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"Strange laughter": Post-Gothic Questions of Laughter and the Human in Samuel Beckett's Work

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The laughter of Samuel Beckett's characters is frequently strange and unsettling. Characters laugh unpredictably, and the reader or spectator does not feel prompted to join them; when we do laugh in response to the Beckettian text, we are often shocked by our own lack of propriety. I examine laughter theory and the laughter in Gothic texts to explore why Beckettian laughter so disconcerts us, and what the implications of this affective response are for our understanding of what constitutes the human, and of our own ostensibly human identities.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett / Gothic / laughter / human / monstrous

The laughter of Samuel Beckett's characters is frequently strange and unsettling. Laughter in realistic literature tends to be prompted by some recognizable source, and often provokes the reader or audience to laugh as well. By contrast, it is often difficult to pin down the source of the Beckettian character's laughter or to join in with it. Readers or spectators who do laugh in response to Beckett's work often feel uncomfortable with their own laughter, "shocked" by its apparent "impropriety," as Wolfgang Iser notes (140). Reading the unfamiliar laugh represented in and provoked by Beckett's work in conjunction with influential laughter theory helps us understand why this occurs and what some of its implications are.

Laughter theory frequently begins by defining laughter as a uniquely human trait, and goes on to narrowly define when, why, and how human beings are

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expected to laugh. We have "conventional expectations" of laughter, laughter having become "an institutionalized pattern of social behaviour" (Iser 160). Gothic literature in particular has exploited our consequent ingrained narrow sense of what constitutes human laughter: the laughing Gothic figure indulges in an activity we have been trained to recognize as human, yet does so incorrectly, producing seemingly non-human laughter.

Beckett follows conceptually as well as temporally this Gothic precedent. His characters laugh inappropriately, unpredictably, and often inexplicably, and because their laughter is not familiarly human according to our ingrained concepts, it makes these otherwise human characters appear unsettlingly non-human. Consequently, readers or spectators often become self-conscious about their own inappropriate laughter, provoking a disconcerting identification with the being who laughs in an apparently non-human manner. The uncertainty generated by Beckett's works has an antecedent in the uncertainties that arise in response to Gothic narratives.

Gothic and Beckettian texts exploit our narrow sense of human laughter both to render certain figures more unsettling and to question the boundaries of our definition of the human. Whereas certain critics have read Beckettian laughter as redemptive of the miserable human condition, Beckettian laughter in fact gestures toward a simultaneously human-and-non-human condition, with complicating implications for the link between laughter and mortality, following the Gothic precedent. "Laughter is peculiar to man," Father Ambrose states in *Molloy* (96), invoking the popular idea that laughter is a uniquely human phenomenon, but "peculiar" has multiple implications in relation to laughter. Rather than laughter belonging exclusively to the human being, Beckett's work encourages us to recognize how "peculiar" or unfamiliar laughter can equally belong to the human, in an expanded understanding of the human that includes more inappropriate and unfamiliar elements than much theorizing on laughter would allow. Moreover, the reader's or spectator's self-recognition in the encounter with the non-human being recurs in both Gothic and Beckettian texts through this dark, uncanny laughter.

Below I survey laughter theory selectively and briefly, in order to ground my claim that the modern Western audience has been trained to recognize laughter as something uniquely human and narrowly defined: a predictable response to specific stimuli that cause a foreseeable, appropriate loss of physical and/or mental control. Against this backdrop, similarities emerge between the Gothic and Beckettian texts concerning the rendering of some figures as less than human through inappropriate or unpredictable laughter. Such instances appear across both waves of Gothic fiction,[1] from *The Monk* (1796) to *Dracula* (1897), and in a number of Beckett's texts from the 1950s: *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the Trilogy (1951–3), *Watt* (1953), *Texts for Nothing* (1954) and *Endgame* (1957).

LAUGHTER THEORY: HUMAN CONTROL

Although there is variation between theories of laughter across the centuries, such theorizing is united by two elements: the recurrent emphasis on laughter

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as a uniquely human act, and on laughter as constituted by a predictable loss of control. The question of when and how far human individuals can retain physical and mental control over themselves becomes key to most laughter theorists' idea of when and why individuals laugh, and to the very identification of the human being.

Helmuth Plessner explicitly links questions of physical and mental control to both the provocation of laughter and the definition of the human being. He argues that humans occupy a unique "eccentric position" (32) in relation to their bodies: the desire to maintain a distinction between the mind and the body, with the mind operating "mastery" (34) over the body. Only humans, Plessner argues, envision this mind-body hierarchy. He therefore defines laughter as one of the "universally human" traits (11), because it reveals both this desire for such a hierarchy and its illusory nature. When we laugh, the mind's "dominant relation to the body is disrupted" (117). The body is "uncontrolled," and "acts, as it were, autonomously" (31). Laughter reveals the human mind's lack of any permanent or reliable control over the body. Consequently, Plessner qualifies laughter as something definitively human: it demonstrates both the human being's desire to retain mental mastery over the body and the human body's essentially unruly nature, its ability to break free and act "autonomously" from the mind. The "creature without the possibility of laughing" is "not human," he argues (7), since humans cannot retain permanent control over their bodies.

The incongruity theory of laughter takes Plessner's model and explores precisely when and why we can expect the human being to succumb to the loss of mental control that leads to the loss of physical control and laughter. Incongruity theorists argue that when the mind meets with an incomprehensible incongruity that it cannot process, it surrenders control. Iser summarizes, "We normally laugh when our emotive or cognitive faculties have been overtaxed by a situation they can no longer cope with. The disorientated body takes over the response from it" (160), laughter being "a crisis response by the body when the cognitive or emotive faculties prove incapable of mastering a situation" (143). Elliott Oring similarly notes that it is the "tension between incongruous domains" or "a violation of logic, sense, reality or practicable action" (14) that occasions the mind's loss of control and consequently stimulates laughter. Crucially, Marjorie Grene adds that the incongruities that produce laughter are only those that appear "not in such a way that harms us" (qtd. in Plessner xii).

