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The Aesthetics of Impersonation and Depersonalization

Samuel Beckett and Philip Roth

Joshua Powell

ABSTRACT. This essay begins by considering an obvious point of difference between the work of Samuel Beckett and Philip Roth. In view of its tendency to present anonymous voices and body parts, Beckett's writing is frequently seen to explore the erosion of personhood. Roth's concern with the secret lives of his characters, by contrast, means that he is often considered to be more concerned with impersonation than depersonalization. While accepting the general validity of this view, the essay complicates it. Through readings of works such as *The Breast*, *Sabbath's Theater*, *The Humbling*, *Molloy*, and *Not I*, it argues that a close comparison of the two writers can reveal the central role that depersonalization plays in Roth's writing and also the stubbornness of personhood in Beckett's.

In a 1984 interview with Hermione Lee for the *Paris Review*, Philip Roth suggests that writing is a matter of impersonation:

You have to be awfully naïve not to understand that a writer is a performer who puts on the act that he does best—not least when he does the mask of the first-person singular. That may be the best mask of all for a second self. Some (many) pretend to be more lovable than they are and some pretend to be less. Beside the point. Literature isn't a moral beauty contest. Its power arises from the authority and the audacity with which the impersonation is pulled off; the belief it inspires is what counts. (qtd. in Lee)

Powerful literature, for Roth, arises when the writer adopts a persona that the reader can believe in—the writer must seem to disappear behind the second self that appears on the page. Roth, though, does not want to think about literary personas as pure un-authored entities. He is interested in the ways in which writers impersonate, rather than the selves that they are impersonating: “I don’t admire the [Jean] Genet that Genet presents as himself any more than I admire the unsavory Molloy impersonated by Beckett. I admire Genet because he writes books that won’t let me forget who that Genet is” (qtd. in Lee).

Roth, then, wants to apprehend the masks that authors wear, but he is less interested in the particulars of the mask than the sense of realness that derives “from the authority and the audacity” with which it is worn. In order to exude this sense of realness, the writer must suppress the urge to censor the person he or she is pretending to be: “The impersonator can’t afford to indulge the ordinary human instincts which direct people in what they want to present and what they want to hide” (qtd. in Lee). What is peculiar about this quotation is the sense that the power of a writerly impersonation hinges on the writer’s capacity to repress personhood—to repress the “ordinary human instincts” that “people” are directed by. The figures Roth impersonates, it seems, are distinct from “people.” I wish to pursue this point further, arguing that, while Roth’s writing is driven by impersonation, it is also heavily concerned with a process of depersonalization. Through writing, Roth may pretend to be other people, but the people he pretends to be are frequently defined by the precariousness of their personhood.

It may be useful, before going any further, to clarify what I mean by the term “person” and the related terms that I have so far mentioned (impersonation, depersonalization, personhood). As Roth’s statement highlights, the term “person” is peculiar in that it seems to imply both singularity and conformity. Personhood can be thought of as synonymous with individuality: to call someone a person is to register a distinct identity (a particular set of feelings, beliefs, desires etc.). But at the same time, returning to Roth’s statement, people are marked by a sense of restraint—they are subject to “ordinary human instincts” which direct them “in what they want to present and what they want to hide.” A person shows a particular set of feelings, beliefs and desires but also gives an impression of self-consciously hiding some of these from public view. To be in the presence of a person, then, is to be in the presence of someone who is able to reveal his or her individuality, but also to give the sense of having a concealed inner world. Roth’s writing is clearly concerned with impersonation—it consistently works to produce distinctive individuals or characters who give the impression of having an inner world—but it rarely stops there. Roth’s oeuvre is undoubtedly populated by some distinct

and memorable individuals, but what makes his writing particularly powerful is the sense that these individuals are frequently in the process of losing their individuality and/or their concealed inner worlds.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this process of depersonalization can be found in Roth's 1972 novella *The Breast*, in which the protagonist David Kepesh is transformed into a six-foot breast. In an interview conducted on release of the work, Roth speaks of how Kepesh has "all but lost touch, to quote him, with the 'professor of literature, the lover, the son, the friend, the neighbour, the customer, the client, and the citizen' that he was before his transformation. What he's become has narrowed his life down to a single issue: his anatomy" (*Reading* 72–73). A particular type of depersonalization is at work here. Kepesh is frequently forced to confront the idea that he is no longer perceived as a person but appears rather as an object to be observed in a "medical amphitheatre," exposed to "closed-circuit television," or placed "under a soundproof glass dome on a platform in the middle of Madison Square Garden" (*Breast* 22). "I am a breast," he declares at one point (13). Yet, even as he reduces himself to a dismembered body part, Kepesh remains a person insofar as he retains a fairly coherent inner world that reflects on his bodily situation and how it will change the way he acts. By the end of the story, Roth states in the interview, Kepesh learns that "he is a breast, and must act accordingly" (*Reading* 69, emphasis in original). The process of depersonalization, then, is not completed in *The Breast*, but it is at work. Roth subjects his character to a transformation that strips away his singularity until he is perceived—and defines himself—with the indefinite article: as a breast.

