Introduction

ESTRAGON: How long have we been together all the time now?
VLADIMIR: I don't know. Fifty years maybe.
…
VLADIMIR: We can still part, if you think it would be better.
ESTRAGON: It's not worth while now.
  Silence.
VLADIMIR: No, it's not worth while now.
  Silence.
ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?
VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.
  They do not move.[1]

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

ARGUMENT: THE ORGANIZATION OF INTIMACY

In Samuel Beckett's drama, wholly intertwined and wildly dysfunctional pairs of men populate a beleaguered world. Male friendship in *Waiting for Godot* (1954) is what survives the trauma of modernity – war, violence, history itself – and in turns becomes emblematic of such a condition. The two old and ragged friends, who hold an unsteady history in their persons and in their tense interactions, seem all that is left of a faded past. What I shall argue in the forthcoming pages is that this connection between male intimacy and the representation of modernity characterizes many literary works from an earlier moment, when these frameworks were established and tested: the English modernist period. Thus, Beckett – writing in the mid twentieth century, purveying an aura of numbness, desperation, and resilience following the Second World War, embodying a position of complex national affiliation – nevertheless displays in exceptionally sparse and skeletal terms an idea that preoccupied writers of an earlier generation, as they confronted their own historical and national situations. What this

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book will undertake is to make cultural and literary sense of the movement from an idealized, often utopian notion of male friendship that governed many literary and social conventions in the late nineteenth century, to an image of modernity as reflecting the wreckage of that very ideal. My underlying contention, in essence, is this: that male friendship often occupies a complex position in literary works, that it does more than provide cover for homosexuality or sentimentalize adolescence, and that in the decades surrounding the First World War, the pressures on friendship increased, coming to the fore in a variety of historical contexts and for a variety of reasons. In the cultural settings of late-Victorian and early twentieth-century England, as in many literary works of these years, friendship took on a heightened and intensified importance, even as its place in personal, social, and narrative desire seemed increasingly tenuous. Writers in this period emphasized both the value and the fragility of male ties, developing images of men and masculinity that were at once haunting, beautiful, troubling, desperate, and self-dramatizing.

When *Waiting for Godot* allies its atmosphere of desiccated absurdity with the relational field of male intimacy, it provides something of a culmination for a history of writing about friendship which continually moves in the direction of just this kind of depletion. Like the poor tree at the center of the *Godot* stage, a good deal hangs, symbolically, on the friendship between Vladimir and Estragon, a form of mutual dependency that runs the gamut from the touching to the violent, the grittily convincing to the manifestly impossible. Much can be said of this strange friendship. One might point to the text's homoerotics, represented in both playful and serious terms; to parallels with other relationship models (husband/wife; mentor/student; parent/child; master/slave); to the doubling of doublings engendered by the arrival of Lucky and Pozzo; and to the production of an often lovely poetry *à deux* out of the characters' shared dialogue. Though many of these topics are common to the representations of male friendship that proliferated in the first decades of the twentieth century, what I want to stress here is a more general observation: in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett stages the simultaneous impoverishment and plenitude of the men's intimacy as a central premise, and this relationship partially embodies the condition of modernity that the play so famously purveys.[2] In Beckett's plays, as in many earlier works that take male friendship as an emblematic and central structure, history's markers are at times obscured, and one question that persistently arises is to what extent the relationship of masculine intimacy comes almost to stand in for history, to set its rather bare outlines in place of a more historically particularized and thick rendering of human relations.

