Introduction

Samuel Beckett's writing foregrounds the body in both representational and textual ways. This can be evidenced in the careful attention his work devotes to sensory perception, most notably the experiences of seeing, hearing and touching. Equally striking is Beckett's emphasis on different forms of movement in his work, whether voluntary, such as walking, limping and crawling, or involuntary, such as shaking and trembling. Beckett's work also problematises the neat distinction between these two types of movement, introducing others, such as tics, that reside in the more indeterminate space between the two. Everyday bodily functions, furthermore, seldom appear normal or unconditioned in Beckett's writing. Frequent, too, is the maiming and fragmentation of the body. These effects are paired and further intensified by textual ones, such as the broken syntax and rhythm of Beckett's performative prose.

This book assays the manifestations of embodiment in Beckett's prose, drama and media plays. It parts company with early readings of Beckett's work, in which the body is largely reduced to an impediment. It also acknowledges that in poststructuralist approaches, the significance of the body often mutates into signification. Instead, this book negotiates a third stance, a materialist one, located at the intersection of textual, phenomenological and cultural concerns.

Although the body in Beckett's writing has received critical attention, crucial aspects of its pronounced status in Beckett's work have remained unaddressed. The first wave of Beckett scholarship, characterised by the work of critics such as Hugh Kenner and Martin Esslin, read Beckett as a transcendental writer who subscribed to a Cartesian dualism. The prominence of the body and its decrepitude was accredited to the body's inherent otherness; what truly mattered in Beckett was the mind and its capacity to move beyond matter. One of the most famous examples of this view is Hugh Kenner's discussion of 'The Cartesian Centaur' in *Molloy*.[1] Kenner argues that the body in *Molloy* is likened to the man-made

machine, namely the bicycle which, like the body, enables the characters' arduous motility. Locomotion, however, is a painful and laboured process because of the imperfection of the body, which pales in the light of the superiority of the rationally constructed bicycle. The body and its surroundings, in this view, are read as little more than obstacles. To subject the abundance of bodily experiences in Beckett's work to such a one-dimensional reading, however, is to offer a reductive analysis of Beckett's writing. Such a reading leaves unanswered the striking instances in the *oeuvre* that invest value in embodied experience. It similarly ignores Beckett's repeated, albeit often reluctant, realization of the unsustainable nature of transcendental thought. Nor does Kenner's reading respond to the centrality of sensory perception in Beckett's work; rather, it fails to take account of those instances in the *oeuvre* that evoke a sense of wonder amidst an austere world view.

The last two decades have seen a shift away from purely metaphysical concerns, to what could broadly be characterised as poststructuralist approaches to Beckett's work. This second wave of Beckett criticism has been better equipped to tackle the complexity and duplicity of Beckett's writing. It has inaugurated brilliant new ways of approaching the question of subjectivity in Beckett's work. In addressing the author's textual foregrounding of the body, poststructuralist critics have brought attention to its prominence in Beckett's *oeuvre*. However, these readings have often shared a poststructuralist bias, which has emphasized the discursively produced body at the expense of the material, fleshly one. Yet the prominence of the maimed and visceral body in Beckett's work clearly signals the author's attempt to move beyond the confines of discourse.

What has been written about less, is the persistence with which Beckett explores the very basics of bodily existence, those conditions that are already in swing before culture lays its mark on embodied identity, and that are thereafter modified and reshaped by its effects. If, as is sometimes suggested, it is the material body that forms the ultimate foundation of identity, by constituting that self that is both singular and, in its perpetual complexity and mutability, always plural and indecipherable, then it is Beckett more than any other writer who deals with this predicament in his work.

The last two decades have seen a proliferation of theoretical approaches to the body. Whether the focus has been on gender, sexuality, textuality or any other bodily construct, books on different aspects of the topic have flooded the market. The prominence of theories that challenge rationality has played a crucial part in the heightened interest in the body. Some

critics even believe these theories have reversed the early humanist privileging of the mind. Poststructuralist thinkers, Michel Foucault at the forefront, can indeed be said to have inaugurated the contemporary interest in embodiment, by stressing the significance of the body in their discussion of knowledge, power and the regulation of physical difference and desire.

