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Technology and the voices of the more than human in Beckett's *All That Fall*

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Abstract

Though to date the radio play *All That Fall* has remained somewhat tangential to Beckett ecocriticism, it is an important text in relation to what Mary Bryden has termed Beckett's critique of 'species hierarchy', where the human occupies a privileged place in the order of creation and indeed, the biosphere. Rather, I argue that *All That Fall* foregrounds mutual inter-species vulnerability through its evocation of increasingly technologised machines that threaten the existence of both human and other living creatures. Creating a dialogue between discussions of Beckett's radio plays by, for example, Julie Campbell, Everett Frost, Catherine Laws, Ulrike Maude and Emilie Morin, and selected ecological readings of Beckett by Paul Davies, Greg Garrard and Carl Lavery, the essay argues that *All That Fall* exploits the technologies of radio in a parody of both divine and human models of creation, inviting the listener to attend to the voices of the more than human, however mediated. From that perspective, the essay reflects on the decision to represent the animal sounds by electronically modified human voices in the BBC Third premiere of the play in 1957, directed by Donald McWhinnie.

Biography

Anna McMullan is Professor in Theatre at the University of Reading and co-director with Mark Nixon of the Beckett International Foundation. She is author of *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama* (2010) and *Theatre on Trial: The Later Drama of Samuel Beckett* (1993), and co-editor of *Reflections on Beckett* (2009) with Steve Wilmer. She has co-edited with David Pattie a special issue of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujour'd'hui* on Staging Beckett at the Margins (29.2, 2017) and, with Graham Saunders, a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on Staging Beckett and Contemporary Theatre and Performance Cultures (28.1, 2018).

Keywords

Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall*, ecocriticism, technology, radio, more than human, BBC Third, Donald McWhinnie.

Technology and the voices of the more than human in Beckett's *All That Fall*

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Beckett shows us what might emerge if we accept that the worst has already happened and that there is no solution to the ecological crisis. In this moment of ontological weakness and lameness, this acceptance that everything is already exhausted, a different kind of knowledge emerges. Here the *oikos* is no longer pushed away, forgotten, dispelled; it is admitted, allowed to exist, given a space to appear. (Lavery, 2018, 24-25)

MRS ROONEY: Oh, the pretty little woolly lamb, crying to suck its mother! Theirs has not changed, since Arcady. (Beckett 1984, 34)

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Beckett experimented across a wide range of media or genres, exploring their different processes and possibilities of world-making, embodiment and voice.¹ Several preoccupations can be traced throughout his work at this time, including the depiction of highly regulated spatial or spatio-temporal systems which subject the human bodies that inhabit them to repeated cycles of activity (as in *How It Is* and some of the mimes, for example),² or a devastated world, inhospitable to human life, where only the hardiest species, such as fleas or ants, still pro-create, as in *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. Mary Bryden refers to Beckett's 'species consciousness' (2013, 3),³ and she and other scholars have explored the ways in which Beckett often 'animalises' his human creatures⁴ eroding the ontological distinctions between the human and the more than human,⁵ or reorients attention from the human towards a range of other species from horses to fleas that co-habit the narrative worlds of his texts. Scholars have also focused on the elements that constitute the biosphere in which his creatures exist, including the atmosphere (Connor 2003) and the weather (Davies 2008). Beckett's radio play *All That Fall* is a particularly apt example of Beckett's refocusing of his listeners' attention from the interior thoughts and experiences of his main protagonist, Maddy Rooney, towards what is, for Beckett, a remarkably rich and diverse world of flora and fauna, and the weather conditions that change from the bright sunlight of Maddy's setting out on her journey to the local railway station, to the 'shrouding' of the day on her return, as the wind rises and rain begins to fall. Technology both transmits

¹ Beckett completed *Fin de Partie* (*Endgame*) in 1955, the radio drama *All That Fall* in 1956 followed by his other radio plays and silent mimes over the next few years, *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1958, the novel *Comment c'est* (*How It Is*) between 1958 and 1960, and *Happy Days* in 1961.

² See, for example, *Act Without Words II* (1958/9) and the prose texts *Imagination morte imaginez* (*Imagination Dead Imagine*) and *le dépeupleur* (*The Lost Ones*) from the mid-1960s. McMullan 2010, 57-66, analyses a number of abandoned mimes and dramatic fragments from this era which 'present non-individualized human figures (A, B, the players) in a series of confining situations where the body is subject to an implacable system' (64).

³ *How It Is* makes several references to 'loss of species' (Beckett, 1984, 29) or having 'clung on to the species' (52).