Superiority theory likewise focuses on the relation between the loss of mental and of physical control as the catalyst to laughter, but formulates the operation of this catalyst differently. According to the superiority theory, the instinctive human response is to laugh at another's suffering or inferiority because it is not one's own, and so provokes "the idea of one's *own* superiority" (151), as Charles Baudelaire puts it in "On the Essence of Laughter" (1855). Resultant laughter is read as an expression of delight in this sense of "suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in ourselves, by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others," Hobbes summarizes (qtd. in Critchley 2). Crucially, this laughter is permitted only by a precise relation of mental and physical control

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postulated by superiority theorists. Following Plato's statement in *Philebus* that we laugh at the suffering of another only when we think them not sufficiently powerful to strike us in retaliation, Marcel Gutwirth observes, "In laughter, the body is defenceless" and consequently humans can surrender to "that physical vulnerability" only when they feel "mental security, the sense of confidence that allows the organism to let down its guard so entirely" (11). Hence we laugh when someone falls over, according to the superiority theorists, because *we* have not fallen over and are hence superior, and because the person on the ground is in no position to retaliate against us.

In distinction to the more complete losses of physical and mental control postulated by Plessner and the incongruity theorists, the superiority theory imagines a qualified loss of physical control alone, humans being so constituted that they cannot find delight in a frighteningly total loss of control. Again, laughter is described by most superiority theorists as "a human phenomenon," "one of the most widespread—indeed, universal—responses of human beings" (Heyd 285), but the boundaries of what constitutes laughter remain narrowly drawn. Laughter otherwise stimulated falls outside the remit of the human within this context.

Finally, the relief theory characterizes laughter as "a release of pent-up nervous energy" (Critchley 2). In "The Physiology of Laughter" (1860), Herbert Spencer theorizes an unconscious, involuntary relationship between the mind and the body: "Nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular action" (395). Thus laughter is "caused by the gush of agreeable feeling that follows the cessation of mental strain" (399): the cessation of mental strain produces an excess of emotion that must be physically discharged, a loss of mental control provoking a loss of physical control. In *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905) and "Humour" (1927), Sigmund Freud transformed Spencer's theory into a model of how the individual escapes the pressure of social repression. According to Freud, humor is "liberating" (162) in that it allows us to temporarily overcome the constraints that prevent us from expressing aggressive or obscene ideas not usually permitted social expression; the consequent laughter signals the release of the energy usually employed to repress such ideas. Here again, laughter signals a surrendering of control, the release of mental energy via the uncontrolled physical convulsion that we recognize as laughter. The human being, according to the relief theory, cannot lose mental control without losing physical control.

This overview of laughter theory reveals how each definition of laughter, coupled with the recurrent emphasis on laughter as a human act, places strict boundaries on precisely what loss or retention of control we recognize as human. Human beings, according to these theorists, lose control and laugh predictably and appropriately, only at certain stimuli and under certain circumstances. The theorized predictable nature of laughter, then, assumes that laughter that is recognizably "human" is also necessarily "convivial" (Gutwirth 13). To retain mental control where we would expect its loss, or to lose physical control with no apparent reason, may strike us as so unfamiliar as to be non-human.

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We find frightening the idea of another creature unexpectedly losing control in our presence. If beings around us retain a control over themselves that we recognize and share, we can predict how they are going to act, and this is reassuring. When the beings around us do lose control, we again want this loss of control to be predictable: we want to know when and why it will happen and what form it will take, so that we are prepared to react accordingly. Hence, we are unsettled or even frightened by the being who laughs inappropriately. We may become so unsettled by beings whose actions we cannot predict or understand that we start to see them as non-human. We are unlikely to accept that such an incomprehensible being is human in the same sense that we understand ourselves to be. Unexpected, inappropriate, unpredictable laughter, then, is unsettling because an activity we have been taught to think of as uniquely human is performed in a way that seems non-human to us.

LAUGHTER AT SUFFERING

Armed with a fuller understanding of why we are inclined to identify inappropriate or unpredictable laughter as non-human, we can more productively explore the effect of inappropriate or unpredictable laughter in the Gothic and the Beckettian text. John Paul Riquelme has observed the recurrent interest throughout much Gothic fiction "concerning the limits of the human (…) about what it means to be a human as a species by contrast with the subhuman" ("Gothic" 6). Unexpected laughter is a crucial means by which both Gothic and Beckettian texts render certain figures simultaneously human and non-human, a disconcerting contradiction that troubles us both cognitively and affectively as we try to comprehend it and its implications.

It is common in the Gothic text to find laughter explicitly identified as non-human. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for instance, the laughter of the vampiric women directly signals their non-human nature, their laughter being explicitly dissociated from the human body, "hard as though the sound could never have come through the softness of human lips" (45). The next time the vampiric women laugh, Stoker describes it as a "soulless laughter" (46). Western theology understands the soul to be unique to the human being, likewise laughter theory also sees laughter as a uniquely human activity, yet in Stoker's text the human activity of laughter is conversely linked to a non-human nature. Stoker draws the troubling association still more tightly when he describes the women's laughter as explicitly demonic, signaling "the pleasure of fiends" (46) rather than the human. This association is a common one in Gothic texts. Melmoth in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) utters a "demoniac laugh" (39). The "loud and fiendish laughter" of Victor Frankenstein's monster disgusts him in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818); his description of his feeling "as if all hell surrounded me with mockery and laughter" (169) replicates Stoker's disconcerting association of the human act of laughter with an explicitly non-human subject. It is unsettling to find the explicit rendering of laughter—an act we are accustomed to

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identify as uniquely human—as something non-human, even expressly denoted as demoniac. The manner in which a monster's laughter increases its dramatic impact proves a notably effective and consequently oft-repeated technique within the Gothic novel, one whose contradictory character has implications for the reader's or spectator's view of their own professed humanity.

