, ignoring her friend’s moment of peril.

“How do you mean?” asked Emily as she reformed her nerves and made her way up the stairs.

“Prometheus gave mankind fire...” Sam shone her light down a hallway filled with doors. Each door had a set of bars, clearly this place had in fact once been an asylum. Emily tried not to let the shiver that ran down her spine as she saw this show.

“Yeah, and?”

“We should keep going up. He gave man mastery over his environment. Then lost all control of his own as a result. If Sisyphus worshipped him and then ended up the same way...” Sam stopped and began to listen intently, though it was not clear for what purpose to Emily.

“He might have been trying to bring the common person something new to make their lives better, then the man punished him,” Emily continued, ignoring her friend’s heightened state.

“You’re right, the man always be keepin’ a king down” Sam said. If Emily wasn’t afraid, there was nothing to be afraid of. “Besides, I thought you said that rock gave him meaning.”

“Well maybe it does, if he chose to take on the punishment.” Said Emily as they rounded the corner onto the fourth floor. They had stopped exploring at this point. They just wanted to get to the end of this place.

“A regular Christ”

“Don’t say that” Emily said with a tone of dismay in her voice. She wasn’t completely over her Catholic upbringing. Emily rushed up the last stairs onto the fifth floor.

“Isn’t that what all the myths we still tell come down to,” pushed Sam. “We retired the ones that are too scary or teach the wrong lesson.” Sam looked around her, but the wonder of the place seemed to have all but dissipated.

They found themselves in what was once an office, but clearly had been used for some unsavory deeds in mean time. The musty smell of abandoned human habitation almost overcame them here. They carefully avoided the needles and condoms strewn about on the floor and moved to the double wide window.

“Don’t be so cynical, there’s hope in this world,” said Emily. She found herself pushing surprisingly hard to open a window. Both girls were going farther than they wanted to. Trying not to disappoint the other.

“Like having to roll a boulder up a hill for all eternity?” Sam said dryly as she climbed out onto the roof of the building.

“Maybe you can spend the time while it’s rolling down around the people you care about,” said Emily as they both sat down on the edge of the roof.

“Do you think this might just be the point of it all?” asked Sam as they listened to police sirens ring out in the background.

“Naw.”

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