In the Lee interview, Roth places the writerly impersonations he performs in a tradition that includes Genet and Beckett; the latter author, I suggest, was also a significant influence on Roth's practice of depersonalization. Beckett's writing certainly seems to have been on Roth's mind when he wrote *The Breast*.¹ In his discussion of the novella, Roth suggests that *The Breast* could have been "more comic, or more grotesque or both," citing Beckett's *Molloy and Malone Dies* as "wonderful models for the kind of humor that manages to be wildly funny and perfectly gruesome all at once" (*Reading* 74). In these novels, Roth continues, "Samuel Beckett does for bodily decomposition what Jack Benny used to do on Sunday nights for stinginess" (74). Roth's statement invites us to draw a link between the plights of Beckett's *Molloy* and *Malone*, and that of Kepesh: for all three, life is progressively narrowed down to questions of anatomy. Roth, however, stresses that his work differs from Beckett's in a crucial way. Where Beckett's explorations of bodily decomposition were, in Roth's view, played primarily for laughs, he himself "resisted comedy" and took "this potentially hilarious situation [. . .] perfectly seriously"

(74, ellipsis added, emphasis in original). Roth, then, differentiates the tone of his work from that of Beckett, but this difference of tone is rooted in the degree to which the respective protagonists of the works retain their personhood. Returning to the account of personhood above, Kepesh retains his personhood to a much greater degree than Beckett's protagonist because he continues to give the sense of having a public and a private self. As Roth puts it, Kepesh is characterized by a tension between his "ethical and social yearnings" and his "implacable, singular lusts for the flesh and its pleasures" (70). Kepesh has a particular set of feelings, beliefs, and desires, but he is selective about which of these to reveal in public and which to conceal. In this respect he remains a person, even as he defines himself as a breast. A protagonist such as Beckett's Molloy is more comic than Kepesh, in that he seems to lose touch with the instincts that, to apply Roth's words, "direct people in what they want to present and what they want to hide." Molloy, for example, seems unable to resist his bodily urges in public view. On the subject of manners and decorum, Molloy states that he is "in the dark, most of the time" and so is prone to "parading in public certain habits such as the finger in the nose, the scratching of the balls, digital emunction and the peripatetic piss" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 21). Of Kepesh, Roth speaks of a struggle between a "measured self" and an "insatiable self," an "accommodating self" and a "ravenous self" (*Reading* 70). For Molloy, this struggle seems to have ended and the accommodating, measured self has been vanquished.

One might well conclude that Beckett's writing is simply more concerned with depersonalization than is Roth's. There are good grounds for this point of view. Roth certainly shows a more persistent desire to investigate the inner conflicts of his characters. But a close comparison of the two writers can nuance this conclusion, revealing the central role that the process of depersonalization plays in Roth's writing and also the stubbornness of personhood in Beckett's. The latter point might be illustrated by reference to a work of Beckett's which is very obviously concerned with depersonalization: the 1972 theatre piece *Not I*. Here the main figure is simply named "Mouth" and the play's presentation, in most versions, consists of a single human mouth alone in the darkness, speaking, screaming and laughing (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 375–83).² This seems an extreme case of depersonalization; the dramatic personage is nothing but a mouth on stage. As Beckett put it to director Alan Schneider, Mouth is "purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is [Henrik] Ibsen" (Harmon 283). In contrast to figures in naturalistic works such as Ibsen's, Mouth is not conceived of as a person with a singular set of interests and motivations but a "stage entity" that is to perform a set of scripted actions. Mouth, however, is never quite stripped

of personhood. After all, the “stage entity” is able to speak and tells what is a fundamentally personal story about the response of a particular individual to a dramatic bodily change.³ The protagonist is in a field on an April morning when all of a sudden things go dark and she starts to lose sentience. After a period in this state, she regains feeling in her mouth and thinks feeling is coming back “starting at the top . . . then working down” (379–80). However, eventually it becomes clear that feeling will remain in “the mouth alone” (380) and the remainder of the narrative is concerned with the particular set of feelings experienced by the protagonist when placed in this state. In *Not I*, Beckett is concerned with the production of a depersonalized figure, but this depersonalized figure carries out an act of impersonation.⁴