⁴ See Weller 2008 and 2013.

⁵ The term 'more-than-human', sometimes though not always hyphenated, was coined by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World* (1996) and is now frequently used in ecological discourses to refer to the species, elements and systems (such as weather) in the earth's biosphere.

this world to the listener, and also threatens the creatures that inhabit it through increasingly destructive machines.

Indeed, the ways in which worlds and creatures are invoked in Beckett's texts are medium specific, reflecting on the conditions and conventions of prose narration, theatrical performance or radiophonic technologies. *All That Fall* is pivotal to a second transmedia concern of Beckett's texts written in the late 1950s: the dissociation of the voice from the body of the speaker — whether the voice of the individual speaker is mediated through recording technologies as in *Krapp's Last Tape*, or whether, as in *How It Is*, there is a more impersonal sense of the voice as transcorporeal utterance expressed through, though not necessarily originating in, the body of the speaker.⁶ In the stage and radio dramas, the recording of the voice heightens both the dispersal of an individual's identity across time, and the transitoriness of human bodily existence in contrast to the technology that allows the voice to live on beyond the moment of its recording and indeed the life of the speaker. The medium of radio, of course, depends entirely on acousmatic sound⁷ which accounts for its ability to 'soar beyond time and space and unite actual happenings with thoughts and forms independent of anything corporeal' (Arnheim, 1936: 15).⁸ As Julie Campbell has argued, radio can therefore 'present extensive movement both effectively and economically', freed from the solid contours of the visually perceived body (2009, 147), but yet retains an inherent 'ghostliness' due to its incorporeality, and because the sonic world of radio can be extinguished in a second by switching off, for example.

All That Fall specifically exploits these radiophonic qualities to evoke the laborious journey of its elderly and ailing protagonist, Maddy Rooney, through the rural environs of the village of Boghill as far as the railway station to meet her husband Dan from the city train, and their walk back together. The play also self-consciously focuses on technology as, on the one hand, the very medium through which the sound world of the radio play is created and transmitted, and, on the other, a destructive force threatening the web of living creatures evoked in the narrative. Building on discussions of the voice in the radio plays by, for example, Julie Campbell, Everett Frost, Catherine Laws, Ulrike Maude and Emilie Morin, and selected ecological readings of Beckett by Paul Davies, Greg Garrard and Carl Lavery, this essay will analyse Beckett's use of the medium of radio in *All That Fall* to place the human in a framework of technological intervention on the one hand, and, on the other, to direct attention to the more than human voices in the play. However, before placing these discourses in dialogue with each other, I want briefly to explore some of the ecological approaches to Beckett's work that have emerged over the last decade or so.

De-centering the human *oikos*

Ecological readings of Beckett's texts in the twenty-first century tend to focus on what Paul Davies has called 'the condition of human alienation from the biosphere' (2006, 74), and on the interrelationships between the human and other inhabitants of the planet and how Beckett

⁶ In his study of the voice in Beckett's work, Lewellyn Brown notes 'the impersonal dimension of language in that the latter pre-exists the subject' (2016, 8). The *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is* refer to 'scribes' who are noting the coerced utterances of the narrated bodies, and the narrator in *How It Is* insists that the narrative originates in an 'ancient' voice once outside but now within him: the phrase 'I say it as I hear it' recurs throughout the novel.

⁷ The term 'acousmatic' to refer to the separation of a sound from its original source, was coined by *musique concrète composer*, Pierre Schaeffer (Morin 2014, 1).

⁸ Several scholars writing on *All That Fall* note that Beckett had read Rudolph Arnheim's *Film as Art* which includes a chapter on radio drama and indeed that McWhinnie drew on Arnheim's theories in radio in his own *The Art of Radio*: see Frost 1991, Hartel 2010 and Laws, 2017, 108.

refigures those relationships in his work.⁹ While Greg Garrard (2012) and Joe Kelleher (2015) acknowledge the overt references to a historically devastated environment in *Endgame* and *Happy Days* respectively, which may be linked to the fear of nuclear catastrophe following the United States attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the post-World War II cold war,¹⁰ they, along with Davies, argue that an ecological reading needs to go beyond the literal level of representation or content. Beckett was evidently not an eco-activist concerned with saving the planet, indeed salvation of any kind is always a myth in Beckett's work, but his texts might be aligned with what Timothy Morton has called the ecological way of thinking (Morton 2010), which decenters the place of the human in the time and space of the planet. Garrard cites Morton's concept of 'kinship in mutual vulnerability as well as struggle for survival' (394) that connects the human with the more than human in a refusal of what Bryden terms 'species hierarchy'. Rather, Bryden argues, in Beckett's work: 'those conceptions of difference may give way to perceptions of some kind of shared subjection' (2013, 3). I will explore that 'shared subjection' or 'kinship in mutual vulnerability' between the human and more than human in relation to *All That Fall* below.