In addition to Beckett's mid-century songs of intimacy, another pared-down and precarious staging of friendship, from a very different tradition, should help to introduce this study. Writing in 1921, the Arctic explorer Apsley Cherry-Garrard (known as "Cherry") chronicled R. F. Scott's disastrous final journey to the South Pole (1910–1913), in a text whose affective power derives from the narrator's relation of comradeship with the lost team. This was Cherry's first and only Arctic voyage, and he writes not solely with future scientists and explorers in mind, but also very much with an eye to the general reader, polar expeditions having become something of a national fascination in England during the era of the Scott and Shackleton journeys. *The Worst Journey in the World* establishes and frames the catastrophe in terms of the concurrent strength and loss of powerful male friendships: "The mutual conquest of difficulties is the cement of friendship, as it is the only lasting cement of matrimony," Cherry writes in his preface, and follows with similar rhetoric: "Talk of ex-soldiers: give me ex-antarcticists, unsoured and with their ideals intact: they could sweep the world . . . In a way this book is a sequel to the friendship which there was between Wilson, Bowers [both of whom died with Scott on the expedition], and myself, which, having stood the strain of the Winter Journey, could never have been broken."[3] Cherry had good reason to stress friendship as a theme in his voyage, since the deaths that marred the expedition constituted the central focus of public interest, and since, much to the English explorers' dismay, they attained the South Pole only after the surprise arrival of a Norwegian party. The journey was the "worst," that is, because its signal accomplishments involved traumatic loss and disappointment, and an important element of Cherry's work is to reframe the disaster in more ennobling terms. What Cherry does from the outset is to call up a history of imagining friendship as a vital, masculine counterpart to domestic life, and, equally, to evoke two powerful legacies: heroic Victorian conventions of explorer literature and survival narratives surrounding the First World War. It is remarkable how closely Cherry borrows the terms of friendship from the discourse of war, attempting to associate his state of agonized memory with the losses surrounding combat, at times even competing with the war for the position of most-harrowing trial and most grievous loss of friends. Cherry's text indicates a central point that will ramify widely in the pages that follow: in the early twentieth century, both the power and the potential for bereavement associated with male friendship were typically intertwined with such major cultural narratives as imperialism and war, and the sense of heightened importance that friendship often projected derived from those weighty connections.

For Beckett and Cherry, then, friendship matters in part because it consolidates, in highly personal terms, powerful and complex cultural values. I shall use the phrase "the organization of intimacy" as a kind of shorthand for the process of fixing and structuring male bonds that prevailed among writers in this period, from late-Victorian aesthetes, to imperial explorers, to modernist artist-prophets. One proposition that recurs in many texts (and not only literary texts) is that friendship might function as a bridging structure between individuals and institutions. If the intimacy between individuals comes fraught with vulnerability, what friendship appears to offer is a kind of infrastructure – practices, conventions, a language, a history – that imbues the often shaky relation between man and man with the sanctity of larger, more powerful and sustainable institutions. While writers of the modernist period are often viewed as viscerally hostile to institutions of all sorts, particularly those that serve the imposing will of middle-class respectability, imperialism, mass culture, or literary convention, what an analysis of male friendship shows is a sense of ambivalence around those institutions that underlie interpersonal ties between individuals, and particularly between men. When I repeatedly refer to the "organization" of male intimacy, then, what I shall be emphasizing is this "blessed rage for order," this interest in strengthening and bolstering male friendship, interleaving it into other cultural narratives and practices. Perhaps the biggest mistake one can make in conceptualizing friendship, unfortunately repeated by many critics, is to assume that it is a private, voluntary relation, governed by personal sentiment and easy communion. It is not. Like any complex social relationship, friendship has its own conventions and institutional affinities (schools, universities, social clubs, as well as more rigidly arranged organizations from the Boy Scouts to the military platoon), and it is shot through with social meaning.[4] The anodyne image of an uncomplicated relation – essentially outside of culture – should clearly be rejected. Like the family, against which it is often set as an alternative, friendship will be constructed in such a way as to reflect a culture's positions on sexuality, gender, hierarchy, and power.

The desire to organize male intimacy is not unique to the early twentieth century; what stands out in this period is, first, that this desire seems to increase and self-perpetuate, to preoccupy an array of writers and social critics, and second, that it repeatedly and dramatically fails. Again, Beckett's drama provides a useful template for visualizing this sense of combined intensification and depletion. Beckett used the term "pseudo-couple" for the endlessly combative, dependent, and ineluctable intimacy between men like Vladimir and Estragon, a relationship that functions as a compromise

between community and isolation. Frederic Jameson, finding in the pseudo-couple a notable stage in the history of the subject, sees this coupling as a way to ward off the final centrifugal spin into late-capitalist monadism.[5] I would suggest that the pseudo-couple represents something like a last stop on the journey male intimacy makes in the first decades of the twentieth century. If Beckett often characterizes his male partners simultaneously by love and aggressivity, inter-dependence and impoverishment, earnestness and parody, these traits will repeatedly arise in narratives that plot the slow decline of the richly optimistic friendships that populated late-Victorian imaginings. In many of the texts and discourses I shall discuss, the pseudo-couple will stand as a kind of threat – more desirable, it would seem, than the total alienation marked by its final flickering extinction, yet itself a *cul-de-sac*, a harrowing image of the bleak interpersonal structures of modernity.