The remainder of this article will be concerned with the ways in which these processes of impersonation and depersonalization work together in the writing of Roth and Beckett. I will begin with the comparison of Molloy and the protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), Mickey Sabbath. Here I will analyze how these personas perform transgressive, impermissible acts, questioning each author's motive for wearing these particular masks. From there, I will consider Beckett and Roth's concern with depersonalization through their shared interest in the figure of the puppet. This will involve an assessment of the links between Beckett, Roth, and Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay “On the Marionette Theatre.” Finally, I will suggest that reading Roth alongside Beckett in this way can alter the way in which we think of Roth as an “experimental” writer.

IMPERSONATING THE UNPERSONABLE: MOLLOY AND SABBATH

In Roth's reading of Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), he describes the figure Beckett impersonates as “unsavory.” I believe this reading has some merit, but it is worth defining the particular character of Molloy's unsavoriness. In Beckett's text, Molloy undoubtedly performs acts that are publicly impermissible but apparently without intending to offend or subvert. He may, for example, repeatedly thump his mother on the skull but this, he tells us, is done in an attempt to get “into communication” with her—he does not consider it an act of violence (*Three Novels* 14). This may be an unsavory act, but Molloy is not self-conscious about its unsavoriness. Similarly, when confronted by a police officer and asked for his “papers,” Molloy thrusts under the policeman's nose the bits of newspaper he uses “to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool” (16). Again, one might recognize this as a transgressive, provocative act but Molloy, we are to believe, does not intend it as such. Rather, he suggests that he has done it out of incomprehension and panic.

It is tempting to draw a link between Beckett's impersonation of the "unsavory" Molloy and one of the more unsavory personas that Roth has put down on paper, Mickey Sabbath. In both figures, there is a strong scent of misogyny, a great deal of cruelty, and a degree of shamelessness. There is, however, a major difference between the two. Though both personas are seen to behave in outrageous ways, Sabbath is much more self-conscious about his misbehavior. Where Molloy's impermissible acts are frequently driven by confusion, Sabbath seems drawn to perform impermissible acts *because* of their impermissibility. As David Brauner puts it, "Sabbath's compulsive taboo-breaking is the expression of a credo of antagonism, his immorality an article of (bad) faith" (*Philip Roth* 124). This contrast manifests clearly in the personas' respective attitudes toward sex. Both Sabbath and Molloy are transgressive when it comes to sex—they both engage in sexual acts that seem to violate the conventions of the societies in which they live—but Sabbath is much more purposeful about his transgressions.

Molloy stumbles into sex, at times literally, and his transgressive exploits, he professes, are driven by a desire to enter a seemingly normative world of monogamous, romantic love: "I would have made love with a goat to know what love was" (*Three Novels* 52). His lack of purpose is evident when Molloy recounts—or attempts to recount—his sexual experience with Edith or Ruth (he is unsure of the name): "She had a hole between her legs, oh not the bunghole I had always imagined, but a slit, and in this I put, or rather she put, my so-called virile member, not without difficulty, and I toiled and moiled until I discharged or gave up trying or was begged by her to stop" (51). There are various ways in which we might define this sexual encounter as transgressive. Beckett's persona, for example, seems to be acting as a prostitute: "She gave me money after each session" (52). But Molloy himself suspects he has transgressed a social rule for one reason: the indeterminacy of Ruth/Edith's gender. Ruth/Edith, Molloy recalls, was an "eminently flat woman" and this leads him to suspect that "she too was a man" (52). Eventually, though, Molloy questions this suspicion when he recalls that, upon her death, Ruth/Edith was found in the bath:

She must have been a woman after all, if she hadn't been it would have got around the neighbourhood. It is true they were extraordinarily reserved in my part of the world about everything connected with sexual matters. But things have perhaps changed since my time. And it is possible that the fact of having found a man when they should have found a woman was immediately repressed and forgotten, by the very few unfortunate enough to know about it. (53)

Molloy senses that if Ruth/Edith were a man his encounter with her would have transgressed the sexual rules of his neighborhood. This transgression,

though, would not have been purposeful but incidental. For his part, Molloy is mainly concerned with the question of whether Ruth/Edith's being a man would invalidate the idea that he found love in the encounter: "there is one thing that torments me, when I delve into all this, and that is to know whether my life has been devoid of love or whether I really met with it, in Ruth" (53). Ultimately, then, Molloy is invested in the idea of romantic love and even suggests he has been faithful to his partner after her/his death: "What I do know for certain is that I never sought to repeat the experience, having I suppose the intuition that it had been unique and perfect, of its kind, achieved and inimitable and that it behoved me to preserve its memory, pure of all pastiche in my heart" (53). Molloy may suspect that he has had transgressive sex, but he does not set out to subvert his society's rules of sexual conduct—he wants his conduct to "behoove" him.