In his 2018 essay, Carl Lavery offers a detailed assessment of Beckett's approach to the medium of the theatre as an enclosed space cut off from the 'chaos of everyday life', not to 'eject or deny the world in an act of spurious aesthetic autonomy, but to find another way of engaging with it' (2018, 17). This other way is attentive to the expanded experience of both time and species that Beckett's work offers: 'In Beckett's hands, theatre is no longer a space where the essence of the human appears; on the contrary, it is a site where the human dis-appears, subjected, as it is, to a series of 'more than human' flows and processes that challenge its much-vaunted exceptionalism and apparent omniscience' (11). Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of the *oikos* (Lyotard 1993), a term whose original meaning evokes the domestic or interior home and foyer of human life, Lavery places the obsession with or search for home or homecomings throughout human culture with the *oikos* (from which the English word ecology derives) as the life world beyond the human individual or species:

Instead then of an ecology that surreptitiously seeks to master the earth, I want to argue for an *oikology* that undoes the human subject by placing it – *the anthropos* – in an immanent world that it is unable to dominate. From this perspective, homecoming, the search for the *oikos*, would be a paradoxical process, something that is doomed, in advance, to failure, a realisation that human being, *contra* its designated place in western metaphysics, is always a deferred or impossible being. In ecological terms –

⁹ In general, ecocriticism is concerned with resisting the positing of humans as masters of the earth's resources, but rather positions them as a species that shares the biosphere with other species, but which has become so dominant, especially since the technological advances of the Industrial Age, that they have caused major impact upon and indeed damage to the earth's environment. The effect that humans have had on the environment is reflected in debates about whether we are now entering, or in, a new age — that of the Anthropocene, rather than the Holocene age which has been ongoing for the last few thousand years: 'The International Union of Geological Sciences are currently debating the relevant scientific merits of the so-called Anthropocene Epoch, which would allow the organization to recognize a diachronic rift separating the epoch of the Holocene— since the last Ice Age receded almost twelve millennia ago—from our current "human epoch"' (David and Turpin, 2015, 4). There are diverse opinions on when to date the beginning of the Anthropocene, whether from the earliest times of human agricultural development, the Industrial Revolution, or World War II.

¹⁰ See, for example, Gibson, 2010, 133: 'From the mid-1950s onwards, there is a strain in Beckett's art which seems less abstract than global. The works in question are fraught with the recognition that something has happened to history itself. They clearly respond to a historical condition, that of the Cold War — or, at least, to particular phases of it — which seemed all-encompassing as none had before.' Sean Kennedy has added other specific layers to these historical traces in Beckett's work in his reading of *All That Fall* and other texts as evoking the declining Anglo-Irish social milieu of the 1930s Irish Free State (Kennedy, 2004).

and this is why Beckett's work is so important - there might be more to be learnt in accepting our absence than in clinging to our presence. (12)

Lavery identifies Beckett's treatment of time as essential to how his theatre functions and works on the spectator: his drama 'slows perception down to the point where things and experiences that ordinarily go unnoticed are allowed to impress themselves upon us' (19), and where we feel ourselves subject to 'the passage of time in our bodies' (23) that we might ordinarily seek to master or ignore. Therefore, he argues: 'theatre's ecological significance resides in the material charge of the theatrical medium itself, in the way in which an affective dramaturgical sculpting of time and space has the potential to disorder and reorder perception to the point where we are able to welcome in the troublesome guest, the *oikos*' (14). He suggests that Beckett's theatre in performance 'recalibrates our vision' and our experience of temporality, creating an environment where, as in the quotation which serves as epigraph to this essay, 'the *oikos* is no longer pushed away, forgotten, dispelled; it is admitted, allowed to exist, given a space to appear.' (25). I will argue that *All That Fall* activates such a recalibration of our perceptual faculties by suggesting a shared species kinship in the mutual vulnerability of life to both ecological and human forces of destruction, and by shifting the listener's perspective from sharing Maddy Rooney's experience of time (both that of the listening present and that of humanly regulated time in the railway station clocks), as she anxiously labours to meet the twelve thirty train, to glimpses of a temporality in which the human appears as an aberration, if a largely destructive one. The acousmatic medium of radio is integral to this placing of the human voice in relation to heightened and self-conscious technological mediations of sound in the play, on the one hand, and, on the other, the sonic evocation of more than human sounds and temporalities.

