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# The World in Singing Made: David Markson's "Wittgenstein's Mistress"

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE WORLD IN SINGING MADE: DAVID MARKSON'S "WITTGENSTEIN'S  
MISTRESS"

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Tiffany L. Fajardo

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Tiffany L. Fajardo, and entitled *The World in Singing Made: David Markson's "Wittgenstein's Mistress,"* having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Ana Luszczynska

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James M. Sutton

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Michael Patrick Gillespie, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 27, 2015

The thesis of Tiffany L. Fajardo is approved.

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Dean Michael H. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Science

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

## DEDICATION

For Michelle, my world entire. . . And my mother, keeper of the ghosts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tautology and contradiction are the limiting cases--indeed the disintegration--of the combination of signs.

-- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

The idea of logic itself disintegrates in the turbulence of a more original questioning.

-- Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?"

I had the idea that the world's so full of pain  
it must sometimes make a kind of singing.  
And that the sequence helps, as much as order helps—  
First an ego, and then pain, and then the singing.

-- Robert Hass, "Faint Music"

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE WORLD IN SINGING MADE: DAVID MARKSON'S "WITTGENSTEIN'S  
MISTRESS"

by

Tiffany L. Fajardo

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Michael Patrick Gillespie, Major Professor

In line with Wittgenstein's axiom that "what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest," this thesis aims to demonstrate how the gulf between analytic and continental philosophy can best be bridged through the mediation of art. The present thesis brings attention to Markson's work, lauded in the tradition of Faulkner, Joyce, and Lowry, as exemplary of the shift from modernity to postmodernity, wherein the human heart is not only in conflict with itself, but with the language out of which it is necessarily constituted. Markson limns the paradoxical condition of the subject severed from intersubjectivity, and affected not only by the grief of bereavement, which can be defined in Heideggerian terms as anxiety for the ontic negation of a being (i.e., death), but by loss, which I assert is the ontological ground for how Dasein encounters the nothing in anxiety proper.

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## INTRODUCTION

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

-- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

The aim of this thesis is to bring the analytic and continental philosophical traditions into fruitful dialogue to interpret how David Markson, a writer who has been lauded as the last modernist in the tradition of Faulkner, Joyce, and Lowry, understands aesthetics, identity, epistemology, and community in the novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. More aptly characterized as a postmodernist, Markson's experimental novel signifies a paradigmatic shift in American letters and contemporary fiction as a whole. It is a work of increasing interest to scholars concerned with theories of subjectivity and community. In line with the Wittgensteinian axiom that "what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest [5.62]" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 68), the present thesis aims to demonstrate how, given the limits of logocentric discourse, the gulf between the analytic and continental philosophical traditions can best be bridged through the mediation of art, which Martin Heidegger defines in "The Origin of the Work of Art" as "truth setting itself to work" (*Basic Writings* 162). This is evinced by the way in which Markson both anticipates and enacts the direction of recent theoretical debate concerned with the synthesis of continental and analytic thought, such as occurs in Lee Braver's examination of Heidegger and Wittgenstein in *Groundless Grounds* (2012). Markson's novel, however, "makes manifest" the affinities between these thinkers twenty years prior to Braver's text. That Markson's novel was earlier than Braver's study points to the perspicacity of art, and experimental fiction in particular, to predict currents in criticism. Furthermore, this thesis will also bring attention to Markson's innovative work

as exemplary of the shift from modernity to postmodernity, wherein the Faulknerian human heart is not only in conflict with itself (the values and institutions of modernity), but with the very language out of which it is necessarily constituted (the existential-epistemological crisis of the "failure of language" in postmodernity).

Assuming the form of one woman's desultory interior monologue which is later revealed to be the very novel we are reading, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* confronts fundamental questions of epistemology and existence--questions of particular relevance to the current debate on "postmodern nihilism" and the vaunted "impasse" of deconstructive theory. The problem at stake for Markson is one of radical doubt; if, as Wittgenstein holds in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "The world is all that is the case" (5), and the case is such that, as for the narrator, one *believes* one's self to be the only person in the world, does this then *create* a world in which, whether or not there are in fact other phenomenal beings, one is experientially and therefore ontologically alone? Moreover, if there is no objective world outside of our perception, how can we ground knowledge or guarantee truth? Such is the perennial complaint of the skeptic--but rather than attempt to answer these questions through the propositional logic of Western metaphysics (which Wittgenstein himself spent a lifetime demonstrating the limits of), Markson uses his fiction to thematize these often abstruse philosophical paradoxes and, instead of concerning himself with offering a solution based on rational argument, resituates the problem of solipsism in the primordial and originary experience of loss.

Neglected in contemporary criticism of the novel, the loss suffered by the narrator--the death of her only son--is a cataclysmic event so damaging that it induces a delusional state wherein the aforementioned "case" is one of radical isolation. As a

consequence of her inability to communicate the intensely personal experience of grief, the narrator enters a crisis that renders her “mad” and severs her from the intersubjective world, effectively emptying this world of all subjectivities but her own. As such, Markson limns the paradoxical condition of the subject affected not only by the grief of bereavement, which can be defined in Heideggarian terms as *anxiety for* the ontic negation of a being (i.e., its death), but by loss, which I assert is the ontological ground for how There-Being (*Dasein*) encounters the "nihilation of the nothing" ("What is Metaphysics?" 104) in *anxiety proper*.

This thesis is structured as follows: The first chapter will offer a comparison of Beckett and Markson, distinguishing Markson's postmodernity from his modernist predecessor. It will set out to describe how *Krapp's Last Tape* offers particular insight into Markson's aesthetic and conclude with an assessment of Markson's place in the tradition. The second chapter will comprise of a close reading of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?"--exploring the role of anxiety in the novel and its preeminence in postmodern fiction. The third chapter will investigate parallels between this anxiety, Lord Byron's poetry, and Blanchot's *Writing of the Disaster*, establishing the disaster in the novel as both the loss of intersubjectivity and the absence of community. Having discussed the postmodern in Byron's romanticism, the study will conclude with an assessment of the romantic in Markson's postmodernism, arguing that it is in and through the work of art that loss becomes communicable.

CHAPTER I: THE WORST POSSIBLE GRIEF: (RE)PRESENTING SUBJECTIVITY  
IN "WITTGENSTEIN'S MISTRESS" AND BECKETT'S "KRAPP'S LAST TAPE"

Maybe that's what we look for all our lives, the worst possible grief, to make us truly ourselves before we die.

-- Ferdinand Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night*

In her perspicacious analysis of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, "Messages: Reading *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," Sherrill E. Grace casually refers to the narrator of the novel as a "female Krapp with a typewriter instead of a tape recorder" (215), but does not pursue this analogy any further. A provocative assertion, the parallels between Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and Markson's novel are striking and numerous. That the influence of Beckett can be seen in Markson's novel is clear, from its preoccupation with the Cartesian mind-body split, "But what is there that is not in my head?" (Markson 227), to its skepticism about the very possibility of existence outside of one's perception. As Annie Dillard writes in *Living by Fiction*, "Fiction, like painting, intrinsically deals with the nature of perception. And fiction intrinsically deals with the world. So that finally fiction, if it has anything at all to do with the world as its subject matter, will begin to ask, What world?" (57). The analogy to painting is congenial as Markson's narrator is herself a painter who, toting a blank canvas throughout the novel, laments her inability to paint, "Months I suspect I gazed at that canvas. . . And then after months of gazing set fire to the canvas with gasoline one morning and drove away" (Markson 24). Markson's protagonist, however, is the unreliable narrator par excellence; whether this event ever took place is less important than the symbolic significance of the canvas, which reminds her of "Winters, when the snow covers everything. . . It is almost as if one might paint the entire world, and in *any manner one wished* [my italics]" (47).

The suspicion of any metaphysical truth situates Markson squarely in the Beckettian tradition of literature that highlights the construction of identity and questions how this identity, without recourse to a transcendental essence (be it the Judeo-Christian soul or Kantian ego), is constituted. To this end, memory plays an important role in designating the liminal space wherein the desire for metaphysical values and the subject's disbelief in them are held in tension.