Sabbath's sexual transgressions take on a very different character from those of Molloy. Unlike Beckett's persona, Sabbath does not participate in sex in order to "know love." Rather, he seems primarily committed to following his desires wherever they may lead. This commitment is acted upon most obviously in Sabbath's extra-marital affair with Drenka Balich, where, according to Sabbath, the pair sustain their relationship by "forthrightly pursuing together our sexual desires" (*Sabbath* 20). However, as the novel progresses it soon becomes clear that Sabbath's exploits are not driven solely by sexual desire. Sabbath, it often seems, is less interested in the sexual encounters themselves than what they stand in opposition to: a sexual existence that consists of monogamy, domesticity, procreation and romantic love. This much is apparent in Sabbath's response when Drenka requests that he "foreswear fucking others" and consent to "monogamy outside marriage" (3; 19). Sabbath is horrified at this request because of its ideological—rather than practical—implications. In practice the "absurdly bearded," "obstinately peculiar," and "quite unalluring" Sabbath has little choice but to be faithful to Drenka (26). But he is concerned that Drenka can find the *idea* of monogamy appealing. It shocks Sabbath to think that the "forthrightness" which has "provided such a healthy contrast to the routine deceitfulness that is the hallmark of a hundred million marriages [...] is now less to your [Drenka's] taste than the solace of conventional lies and repressive puritanism" (20, ellipsis added). If he accepted Drenka's demand, the affair would continue without any significant change in his behavior. But the encounters with Drenka would lose their value for Sabbath if they no longer served an ideological purpose, namely the undermining of the conventional, monogamous marriage. Sabbath's sexual encounters, then, are as much,

if not more, about attacking conventional sexuality as pursuing desires. In Frank Kelleter's words, "Sabbath is much less concerned with his own sexual satisfaction than with the attempt to prove other people's existence unsatisfactory" (270). Where Molloy struggles to place his seemingly transgressive sexual encounter within the frame of romantic, monogamous love, Sabbath struggles to keep his encounters out of this frame.

When one thinks about Beckett's impersonation of Molloy and Roth's impersonation of Sabbath, then, a clear contrast emerges. While both writers impersonate transgressors, Roth's persona is driven by a moral conviction that the non-transgressive way of doing things is wrong. Beckett's, by contrast, transgresses out of an incapacity to adhere to the non-transgressive. A moral interest—albeit an inverted one—seems to lie behind Sabbath's misbehavior where it does not for Molloy. How does this point of contrast affect our view of Beckett and Roth as writers of impersonation? It may be argued that Sabbath's peculiarly moral approach to sexual transgression makes him more of a person than Molloy. I am not sure this is the case, however. If we return to Roth's discussion of literary impersonation, a question emerges as to whether Sabbath's moral convictions around sex make us believe in him more than we believe in Molloy. It does not in my view, and this is because Molloy's sexual transgressions also derive from a singular set of feelings, beliefs, and desires. These feelings, beliefs, and desires may be more confused and less (im)moral than those of Sabbath, but this does not make him any less of a person. In *Molloy* and *Sabbath's Theater*, I would argue, Beckett and Roth are both carrying out literary impersonations; they are merely impersonating different kinds of people.⁵

This comparison of Molloy and Sabbath raises a further question of each author's motive for donning these particular masks. From the above discussion one might assert that Roth's writing is more concerned with the transgression of social convention than is Beckett's. Because Sabbath is more self-conscious and purposeful about his transgression, it may be argued, we are more likely to take him seriously and question the social conventions that he transgresses. I would question this view. The persona of Molloy may not have a moral purpose for his transgressions, but this does not mean that Beckett has no moral purpose for making him transgress. Critics such as Paul Stewart have read Molloy's persona as part of Beckett's reaction against heteronormativity and an ethics of reproductive sex (106–7). Here, I would argue, Molloy's failure, in spite of his best efforts, to grasp the rules of sexual normativity works to make us question the coherence and morality of these rules. Though Roth works more explicitly, both authors use a method of literary impersonation in order to interrogate particular social conventions.