***All That Fall* and Acousmatic Technologies**

In his foundational study of Beckett's radio plays, Clas Zilliacus notes that the period of the 1950s, when Beckett began writing for radio and was working with the BBC radio drama team including Donald McWhinnie, Barbara Bray and Desmond Briscoe,¹¹ was one of intense experimentation in the radio medium. This climate of innovation was influenced by developments in French radio pioneered by *musique concrète* composer Pierre Schaeffer which, as Emilie Morin notes, the BBC was keen to emulate (Morin 2014: 2). Zilliacus also cites Irving Wardle who referred to a simultaneous trend towards the 'interiorization' of radio drama (Zilliacus: 14). Wardle described this trend, which he saw as particularly dominant in West German radio drama, as 'the emergence of individual consciousness as the only certain reality' (Wardle 1968: 15). The tension between, on the one hand, the ability of radio to 'locate the drama inside the head of the protagonist' (Frost 2009: ix), and on the other, to exploit radiophonic sound effects which draw attention to the constructedness of the sound world of a radio play, is epitomised in Beckett's *All That Fall*, broadcast on the BBC Third Programme on January 13, 1957.¹²

¹¹ Donald McWhinnie was appointed Assistant Head of Drama at the BBC Third Programme in 1953, with Barbara Bray as Drama Script Editor (Zilliacus 13). Desmond Briscoe was a drama studio manager at the BBC in the 1950s and worked on the sound effects of the BBC's 1957 *All That Fall*, subsequently co-founding the BBC Radiophonic Workshop.

¹² The history of Beckett's involvement with the BBC, the invitation to write a play specifically for radio by John Morris, Controller of the Third Programme in 1956, its subsequent development, and the context of BBC radio at that time have been discussed in detail by such scholars as Zilliacus (1976), Frost (1997), Morin (2011), and the edited collection *Samuel Beckett and the BBC: A Reassessment* (Addyman et al, 2017), which includes a detailed and fascinating analysis of the creative collaborations and resulting sound world of the BBC's *All That Fall* by Catherine Laws.

In his book *The Art of Radio* Donald McWhinnie, the director of the BBC's 1957 premiere of *All That Fall*, affirms the power of radio 'to communicate secret states of mind, the inner world and private vision of the speaker. [...] The very intimacy of radio... means that we may have acutely the sense of sharing his thoughts and experiences as though they are our own' (1959: 57). Everett Frost has argued that listeners to Beckett's first radio play 'experience the action and perceptions of the play as originating entirely and exclusively from within the mind of Maddy Rooney' (1997, 194). The use of what McWhinnie called 'close focus', the aural equivalent of filmic close-up (1959, 57), by placing the microphone closer to the actor playing Maddy Rooney than anyone else, intensifies the sense of sharing Maddy's interior processes of perception and consciousness: 'the effect we want is of an unspoken thought, magically overheard [...] Magnified by the microphone, it draws us into the mind of the character, it is almost as though it had been spoken in our own head' (134-5). These moments of aural intimacy are contrasted with Maddy's vocal level when she is addressing the inhabitants of Boghill that she meets, which is louder and has a different relationship to the microphone. The proximity effect of Maddy's internal reflections establishes her inner consciousness as the most 'real' layer of the play.

However, the psychoacoustic qualities of *All That Fall*, where the listener creates the world of the play as it is evoked through Maddy's spoken thoughts, dialogue and the sound effects of a rural landscape and then village train station, are juxtaposed with many self-conscious references to the medium, as when the opening animal sounds are denaturalised through being treated as choric or musical elements, appearing singly on cue and then together (as Beckett would do with human speech later in *Play*) or self-conscious references to the conventions of radio drama where only that which is heard exists. Donald McWhinnie and his team immediately saw that Beckett's script would enable them to experiment with exactly the kinds of denaturalisation and formalisation of sound that they wished to explore. According to Catherine Laws, the 1957 broadcast was concerned with 'exploiting the dramatic tensions of manipulated concrete sound within a more abstractly conceived formal, musical structure' (Laws, 2018, 124). This led to the decision to realize the animal voices at the beginning and throughout the play by technologically modified human impersonations. McWhinnie argues that the opening of the play 'demands a strict rhythmic composition; a mere miscellany of animal sounds will not achieve the effect' and that 'the way to deal with the problem seemed to be by complete stylization of each sound, that is to say, by having human beings to impersonate the exact sound required. This enabled us to construct an exact rhythmic pattern' (133). So, for example, the hoof-beats of Christy's horse were 'made by recording the sound of an actor's mouth playing tunes on the roof of his mouth' which McWhinnie compares to 'drum-strokes... in a formal rhythm' (1959, 136). Even the sounds of the weather were replaced by human-produced sounds: the wind 'was human breath, technically treated, used on this, and subsequent, occasions as a purely formal device with the barest pretense at realism' (144).¹³