For Krapp, as for Markson's narrator, the possibility of a fixed, immutable truth which grounds the self is an enticement that dangles ever before one, and yet, as is illustrated by the myth Tantalus, recedes from one's epistemological grasp the moment one reaches out to seize it. Both Krapp and the unnamed author of Markson's meta-narrative<sup>1</sup> find themselves in a similar predicament, with memory functioning as the teleological means through which this elusive self can be definitively established. The act of remembering, however, is by its very nature paradoxical--the recalling to presence of an absent past. Therefore, to ground identity on the basis of memory is to found the present self on the paradoxical absence out of which it is constituted, for the necessarily absent past can only be brought into presence through the reflective interpretive gesture of remembering. That both Markson and Beckett's characters evince a pathological obsession with their pasts is therefore telling. In her aptly titled chapter "The Agony of Perceivedness," Lois Oppenheim's description of Krapp's search for identity is equally applicable to Markson's mistress, as "Krapp seeks not to obliterate, but rather to reify, the

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<sup>1</sup> Although critical conventions have established her as "Kate," citing Markson's short story "Healthy Kate" as the genesis of the novel, she alternately refers to herself as "Kate," "Helen (of Troy)," and "Artemisia," raising the question of how one determines which name is "real" given the narrator's unreliability. Furthermore, she ironically comments "Surely in writing to total strangers one would have the courtesy to identify one's self" (Markson 216).

perception of self... everywhere in Beckett the nefarious mind-body/subject-object schism is problematized as the struggle to reconnect, which is clearly to say the struggle to re-collect" (*The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* 145). As such, the struggle to re-collect is also the struggle to recover a past that is always lost to the vagaries of perception and, as past, is necessarily constituted by the residue of loss itself.

Intuitively, if the self is not a pre-inscribed essence, then it must be redefined as the sum of its experiences. The sum, however, can be taken as either a coherent unity (whole) or a diffuse plurality (fragmented). In modern fiction, the struggle to re-collect is thus the struggle to assemble these fragmented selves--to "re-collect," as it were, the disparate constituents of identity. As such, the past that should confer identity masks the simultaneous estrangement which occurs in treating these experiences as static fragments (objects) to be "re-collected" in consciousness, when they are properly conceived as dynamic events, coextensive with the subject's hermeneutic interpretation of them. This reductive treatment of the past is nonetheless undertaken to preserve the concept of a self that is not threatened by the consequences of traditional Cartesian solipsism which, when pushed to its logical limits, calls into question not only the existence of the world, but also the existence of the subject who perceives it.

The above formulation also brings an important distinction to light: the self that Krapp attempts to reify is that of the modern *empirical subject*, while the self of Markson's mistress does not preclude the empirical subject, but goes beyond this psychological self to reify the postmodern *metaphysical subject* as understood by the theory of solipsism in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Philosophicus*. In *Transcendence*

and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Michael P. Hodges describes Wittgenstein's view of subjectivity as follows:

Only for a subject can one fact represent another. Without subjectivity there would be merely an unarticulated totality of facts. Thus subjectivity is a *logically* necessary condition for the possibility of representation.

However, because the *Tractatus* is concerned with representation as such, not with particular forms of representation, the subjectivity required is in no sense particular. Rather it is the totality of facts *as* representable.

Therefore, the metaphysical subject cannot be an item in the world, but the limit of the world considered as the limit of all possible representation. . .

This distinction between the metaphysical subject and a particular individual subject lies at the center of Wittgenstein's treatment of solipsism. (76)

This passage refers to a key proposition in the *Tractatus* which states, "The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world--not a part of it [5.641]" (Wittgenstein 70). Here the Wittgensteinian perspective on subjectivity shares affinity with the phenomenological view espoused by Heidegger's "existentialism," which states that, in conceiving of the subject as *cogito*, Western metaphysics since Descartes has essentialized the subject, creating the mind-body split that renders consciousness an object among objects.

The epistemological consequences of this Cartesian objectification are significant, as they draw a decisive difference between the representational view of knowing and the

phenomenological understanding of knowing. The dilemma of realism versus idealism can thus be seen to originate from within the former Cartesian perspective. The representational view of knowing is the natural attitude which is unaware of intentionality. The representational view itemizes existence without taking into account the world as transcendent and objects as immediately present (intentionally) in consciousness. The world, then, is disconnected from the cogito that interacts with objects (uses them pragmatically), but does not penetrate to their ontological "essence," which is not, as in the representational view, noumenal, but rather intentionally constituted by a functional relation to being-in-the-world. The Cartesian view therefore gives rise to the misapprehension of consciousness as yet another "thing" among "things."

The decisive difference that emerges in the phenomenological view is the recognition that consciousness is relational; i.e., no world without man, no man without world. Thus, to be conscious is to be conscious "of." As Heidegger contends, the representational view neglects this "of," forgetting the ontological difference between ontic beings and ontological Being-as-such (*Dasein*). George Kovacs sheds light on the necessity of the ontic/existentiell and the ontological/existential distinction, explaining that "Ontological questioning is more primordial than the mere ontical way of inquiring (for instance, in the sciences) because it is concerned with the problem of the meaning of Being... The existentiell (the ontic) is the bearer of the existential; the existential is discerned within (grounded in) the existentiell" (49). The Heideggarian difference between ontic beings and ontological Being has a corollary in Wittgenstein's philosophy of solipsism, wherein the empirical subject (psychological) and the metaphysical subject

(the "philosophical self" referred to as the "limit of the world" [5.641]) can be divided into the existentielle (particular) and existential (foundational) categories, respectively.

Both Heidegger's phenomenology and Wittgenstein's logical positivism attempt to go beyond the representational view of knowledge, which is unable to overcome the dualistic dilemma brought about by the rigid separation of man from world. As Lee Braver explains in *Groundless Grounds*:

One reason for their importance is that they both developed powerful critiques of traditional philosophical theories. Heidegger and later Wittgenstein undermine the Cartesian conception of the self, reality, and the relationship between them. . . . What is distinctive about Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's work is the way in which they construct thorough alternatives which do not so much refute Cartesian ideas as prevent them from arising in the first place. They both try to show that the underlying ideas, far from being self evident and foundational, actually rest on and perpetuate a whole host of misguided presuppositions. (2)

The presuppositions alluded to by Braver lead to the "scandal" of philosophy--realism originates in the naive objectification of things as independent of the perceiving subject's consciousness, while idealism is certain only of the "I" and lapses into solipsism when confronted with the problem of intersubjectivity.<sup>2</sup> As Braver asserts, both Wittgenstein

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<sup>2</sup> "The 'self of solipsism' is merely the possibility of representation of language... That there is representation *shows* 'the truth of solipsism.' That is why Wittgenstein says in the famous comparison with the visual field that 'nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye' (T 5.633). We become aware of that only by recognizing that it is a visual field. Similarly, 'the truth of solipsism' cannot be inferred from anything that is represented but from the

and Heidegger repudiate the dualistic thinking that places an imperious subject over-and-above a world which he/she is indeed within. In contrast to this view, these philosophers collapse the real/ideal binary that reduces the world to an object, erecting in its place the consideration of the world as a field which acts upon the subject and is mutually acted upon; therefore, consciousness achieves neither priority nor mastery of it.

The most conspicuous parallel between Beckett's Krapp and Markson's narrators is their existential situation; both characters find themselves thoroughly isolated, with only their thoughts as company in a world divested of other subjectivities. Although this situation is further radicalized in Markson (the unnamed narrator makes explicit claims about being the last person in the world), Beckett's Krapp is also the sole inhabitant of *his* world, a world of frustrated expectations and bitter disappointments. In his self-imposed confinement, the seventy-year-old Krapp is a prisoner of his past who is wholly alone but for a series of tapes made at various points in his life. Krapp spends the duration of the one-act play listening to the sound of his own recorded voice, pausing at intervals either to drink or to criticize the "stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago" (62).

Although the tapes are meticulously stored and catalogued, Krapp's intentions in making them are never expressed; apart from the attempt to anchor the perpetual slippage of identity, or to stave off the onset of senility, there is no discernible purpose behind his fastidious archiving. Rather, the tapes that serve as representatives of past selves also serve as a means to distance him from them. Krapp achieves this by repeatedly listening to the voice on the recorder until it becomes the experience of someone else; "Hard to

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"fact" that it is represented. The metaphysical subject is language taken as the possibility of representation." (Hodges 84)

believe I was ever that young whelp" (58). This estrangement allows him to control his response to "all that misery" (58), making the pain of memory less acute.<sup>3</sup> As John Knowles elucidates in "Krapp's Last Tape: The Evolution of a Play," this repetition has a dissociative effect. In a passage that merits quoting at length, Knowles notes its role in the play:

Repetition lies, in fact, at the very thematic centre of Krapp's last tape. At seventy years of age, Krapp repeats a ceremony that he has been performing for the past forty-five years. . . . By adopting the mechanical device of the tape-recorder and giving to Krapp the power of instant recall of his own past, Beckett has created a stark confrontation between man's various selves in which decline, loss, failure, disillusionment and discontinuity are shown concretely. Moreover, in this way, the spectator has become the active agent, listening, observing, and able himself to assess the width of the chasm that separates Krapp from his former self and judge the strength of his obsession with a portion of his own past that he had earlier rejected as being unworthy of him. . . . (1)

The repetition discussed by Knowles acts as a bulwark against another theme shared by Beckett and Markson: the inevitable deterioration of the mind, which in the Cartesian paradigm is the seat of the cogito and therefore of the self. The Cartesian view of the self, however, is problematic in that it pictures the world as exterior and the self as

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<sup>3</sup> Although genetic criticism is outside the scope of this paper, as John Fletcher notes in "Beckett as Poet": "Much of Beckett's writing springs directly from a private pain: but it is always well disguised. It is now known, for instance, that there was a "green girl" in his life in Dublin: she wore green... in the play Krapp's Last Tape, Beckett asked himself rhetorically, "What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway platform?" (138). The girl in question died of consumption.

interior, reifying the old opposition between the material and the ideal. Once again, this opposition also gives rise to the mind-body split which accounts for the frailty of the body, but mistakes the mind as insulated from the exterior stimulus of the world, when in fact both the mind and body participate in the perceptual event.