Of course, the preceding century had its own friendship history, and this legacy marks and delimits the narratives of male intimacy in the modernist period. For the Victorians, friendship had classical, imperial, sentimental, and at times heroic connotations, with the Romantic ideal of the friendship poem and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) standing as literary high-water marks, and the milieu of mid-century Oxford representing one of its greatest institutional manifestations. Thomas Carlyle's idealization of monastic community in *Past and Present* (1843), aesthetic movements like the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and the work of such social reformers as Thomas Hill Green at the end of the century present influential examples of a cultural politics organized around idealized male fraternities. Nineteenth-century imperial discourse, too, relied heavily on tropes of male friendship, as did fictions of class reform in much "condition of England" writing. While this varied history cannot easily be schematized, we might generalize enough to argue that the breakdown of the ideological rationale surrounding these well-worn conventions of male comradeship, in many cases, sets off a process of faltering and elapsing male fellowship, a protracted unraveling that emerges most fully in the work of post-Victorian writers.[6] The history of male intimacy is never incidental to the dynamics I will be describing; on the contrary, what makes the tension surrounding friendship at the turn of the century so vivid is precisely the fact that male bonds had been intricately interwoven into many rich traditions of Victorian Britain.

When I began this study, I assumed that some kind of cohesion would be possible between institutions and personal bonds – that, for instance, I would discover a form of productive literary power in the idea of the nation

as a brotherhood (along the lines, perhaps, of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*[7]), or of the university circle as a forum for protecting marginalized sexual identities, or of military service as a rewarding experience of comradeship. What I have found, by striking contrast, is that in all of these cases, and indeed more generally, the urge to organize and structure intimacy becomes an impossible goal to achieve, and this not only for the relatively obvious reason we might predict: that such desires represent a way to secure a safe place for homosexuality, which in the late nineteenth century was increasingly threatened. While the status of unorthodox sexuality will surface repeatedly in this study, it by no means dominates my understanding of how and why friendship fails as a convention with lasting power or as a bridging structure between individuals and institutions. In nearly every case, some conjunction of forces emerges to thwart the establishment of idealized or comforting male relations. Typically, these disruptions come from a combination of internal contradiction (something in the structure of friendship) and external or historical constraint (most notably under the stress of war), which together set in motion a cycle of failure or disappointment. The pressure of the physical body, the loss of ideological cover for imperialist myths, the actual experience of intimacy in war, the disruption wreaked by injury and debility: each of these problems in effect propels the individual out of the safe space of friendship, and each is presented in terms of the "authentic" story of modernity. More than any other event, the cataclysm of war produced gigantic tears in the fabric of friendship and generated a language to account for them.

The First World War represents the pivot of my study, as it has often been perceived by scholars to divide European cultural history into any number of "before and after" sequences. It is here, in the experience of the trenches and in the many retellings of the traumatic years of 1914–1918, that we will find the most direct pressure on the idea (and ideal) of male friendship, and it is here, too, that the story of lost friendship will be most compellingly imagined as a site for the heightened and unmediated experience of modernity. As Cherry's allusions to the war as a highly visible locus of intense and hard-won male loyalty suggest, the war intensified and focused much that had been previously assumed about the role of male friendship in British culture, and the transformations it entailed had lasting consequences for the way intimacy and lost friends were represented in postwar contexts. Combat was not the only forum in which male intimacy was elevated and tested, but it became a kind of standard, as well as a metaphor, for the most resilient, cherished, and vulnerable of bonds. Moreover, given the sense of cataclysmic change that many Britons, both combatants and

civilians, associated with the war, the urgency surrounding comradeship in battle seemed to carry an extra charge, to intensify – perhaps to the breaking point – an already loaded cultured signifier.