It is not only such explicit description that pushes the reader to recognize laughter in the Gothic text as frequently non-human, however. Often, it is the laughter's unexpected provocation that renders it suspect. We noted concerning laughter theory that the boundaries drawn around what should naturally provoke laughter in the human being, and the assumption that human beings share predictable physical and mental responses to certain phenomena, are key recurrent elements of the definition of laughter. The Gothic figure, by contrast, frequently laughs at unexpected provocations. Stoker's vampiric women laugh at the pitiful movements of the doomed human child in Count Dracula's bag (47), at the anticipation of Jonathan's destruction at their hands, and at his subsequent rage and terror (58). Few human beings could fathom laughing at the injured child's fate; given the anthropological imperatives against infanticide and cannibalism, such a response would contravene the anthropological perspective on what it means to be human.

Moreover, the unpredictable nature of the vampire's laugh heightens this sense of distinction between human and vampire. The individual who did laugh would be labeled "monstrous" or "inhuman" by others; modern Western society is trained to interpret unpredictable or inappropriate laughter as signaling a lack of recognizably human traits, a fact that Stoker here exploits. Even in earlier Gothic texts that stand as pre-anthropological in relation to the rise of anthropology in the wake of evolutionary theory, laughter provoked by an inappropriate source heightens the reader's sense of the laugher's non-human status. In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Melmoth's laughter at the sight of the dead lovers' bodies is described by Stanton as "an outrage on humanity" (31); Melmoth's reaction is set in explicit contrast to the conventional understanding of what predictably or appropriately might provoke human laughter. Thomas de Quincey's protagonist in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) similarly apologizes for his own "very reprehensible" laughter "in the midst of my own misery" (39). Inappropriate laughter renders him, by his own admission, "guilty" of an "indecent practice," and of "infirm nature" (39), monstrous. In John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), Lord Ruthven's "loud laugh" is provoked by and mingles with "the dreadful shrieks" (47) of the woman he attacks, and such unexpected laughter, with which the reader is not likely to join, heightens appreciably the unsettling nature of the scene. The being who laughs at what we do not, who laughs at what does not usually provoke human laughter, appears less-than-human to the self-identified human being.

Beckett's characters also frequently laugh unexpectedly or inappropriately, and such laughter likewise makes them appear disconcertingly less-than-human. The Beckettian text rarely labels laughter as non-human as explicitly as the Gothic text does, but the source of the laughter renders such laughter disconcertingly

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unexpected. Like the vampires laughing at the frightened child and Melmoth laughing at the dead lovers, the Beckettian character laughs at suffering, albeit on a frequently less melodramatic scale: the pitiful, the painful, the inadequate. Two of the best-known references to laughter in Beckett's work emphasize this. In *Watt,* Arsene summarizes the prevalence of laughter at "that which is not good," "that which is not true" and "that which is unhappy" (40). Similarly, in a direct response to Arsene, Nell in *Endgame* declares that though one shouldn't "laugh at these things," nevertheless "[n]othing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. (. . .) Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world" (101).

Other Beckettian texts are replete with instances of characters laughing at the sight or thought of suffering. When Clov laughs at the story of the starving beggar and his son in *Endgame*, he and Hamm assume that it must have been one of the pitiful elements of the story that made him do so:

> CLOV: A job as a gardener!
> HAMM: Is that what tickles you?
> CLOV: It must be that.
> HAMM: It wouldn't be the bread?
> CLOV: Or the brat.
> (*Pause*.)
> HAMM: The whole thing is comical, I grant you that. (121)

The man driven to beg for a job, the pitiful request for bread, the starving child, or the whole sad mess: one of these has provoked Clov's laughter. Lousse in *Molloy* laughs at her dog's graveside (32). The "Israelite" in *Malone Dies* laughs when faced with Malone's "wetted trousers and the little pool of urine at my feet" (211). The narrator of *The Unnamable* records "a great cackle of laughter, at the sight of his terror and distress[.] To see him flooded with light, and then suddenly plunged back into darkness, must strike them as irresistibly funny" (349). In *Waiting for Godot*, we find Pozzo "*in raptures*" at the discrepancy between Lucky's miserable state and Estragon calling him "Mister" (28). Later, Estragon is "*convulsed with merriment*" (35) at Pozzo's tears. Mr de Baker laughs at Mr Nackybal's mute, humiliated ignorance in *Watt* (164). Beckett's characters frequently laugh as inappropriately as the non-human, monstrous Gothic figures.