What is notable in the two authors, however, is the anxiety-fraught relationship of their characters to a stable, unified identity that is at once desperately sought and continuously rejected. When emphasis is placed on the past as the exclusive means of establishing identity, a destructive stasis ensues; understood properly, Being is not a fixed essence but must be conceived as the self-projecting project, i.e., as a being-towards that thrives in the dynamic potential of phenomenological ek-stasis (the transcendence of Dasein). Without this understanding, the subject no longer participates in the creation of meaning, but becomes the passive observer of a set of facts from which it is removed. This perspective is deceptive in that it reinforces a false idea of objectivity, and the notion that a "true" version of events exists independent of the perceiving subject. The self, however, is never free of prejudices and presuppositions. That the past is simultaneously remembered and reconstituted anew in the very act of remembering is obscured by the desire for an illusory truth. The nostalgia for a prelapsarian past before the necessary consequences of skepticism, that all "truth" is provisional, and the attendant fragmentation that occurs with the advent of modernity leaves an indelible mark on both Beckett and Markson's work.

In both works there is no Other to disagree with the self's assertions, making the self omnipotent but for its responsibility to metaphysical truth and its guilt over failing to adhere to this absolute standard; more pointedly, both Beckett and Markson's characters

experience distress over not having a standard to adhere to.<sup>4</sup> Krapp, the imperious subject, is also free to start and stop his tapes at will, omitting details that are injurious or contradictory to the self constructed; duly, Markson's narrator displaces the loss of her son, preferring to sublimate her grief in the anecdotal trivia which comprises the bulk of her manuscript. However, as shown in the passage below, this equanimous state is constantly threatened by the intrusion of bereavement:

Leonardo [da Vinci] was also left-handed. And a vegetarian. And illegitimate.

The slides that I took of my mother and father still exist, presumably.

Presumably, old slides of [my son] Simon still exist, too.

I suppose there is something ironical in my knowing so many things about Leonardo, and yet not knowing if the slides that I took of my mother and father, or any of my little boy, still exist.

Or, if they exist, where.

Time out of mind. (Markson 69)

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<sup>4</sup> Ewa P. Ziarek's *The Rhetoric of Failure* investigates this dilemma: "In the context of modernist aesthetics, negation can be seen as a process of purification of art from any external significance--from truth, moral obligations, and social relevance... Yet, in Beckett's texts, negation seems to exceed the proper boundaries of aesthetics and to assume disturbing philosophical or cognitive implications as well. Leaving its "proper" area of competence, modern art questions the very possibility of truth not only within but also outside the sphere of aesthetics. It contests the claims of rationality by testifying to the disappointing limitations of language or by revealing its perverse aberrations. Bearing the fate that befalls language in general--its shortcomings, deviations, and failures--art seems to succumb to *mourning* [my italics] for the lost truth" (159).

A seemingly neutral comment on da Vinci's illegitimacy leads to memories of her own parents, and subsequently, back to the endlessly recursive thoughts of her son. As exemplary of the novel's Tractarian conceit, the last phrase is nonsensical, but sheds light on how ambiguities in language, while logically unintelligible, express certain "truths" that logic, however precise, is ill-equipped to grasp. One such consequence of this ambiguity is that even the most innocuous thoughts contain within them the germs of loss.

This loss is inextricable from the interpretive process by which memory both reveals and conceals the presence of absence. Although "knowledge" (which is not fidelity to metaphysical truth but an encounter with the phenomena of the lifeworld) originates in the immediate, primordial experience of the pre-reflective, this knowledge cannot be brought to the fore without the reflection which describes the initial pre-linguistic event. In this way, the past is always already the presence of absence. Whereas the pre-reflective is simply an awareness of sensation, the ever present absence of the past is necessarily given to reflection as a being-aware-of-awareness. The structure of memory, as such, is fundamentally hermeneutic. The process of remembering is therefore a movement from the pre-linguistic experience to its representation in language. This movement is the *re-presenting* that occurs when the absent past appears before consciousness as a recollection of prior events. As always already absent, the past is itself the manifestation of the subject's grounding in loss.

However, one important distinction to be made between the works under consideration is that the crucial realization that truth is never more than provisional is reached only in Markson. While Krapp enacts a desperate attempt to reach essential

identity, he never becomes cognizant of this goal. Although the unnamed narrator in Markson is generally unaware of how her questions about representation and perception point to the inability to know truth--if indeed there is a transcendental truth to be known--there are glimmers of understanding that surpass the ruminations of Krapp. Whereas Markson's narrator asks, "What do any of us ever truly know?" (59), Krapp is troubled by a moment on the tapes in which he believes he has apprehended the significance of his life:

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indulgence until that memorable night in March at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision, at last. This fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . . (*hesitates*) . . . for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely--[*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*]. . . (Beckett 60)

Despite the play ending with his disillusion, the very fact that Krapp revisits this memory indicates a nostalgia for metaphysical values. Whether Krapp ultimately concludes that these values are unattainable, to borrow a phrase from Markson's narrator, the futility of this search is arrived at "tardily." The more radical position is taken by Markson, whose heroine begins the novel with the confession that she cannot remember "when it was that I stopped looking" (18). Although in this instance she is referring to the search for other individuals, and therefore intersubjectivity, this statement can also be interpreted as the

postmodern disavowal of absolute truth. Implicit in the situation of loss is the arbitrariness of language which, without recourse to a transcendental meaning, cannot guarantee the truth it purports to convey. Nevertheless, the specter of this transcendence is one which haunts Beckett and Markson alike.

## CHAPTER II: THE WORLD IN SINGING MADE: "WITTGENSTEIN'S MISTRESS" AND THE IDEA OF (DIS)ORDER

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

-- Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"

The postmodern departure from the nostalgia for metaphysical values (e.g., Absolute Truth) seen in Beckett is most evident in Markson's ability to, in phenomenological terms, "bracket-out" the question of God. Engaged in the selfsame process as his heroine and Heidegger before her, Markson is also "dismantling" the presuppositions of Western metaphysical thought by writing a novel in which the search for transcendence becomes a question of ontology and not traditional Judeo-Christian theology.<sup>5</sup> Once again, Sherrill E. Grace is astute in her characterization of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a "grail quest narrative" wherein "the end, secret, hidden truth, the grail--is there from the beginning... *Dasein*" (213-14). Grace, however, is unaware of just how crucial this concept is to the philosophical inquiry that informs the novel, and this becomes increasingly clear with reference to Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?".

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<sup>5</sup> "Both [Heidegger and Wittgenstein] consider the negative step of disassembling received views to be a necessary preparation if their positive work is to avoid perpetuating these perennial problems. For later Wittgenstein, this means disenchanting various "pictures" that have taken over one's thinking about a subject, while early Heidegger proposes the *Destruktion* or "dismantling" of traditional theories, a process that would have formed the second half of traditional theories, a process that would have formed the second half of *Being and Time* had he completed the work." (Braver 14)

Delivered in 1929, this lecture is arguably the most succinct and accessible presentation of the metaphysical questions elaborated in *Being and Time*, and stands as a key text in Markson's highly allusive world. Through his depiction of anxiety in *WM*, Markson poses Heidegger's question of "How is it with the nothing?" (Heidegger 96) from the perspective of fiction, which is the only viable alternative once the "legitimacy of the rule of 'logic' in metaphysics" (108) is shown to be suspect.