Although Foucault can be said to have initiated the current interest in embodiment, the body in his work emerges as a discursively ordered product of institutionalised knowledge and power.[2] The emphasis, rather than being on the body itself, lies on discourse.[3] Similarly, post-Lacanian feminism, in its anti-essentialist drive, has stressed the discursively produced nature of gender, exemplified in the work of theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.[4] While my aim is not to refute the importance or value of either of these influential theoretical standpoints, one could argue that the body is often curiously neglected, if not absent, in both. In what could broadly be characterised as poststructuralist thought, the discursively produced body takes precedence over, if not eclipses, the flesh. Put another way, the problem of representation is privileged over experience. One of the salient characteristics of poststructuralist accounts of embodiment, therefore, is the curious mutation of the significance of the body into the problem of the body as signification.

Foucault, however, inheriting the nineteenth-century stance of the dandy, posits the individual body as the site of resistance to the regularisation of disciplinary powers. As Anthony Giddens has suggested, the body, in modernity, becomes a 'visible carrier of self-identity'.[5] It is precisely the contemporary belief in embodied experience as the locus of identity that also generates a proliferation of identity politics that stem from different carnal standpoints, determined by considerations such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity or social class.

In cultural-materialist theory, the body becomes a site of construction that responds to the 'demands of rapidly changing cultural norms and values'.[6] One dimension of this approach to embodiment is the emphasis on cultural practices, and their significance to the construction of identity. Theorists such as Jameson and Baudrillard have stressed the shaping force of culture on the body, but in their thinking, 'it is the image of the body rather than the body as such that is central to identity. The body is seen as being saturated with cultural signs or as becoming merely a series of cultural quotations.'[7] Pierre Bourdieu is one of the few theorists to have discussed the influence of cultural practices on the body itself. He argues that the consumption habits of different social classes produce

bodies that differ in shape, size, weight, posture and health, as well as in mannerisms and gestures.[8] While Bourdieu's meditations on the body are compelling, little consideration is given to prereflective physicality. Cultural-materialist approaches, therefore, court the risk of presenting an 'over-socialized conception' of embodiment: the phenomenology of the body and its sensuous potentiality are too lightly overlooked.[9]

In Beckett's writing, prereflective physicality becomes progressively more prominent.[10] This coincides with a gradual stripping down of cultural codes, in what can be seen as a form of phenomenological reduction or bracketing, evidenced, for instance, in the austerity of Beckett's settings. Through a discussion of the manifestations of physical suffering and pleasure, different forms of perception and the significance of motility and technology in Beckett's writing, this book will question three critical myths about Beckett's work: namely, that it tends towards disembodiment, silence and stasis, none of which, in this reading, is ultimately advocated in Beckett's work.

Although the question of gender in Beckett's *oeuvre* is a pertinent one, it remains beyond the scope of this study. I have chosen not to address the topic, because a cursory discussion would not do justice to its complexity. In my reading, Beckett moves from an initial misogyny, particularly prominent in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932; published 1992) and *Murphy* (1938), and still overtly present in *Molloy* (1951) and *Malone Dies* (1951), to a more universalist, albeit not gender-indifferent view.[11] This shift can be detected in *All That Fall* (1956), a play which sports Beckett's first female protagonist, Maddy Rooney. It can be evidenced most clearly in such late works as the stage play, *Rockaby* (1980), and the novel, *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), with their sympathetic portrayal of female protagonists.[12] The question of masculinity in Beckett's work is an underresearched area, which merits substantial and sustained analysis of its own.[13]

In order to address the basic modalities of embodiment manifest in Beckett's writing, I begin by turning to phenomenology and, more specifically, to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61). *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty's major work, constitutes a unique consideration of embodiment, and one that has not been surpassed by subsequent thinkers.[14] Published in 1945, in the aftermath of the Second World War, *Phenomenology of Perception* argues that, instead of being an object in the world, the body, by constituting not only the subject's point of view, but subjectivity itself, forms the foundation of all forms of human experience. Merleau-Ponty stressed what he called the 'primacy' of perception,

foregrounding the importance of prereflective experience to our encounter with the world.