Undoubtedly, both Beckett's script and, to an even greater extent, McWhinnie and his team's broadcast interpretation of it, foreground what Laws refers to as 'the composedness' of the world of the play: 'composed by Maddy herself, as her words and sounds guide us, but the radiophonic mediation points beyond this, reflexively, to other agencies: the author, the production team... and ultimately ourselves, as we piece together the ambiguous soundscape' (107). In this sense, technology enables and mediates the creative labour of the play and its

¹³ The 1957 BBC *All That Fall* also musicalized the sounds of Maddy's and Dan's corporeal efforts of walking, unassisted by mechanical means of transport, the dragging feet and panting become formalized into precisely rhythmic, percussive sounds which only gradually become interpretable as human footsteps. The one exception, as McWhinnie notes, was the sequence where Maddy is hoisted into Mr Slocum's car, as 'the one scene in the play which may be handled realistically, since its farcical detail is so extravagant and unreal in itself' (141).

realization. I will explore this focus on composition or creation in more detail below, and will return to some of the stylized choices of the BBC production in the light of that argument. However, the narrative of *All That Fall* incorporates an awareness of the destructive consequences of the human will to make or create (*techne*) on the life world. I'm interested in how the play combines parodic references to the divine creation of the world with a historical sense of the human invention of ever more powerful machines.

Technological interventions and the parody of creation in *All That Fall*

The opening of the text of *All That Fall* introduces the listener to the sound of four animals: a sheep, bird, cow and cockerel 'severally, then together' (Beckett 1984, 12). This stylisation may suggest that we are hearing the animal voices through a human consciousness which we shortly understand to be Maddy's, or, as Laws suggests above, that this is an entirely sonically constructed and rhythmically composed world from the outset, where all the creatures and the sounds they make are subject to the creative and technical processes of the author, director and technical team. However, the opening of *All That Fall* follows the order of creation in the book of Genesis: animals *before* humans, and, as many scholars have noted, there are several ironic references to the Bible, most emphatic and savage in the eponymous reference to the Lord upholding all that fall, subjected to 'wild laughter' by Dan and Maddy (Beckett, 1984, 38). When Maddy also questions the Biblical passage which values one human life as equivalent to many sparrows, Dan asks: 'Does that put our price up?' (37). Their irony towards the assumption that human life is of greatest value in the order of creation suggests what Mary Bryden has termed wider 'antipathy' in Beckett's work to 'the notion of a species hierarchy in which God presides over an order of creation which descends through human beings down to the 'lower' order of flies and minute pond life' (Bryden 2013, 3).

Such self-awareness of the act of artistic creation as invoking (ironically) the divine creation of the world recurs throughout Beckett's work and particularly in some of the work written in the 1950s: Charles Lyons notes the recurrence of anti-creation motifs in *Endgame*, linked to an attack on genesis and generation (1964), and *How It Is* takes place in a post-Judgement cosmology which exists exclusively of an *infernal* mudscape with occasional glimpses of a life 'above in the light'.¹⁴ Beckett contracts and expands time, drawing attention to the phenomenological moment of listening, but also placing that moment of the ever receding now in the context of a temporality that goes beyond the human. In *All That Fall*, Maddy's evocation of the 'dust [that] will not settle in our time' (16), suggests both the moment in her journey when she and Mr Tyler have been nearly run over by Connolly's van, and the dust to which human bodies must return, and perhaps the universe as well.