Although they often laugh at their own suffering, rather than at suffering they have inflicted on another, Beckettian figures' inappropriate laughter at suffering elicits the same set of anxieties provoked by the Gothic figure's laughter at the terrifying or the horrific. We have not been taught to recognize the unhappy or the pitiful as a legitimate source of humor, and consequently such laughter is disconcertingly unexpected, unfamiliar to the point of appearing non-human. Like Lord Ruthven's "mockery of a laugh" (46) at the woman's shrieks in Polidori's *The Vampyre*, laughter provoked by misery is referred to in the Beckettian text as not really laughter. Moran in *Molloy*, for example, finishes his description of his laughter at the thought of his future punishment at Youdi's hand with the comment, "Strange laughter truly, and no doubt misnamed" (156). Similarly,

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in describing the "*risus puris*" in *Watt*, Arsene notes that "the bitter, the hollow and the mirthless" laughs are "strictly speaking not laughs, but modes of ululation" (40). As the Gothic monsters' laughter at pain and death emphasizes their non-human status, so too the Beckettian figure who laughs at suffering does not strike us as human. To laugh at suffering is explicitly coded in the Gothic text as not really human, and in the Beckettian text as not really laughter; neither form of laughter signals human status.

The superiority theory, however, may offer a lens through which the Gothic and Beckettian laughter at suffering can be read as predictable, recognizable, and human. According to the superiority theory, to laugh at another's suffering is to revel in the sense of one's own superior position, and without fear of the weaker being's retaliation. Thus Stoker's vampires can laugh at the injured child and Ruthven at his female victim, not being subject to their suffering and fearing no potential retaliation on their part. Within Beckett's work, the watchers in *The Unnamable* who laugh at Worm are not subject to the same painful experiences that he is, and have no reason to fear any potential retaliation on his part. The irresistible loss of physical control signaled by their laughter is permitted by their mental sense of control, and their indulgence in it can be read as predictable and the recognizably human in the context of the superiority theory. Similarly, Pozzo can laugh at Lucky and the "Israelite" at Molloy, not suffering as they do and anticipating no retaliation. In the context of the superiority theory, to laugh at the unhappy is in these instances an understandable and predictable human response.

However, Beckett extends the Gothic idea of non-human laughter provoked by suffering by having his characters laugh at their own as well as others' suffering. In doing so, they negate the potential of the superiority theory to explain such laughter as predictable, recognizable, human. We noted, for example, that Moran in *Molloy* laughs "at the thought of the punishments Youdi might inflict on me" (156). In *Endgame*, Hamm laughs at the thought that he "wasn't much longer for this world" (118), a laugh provoked both by the thought of his own demise, and the pitiful fact that he still endures his miserable existence. Hamm and Nagg laugh at Hamm's conspicuous lack of any "honour" (116), a personal failing on Hamm's part and the source of further suffering on Nagg's, for instance when Hamm refuses him the promised sugar-plum. Moreover, Clov's laughter at Hamm's story is complicated by the suggestion that Hamm could be retelling the story of how Clov came to live with him: is Clov laughing at his and his father's own past suffering? Similarly, when Lousse in *Molloy* laughs at her dog's graveside, she might well be laughing at her own grief rather than, or as well as, at the dog's death.

Characters laughing at their own misery complicates the application of the superiority theory in two ways. Firstly, to laugh at oneself involves considering oneself simultaneously superior and inferior; secondly, one can always fear retaliation from oneself, the self being perfectly capable of punishing the self. The Beckettian individuals who laugh at their own suffering confound the possibility of reading laughter at the unhappy as a recognizable, comprehensible human response.

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LAUGHTER AS FRIGHTENING LOSS OF CONTROL

We noted above that inappropriate or unpredictable laughter unsettles us to point of pushing us to see the laugher as less-than-human because we take comfort in the sense of a shared, predictable control over our minds and bodies. We feel vulnerable when confronted with beings whose loss of control is unexpected since we are unable to predict their actions, or even to identify them as "human like us." Beyond laughter explicitly labeled as non-human, Gothic texts frequently use unexpected or inappropriate laughter to signal a protagonist's unsettlingly complete loss of control when confronted by horror. Of course, for the mind to be able to retain control when confronted with such inexplicable incongruities or violations of logic and reality as the Gothic protagonist faces would be to exhibit a distinctly non-human degree of control. Consequently, certain losses of physical control that result from a loss of mental control when facing incomprehensible Gothic phenomenon can mark an individual as recognizably human. However, this is crucially only if the loss of physical control takes certain forms—and laughter is notably not one of these forms.

We have already noted Grene's assertion that the human being laughs at the inexplicable only if it does not appear to exist "in such a way that will harm us" (qtd. in Plessner xii). The individual who laughs when faced with the Gothic phenomenon violates this expectation. An appropriate human manifestation of a loss of physical control following a loss of mental control may be weeping, trembling, or fainting in a Gothic text. For example, the narrator faints and weeps at the sight of his punishment in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842) (215, 221, 226); Victor Frankenstein trembles at the memory of his grave-robbing; Mina's faints as Dr. Van Helsing spells out to her the consequences of Count Dracula's bite and his immortal condition (Stoker 334). These losses of physical control occasioned by the loss of mental control mark Poe's victim, Victor, and Mina as recognizably human, since only a non-human being could retain mental control faced with such overwhelming terrors.

By contrast, to laugh before a threatening, incomprehensible phenomenon appears a distinctly non-human reaction, and consequently signals a disconcerting rather than familiar degree of lost control. When Victor Frankenstein laughs hysterically at the impression that his monster is about to enter the room where he and Clerval sit, his laughter is described in terms that emphasize his unsettling loss of control, being "unrestrained," "unusual" and of a "wildness" that "frightened and astonished" his friend (Shelley 61). Victor's laughter is unfamiliar in form and unexpected in provocation; when Clerval begs him, "Do not laugh in that manner" (61), he implies *in that unfamiliar, unruly, non-human manner*. In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the "wildest paroxysms" of laughter signal the captives' descent into utter madness, the extinction of "all humanity" (57) that Melmoth warns Stanton will soon occur within him. Stanton's attempt to laugh like the other captives will act as "an invocation to the demon of insanity to come and take full possession of you" (57), Melmoth predicts. Inappropriate laughter is here coded in terms of

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demonic possession, highlighting the non-human state that such laughter not only signals but also causes. In Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), Roderick Usher's hysterical laughter "appal[s]" his friend. The "unrestrained," "mad hilarity" (104) he demonstrates at the thought of Madeline breaking out of her tomb is closely aligned with the idea that Roderick is "giving up his soul" (104) over the course of the narrative. Roderick must inevitably fall with the house rather than escape with the narrator, having surrendered his human existence. In each of these cases, laughter is unsettling because the form and the degree of control lost—rather than the reason that control is lost—are unfamiliar to our received ideas of human laughter.