PUPPET THEATERS

Beckett and Roth, then, are comparable in the way in which they carry out literary impersonation, but what of depersonalization? It does not seem much of a stretch to call Beckett a writer of depersonalization, but Roth's work might appear more resistant to that label. In the remainder of this essay, however, I wish to show the degree to which processes of depersonalization are crucial to works such as *Sabbath's Theater* and *The Humbling* (2009). As this choice of texts might suggest, Roth's concern with depersonalization is closely connected to his interest in the theater. *Sabbath's Theater* demonstrates this interest through the directorial practice Sabbath applies when working with his first wife Nikki in a production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). What Sabbath asks Nikki to do here is simply, almost mechanically, to follow a set of instructions: "Sabbath had asked Nikki to go silently around the empty room brushing all the walls with the tips of her fingers. No tears please. Just circle the room touching the bare walls and then leave—that'll do it" (*Sabbath* 21). Nikki, Sabbath stipulates, should not embellish the role with any of her own personality (tears, sounds). Rather, she is to carry out a set of rigid instructions, something she does with a degree of success: "And everything she was asked to do, Nikki did exquisitely . . . and it was for him (Sabbath) rendered not quite satisfactory by the fact that whatever she played, however well, she was still also Nikki" (21, ellipsis in original). Through his directorial practice, Sabbath attempts—but ultimately fails—to depersonalize Nikki.

Though his attempt at depersonalization says something about the controlling nature of Sabbath's character, his aesthetic motives should not be ignored. In Sabbath's mind, the aesthetic power of theater seems to be obstructed by the fact that actors are "real" people. Nikki, Sabbath thinks, "seemed always less than convincing to him because of being a real person" (21). This, we are told, leads Sabbath back to his principal aesthetic interest, puppetry. "With Puppets," he reasons, "you never had to banish the actor from the role. There was nothing false or artificial about puppets, nor were they 'metaphors' for human beings. They were what they were" (21). As Kelleter has observed, the aesthetic principles that Sabbath advances, here, compare interestingly with those voiced by Herr C. in Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay "On the Marionette Theatre." Though he is speaking of dancing rather than acting, Herr C. also states that the puppet has aesthetic advantages over the human. When the narrator asks him to name the advantages, Herr C. responds as follows:

The advantage? First a negative gain, my excellent friend, specifically this: that such a figure would never be affected. For affectation appears,

as you know, when the soul (*vis motrix*) locates itself at any point other than the center of gravity of the movement. Because the puppeteer absolutely controls the wire or string, he controls and has power over no other point than this one: therefore all the other limbs are what they should be—dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers. (24)

The link between Sabbath and Herr C. is clear. What Sabbath likes about Nikki's performance is that she will perform the actions he asks her to do without embellishing them with her personality. What he does not like is the "also" in Nikki's acting—the sense that the parts of Nikki that he is not directing are still endowed with personhood (*Sabbath* 21). As is the case with Herr C., Sabbath prefers puppets because, with them, the parts of the performer that are not under direction are "dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity." Both grow frustrated with human performers because they have an existence outside of the actions that they are scripted to perform.

In light of this similarity, one might suspect that Roth was directly influenced by Kleist's essay when producing the character of Sabbath. There are some grounds for this hypothesis but it is by no means certain. Roth was familiar with Kleist's writing,⁶ but I do not know that "On the Marionette Theatre" is a work he ever read. In any case, there are crucial differences between the ideas of Sabbath and Herr C. As Kelleter points out, "Sabbath seems directly to confront Kleist's Romantic idealism" (264) when he muses on the difference between (hand) puppets and marionettes:

Puppets can fly, levitate, twirl, but only people and marionettes are confined to running and walking. That's why marionettes always bored him: all that walking they were always doing up and down the tiny stage, as though, in addition to being the subject of every marionette show, walking were the major theme of life. And those strings—too visible, too many, too blatantly metaphorical. And always slavishly imitating human theater. Whereas puppets . . . shoving your hand up a puppet and hiding your face behind a screen! Nothing like it in the animal kingdom! (*Sabbath* 244, ellipsis in original)

In his reading of this passage, Kelleter focuses on the contrast between the "idealistic faith in an artistic mechanics" that underpins Herr C.'s enthusiasm for the marionette, and Sabbath's use of puppetry for "personal, indeed sexual, gratification" (264–65). But perhaps a more obvious point to make about the passage is that Sabbath seems to dislike marionettes because they are too much like people. Puppets, Sabbath notes, can move in ways that are beyond "people and marionettes." They take Sabbath further away from the theater of personhood. Sabbath's aesthetic practice, then, is driven by a desire

to produce figures that are distinct from people. But what of Roth's? In Sabbath, have we not seen Roth produce a literary persona with a particular set of moral—and aesthetic—interests? This may be so, but I would suggest that the personhood of Mickey Sabbath, like that of many other Roth characters, is never stable. Roth frequently asks us to doubt the personhood of his own characters, and the way in which he does this might be examined through a consideration of Roth's writing in relation to Beckett's theatrical practice.