The war has long been assigned pride of place in the history of modernism. Critics have attributed the formal and thematic shape of such exemplary texts as *The Waste Land* and *To the Lighthouse* in part to the war's myriad effects on the high modernists of the 1920s, and a whole host of familiar features of modernism has been connected with the experience of the war on the Western Front – physical, psychological, epistemological, and ethical. As Paul Fussell writes in his influential study of the war and modernity, "I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."[8] Critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose seminal reassessment of modernist gender politics in many ways counters Fussell's agenda, also concede that a particular narrative of modernization is exemplified by the war: "World War I virtually completed the Industrial Revolution's construction of anonymous, dehumanized man, that impotent cipher who is frequently thought to be the twentieth century's most characteristic citizen."[9] At the same time, First World War scholars have continued to refine and nuance their accounts of the war's role in configuring the literary and cultural life of the decades that followed, arguing, for instance, that the war's technologies, psychic effects, and metaphors intervened in diverse spheres of post-war society. Such issues as the politics of class and gender, the commodification of war-related technology, the development of public health, and the treatment of mental disease were fundamentally altered as a consequence of the war, in ways that are often both decisive and surprising.[10] Even if we subscribe to the narrative of war-as-watershed, then, we ought not to assume an easy understanding about how the war codified or undermined fundamental principles, or what the effects would be when civilian writers adopted the war as their own perceptual and epistemological experience.[11] If it was not a straightforward catalyst for one kind of change or development, the war was an incalculably important event in the cultural and literary politics of the period, in setting the tone for many aspects of post-war existence, and in constructing riveting images of modernity. Perhaps most important for our purposes is to recognize that the war produced highly visible reconfigurations of male community and attacked the physical body in terrible new ways, and these powerful features made the war seem to many contemporaries – as to today's critics – like a transformative event in the logic of masculine intimacy.

One subject foregrounded by the war, but implicit in any study of male bonds, involves the physical body. The cultural history of the male body reached a crisis point in the experience of the war, as the clash between technological innovation and physical vulnerability exploded beyond people's wildest pre-war imaginings. The degree and scale of physical decimation, the massiveness of industrial efficacy in killing and maiming, reached an unfathomable apex during these years, and the after-effects can be documented not only as a matter of corpses, but also on the wounded bodies of those who returned from war. Combatants faced the most ghastly forms of bodily dismemberment and loss, and the wider civilian populace, too, was confronted with a scale of injury that challenged fundamental concepts of masculinity, physical integrity, the mind/body divide, and the notion of work. To talk about the body in this period requires that we recognize the terrifying reality of wounded flesh as well as the cultural associations heaped onto the body in war, perhaps its most extreme, over-signifying activity. In this analysis of intimacy, I shall encounter the body in many forms, from the glowing, glistening, vibrant body of aestheticist dreams, to the imperialist body as a repository for ideology, to the smashed and debilitated body at war, and finally to the "broken" body of the post-war years, when the perception of brokenness became a trope for the physical and spiritual state of a war-scarred culture.

To the extent that it makes sense to trace overriding movements, one striking progression involves the body's devolution from idealized whole to broken ruin, from protected and nurtured to torn and abandoned. Such a trajectory might come as something of a surprise, given the general interest, in the years both before and after the war, in notions of revitalization: much attention was paid to health, the clean and powerful physique, the body resplendent and ready for commodification, an answer to the many fears of "degeneration" that haunted the turn of the century.[12] Yet, during the same period, we also see a persistent picture of the body withering and faltering, and not only in the context of the society's failures to revitalize its impoverished urban population. It is often the very paragon of masculinity – soldier, athlete, imperialist – whose physical dissolution becomes a subject of anxiety and/or a metaphor for cultural change. As I chart such movements, I shall suggest homologies with various features of literary modernism (the marginalized physical body an image of modern man; shared mutilation a sign of protest; the broken post-war body a figure for literary self-constructions), and I shall operate on the line between what we might call constructionism and essentialism. If it has become a truism that the body is fashioned, constructed, receptive to cultural shifts, infused and

interpolated by intangible power structures, I am also struck by a persistent sense of irreducibility about the body – an irreducibility that I am hesitant to write off as mere mystification.[13] To recognize the body as a product of culture need not require that we lose our sense of its significant and perhaps untranslatable physical qualities: pain, dismemberment, pleasure, detachment from the practices of narrative.[14]