As a consequence of her inability to communicate the intensely personal experience of grief, Markson's narrator enters a crisis that renders her "mad" and severs her from the intersubjective world, effectively emptying this world of all subjectivities but her own. Here, an early essay by fellow novelist David Foster Wallace, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," is particularly insightful, offering a concise summary of the novel's central conceit:

Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* succeeds in doing what few philosophers glean & what neither myriad biographical sketches nor [Bruce] Duffy's lurid revisionism succeeds in communicating: the consequences, for persons, of the *practice of theory*; the difference, say, between espousing 'solipsism' as a metaphysical 'position' & waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, leaving you the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment & world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea. (222)

Given Wallace's currency as a postmodern writer with a reputation for both artistic and commercial success, this essay was recently included in the Dalkey Archive's reprinting

of Markson's novel and has become the most widely available piece of criticism on Markson's work. While this has no doubt increased Markson's readership, Wallace also makes several misleading assumptions on which he bases his assessment of the novel's so-called less effective elements, and these assumptions have been uncontested up to now.

Although Wallace praises Markson's technical feat of creating a Tractarian world, the grieving subject is immediately discounted as a psychological gimmick. Wallace writes, "The death of her son & separation from her husband are also in *WM* presented as a very particular emotional 'explanation' for her 'condition', a peculiar reduction of Markson's own to which I kind of object. The presentation of personal history as present explanation... threatens to make *WM* just another madwoman monologue in the Ophelia-Rhys tradition..." (232). Here Wallace makes clear his view that this is the unnecessary residue of convention in a novel experimental enough to forego plot, but not radical enough to divest its character of motivation. In a particularly galling turn, Wallace accuses Markson of "objectifying" his narrator by "explaining her metaphysical condition as emotional/psychical, reducing her bottled missive to a mad monologue by a smart woman driven mad by the consequences of culpable sexual agency" (233).

Providing little justification for this claim, Wallace takes advantage of the fragmentation in the novel to impose a reading that is, ironically, a good deal more misogynistic than any of the faults he finds in Markson. This becomes evident with his concluding remark, "I think finally the reason I object to *WM*'s attempt to give Kate's loneliness a particular 'motivation' via received feminine trauma is that it's just unnecessary" (235). The "received feminine trauma" at stake is the death of the narrator's

only son--that Wallace would characterize this loss in terms of gender betrays his own sexism and shows a startlingly myopic perspective, as the loss of Rudy in *Ulysses* has never been dismissed as a "received feminine trauma" with respect to Leopold Bloom. Furthermore, in the midst of this fault-finding, the most detrimental impression Wallace gives his readers is that Markson is only concerned with the implications of the *Tractatus*. What Wallace fails to note is the equally important influence of Heidegger, whose name appears frequently throughout the novel and who surpasses Wittgenstein in that he attempts to speak the unspeakable--the nothing that Wittgenstein passes over in silence and that is disclosed "in the fundamental mood of anxiety" (Heidegger 100).

To apprehend the radicality of Heidegger's metaphysical inquiry, we must first understand that the problem of the nothing is one which is intimately connected to the forgetting of the ontological difference between beings and Being as such. According to Heidegger, the search for God is the culmination of Western metaphysics; this "grail quest," however, is problematized by the spurious identification of Being with God. For his philosophical predecessors, God was conceived, a priori, as the highest being in a hierarchal chain of beings. God, as the highest being, determined the nature and range of all beings beneath It (or the Judeo-Christian "Him"); an understanding of God therefore provided an understanding of humanity. Seductively simple and grossly reductive, Heidegger is critical of the methodology employed by his forerunners. He contends that, in dealing with "beings," metaphysics forgets *Dasein*, or Being-as-such, and neglects the radicality of this ontological difference. As George Kovacs in *The Question of God in Heidegger's Phenomenology* elucidates:

The final aspiration of [Heidegger's] philosophy is not a metaphysical perspective leading to the discovery of a highest being (God) as the source of all beings, but the comprehension of the hidden meaning of Being as it can be reached through the existential analysis of There-Being in *Being and Time*. (53)

Heidegger argues that metaphysics does not examine its foundations; thus ontology and theology become entangled and the concrete world is lost in systematized abstractions. Subsequently, the ontological difference is not only neglected, but wholly obscured.

Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is chiefly its inability to describe *Dasein* or There-Being. Before Heidegger, Being was understood in terms of Greek ontology and Judaic anthropology:

The theological definition of the Being of man as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) is an assimilation of the ancient Greek anthropology (man as an entity; it leaves unexplained the human being's Being). The Being of God is (ontologically) interpreted in [Judaic] theology in the same way as the Being of man, that is, according to the inadequate Greek ontology. . . . In Greek ontology the Being of God and the Being of man remain unexamined. (Kovacs 56)

For Heidegger, man's Being is ontologically distinct and characterized by "worldliness." There-being is necessarily to-be-in-the-World; its metaphysical "essence" is its existence or its relationship with this to-be. If There-being and World are indeed inextricable, then the Cartesian notion of a subject-object duality collapses. The ego is consequently

stripped of its former prestige as executor of the imperious will that stands over and against objective reality.

In rendering this naïve realism unattainable, Heidegger brings to the fore its epistemic nostalgia for a world in which sign and signified are granted an a priori congruence. Given that these metaphysical assumptions have led philosophy astray, Heidegger does no less than attempt to dispense with the realism/idealism dichotomy by reframing the dilemma in terms of temporality. As both an ontological and ontic condition for There-Being, temporality discloses how the phenomenological principle of man-World relatedness shifts the concerns of philosophy from an exhausted metaphysics to There-Being's finitude.

In metaphysics, God is posited as a divine being that, qua Creator, is the fount of ontological Being for all phenomenal beings. However, There-Being is finite (i.e., towards-death) and defined by its quintessential temporality; hence God, as atemporal, cannot have There-being—the There-Being common to “Man” and the focus of Heidegger's study. The metaphysical notion of God is incongruous with There-being; it indicates the anthropomorphizing of the statement “God exists” because for beings existence is predicated on the temporality which God transcends. Furthermore, with respect to the nothing, Heidegger writes "if God is God he cannot know the nothing, assuming that the "Absolute" excludes all nothingness" ("What is Metaphysics?" 107-8). Therefore, while Heidegger's analysis does not preclude God, it does entail methodological atheism with respect to the question of Being:

Heidegger's definition of the very nature and task of philosophical thinking may be described as a methodological atheism; it is neither “for”

nor “against” but rather “without” God (as the last and first explanation of being and thinking); it comes from and returns to Being (and not from and to God, who cannot be forced into the categories or concepts of philosophical reflection). (Kovacs 201)

Since the metaphysical tradition cannot overcome itself, it must be rethought outside itself with Dasein as its point of departure.

It is worth noting here that in one of the narrator's most candid moments, she dismisses the "depression" (Markson 71) that causes her to stop working on her manuscript (the novel we are reading) with the explanation, "It will pass. In the meantime there is little one can do about it. Anxiety being the fundamental mood of existence, as somebody once said, or undoubtedly should have said" (72). Exemplary of Markson's highly allusive technique, after several intervening references to other artists and writers including Pablo Picasso, Dylan Thomas, Helen Frankenthaler, and most significantly, the Mexican poet Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz,<sup>6</sup> the narrator is suddenly triggered to remember who wrote the phrase:

Though perhaps it was Kierkegaard who said that, about anxiety being the fundamental mood of existence.

If it was not Kierkegaard it was Martin Heidegger.

In either case I suspect there is something ironical in my being able to guess that something was said by Kierkegaard, or by Martin Heidegger. . . (72)

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<sup>6</sup> "Mexico having appeared as reasonable a place in which to begin to look as any, however, whether I was mad or not... And even if one surely does not have to be mad in the least, in being drawn to the grave of one's only child." (Markson 224)

This apparent confusion belies the associative connection between the two thinkers who, whatever philosophical movement they are ultimately grouped with, share particular concerns about the subject's relation to the world and finitude which commentators have traced through the genealogy of existentialism. For Heidegger, however, it is not solely the experience of freedom as unactualized potential that characterizes anxiety, but also the "nihilation of the nothing" (104).

That this analysis of anxiety is important to a more complex reading of Markson's novel than Wallace permits becomes clear with further recourse to "What is Metaphysics?". Apart from her belief that she is the last person in the world, her circumstances are eerily mundane. In fact, the most accurate characterization of her actions and attitude when she is not "depressed" or "anxious" may be one of profound boredom, "doing such things as rolling hundreds and hundreds of tennis balls down the Spanish Steps, or waiting for seventeen hours for each of her seventeen wristwatches to buzz before dropping each into the Arno" (230-1). For Heidegger, however, the experience of boredom attains an especial significance with respect to Dasein:

No matter how fragmented our everyday existence may appear to be, however, it always deals with beings in a unity of the "whole," if only in a shadowy way. Even and precisely when we are not actually busy with things or ourselves, this "as a whole" overcomes us--for example in genuine boredom. Boredom is still distant when it is only this book or that play, that business or this idleness that drags on. It irrupts when "one is bored." Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and human beings and

oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole. (99)

Whereas Heidegger uses fog to evoke this pervasive indifference, Markson articulates this removal of all things and human beings with images of snow:

Winters when the snow covers everything, leaving only that strange calligraphy of the spines of trees, it is a little like closing one's eyes.