Similarly, Beckett frequently heightens the discomfort caused by his characters' unsettlingly unexpected laughter by emphasizing the degree of lost control that such laughter entails. Clov "*bursts out laughing*" (123) at the story of the starving beggar, his body apparently unable to contain his laughter. Similarly, the laughter of the watchers in *The Unnamable* comes "irresistibly" (349). Estragon's being "*convulsed*" by his laughter at Pozzo's tears (35) replicates the language of convulsion and contortion that many of the theorists we have discussed use to mark the loss of physical control that occasions laughter. So too does the Israelite's "fit of laughter" (211) at Malone's wet trousers. Moran's laughter at his anticipated punishment entails such a loss of physical control that he has to "lean against a tree" to "keep me from falling" (156).[2] Laughter in these all cases is provoked by an unexpected source, constitutes an unexpected form of the loss of physical control, and signals a degree of lost control that is unexpectedly and consequently unsettlingly extreme.

LAUGHTER PROVOKED BY GOTHIC AND BECKETTIAN TEXTS

We have thus far restricted our examination to laughter presented *in* the Gothic and Beckettian text. As we turn to consider how these texts not only exploit our narrow ideas of human laughter to affective ends, but also trouble those definitional boundaries, the laughter provoked *by* the texts reveals itself as crucial. If the Gothic and the Beckettian text exploit our ingrained sense of inappropriate and unpredictable laughter to render certain figures unsettlingly less-than-human, what is the effect when the readers or spectators themselves are driven by these texts to laugh in inappropriate or unpredictable ways?

While figures laugh within the Gothic text, we do not usually expect the reader of the Gothic text to laugh. This is a mode, after all, populated with terror, rape, enforced confinement, mental collapse, murder: to laugh at such things would be to laugh as inappropriately as the monstrous antagonists themselves do.[3] Yet there are instances when the Gothic text may make us laugh. André Breton, for example, included Poe and de Quincey in his seminal *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1940), which uses the incongruity theory described in the first section of this paper to explain how the Gothic work can become a source of dark humor. Breton declares that de Quincey is a "humorist" (81), invoking the "wilful extravagance" and the "levity" of his works despite their "pathetic," "cruel" and "shocking"

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ideas and images (86). The similarly contradictory nature of Poe's work, Breton continues, makes it "generate humour" (116), black humor rendered from the recurrent juxtaposition of the individual's capacity for greatness and the more "shadowy" existence, the "human inconsistencies" and "morbid states" (116) that recur within his tales. According to Breton, the reader is in fact likely to laugh at the "agonies" (62), "intense suffering" (63), "phantoms" (67), "cancerous kisses" (73), "unutterable monsters" (74), and visions of being buried alive in *Confessions* and at the threat of death and of the undead in Poe's work.

Breton's recognition of the role played by the "extravagance" of the Gothic mode leads us also to the manner in which the "Gothic excess" (Botting 2) of style and narrative event provoke the reader's laughter. Riquelme has suggested that when the modern reader, skeptical of or jaded by such melodrama, laughs at the Gothic's "exaggerated forms" ("Gothic" 5), we might also assume that such moments were also intended to elicit similar laughter from the contemporary reader: "Read belatedly, the narratives can sometimes cause laughter because of their exaggerations, the self-parodic character of which could not have escaped their authors" ("Gothic" 1). Botting observes that the Gothic's "overabundance of imaginative frenzy" (3) often "provoke[s] ambivalent emotions" (2): one of these emotions might well be a deliberately induced incredulity that results in laughter. If we laugh at Stoker's description of Renfield guzzling down his flies, spiders, and birds, or when Frankenstein cries histrionically to the "[w]andering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds" (89), such ostensibly inappropriate laughter might well have been deliberately induced by the text, Riquelme suggests. Breton's citing of the Gothic mode's black humor and Riquelme's sense of the possibility of Gothic self-parody both point us towards the Gothic text's pushing the reader to laugh at unexpected moments in unexpected ways. As readers of the Gothic text, we find ourselves laughing as inappropriately or as improperly as the monstrously laughing figures we find in their narratives. Having witnessed the laughter of the monsters in the Gothic texts, such inappropriate laughter coming from ourselves offers the disconcerting possibility of self-identification with the non-human laughers.

The Beckettian text also pushes the reader to laugh in a manner we identify as inappropriate, both because of its source and because of its non-accordance with the laughter of others. Laughter theorists have frequently emphasized the significance that the individual in society accords to simultaneous laughter, individuals laughing in unison at the same phenomenon. From this shared, contagious laughter we construct a sense of a shared human community. Oring observes that to laugh together "implies a community, a fellowship of laughers with whom the humour is shared" (56), and W.W. Pilcher likewise notes the power of laughter to maintain "group solidarity" by imposing and reflecting "a stable system of social behaviour" (qtd. in Gutwirth 42). Beings who laugh at what we laugh at react like us, think like us, are like us; we are safe in their company, able to predict their behavior, made vulnerable by the loss of mental and physical control at the same time as they are. Gutwirth goes so far as to assert that the fact that the "infectious" (12) and

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"convivial" (13) aspects of laughter make it "when all is said and done, human" (13). We recognize the being that reacts to the same phenomena in the same way that we do to be human in the same way we believe ourselves to be human.