My discussion of embodiment in Beckett's work hence opens with an overview of Merleau-Ponty's theory of the incarnate subject. Merleau-Ponty not only worked in Paris contemporaneously with Samuel Beckett; he was also situated at the École Normale Supérieure when Beckett was working there as *lecteur* from 1928 to 1930.[15] According to Mme Merleau-Ponty and Beckett's publisher, John Calder, Merleau-Ponty's library contained several of Beckett's works.[16] Lois Oppenheim also points out that Beckett's friend, Georges Duthuit, was a close acquaintance of Merleau-Ponty's, and may have functioned as 'a conduit' between the two men.[17] It is, furthermore, possible that Beckett's pupil at the École Normale Supérieure, Jean Beaufret (1907–82), a philosophy student and future expert on Heidegger, was familiar with the young Merleau-Ponty.[18] Both, after all, were to become advocates of phenomenology.[19] During this time, the young Beckett often discussed philosophy with 'the Beausprit', as the author called him in his letters to Thomas MacGreevy.[20] Alberto Giacometti, whom both Beckett and Merleau-Ponty knew, is yet another possible 'conduit' between the two men.[21] Most crucially, however, Beckett and Merleau-Ponty shared the intellectual climate of inter-war and post-war Paris. Although, therefore, we do not know whether Beckett read Merleau-Ponty's work and do know that Merleau-Ponty read Beckett's, my aim here is not to suggest that the one was influenced by the other, as much as to use Merleau-Ponty's work as an index or backdrop against which to illuminate central concerns in Beckett's writing. Merleau-Ponty's work, as we shall see, has at least this much in common with Beckett's writing: whereas Merleau-Ponty's *oeuvre* signals the first conscious effort in philosophy to bring the body to the forefront, Beckett's work can be read as one of the most serious inquiries of this kind in literature. The common denominator between the two writers is the concept of the phantom limb, which in the work of both authors is based on an idea of corporeal memory. I shall argue, therefore, that the work of Beckett and Merleau-Ponty shares several fundamental characteristics but, simultaneously, other crucial and profound discrepancies. Whilst, therefore, this book is not constructed around Beckett and Merleau-Ponty *per se*, the topic forms the focus of the first chapter; Merleau-Ponty's ideas will also be returned to in several subsequent chapters of this book.

The primary texts discussed in the first chapter are Beckett's extended essay on Proust, written in 1930, and his stage play *Krapp's Last Tape*,

from 1958. Throughout this book, I will discuss works that have been considered central to the author's *oeuvre*, as well as others that have received less critical attention. The corpus includes Beckett's correspondence, manuscripts and notebooks, as well as his stage plays, novellas, film, prose fragments, radio plays, novels and television plays. I also discuss Beckett's critical writings as an index of his aesthetic preoccupations. With the exception of the early correspondence, notebooks and critical writings, the common denominator is the focus on Beckett's mature works, here understood to begin with the novellas, *First Love*, *The Expelled*, *The Calmative* and *The End*, written in 1946. In this reading, Beckett moves away from an initial Cartesianism, especially prominent in the novel *Murphy* (1938), albeit in the form of parody, to a more complex, yet at times reluctant, abandonment of dualism.[22] The mature and late works, in short, form Beckett's most intricate and intense investigation into issues of embodiment.