Certainly reality is altered.

One morning you awaken and all color has ceased to exist. (47)

Significantly, Heidegger goes on to call this boredom a mood in which "this revealing--far from being merely incidental--is also the basic occurrence of Dasein" (100).

Nevertheless, Heidegger also makes an important distinction between this attunement and that of anxiety, writing "But just when moods of this sort bring us face to face with beings as a whole they conceal from us *the nothing* [my italics] we are seeking" (100). Boredom is therefore a mere negation of the totality of beings.

As with There-Being, which up to Heidegger had been construed as the Kantian ego or Judeo-Christian soul but remained a mere "thing" with transcendental qualities, the metaphysical tradition has attempted to conceptualize the nothing in terms of negation, deriving its idea of the nothing from the negation of a particular thing. Taking this flaw in Western metaphysical thinking as his point of departure, Heidegger argues for a new interpretation of the nothing:

Is the nothing given only because the 'not,' i.e., negation is given? Or is it the other way around? Are negation and the 'not' given only because the

nothing is given? That has not been decided; it has not even been raised expressly as a question. We assert that the nothing is more original than the 'not' and negation. (97)

While the ontological difference between negation and the nothing may at first appear to be an example of the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language" (*Philosophical Investigations* 100) that Wittgenstein defines philosophy as a battle against, it is precisely this distinction that comes to the fore in *WM* as a metaphysical issue which must be thought beyond the limits of traditional metaphysical thinking. As with Heidegger's reevaluation of the ontological difference between negation and the nothing, anxiety is not only a particular psychological state, but an ontological experience.

Contrary to the expectations a reader may have for someone who professes to be the sole survivor on a planet devoid of all life, she does not feel threatened by the end which others must certainly have met. That the world is stripped of all subjectivities but her own is an "absurdity" which she, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa before her, accepts without question--only for Markson it is not grotesque or fantastic, but a situation terrible in its everydayness, "One manner of being alone simply being different than another manner of being alone, being all that she would finally decide this came down to, as well" (Markson 231). Most conspicuous--and, paradoxically, conspicuous in the fact that it is wholly absent--is her total lack of fear. In a passage that merits quoting at length, Heidegger explains how psychological anxiety (ontic) differs from existential anxiety (ontological):

Does such an attunement in which man is brought before the nothing itself, occur in human existence?

This can and does occur although rarely enough and only for a moment in the fundamental mood of anxiety. By this anxiety we do not mean the quite common anxiousness, ultimately reducible to fearfulness, which all too readily comes over us. Anxiety is basically different from fear. We become afraid in the face of this or that particular being that threatens us in this or that particular respect. Fear in the face of something is also in each case a fear for something in particular. Because fear possesses this trait of being "fear in the face of" and "fear for," he who fears and is afraid is captive to the mood in which he finds himself. Striving to rescue himself from this particular thing, he becomes unsure of everything else and completely loses his head. (100)

As such, psychological anxiety can be said to be the common anxiety "in the face of," and ontological anxiety that which brings one before the nothing. As corollaries of this difference, in much the same way that the existentiell and existential modes of anxiety obtain, the protagonist's bereavement is also experienced at both the ontic and ontological level. The particular "thing" that Markson's narrator strives to rescue herself from is the reality of her son's death. To prevent herself from experiencing this grief, she "loses her head" by becoming mad. From a psychological standpoint, this phenomenon may be best explained with recourse to Freud.

Having demonstrated his familiarity with Freud in the critical study *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano: Myth, Symbol, Meaning*, Markson is likely to have encountered Freud's

theory of parapraxis, or the infamous "Freudian slip," prior to the composition of *WM*.<sup>7</sup> Although the popular notion involves only errors in speech, in "Psychopathology of Everyday Life" Freud delineates several of the more obscure parapraxial categories relevant to interpreting *WM*, including errors in memory, and significantly, mistakes in reading. In each case of parapraxis, the crux of the phenomenon is that the error, be it in speech, memory, or reading, reveals a powerful unconscious motive on the part of the subject. In *WM*, this unconscious motive manifests itself in the narrator's repression of her son's death, "There being surely as many things one would prefer never to remember as there are those one would wish to" (Markson 221). In the introductory chapter entitled "The Forgetting of Proper Names," Freud describes the process as follows:

I can no longer conceive the forgetting of the name Signorelli as an accidental occurrence. I must recognize in this process a *motive*. There were motives which actuated the interruption in the communication of my thoughts... and which later influenced me to exclude from my consciousness the thought connected with them... that is, I wanted to forget something, I *repressed* something. To be sure, I wanted to forget something other than the name of the master of Orvieto; but this other thought brought about an associative connection between itself and this name, so that my act of volition missed the aim, and I *forgot the one against my will*, while I *intentionally* wished to forget the other. (37)

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<sup>7</sup> Freud is also mentioned in the same context of anxiety in Markson's later novel *Reader's Block*: "Despite decades of self-analysis, Freud was forever so anxiety-ridden about missing trains that he would arrive at a station as much as an hour ahead of time" (12).

This passage is significant in view of the fact that she not only has trouble remembering whether Kierkegaard or Heidegger wrote "Anxiety is the fundamental mood of existence," but more importantly, the name of the son she buried, "Time out of mind. Meaning that one can even momentarily forget the name of one's only child" (Markson 9). For the narrator, then, the motive concealed and discovered by her errors is necessarily a reconciliation with the loss of her deceased son. The subsequent repression of this loss occurs because the narrator is unable to deal with the responsibility she feels for her child's death "even if it was nobody's fault that Lucien died after all" (225). However irrational, this responsibility for the death of her son, and the concomitant guilt, is inescapable except from "behind the veil of madness [that] protected [her]" (47) from her grief and forestalled the mourning of her loss.<sup>8</sup> One of the few expressions that is not repeated over the course of the novel, "veil of madness" is also a significant phrase because of its ironic theological overtones--a repentant sinner, she "takes the veil" of madness to atone for an imagined crime in a world where there is no deity to absolve her.

Nevertheless, this psychological (or ontic) condition is not the only dimension of her madness. In the next chapter I will explore how by understanding exile as "the receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety" (Heidegger 101), the

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<sup>8</sup> As described by Philippe Ariès in *Western Attitudes Toward Death: from the Middle Ages to the Present*, the advent of the Romantic era also saw a significant change in mourning practices: "The 19th century is the era of mourning which the psychologist of today calls hysterical mourning. And it is true that at times they almost reached the point of madness, as in the story of Mark Twain, "The Californian's Tale," dated 1893, in which a man who after 19 years had never accepted his wife's death celebrated the anniversary date of her death by awaiting her impossible return in the company of sympathetic friends who helped him maintain his illusion... This exaggeration of mourning in the nineteenth century is indeed significant. It means survivors accepted the death of another person with greater difficulty than in the past. Henceforth, and this is a very important change, the death that is feared is no longer so much the death of the self as the death of another, la mort de toi, thy death" (67-68).

definition of exile can be broadened from the ontic exclusion of a particular being from a specific locale/temporality to encompass an ontological event that occurs in Being as such. This can be seen in the novel as the protagonist is not estranged from a particular culture/community, but from the very possibility of community itself.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein expresses the view that "Death is not an event in life: We do not live to experience death [6.4311]" (87). Similarly for Heidegger, we cannot experience our death but we can experience the loss of Being that occurs in anxiety and which attunes us to the nothing. In Markson we can therefore revise the Heideggerian formula from a being-towards-death to a being-towards-loss; while death may be the horizon of Being, the finitude which gives meaning to the existential self-projecting project, it is always experienced proximally and cannot be experienced as "mine," for it is always the death of another (of-and-for-an-Other). Loss, however, communes with the nothing, grounding the very possibility of "my death" in the "nihilation of the nothing" (Heidegger 104).

### CHAPTER III: THE WRITING OF THE DISASTER: (IN)SCRIBING POSTMODERNITY IN LORD BYRON'S "DARKNESS" AND "WITTGENSTEIN'S MISTRESS"

The disaster--experience none can undergo--obliterates (while leaving perfectly intact) our relation to the world as presence or as absence; it does not thereby free us, however, from this obsession with which it burdens us: others.

-- Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

In the only comprehensive critical work available on the fiction of David Markson, *This is Not a Tragedy: The Works of David Markson*, Françoise Palleau-Papin offers a persuasive argument for the influence of Walt Whitman on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. An astute analysis of the multiple intertextual allusions to Whitman's poetry, Palleau-Papin paves the way for the presentation of compelling evidence for the influence of another key literary figure, namely Whitman's predecessor, Lord Byron. Though seldom regarded as "postmodern," the apocalyptic and exilic themes of Byron's poem "Darkness" can be read as anticipating the loss of metaphysical values (e.g., Absolute Truth, God, or the secular source of essential meaning, Community) that becomes fully realized in the unpeopled universe of Markson's novel. Moreover, whether Markson consciously drew from the poem or not, the same stark images of watchfires, burnt homes, and extinction pervade both works.<sup>9</sup> However, while a genetic argument that offers incontrovertible proof of this connection may be of some interest to Byron and Markson scholars alike, this approach obscures the purpose of contemporary literary criticism, which is not to arrive at the author's intentions, but to further critical analysis and open the literature under consideration to new interpretive possibilities. To this end,

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<sup>9</sup> According to *Markson Reading Markson*, a website devoted to recording instances of Markson's marginalia, he did in fact own a copy of *The Selected Letters of Lord Byron* inscribed "Lord Markson"; Byron is also referenced twice in his later novel *Reader's Block* (42, 83).

a postmodern reading of "Darkness" is useful in demonstrating how, for both Byron and Markson, the loss of metaphysical values is inextricable from the topos of disaster.

As Geoff Payne points out in *Dark Imaginings: Ideology and Darkness in Lord Byron's Poetry*, it is tempting to read "Darkness" biographically since "1816 saw the very public collapse of Byron's marriage and. . . The year also saw the beginning of his European exile" (33); however, as I will argue, this narrow interpretation excludes a richer range of readings for the postmodern subject. The necessity of biographical details to ground one's hermeneutic has heretofore been overstated by critics for whom such readings further their ideological claims. For these critics, it is in their interest to belabor historical context as the sole fount of meaning and to denigrate more radical readings which, by virtue of their methodology, implicitly question the authority of established approaches to textual analysis. Although Payne later notes that "a different symbolic process which organizes [Byron's] ideas within the artistic framework of the lyric" (34) is at work, Payne's preceding characterization of "Darkness" as a "manifest response to the developing chaos in his personal life" (34) frames his argument, capitulating to the institutional mandate for historical evidence and placating opponents who would otherwise object to the relevance of a reading where gender featured prominently (despite its timeliness for feminist and queer theorists). That some fifty years have passed since Roland Barthes published "Death of the Author" seems lost on contemporary critics who appear more concerned with exhuming bodies than with answering questions about how we read and why, questions for which a facile recourse to authorial intent often fails to provide satisfactory answers.

While the historical fact remains that 1816 is both the year that Byron's marriage disintegrated and the year he composed "Darkness," to determine that the poem emerges solely from his need to vent frustrations with his then wife is reductive in a twofold sense: On the one hand, this approach attenuates the range of interpretive possibilities, locating meaning in a causal chain that adheres to the rules of propositional logic; and two, such a reading reduces the literary theorist to the role of historian, when philosophy is the vocation of the theorist proper. As stated in Alice Levine's "Introduction" to the Norton Critical Edition of *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, "exile in Byron's poems is not merely a literal or dramatic circumstance but is symbolic of a personal and societal alienation, a psychological and *metaphysical* [my italics] condition" (xvi). That Byron's "personal and societal alienation" spring from the material circumstances of 1816 is an easily established and obvious conclusion; it is the metaphysical aspect of Byron's exile which transcends the biographical details of his life and situates him among the postmodern literature of disaster.

As a narrative of human extinction, "Darkness" typifies what French theorist Maurice Blanchot terms "the writing of the disaster." In *The Writing of the Disaster*, a work of criticism that blends literary theory and philosophy (in particular, Derrida, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein), Blanchot examines the concept of disaster, its role in the creation of texts, and its significance for the modern epoch. For Blanchot, the disaster is both figurative and literal in that the "writing" is not only the act of bearing witness (as by a scribe) to the disaster, but is also that which is written by the disaster itself. Although Byron's "Darkness" appears most readily to satisfy the first condition by recording apocalyptic events that echo the Book of Revelations--as with his capitalization

of "Famine" (69), a potential reference to the Four Horseman, and "Fiend," (69) suggestive of the Antichrist--"Darkness" satisfies the latter condition as well. By producing a system of signs, or "writing," that evokes the loss of metaphysical values, what is tacitly inscribed by the annihilation depicted in "Darkness," i.e., written by the disaster, is the coming existential-epistemological crisis of postmodernity. For critics who would argue that, on the basis of Byron's chronology alone, the attribution of "postmodern" is specious, Levine responds:

Byron shares with many modern and postmodern writers a postwar consciousness and sense of a moribund society. He anticipated James Joyce in taking as his materials the contemporary social, political, cultural, and linguistic landscape, at the center of which is situated his own perceiving consciousness--the product, exile, and conscience of his people. Like Joyce, Baudelaire, Beckett, and Nabakov (all of them writers of exile), Byron adopts a range of postmodern attitudes and rhetorical strategies: playfulness, sly narrative poses, intertextuality, artificiality, the absurd, and indeterminacy. (xviii-xix)

Byron's "Darkness" therefore functions in much the same fashion as the Biblical book with which it shares visionary resonances--as a text in the prophetic mode, anticipating that the absence of metaphysical values will become the dominant theme of postmodern thought.

For Byron, the trauma caused by the loss of metaphysical values cannot be imagined except as a radical "Darkness"; the eclipse of the rationalist and logocentric views of the Enlightenment with which Romantics found themselves disillusioned. As

Jane Stabler asserts in "Byron, Postmodernism and Intertextuality," this disillusion was analogous to postmodernity's rejection of "wholeness," which is predicated on the essentialism of Western metaphysical thinking and still sought by modernists for whom the postmodern view is deemed bleak:

. . . Both [Byron and Shelley] were wary (as Lacanian theory would be) of fantasies of wholeness, but while Shelleyan poetry reaches towards 'The One' which remains, Byron's verse follows 'the many' which 'change and pass', contemplating nostalgically or sardonically the prospect of ideal resolution.

Shelley and Byron's disagreement on the matter of ideal versus 'peopled' existence offers a way of conceptualising the contested ground between modernism and postmodernism. (867)

Similar to the distinction drawn by Stabler between Shelley and Byron, David Markson's suspicion of any metaphysical truth situates him squarely in the Beckettian tradition of literature which highlights the construction of identity and questions how this identity, without recourse to a transcendental essence (be it the Judeo-Christian soul or Kantian ego), is constituted. Whereas the desire for metaphysical values and the subject's disbelief in them are held in tension by Beckett's modernity, for the unnamed narrator of Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, these metaphysical values are so thoroughly obliterated as to be beyond mere "disbelief"; echoing Byron's "The world was void" (69), in Markson's postmodern world, there are simply no longer any values left to negate. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is worth remembering here that the narrator often ponders the phrase "anxiety being the fundamental mood of existence" (Markson 72), but mistakenly

imputes this phrase to Kierkegaard, whose analysis of dread is known to have influenced Heidegger. For Byron, then, the lines "Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day, / And men forgot their passions in the dread / Of this their desolation" (6-8) have an especial significance when read through a phenomenological lens, as it is in the midst of this "dread" (*Angst*) that one experiences the "desolation" of the nothing.

Subsequently, if the "disaster" in Blanchot is interpreted as trauma at both the ontic and ontological level, then Markson's protagonist can be said to experience a twofold loss: One, the death of her son (ontic/existentiell disaster); and two, the subsequent disappearance of other beings, or the absence of community (ontological/existential disaster) which is also envisioned in Byron's poem. Both events give rise to the inability to communicate, as the experience of loss exceeds the boundaries of logocentric propositional language and thereby results in its disastrous failure.

This failure of language is intimately connected to the failure of logic. From a Heideggerian perspective, logic is an obstacle to the authentic thinking process. As Heidegger states in "What is Metaphysics?":

...The nothing is the origin of negation, not vice versa. If the power of the intellect in the field of inquiry into the nothing and into Being is shattered, then the destiny of the reign of "logic" in philosophy is thereby decided. The idea of "logic" itself disintegrates in the turbulence of a more original questioning. (105)

In this respect, both Byron's "Darkness" and Markson's novel enact Derridean poststructural theory in which meaning is no longer conceived as a pre-inscribed essence, but generated through opposition and deferral.