Several critics have noted that Maddy is conceived as a creator figure, or 'ironic earth mother' (Frost 1997, 198) as she conjures the world of flora – 'there is that lovely laburnum again' (14, 36), and especially the world of animals, from the 'pretty little woolly lamb' (34) to the cooing ringdoves, or the feeding animal world at the end of the day: 'The cows — [*Brief moo.*] — and sheep — [*Brief baa.*] — ruminates in silence' (Beckett, 1984, 32). Sarah Bryant Bertail notes Maddy's calling of the animals into being in an ironic echo of Adam's act of naming the animals in Genesis: Maddy is 'the mouth that produces the landscape, the matrix through which creation *takes place*' (1995: 10), though she invokes them as they are subsiding into silence (and therefore radiophonic non-being), leaving Dan and Maddy 'Alone. There is no-one to ask' (Beckett, 1984, 32). If Maddy is a creator or 'orchestrator' figure, as Katarzyna Ojrzyńska calls her (49), her ability to compose, or I would suggest,

¹⁴ As Daniella Caselli among others has demonstrated, the muddy cosmology of *How It Is* is modelled on Dante's *Inferno* (Caselli, 2005, 148-182).

transmit, to the listener the voices of other species falters, as Ojzyenska notes: Maddy becomes increasingly exhausted, feeling, ‘very cold and faint’ (34) on the walk back from the station in the final part of the play. This may be echoed in the fading of the more than human voices she invokes in the extract cited above – the animals are not heard directly in the sound world of the play after this moment.

Moreover, Maddy contrasts the voices of the animals to her own human speech, which seems to her increasingly bizarre, anachronistic and on the edge of extinction: Dan complains that Maddy sounds as if she is ‘struggling with a dead language’, and Maddy replies: ‘Well, you know, it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic’ (34). The language of the animals, however, ‘has not changed since Arcady’. Everett Frost argues that the animal sounds in the text ‘are not sound effects at all. They are other voices in the text, speaking a language that... survives unchanged from pre-lapsarian times, and unintelligible to human ears closed to Arcady by the fall’ (Frost, 1997, 198). Therefore, I would argue that, while Maddy’s attention to the more than human world around her allows their voices into the sound world of the play, she has no omniscient authority over them. Instead, she shares with them a ‘kinship in mutual vulnerability’ before the onslaught of increasingly threatening and invasive technological machines.

Maddy encounters layers of human technology and intervention during her journey which enact a history of the Anthropocene from the invention of the bicycle, to the horse driven cart, the motor car and finally the monstrous train associated with modernity and the Industrial Revolution. The text stresses the ‘exaggerated station sounds’ that should herald the arrival of the train with ‘great hissing of steam and clashing of couplings’ (27).¹⁵ However, each of these incrementally more powerful machines proves increasingly disastrous for the animal species and even the human species, since the reason for the delay of the twelve thirty train is that a child was killed by falling under its wheels (the reason for the child’s fall is never confirmed). There is also a gendered perspective on this destruction — the bicycle, horse and car are driven by men (though the train seems to be pure machine) while the victims are mostly female, from the hinny that Christy wallops, to the hen run over by Mr Slocum’s car. Indeed, Maddy shares a cross-species experience of endangered female reproduction. Most of the female animals in *All That Fall* are either sterile, like the hinny harnessed to Christy’s cart, or beyond reproduction,¹⁶ like Maddy herself — even her daughter, ‘little Minnie’, had she survived, would be ‘girding up her lovely little loins, getting ready for the change’ (16). Although the published text refers to a genderless ‘little child’ (39) who fell under the wheels of the train, in a letter to Kay Boyle in 1961, responding to her request for clarification about Willie’s motives in *Happy Days*, Beckett replied that that is ‘like the question in *All That Fall* as to whether Mr Rooney threw the little girl out of the railway carriage or not. And the answer is the same in both cases – we don’t know, at least I don’t. (Beckett, 2014, 435): Beckett here, whether consciously or not, seems to conceive of the child as also female, like the other victims of technology in the play.

In addition to the physical effort of the journey, and the threatening world of machines that Maddy has to negotiate to get to the station, she encounters increasingly unsympathetic and indeed violent human beings. Although Christy and Mr Tyler are friendly enough, Mr Slocum regrets offering Maddy a lift in his motor car, and Miss Fitt has to be

¹⁵ McWhinnie interpreted this sonic evocation of the train in psychological and affective terms as communicating the significance of the arrival of the train for the humans awaiting their delayed ‘nearest and dearest’: ‘The sound-complex in its grotesque fantasy must fulfil the wildest expectations and fears of the people who have been biting their nails on the platform; we should hear it as the nightmare realization of their own heightened anxiety’ (1959, 147).