Several models for thinking about male intimacy and the sexual body have received extensive theoretical treatment. The first involves the movements in late nineteenth-century Britain of simultaneous awakening and foreclosure with respect to male desire and homosexual identity. Without entering into the ongoing debate about whether or not homosexuality was "invented" in the last decades of the century, a product of sexological theory and its institutional embodiments, I do want to mention two significant and interconnected developments in England during the period: the availability of languages and theories to depict the homosexual as a coherent ontology and, at the same time, the pursuit and criminalization of homosexual men.[15] Both of these developments transpired with a high degree of spectacle, and thus a pattern emerges of increased publicity in tandem with an ever-greater imperative to closet and encode. Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love* (1998) beautifully captures this double sense. Focusing on the figure of A. E. Housman, the drama is organized around the pronounced – and tragic – contradiction in the late-Victorian period between the romanticization of male love at Oxford, with its rich literary associations, institutional protection, and connection to a host of all-male athletic, intellectual, and social activities, and the harsh new reality of homophobic punishment in the real world, emblematized in the play by London and by the shadowy figure of Oscar Wilde.[16] What Stoppard suggests is that the flowering of a Platonic ideal of male love coincided with (and perhaps helped to ignite) the onset of new medical and legal practices that would effectively crush and closet all possibilities for flexible, homoerotic community. Double talk, canniness, and indirection; the strategic postures of flamboyance and performativity; tragic silencing and psychological trauma; punishment and protest – all of this and more can be understood to follow from the combined opening up and shutting down of a space for homosexuality. Dominant markers in this history include the enactment of the Labouchère Amendment (1885), which criminalized the practice of even private, consensual male homosexual acts in England, and the Wilde trials (1895), with their extreme and lasting public resonance. In short, a basic outline emerges: an increased prominence accorded to male love and desire at many levels – cultural, discursive, medical, aesthetic, and personal;

followed by and/or conjoined with an increasingly stifling and punitive at-
mosphere; all of this producing diverse literary and cultural consequences,
which reverberate not solely in manifestly arch or decadent texts, but in
many works that betray this history only indirectly.[17]

Even more of an enabling paradigm for this study, and indeed at the
basis of much theoretical work on the subject of male homoerotics, is
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homo-
social Desire*.[18] Sedgwick's essential insight involves what she calls a rupture
along the continuum of male relations. Positing and exploring the seem-
ingly inexorable (yet, as she stresses, historically particular) conjunction of
patriarchal homosociality with homophobia, Sedgwick traces in English
literature a pattern of desire and expulsion with respect to male love that
seems virtually omnipresent in such genres as the domestic novel, the ad-
venture quest, and the pastoral (to name just a few). My thinking about
how male intimacy was conceived, structured, and challenged in the early
twentieth century effectively begins with Sedgwick's observations about the
cultural contradictions surrounding male bonding. This influence notwith-
standing, it will be helpful, right from the start, to clarify some differences
in approach. Most centrally, when I discuss ruptures between individuals
and institutions, personal friendship and corporate forms of comradeship,
I am pointing to patterns of disjunction that have as much to do, for in-
stance, with imperial or military ideology as with physical desire. What I
have found perhaps most remarkable in these investigations is that it is not
easy to predict where or why friendship will falter, or a conflict will emerge
between personal intimacy and its institutionalization. At times, the impor-
tance of sexual desire thwarts smooth narratives of friendship, as one might
expect; at other times, sexuality remains marginal to the dislocations that
unhinge friendship and propel the male subject out into the bleakness of
modernity. In addition to the homosocial/homosexual divide, then, there
are other tensions and incompatibilities that provoke a breakdown in the
functioning of friendship, and these will matter equally with sexuality in
configuring the constraints and limitations on male friendship in the early
twentieth century.

Nevertheless, to depict a struggle around male bonds as a central feature
animating many works of this period could be said to move in the direc-
tion of "queering" the literary. That is, the marginalized position of the
male homosexual in this period comes to resonate more broadly, a notable
voice in seemingly "straight" texts, and this would seem to contribute to
a general adjustment in our rendering of the literary, as challenging new
voices assert themselves in strident tones, both discordant and moving.