A defining feature of Beckett's drama is undoubtedly the sense of non-personhood that surrounds the figures that populate it. This manifests in a tendency to compare the human person with the puppet. Writing specifically of Beckett's drama, Kenneth Gross (2011) notes:

Samuel Beckett's plays [. . .] give us human creatures at the edge of humanity, possessed of a severely limited, even mechanical range of movement and gesture, bound in the earth or to a rocking chair, or reduced to spotlit mouths, disembodied hands, and depersonalized voices. They show us humans caught by the inhuman forces that yet emerge from *within* the human. (77, emphasis in original, ellipsis added)

For Gross, Beckett's creatures resemble puppets in the degree to which they seem caught between people and things. But Gross goes on, "I cringe to think of the plays performed outright using puppets. That would literalize the fiction and kill the dramatic force of seeing a human actor whose body and voice are under stress" (77). Beckett's creations may be in the throes of depersonalization, but a large part of the power of Beckett's writing resides in the feeling that the process is never complete.

Beckett's interest in the person-puppet was a persistent one and seems to have been inspired by two earlier European authors. David Tucker (2012) observes that "tropes of puppetry" appear in Beckett's earliest works—where characters are frequently likened to puppets—and these tropes find a "reinvigorated and particularly focused manifestation" in some of the later works (161–62).⁷ Beckett's early uses of puppetry, Tucker continues, owe a debt to his reading of the seventeenth-century Flemish philosopher Arnold Geulincx but in later works Beckett's Geulincxian interest in puppetry would be combined with a concern with the Kleistian puppet (161–75). If we had to be slightly cautious when suggesting the influence of Kleist's essay on *Sabbath's Theater*, one can be bolder when discussing its influence on Beckett. According to James Knowlson's 1996 biography, Beckett began to show an interest in Kleist in the 1960s, and from the 1970s onwards repeatedly used "On the Marionette Theatre" as a reference point when explaining his theatrical aesthetic (569; 584; 632–33). In particular, Knowlson notes that Beckett had Kleist in mind when working on the 1976 television play *Ghost*

Trio. As Knowlson suggests, the main figure in this play (named merely F) is “poised between two worlds” (633). At times, F seems like a kind of puppet, mechanically performing the actions that a mysterious voice (V) predicts or commands: “‘Now to door’ (F goes to door), ‘Open’ (F pushes door open), ‘Now to window’ (F goes to window), ‘Open’ (F pushes window open)” (*Dramatic Works* 410). But at other points in the play, F seems to show self-consciousness and a capacity to transcend V’s instructions. For example, when F goes to a mirror and looks at his face in it, V gives a “[surprised] ‘Ah!’” She has not predicted this (410–11). F is not quite a puppet.

What Beckett seems to take from Kleist, then, is a theatrical aesthetic that is built around the losing—though not complete loss—of personhood. It is not just that figures such as F seem to be caught between the person and the puppet. Like Sabbath’s, Beckett’s theater seems interested in banishing “the actor from the role” (*Sabbath* 21). Here it is useful to look at the context in which Beckett’s theater was written. Beckett’s dramatic writing, as Anthony Uhlmann has suggested, opposes the Stanislavskian process of method acting in which the actor is required to merge with the role:

Clearly, Beckett’s concepts of dramatic production seem antagonistic to those which have dominated twentieth-century practices, such as those developed by the Russian director and theorist Stanislavski, through which the actor is asked to look within him or herself to find the reality of the part (i.e., their own unapologetically subjective understanding) in order to express a real subjectivity on stage. (55)

This antagonism manifests in Beckett’s own comments, as reported by biographer Dirdre Bair: “‘Not for me these Grotowskis and Methods,’ Beckett storms. ‘The best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text. I’m trying to find a way to write one’” (544). In spite of these comments, Beckett never completely wrote actors out of his plays. Even late works like *Quad* (1982) and *Nacht und Träume* (1982), which in Beckett’s words require “no acting, but simply a minimum of controlled movement” (qtd. in Knowlson 683), use humans (often mime artists) rather than mechanical entities. Beckett may, in Uhlmann’s words, have seen “his actors as ‘puppets’ akin to Kleist’s” but he persisted in working with actors rather than puppets (69). This is where I slightly disagree with Uhlmann’s reading. Drawing on the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, Uhlmann argues that Beckett’s tendency to see his actors as Kleistian puppets is rooted in his desire to “develop a univocal and externalised expression of a given set of ideas, images or affects through the rational ordering and interconnection of all of the elements in play within the performance piece” (60). The improvisations of the method actor, he suggests, would disrupt this effect, so Beckett preferred to conceptualize the