¹⁶ As suggested above, Beckett tends to substitute textual or vocal reproduction for female human cycles of birth. See Stewart who refers to Beckett’s ‘horror of female reproduction’ (2011, 133).

shamed into lending Maddy a helping arm in order to ascend the steep path leading to the station: ‘Your arm! Any arm! A helping hand! For five seconds! Christ what a planet! [...] Pismires do it for one another. [*Pause*] I have seen slugs do it.’ (23). In addition to the attempts of everyone else on the platform to ignore or get away from Maddy, there are acts of human on human violence: in a sound cue that might be overlooked (see Frost, 1997, 217-8), Mr Barrell delivers a ‘back-handed blow’ to young Tommy the station porter after several earlier threats, for which he is reprimanded by Mr Tyler (24), and, on their journey from the station, Maddy and Dan hear the cries of Mrs Tully whose husband ‘is in constant pain and beats her unmercifully’ (33). In general, the human comes across as a species which destroys other species and the environment and is unlikely to come to the aid of its fellow beings unless compelled to. Their attitude to animals is entirely instrumental and indeed cruelly indifferent. Only Maddy is tuned to the voices of the more than human and opens a space in the technologized soundscape of *All That Fall* for them to be heard.

Human and more than human voicings in *All That Fall*

In contrast to all of the other humans in the play, Maddy is extremely alert to the world of flora and fauna, noticing the ‘lovely laburnum’, and listening to the doves, the lambs and other creatures. This can be read as confirming Maddy’s privileged perspective: we access the voices of the more than human via her perception. Yet she does not speak for them, acknowledging that they are a species apart with their own distinct language. Though Maddy at times speaks of the flowers and animals around her as inhabiting an innocent, unspoiled Edenic or Arcadian world from which humans have been outcast, at other times, she acknowledges that they have their own ‘troubles’ and embodied forms of suffering: from the ‘cleg-tormented eyes’ (13) of the hinny harnessed to Christy’s cart, and coerced into moving on its owner’s demand, to the hen run over by Mr Slocum’s car: ‘What a death! One minute picking happy at the dung, on the road, in the sun, with now and then a dust bath, and then – bang – all her troubles over. [*Pause*]. All the laying and hatching.’ (19). As Christy gives his hinny ‘a good welt on the rump’, Maddy muses: ‘If someone should do that for me, I should not dally’ (13). Maddy positions herself alongside these fellow creatures, rather than as their master, recognising that she and they share a ‘kinship in mutual vulnerability’. She identifies with their subjected status, refusing the hierarchies that are otherwise embedded within the human and technological world of the play.

This de-centering of the human in relation to a greater web of species in *All That Fall* sheds some further light on Beckett’s disagreement with McWhinnie on the use of human actors to impersonate the animal sounds in the play. Beckett was very pleased with many of the elements of the BBC 1957 production, as he wrote to McWhinnie, including ‘The double walk sound [of Dan and Maddy] in the second half’ and ‘their wild laugh (marvellous)’ (Beckett, 2014, 12), as well as the performances of Dan (James Gerard Devlin), Miss Fitt (Shiela Ward), and especially Maddy (Mary O’Farrell).¹⁷ However in the same letter, he notes ‘I didn’t think the animals were right’. Beckett does not articulate his reasons for this in detail, though he had expressed concern about McWhinnie’s approach to the animal sounds in an earlier letter on 18 December 1956, during the production process: ‘I do not see why the animal utterances by mere humans’ (687), the adjective ‘mere’ suggesting a rather cynical view of humans as privileged inhabitants of the planet. Beckett continues: ‘Perhaps your idea is to give them the unreal quality of the other sounds. But this, we agreed, should develop from a realistic nucleus. I think the absurd apropos with which they occur, and their

¹⁷ See Zilliacus 65-68 for a more detailed discussion of the actors in the 1957 BBC *All That Fall*, which included Patrick Magee as Mr Slocum, and Jack MacGowran as Tommy.

briefness, are enough to denaturalize them. And if not could they not be distorted by some technical means? (2011, 688).¹⁸

Beckett was therefore in sympathy with McWhinnie's desire to acknowledge the constructed nature of the radiophonic world evoked in the play. However, the replacement of recorded 'real' animal sounds by electronically modified human sound focuses exclusively on human agency and entirely erases any sonic echo of the *oikos*. Frost emphasizes that in the Voices International production for American public radio in 1986, 'it seemed essential to use real animal sounds — so that there be no possibility of confusing the Arcadian animal language with something human and fallen. The animals make a wonderful music of their own that conveys on radio a context that is rural but not real' (200). Maddy may orchestrate these voices, as do the author and technical production team, but she does not simulate or impersonate them, rather she continually invites them into the listener's perceptual consciousness, and draws attention to their vulnerability to the mad-made environment she shares with them.