Much of Beckett's interest in the body manifests itself through an emphasis on different forms of sensory perception; this theme will form the topic of chapters 2, 3 and 4. Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of the visual dimension in Beckett's prose and *Film* (1964).[23] It begins with an overview of received Western notions of vision and rationality, followed by a discussion of Beckett's correspondence with his close friend, the poet and critic Thomas MacGreevy. The chapter also briefly addresses Beckett's critical writings. In both the letters and the critical works, Beckett reveals his preoccupation with the reorganization of perception in modern art which, in turn, is intricately connected with a re-evaluation of subjectivity. This discussion will be followed by a reading of two of Beckett's novellas, *The Calmative* and *The End* (1946), in which Beckett re-imagines the experience of seeing anew, in embodied and fallible terms, and further develops his investigation into the status of subjectivity. I close the chapter with a discussion of Beckett's *Film*, in which he explores the question of self-perception and stages his conclusions about sovereign subjectivity.

A number of early critics have discussed the importance of hearing in Beckett's work, arguing that sound functions as a marker of interiority in Beckett's writing. The focus of these readings, in other words, has been on the inner ear of the mind, rather than the embodied ear of flesh in Beckett's work. Beckett's writing, and modernist literature more generally, none the less, dedicates extraordinary attention to hearing and listening. This is no doubt at least partly due to the rapid development of various auditory technologies in the second half of the nineteenth century

and the early decades of the twentieth, particularly in the period between 1875 and 1925. The telephone and the phonograph, for instance, were both invented in 1876. Although magnetic recorders, too, date from this period, tape recorders did not reach popular consumption until the mid 1950s; Beckett's work is the first to bring one on stage. Sound technologies, such as radio, gramophone, telephone and audiotape, in fact reconfigure our received notions of time and space. They hence have an important impact on the body and our understanding of its boundaries.

What has been overlooked, the third chapter will argue, is the special relevance the acoustic has to issues of embodiment in Beckett's writing. Unlike the proximity senses – namely touch, taste and, to some degree, smell – that ground the Beckettian subject in the body, hearing promises a certain expansion of corporeal boundaries. Sound, furthermore, is not only more expansive than the proximity senses; it also traverses obstacles that vision cannot overcome, transporting the subject across spatial and temporal confines. The transporting quality of sound in Beckett, however, does not free the subject from the grasp of its material, situated condition. On the contrary, through an analysis of four of Beckett's radio and stage plays, namely *All That Fall* (1956), *Embers* (1959), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *That Time* (1975), all of which make use of various auditory technologies, I argue that Beckett, showing an acute awareness of the complex phenomenology of sound, ultimately grounds the acoustic in an austere materialism. By virtue of its multispatiality and multitemporality, made possible by various sound technologies, the acoustic, by doubling and remaking the subject, in fact serves only to augment and intensify the predicament of the body: Beckett's characters transgress spatial and temporal confines only to be rooted ever more firmly in the physical conditions of existence.

Chapter 4 focuses on the shorter prose fictions that Beckett wrote in the 1960s, namely *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Ping* and *The Lost Ones*. Critics have tended to view these texts, which are linked not only in imagery but also through their textual genetics, as allegories of the human condition or as parables of the authorial process. Closer scrutiny of them, however, reveals that they engage in a probing examination of the contradictory nature of perception and the embodied state of subjectivity. Through a systematic set of negations, marked by the abandonment of the first-person narrator, the privileging of gesture and posture over language and hearing and, most prominently, the prioritising of the sense of touch over that of vision, these works question and undermine the primacy of the conceptual order, foregrounding

exteriority and surface over interiority and depth. The narrating voice itself, through its application of conflicting and ultimately self-negating registers, becomes the locus merely of further doubt and uncertainty. The same can even be said of the persistently failing mathematics of the narrator. In short, the systematic interrogations and negations in the texts set in motion a vacillating dynamic between subjectivity and its dissolution.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the prominence of different forms of motility in Beckett's work. The primary texts discussed figure amongst the most canonised in Beckett's *oeuvre*, namely the three novels of the Trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, written in the late 1940s, and the stage play, *Waiting for Godot*, written between *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. I shall focus on different modes of motion prominent in these works, whether voluntary, such as walking, rolling or crawling, or involuntary, such as twitching, convulsing and trembling. The chapter will also contain a consideration of the abject body, and the impact of the grotesque tradition on Beckett's writing. The bodies in Beckett, as a result of their abject and unruly nature, threaten the subject's autonomy, but for the very same reason, they remain stubbornly individuated.