Iser argues, however, that laughter in Beckett's theater "has lost its contagious nature," and is "apparently robbed of its contagious qualities" (159). Spectators of Beckett's drama, he observes, often find themselves laughing alone at an apparently inappropriate or unexpected moment. Iser focuses on how *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* stifle the audience's laughter by making their own faith in language, their "compulsion to understand" (180) into the comic butt; we resist the experience of suddenly regarding "our interpretations and guiding norms as nonsense" (163).

More relevant to our exploration is the effect he traces in the reaction of the audience member who does laugh inappropriately, in isolation, without the rest of the audience joining in. The spectator is "deprived of a collective confirmation" at such moments, Iser observes, stripped of the "communal laugh by means of which the audience confirm one another's reactions" (40). The spectator's laughter in this context seems "somehow inappropriate" (159), making the spectator "conscious of his own loss of control" (160). Rather than laughter acting as "confirmation" (140) of the shared humanity of the audience members, the spectators who laugh alone seem to exhibit the same "impropriety" (140), the same unexpected loss of control and the same improperly-human action that the seemingly less-than-human characters onstage demonstrate. Spectators provoked by Beckett's drama to laugh in isolation are driven to question either their own humanity or the narrow boundaries we have placed on our attitudes towards the human that are bound up with laughter.

FORCED LAUGHTER AND MORTALITY

When we think of how the Gothic or Beckettian text might trouble as well as exploit our ingrained sense of what the human is based on our understanding of laughter, it is worth noting one form of laughter that renders the Beckettian figure seemingly recognizably human. This is the forced or conscious laugh, which can frequently be understood as a self-protective gesture. Gutwirth testifies to the human experience of using laughter as a defense mechanism, the "creation of a comic perspective from which to maintain one's distance" from "the dubious, the threatening, the unspeakable" (123–124, 125). Freud likewise observes the potential for laughter as a mechanism "by means of which a person refuses to suffer," adopted "in order to ward off suffering" ("Humour" 163, 164). Fry describes sufferers of cataplexy (muscle weakness and/or loss of consciousness triggered by a range of emotional responses, including laughter) using a similar technique: "If the humor-cataplexy link is more specific and the weakness appears only with the stimulus of a deep belly-laugh, this reaction has sometimes been prevented by the hasty substitution of a high, twittering laugh" (80). This substitute laugh may "govern, by its artificiality, the intensity" (80) of the emotion experienced.

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Similarly, certain instances of forced laughter in Beckett's work offer the possibility of reading such laughter as the attempt to control more negative emotions, to distance oneself from "possibly dangerous involvements" (Fry 81) with the chaos or despair of the individual's existence. Clov's repeated "*brief laugh*" (92) that opens *Endgame* might be interpreted as this kind of laugh, as he observes the bleak landscape outside the house and Nagg and Nell's miserable state in their bins. So too could his laughter at Hamm's suggestion that the two of them are beginning to "mean something" (108). The reader or audience member can empathize with Beckettian individuals whose forced laughter is a self-protective attempt to distance themselves from the misery of their existence. Such empathy with the experience of pain and the attempt to avoid or overcome pain is different from other forms of laughter in the Gothic or Beckettian text discussed above. Thus, these beings seem more immediately human because self-identified human readers or spectators can recognize their own reaction in them in a manner that does not cause discomfort. Notably, the forced laugh is one that seems distinctly wrong, unnatural or non-human according to the strict definitions imposed by the theorists reviewed above. Yet it is this form of theoretically non-human laughter, alone among all the other instances of laughter we have examined, that makes the Beckettian figure seem more recognizably, identifiably human.

Like the inappropriate laughter provoked in the reader or spectator, the humanizing effect of this ostensibly unnatural forced laughter enables a recognition that the Gothic and the Beckettian texts involve or trigger a re-imagining of the human. Riquelme has identified this (although not specifically via the presentation of laughter) as a recurrent feature in Gothic fiction, arguing that the most interesting Gothic texts do not merely reinforce our sense of "the limits of the human" ("Gothic" 6), but also encourage new ways of thinking about "what it means to be human" ("Gothic" 3) by "challeng[ing] prevailing notions of the human" ("Modernist Gothic" 21) and troubling the traditional hierarchies that designate some modes of behavior "more fully human than others" ("Modernist Gothic" 33).

Dracula offers a memorable instance of such an impulse in the context of laughter. We have already noted how the unexpected, inappropriate nature of the vampires' laughter plays a crucial role in rendering them so unsettlingly non-human. However, elsewhere in the text, unpredictable and conventionally inappropriate laughter is reinstated as befitting and indeed constitutive of the human condition. Van Helsing laughs hysterically following Lucy's funeral, in a manner that initially appears to John Seward—and most likely to the reader as well—as utterly inappropriate and inhuman. However, Van Helsing's subsequent explanation of his laughter positions it as a fundamentally human response; indeed, a redemptively human response, one that both signals and conserves the humanity of the laugher:

> Oh, friend John, it is a strange world, a sad world, a world full of miseries, and woes, and troubles; and yet when King Laugh come he make them all dance to the tune he play. (. . .) And believe me, friend John, that he is good to come, and kind. (. . .) King

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> Laugh he come like the sunshine, and he ease off the strain again; and we bear to go on with our labour, what it may be. (Stoker 186–7)

Against our learned idea of human laughter as almost clinically predictable, Van Helsing posits that "true laughter" is always unpredictable and often inappropriate, and "chooses no time of suitability (…) the laugh he come just the same" (186). Unruly, unpredictable, or inexplicable laughter may be as human a laughter as any other, Van Helsing asserts. Against the strain of an often miserable human existence, unruly laughter might be welcomed as a redemptive human response rather than condemned as something unsettlingly non-human in the doctor's mind. Here, the Gothic text plays on our ingrained sense of what in laughter is recognizably human in a way that troubles our sense of what it might mean to be human and what counts as acceptable human behavior, rather than simply to signal the unsettlingly non-human figure.