In the light of the argument above, Beckett's desire to retain a denaturalised version of real animal sounds can be interpreted as wishing to retain the play's invocation of a life world and biosphere which is not just the home and property of humans. Though Maddy longs to be back at home — returned 'safe to haven' (34) — that *oikos* is 'offstage' in *All That Fall*, and 'being at home' is defined earlier in the play as 'a lingering dissolution' (15). Dan would prefer to avoid 'the horrors of home life' (33) and dreams of 'of another home, another — [*He hesitates.*] — another home' (32). *All That Fall* (along with much of Beckett's other work) portrays the human species as attempting to control or create a world, but also displaces or exiles the human in a temporality and web of life in which they are transitory, inconsequential visitors. The abandonment of the human by divine indifference and their subjection to a biosphere that they cannot control is emphasized by the ending of the play. As the act of creation is mimicked in the opening of the play, the ending evokes a 'tempest of wind and rain' (39), that subsumes the entire sonically evoked world, including Maddy and Dan, in a soundscape that suggests a Flood-like apocalypse, interweaving technological, biblical and ecological versions of extinction.

Conclusion: 'we're talking of the species the human'¹⁹

All that Fall is one of Beckett's most overt portrayals of the negative impact of human technological agency on the *oikos*, even while it uses radiophonic technologies to creatively realize that agency. Beckett's next radio play, *Embers* (1959) is set even more specifically in the mind of its protagonist Henry: though we hear his bodily movements, those of his wife Ada are silent, suggesting that she is a ghostly presence he has conjured. Henry invokes sounds such as horses' hooves which are abstracted and formally structured, appearing and disappearing on command as if we are indeed inside Henry's head. Yet, the play is set on a strand, between land and sea, and the rhythms of the sea counterpoint the imagined or produced sounds and stories with which Henry attempts to 'drown' out the sucking sound of the shingle which is associated with death, specifically the disappearance of his father who has apparently drowned, and, like the tempest of wind and rain at the end of *All That Fall*, with a non-anthropomorphic force oblivious and indifferent to human existence. The inner and outer spheres are not collapsed into a pathetic fallacy, rather the *oikos* retains its opacity, its resistance to human interpretation.

In most of Beckett's subsequent radio plays, the focus is as much on the efforts of

¹⁸ Catherine Laws has carried out detailed research into the production process of *All That Fall* at the BBC, and explains that what Beckett was recommending would in fact have been difficult to achieve with the technology available to the BBC in 1956 (Laws, 2017, 111).

¹⁹ Beckett 1964, 52.

composition (verbal and musical) as on the narrative of the play. The *oikos* has been largely displaced in an abstracted formal acoustic environment mediated by a strangely impersonal creative authority, as words and music are conceived as separate sound streams, embodied as characters in *Words and Music* but simply ‘opened’ and ‘closed’ in *Pochade radiophonique* and *Cascando*. In some of the prose work of the mid 1960s including *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *The Lost Ones*, though the animal world is absent, the enclosed spaces in which the human bodies are located with no apparent exit resemble self-regulating biospheres, with references to their changing climates and temperatures. In these texts, the imaginative or generative faculties of the creator or deviser can produce only almost extinguished worlds in which the human animals are rigorously subjected to the seemingly arbitrary rules and systems of their constructed biosphere.

In relation to Beckett’s later work, therefore, *All That Fall* seems both exceptional and pivotal. On the one hand, Mrs Rooney, as the first female protagonist in Beckett’s work whose consciousness and perception is the gateway to the world of the play, is remarkably attuned to the living world around her, and, in terms of Beckett’s radio work and indeed his oeuvre, the vivid if satirical evocation of the thinly disguised world of Beckett’s boyhood in Foxrock in both its social milieu and its landscape is indeed exceptional.²⁰ However *All That Fall* clearly shaped Beckett’s experiments with sound and the dissociation of voice from body across the different media of his subsequent work, and may have influenced his later more abstract conjuring of human bodies within a degenerating ecological system. *All That Fall* is therefore an important text in an investigation of Beckett’s ‘species consciousness’: as Lavery has argued in relation to Beckett’s theatre worlds, *All That Fall* ‘recalibrates’ our perceptual apparatus, creating an aural space for the voices of the *oikos* to be heard, and inviting the listener to question the ‘species hierarchy’ between the ‘mere’ human and the more than human, foregrounding rather their interdependence and mutual vulnerability.

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²⁰ Scholars have linked the writing of *All That Fall* in English to Beckett’s return to his early memories of Ireland. See Kim 2010, 80-81.

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