actor as puppet. I can see the merits of this argument but would add that a drama of impersonation and depersonalization tends to play out alongside Beckett's "rational ordering and interconnection" of elements. In employing humans rather than puppets, Beckett presents a drama in which the human person seems to be losing his or her personhood and becoming part of a "univocal and externalised expression." Beckett asks us to watch as humans lose touch with their individuality and their concealed inner worlds.

Roth's writing is also concerned with this process of watching individuals lose touch with their individuality and their concealed inner worlds. But whereas Beckett's theater allows an audience to watch this process from without, Roth's prose attempts to give us the experience of his characters as they watch this process from within. The clearest examples of this can be found in Roth's portrayals of two out-of-work actors: Sabbath and Simon Axler. Both of these protagonists undergo a crisis in which they are brought to question their own individuality—what it is that distinguishes them from other people. Before he breaks down in tears at the Cowans' kitchen table, for example, Sabbath reflects that he is "just someone who had grown ugly, old, and embittered, one of billions" (*Sabbath* 143). Similarly, when reflecting on the loss of his ability to act, Axler reflects that "all that had worked to make him himself now worked to make him look like a lunatic" (*Humbling* 2).

Both Sabbath and Axler, then, begin to think of their selves in impersonal terms (as "one of billions" or "a lunatic"), but the experience of depersonalization goes beyond this. It is also characterized by the way in which both Sabbath and Axler begin to doubt the authenticity of their inner worlds. They cease to believe that their actions derive from their own feelings, beliefs, and desires and instead suspect that it is all an "act." This can be seen as Sabbath begins to cry in front of the Cowans: "obeying the law of disappointment, disobedient Sabbath began to cry, and not even he could tell whether the crying was an act or the measure of his misery" (*Sabbath* 143). Sabbath seems to be able to feel misery but not believe it is authentically his: "true lives," he reflects, "belonged to others, or so others believed" (143). In a comparable fashion, Axler is skeptical about the authenticity of the suffering he experiences during his crisis. We are told: "the worst of it was that he saw through his breakdown the same way he could see through his acting. The suffering was excruciating and yet he doubted that it was genuine [. . .] The whole thing seemed to be an act, a bad act" (*Humbling* 5, ellipsis added). Roth presents characters who feel as if they have been hollowed out—who no longer believe in their own inner world and so are condemned to perform an impersonal, inauthentic act. In this way, they come to see themselves as objects of depersonalization.

CONCLUSION: SURFACE AND DEPTH

I argue, then, that Beckett and Roth are writers of impersonation but also depersonalization. Through writing, they pretend to be other people, but the personhood of the people they pretend to be is fragile. There is undoubtedly a socio-political dimension to this practice. I have suggested above, for example, that the impersonations of Beckett and Roth work to interrogate particular social conventions. But the practice also relates to an aesthetic tension that exists in the work of both Roth and Beckett: a tension between what I would call surface and depth representations of human activity. Beckett and Roth are undoubtedly interested in representing the inner realities of human subjects. This much is evident in Beckett's exploration of the conscious reflections of the nameless protagonist in *Not I* as she tries to make sense of the extreme bodily change that befalls her. It also appears in Roth's portrayal of David Kepesh as the professor of comparative literature who comes to terms with his metamorphosis into a breast. However, both writers are also drawn to more reductive, surface representations where the human subject exists as mere matter to be pushed and pulled around by certain psychological, biological, or even metaphysical forces. In Beckett's case, a tendency toward this aesthetic can be seen as early as 1932 in a letter to his friend Thomas MacGreevy. Here Beckett voices a desire for writing that reflects the involuntary, reflexive nature of much human activity: "I'm in mourning for the integrity of a pendu's [hanged man's] emission of semen, what I find in Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind" (Fehsenfeld and Overbeck 134–5). The process of depersonalization that we have seen in his later work manifests this desire for a literature that reflects the involuntary, unconscious nature of much human activity. But I have suggested that Beckett's theater is ultimately less interested in representing the non-person than staging a process of depersonalization in which humans are, in Gross's words, "caught by the inhuman forces that yet emerge from *within* the human" (77, emphasis in original).