Our analysis of how the Beckettian laugh functions as a self-defensive gesture against life's suffering bears a significant resemblance to Van Helsing's vaunting of inappropriate, unpredictable laughter as not merely a human act, but an act that allegedly redeems and protects one's very humanity. Some critics who emphasize the alignment of laughter and misery in Beckett's texts have similarly read laughter as redemptive of human existence and our mortal condition. However, they do so to an extent that may not be supported by the texts themselves. When Arsene describes the *risus puris* as "the laugh of laughs" (40), or "the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke" (40), it has led some readers to interpret that "highest joke" as death itself, being "the joke of mortality" as Gutwirth argues (185). If mortality is "the highest joke," and if we can laugh at this joke, we discover a method of both accepting and withstanding the human condition, "a way of facing up to this unhappiness and of acknowledging the inevitable futility of the 'human condition,'" as Salisbury summarizes (4). Shane Weller, for example, asserts that laughter acts in the Beckettian text as a positively-inflected "mode of knowing (…) of being certain, if only of our own finitude" (23), a consolatory acknowledgment of the mortal state that consequently offers "resistance to nihilism" (23). Similarly, Critchley reads laughter's "acknowledgement of finitude" as a "powerful" healing recognition (187). While not going so far as to invoke question of mortality and finitude, Iser also presumes laughter is a source of "relief" (180, 181), rendering "the human condition both experienceable and palatable" (181). Being "able to laugh in spite of it all" (163–4), he asserts, might signal a liberation, a triumph of sorts, whereas the Beckettian spectator's inability or refusal to laugh indicates "that they cannot cope" with "the human condition" (163).[4]

Such determined optimism ignores the more unsettling lived experience of Beckettian laughter. The laughter that renders the Beckettian character recognizably human is, we have seen, a rare occurrence, and even then it is an unwarranted leap to go from reading such laughter as humanizing to reading it as redemptive of the human condition. Even when Beckettian laughter does suggest the human rather than the non-human, to be rendered recognizably human is not necessarily

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to be redeemed. Beckettian laughter provokes revulsion, fear, or at best pity or empathy, rather than any sense of liberating, healing redemption. More significantly, the more common "strange laughter" usually evokes suspicion, discomfort, or even fear. Although some forms of Beckettian laughter can be understood as humanizing, they stop short of the redemption that Van Helsing declares in Stoker's Gothic text or Critchley and Weller declare of Beckett's work.

Weller's and Critchley's similar views of the Beckettian laugh as redemptive does, however, point us helpfully in the direction of the frequent association of laughter and death in the Beckettian texts under discussion. The narrator of *The Unnamable* imagines that his eventual death will be in laughter: "I'll laugh, that's how it will end" (401). In *Texts for Nothing,* the narrator of text V reminds himself, "If only I could laugh, all would vanish, all what, who knows, all, me" (22), and in text XII laughter is qualified as the domain of the "non-exister" (50). In *Endgame*, Nagg remembers that Nell's laughter nearly killed them on their boating expedition: "It always made you laugh. (*Pause*.) The first time I thought you'd die. (. . .) You were in such fits that we capsized" (102). Estragon, laughing at Pozzo's tears in *Waiting for Godot*, declares "He'll be the death of me!" (35). Lousse in *Molloy*, we recall, laughs beside her dog's grave. Hamm and Clov's acknowledgment in *Endgame* that they no longer laugh is linked with their inability to end their miserable existence. This association is heightened by the double meaning of the word "corpsed," onstage laughter elided with the dead body. Beckett includes a similarly loaded wordplay in *Texts for Nothing*, when the narrator of text VI links the "danger of mirth" with his determination to be "grave" (28). As with "corpsed," the association of the dead body in the double meaning of "grave" renders it evident that the "danger of mirth"—or indeed the "promise of mirth" in *The Unnamable* and *Endgame*—is death.

Baudelaire's writing on laughter offers a Gothic perspective on the connection between laughter, death, and the recurrent sense of the simultaneously human-and-non-human that is more appropriate to the reader's unsettling experience of Beckettian laughter than Weller's and Critchley's interpretations. Baudelaire links laughter to death by way of the Biblical Fall, which, he speculates, made laughter as well as death part of the human condition. "Human laughter is intimately linked with the accident of the ancient Fall" (49), he asserts, and when "knowledge comes (. . .) laughter will come too" (151). The human being's laughter, thus connected with the postlapsarian condition, becomes the signal of the need for redemption, rather than the achievement of redemption that Critchley and Weller theorize. Beings that laugh are, according to Baudelaire's model, distinctly human, prey to pain and death. The divine do not laugh, and the prelapsarian, immortal being in Paradise did not laugh, he declares.