For example, the mind's fragility figures prominently in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, where repetition creates an ominous sense of linguistic futility and fractured perception. For Byron and Markson, however, conventional notions of binary pairs such as "dark" and "light," "sane" and "insane," etc., are inadequate and unstable. This essentialist taxonomy is not only vague, but has dire ramifications because it is sustained by the axioms of Aristotelian logic in which the principle of the excluded middle (wherein only one choice can be actualized to the exclusion of the other) and the principle of non-contradiction (for a proposition to be rational it must be either true or false) are sovereign and irrefutable. As such, the logocentric approach to insanity that fails to define it as anything other than that which is "not-sane" is as ineffective as defining "darkness" as "not-light." For Heidegger, the aforementioned binaries of sane/insane and dark/light collapse<sup>10</sup> in the experience of "the nothing," which cannot be grasped by the logic of negation, but must be understood as a radically primordial, prelinguistic experience.

Given that the prelapsarian one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified is no longer possible after the loss of metaphysical values that attends the "disaster" of poststructural critique, the deeply subjective experience of the nothing is incommunicable and results in radical isolation. An existential-epistemological crisis follows in which the individual is simultaneously isolated (pure subjectivity) and effaced (the self is only self in relation to Other). The ultimately untranslatable, inexpressible experience of the nothing throws this conflict into relief. "Madness," as such, becomes

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<sup>10</sup> These binaries collapse for Foucault as well: "But while error is merely non-truth... madness fills the void of error with images, and links hallucinations by affirmation of the false. In a sense, it is thus plenitude, joining to the figures of night the powers, to the forms of fantasy the activity of the waking mind; it links the dark content with forms of light. But is not such plenitude actually *the culmination of the void?*" (*Madness and Civilisation* 106)

the search for intersubjectivity; an intersubjectivity that paradoxically occurs outside the mediation of language and is therefore unattainable.

Nevertheless, the narrator is incessantly drawn to the "inconsequential perplexities" (Markson 88) that emerge when meaning and reference are brought under scrutiny, such as whether the house she has burned to the ground can still be referred to as a "house" when all that remains is smoke and ash:

I still notice the burned house, mornings, when I walk along the beach.

Well, obviously I do not notice the house. What I notice is what remains of the house.

One is still prone to think of a house as a house, however, even if there is not remarkably much left of it. (11)

Throughout the novel she returns frequently to this image, which is not only psychologically arresting, but also strikes at questions of ontological significance about the subject's way of being-in-the-world. As the novel progresses, this tenuous connection between appearance and so-called reality becomes increasingly complex and emotionally charged; smoke is no longer mere smoke, but the signifier of a former life. This idea is evoked by the thought "where was my own house when all I was seeing was the smoke from my potbellied stove but was thinking, there is my house?" (212) in which the deeply felt loss is concealed by the surreal disjunction that is produced when the ambiguities of meaning and reference undermine the truth value of propositional statements.

Furthermore, the narrator explains that she has burned two houses to the ground:

Why I burned the first one I would rather not go too deeply into. I did that quite deliberately, however.

That was in Mexico, on the morning after I had visited poor Simon's grave. (14)

Why she would "rather not go too deeply into" her reasons for burning the house is because this forces her to face the irrevocable loss of her son<sup>11</sup>--a loss which exceeds the boundaries of rational language and therefore cannot be communicated with the precision over which she obsesses. This burning of homes has a compelling parallel in "Darkness":

And they did live by watchfires--and the thrones,  
the palaces of crowned kings--the huts,  
The habitations of all things which dwell,  
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consumed,  
And men were gathered round their blazing homes  
To look once more into each other's faces. (10-15)

The existential situation of Markson's narrator, however, is one in which she finds herself radically isolated, unable to illuminate the face of the Other, with only her thoughts as company in a world divested of all subjectivities but her own. This situation is presented *in extremis* by Markson as the protagonist does not simply *feel* alone, but makes explicit

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<sup>11</sup> "The example of the Ancients, their piety toward the dead as shown by the remnants of their tombs as at Pompeii and by the eloquence of their funeral inscriptions, was called to mind... Their tombs therefore began to serve as a sign of their presence after death, a presence that did not necessarily derive from the concept of immortality central to religions of salvation such as Christianity. *It derived instead from the survivors' unwillingness to accept the departure of their loved one* [my italics]." (Aries 70)

claims that she is the last person in the world and cannot remember "when it was that I stopped looking" (Markson 18).

Moreover, a compelling connection to the watchfires is present, as the unnamed narrator mentions "sitting above the [Scamander] one evening on the excavated walls, and gazing toward the channel, I was almost positive one could still see the Greek watchfires, being lighted along the shore" (Markson 13). Not only is this thematically relevant, depicting the hopelessness of the last woman who, in her desperation, fantasizes about contact with an absent community, but it also makes the case for a speculative allusion to Byron since the narrator speaks of "the Dardanelles, which used to be called the Hellespont. The name of Troy had been changed too, naturally. Hisarlik, being what it was changed to" (8). Here Markson may be inviting the reader to make the allusive leap to Byron, suggesting "Written after Swimming to Asbestos" by referring to the "Hellespont." Furthermore, this reference is notable because in the preceding lines she recalls that "The name of the river at Hisarlik is the Scamander" (13) and, in the line prior to that, mentions that the plaque on the house where John Keats died reads "Giovanni Keats" (13). Therefore, it is as she sits above the Scamander, thinking about the name Giovanni (which itself contains a resonance with Don Giovanni, or Don Juan), that the image of watchfires comes to her. Is it not possible, then, that in this web of allusions, the initial image is borne of her association with Byron's "Darkness"? In any event, the line "And they did live by watchfires" (10) provides a succinct representation of the existential quandary at the heart of the novel. In addition, that "the habitations of all things which dwell / Were burnt for beacons" (12-13) shows another connection, as she inadvertently creates a watchfire by burning her beachfront home, even after having

disavowed the search for other beings. Near the novel's close, the watchfires are mentioned again, with her stating that she has "taken to building fires" and pretending that "the fires are Greek watchfires" (239). Again, by using the verb "build" instead of "set," Markson calls attention to the fact that meaning and reference are often slippery--in its negation, the house that she has dismantled for kindling is ironically "rebuilt" as a fire.

In yet another ironic turn, the preceding pages reveal that what we are reading is her "autobiography." She muses:

As a matter of fact, it might even be an interesting, novel in its way.

Which is to say a novel about somebody who woke up one Wednesday or Thursday to discover that there was apparently not one other person left in the world.

Well or not even one seagull, either. (230)

In her exile from beings in their totality, the world is, as described by Byron, "Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless-- / A lump of death--a chaos of hard clay" (71-72).

Although there are still trees in the narrator's world, whether there are indeed other people, or even seagulls, is irrelevant; she is the sole inhabitant of *her* exilic world and sole arbiter of its rules. By understanding exile as "the receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety" (Heidegger 101), the definition of exile can be broadened from the ontic exclusion of a particular being from a specific locale/temporality to encompass an ontological event that occurs in Being as such. This can be seen in the novel as the protagonist is not estranged from a particular culture/community, but from the very possibility of Community itself. Applying Wittgenstein's theory of private language use

as the paradigm for the narrator's private language game, Sue-Im Lee's "Community as Multi-Party Game: Private Language in David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" describes how solipsistic absence of agreement causes the narrator to exist in either a state of omnipotence (the game succeeds) or madness (the game fails):

Markson offers a parable of fictional world-making as the most successful rendition of a private language game. In her freedom to recount the world however she wishes, she is free to make the world however she wishes. Thus in ["Kate's"] tales of being the last person alive on earth, there is a direct connection between her linguistic omnipotence and her ontological omnipotence. (155)

In turn, the paradoxical state of madness and omnipotence which the extinction of other beings (i.e., subjectivities) confers upon Markson's narrator, the inheritor of an "empty plenum," is also evoked by the personification of Darkness that occurs in the last lines of Byron's poem, where he writes "Darkness had no need / Of aid from them--She was the Universe" (81-82).

As a narrative of human extinction, the contradictory personification of Darkness presents an intriguing aporia. Where one expects to see the impersonal pronoun, "It," we are instead presented with the personal "She"; it is thus through the destruction of intersubjectivity that a new subjectivity emerges--Darkness as pure subjectivity, not merely sufficient unto itself but omnipotent. Here Darkness is triumphant as opposed to nihilistic; solitude is liberating as opposed to lonely and oppressive. As such, Darkness may be without order, but the ensuing "chaos" (Byron 72) is also freedom from communal law and responsibility to the Other for whom Darkness has "no need / Of aid"

(81-82). In a similar vein, that "Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day" (Byron 6) parallels a segment of Markson's novel, wherein the narrator mentions that "the first snow had come and gone" (233) and goes on to describe a striking inversion of Byron's "all was black" (21):

Still, on the morning after [the snow] fell, the trees were writing a strange calligraphy against the whiteness.