Whether Roth goes quite as far as Beckett in exploring surface representations of the human subject is questionable. Clearly his novels explore involuntary bodily responses. Here, one thinks particularly of Sabbath's homage to the "morning hard-on": "Nothing more faithful in all of life then the lurid cravings of the morning hard-on. No deceit in it. No simulation. No insincerity. All hail to that driving force! Human living with a capital L!" (*Sabbath* 154). But Roth has never come as close as Beckett to being satisfied with this surface representation. This becomes evident when one considers the extent of each writer's dramatic work. Beckett is equally well known for his drama and prose, and it

is in the former—with works like 1957's *Act Without Words I*—that he came closest to eschewing the person and portraying, in his own words, “human meat—or bones” (qtd. in Gontarski 31). Though he is obviously regarded primarily as a novelist, Roth also, we should not forget, spent a great deal of time working on dramatic projects,⁸ and it is in his relationship with this medium that we might best perceive Roth's unwillingness to be satisfied with surface representations. For example, in a discussion of *The Nice Jewish Boy*, a play that was read as a workshop exercise at the American Place Theater in 1964, Roth notes that he was satisfied with the “comic *surface* of the play” but the “realistic dramatic conventions” he adopted did not allow him to get to “the character's secret life” (*Reading* 34, emphasis in original). Roth continued to be drawn to the potential for surface representation that theater offered,⁹ but through a focus on prose he attempted to penetrate the inner realities of characters much more persistently than did Beckett. Indeed, as we have seen, the depersonalization of Roth's characters is often only accessible via accounts of their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

This focus has consequences in terms of how Roth is placed in relation to other modern authors. If his persistent concern with the secret worlds of his characters is what separates Roth from writers who are better known for formal innovation, such as Beckett, much of what I have discussed in this essay also serves to distance him from a more rigidly realist tradition. Even as Roth impersonates figures with moral and aesthetic interests, he constantly reminds us that his people can be seen—and see themselves—in more reductive ways. In recent decades, numerous critics have argued that Roth might be seen as an experimental writer insofar as he moves between different genres of writing. Reading Roth's work alongside Beckett's allows us to formulate another way in which Roth might be thought of as an experimental writer. In the interview with Lee, Roth suggests that the power of literature depends on a writer's pulling off impersonations that inspire belief in the reality of the individuals portrayed. In his own writing, however, Roth asks us to watch as his characters lose faith in the reality of their own personhood. His literary experimentation, then, like Beckett's, might be defined in terms of its tendency to question what literature might look like when its protagonists lose their individuality and their sense of having an inner world.

NOTES

1. The link between Beckett and Roth has not been drawn frequently but a few critics have recognized it. Marie A. Danziger sees Beckett and Roth as postmodernist authors who are connected by the way in which their works stage “writer/reader conflict” (185). Andrew Bennett recognizes that Beckett and Roth share a fascination with

human ignorance (218). And Kenneth Gross suggests that the protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), Mickey Sabbath, is a man "whose own motto might come from Samuel Beckett: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'" (Gross 60).

2. In the original version of *Not I*, the mouth was accompanied by the hooded figure of the Auditor. In later versions, though, with Beckett's approval, the figure was removed, leaving an elevated mouth alone on stage. Beckett manipulated lighting conditions in an attempt, one might assume, to fix the audience's eyes on this mouth. In the auditorium, as James Knowlson puts it, "everything is blacked out except for the illuminous mouth" (592).

3. Throughout the play we are encouraged to identify this protagonist with the mouth on stage as "Mouth" threatens to use the first, rather than the third person.

4. It should be noted, however, that in performances this story is spoken so quickly that the audience find it difficult to follow.

5. This is not to say that Molloy and Sabbath do not undergo processes of depersonalization. Molloy's depersonalization has been seen in his inability to display a measured, public self and Sabbath's depersonalization will be discussed later in the essay.

6. Roth is known to have taught Kleist in a comparative literature course at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s (Hayes 102–3), and refers to Kleist's story "Michael Kohlhaas" (1808) in a 1966 conversation with Jerry Mangione (Searles 10).

7. In *Molloy*, for example, Beckett's protagonist recalls that "I suddenly collapsed, like a puppet when its strings are dropped" (*Three Novels* 49).

8. As well as "The Nice Jewish Boy" Roth wrote several short experimental plays, and worked on numerous theatrical adaptations. For a detailed account of this, see Witcombe.

9. Here we might think of a prose work such as *Deception* (1991) in which, as David Brauner ("Performance") and Mike Witcombe suggest, the characters' inner worlds seem to retreat and dialogue takes over.

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