"[F]initude inheres in the human condition" (122), Gutwirth asserts, and Baudelaire posits both the Biblical knowledge that leads to finitude and the knowledge of this finitude as an essential basis for laughter. This association accords closely with the recurrent connection between laughter and death in Beckett's work, offering the opportunity to interpret laughter as a potentially

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unsettling reminder of mortality rather than a redemptive acceptance of it or a complete negation of humanity itself. However, alongside the human, Baudelaire also reads the non-human, the "Satanic" (150), and "monstrous" (151), in laughter. While it is the action of the fallen and hence mortal human being, laughter also signals the "diabolic" (154), recalling how Gothic laughter is "soulless," "fiendish" and "demoniac" in *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Melmoth the Wanderer* respectively.

Baudelaire's model of how laughter might signal the inextricable mix of the human and the Satanic, the human and the non-human, accords closely to our experience of Beckettian laughter, which renders the laughing figure alternately—or sometimes simultaneously—human and non-human, mortal and immortal. Following his Gothic predecessors, Beckett's association of laughter with death muddies the idea of the human condition rather than crystallizing and redeeming it. Their laughter may remind us of their mortal state, but the reminder is a promise that frequently remains unfulfilled. Hamm and Clov cannot end their miserable existence; Didi and Gogo fail to hang themselves; Molloy, Moran, and the Unnamable must "go on" (407) and on and on.[5] Their laughter reminds us of a human mortality that the texts do not enact; they live an undead and undying existence comparable to the Gothic creature, the vampire, ghost, or zombie, in short all those who are not quite living yet not quite dead. Beckettian laughter complicates the way we define the nature and limits of the human. The laughing Beckettian subject offers gradations of the human rather than a strict binary division between the human and the non-human. His characters fall somewhere between the two poles: not fully non-human, yet not human as defined by our usual recognitions and identifications.

CONCLUSION

While laughter theorists have repeatedly claimed that laughter is a uniquely human phenomenon, their theorizing marks out a narrow range of laughter that we define as recognizably "human." Both the Gothic and the Beckettian text exploit this ingrained attitude. In Gothic texts, inappropriate laughter repeatedly signals the non-human, the monstrous. Gothic (and subsequently Beckettian) texts include laughter that the modern Western reader or spectator is conditioned to identify as inappropriate and unpredictable to render their characters unsettlingly non-human—unsettling not only because of their monstrous status and behavior, but also because they engage in the laughter that much theory claims as a uniquely human activity. *Dracula* offers a reworking of this idea: Van Helsing proposes that unpredictable, inappropriate laughter may be as proper to the human being as the predictable, appropriate laugh.

The dark laughter of Gothic texts throw light on the related effects and implications of the "strange laughter" in Beckett's texts, but Beckettian laughter extends and complicates the implications of Gothic laughter. The Beckettian laugher is frequently both monstrous and human, replicating Baudelaire's idea of laughter as simultaneously human and Satanic. It is thus disconcerting in two ways.

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Firstly, it signals the melding of what we might have considered to be a clear binary, the human and the non-human or monstrous. In the absence of a stark contrast between the two qualities, we are left with the question of what the relationship between the human and the non-human has become in Beckett's texts. We are presented with a co-existence of opposites that seems to establish a new kind of identity. This new idea of the human resists traditional definition; it breaks free of the concepts previously expected or accepted. Yet imposing too rosy an interpretation on this new identity disregards the distinctly disconcerting effect of the laughing Beckettian creature. The similarities between the half-human laughter in the Gothic and the Beckettian text warn us against placing any too determinedly optimistic framework of interpretation onto Beckettian laughter. There is something comforting, certainly, in the idea that even when laughter, the thing theorized as making us uniquely human, is distorted or corrupted, the individual does not become entirely monstrous, unrecognizable to the point of being clearly non-human. However, emphasizing inclusivity ignores the unsettling experience of confronting the laughing Beckettian being.

Secondly, Beckettian laughter disconcerts by triggering the reader's or spectator's laughter at unexpected or inappropriate moments. Such moments elicit an unsettling self-recognition by the reader or spectator concerning the similarly inappropriate laughter of the human-non-human Beckettian being. Readers and spectators laugh inappropriately in response to these texts, and such unexpected, inappropriate laughter challenges any complacent idea they might have of themselves as human. Much as we might still wish to, we cannot distance ourselves from these not-quite-human, not-quite-non-human laughers. "Strange laughter," both presented in and provoked by the texts, complicates and potentially extends our ideas of what constitutes the human laugh, and therefore the human. Neither unambiguously human nor absolutely non-human, the laughing Beckettian subject is "strange" and estranging—above all disconcerting because it troubles our ideas of human identity and of our own identities.

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Notes

1. In "Gothic," Riquelme identifies a distinction between "'first-wave Gothic novels" (6) published between 1764 and 1825, and a second wave beginning in 1860. He cites "the cataclysm of the French Revolution" (9) as a significant turning-point between the two waves.

2. In fact, Moran's laughter at the prospect of his punishment is rendered even more unsettlingly non-human by the unfamiliar manner in which he loses control, as well as his unfamiliar reason for doing so. Although he loses control of his body, his facial features remain "composed in their wonted sadness and calm" (156). How does one laugh so hard while retaining control of one's facial features?

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We are frightened not only by the being who loses control but the being who retains control in ways we cannot predict or understand.

3. While affect is central to the Gothic, and the fear elicited by the Gothic novel is often thrilling and thus enjoyable, it is a great step from "illicitly enjoyable thrill" to "wholehearted laughter" when faced with the cited scenes.

4. Iser does ask, "But are we really able to free ourselves from unhappiness by facing up to it?" (164). However, this is not a question he explores in any real depth in the cited text.

5. Malone, one of the rare Beckettian characters of whose death we can be reasonably assured, notably fails to laugh throughout the narrative.

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