For that matter, the sky was white, too, and the dunes were hidden, and the beach was white all the way down to the water's edge.

So that almost everything I was able to see then, was like that old lost nine-foot canvas of mine, with its opaque four white coats of gesso.

Making it almost as if one could have newly painted the entire world one's self, and in any manner one wished. (233)

In this instance, historical context for "Darkness" is particularly useful, given that the poem was composed after the eruption of a volcano which, like the snow in Markson's novel, blotted out the sky with a tremendous quantity of ash. Moreover, it is notable that in this revelatory moment the unnamed narrator who has been lamenting her inability to paint, can now paint "the entire world one's self, and in any manner one wished," much akin to Byron's last line, "She was the Universe" (83). She also observes that the "trees were writing a strange calligraphy against the whiteness," as though the writing of the disaster was thrown into relief by the experience of pure subjectivity.

As such, while there is strong evidence that the imagery in "Darkness" influenced Markson, whether a genetic argument for Byron's impact on Markson can be made is

beside the point. The parallels between these works, be they conscious or unconscious, speak to a more compelling case for literature's preoccupation with the disastrous loss of metaphysical values. Byron's "Darkness" is thus the most radical of his poems because it represents a break with all metaphysical values, including Community and even man's communion with nature, which is arguably the strongest current in Romantic thinking and a defining trope of the movement. In this way, Byron's relationship to postmodernity is similar to that of Marlowe's relationship to imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*; as elucidated by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, "there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable" (23). For Byron, although he lacks the language in which to "think" postmodernity, the terms of his Romanticism express a conflict with the "system" of language that finds itself yoked to the rule of logic.

## CONCLUSION

Let us sculpt in hopeless silence all our dreams of speaking.

-- Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

In a 1990 interview for *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, "A Conversation with David Markson," Markson discloses that his working title for *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was "Keeper of the Ghosts." A telling revision, the former title expresses the central character's plight as both the last living person on earth and someone who has suffered the loss of loved ones. As in the epigraph to the novel, Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "What an extraordinary change takes place. . . when for the first time the fact that everything depends upon how a thing is thought first enters the consciousness, when, in consequence, *thought in its absoluteness replaces an apparent reality* [my italics]" (Markson 6), for the protagonist, the intensely personal experience of grief is incommunicable; in its absoluteness, the thought that she is utterly alone replaces the apparent reality of intersubjectivity and becomes apparent solipsism. The futility that one feels in the isolation of grief, often described by the bereaved as an inability to connect with others, is thus given an ontological dimension.

As the narrator reiterates throughout the novel, she has been hearing Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody*, a Romantic opus about spiritual privation and solitude. Near the novel's close she mentions:

Oh. And I have been hearing the Alto Rhapsody again also, these days.

Which is to say, the real Alto Rhapsody this time, what with all of that having finally been sorted out.

Even if it is hardly the real one either, naturally, still only being in my head. (Markson 240)

Although she struggles to remember the importance of this piece, she recalls early on that "In SoHo, my recording of the Alto Rhapsody was an old Kathleen Ferrier recording" (38). For the attentive reader, this yields a potential source for her self-identification as "Kate."

While the other names that appear in the novel, "Helen" and "Artemisia," are easily traced back to Helen of Troy (or Helen Frankenthaler) and Artemisia Gentileschi, the name "Kate" seems at first to be her "real" name because it is referred to prior to the mention of Kathleen Ferrier and takes the diminutive "Kate" instead of Kathleen. The context in which it appears, however, is a memory of her mother saying "You will never know how much it means to me that you are an artist, Kate" (33) and which is repeated near the novel's close, but with the variation "You will never know how much it means to me that you are an artist, Helen" (228) proceeded by an anecdote wherein the narrator confesses she had intended to sign her mother's mirror "Artemisia." Amid this confusion, it can be seen that there is no means to definitively establish her identity if she is our only frame of reference.

Why, then, has Markson chosen Kate as the first name assumed? Among the notable performances to Ferrier's credit, Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, translated as *Songs on the Death of Children*, may provide the key to one of Markson's most subtle allusions. If not the key, then at the very least a felicitous coincidence, for the novel can be said to function as the narrator's *Kindertotenlieder*--the loss that cannot be understood but in the singing of it. Therefore, the narrator's search for precision in language, while

Wittgensteinian, speaks more to the artist's desire to convey a provisional truth, the truth of loss and the truth of the nothing, than to represent a "reality" that is always already constituted through our fallible perception. As Heidegger describes in "The Origin of the Work of Art," "Truth happens in Van Gogh's painting. This does not mean that something at hand is correctly portrayed, but rather in the revelation of the equipmental beings of the shoes beings as a whole. . . attain to unconcealment. Thus in the work it is truth, not merely something true, that is at work" (181).

In a sly reference to Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," Markson's narrator comments "One of the things people generally admired about Van Gogh, even though they were not always aware of it, was the way he could make even a chair seem to have anxiety in it. Or a pair of boots" (138). Given that "Anxiety reveals the nothing" ("What is Metaphysics?" 101), and "Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom" (103), the anxiety that Van Gogh depicts is none other than the transcendence of *Dasein*, for "Being held out into the nothing--as *Dasein* is--on the ground of concealed anxiety is its surpassing of beings as a whole. It is transcendence" (106).

As such, Markson dramatizes the process by which the negation of death gives way to the nihilation of loss when anxiety does not have an object, in Heidegger's anxiety proper:

We "hover" in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. . . Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round, in the face of anxiety all utterance of the "is" falls silent.

That in the malaise of anxiety we often try to shatter the vacant stillness with compulsive talk only proves the presence of the nothing. ("What is Metaphysics?" 101)

Here Heidegger makes an important distinction between "speech" and "talk" which is rooted in the concept of authenticity. While this complex analysis of the forms of existential discourse is explored in further detail in *Being and Time*, Richard Kearney's *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* succinctly explains the main thrust of Heidegger's thought and suffices for the purposes of this conclusion. Kearney writes:

The authentic form [Heidegger] calls 'Saying' (*Sagen*). This he identifies with our ability to remain responsible for our speech by remaining *silent* so as to *listen* and thus genuinely *respond* to the voice of Being. The inauthentic form he calls 'Idle Talk' (*Gerede*), which he goes on to define as an opinioned chatter totally unmindful of, because unresponsive to, the claim of other *Daseins*. (46)

The idle or compulsive talk that only proves the presence of the nothing and with which Markson's narrator fills her manuscript is, however, not wholly "unresponsive to other *Daseins*"; despite her best efforts to repress her memories, she is haunted by both her deceased son *and* her missing husband who, while potentially alive beyond the "veil of madness" (Markson 47) that conceals other beings from her, is inexorably lost to the Long Ago:

In fact when I finally did solve why I had been feeling depressed what I told myself was that if necessary I would simply never again allow myself to put down any such things at all.

As if in a manner of speaking one were no longer able to speak one solitary word of Long Ago. . .

Especially if even in writing about such harmless items as pets I could still wind up thinking about meningitis, for instance. Or cancer.

(Markson 228)

Bearing in mind that it is her "depression" that causes her to cease typing and which leads to her initial thoughts about anxiety as the fundamental mood of existence, the compulsive talk which proves the presence of the nothing is also, paradoxically, the authentic Saying in its totality as the "absolutely autobiographical novel" (230), or more generally, as the *work of art* which we are reading:

There is a distinction to be made between this sort of depression and the depression I generally felt while I was still doing all of that looking, by the way, the latter having been much more decidedly a kind of anxiety.

Although I believe I have noted that.

One day I appeared to have finally stopped looking, in any event. .

Doubtless it would have been the same time I stopped reading out loud, also. (84)

Significantly, as the last person in the world, for the narrator to stop reading out loud is tantamount to her taking a vow of silence. That hers is the authentic Saying which remains silent to respond to Being therefore becomes clear, as the only compulsive talk that occurs for her is now written in the aftermath of "the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering [in anxiety] where there is nothing to hold onto, [and where] pure Dasein

is all that is there" (Heidegger 101). For Markson as well as Fernando Pessoa, the Brazilian poet with whom he shares affinities, writing after the disaster is the silent activity wherein we sculpt our "hopeless dreams of speaking" (*The Book of Disquiet* 343). This silence, however, is also the Saying of poetry--the mute singing of the words that one paradoxically cannot hear, but that we read and lend an imagined sonority--such that a world is brought into being, and in singing, made.

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