The focus of the sixth and final chapter is on the impact of perceptual technologies on Beckett's work. New technologies are often conceptualized in relation to the human body, as prosthetic devices that function either as instances of organ- or sensory extension, or as forms of organ replacement, to make up for an individual deficiency or lack. Beckett, whose work foregrounds technology both in its media and as an actual presence, examines the manner in which new technologies change the way in which we see, hear and more generally perceive the world, producing in us a double-perception that differs from earlier modes of perceiving. Inventions such as Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography (1880s) and Wilhelm Röntgen's X-rays (1895) enhanced the human eye and appropriated scopic ideas of knowledge, whilst simultaneously underscoring the limitations and lack in human, embodied vision. In a number of his works, this chapter argues, Beckett stages the manner in which perceptual technologies, by being more objective, stark and 'reliable' than the human eye and ear, not only differ from but perhaps also liberate human perception from its association with rationality and objectivity, freeing it for sensuous, subjective and aestheticised perceptual experience. If technology, Beckett seems to suggest, does the quantifiable seeing and hearing for us, human perception is freed for qualitative sensory experience. Beckett's television plays, *Ghost Trio* and *. . . but the clouds . . .*, the

chapter argues, centre on the subjective, embodied, yearning human eye and ear.

Medical technologies form an important subcategory of perceptual technologies. The sixth chapter will close with a consideration of the impact of medical imaging techniques on Beckett's work. Beckett himself had first-hand experience of these techniques, having, for instance, undergone a series of X-rays and gruelling bronchoscopies in 1968. These technologies transgress the boundaries of interior and exterior, turning the body inside out, making us strange to ourselves. They also digitise and replicate the body, reproducing it as code or pixellated image. These two-dimensional and fragmented images that give the subject or physician an understanding of anatomy and physiological processes, 'frantic with corporeality', also virtualise the body, suggesting, often in problematic ways, its reconfiguration.[24] They hence participate in what Hal Foster has called 'the double logic of the prosthesis'.[25] I conclude with a consideration of instances of this tension in Beckett's late television plays, *Nacht und Träume* and *What Where*.

CHAPTER 1

The body of memory

In recent years, several fine works on different aspects of embodiment have appeared in print. What many critical accounts of the body have had in common, however, has been a tendency to analyse the various facets of embodiment as effects of discourse. At its most extreme, this trend has not only eclipsed the material dimension of embodiment, but diminished the body itself to the status of a concept. As Bryan Turner has argued, 'despite all the references to pleasure and desire, a structuralist analysis of the body . . . ignores the phenomenology of embodiment.'[1] This trend has also had an impact on Beckett studies. While a number of critics have addressed Beckett's textual foregrounding of the body in striking and compelling ways, the role of the body as the complex and perpetually mutable basis of subjectivity in Beckett's writing has received less critical attention.

Despite the transcendentalist claims of early humanist readings of Beckett's work, critics now widely concur that the Beckettian characters' experience of the world is a markedly physical, bodily experience. Whether we are dealing with the prose or the drama, it is the body, rather than the *cogito*, that gives the characters assurance of their existence. In *Company* (1980), the narrated character is lying on his back in the dark, listening to a voice. He is aware of this 'by the pressure on his hind parts and by how the dark changes when he shuts his eyes and again when he opens them again'.[2] His existence, in other words, is determined and even brought about by tactile, visual and acoustic sensations. In *Footfalls*, we learn, through the female voice that narrates May's childhood conversation with her mother, that it is not enough for May merely to feel her existence through motion; May also needs to *hear* she exists, however faint the feet fall. When May, a moment earlier in the play, addresses her mother, the conversation, not surprisingly, centres around the mother's bodily needs: 'Would you like me to inject you again? . . . Would you like me to change your position again? . . . Straighten your pillows? Change your drawsheet?